

THE CONSEQUENCES SERIES



Complete Five Novel
Box Set

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author
Aleatha Romig

Aleatha Romig

Author of the #1 New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Book Series

CONSEQUENCES

TRUTH

CONVICTED

REVEALED

BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES



Book 5



Book 4



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THE CONSEQUENCES SERIES

The Consequences Series:: Complete Box Set

By:
Aleatha Romig
New York Times and USA Today bestselling author

**Once you've been Aleatha'd you will want MORE Books by New York
Times bestselling author
Aleatha Romig:**

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VOLUME ONE

CONSEQUENCES

Book #1 of the bestselling Consequences series

By:

ALEATHA ROMIG

CONSEQUENCES

Nobody ever did, or ever will, escape the consequences of his choices.

—Alfred A. Montapert

By:

Aleatha Romig

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you especially to my wonderful husband, children, and mother. I love you all! You have my undying love and gratitude for indulging me while I pursued my dream.

Also, I'd like to express my sincere appreciation to the readers of CONSEQUENCES, thank you all for reading my first novel. Please know you hold a special place in my heart. I truly enjoy hearing from each and every one of you; contact information is at the end of this novel. Feel free to let me know your thoughts!

Please know CONSEQUENCES is only the beginning of our saga. Anthony Rawlings and Claire Nichols' story continues in TRUTH, released October 30, 2012. Their story continues with so many other characters you will learn to love and hate, with CONVICTED, released October 2013. Book #4, REVEALED, was released May 2014. And the fifth book, BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES was released January of 2015. For additional Consequences, you can enjoy the Consequences reading companions: BEHIND HIS EYES CONSEQUENCES and BEHIND HIS EYES TRUTH. These companions answer the question: "What was Tony thinking?" during significant scenes in the first two novels. The companions were released in January and March of 2014.

Thank you for boarding this amazing ride! The twists and turns will make it worth it. I promise!

*At the very end of this box set is a complete listing of characters and a Consequences timeline. I advise against looking too early as it will contain spoilers.

DISCLAIMER

The CONSEQUENCES series contains dark adult content. Although there is not excessive use of description and detail, the content contains innuendos of kidnapping, rape, and abuse—both physical and mental. If you’re unable to read this material, please do not purchase. If you are ready, welcome aboard and enjoy the ride!

~Aleatha Romig

CHAPTER ONE

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, not the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.

—Charles Darwin

THE FADE INTO consciousness happened slowly, like the melting of ice. The water was still present. It just changed form. Claire's mind couldn't process the entirety of her circumstance. She knew she was awakening, felt the warmth of soft sheets and a thick comforter against her skin, but it felt wrong. Where was she? Suddenly, the ice became liquid and her veins filled with the cold, condensing fluid. Her heartbeat intensified as the poor muscle attempted to pump the viscous solution. The sting of her swollen eyelids brought back memories of her arrival to this place. She strained to listen, to hear anything. The only sound that registered was an incessant ringing within her ears. More with curiosity than courage, she cautiously opened her eyes. Peering around the room, she discovered that she was indeed alone. Momentary relief caused her chest to contract and a sigh to escape her lips.

Under other circumstances, she might relish the amazing softness of the silk sheets or the grandeur of the king-sized bed. Today, however, despite the warm cocoon, her body shivered as the fog of her mind cleared. The memories of the previous night began to surface from the depths of her unconsciousness. Perhaps it had been nightmare. She tried to convince herself the memories weren't real.

But then, how did she get here? And where was here?

Enormous windows, currently covered by golden drapes, allowed just enough sunlight for her eyes to adjust. For the first time since her arrival, she looked, really looked at her surroundings, seeing the four ornately carved corner posts of the bed. They were exquisite, and looking beyond, so was the room where it sat. The alluring bedroom looked larger and more lavish than

any she had ever seen. The room looked like heaven, but she already knew it was hell.

Again, she listened: nothing. The only sounds were the memories in her head. She heard herself screaming until her throat felt raw and pounding on the bedroom door until her clenched fist ached. No one heard, or if anyone heard, no one cared. This beautiful room was her prison.

Slowly, she attempted to sit. The act in itself caused discomfort: more evidence that last night was real. Slowly shifting, she managed to see more of her cell: a sitting area with an overstuffed chair, complementary sofa, small fireplace in the wall surrounded by marble tiles, and a cozy table for two with a crystal vase of fresh flowers. The intimacy of the table caused Claire's stomach to churn. The bile that seeped into her throat tasted vile. She tried desperately to swallow.

Conspicuously missing were dressers or other furniture usually associated with a bedroom, yet dimly, she remembered being told that this was her new bedroom. Looking around the perimeter of the room, she saw beautiful white woodwork: built-in bookcases, shelves, and three doors. The one farthest from her bed appeared solid, firm, and unharmed after the pounding she'd delivered the night before. There was no reason to believe that it would now be unlocked. What Claire did know, with some certainty, was that it held her only avenue to freedom. She needed to find her way back through that door.

Closing her eyes, she recalled the events of last night. As the memories started to flow from the recesses of her unconsciousness, her new goal became to stop them. She failed—seeing *him* behind her closed lids.

Anthony Rawlings was so different from the man she met less than a week ago: the handsome tall man, with brown hair, and the darkest eyes she'd ever seen. He'd been polite, kind, and gentlemanly. Last night, none of those words could be used to describe him. To say he was cruel would not explain what she endured. One could say demanding, aggressive, abrasive, controlling, but above all—brutal.

Shifting slightly, Claire realized that the slightest movement caused her muscles to ache. Her thighs throbbed, her body was tender, and her mouth felt swollen and raw. She remembered his scent, his taste, and the sound of his voice. Those thoughts instigated a revolt deep in the recesses of her stomach. At that moment, the images of him made her heart race, not in anticipation, but fear.

This was insane. Things like this happened on crime shows and movies, not in real life and not to people like her.

She tried to censor the memories, searching for the ones of him finally leaving the room and her futile barrage on the door. Tears fell from her swollen eyes as the visions replayed in her mind. She laid her head back on the velvety pillow and allowed herself the luxury of more sleep: an escape

from this reality.

The next time she woke, Claire knew she couldn't put off looking behind the other doors any longer. She needed to find the entry to the bathroom. The sumptuous carpet enveloped her feet as she stepped from the bed. Despite the plush carpeting, the weight of her body made her legs cry out in pain. Sadly, she remembered crying out more than once. Her internal monologue screamed with unanswered questions: How did this happen? How did I get here? Why am I here? And how can I get out?

The three doors she'd counted earlier were arranged with two near the bed and one by the sitting area. Claire wrapped a sheet around her aching body and slowly approached the lone door: the massive barrier of solid wood—her passage to freedom. Anxiety induced trembling, causing her hands to shake as she slowly reached for the cold metal of the door knob. If it moved, would she flee wrapped only in a sheet? Hell, yes!

Excitement quickly turned to disappointment as the lever remained perfectly horizontal. It didn't even wiggle, as many locked doors do. The barrier stood unyielding. Despite the expected outcome, disappointment caused the pain within Claire's body to intensify. Turning around, she viewed her cell. One of the other two doors had the best chance of holding her desired destination. She opened the first door and revealed a closet, one the size of most bedrooms. It could more accurately be considered a dressing room given the built-in drawers, shoe racks, shelves, and hanging racks. Surprisingly, the racks and shelves were full. These clothes seemed to come straight from a *Saks* photo shoot, not the kind Claire would or could choose for herself. She was more the *Target* or *Vintage* type. These clothes belonged to someone who lived the life of the rich and famous. Who was that someone? Claire wondered why she was in that person's room, and why she remembered being told it was hers.

Opening the next door, Claire found her destination. She stepped into a bathroom like one she'd seen on television, large and very white. The coolness of the tile hit the soles of her bare feet. White marble, white porcelain, silver accents, and glass surrounded her. If it weren't for the plush purple towels, the room would be totally devoid of color. There was a large garden tub and a full glass shower that sported large and small showerheads from every direction. The sink adjoined a dressing table with a large lighted mirror and stool.

She turned to see the person in the mirror. The image frightened Claire as she studied the reflection. Her tangled brown hair framed an unfamiliar face. There were bruises around her lips nearly matching the color of the towels, and her left temple appeared red and swollen. Slowly, dropping the sheet, the visual evidence of the soreness she felt could be seen as red and purple bruises over her body. The vision restarted her tears. With steely

determination, she gripped the lever of another door within the bathroom and found the toilet.

A plush white bathrobe hung near the shower. Twisting the knobs to adjust the water, Claire decided a shower would make her feel better. Hot steamy water hit her skin as she stepped into the spacious stall. The prickling sensation of a thousand needles pierced her shoulders as the hot water flowed over her battered muscles. It was a sensation of both pleasure and pain. She allowed the water to continue its assault, and as time passed and the temperature remained high, her muscles relaxed. The sweet floral aroma of the shampoo and body soap replaced the odors of last night. A renewed sense of strength filled her resolve. Somehow, she would survive this nightmare.

Claire developed a plan as she used the towel to dry her battered body. She would talk to Anthony and explain that this was a mistake. They could split ways, no questions asked, and no charges pressed. The soft robe warmed her, providing a bogus sense of security.

The woman in the mirror looked better; however, her dark hair now fell messily in wet tangles. Without thinking, Claire began to open drawers and cabinets. Just like the closet, the bath was fully stocked. In front of her she saw thousands of dollars' worth of name-brand cosmetics. She found everything from skin care to eyeliner. Of course, there was also an array of hair supplies. She was wearing someone else's robe, sleeping in her bed, and showering in her bathroom. Using her hairbrush only added to the list of intrusions. Claire didn't have many other options.

When Claire opened the door to the bedroom, she was startled to see a tray of food waiting on the dining table. Prior to that moment, she ignored the pangs of hunger. God knows the thoughts of the previous night made her stomach turn, yet the aroma from the covered plate intrigued her. She lifted the lid to discover steaming scrambled eggs, toast, and a side of fresh fruit. On the tray, she also noticed a glass of orange juice, one of water, and a carafe of coffee.

With her stomach full, body relaxed from the shower, and no immediate path to freedom, Claire decided she wanted more sleep. It was then that she realized the bed was made, not only made, but the sheets had been changed. The room appeared as though the horror of last night never occurred. Her body screamed otherwise. She pulled back the covers, climbed between the soft satin sheets, inhaled the fresh clean scent, and closed her eyes. It wasn't the escape she wanted, but it was a temporary diversion.

The knocking at the door near the sitting area woke Claire. She'd been somewhere in a dream, far away. The knock and the unfamiliar surroundings left her temporarily disoriented. How long had she been sleeping? Sunlight, though not as bright, continued to seep from the edge of the drapes. The repeated raps brought her to the present. Yes, she was a twenty-six-year-old

adult, yet at that moment, Claire decided to behave as any five-year-old child would and imitate sleep. Lying still in bed, she heard the door open.

Tentatively opening her eyes, she watched as a woman quietly entered the room. Given Claire's perspective, it was difficult to tell, but the woman appeared taller than her by a few inches with salt-and-pepper hair. Claire assumed she was about the age of her mother, had her mother been alive. As the woman approached, Claire lifted her head and spoke, "I'm sorry if I'm in your room."

"No, Ms. Claire. It's your suite, not mine. I'm here to help you get ready for dinner. My name is Catherine."

Claire slowly sat in amazement. What the hell did she mean get ready for dinner? She was being held prisoner in some luxurious suite, covered in bruises, and this person was supposed to help her get ready for dinner. "I'm not trying to sound ungrateful. But what do you mean 'ready for dinner'?"

"Mr. Rawlings will be here precisely at 7:00 PM for dinner. He expects you to be ready and dressed accordingly. I presumed you might need some assistance."

At first, Claire couldn't wrap her mind around the entire scenario. He wanted her *dressed* for dinner. Who the hell did he think he was? "Listen, if you want to assist me, let me out of here." Claire did her best to keep her voice from raising another octave, yet the fear of seeing Anthony and the possibility of escape made that all but impossible.

"Ms. Claire, that is not up to me. I'm here to assist you as I can." It didn't make any sense. Yet in the desperation of the situation, for some reason, Claire believed this lady. Catherine continued, "We only have an hour. Perhaps we could begin with your hair?"

Undaunted by Claire's appearance or even the circumstance of her presence, Catherine's calmness eased Claire. She shook her head, remembering the resolve from her shower, spoke with a convincing authority, "Catherine, thank you for offering to help, but I don't plan on dressing for dinner. I actually believe there has been a mistake. I will be leaving here soon." While Claire continued, Catherine came and went from the closet with a blue cocktail dress and matching shoes. "Oh, I don't know whom those clothes belong to."

"Why, miss, they belong to you. Now, we really should move along, and even if you don't plan to eat, do you not need to wear clothes?" Claire noticed her pattern of speech seemed formal. She couldn't place the origin. It definitely wasn't the Georgia accent she appreciated but worked daily not to duplicate.

Catherine gently took Claire's hand and walked her into the bathroom. Claire obediently sat at the dressing table as Catherine began to softly brush her hair. She decided to not protest this kind woman. Instead, she would save

her energy to face Anthony.

"There are cosmetics in the drawers in front of you. Perhaps you could begin to apply some while I do your hair." Then she added, "You're very pretty without it, but I believe it will make you feel better after sleeping most of the day."

Claire looked into the mirror. Seeing her eyes, temple, and lips, she began to cry. It wasn't the sobs of earlier, but a rush of tears quietly flowing down her cheeks.

"Now, miss, that won't help the situation. Mr. Rawlings appreciates punctuality. Crying will only make the cosmetics run."

"I don't want to face *him*." After the first desperate sentence, she hesitated. Claire didn't know this woman. She obviously worked for Anthony. Why would she confide in her? Then Claire looked in the reflection, not at herself but at the woman behind her. Her eyes were the color of steel, gray and soft. Her expression wasn't one of duty or pity, but of compassion. It may have been wishful thinking, but for some reason, the words continued to flow. "After last night, I feel so... dirty. You don't know what he did, what he made me do. I'm too embarrassed." Her words came accompanied by tears, and her nose began to run.

Catherine's voice held no judgment for either Claire or Anthony, instead desire for understanding, as if that could be possible from Claire. "I have known Mr. Rawlings for a long time. Did anything happen last night that he did not want to happen?"

Claire shook her head. "No. Everything that happened *he* wanted to happen."

"Then there's no need for you to be embarrassed. When you do something that he doesn't want you to do, *that* is when you don't want to face Mr. Rawlings."

Catherine went to the cabinet, removed a washcloth, and wet it in the sink. She handed it to Claire, who compliantly wiped her face and began to apply make-up. It wasn't long until they were satisfied with the results. The bruises were concealed quite well under a covering of foundation and powder. The lipstick made the swelling less noticeable. When Catherine entered the bathroom with the dress, Claire realized she was naked under the robe.

"Umm, I don't have any lingerie."

"Yes, miss. Do you not remember Mr. Rawlings's rules?" Without waiting for a response, Catherine continued, "No underclothes, ever."

Claire fought the fog of last night. She couldn't understand why the memories were so fuzzy, yet somewhere she had some recollection of such a conversation or, more accurately, a demand. Then again, this entered the world of ridiculous. Who the hell was he, that he even thought he could make such demands, and they would be followed?

Catherine assisted Claire with the dress, so as not to mess her hair and make-up.

Claire vowed to herself regardless of how absurd it sounded: I'm not sure how or when, but I will leave here, get away from him, and go to a place where women wear underwear.

Catherine smiled approvingly at her as she stepped in front of the mirror. "Mr. Rawlings will be pleased. Now, I must go; he'll be here soon."

The reminder of his impending arrival sucked some of the resolve from Claire's demeanor as well as the air from her lungs. Catherine knew him. Maybe if she stayed, he would... Claire didn't know how to finish that thought. He would be nice? Let her leave? It just seemed safer with this woman around.

"Perhaps you could stay until after his arrival?"

Catherine didn't respond, but the look of satisfaction briefly changed to sadness. Instantaneously, Claire knew that Catherine's departure was beyond both of their control. Claire would be face-to-face with her fear: the man that abused and dominated her the night before. She also knew that he was her only means of escape. For that reason and that reason alone, she would face him. "Thank you again for your help. I really doubt I will be here tomorrow. He and I will discuss it over dinner."

Catherine nodded. It was an acknowledgment of Claire's statement, not an affirmation of its accuracy. Then she left the bathroom. Claire heard a faint *beep* as Catherine left the suite. It reminded her of the noise made by a car fob.

While still in the bathroom, her heart rate increased when she heard the faint *beep* again.

He didn't knock. He just opened the door and entered. Claire imagined him surveying the empty suite. If she stayed in the bathroom, would he eventually come for her? Or leave? While she debated, he waited silently in the bedroom. It took a minute or two, but slowly, Claire opened the bathroom door and entered the suite.

She used all her strength to suppress the fears that screamed to get out, determined to meet him head-on at his mind game. The first things she saw as she entered the suite were his eyes—his dark black eyes—resembling voids or black holes. His lips were moving. He was talking, yet Claire could only hear the memories of the previous night. She walked to the bookcase at the far end of the suite, feigning strength.

The fake resolve melted as she turned to see the eyes staring directly at her. Then almost instantaneously, he was there, right in front of her. His proximity caused her stomach to wrench, bringing back the nasty bile from earlier.

His large hand captured her chin, pulling her eyes and face toward the

dark voids. His strong voice was deep, slow, and authoritative, “Shall we try this once more.” It wasn’t a question but a statement. “It is customary for one person to respond to the greeting of another. I said good evening.”

Claire’s knees went weak at his touch. She wanted to yell, to run, but she couldn’t let herself. If she couldn’t be strong, she could at least avoid fainting. “I’m sorry. I don’t believe I’m feeling well.” With his grip still upon her chin, she knew he could feel her body tremble.

He repeated, “Good evening, Claire.” This time, it was more drawn-out. His eyes were so cold. Claire couldn’t distinguish what they said, only see the depth of their infinite darkness.

“Good evening, Anthony.” She would tell herself she sounded strong, but she didn’t.

At that moment, the door opened again, and a young man pushing a cart brought them their meal. Claire started to walk toward the table, but Anthony’s hand seized her arm, stopping her. She looked back up at him, into those eyes. He reached with his other hand to lift her dress and place a hand on her buttocks.

The shock of his touch quickly turned to anger. Her green eyes flashed fire, and her neck stiffened. “What the hell...?” Her impulse was to lash out, but the hand that held her arm tightened its grip, causing her to forget her words.

“I see you can manage to follow at least one rule. Shall we eat?” His grip loosened as his voice attempted a reasonable tone.

Anthony pulled back Claire’s chair at the intimate table. She eyed the display: It all looks so nice and is such a masquerade. The food smelled wonderful, but Claire’s stomach wouldn’t allow her to eat. All of her pep talks about standing up to him proved worthless. Instead, she sat politely, playing with her food and nodding attentively.

Looking at the dinner, Claire felt that something was missing, besides common sense. The young man had poured water into the glasses, yet to make the masquerade complete, at such a dinner there should have been wine or champagne.

It was almost as if he read her mind when Anthony commented, “I do not like to drink alcohol. It inhibits the senses.”

She immediately thought how nice it would be to have a fifth of Jack Daniels.

Anthony clearly relished her discomfort. “Don’t you like your food?”

“I do. I guess I’m just not hungry.”

“I heard that today you have only eaten breakfast. I suggest you eat. You will need your strength.” As he took another bite, he sent her a grin which didn’t reach his eyes.

Claire used every ounce of energy to remain seated and not run. Besides,

the door was shut, and she heard the faint *beep* when the waiter left.

Apparently, the night before was only a prelude. Once Anthony finished eating, he stood and took Claire's hand. Her trembling increased as she stood. He smiled and held her at arm's length as he asked, "Did you choose this dress for the evening?"

"No, it was Catherine." She remained tall and defiant even though she knew her will would not be considered in his plans.

"Yes, she knows me well. Now take it off." No sweet talk, no kisses, nothing. Just a demand to remove her dress. Claire didn't move. She glared first at him and then at the floor.

Taking a deep breath and returning her eyes to him, she said, "I think we need to talk about this—" In a sudden movement, the dress fell from her shoulders as he tore the lavish fabric from her body. Claire stood in shock, wearing only high heels.

"Apparently, you do not remember all the rules. Rule number one is to do as you are told."

The trembling intensified as tears teetered on her painted eyelids. No words came from her mouth. It was all right. Anthony had other plans for her mouth. He pushed her down, directed her to kneel, and unzipped his pants. She noted immediately that he followed his own rules: no underwear. He didn't speak but roughly engaged her movement. At first, fearful of suffocating, she attempted to fight and back away, but he entwined his fingers in her hair and directed her as he found fit. From there, the evening continued until about 1:00 AM.

When Anthony finally left the room, Claire threw back the blankets, grabbed the robe, and rushed to the door. Her hand gripped the smooth gray lever and pulled with all her might. It didn't budge. She formed a fist and pounded again. Her hand throbbed, yet no one responded. The only answer was an eerie stillness.

Claire reached for something, anything. Finding the vase of flowers, she threw it against the wall. The crystal shattered, showering the wall and carpet with crystal shards and water. The flowers unable to drink, scattered on the floor, left to wilt and die. Claire sank to the ground, tears flowing. Succumbing to the exhaustion and desperation, she fell asleep where she lay.



THE NEXT MORNING, Anthony entered the suite. The sound of the *beep* and the opening door startled Claire. She rose and their eyes met. He surveyed the suite: a lamp overturned by the bed, a scarf tied to one of the bedposts, and the broken vase near their feet. He smiled. "Good morning, Claire."

"Good morning, Anthony," she said with more determination than she'd been able to muster last evening. "I want you to know I have decided to go home. I will be leaving here today."

"Do you not like your accommodations?" Anthony's black eyes shone as his smile widened. "I don't believe you'll be leaving so soon. We have a legally binding agreement." He removed a bar napkin from his suit pocket. "Dated and signed by both of us."

Claire stared, astonished as her mind started to turn. This whole situation was so idiotic it couldn't possibly be real. Who in their right mind thought a bar napkin was a legal agreement? And even if it was, which was like a snowball's chance in hell, it never gave rights to abuse, demean, or condemn a person to slavery. Dumbfounded, she stared—speechless.

Anthony continued, "Perhaps you don't remember. You agreed to work for me, to do whatever I deemed fit or pleasing, in exchange for me paying off all of your debts."

Claire's head throbbed. She recalled something of a napkin, maybe a job offer, but it was fuzzy. Besides, she would stay in debt and work double or triple shifts at the bar before agreeing to this!

"Apparently, you've been busy in the last twenty-six years. With education, rent, credit cards, and car, you have managed to accumulate approximately 215 thousand dollars of debt. This agreement was dated March 15, and as with any legally binding agreement, you or I had three days for recession. Today is March 20. I currently *own* you, until your debt is paid. You will not be leaving until our agreement is complete. End of discussion."

In desperation, her trembling resumed, and she found her voice. "It is *not* the end of this discussion! This is ludicrous! An agreement doesn't give you the right to rape me! I am leaving!"

She eyed the door to the hallway, only a few feet away and miraculously left open. Without warning, Anthony's hand contacted her left cheek and sent her the other direction across the floor. He slowly walked to where she lay. He didn't bother to bend down, merely looked at her from high above, and repeated, "Perhaps in time, your memory will improve. It seems to be an issue. Let me remind you again, rule number one is that you will do as you are told. If I say a discussion is over, it is over." Picking up the napkin and placing it in his suit coat pocket, he continued, "And this written agreement states *whatever is pleasing to me*, means consensual, not rape."

Still towering over her, he straightened his suit jacket and smoothed his tie. "I have decided that it would be better if you do not leave your suite for a while. Don't worry. We have plenty of time: 215 thousand dollars' worth of time." With that, he turned to leave the suite, the sound of broken crystal echoing from under his Gucci loafers. His controlled, imposing tone terrified Claire more than his words. He spoke with such authority it left her powerless

to move or speak.

"I'll inform the staff that you may have your breakfast, after you clean up this crystal." He disappeared behind the large white door.

Claire heard the *beep* and the lock as she allowed herself to reach up and touch her stinging cheek. The total silence returned as she looked at the mess before her. Though it was a small, insignificant protest, she heard herself say, "I'd rather starve than clean this up."

A while later, with tears in her eyes and the sound of sniffles, she found herself crawling around the floor retrieving pieces of crystal. She had most of the large pieces picked up when she noticed the blood on her robe. After investigating, Claire determined that it came from a cut on her hand. The blurriness of her vision made the task difficult as she tried unsuccessfully to remove the sliver of crystal from her palm. Suddenly, the too-familiar *beep* made her turn toward the door, terrified of Anthony's return.

Catherine entered, looked around, and shook her head. "Ms. Claire, let me clean that. You'll end up cutting yourself."

"I believe I already have." Claire held out her hand. Very tenderly, Catherine led Claire into the bathroom and removed the crystal. She then cleaned and bandaged her hand. When they returned to the suite, the evidence of the previous night was gone. The suite was clean, no overturned lamps, no scarves, and the vase was gone. Sitting on the table was a tray of food.

Claire walked to the table and obediently ate her breakfast—alone. An overwhelming feeling of desperation filled her chest. She was trapped, alone, and didn't know what to do.

Grandma always said a new perspective was helpful. Claire decided to take a shower again, and then hopefully, she would think of something.

CHAPTER TWO

-Five days earlier-

The trust of the innocent is the liar's most useful tool.

—Stephen King

T

HE DAY FILLED with meetings served its purpose. First, he met with the station manager, then endless hours with the sales team listening to budget reports followed by proposals. Truthfully, these meetings didn't usually warrant the attendance of the parent corporation's CEO. Judging by the way WKPZ's executives fell over themselves to justify every expense and augment every proposal, they demonstrated that they at least recognized this visit as extraordinary. Truth be known, Anthony Rawlings didn't give a damn about the two-bit television station. It already served its purpose. If he closed it tomorrow, he wouldn't lose sleep; however, the meetings revealed that the station was turning a profit, and given the current state of economy, profitable was good. When he returned to the main office, he would assign a team to investigate an impending sale. Wouldn't it be great if this acquired station could reap both personal and monetary benefits?

After the conclusion of the meetings, he agreed to a social outing with the new station personnel director and his assistant. If they knew anything about him, they would realize that this was completely out of character. Totally self-serving, his acceptance of their invitation came with one stipulation: they must go to the *Red Wing*. He told them, he'd heard it had the best fried green tomatoes in Atlanta, Georgia.

Thankfully, the two associates had families that were waiting earnestly for their return. Anthony listened attentively to their personnel plans and thanked them for their devotion to WKPZ. After sipping a *Red Wing* signature beer and consuming a portion of the fried green tomato appetizer, Mr. Rawlings insisted that they take leave and spend time with their loved ones; however, if he were questioned under oath, he wouldn't be able to recall one word they

said. His attention was focused on the brown-haired, green-eyed bartender. He knew she was scheduled to start her shift at four o'clock and would be here. As soon as his associates left, he texted his driver and informed him that he would be at the *Red Wing* until late. Then, he casually walked to an empty stool at the end of the bar, near the wall. It reduced the probability of anyone striking up conversation by fifty-percent. He would have preferred one-hundred-percent, but damn, he couldn't have everything. Yet.

The only object of his conversation and attention would be the smiling young woman on the other side of the shiny smooth wooden slab.

"Hey, handsome, do you need another beer?"

Anthony lifted his gaze and looked into her emerald eyes. He had a handsome face and knew after many years of practice exactly how to use it; however, at this moment, his smile was genuine. *She* was finally talking to him. It had been a long, lonely road, but the destination was in sight. "Thank you, I would."

Sizing up the remaining contents of his glass, she asked, "Is that one of our custom wheats?"

"Well, yes, it's the La Bière Blanche."

She smiled sweetly and hurried away to fill him another glass. Returning with the amber liquid, she efficiently removed his empty tumbler, replaced it with the full glass, and a fresh Red Wing napkin.

"I would like to start a tab," Anthony said.

"That would be great. If I could have your credit card, I'll begin one right away."

Anthony opened his Armani jacket and removed the wallet from the inside pocket. He had so many things he wanted to say, but he had all night. Hell, he had forever. Her shift wouldn't end until 10:00 PM, and he planned to spend the evening sitting right there. Handing her his platinum Visa, he watched as she read the name.

"Thank you, Mr. Rawlings. I'll return this to you in a minute." Her smile or expression never wavered. She turned away toward the cash register. Anthony sat back against the chair with a brief moment of satisfaction. She didn't know who he was. This was perfect.

During the next few hours, Anthony observed as Claire chatted and flirted with customer after customer. Her attentions were friendly and attentive, but never overtly personal. Some of the customers were greeted by name as they found their way to an empty seat. Many knew her name before she could introduce herself. Anthony assumed they were regulars. Both men and women appeared pleased to have her wait on them. She moved nonstop, clearing away empty glasses and plates and replacing them with more of the same or checks in need of payment. She wiped the shiny wooden bar and smiled even when a comment deserved a strong retort. After so much time

watching her from afar, being this close gave him a rush greater than securing a multimillion-dollar deal. Perhaps it was the knowledge of what was to come.



AFTER TENDING BAR on and off again for years, Claire Nichols knew how to read people. More importantly, she genuinely liked the little quirks that made them real. For instance, take Mr. La Bière Blanche, he'd been watching her for the last few hours, like a lion sizing up its prey. She judged that he was at least ten years her senior, but hid his age well, behind that perfect smile, dark, wavy styled hair, and amazing brown, almost-black eyes. Claire smiled a secretive smile. She was watching him too.

"What time do you get off?" His strong, husky voice resonated above the clamor of the bar, patrons, and music.

"Now, Anthony, isn't that what you said your name is?" Claire's chatty work tone contained the slightest of a Southern drawl, the kind of accent you pick up from being around it so much. Her roots in Indiana with a mother that taught English wouldn't allow her to drag those syllables out too far—unless on purpose.

Smiling a devilish grin and flashing those sensual eyes, he met her gaze. "Yes, that's correct, and if I recall, your name is Claire."

"And, even though I'm flattered, I don't usually see my customers outside this esteemed establishment."

"All right, what time do you get off? Perhaps we could sit in one of those booths, right here..." He gestured toward the dance floor. "...in this esteemed establishment and talk? I would like to know more about you."

Damn. He was smoother talking than any of the regular Joes that sat on these stools. And now that his silk tie was in the pocket of his Armani suit coat, and the top button of his silk shirt was undone, his casual business persona was incredibly sexy.

"Now tell me again what brings you to Atlanta. You aren't from around here, are you?" Claire said, leaning against the bar.

"Business, and no, but I think I'm the one who wanted to ask the questions." His tone demonstrated a playful quality and at the same time exhibited focus and control.

Claire's intuition told her that he was used to getting his way. Something made her wonder if that's what made him successful in business. His appearance definitely said success. She pondered if that transcended to his personal life.

Claire listened and watched as Anthony's eyes glistened. He was tall, and

now that the coat had been removed, she could tell he was muscular, with a wide chest and firm waist. Most importantly, his left hand had an empty fourth finger. That would definitely be a red flag. Against her better judgment, Claire decided she wanted to answer his questions.

“Okay.” Claire smiled charmingly. “But I will’ve been standing behind this bar for six hours straight. I can’t promise I’ll be the best company.”

“Then I take that as a yes? But did you tell me the time? Or am I still waiting for that answer?”

She found herself absorbed in his eyes.

“Yo! Hey, sweetheart, how about you give us some service down here?” Claire’s attention was suddenly pulled away from the hold of those amazing eyes. The asshole down the bar needed more Jack and Coke. As she started to walk away, Anthony reached for her hand, which had been resting on the bar only inches from his. His warm touch made her skin tingle. He didn’t ask again, but his expression did...

“At 10:00 PM. I get off at 10:00 PM.” She removed her hand from under his, shook her head, and walked down the bar, smiling to herself. She needed to find out what the asshole wanted.



THE DEEP-RED VINYL seats of the semicircular booth situated on the edge of the dance floor tried unsuccessfully to imitate fine upholstery. Music filled the air, too loud and too fast. In Anthony’s mind, it created the perfect climate, requiring him and Claire to sit close in an effort to hear one another. He also had a bottle of the Red Wing’s finest Cabernet Sauvignon. Looking at his watch for the hundredth time, he read the hands as they said 10:30 PM. It was then that he saw Claire walking across the empty dance floor toward his booth.

This night was definitely filled with out-of-character behaviors. Not only did Anthony Rawlings *not* fraternize with regional associates, he *never* waited for anyone. Under any other circumstance he would have been up and gone by 10:05 PM. His friends, associates, and employees all knew his obsession with punctuality. Tonight was different.

As Claire eased herself into the booth, she smiled a fatigued grin and apologized, “I’m sorry for the delay. There was a problem with the cash register, but all’s well now.”

He gently touched her hand. Momentarily, he was transfixed by the contrast: large and small. “I was beginning to wonder if you were standing me up.” His grin hinted toward levity. “But since I could see you across the room, I hoped I might still have a chance at friendly conversation.”

Claire's exhale and upturned lips told him she was relieved. Was it because he was still waiting or merely that her shift was complete?

"Perhaps we could have a glass of wine, and you could enjoy sitting instead of standing."

"I believe that would be very nice."

Anthony poured the wine and noticed Claire's expression relax. The transformation occurring before him was from bartender, to the real Claire Nichols. He watched as she took the glass, placed her lips on the rim, closed her eyes, and relished the thick red liquid on her tongue. Anthony fought the urge to think too much about her actions. "So what's a classy girl like you doing waiting on stooges like us?" Anthony's rich voice refocused Claire's attention.

Her eyes twinkled with emerald lights as she turned to face him. "Why, Anthony, I do believe that self-deprecating statement was a compliment to me, in a way." Her intonation held the Southern accent far from her native Indiana cadence. He only arched his eyebrows in response, waiting patiently for an answer. Claire shook her head succumbing to his charm. "I'm an out-of-work meteorologist. My news station was bought about a year ago. In their infinite wisdom they decided I was no longer needed. So this..." She said as she glided her free hand open above the table. "...is my new glamorous life. Don't knock it. It pays my student loans as well as multiple other bills."

His deep laughter was nonjudgmental. "Wouldn't you rather be doing the weather thing than this?"

"Of course, but honestly, this isn't so bad. I have some great friends here. There's always something happening, and I meet nice people like you." Claire took another sip of the wine and leaned a little closer. "So that's my story in a nutshell. Sir, it is your turn. You said you are here on business. What kind of business do you do?"

"I'm actually involved in many businesses. I came to Atlanta for an acquisition, and some associates convinced me to come here to your revered establishment to try the world-famous fried green tomatoes."

"Oh, they did. Did you?"

Anthony nodded. "Yes, I did."

Claire looked into her glass in an attempt to hide the snicker that escaped her lips. "Did you like them?"

He likewise looked into his glass. "No, I don't believe I'm destined for Georgian cuisine." Unable to keep it silenced any longer, Claire's laughter caused him to look up. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because I think they are awful! Every time someone orders them, I want to whisper, 'No, don't do it.' It's just that they are so—"

"Slimy!" They said in unison and chuckled.

The conversation progressed effortlessly. She asked about his acquisition.

Would his trip be successful? Anthony was honestly surprised at her depth and knowledge. It was a shame that her news station hadn't kept her on. She deserved so much better than tending bar. Of course, that was what he told her. They discussed her career opportunities. Due to Anthony's involvement in multiple endeavors, he offered the possibility of assistance with more profitable employment. Claire thanked him for his offer, but doubted his ability or desire to truly assist.

"You know, your destiny could be as simple as an offer and a signature away." He channeled every deal he ever made, which were more than he could count or recall. Placing a napkin on the table, he drew her attention to the center design. "Just imagine, instead of the swirly lettering saying *Red Wing* it was blocked and read, *Weather Channel*."

The bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon was almost empty. Claire closed her eyes and did as Anthony instructed: she imagined. Exhaling audibly, she said, "That would be wonderful. It would be the offer of a meteorologist's dreams."

Closing in on the deal, he said, "Well, Claire, if this napkin were that contract..." He reached for a pen in his breast pocket and wrote at the top of the napkin *Job Contract*. "...would you be willing to sign? Would you really give this all up for a job offer?"

She didn't blink. "In a heartbeat!" Removing the pen from Anthony's hand, she signed, *Claire Nichols* next to the bar's insignia.

About midnight, Claire thanked Anthony for the lovely company and explained that she was very tired from her long day and needed to get home.

"I'll be in town for a few more days. Perhaps I could call you for dinner? It isn't proper to offer a lady alcohol without food."

"Thank you, I'm honored, but I believe I'll chuck this up to my brush with an amazing gentleman and go on with my glamorous existence. I fear that the *Weather Channel* will not be contacting me anytime soon."

Although her refusal surprised him, he didn't let it show. In the long run, it wouldn't matter, but he would play into her chastity. "I truly understand; dangerous man from out of town tries to learn your secrets and offers to help you with your aspirations. You're wise to keep your distance." Although his grin had sinister written all over it, he assumed she would detect the facade.

"A girl can't be too careful. Truly, I'm honored, and I don't think you seem that dangerous." She began to scoot out of the booth, but he caught her hand. Their eyes met, he bowed his head, and kissed the back of her hand.

"It was wonderful to meet you, Claire Nichols." With a smile, she retrieved her hand and slowly slid from the booth.

The next minute, he was alone. He took the pen, signed his name, and wrote the date on the same napkin. He carefully folded it and placed it in the pocket of his suit jacket. Then he pulled out his phone and texted his driver:

"PICK ME UP NOW."

He always used full words. Text language was a joke. Closing his eyes, he thought, yes—my acquisition is going quite well. Thank you for asking.

CHAPTER THREE

To look backward for a while is to refresh the eye, to restore it, and to render it the more fit for its prime function of looking—forward.

—Margaret Fairless Barber, *The Roadmender*

C LAIRE CONTEMPLATED HER situation as she ate. She hadn't taken the napkin discussion seriously. Anthony probably expected that. She didn't prepare to move from her Atlanta apartment or even consider the possibility. His recollection of a document that legally bound them was a complete shock. Claire's gut told her it wasn't legal, but what recourse did she have to fight from this room? She'd searched high and low for a telephone, computer, or some form of communication—nothing.

She actually thought she would walk out of this twisted nightmare; however, it wasn't a nightmare, twisted or otherwise. It was her reality. Her mind searched for a way to survive and escape.

Claire relished the warm oatmeal, fruit, bacon, perfectly brewed coffee, and juice. Yesterday, she'd hardly eaten. Today, she was ravenous, devouring every ounce, even checking twice for more coffee in the carafe. At least starvation wasn't part of Anthony's plan.

Standing for a shower, she moved gingerly, experiencing the same aches and pains of the day before—perhaps intensified. Claire wasn't sure if she wanted to see herself in the mirrors, as she cautiously stepped into the generous bathroom and slowly approached the dressing table. The image that reflected back looked scary: hair messed and tangled, face sporting various shades of red and blue. The worst image had to be her lips: swollen, looking as if she'd received Botox injections. This time there were no tears; instead, she stared and considered.

Grandma Nichols told her more than once she was an unusually strong young woman. In Claire's mind Grandma was always strong. Grandpa's work in law enforcement took him away from home. Grandma never complained.

Instead, she was the heart of the family: always there for everyone and often giving advice, such as: "It's not the circumstances that make a person a success. It's how that person responds to those circumstances." Grandma believed every situation could be made better by the right attitude. Claire dropped the robe. Beholding the vision in the mirror, she believed Grandma never anticipated a situation like this.

After the shower, Claire decided to *not* dress appropriately in expectation of an Anthony visitation. If he were to walk in her suite, he would find her in jeans, a t-shirt, and fuzzy socks. Furthermore, there would be no make-up and no hair primping. It may be a small act of rebellion, but Claire didn't have many rebellious options. Every bone in her body wanted to fight. She tried to fight during the past two nights, but that hadn't worked well.

Entering the grand closet/dressing room, Claire realized that yesterday she hadn't truly appreciated all it had to offer. First, she began to look for underwear, but remembered that it didn't exist in any of the drawers. So, Claire searched for jeans. There were multiple pairs, different shades of blue with different leg styles. Wearing jeans must not break any rules; if it did, they wouldn't be there. The brands she read on the labels she'd only seen in stores like *Saks*, *Hudson*, *J Brand*, and *MIH*. She never in her life tried on jeans like these. They were soft, amazingly comfortable, and fit perfectly.

Feeling a chill as she removed the robe, Claire decided a sweater would be better than a t-shirt. The countless choices were equally as fashionable. She decided on a *Donna Karan* pink, fuzzy cashmere sweater. Before putting it on, she looked for a bra. Apparently, bras were against the rules too; however, she did find a drawer full of various colored camisoles. She chose pink.

It was like a treasure hunt, as she searched the drawers and cabinets of the closet. Still rummaging for fuzzy socks, she found multiple drawers of lingerie. The silky black and red negligees in multiple lengths made her uncomfortable as they reminded her of a *Victoria's Secret* fashion show. Finally, she discovered socks. Claire couldn't comprehend that all of these lavish and extravagant clothes were for her. Truthfully, she didn't want them.

Driven by curiosity and boredom, she read the labels on the evening dresses: *Aidan Mattox*, *Armani*, *Donna Karan*, and *Emilio Pucci*. These dresses alone could pay her rent in Atlanta for six months. Fleetingly, she wondered about last night's dress. Its tag would remain a mystery since it disappeared when the room was cleaned.

Next, she inspected the shoes: pumps, sandals, boots, and slip-ons—most with four-inch heels or more. The brands were equally as high-priced as the dresses: *Prada*, *Calvin Klein*, *Dior*, *Kate Spade*, and *Yves Saint Lauren*. Never really a shoe person, Claire usually wore casual footwear: *Crocs* and sneakers, rarely heels and never that high. Of course, every pair was her size.

Her mind slipped back to high school. Ten years ago, she would have done anything for a closet supplied like the one in which she stood. Back then, her sister helped her fit in despite her parents' modest income. Emily took her to consignment shops, bargain-hunted and shopped sale racks. It worked. Claire was part of the *in* crowd, wearing the right clothes, shoes, and carrying the right purse. As she turned slowly and took in all the clothes, she wished she didn't have this closet or any of the memories.

Hearing the *beep*, she knew the suite door had opened. Her heart raced. Who was here? How long had she been in the closet? Stepping into the suite, she saw lunch being delivered by the same young man that brought dinner the night before. Claire hadn't notice last night, but he appeared Latino. She asked him about the food. He smiled and said, "I bring Ms. Claire lunch." She asked about Catherine, if she would be visiting. He replied, "I bring Ms. Claire lunch." Claire smiled and thanked him for the lunch. Other questions seemed senseless.

Each response and smile the young man offered was unaccompanied by eye contact. Claire thought about his job: bringing her food. Obviously, with the lack of make-up, he could see her bruises. Hell, he opened a locked door to bring her food. What did he think of her, of the situation? The idea of seeing her plight from someone else's perspective weighed heavily on her chest. Sadness intensified at the realization: she once again was completely alone.

Instead of going to the table, Claire sat on the sofa and wrapped her arms around her knees. Staring into the fireplace, she contemplated turning it on. Time passed without record. She didn't remember sleeping. Her position didn't change. The unbearable quiet and isolation combined to create a kind of time-and-space continuum. It was after 3:00 PM on the bedside clock before she moved from the sofa. It was then she realized that the food remained on the table, untouched.

The subtle glow from behind the curtains reminded Claire that she hadn't looked out the windows since she awoke yesterday morning. When she checked for a means of escape the first night, everything was locked tight. At that time, the nocturnal darkness wouldn't permit her to see past her own reflection.

Of the multiple golden draperies, the largest covered a section of wall near the sitting area. Claire moved toward it, searching for a cord to pull to make the draperies move and reveal the secrets on the other side. After minutes of seeking, Claire found a switch. Tentatively, she pushed it up. Instantaneously, the draperies opened, revealing tall French doors with a balcony beyond.

In her hysteria the other night, she hadn't noticed the French doors, thinking instead that they were only windows. She definitely didn't see the balcony. Her mind raced with possibilities: maybe from the balcony she could

climb down. Alas no, the French doors were locked and bolted. Expectedly the key was nowhere to be found. Claire had a good idea who possessed it.

The view beyond the doors revealed a massive uninhabited countryside: for miles only trees—thousands and thousands of trees—on very flat land. Once she stopped seeing the magnitude of unpopulated land, she realized that the trees weren't green, and the earth wasn't red. When she and Anthony made their contractual agreement, they were at a bar, the *Red Wing*, in Atlanta. What she saw from her locked balcony doors didn't look like Georgia.

She yearned for her home in Atlanta. Even though she wasn't from there, her career path had taken her to WKPZ, a local affiliate out of Atlanta. That path started with a major in meteorology at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Being born and raised in Fishers, outside of Indianapolis, college in Indiana was expected. Her dreams almost ended when both of her parents tragically died during her junior year. Miraculously, she received a scholarship. That, with her student loans and bartending, allowed her to continue her education. After graduation, her path took her to a one-year unpaid internship in Upstate New York. Being in the weather business, she should have realized how much she would hate the weather in Albany; however, it was the ability to live with her sister and brother-in-law that made the offer easy to accept. Recently married, Emily and John were very willing to help Claire any way they could. Emily taught school, and John recently started practicing law with an esteemed firm in Albany. Since the two were high school sweethearts, Claire knew John most of her life. Living with them was easy. In hindsight, maybe not for the newlyweds; but for Claire, they were her only family.

When the offer came toward the end of her internship for WKPZ, Claire willingly followed her path to Atlanta. She figured the Vandersols needed some time alone, the weather was better in Atlanta, and the job was everything she'd prayed for. As the years continued, she learned more and more about the business, earned respect, notoriety, and a growing income. The station manager told her more than once that her willingness to learn and work made her a rising star.

The path hit a roadblock in April of 2009 when WKPZ was purchased by a large corporate network. Claire wasn't the only person to lose her job. Actually, over half of the veterans and most of the interns and assistants were let go. By then, she had student loans, an apartment, car and credit card debt. Honestly, that credit card and bartending kept food on the table while she looked for new employment. She considered leaving Atlanta. But she liked the city, climate, and people.

In Atlanta, she could depend on indigo blue skies and rusted red dirt. The vision out her window was black and white, like an old photograph. The ground, trees, and grass were colorless. The cloud-covered sky hung low and

endless. The word that came to mind was *cold*. She could be in Indiana, Michigan, or anywhere in the Midwest. They all looked alike. She hated winter, the darkness, and lack of color. Now, she was staring at it through the windows of her prison.

Claire wondered if she should have opened the drapes. Her discovery made her situation direr. If she weren't in Atlanta, where was she? And how did she get here? She looked at the stupid switch and considered shutting away the bleak outside world. It wasn't helping her attitude. Claire decided the switch didn't help her attitude, nor did the non-English speaking servant, the expensive clothes, or the lavish surroundings. She was being held prisoner by a crazy man who somehow believed that he now owned her. Her location, luxurious surroundings, fancy clothes—none of it mattered. She could have been in a cinder block cell. She was still a prisoner, and the stupid extravagant stuff wouldn't change that.

As hours passed into days, Claire had nothing to do but think. She mostly thought about escaping: fantasizing about running through the massive wooded forest outside her window. In her fantasy, salvation was through the trees, but she couldn't get outside the room, much less to the trees. After a few days in a moment of heated desperation, Claire took one of the chairs from the table and tried to break the panes of glass on the French doors. The damn chair bounced off the glass. She searched the suite for anything heavy. The closest thing was a thick book. Even with repeated strikes, the windows remained intact.

The hours and days spent alone made her yearn for the hustle and bustle of the *Red Wing*. She wondered about the regulars and her coworkers. Had anyone reported her missing? These thoughts usually resulted in tears and a headache. In an attempt at self-preservation and sanity, she began to think about the past. Was there something in the past that led to this?

Liking earth science and weather, meteorology seemed a natural choice. She loved the unknown. As a teenager she experienced her first tornado. The power and unpredictability of the storm fascinated her. It exhilarated her to watch warm and cold fronts collide. She loved to learn more about the whys and hows. The computers could help you predict the weather. But it is such a small part. Why do some fronts stall and create floods when days before the models predicted only an inch of rain? How can a warm sunny day suddenly turn stormy? She wanted to understand it better, to control the outcomes in some way, and perhaps minimize its destructive forces. But now a degree in meteorology seemed useless.

-NEAR THE END OF MARCH-

HE'D BEEN IN the little apartment on multiple occasions. Thankfully, this would be his last visit. Looking at his *TAG Heuer* watch, he knew the movers should be there in thirty minutes. He slowly walked around the small rooms. Starting in her bedroom, he surveyed her remaining belongings. Everything else, clothes and household items, had been placed in boxes labeled for donation. The full-sized bed was now stripped with only the mattress, boxed springs, and frame remaining.

On top of the dresser were the items Anthony pondered. There were pictures in frames, indicating sentimental attachment. He knew most of the faces, some he'd seen in person, and others he'd learned about through whatever means necessary. There was a picture of her grandparents in one of those cheap frames labeled *Grandparents*. Then there was an old picture of Claire with her sister, Emily, and their parents, taken in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. If he had to guess, Claire was about twelve or thirteen. There was a close-up of Claire and Emily at Emily's wedding. He would have known the location even without the evidence of Emily's veil. He remembered the day. It was hot and humid, even for Indiana. The last was a more recent photo of Emily and John sitting on a sofa.

A few pieces of jewelry sat on top of her dresser. The inexpensive pieces had been included in the donation boxes. These items, however, were of finer quality. A pearl necklace on a white gold chain was the same one Claire wore in the wedding picture with Emily. There was also a pair of diamond earrings. As Anthony fingered the diamond studs with his gloved hands, he decided to put them into the donation box. The damn things couldn't be half a carat total weight. He grinned. If he wanted Claire to have diamond earrings, they sure as hell would be bigger than that.

Walking toward the living room, he glanced into the bathroom, completely empty. Most of its contents were thrown away. No one wants a used shower curtain. The living room was unnaturally sterile, dramatically contrasting the way he'd found it. Months ago, when he first entered the apartment to place the surveillance cameras, the small living room surprised him. He had closets bigger than this, yet it was homey. If that were possible. It may have been the pictures, plants, or eclectic furnishings, he really didn't know. It felt warm, like her.

Now the room was down to the bare essentials. He looked at his watch: seventeen more minutes. He picked up the laptop and placed it in the case. Going back to the bedroom, he decided to keep all the framed pictures and the pearl necklace. He put them all in the case with the laptop.

Reminiscing, the computer had been invaluable. With it, he'd been able to access her calendar, e-mail, and various accounts. He found all scheduled commitments and via e-mail regretfully canceled. He also e-mailed her

employer, Facebook friends, and sister. They all received a similar message describing an amazing opportunity she received, how she'd be unreachable for a while, but would get back to them as soon as *her* decision regarding *her* future was made. Through the laptop, her bank accounts, credit cards, auto loan, utility bills, cellular phone. Everything was assessed. The balances now all read zero. After paying each final statement in-full, the accounts were closed. The monies that went into her bank accounts were difficult to trace, but if someone took the time to do it, they would learn it was a settlement from WKPZ. Anthony hoped no one would investigate that thoroughly, but if they did, that discovery should pacify them. Of course, WKPZ had no record of such a transaction, but the probability of anyone investigating that thoroughly was low. The fact the monies had been deposited into her various savings and checking accounts four days before her disappearance led to the allusion. Smiling, he recalled sitting with her at the *Red Wing*, knowing she had an extra 200-plus-thousand-dollars in her accounts and was clueless. Anthony knew from his surveillance that Claire only checked her accounts on the weekend. At that time, she would sit down and attempt to make ends meet. The day after she did her little balancing act, the funds electronically appeared.

The settlement money and *see you later* e-mails combined to make her disappearance appear planned. If he could reach his own back, Anthony would give himself a hardy pat. He deserved it!

The manager at the *Red Wing* had been the most difficult to quiet. After the e-mail, he immediately began calling and texting her phone. Thankfully, Anthony had her BlackBerry with him back in Iowa. *Claire* responded apologetically to the manager, via text:

"SHE WAS SO SORRY TO LEAVE IN SUCH A RUSH, BUT YOU HAVE TO ANSWER WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS."

Anthony was pretty sure that if she were to return to Atlanta, which she wouldn't, the *Red Wing* would not be willing to reemploy.

Keeping Claire's laptop, Anthony could check her e-mail and account balances. He would also be able to periodically send e-mails or post a Facebook status updates to keep the curious from overreacting. Even though the computer would be in Iowa, with a VPN (Virtual Private Network) set in Atlanta, the web address and URL wouldn't change. No one would know the point of origin.

Claire's BlackBerry met an unfortunate accident. Many cell phones contain GPS trackers. Anthony wasn't willing to take that chance. A mass text went out explaining that Claire would have a new number and would contact everyone as soon as possible. Then, after removing the SIM card, Anthony backed his rental car over the device. It didn't survive. His case also contained the final hardware of his surveillance equipment. He definitely

didn't want some stupid painter running across one of his cameras.

Six months of footage taught him much about Claire Nichols. She kept late hours and enjoyed sleeping late in the mornings. She liked to cook and bake, but gave a lot away. There were no boyfriends or male visitors to the apartment, which pleased Anthony. She liked to talk on the phone and chat with people on the computer. She rarely watched television except for a show called *Grey's Anatomy* and another on the same station. She liked to exercise, sometimes walking with the lady next door. Rarely did she stay around the apartment, going out with friends frequently. Many times, she would return home in a less than sober state, but always alone. During Christmas season, she put up decorations and even a tree. The best part of the surveillance was access to her schedules and passwords. The computer hacking would have been more difficult without those passwords. Oh, he could have done it, but this was easier.

Anthony heard the knock on the door. He removed his gloves, put them in his pockets, and opened the door. A burly man with underarm stains and a perspiration-drenched face met his gaze. He inquired. "Hi, are you John Vandersol?"

"Yeah, that's me. You the movers? Come on in." Anthony decided that even though he looked nothing like Claire's brother-in-law, his presence in her apartment made more sense than any other male. People rarely remembered faces anyway.

Anthony signed the contract and paid the man in cash, with a 200 dollar tip. He explained that his sister-in-law moved to another city for a job and wanted all of her things taken to the local refuge for donation. The mover wasn't interested in the backstory, and Anthony didn't push. He gave enough information to make the transition plausible and not too much to make it sound contrived. Too bad Claire wouldn't be filing taxes. She could receive a hell of a deduction for her donations. It didn't take the men long to empty the apartment.

Her car sold for an amazingly low price. Actually, it hadn't been enough to pay off the loan, but the point was to get rid of it. Forging her signature on the paperwork wasn't difficult. He used her signature on the napkin as a pattern. The fortunate buyer didn't ask questions.

Caressing the case that held the only remnants of Claire's previous life, Anthony wiped the doorknob with his gloves, locked the door to the empty apartment, and placed the keys into an envelope. The complex had been emailed about Claire's sudden move, as well as reimbursed for severing the lease. The envelope was deposited into an open slot in the office door. Getting into the rented vehicle, he called his driver. "Pick me up at *Budget Rental*, ten minutes."

Anthony didn't like doing all these tasks himself. Under different

circumstances, he would hire someone to box the items, or wait for the movers. This, however, wasn't normal circumstances. He couldn't risk others knowing his plan. He couldn't even trust his best friend and head of his legal team. This was all very private.

Eric, Anthony's driver, had some clue about things transpiring in Atlanta. Truthfully, he had more than a clue. He helped transport Claire back to Iowa; however, Eric's allegiance was steadfast, as was the rest of his household staff.

Sighing as he parked the inconspicuous gray Toyota Camry in the lot of *Budget Rent-A-Car*, he thanked God this was done. Now to change into his kind of clothes, get back to his real life, prepare for his scheduled meetings overseas—and decide Claire's future.

He flashed a private smile. The acquisition was complete.

CHAPTER FOUR

There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt.

—Erma Bombeck

MULTIPLE TIMES A day, she would think of her chance meeting with Anthony Rawlings. She believed his name sounded familiar, but didn't and still doesn't know why. God, she would love to put his name in *Google* and see what popped up: maybe *Crazy Abusive Man or Nut Job with a Supremacy Complex*?

She recalled that one day while tending bar they started to talk, not about anything particular, just chat. He was attentive and charming. His eyes mesmerized her, not with fear as they did now, more of a pull, an attraction. Her policy was not to see patrons socially, yet for some reason, when Anthony invited her to a small booth after her shift, she accepted. In hindsight, Claire believed she was safe, still being in the *Red Wing*. Once there, they continued talking and drank some wine. At some point, he had a napkin and talked about helping her obtain a job. It was something about the *Weather Channel*—definitely not this. She remembered signing the napkin but couldn't recall him signing it. The entire scenario seemed harmless. She couldn't remember what was written on the napkin. It was never discussed again as they shared a few more glasses of Cabernet Sauvignon.

After that, she went home—alone.

The next day she slept in, shopped for groceries, which now sat rotting in her refrigerator, and worked the closing shift. Had she known it was her last full day of freedom, she would have spent it in a more productive manner: visiting with friends, enjoying a crowd at the mall, or calling her sister. Claire wondered if Anthony returned to the bar that day. She didn't think so, but she did remember his call that evening...

ABOUT A WEEK AGO—MARCH 16

THE CALL SURPRISED Claire. After their talk the night before and her refusal to see him for food, she never expected to hear from him again. Yet the call came as the seats around the bar were beginning to fill. Her boss didn't appreciate personal calls, at slow times of the day much less during busy times. "Hello, this is Claire. May I help you?"

"Good evening, Claire." Her heart skipped a beat, immediately recognizing the deep, husky voice that accompanied the handsome, dark-haired, dark-eyed man.

"Anthony?"

First a chuckle, then. "I'm impressed. You have a wonderful memory for voices."

Well, yeah, when they accompany people like you. "Thank you, I talk with people for a living. I'm surprised you called. Did you forget or leave something?"

"Well, yes and no."

The manager walked toward her. She covered the phone and whispered, "Customer from yesterday looking for something." He turned away and walked to the kitchen.

"Okay, if you let me know what it is, I can look around and call you back. First, let me get your number."

"Oh, you definitely have my number. First, I think you should know what I left." Claire waited impatiently. He sounded mysterious, but there were people waiting.

Finally, he said, "You, Claire."

Her cheeks flushed. "Excuse me?"

"I've been thinking about you and would be honored if you'd agree to accompany me to dinner."

Claire's mind scrambled. She tried to think, but the bar was filling with patrons all looking to her for service. Anthony was waiting for her to respond. Last night, he was so handsome and charming. The prospect of someone like him, older and successful, taking the time to call her after a few hours of chatting was flattering. She worked to sound resilient. "I'm sorry, I work until close. That's too late for dinner."

"Someone named Crystal, who answered the telephone earlier, said you work the early shift tomorrow. Or will you turn me down again and send me home heartbroken?"

Claire sighed. This was outside of her comfort zone, but then again, she didn't want to be responsible for sending some poor, successful, gorgeous businessman home heartbroken. "I'm supposed to get off tomorrow at 6:00

PM, but if you recall from last night, it isn't always prompt. I could be ready by 7:00 PM, if that isn't too late?"

His tone sounded lighter and quicker. "Wonderful. Should I pick you up at the Red Wing or your place?"

Oh, God. She wasn't ready for him to know where she lived. "I can meet you—"

He cut her off. "I'm sure you can, but let me pick you up in style. I'll see you at 7:00PM at the Red Wing. We're going to Chez Czar. Until tomorrow, Claire." The telephone disconnected.

For the next sixty to seventy minutes, the barrage of orders and customers needing pacification kept her mind from fully registering her actions. She'd accepted an invitation to one of the most exclusive dining spots in Atlanta, with someone she barely knew. She broke her no dating a customer rule and her no going in the same car on a first date rule; however, just maybe, the first date was in the booth at the Red Wing. Then this would officially be the second date—which was totally acceptable. Oh my, what would she wear?

The next morning, she didn't have much time; however, after shaving her legs, Claire decided to swing by Greenbriar Mall and see if Macy's had anything appropriate for an evening with a man like Anthony Rawlings, in her price range. It turned out there was nothing for free, but she did find a simple black dress on its second markdown. It was shorter than she normally wore, but it fit, and she didn't have time to be picky. After a quick run through Burlington's, she purchased a pair of simple black heeled sandals. These items, accompanied by a black cotton half sweater, she had at home, would be perfect for a cool spring evening.

March 17th was a bigger holiday in the bar business than Christmas. Thankfully, Claire's shift ended at 6:00 PM. She wanted to be gone before the holiday crowd hit the Red Wing. St. Patrick's Day bestowed a claim of Irish roots on each patron, all anxiously awaiting their share of the green beer. By 6:15 PM, she was officially clocked out, with her register balanced. In the back of the bar, was a small locker room where the female employees kept their purses, coats, and extra clothes. Opening her locker, Claire pulled out the black dress.

After changing her clothes and stuffing her Red Wing t-shirt and jeans back into the locker, she looked at herself in the mirror. Twisting and turning, her uneasiness came out in her reddened cheeks. This wasn't her. She was jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes. Pushing forward, she added eyeliner, mascara, and lip-gloss. That, accompanied by a quick brush through her hair, was as good as it would get.

Judging by the hoots from both sides of the bar when she entered the front of the Red Wing, she did all right. "Check you out, hot stuff. Where ya going all dolled up?" This flirting tone was one of the many voices from Claire's

manager repertoire.

Feeling playful, she decided to respond all Southern belle, “Why, sir.” The syllables drawn-out. “I don’t know what you mean.” He raised his eyebrows and stared. “Well, goodness gracious, I do have a little ‘ole date with a tall, dark, handsome stranger.”

A few minutes later, a shiny black Porsche pulled up to the front of the bar. “See y’all later. Don’t wait up.” The coworkers behind the bar did some more hoot’n and holler’n as Claire smiled and the voices faded into the sounds of the night on the other side of the door.

Anthony got out of the driver’s side. His perfectly tailored light-colored Armani suit validated the purchase of her new black dress. Chivalrously, he kissed her hand and escorted her around to the passenger’s door. At the time, Claire believed that the simple act was the most elegant gesture she’d ever experienced.

Being a four-star authentic Italian restaurant in the heart of Atlanta, Chez Czar had a reputation for being continually booked. Claire wondered how they could possibly have reservations on such short notice; however, as soon as they arrived the hostess greeted them warmly and guided them to a premium table.

When the waiter arrived with menus, Anthony immediately asked for their best bottle of Batasiolo Barolo. After the waiter departed, Claire began to look at the menu. She couldn’t help notice there were no prices. What did that mean? When she looked up from behind the large leather-bound folder, Anthony was looking at her—not his menu. Once again, Claire felt her cheeks flush. “Do you already know what you want?” she asked.

“I believe I do.” He reached for her menu. Claire released it, although she hadn’t had a chance to really see her choices. The whole no price thing had her a little be-fuddled. “And, I can’t see you behind that big menu.” Claire smiled. She’d never met a man like Anthony. She felt like she had his full attention, which was nice, but a little unsettling. When the waiter returned with the wine, he poured a small amount into a glass. Anthony tasted the liquid and replied, “Ahh, yes.” The waiter poured two glasses.

Claire wondered if this was the type of service people talk about on cruise ships. Goodness knows people weren’t treated like this at the Red Wing or Applebee’s for that matter. Before she realized what happened, Anthony had ordered dinner. Tentatively, she replied, “Well, thank you.”

“Don’t you like Caesar salad and shrimp linguine?” he asked, dismayed.

“Oh, I do. It’s just, no one has ever ordered for me without first asking me my preference.” Claire thought to herself, But then again, I have never met anyone like you.

The tips of his lips moved upward and his eyes shone. “If you don’t like your food, we can certainly send it back for something else.”

As soon as the linguine arrived at the table and the aroma of garlic and butter penetrated her senses, Claire knew the taste would be even better. When the shrimp touched her tongue, she relished the seasoned flavor. Anthony was incredibly charming and polite. After dinner, as they waited for the valet, he gently placed his arm around her waist. He was much taller than she realized at the Red Wing. Leaning down to her ear, he whispered, “May I kiss you?”

Feeling the unstoppable sensation of his stare, Claire only nodded. When his soft and full lips touched hers, she momentarily felt the rest of the world disappear. It ended too soon as he pulled away and smiled. Claire’s cheeks flushed. Once they were alone in the car, he asked, “Are you ready to go back to the Red Wing, or should I take you to your home?” As Claire contemplated her options, he offered her a third alternative. “Or would you like to join me in my suite, perhaps for some more wine, or we could call room service for dessert?”

Smiling, she responded, “I like dessert.”

The hotel’s foyer was exquisite—marble floors, large glowing chandeliers, and huge floral arrangements. Claire tried to not look around. She’d never entered such an exclusive establishment. His suite at the Ritz Carlton was as large as an apartment. Once inside, he remained suave and sensual with deep, dark brown eyes. His glance transfixed her, giving her the sensation of chocolate, dark and melted. Although she didn’t know him that well, she agreed to romance and sexual pleasures. Something about him made her break all her own rules. He was prepared, romantic, and attentive.

After midnight Claire lifted her head to meet Anthony’s soft gaze. “I really need to go home.” Claire enjoyed the soft 700-count sheets a little too much. “I don’t want to disturb you. So I can get a taxi downstairs.” When she started to shift away, he gently reached for her arm.

“If I promise you a ride in the morning, would you consider some more dessert?” Anthony’s expression, as well as another of his features, informed Claire he wanted her to choose the dessert.

She knew she wasn’t scheduled to be at work the next day. “I don’t want to disrupt your schedule. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“I promise this is not a disruption. And maybe after more dessert, we could have another glass of wine. There is still some in the bottle from room service.” The last time she looked at a clock, it was 1:15 AM.

Even at that moment, Claire didn’t realize the consequence of their napkin agreement.

As Claire lay on the sofa recalling the events that led her to this place and this

situation, she couldn't recall traveling. She remembered a car, but couldn't recall any other part of this house. She couldn't remember any other memories of Atlanta. That time: 1:15 AM, was her last conscious memory of her life.

From the other windows near the bed, she saw only trees. Because she couldn't see more of the house, Claire decided she must be at the end of the dwelling. Even if her windows opened, they were high off the ground. If she tried to jump from this height, she'd break something. Each morning the skies lightened to shades of gray, and in the evening they darkened too soon. Keeping track of days became difficult.

Staring out at the unfamiliar landscape, Claire questioned her location. She told herself when Catherine returned she'd ask where they were. Catherine didn't come. The young non-English speaking man came and went. Day after day, no one came to talk to her. The food came and the room was cleaned. Clothes were miraculously washed and returned to her closet or drawers, but no person was ever seen. She was alone. The isolation was hell. It may not leave physical markings, but there was no question, in Claire's mind, it was a neater form of Anthony's abuse.

Although Claire wasn't a TV watcher and the TV in her suite didn't receive many stations, she did check the news each day to learn the date. On April 2, she finally heard a repeated knock at the door.

During her thirteen days of isolation Claire learned a few key things. First, after two or three days she realized the Weather Channel would do local weather. The first time she sat to watch, she stared stunned. The midnight announcer, Shelby, graduated from Valparaiso the year before her. Claire watched in disbelief. Why was Shelby on the Weather Channel while she was being held prisoner in a house in Iowa? The local weather came from Iowa City, Iowa.

Claire discovered her windows faced southeast. This was discovered on one of the few days during which the sun actually shone. Though the hours of sunshine grew in length by minutes each day, the outside still looked cold. With the insulated windows and warm fireplace, Claire's only knowledge of outdoor temperature remained Shelby and her co-anchors.

As a means of escape, Claire turned to reading. The built-in bookcases were filled with current bestsellers. There were series and individual books. When she was a child she loved to read, but life had become too busy. That no longer seemed to be a problem.

Claire also discovered a small refrigerator continually stocked with water and fruit. No one asked what she wanted to eat, and truly she wasn't hungry.

There wasn't anything for her to do to build an appetite. Each day she showered, dressed, and primped a little. Her initial rebellion became meaningless with no one to rebel against. One positive, with each passing day, her bruises faded from red, to blue, to purple, to green, to a now very indistinct yellow.

The knock came again. Food usually entered after the first knock. This person was waiting for an invitation. Claire didn't think it was Anthony; he didn't knock. *Could it be Catherine?*

Slowly, she approached the door, and asked, "Yes? Who's there?" The anticipation of actually hearing a voice stimulated her as she waited for a response.

CHAPTER FIVE

Disappointment to a noble soul is what cold water is to burning metal. It strengthens, tempers, intensifies, but never destroys it.

—Unknown

“*M*s. CLAIRE, MAY I come in?” Claire’s heart leaped. The woman she barely knew was the one person Claire prayed would come to her each of the last thirteen days. Excited to use her voice again, she said, “Yes, Catherine, please come in.” It wasn’t as though Claire could open the door from her side. Claire heard the beep.

Catherine opened the door and smiled sadly at Claire. Claire wanted to hug her, but something in Catherine’s eyes said, “No, not now. I wasn’t able to come up here before.” It was as if she spoke, yet her lips never moved.

“Ms. Claire, you seem... well rested. I have a message for you.” Claire nodded, anticipating the message from Anthony. “Mr. Rawlings will be coming to see you tonight. He will be late in the city. He said to expect him between 9:00 PM and 10:00 PM.”

Claire looked at the clock near the bed. It was only 4:35 PM. “Okay.” She didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t exactly refuse his entering. He didn’t ask, only proclaimed. “Will we be dining?”

“You’ll dine alone. His arrival will be too late for dinner.” Catherine looked as though she wanted to say more, but knew better. Maybe someday Claire hoped she would be like that—know better. Then again, hopefully, she would be out of here before then.

“Catherine, could you please help me prepare?”

“No, miss. I’m sorry, but your attire and presentation are to be of your own doing.” Catherine turned to leave the suite.

“Please wait. Catherine, can’t you please stay and talk to me, even for a little while? After all, we have five hours before Mr. Rawlings will arrive.”

"I must go, but may I say, you look beautiful? I like your face... well—ah... clear." Catherine smiled a real and tender smile and exited the suite.

Somehow Claire knew it was a mind game. He was testing her to see how she would dress, look, and act. He was also testing her to determine if the mere promise of his presence caused uneasiness. She decided this examination was an opportunity to respond to her circumstances—instead of react. He would take her body. That reality had been made painfully clear; however, she would *not* let him have her mind. He wanted her to spend the next five hours alone, dreading his arrival, filled with fear and trembling. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Claire had five hours to prove she was in control of her life: if not to him, then at least to herself. She walked into her closet and, like a general selecting soldiers, perused the racks and shelves selecting an outfit that would bolster her self-confidence. She found it: a black dress with a long flowing skirt. The idea of being near him in a dress made her queasy, but she liked the boldness.

With each flash of the mascara, or zip of the flowing black satin dress, she reviewed her decision. Escape from this room was not possible. The only way to get out of here was to concede to whatever he demanded and find another path. Looking at herself in the mirror, Claire straightened her neck, righted her shoulders, and confirmed her mission. She had tried physically fighting. It had been counterproductive and only seemed to intensify Anthony's resolve. She needed to yield—temporarily—to his demands in order to access a means of exodus. Completing her hairstyle, she dissected her plan. It may have seemed like surrender, but her gut told her that resigning to him, with a straight face and experiencing the effects of her verbalization, took more control than the pleas, accusations, and fighting of two weeks earlier.

At 8:45 PM Claire buckled the Jimmy Choo sandals and stood before the mirror. She looked the part; she just needed to perform it. With each tick of the clock her nerves wreaked havoc with her stomach. The meal she'd consumed hours ago threatened to revolt.

Damn him! She knew this was his plan, and she refused to give him the gratification. Reaching for her current novel by the bed, she went to the overstuffed chair and sat. Although she read the words, the text made no sense. She couldn't concentrate as her chest thumped with a too rapid heartbeat, and her mouth tasted like cotton. Getting up, Claire retrieved a bottle of water. While her sweaty palms made opening the cap difficult, the water helped her dry mouth—until it hit her stomach. Fearing she would need to run for the bathroom, she remembered to breathe—deep cleansing breaths. Miraculously, her nerves began to calm as the flames of the fire warmed, and she attempted to concentrate on the words of her book.

At 9:58 PM, preceded by the *beep*, her suite door opened. Anthony walked in like he'd been there earlier that day—not two weeks ago. Dressed

in a dark gray double-breasted silk suit, he appeared heavier than she remembered; maybe not heavy—massive, broad-chested. She wasn't sure of his height, but guessed about six four which would make him an entire twelve inches taller than she. His age showed in fine lines around his dark eyes. Claire estimated him to be in his late thirties.

"Good evening, Claire." His voice rumbled through the suite.

The heat from the fireplace helped to ward off trembling. Claire stood and nodded. "Good evening, Anthony." Taking command, she suggested, "Shall we sit?"

Anthony sat on the sofa, leaned back, and unbuttoned his jacket. Claire sat on the edge of the chair and looked directly into his eyes. She wouldn't show fear; although his dark eyes were the scariest things she'd ever seen.

"Do you think you are ready to continue with our agreement? Or do you need some more time alone to consider the situation?"

"After consulting my attorney, I feel I have no choice but to continue with our agreement."

Anthony's eyes darkened at the mention of a consultation. "Claire, I know you're joking, but do you really think it's a good idea? Considering your circumstances?"

Keeping her smile intact, she said, "I've had a lot of time to think, joviality has sustained me."

"I must say your demeanor impresses me. I'll need to deliberate on this new personality."

The two sat in silence while the fireplace blower hummed in the background. Claire used every ounce of control to appear calm while Anthony pondered. He remained seated against the back of the sofa, yet his jaw seemed to clench as his eyes devoured her, scanning and taking her in. She wished she could read his eyes. Then suddenly they caught hers. "Tell me what you have learned during your reflection time."

"I've learned I have many clothes, very nice clothes, may I add. I have a balcony that I can't access because the door is locked. I have a refrigerator and small microwave, but honestly, the microwave seems unnecessary as I also have food brought to me three times a day."

"That's all very nice." Anthony said with a hint of sarcasm. "But what have you discovered about your situation? Do you even know where you are?" His mocking tone suggested confidence that only he held the answers he sought.

Claire contemplated her response. Should she be honest and tell him she learned Iowa City from the Weather Channel? What if that resulted in loss of TV stations; she might not know what day it is. Then again, if she lied and said she didn't know and he caught her in a lie, what would happen? Maintaining an air of confidence, she said, "I'm in Iowa, or at least

somewhere near Iowa City.”

Gripping the arm of the sofa with his right hand, Claire watched his muscles tense. Each word became more exaggerated as he spoke, “And you learned this from whom?”

“I learned it from the *Weather Channel*—Local on the Eights. The local weather for this area comes from Iowa City, Iowa.” Claire continued to sound as lighthearted as possible.

Anthony’s body relaxed and he nodded his head in approval. “Very well, that will spare me telling you.” Claire wanted to ask how she got there, but before she could, he continued, “For the sake of clarity, since that seemed to be a problem in the past, you are aware that your indebtedness *to me* can only be determined paid *by me*?”

Claire swallowed. This is what she anticipated. Smiling, she nodded.

His voice, was strong and authoritative. “I prefer verbal confirmation.”

“I am aware that you are the only one who can decide when my debt is paid in full.” The calmness of her voice surprised even Claire. She said a silent prayer that he wouldn’t notice her hands balled into fists with her nails biting into her own palms. If she concentrated, she could remember to relax her hands, but at this moment, her concentration was needed elsewhere.

“You are also aware that your duties require you to be available to me whenever, wherever, and however I demand?” His dark eyes never faltered, staring directly at her, yet his body language looked relaxed, arrogant. He was definitely a man willing to push Claire to the brink. It was like watching a poker game, pushing the odds. Would there be a payoff? Or would someone blink?

“I am aware.”

“You’re aware that you must at all times obey my rules?” Anthony’s eyes penetrated.

“I’m aware that I must do as I’m told.” The words hurt her throat but sounded easily spoken. She was not going to let him fluster her, and damn, she didn’t need that skin on her palms anyway. Her smile remained steady and undaunted.

Anthony remained silent for an extended period of time, watching Claire. Finally, he spoke, “Very well.” He stood. Claire expected some kind of directive. Instead, he walked toward the door.

“Wait.” She proclaimed. He turned to look at her, displaying astonishment at *her* command. She immediately realized her words overstepped her bounds, but she couldn’t go on locked alone in the suite. Her tone softened, “I’m sorry, but may I leave this suite?”

“As long as we are certain on the terms of our agreement *and* you follow the rules and orders given, I see no problem with you roaming the house.” He reached for the door handle. “It is rather large. I’ll be working from home

tomorrow. Your services will be utilized then, so be prepared for my call. When I have a chance, I'll give you a tour of the house and define your limitations. I think it's best that you don't roam tonight. I don't want you getting lost." She heard the *beep* as he reached for the lever.

"Anthony? I don't have any... duties tonight?" her voice began to fail her. She sounded less like the strong, lighthearted woman she desperately tried to project and more like a child.

"I have recently arrived from a series of meetings in Europe and am quite tired. I'm glad to know we have a mutual understanding. Good night, Claire."

"Good night, Anthony." He shut the door. She heard the *beep* and the lock.

Her thoughts swirled. He has been in Europe! I've been locked in here while he was on another continent! Okay, focus, the door will be open tomorrow. I engaged in a conversation, the first one in almost two weeks. He didn't say anything about my appearance: all that work and not a word. Perhaps compliments aren't his style, only criticism. That's all right, because tomorrow I'm leaving this suite and leaving the suite is one step closer to going home!

Tossing and turning, Claire had too much energy to sleep. It wasn't just her body—her mind spun with the excitement of her impending release. During the past thirteen days her every need was met—except her need to be with people. She couldn't remember a time in her life that didn't include interaction. It was something she took for granted—until now. The isolation was unbearable. While it was happening, she wouldn't allow herself to think about it, but now that the end was near her anticipation mounted. She lay in bed and pondered Anthony Rawlings. *What kind of man is he?*

He obviously liked control—complete control. What did he mean when he said, "Be prepared for my call"? Did that mean she should be up early waiting for someone to come and get her? He didn't give her a time. She looked at the clock: 5:33 AM. Should she get up now? What if she fell asleep and wasn't ready when he called? Could she end up locked in her suite another thirteen days? She couldn't take that. Claire needed companionship.

Her mind slipped back to college and recalled living in the sorority house surrounded by girls. She often longed for alone time, away from the drama. There were always issues between sisters, with boyfriends, classes, or parents. At the time, she wished for a place of her own and time by herself. Another of Grandma's sayings came to mind: "Be careful what you wish for." She would love to have that camaraderie, and even drama, again.

At 6:00 AM she gave up, got out of bed, and went to the bathroom to get ready for whatever the day had in store. She spent almost two weeks doing the same thing. Now, she prepared to venture into the unknown. It both scared and excited her—just like the unpredictability of weather.

Claire's breakfast waited on the table when she left the bathroom. With her hair styled in a low ponytail—casual yet classy, and her make-up done, she decided to dress before eating and entered the closet. Stepping into the sea of material Claire wondered if every outfit would be so difficult to choose and every action was a test? Decision made, she put on dark jeans and a sweater. Entering her suite, ready for coffee, she suddenly dropped her shoes and let out a startled, muffled scream.

Lost in her own thoughts, Anthony's presence caught her off guard. She hadn't heard him enter. Damn, could he learn to knock? He grinned at her surprised and shocked response. He'd startled her, and she could tell that made him happy. "Good morning, Claire."

"Good morning, Anthony, I didn't hear you come in." She picked up her shoes and regained some composure.

"Are you ready for your tour?" He looked at her uneaten breakfast. "Did you plan to eat first? I have a web conference in forty-five minutes."

"What's a web conference?" Suddenly, she thought she shouldn't have asked, or should she? She just didn't know what to do or say. She knew it was just nice to have someone to talk to—even him.

"It's like a conference call between many different people, but instead of being on the phone it is over the Internet."

She couldn't believe how casual and friendly he spoke. He even looked more relaxed, wearing slacks and a shirt with no tie or jacket. It reminded her of the Anthony she met in Atlanta. "It's okay. I'm really not hungry. I'm more excited to get the tour." She put on her shoes and sipped a little coffee.

He began by explaining the shape of the house, a main section which housed the dining room, formal living room, sitting room, kitchen, and the grand foyer. The foyer contained the main stairway. Two large wings projected off from the main section. Stairways were also found at the end of each of those wings. The staff had access to an elevator for transporting carts and larger items to the second and lower level.

He continued to explain: Claire's suite was located on the second floor of the southeast wing, as they stepped out of the suite. Claire looked slowly down the great expanse of the hallway at many other doors. She hadn't heard anyone or anything her entire stay. Anthony moved five steps ahead before she remembered to walk. The sensation of stepping out of the suite was unnerving, like leaving the security of a nest.

She quickly caught him and did her best to walk at his fast pace. At times he wouldn't say a word, just walk. Other times, he spoke at great length about a piece of art or antique. Along the tour he showed her a library adorned with beautiful cherry woodwork and book-lined shelves. It occupied two stories and contained a back wall with a sliding ladder like you see in movies. She could get lost in there for days. She looked around for a computer. Didn't all

libraries have computers? “Is there a computer in here, some way to find books?”

“I think it would be best for you to not have access to computers, the Internet, or telephones.” Anthony’s statement wasn’t an answer to Claire’s question. It was a proclamation.

The tour of his magnificent house held so many treasures that Claire momentarily forgot why she was there. His declaration brought the reason rushing back. She knew all forms of communication were absent from her suite, but assumed that outside the door there would be Wi-Fi. Even though she hadn’t seen her BlackBerry for over two weeks, she hoped she would once again be connected to the real world. He looked at her with his dark eyes as he spoke. She did her best to maintain his gaze, swallowed, and nodded in response.

Next, he took her to an exercise room in the lower level, complete with all kinds of weight equipment, as well as a treadmill, elliptical, and stepper. Attached to the workout room was an indoor pool. Though not full sized, it was big enough to swim laps. When she saw the pool, the stunning mosaic tiles that covered the walls and floor, the windows that allowed sunlight to penetrate, and smelled the familiar chlorine, she let out a gasp.

“Do you like to swim?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. This is amazing.” Claire’s eyes glowed.

“You’ll have bathing suits tomorrow.”

His words surprised her. She hadn’t asked; however, he was offering, and she did like to swim. “Thank you.”

The formal dining room was exquisite. The table currently held chairs for ten, but the room seemed as though it could seat at least three times as many. The intricate woodwork accented light yellow walls and included hand-carved trim, molding, and built-in cabinetry. The ceiling was divided into sections separated by wood trim, each section embellished with different designs and some sort of gold flaking that created a shimmer in the light of the sun. The cabinetry held what Claire believed to be very lavish crystal and china. The height of the ceiling allowed the windows and French doors to be taller than most, at least ten feet, and adorned by exquisite flowing draperies. “We’ll eat in here when I decide. If I’m not home, you’ll eat in your suite.”

Down the west corridor just off the main section was a set of grand double doors. “This is my office. Your services will be required in here on days I work from home—like today. My office is strictly forbidden without my permission. Is that clear?” Claire nodded. Anthony turned to look at her, standing very close. “Claire, I want verbal responses to my questions. Do not make me tell you that again.”

“I understand, your office is off-limits unless you tell me to be there.” Her eyes fluttered from his eyes to the wall, straining to maintain eye contact.

They hadn't made it down the rest of the west corridor when Anthony looked at his watch.

"I have business I must do. It's 7:25 AM. I want you back at my office at 10:30 AM. You have some debt to pay off." He obviously enjoyed the uncomfortable feeling his remarks produced. "Do you think you can find your way back to your suite?"

"Yes, I can, but do I have to?" She told him how she would like to go back to the library and look around. She promised she would be back by 10:30 AM.

He hesitated, but reluctantly agreed. "We have not discussed all of the rules pertaining to the house. At this point, do not go outside. Permission for entering the grounds will be contingent upon your ability to follow rules within the house."

"I understand, and I'll be back by 10:30 AM." Filled with exhilaration, Claire walked down the marble corridor toward the library. The sensation of her shoes on the marble floor, the sound of her steps, and the coolness of the empty hall thrilled her senses. To be so deprived of anything except the same four walls, no matter how beautiful, and to be free to roam was ecstasy. She had three hours to spend in the library.

Anthony's collection of books was amazing. He had classics: *Tale of Two Cities*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, *Moby Dick*, and literally hundreds more. There were resource books, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and language translation books. She found biographies and memoirs, science fiction, romance, thrillers, and fantasy. Just as she entered another section Anthony met her face to face. Once again, she jumped. This time he wasn't smiling.

Claire's mind spun, I can't be late. I've been watching the clock over there. The clock read 10:37 AM. Where had the time gone? "Oh, Anthony, I'm so sorry. I was just engrossed in all you have—"

His hand struck her cheek. She didn't fall but wobbled off balance. He then pulled her toward him. His warm hand on the back of her neck, entwined her hair, and caused her face to tilt upward until all she could see were his penetrating eyes.

"Simple instructions, which were what you were given, perhaps you're not ready to leave your suite, not quite yet." He loosened the grip on her hair.

"No, please, don't say that. I can follow instructions. I can." Claire didn't want to beg, but she couldn't stand the thought of being locked in her suite another day.

"Follow me to my office, now."

Each of his strides equaled three of Claire's; she practically ran to keep up. When they reached the double doors of his office, he opened one and shoved her inside. She had only seen his office doors, but now she looked

around the interior. Like everything else in the mansion, it was lavish and substantial. The walls were surfaced with more of the impressive cherry paneling, decorative trim, and ornate bookcases. There was a very impressive mahogany desk, a leather sofa, chairs, and a conference table. His desk contained many computer screens as well as a large screen on the wall that could be one or divided into multiple screens. Currently, it was subdivided, and each screen contained stock market information. The lights on the telephone indicated it held multiple lines.

He turned and locked the door. Claire's heart pounded, her face felt flush, and she began to tremble. Standing alone in the vastness of his office, she watched as Anthony contemplated his next move. His angry expression terrified her. The completely black eyes were the same ones she'd witnessed in her suite two weeks before.

After a protracted silence, he spoke with an even flat tone. "So you say you *can* follow instructions, we will see."

The debate was over. It was the outcome that frightened Claire. A few hours ago he'd been another person. Now, the man standing before her was the same one who abused her so violently the first two nights of her stay. His grin wasn't playful—it was ruthless. "Let's start with you taking off your clothes."

Doing her best to be obedient, Claire did as she was told and removed her clothes, starting with her shoes and ending with her sweater. Next, he told her to lie down on the carpet, face first and keep her eyes down. She did—feeling the plush carpet rough against her skin. Her trembling intensified as the vulnerability of the position alarmed her. She couldn't see or hear his movements. Straining to listen, she eventually heard his belt as it passed each loop. The first lash hit so unexpectedly that it made her scream out in agony—and shock. She moved her hand to her mouth, bit down, and refused to scream anymore.

When she didn't respond, he turned her over, stood above her, and removed his tie and slacks. He didn't say a word but watched for her reaction. Perhaps she was in shock. Whatever it was, Claire was unable to respond. She waited, knowing that whatever he chose to do would be bad. His hands forcibly moved her legs, while she observed—disengaged—as if in another dimension. The scene she witnessed was brutal and domineering.

By the grace of God, she felt everything in a removed yet present fashion. She saw his actions and heard his demands. She was present, saw his expression, felt his body, smelled his skin, and tasted her shame, yet she was somehow detached—not there. By the time he finished, her body exhibited various rug burns, and her hair was tangled and matted from the same lush carpet.

Anthony Rawlings then callously stood and dressed. Pausing for a

moment, he loomed six feet above her and then silently walked to the attached bathroom. There, he combed his hair and replaced the tie he'd removed. Meanwhile, Claire sat in the middle of the room involuntarily shivering, holding her clothes, and silently weeping, unsure of her next move.

When he returned to his office, his expression was of disdain and his tone was flat and cold. "You may go to your suite, clean yourself up, and get ready to demonstrate to me again your ability to follow instructions."

Claire began to gather her clothes and dress, when he added, "Do not leave your suite until I decide. Your pass to roam has been revoked." Her mind was beyond comprehension; thinking outside the box was more than she could handle. She remembered an agreement with herself for self-preservation: conceding to demands. Yet at this moment in time, Claire didn't know or understand what she was doing, agreeing to, or being forced to do. She was lost and most likely suffering from shock. She only remembered his directives: go back to her suite and clean up.

Leaving his office, she turned toward the grand staircase. Beyond the stairs through the magnificent foyer with the high ceiling, Claire saw the double doors leading to outside. They were tall and ornate. Without thinking she walked toward them. Perhaps she should have run, but no one was around. The house was empty, like a museum or perhaps a tomb.

She heard her heart pound in her ears as she approached the handle wondering if it would open. She wouldn't learn. Suddenly, the sound of shoes on the marble floor of the corridor muffled her heartbeat. The footsteps didn't sound rushed—but determined—and were getting closer. Claire quickly turned and began the ascent to the second floor. She didn't look back down. She didn't want to see the person producing the footsteps, especially if that person would meet her gaze with a black-eyed stare. Instead, she walked toward her suite.

By the time she closed the door her internal monologue was in full gear. He actually hit me with his belt! My God! The man is mad. I have to find a way out of here!

At that moment, she didn't search for an escape. Instead, she showered, redid her hair, her make-up, and put on another outfit. While she cleaned herself up she contemplated fleeing. Questions arose: Where would she go? How would she get there? How far to civilization? And what were her chances of success? And most importantly, if she failed, what would he do?

Her lunch arrived. Even though she missed breakfast, she barely ate. She sat quietly on the sofa, read a book, stared into space, and waited for instructions. A feeling of helplessness settled into her chest like nothing she'd ever known.

About 4:30 PM, the *beep* sounded. The door opened, and she dutifully obeyed. His demeanor, less malicious than before, seemed merely callous.

The forbearance of the early morning and the tour were gone. Anthony had a goal for his actions: Claire needed to understand who was in control. She had done this to herself. He told her. She needed to do what she was told. But did she? No.

He made her say: "No, I didn't do what I was told." And behaviors have consequences. Could she remember that? "Yes, I understand behaviors have consequences."

That evening they didn't dress appropriately as they prepared for dinner in Claire's suite. Anthony decided Claire would model some of the lingerie. Dinner was eaten while wearing a flowing black silk negligee.

Every time she thought he was done and would leave, he regrouped. Maybe a drink of water or check the messages on his iPhone, then he resumed. The violence ended, but the domination continued. Although Claire wanted to scream, she didn't. The more she obeyed, the less ruthless his instructions. After midnight, Anthony left her suite. He didn't say whether her door would be unlocked in the morning, and she couldn't remember if she heard the familiar *beep*. She wanted to check, but her body barely moved. Instead, she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their life.

—William James

*H*ER EYES DIDN'T open until she heard the door and her breakfast arrived. It usually came after she awoke. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was 10:30 AM, the latest she'd slept since her initial arrival. The young lady with the food apologized. "I'm sorry, Ms. Claire. I know you were still asleep, but Mr. Rawlings would like you dressed and in his office by noon. Catherine said you need to eat." She handed Claire her robe as she got out of the bed.

"Is Mr. Rawlings working from home again today?" Claire's head pounded and body ached. This was way too late for coffee, and perhaps the activities of yesterday were affecting her.

"Miss, today is Sunday. Mr. Rawlings is usually home on Sundays." The young lady left the suite. Claire made a mental note: Watch out for Sundays.

Timidly, Claire approached the mirrors in the bathroom. Lowering the soft robe, she saw long red stripes on her back and new bruises. She didn't cry; instead, she steamed with anger. Of course, it was directed toward *him* but also at herself. She wanted this nightmare to end, but she couldn't figure out the solution. Claire wasn't accustomed to the feeling of helplessness, and she didn't like it. Her only solution was to remain resolute until an opportunity for escape arose.

At 11:57 AM Claire knocked on Anthony's office door. The door opened, and he looked up from his desk. "Good afternoon, Claire."

Smiling respectfully, she replied, "Good morning, Anthony. I believe it's still morning." Claire walked into his office and stood before his desk: the same place where twenty-four hours earlier had been the terrifying scene of his rage and domination. With her back straight, chin high, and smile

plastered on her lips, she looked at his eyes and wondered who he would be today.

The blouse she chose and her make-up covered the visible signs of the prior day's happenings. Anthony sat quietly and studied her. The silence made her uncomfortable. She prayed he couldn't hear her heart beating too fast or notice her wet palms. Long ago, she learned that awkward silences were an interview technique. She wouldn't be the one to break the silence.

Finally, he said, "I believe you are correct, for another two minutes." Anthony's eyes seemed lighter. So Claire breathed easier and smiled. She was on time. He continued, "Lunch will arrive here in a few minutes. I thought we would discuss some of the glitches that our business deal has encountered." He stood and moved toward Claire.

She kept her ground, neck straight, and watched as he circled the grand desk. He stopped only inches away. She inhaled his fragrant cologne and tilted her neck upward to see his face. He didn't speak but indicated with a gesture that they move to the conference table where he pulled out a chair for her to sit; she did. He sat at the head of the table with Claire to his right. The room was silent as Claire thought to herself how his gentlemanly behaviors were such a farce.

With her smile still intact, Claire asked, "Glitches? I'm not sure what you're referring to."



BEFORE RESPONDING, HE sat back and contemplated Claire Nichols. Her eyes contained an intense fire. She had more daring than half of the presidents of his many companies. After what he put her through, he couldn't help but be astounded.

"I wasn't sure you would come here today."

"I wasn't aware I had a choice. I believe my job duties include doing as I'm told."

"That's correct." He chose his words carefully. "Perhaps you can be trained."



CLAIRE'S MOUTH TWITCHED, but she stayed steady. Getting upset would only accomplish losing control. By losing control she would be giving it to him. He may take it, but by God, she wasn't giving it. "I'm trying my best. Now glitches?"

A knock came as the door opened and their lunch arrived. They sat in silence as the young lady placed their food in front of them and asked Mr. Rawlings if they needed anything else. He informed her they were currently fine. She retreated from the office and closed the door behind her.

"Glitches, yes—I spent 215 thousand dollars for a business deal. I make deals that will be lucrative to me. I expected a better return for my money than I've experienced in the last three weeks."

If this was supposed to shock Claire, it didn't. She casually picked up her fork, ate a piece of broccoli, and responded. "I would believe that yesterday you successfully increased your return." Stabbing another piece of broccoli, she added, "Besides, wasn't it you that decided your business holding would be locked away for almost two weeks?" She ate more broccoli. Part of her feared retaliation, but the other part believed he appreciated the bravado.

"That is true, and after what I'm currently witnessing, I'm considering the possibility that it was worth it." He watched her expression as he spoke. "And we have no deadline for completion of our contractual agreement."

Claire didn't know if she should be happy that he seemed impressed. She did think an estimated timeline would be nice, but she didn't mention that either. Instead, she said, "Then apparently, the *glitches* have been resolved." She felt she appeared respectful enough to avoid confrontation, but impertinent enough to demonstrate resilience. The light brown gleam around his irises, somehow told her he wouldn't explode. She would learn to read him. They continued to eat.

Claire let Anthony do most of the talking. He discussed more of the *house rules*. She could roam the house; however, in anticipation of more glitches, she was not permitted to go outside or consider leaving the property. His office and the corridor of his suite were off-limits. Her schedule would be hers for most of the day—unless told otherwise by him or Catherine. He didn't work from home that often, but when he did she would be required to be nearby and available at all times. On days he went to the office, his only requirement would be that Claire be back in her suite by 5:00 PM to receive evening instructions. He was a very busy man and wouldn't be home every evening to dine with her; however, on the nights he intended to be home, she would receive instructions for time of dinner, apparel, and other plans he may have. If he were in town, she would receive instructions as to his intentions regarding visiting her suite and the estimated time of his arrival. Claire verbally responded to all of his rules.

The young lady with the food came back to clear the dishes and brought a carafe of coffee with two cups. Claire's headache was improving with food, but more coffee would be helpful. Anthony told the young lady that he and Ms. Claire would be having coffee on the sun porch. She thanked him and left with the coffee. Claire didn't remember a sun porch from the tour.

Walking beside Anthony, they left the office. Located in the rear of the main section of the mansion, through the archways behind the grand stairs, and past the sitting room, they stepped down into a room made completely of glass. Claire felt faint as her eyes adjusted to the sunshine, and she inhaled the fresh spring air. The room was decorated with brightly cushioned rattan furniture as well as tropical plants. Anthony sat on a loveseat and Claire on a chair. The sides of the room were opened to allow a cool fresh breeze. Her bogus composure disappeared as the sensation of the fresh spring air blew her hair, and she listened to the faint sounds of nature.

When she was a child, her dad, a policeman in Indianapolis, knew how much Claire loved the outdoors. Each spring he'd take her to one of the many state parks. They would spend the weekend together hiking, fishing, talking, and wandering. Her grandfather, his father, had been FBI. It was ingrained in them to be cautious. On those weekends he let Claire believe she had control over their plans and the direction of their adventures. Remembering their activities she smiled, knowing he did most of the steering and all of the protecting. The aroma of the fresh spring air brought the memories of those adventures soaring back to Claire's consciousness.

Just off to the side of the sun porch Claire saw a large pool. The water was covered with a large tarp, furniture was absent from the deck, and fountains were nonoperational. Though not in season, it definitely held potential for a wonderful place to spend her *Claire time* once the weather warmed.

As they sat and sipped warm coffee with a cool breeze, Anthony informed Claire that he'd be leaving for three days on a business trip. His businesses were located all over and traveling was an important part of his work. He would leave later in the afternoon as his meetings were scheduled to begin very early in the morning. He did plan to be home Wednesday evening, and she would be informed if his plans changed.

“Anthony, what do you do?”

“Do you truly not know who I am?”

It frightened her to bruise his ego, but erring on honesty was always best. “I’m sorry if I should, but I don’t. I thought at first that your name sounded familiar, Anthony Rawlings, but I’ve tried for over two weeks, and I admit I don’t know.”

He leaned back on the loveseat and offered a brief autobiographical synopsis. He called himself a businessman who had built his fortune from nothing. The beginning of and bulk of his success came with the Internet; he and a friend created one of the first Internet search engines. He later bought out his friend’s part of the company, diversified his holdings, and has done pretty well.

Claire chuckled. “You made your fortune, because *this...*” Looking around the vast expanse of his mansion. “...is more than doing *pretty well*.

With the Internet, and the only technology in your home is in your office?"

"Perhaps I want my home to be an oasis from my business life."

Claire pondered that for a moment. "I understand. My grandfather and my father were both in law enforcement. They saw things that people should never see. Sometimes my grandfather would be gone for months at a time doing undercover work. Actually, I remember a story from when I was young, where he was gone for around two years. My father was home each night, but anyways, my dad didn't want home to be anything like work. I couldn't even watch *COPS* on TV. I think it was like you were saying—an oasis."

Anthony went on to ask about Claire's family. She said her grandparents passed away before she graduated high school. Her parents were tragically killed in a car accident during her junior year of college. She did have a sister and brother-in-law in New York State. Fleetingly, she wondered when she would talk to Emily again. With the breeze and the sound of birds, Claire casually went on talking. She asked Anthony about his family. As soon as her question left her lips she saw his eyes darken. She calmly added, "But if you don't want to say anything, I don't need to know."

Perhaps it was her quick observation or the realization that she could read him, but his eyes lightened. "My parents are also gone. It was an accident when I was twenty-four. I have no siblings, and my grandparents are also gone." The serenity returned as they both offered each other sincere condolences at their loss.

Claire's coffee was gone, and she didn't know what else to say or discuss. She could see Anthony watching her as she stared out to the pool area. Beyond the pool was the backyard. The corner of it could be seen from her room but not the pool or porch. Past the yard were trees. From the second story, she knew they went on forever, but from this vantage, they created a gray veil surrounding the yard. Soon little starts of green would transform the bleak veil into a colorful curtain. Claire really enjoyed spring.

Anthony excused himself, saying he needed to prepare for his trip, and informed Claire she was welcome to stay on the porch or go elsewhere in the house. He would look for her before he left. He smiled what appeared to be a real smile. "I'm pleased that the *glitches* have been resolved. I have plans for our agreement."

The smile seemed right, the unspoken portion of his statement made Claire shiver. After he left, she looked down at her arm and saw the goose bumps that rubbed her sleeves. She told herself they were caused by the breeze.

Claire returned to her suite, recognizing that with the ability to roam she didn't feel the need. Besides, she was tired. Sleeping late can do that to a person; however, her gut told her yesterday's *glitches* were more likely the cause of her fatigue and her aching body. She contemplated a nice long bath

in her beautiful garden tub as she entered her room.

On the bed, laid out so she could see each one, were multiple bathing suits: one-piece suits like she wore in high school swim class and bikinis that would be perfect for the sun. She liked the styles but wondered if they would fit. Of course, they would, hadn't everything else? She had to wonder how a promise made Saturday morning could be so quickly fulfilled on a Sunday, seemingly far away from anywhere.

Anthony told her that she would have bathing suits *tomorrow*. Apparently, he was a man of his word. That earned him *one* on the positive column. The negative column had more tallies than Claire could count.

Peeking out from under the white cover up was a wrapped gift. It was a small box wrapped in white paper with a gold foil ribbon. Claire usually liked gifts, but she didn't feel good about this one. What did it mean? Was it because of how he had been or because of how he would be? She picked it up and decided she didn't want to know. Sitting the gift on the corner of the bed, she wearily entered the bathroom to soak in the tub.

After the bath she chose the same soft robe she wore before. It felt warm. With some slippers, she would be comfortable until she retired. Combing out her wet hair, she chose to not put on make-up. It was only 5:30 PM, but she was exhausted.

Anthony said he would look for her before he left. She expected to find him in her suite. If she opened the door and he wasn't there, would she be disappointed? Only because she wanted him to leave, so seeing him one more time would be a means to that end. Upon opening the door, she wasn't disappointed, and his presence didn't startle her. He was seated at the table with the gift in his hand. "You haven't opened your present."

"I knew it was from you and thought you might want to see me open it," she lied.

He set the gift on the table and walked toward her. Although his height dominated her small frame, she held her ground and looked up at him as their bodies touched. He pulled her close and held her there with his strong, solid arms. She knew her emerald eyes appeared weary as he examined her face. His soft brown eyes gleamed while his musky fragrance overwhelmed her senses. She wasn't afraid, only tired. Silently she prayed: Dear God, if he wants me to do something, I hope it's over soon.

In one swift yet gentle motion he lifted her and carried her to the bed. Although he had a trip to take, he didn't seem rushed. Instead, he laid her on the bed and leisurely untied her robe. Claire remained still as he stood and looked at her body—completely nude—pink from the warm bath—and smelling of bath beads. Neither one spoke. There were no instructions, no insults, and no rules. Attempting to conceal his burning carnal desire, Anthony's fingers moved slowly as his light touch traced over her breasts,

down her stomach, and over her hips.

The heat intensified as his touch turned to caresses. She didn't want to respond. Wanting to remain unfazed by his actions, she reminded herself, this is the man that hurt me; however, when his lips contacted her soft skin, beginning at her neck, nuzzling her collar, and suckling the flesh of her breasts—her body stirred deep inside. Fighting the sensations, she remained stoic until his tongue tenderly teased her nipples and his fingers explored new depths. Unconsciously, she pushed away the absurdity of the situation, as well as the abrasiveness of his five o'clock shadow. Her nipples hardened while her back arched, pushing her breasts upward.

The open drapes filled the room with natural light. As his mouth tantalized her skin, she sat forward allowing him to gently remove her robe. It was then, Anthony gasped.

Claire froze—unsure why he made such a sound, and turned to see his face. His features were softer and more concerned than she'd ever witnessed. He didn't say a word but tenderly caressed her neck and back. His actions were sensual, careful, and tender.

Slowly, he joined her on the bed, and only after ensuring that she was moist and ready did he enter her body. He'd been there before, but this was different. The only sounds from his mouth were incomprehensible noises that made their meaning clear. Soon, she responded in the same language. This time he wasn't the only one to experience fulfillment—Claire did too.

After they were both satisfied, she rested on the satin sheets while he walked to the table, completely nude. From her vantage point she saw his muscles defined from exertion, and firm skin glistening with perspiration, as he picked up the gift and turned back toward her. Lifting her head from the pillow, her long damp brown hair cascaded in waves around her face. Anthony handed Claire the gift and watched as she removed the wrapping from the black velvet box. Inside was a Swarovski wristwatch. She smiled.

“It's meant as a way to avoid *glitches* in the future,” he said softly.

“Thank you. I would really like to avoid those.”

She handed him the box and lowered her head to the pillow. Completely drained of energy, she closed her eyes and felt the soft warmth as Anthony lifted the covers over her body. She could still smell his musky scent as she drifted into unconsciousness. She didn't wake until Monday morning.



IN THAT TIME between sleep and wakefulness, Claire wondered if yesterday evening had been real. How could it be real if Saturday was too? Could Anthony Rawlings really be two such different men? As the fog began to

clear, she realized that whoever he was, he was gone for the next two and a half days. This comprehension gave her a renewed vitality. She didn't know what she would do with her sixty-five hours of freedom, but she knew she would find something.

Her breakfast sat on the table when she exited the bathroom and the drapes were opened. The sky radiated a very light shade of blue, and there seemed to be clouds forming in the distance. It was spring in Iowa. The weather could be unpredictable. After breakfast she decided to try the indoor pool. She swam laps for forty minutes and rested in the hot tub. It felt wonderful to push her muscles beyond their limit. Other than her duties, she'd done nothing to exercise in almost three weeks. Surprisingly, the lack of physical activity didn't seem to cause weight gain. She didn't have a scale, but she could tell in the mirror and with her new clothes. If anything she'd lost weight. She lay back and closed her eyes amid the hum and bubbling of the tub and realized it was her diet. In three weeks she hadn't had any alcohol—not even a glass of wine. She also hadn't consumed one ounce of dessert—not a cookie, brownie, or even a piece of dark chocolate. Now that the realization hit her, Claire craved chocolate.

The sixty-five hours passed without event. She thoroughly investigated the house. It was luxurious, vast, and held many amenities; however, the more she explored, the more she realized, it was still a prison. She couldn't leave. She couldn't go outside. It may be bigger and grander than her suite, but it still had walls.

Claire made an effort to get to know the names of the staff. The young lady who brought food was Cindy. The young man who speaks little English was Carlos. Anthony's driver was Eric. There were others that cleaned, cooked, did laundry, and tended the grounds, but Claire rarely saw them. So she didn't have the chance to learn their names, yet whenever she passed one or encountered them in a hallway, they would nod and acknowledge her. "Ms. Claire."

On Wednesday, before Anthony was scheduled to return, Claire watched from the sun porch as nimbostratus clouds formed in the west. A month earlier, this weather phenomenon would have thrilled her. Watching storms form, either in person or on the radar screen, had always filled her with excitement. As the dark clouds approached, she began to hear the distant rumbling of thunder and felt the distinct drop in pressure. Claire knew that Iowa, like Indiana, had its share of tornadoes. Despite the drop in pressure, her instincts told her this was going to be just a good old-fashioned spring thunderstorm: the kind that's loud and boisterous, but usually blows over with little damage. Momentarily, she became mesmerized as she watched and listened. In the past, she'd been too busy to just watch and listen to the weather. Now, with the time she just stood.

Catherine finally broke the spell. "Ms. Claire, please come in. We need to shut the windows. You'll get wet."

Claire came in and went to her suite. The howling of the wind electrified her emotions. She knew Anthony would return today. She hated him with every bit of her being. She detested his patronizing demeanor, his callous attitude, and above all his abusive mentality. And she hated being alone. She liked Catherine very much, but she treated Claire like a guest or a superior. Claire longed for someone to talk to, to laugh with, and to just be near. With all her heart and soul, she didn't want that person to be Anthony Rawlings. Therefore, when 5:00 PM arrived and Claire waited for word of his arrival, she should have been pleased with Catherine's report. "Mr. Rawlings is delayed due to the storm fronts. The pilot won't fly west of Chicago, due to high cloud banks. He'll be home tomorrow evening and plans to dine with you at that time. You'll know more tomorrow."

Claire thanked Catherine for the information, ate her dinner, read a little, and went to bed.



AFTER ANTHONY RETURNED, the schedule he discussed went into full gear. She was in her suite at 5:00 PM each evening to learn his plans. Things were very busy with his work and many nights he didn't visit at all. Sometimes they ate in her suite and sometimes in the dining room. Sometimes he called upon her for her duties, other times he said he had work to do. The days turned to weeks and the weeks to another month.

The positive aspect was that there'd been no more *glitches*. That didn't mean that Claire experienced anything like the afternoon in her suite. On the contrary, each task to fulfill her contractual agreement was about him. Nonetheless, she felt content to avoid the explosive unpredictable *glitches*.

At some point during the beginning of May after Anthony was finished with Claire, he chose to stay in her bed. She realized this after she fell asleep and woke in the middle of the night to the sound of his breathing—steady and rhythmic. The consciousness of his presence frightened her. Did he have additional plans? Should she be doing something? She was too afraid to wake him and ask. Instead, she quietly, slowly moved to the edge of *her* side of the bed and fell back to sleep. When she awoke in the morning, he was gone.

On May 12, a Sunday, Catherine informed Claire that she and Mr. Rawlings would be eating on the back patio. The temperature had steadily increased, and the backyard was vibrant with color: intense shades of greens, ruby reds from the red bud trees, and pure white from the dogwood trees. Anthony employed groundskeepers that had been busily planting thousands of

annual flowers in the gardens, beautiful clay pots, and flowing hanging baskets. The pool was recently opened with ever-flowing fountains which at night produced a colorful light show that changed the water from clear, to pink, to blue, to green, to red, and back to clear.

Claire remembered the day, because as they sat to eat Anthony asked, “Have you been swimming in the outdoor pool yet? It’s heated.”

After so much time of following his rules and being incarcerated inside, her bravado failed; she started to cry. Her reaction obviously surprised him. Through muffled tears Claire replied, “This is the first time I’ve been outside in two months. I didn’t think I was allowed to go outside.”

If he had been initially moved at her emotional response, he quickly recovered. “Yes, that’s correct. I know exactly how long it’s been since you have been outside.” His voice resumed the authoritative tone she despised. “And I’m happy to hear you still remember who’s in control of your access to additional privileges.”

Claire nodded her head ever so slightly, she understood. Anthony cleared his throat. She looked into his eyes trying to blink the tears from hers. “Yes, I understand, but, I truly love being outside.”

“Surely you are smart enough to figure this out,” Anthony teased.

Confused and upset by the loss of her falsely perceived equality, Claire said, “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Claire, I’m an important man. I have hundreds of thousands of people in hundreds of companies who depend upon me for their livelihood. I balance a lot on my plate. Being observant to your wants and whims is not on my list of priorities. If you want to go outside ask.”

The simplicity startled her, and the reality nauseated her. She was an adult, and she was asking permission to go outside. Her memory seemed foggy, but she couldn’t recall doing that since she was maybe ten or eleven. It was one of his tests. Would she surrender to his authority or would she refuse and spend the summer inside? If she surrendered was it really submission or was it her way of manipulating the situation? The internal debate continued for a short time.

“Anthony, may I please leave the house and go outside?”

“You may be outside; however, you may not leave the property without me or my permission.” His tone continued; nonetheless, Claire’s only concern was his meaning. He continued, “Remember to be available to me whenever I’m here. Therefore, no wandering the grounds if I’m present, and you must be in your suite by 5:00 PM each evening for instructions. Can you follow these rules?”

“Oh, yes, I can!”

It may still be a prison, but it had just multiplied in size.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Greed, for lack of a better word is good. Greed in all its forms for life, for money, for love, for knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind.

—Gordon Gekko, Wallstreet

THE CLOUD OF smoke levitating near the suspended ceiling created a haze, making the florescent lights appear dim within the small office. Nathaniel clenched his teeth while analyzing the figures. Since taking the company public, the numbers showed profits. The stock continued to grow, and industry reports were favorable. Rawls Corporation was in the black, and considering the current economic climate of the 1970's, that was good. The problem was Nathaniel Rawls didn't want *good*. He wasn't content with *black*. He wanted more—a lot more. The sound of the furnace blowing warm air created a hypnotizing hum. He leaned back, took a long draw on his cigarette, and rubbed his temples. How could he make the figures in the profit column multiply? Hell, others were doing it. He wanted to too.

Punching the black button on the small box, he bellowed, "Connie, get Samuel in here, now."

The crackling voice responded immediately. "Yes, sir, Mr. Rawls."



SAMUEL ENTERED THE small paneled office inhaling the suspended cloud. The sight of his father hunched over the books and spreadsheets meant only one thing: he was in for the *We can do better* speech. "Yes, Father, did you want to see me?"

"Have you seen the latest figures?"

"Yes, sales to major distributors are up eighteen percent."

“That’s chicken feed! Textiles can’t make shit in the United States. We have to revisit the idea of moving operations out of country. In Mexico we can produce the same merchandise for less than a quarter of what it costs here. Hell, the unions here in Jersey are costing us a fortune.”

Samuel learned long ago to pacify his father, let him blow off some steam and things would settle. “We’ve looked into that. The problem is that we would lay off hundreds of workers who’ve been loyal through the years. Besides, as I said, we are in the black.”

Nathaniel blew a cloud of smoke toward his son. “I’ve decided to hire Jared Clawson as CFO, chief financial officer. The man has some innovative ideas.”

“Didn’t he just leave New England Energy amid allegations of illegal activities?”

“Nothing was proven. Besides, I’ve seen the figures. When Clawson was assisting with finance at NE Energy, their profits were through the roof. Since his departure, they’re doing well to keep the grids going.” Samuel remained silent. “The man is a damn genius. We’ve met a few times. He believes Rawls has potential, and he has some great ideas.”

Samuel knew his opinion didn’t matter. If Nathaniel’s mind was made up, Jared Clawson was coming on board. The only thing he could do was watch, and do his best to stop anything illegal before it began. “The contracts with Huntington House are in their final stages. They have plans for a new clothing line. The potential for revenue is huge. They have distributors all up and down the East Coast.”

“Damn chicken feed,” Nathaniel grumbled.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A strong positive mental attitude will create more miracles than any wonder drug.

—Patricia Neal

SURVIVAL FOR THE last two months was facilitated by a technique Claire called *compartmentalization*. She couldn't bear the entirety of her situation, but she could handle a part at a time. The colossal lapse in judgment that brought her to this circumstance: the treatment, punishment, or consequence that *he* felt he had the right or ability to carry out, the duties he could tell her to do, and the fact that she obeyed, were all too much. She had to separate them and deal with them in small manageable bits. Some days that was possible—other days it was more difficult.

Her morning workouts now included swimming and weight training. Exercise supposedly produced endorphins, and endorphins helped elevate mood. That seemed like a good idea.

Before she was allowed outside, Claire spent many afternoons with a blanket and a good movie. The lower level of the house contained a movie theater. With Anthony's busy schedule, she wondered if he ever used the theater. It held hundreds—if not thousands—of digital movies. Claire loved the classics, especially musicals. They were a magnificent escape from reality. She could lose an entire afternoon curled up in a large soft recliner watching happy people sing and dance.

It was near the end of May, and Claire had taken advantage of her outdoor liberty every chance she could by lounging at the pool, walking in the gardens, or reading books in the yard. Now, she wanted to explore. The woods held the possibility of both plant and animal life. It had been a few years since she studied Earth science, but she believed it would come back. Anthony said his house had been on this land for fourteen or fifteen years. Claire believed no one had been back in the woods for years. The potential for

real undisturbed wildlife excited her. Not that there would be bears or lions but deer, rabbits, birds, and rodents. In her current situation, self-preservation encouraged her to find happiness wherever possible.

Three days earlier she'd asked Anthony for hiking boots. Now she was tying them and preparing for her new adventure. Inhaling the sweet smells of nature, Claire contemplated her path as Catherine came rushing toward her. "Ms. Claire, I'm so glad I didn't miss you."

Claire's tranquility evaporated into the afternoon haze. "No, it looks like you caught me, and I promise to be back before 5:00 PM."

"Ms. Claire, I just received a call from Mr. Rawlings. He has an engagement tonight in Davenport. It's a fund-raiser for the Quad City Symphony at the *Adler Theater*."

"So, he won't be back tonight?" she asked, thinking that perhaps she could stay out in the woods later than 5:00 PM.

"No, miss, he'll be back."

"What?"

"He'll be here at 6:00 PM to pick you up. You are to accompany him to the symphony."

Claire stared at Catherine in disbelief. She'd just been permitted outdoors, and now she was going to Davenport to the symphony. Saying *no, thank you*, didn't seem to be an option. Her mind swirled. "Catherine, I've never been to a symphony before. Can you please help me?" Claire prayed that this wasn't another test about appropriate dress.

"Of course, I will, miss. Now, let's go up to your room, and we'll get started."

They did. Catherine went directly into the closet and came out with a long black evening gown. It was simple, yet amazingly beautiful. Claire showered again. Catherine helped with her make-up and hair. They straightened, pinned, and curled her long chestnut locks until they were piled on her head with cascading curls dangling down her neck. There were even exquisite sparkling earrings for Claire to wear. Securing them in her pierced ears, she thought how long it had been since she'd worn jewelry and how nice they looked with her hair up.

Another accessory that surprised Claire was the handbag. She hadn't gone anywhere or needed a handbag in months, but tonight Catherine had one for her. Anthony would be home and ready at 6:00 PM. Apparently the symphony began at 8:00 PM, with cocktails at 7:00 PM. Catherine explained that it took one hour to drive to Davenport, and Eric would chauffeur them in the limousine.

Before she dressed, still wearing her robe with her hair done and make-up perfect, Claire sat on the edge of the large marble tub, fighting the queasiness boiling within. Looking to Catherine, she asked, "What does Mr. Rawlings

expect of me this evening? How should I act? If he has rules for being out, he hasn't told me; and if you know, I would truly appreciate being informed."

Catherine's eyes shone with care and concern. Claire truly believed she wanted to help her, and she'd do anything to make this evening a success for both Claire and Mr. Rawlings. Sitting next to Claire, she gently took Claire's hand in hers and said, "Ms. Claire, you are to look beautiful, and you do." Her smile reassured Claire who nodded as Catherine spoke. "Mr. Rawlings is a very influential businessman. He's a fervent believer in appearance. If things look right on the surface the underside is rarely questioned; however, things may be great in reality, but if one perceives them to be amiss, it is difficult to change that perception. Therefore, Ms. Claire, you are expected to be the perfect companion: beautiful, polite, contented, and appreciative."

Claire thought to herself: well, *perfect...* okay, no pressure.

Catherine continued, "A man of Mr. Rawlings's standing is constantly observed by others. Some watch to imitate, others to mar. That is why he requires his home to be a place of quietude. He must do so much for so many that he needs a place to repose and refuel. That is where you have been so good for him."

Claire looked into Catherine's eyes. She was sincere. Claire believed Catherine had Mr. Rawlings's best interests at heart; however, she was sure Catherine didn't understand the ways he expected to be *helped*.

Catherine continued, "But, above all, Mr. Rawlings requires confidentiality on the part of anyone who works for him or is near to him." Claire pondered that thought. "Ms. Claire, you have had the rare opportunity to get to know Mr. Rawlings in a way most do not. The information you hold must not be shared with anyone. He has allowed you to see a more intimate side of himself. The Mr. Rawlings the world knows is much more guarded. He has placed a trust in you. You should know he does not fully trust many people. Do *not* ever discuss Mr. Rawlings or your relationship with anyone." Catherine smiled and squeezed Claire's hands. "I know you will be wonderful, Ms. Claire. Mr. Rawlings will be proud to have you on his arm."

For a moment, Claire sat silently contemplating Catherine's words: *a rare opportunity? a trust? an intimate side of himself?* She hadn't asked for any of this. With all honesty, she considered the possibility of bolting from the symphony. Did Catherine expect her to feel honored? She mostly felt... well, conflicted.

Catherine insisted that Claire eat a light dinner before dressing. The beaded silk gown with the halter bodice fit like it was custom made for Claire. With the Ralph Lauren black high-heeled shoes the dress' length was perfect. The beading made the material heavier than Claire had anticipated. Watching herself in the mirror, Claire turned ever so slightly and the skirt pitched that direction. It was the most stunning dress Claire had ever seen, much less

worn. Next, Catherine assisted Claire with a lightweight black silk wrap and matching handbag. Inside the handbag she placed lipstick and powder.

Catherine reminded her, “There will be people everywhere. Remember *appearances* are everything. Ms. Claire, you are striking!” Catherine’s eyes shone in approval.

Claire looked at herself again in the mirror and felt like she was viewing someone else. Tentatively smiling at that person in the mirror, Claire agreed she looked beautiful.

At 5:50 PM they left the suite for the foyer. Instead of the usual route, Catherine took Claire the longer way, forcing them to descend the grand stairs. When they reached the top of the stairs Catherine coughed ever so slightly. She looked up at Claire, taller than her in her heels, and gave her one more reassuring smile. Catherine gestured for Claire to descend the staircase first.

Waiting by the front door, iPhone in hand—texting, stood Anthony. He emitted confidence and animal magnetism. His tuxedo, obviously tailored specifically for him, looked exquisite as it accented his broad shoulders. There wasn’t a piece of his dark hair out of place as it was gelled and combed to perfection. His face was smooth like he’d recently shaven. Claire couldn’t help but think that he looked incredibly handsome. Following the sound of Catherine’s cough, he glanced to the top of the stairs. Suddenly, the business that demanded his attention appeared to be forgotten. He watched as Claire gracefully descended the flight of steps. As his eyes beheld her every move, she wondered if she should smile. She wasn’t sure how he would react. His expression emanated favor. Claire wanted his approval. She told herself she didn’t need it. She was happy with the way she looked, but she knew she wanted it.

Once at the bottom of the stairs she proceeded to Anthony’s side. He didn’t speak at first, then not to Claire but to Catherine. “My dear Catherine, you have outdone yourself. You’re an artist.” He bowed to her at the waist.

“Mr. Rawlings, an artist is only as good as her canvas. You are accompanying a beautiful canvas.”

“Or...” he said. “...should we say, she is accompanying me.” Now to Claire, he commanded, “We must go, Eric is waiting.”

If Claire were concerned about conversation topics on the drive to Davenport, she needn’t have been. After assisting Claire into the back of the limousine, Anthony once again became engrossed in his iPhone and multitasked with his iPad. On days he worked from home, Claire was often expected to stay in his office in case her services were required. She overheard many business calls, web conferences, and webinars. Therefore, listening to him discuss some dealings on the phone on the way to the symphony seemed strangely comfortable.

Claire wanted to thank him, tell him how excited she was to leave the estate and see something—anything; however, his work preoccupied him throughout the ride. She was busy too: watching out the tinted window, seeing different views and different things. Even the sensation of being in a car exhilarated her. She'd never ridden in a limousine. The interior was exquisite, and she could smell the soft leather seats that formed a horseshoe.

They approached Davenport as the sky filled with a mixture of pink and purple. It reminded her of vibrant paints swirled together. Soon the sky began to darken and the lights of the city illuminated the horizon. It was the most splendid combination of sky and skyline she'd ever seen.

Minutes before their arrival, Anthony ceased his business and turned to Claire. "Has Catherine prepared your behavior for the evening as well as she has your appearance?"

Claire thought to herself: somewhere in that statement is a compliment. I'm going to take it. "She's given me her advice, but I'd feel better if I heard yours."

"Very well, when we arrive there will probably be photographers. Don't act surprised or shocked by the attention. Just flash a beautiful smile and radiate confidence. Stay next to me at all times. There will be reporters who'll try to learn your identity. I have a publicist who'll know the time to release any necessary information. That is *not* you. I will do most of the talking; however, common sense will need to be with you. If spoken to, you will respond, but do *not* share information that is privileged. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"I've been asked to attend this event because of a donation I made to the Quad City Symphony and the Support the Arts Foundation. Have you ever been to a symphony before?" Claire said that she had not. Anthony continued as the limousine snaked and crawled along narrow streets. Traffic was stop and go. Claire thought this meant they were getting closer. "The symphony is a delightful evening. I believe you'll enjoy the music. This conductor is incredibly talented."

"Thank you, Anthony, for allowing me to join you this evening."

"I admit you've learned your lessons well. Now it's time to see if you can continue to follow the rules outside the boundaries of my estate."

"I'll do my best."

Anthony gently took Claire's chin and turned it toward him. "You *will* succeed. Failure in a public setting is not an option." Their eyes locked on each other.

"Yes, Anthony. I will continue to follow your rules." The car slowed and stopped.

Anthony whispered, "Wait for Eric. He'll open the door and assist you in getting out. I will be right behind you, and we'll enter the theater together."

Catherine said there would be people looking at them, and Anthony warned about photographers, but Claire hadn't expected the *Emmy* red carpet treatment. There were cameras everywhere and people shouting questions. At WKPZ there was a meteorologist, Jennifer, about ten years Claire's senior. She took Claire under her wing and taught her all about working for a news station. Jennifer was preparing Claire for the cameras, prior to the buyout. The stage advice Jennifer gave her about appearance and demeanor proved helpful. She told Claire, when those cameras turn on and your image transcends people's living rooms, they don't care if your dog just died, your boyfriend cheated, or you won the lottery. They care about the weather. So find a mask, keep it polished, and when that red light turns on, wear it proudly. It worked for Jennifer. She retained her position after the buyout.

Eric opened the door. Claire gently swung her legs outside the car and put on her mask. It was the mask of the beautiful face she'd seen smiling back at her in the bathroom mirror earlier that evening. Her movements flowed gracefully, and her smile never waned. She diligently followed everyone's advice.

Anthony exited the car, nodded with a handsome smile to the crowd, and gently placed his hand in the small of Claire's back. Her nervousness changed to exhilaration as they advanced through the crowd and into the theater. Waiting inside the doors was a man who enthusiastically greeted Mr. Rawlings and escorted them upstairs to a private room. Once there, the reporters were gone, but the people remaining were equally anxious to speak with Anthony Rawlings.

As they mingled, Anthony took two crystal flutes of champagne and handed one to Claire. His voice sounded different—chatty—as he greeted and was greeted by different people. He graciously introduced his companion Claire Nichols, to the individuals and couples they encountered. Claire smiled politely, shook hands, and made small talk. Claire watched the man she'd come to know. He seemed so different. Many people wanted to talk to him, and he knew all their names. After so much time alone, his social skills captivated her.

After the lights flashed, he gently touched her elbow and led her to their seats. They stepped through the black curtain where Claire could see the entire theater. Anthony had directed her to a private box above and to the right of the stage. They sat and she beheld the magnificent view: ornate walls, crowds of nicely dressed people, and beautiful velvet curtain. Too quickly, the auditorium darkened and the spotlight hit the stage.

A woman with a German accent began to speak. "Before we begin tonight's performance, I would like to thank everyone for their attendance. I would like to ask you, the audience, to join us at the Quad City Symphony in thanking the one man who made this evening's performance, as well as future

performances, possible, Mr. Anthony Rawlings.”

Suddenly, the spotlight shone directly into their box. The crowd erupted in applause and a standing ovation. Claire watched as Anthony stood and acknowledged the gratitude with a dashing smile and a wave. He sat back down, and with the light still on them, leaned over and took Claire’s hand. She smiled at him. His eyes were so light. The spotlight turned off and the symphony began.

They hardly spoke during the entire performance other than to comment on a musical piece. When not occupied with applauding, Anthony’s hand continued to gently hold Claire’s. The entire concert ended too soon. The lights came up and they stood to go. Whispering in his ear Claire thanked him again. It was more than she could have imagined. He smiled, gently placed his hand in the small of her back, and led her through the crowd to the foyer. Once outside, Eric opened the door of the waiting car and Anthony assisted Claire as she entered the limousine.

The stark contrast in volume left Claire’s ears ringing as the limousine pulled away from the curb. Her mind swirled with thoughts, the evening was wonderful: music, champagne, people, theater, everything. They were riding for a few minutes when she realized Anthony hadn’t spoken since they entered the limousine. Her heart rate increased as she contemplated the possibility he was upset. She told herself he couldn’t be. She did everything everyone told her to do. She kept up appearances and let him do most of the talking. She felt his eyes upon her, but was afraid to turn and face them. The ringing in her ears turned to silence—completely devoid of sound—silence. She adjusted her new mask and turned. “That was a magnificent evening, thank you again.”

“Do you really think so?”

She wondered if he was asking about the symphony or her. “I do. The music was performed beautifully, and you were right about the conductor.” Her pulse quickened, unable to take the suspense any longer, she asked, “Did I do all right?”

“What do you think?”

She contemplated her answer. “I think I did well. I listened to Catherine, and to you, and did well.” She hoped her voice didn’t expose her insecurity.

Anthony didn’t respond but reached into his briefcase. Claire assumed the conversation was now over, and he planned to resume work. She decided if the conversation was over and he didn’t say she failed, she must have succeeded. She exhaled.

Suddenly, he turned to her and extended a square black velvet box. “I believe you did well.” She liked the tone of his voice, it sounded like the man at the theater. “I told you every action has a consequence. That can be negative, as we’ve seen, or positive. I believe that tonight, you earned a

positive consequence.”

“Anthony, I don’t need a gift. I wanted to make you proud. If I did that, then I’m happy and that’s enough.”

“It is a gift, or at least I believe it was; however, it’s not new.” Anthony still held the box before Claire. With the running lights illuminating the cabin she could see his smile: genuine, not cruel or sadistic. “Will it always be this difficult to get you to open gifts?”

She took the box. “You have my curiosity piqued. What are you giving me that’s old?”

She opened the velvet hinged box. The lump in her throat made her choke, unable to speak. The dainty white gold chain with a pearl on a white gold cross hung on the satin. The surprise overwhelmed her. She only saw the necklace for a millisecond before her eyes filled with tears. She looked at Anthony again, tears trickling down her cheeks. “How did you? Where did you get this? It was my grandmother’s.”

“It was in your apartment in Atlanta when it was cleaned out. I thought you might want to have it. Do you?”

Claire listened to his words. Her apartment had been cleaned out. Where were the rest of her things? She needed to compartmentalize. Right now, she concentrated on her grandmother’s necklace. “Oh, yes, I do!”

He asked if he could help her put it on. She nodded, yes. A verbal answer wasn’t required. Next, he took the box out of her hand and started to remove the satin board. Claire observed his tenderness as he held the fine chain and delicate clasp. She turned away and he draped the necklace around her neck. Taking the compact out of her purse, she watched as the pearl moved up and down to the beat of her heart.

“Anthony, there isn’t a necklace you could have bought that would mean more to me than this.” Her tears dried, yet her emerald-green eyes sparkled.

“People who know me well, and they are numbered, call me Tony. You may call me *Tony*.”

“Thank you, Tony. This has been an amazing night. How can I ever thank you?”

Tony turned off the riding lights in the cabin. Home was still over a half hour away and the window between them and Eric was closed. His smile morphed into a devilish grin. “I have a few ideas.”

CHAPTER NINE

My formula for living is quite simple. I get up in the morning and I go to bed at night. In between, I occupy myself as best I can.

—Cary Grant

THE WEATHER CONTINUED to warm. Claire could now sunbathe in her new bikinis. Each time she stepped through the door onto the deck of the pool, she felt like she was entering a resort. She could eat at one of the umbrella tables, read in a lounge chair, or swim in the tepid water. The Iowa sunshine resulted in a beautiful, golden tan. Her hair, which was always brown, now shimmered with golden highlights contrasting the normal chestnut shade.

It seemed impossible, but Claire actually felt busy. She would wake, work out, shower, and eat breakfast. Then, if Tony were out of the house, the possibilities were numerous. The pool remained a good option; however, Claire preferred that in the afternoon. What she enjoyed beyond anything was exploring the woods. The land around Anthony Rawlings's estate extended for miles in most directions. One evening, she asked if walking in the woods was permitted. Tony explained that she could probably walk hours and not reach the property line. He never ventured into the woods, but he had flown over in a helicopter to survey the land, determining the best location for the house. This made her feel better about exploring. He didn't want her leaving his property without him or his permission, but she could wander and roam and still follow the rules. The fact that even Tony hadn't been out there made it more appealing.

Claire wanted to learn all about the land. To do this she decided to go different directions each time she ventured through the trees. She discovered areas where the trees were so dense there was no ground vegetation and it remained cool even as the temperatures of summer increased. She also found spontaneous clearings usually filled with flowers. The earlier in the morning

Claire went into the forest, the more flowers she would see. There were morning glories blue as the sky above. After the sun's warmth caused those to close, the white daisies and yellow mustard flowers would fill the void and create a multicolored canvas. With flowers came insects. Claire watched the bees busily pollinating and the multiple kinds of butterflies fluttering about. She decided to check Tony's library to see if he had a book that would help her classify the different species.

Catherine expected Claire back for lunch each day, so she tried not to venture farther than an hour and a half in any direction. During her past life, she walked for exercise, sometimes at a gym but more often around her neighborhood in Atlanta. Walking on sidewalks and through a nearby park she measured distance by time. One mile took fifteen minutes. Lately, her adventures took her along the path less traveled. It wasn't unusual for her to climb over fallen trees or up steep embankments. Due to these obstacles Claire estimated that one mile took closer to twenty minutes. With those calculations she traveled approximately four miles away from the house on each adventure.

One morning, she happened upon a den of foxes. Initially frightened, she watched them from a distance. There were two large and three small foxes. The small ones ventured away from the den, but the larger ones would always be within sight. It reminded Claire of camping with her dad. It filled her with warmth and a reassuring glow of protection.

It seemed like more recently she thought about her childhood and not her pre-contractual adult life. Perhaps it was a compartmentalization thing. Childhood was the past. It couldn't be changed, only remembered.

Her life before March 15 was actually present—or should be present. She *should* be in Atlanta, tending bar at the *Red Wing* and trying desperately to find another job in meteorology. She should be going out with friends and drinking so much her head hurt the next morning. She should be talking to her sister on the phone or e-mailing her and learning about her and John.

Currently nearing the end of June, Emily would be out of school for the summer. John was a busy associate in a law firm. Before Claire *disappeared*, Emily mentioned visiting Claire. "You know I'm off work in the summer and John is busy. I could come spend some time with you in Atlanta."

"Gosh, that would be great, but it gets really hot here in the summer, and I have to work, so you would probably be bored." Claire now felt bad that she hadn't been more encouraging. Honestly, she worried that Emily would disapprove of her tending bar or something else. Claire hadn't wanted to listen to her advice. Now she would love to hear her advice or even her voice. Claire sighed and wondered about Emily: did she wonder where Claire had gone? Had she tried to contact her? Soon she realized the wooded scene in front of her was blurry and tears were spilling over her lids onto her cheeks.

Claire decided to avoid those thoughts. Put them away in that compartment labeled *later*. Childhood provided safer thoughts and memories.

Tony explained that his land was virtually pie-shaped. The front of the property was where the drive met the highway, then the house, and then the land fanned out from there. Claire felt as though she was getting a handle on the layout of the property but it was taking time. Luckily, she thought that is the one thing I have plenty of, because there's a lot of land to explore. Of course, that followed with thoughts of the mysterious timetable. When would her debt be considered paid?

One cool morning, Claire sat on her jacket at the edge of a beautiful clearing and watched a magnificent wildlife performance. First, she saw deer run across the open field. With each jump their white tails caught the sun like bright white powder puffs. The longer she sat the more deer she saw. They would slowly approach the clearing, run across, and slow again once in the safety of the trees. There was no threat to them at that time, but instinct told them that the trees held security. Claire wondered where her security was, or perhaps, this was a lesson in instinct?

Claire contemplated talking to Catherine about packing a lunch so that she could stay out in the woods longer. Then she decided that might be something to do when Tony was out of town. She didn't want to get lost and not be back to the suite by 5:00 PM. She hated his rules, but following them made her life more pleasant.

On days Tony stayed home, exploring wasn't an option. He required her to stay near in the event her services were needed. She was often told to stay in his office where she would read, sitting on the soft leather sofa until he summoned her. There were days when he never requested her services, yet she wasted the entire day in his office. Claire knew it was more of the continued power play. He controlled her time, her body, and her life.

To continue her busy days, after lunch Claire sunbathed by the pool or read on the sun porch. She also had the library that could captivate her for hours at a time. If it rained she might opt for a movie in the theater. There were so many things to do. The addition of an occasional evening out with Tony was the biggest change to Claire's busy schedule. It started with the symphony. Since that time she accompanied him to a few other events. None as formal as the symphony, and all charity related, different foundations having dinners or cocktail parties or benefits. Each time Tony would tell Catherine that Claire needed to be ready for a specific event. She liked getting out away from the estate, but an invitation instead of a mandate would be nice. Apparently, companionship to events had now been added to her job description. Claire believed she did well at each turn and felt confident as long as Tony was near her. He would handle any situation that came her way.

At an event to honor donors of the University of Iowa's Children's

Hospital, Claire stood dutifully at Anthony's side while he spoke with a gentleman to whom she'd been introduced. Another man began to speak to her. It started innocently enough. "Hello, Ms. Nichols, I'm not sure if you remember me? We met a few weeks ago at the Quad City Symphony." His volume was low, to either lure her away from Tony or not be heard by him. Claire believed she remembered him. She tried to remember names as well as Tony, but she could only recall his face. He then introduced himself: Charles Jackson, and made small talk about the symphony. He started asking her about her place of residence, did she live in the Quad City region? Chicago? What brought her to this area? The entire time Claire stayed steady to Tony. She didn't want to interrupt Tony's conversation, but her instincts told her this wasn't good. She successfully avoided direct answers, but he persisted beyond political correctness. She decided she needed to get Tony involved before this man dragged something out of her she wasn't allowed to divulge. She lightly placed her hand on Tony's arm. At first, he didn't respond, so she squeezed it a little. When he excused himself from his conversation, he turned to Claire. She hated that she interrupted him, but she wore her mask and politely motioned toward the gentleman.

"Anthony, this is Charles Jackson." Anthony turned to Charles and shook his hand. Charles appeared uncomfortable. It was not an emotion shared by Tony. "Mr. Jackson has been incredibly inquisitive. I thought you might be able to be of assistance to him."

Claire stood back a half a step, still holding Anthony's arm, and watched as he turned to Mr. Jackson, who looked increasingly pale. Anthony's voice was one Claire recognized immediately. It was not his chatty social voice. "Mr. Jackson, I'm very good with names and faces. I remember seeing you at the symphony. I do not believe we were introduced. It's not my practice to converse with members of the press. It is my policy to allow my publicist to discuss such matters. I recommend that you speak to her, not my companion."

Mr. Jackson didn't have difficulty distinguishing the tone or the meaning. He apologized profusely to Anthony and then to Claire and made his way out of the event. Claire felt ill. She honestly didn't know how she would have handled it without his help. Tony placed his hand on top of Claire's as Mr. Jackson walked away.

"Tony, I'm sorry I interrupted your conversation. I just felt uncomfortable."

Leaning down to her ear and squeezing her hand, he whispered, "It's fine. You made the right decision."

She exhaled with relief.



HER CURRENT JOB passed its three-month anniversary. She still felt trapped and hated that she was there, but she didn't hate every day. She thought of each day as a new possibility, and like everyone else in the world, some days were better than others. She knew the difference with her life was that her barometer was not her. It summed up her dependence on Anthony Rawlings. The tone of her life depended totally and completely upon his frame of mind.

He traveled a few days a week every couple of weeks. While she was secluded to her suite, he'd been in Europe, which apparently happened with some regularity. These momentary *freedoms* upset her. Instead of relishing them, she felt lonely. There would be some evenings that he had business obligations and wouldn't dine with her or even come to her suite. Some of his ideas for her job requirements didn't settle well, but she came to prefer that to being alone.

June came and went. Since Claire chose to not watch television, she didn't know that the entire country was enduring a heat wave. She just knew that the outside air was heavy and within minutes could feel the perspiration dripping between her breasts and down her back. If a breeze blew it felt sticky and oppressive, not refreshing. Even being at the pool was uncomfortable unless early or late.

One evening, Catherine told Claire that Mr. Rawlings wouldn't be home until late. Claire didn't like vague terms like *late*. Normally she would wait in her suite to see if he came to her, but the day was scorching, and she knew *late* could mean *not at all*. With the sunset, she decided to take a swim.

Walking to the pool, Claire realized she rarely ventured out of her suite at night. The house seemed eerily quiet, like a museum after closing. The staff were mostly retired to their rooms and the lights were low. Her flip-flops echoed as she stepped onto the marble floor at the base of the staircase. After four months, Claire didn't need lights, she knew her way through the arches and into the sitting room. She paused at the windows and looked out to the pool. The water changed from pink, to green, to yellow, to purple, to blue, to clear, and back to pink. The deck lights were off, creating the illusion of a colorful abyss engulfed in complete darkness. She considered turning on the deck lights and decided against it.

Stepping into the summer night, the air sat heavy and still. The contrast from the air conditioning reminded her why she stayed indoors all day. Looking toward heaven she knew she made the right decision about the lights. The velvety sky glistened with a million stars. The water enveloped her body as she walked down the steps. Its temperature barely varied from the air and she quickly submerged herself. After swimming a few laps she floated on her back, watching the sky and thinking about constellations. Suddenly, Claire froze.

Deep in thought and enjoying the stars, she realized Tony was standing at

the edge of the pool. He'd been speaking, but her ears were submerged, and she couldn't hear him. Seeing his silhouette from the lights of the fountain startled her. She lifted her head out of the water to clear her ears and began to tread water.

"Tony, you startled me. Catherine said you wouldn't be home until late." She couldn't see his eyes. She waited for him to respond. He stood in silence for a moment. As she debated about talking, he walked to a chair hidden in darkness. When he returned she could only see his silhouette, but knew he was now nude.

Still not speaking, Tony dove into the pool. He swam up to Claire and wrapped his arms around her. Within seconds, Claire's bathing suit disappeared. His actions were fast and rough. Their mouths united as their tongues searched wildly for one another. He moved from her lips to the nape of her neck and all places in between. The pool depth allowed Tony to touch but not Claire. She wrapped her legs around his torso, allowing him to support her. He continued to nuzzle her neck, lifting her body so her round supple breasts found his lips. His kisses became nips, and he gently bit the tips of her hard nipples. Claire groaned with pleasure.

His hurried movements caused his bristled face to scratch her soft skin; however, the pain of his beard was quickly forgotten as the pleasure from his touch filled her consciousness. His mouth tantalized and his hands explored. Claire's back arched as she pressed her breasts toward his mouth and wrapped her fingers in his wet hair. Though the night was hot, Claire's arms and legs cloaked with goose bumps. In the silence of the country night, her moans echoed as her body convulsed.

Tony eventually led Claire out of the pool, onto a chaise lounge. He resumed his exploration; however, not with his hands. They still hadn't spoken. Claire's mind teetered between the cognizant *he doesn't seem upset* and the unconscious *ecstasy*. His actions slowed, became more deliberate and sensual, causing sensations deep inside of her. She held on to his massive shoulders and accepted everything he had to offer.

The carnal heat intensified by the night's humidity instigated perspiration. Claire tasted the amazing salty, sweat, and chlorine potion as her lips and tongue seduced his neck. When he finished they were both moist, more from one another than the pool.

Panting, they lay still, listening to the cicadas and crickets. Finally, with a grin, Tony spoke, "Good evening, Claire." His eyes were soft suede brown. "I wasn't happy when you weren't in your suite." Claire started to speak but stopped as Tony's finger lightly touched her lips. "But your idea of a swim on this hot evening was much better than what I planned."

Claire smiled. They moved back into the water to cool off but found that even in the water they had problems staying cool.

Later that night in Claire's suite, Tony brought up the situation at the University of Iowa Children's Hospital Event. He told her it hadn't been a planned test; however, had it been, she would have passed. He believed she could be trusted with more responsibilities and independence. Therefore, on her table was a wallet containing her ID—her driver's license, and a new credit card. The card was on his account and was for her use when he wasn't around.

"What do you mean when you aren't around?" Her voice didn't hide her fear. Tony smiled at her trepidation.

"You'll only leave the grounds without me, with Eric, and my permission, but I'll need to travel to Europe for at least a week next month. You've behaved well." He smiled and ran his hand over her bare thigh and buttocks. "Very well, and you've followed instructions much better than I would have given you credit for a few months ago." His hands roamed; Claire's eyes closed as her body responded. Tony's voice was both masterful and playful. "As a matter of fact, I believe right now you would do as I say."

Opening her eyes, she gazed into his, and answered, "I would." Her voice yearned as her body mindlessly obeyed, responding to his touch.

"I think we should continue to test that theory," he said with a devilish grin. "But first I believe you have earned the ability to do some shopping for yourself."

Claire's first thought was, she didn't want to be by herself. What if someone like Mr. Jackson approached? But then again, wasn't that what she'd wanted since she arrived, to be out, away, alone forever? She would need to file these thoughts, compartmentalize, and think about them tomorrow.

Tony was testing his theory. She needed to hear his every word. The directives for this test were proving playful and exciting. Claire knew she could pass.

CHAPTER TEN

Life is not what it's supposed to be. It's what it is. The way you cope with it is what makes the difference.

—Virginia Satir

STANDING AT THE rail of her balcony, Claire stared at the scene in front of her. The rays of moonlight illuminated the yard and tops of the trees, changing the familiar objects to unfamiliar colors. Under its brilliance, the trees appeared black and the grass silver. The multitude of stars glistened as she listened to the sounds of coyotes in the distance. This noise worried her. She thought about the smaller animals in the woods and hoped for their safety.

Although she hadn't been outside long, the humid air caused her to perspire. She could feel her hair stick to her neck as droplets of sweat rolled down her back. Claire had received word: Mr. Rawlings wouldn't be home until after 10:00 PM, and she would dine alone. This was the third night in a row. Last night, he hadn't come to her suite at all. The night before, it'd only been for a few minutes to touch base. Apparently, things had been extremely busy.

The clock said 11:00 PM when she retreated to the balcony. She hadn't seen him, or received a message, and wanted to do something—anything. Patience wasn't a virtue she possessed in her old life. Now as she gazed at the countryside, she knew she was losing what little she'd recently been forced to acquire. She was thinking about how even the air smelled warm when the door behind her opened.

"Oh, hi, Tony, you startled me."

"I thought perhaps I'd need to search for you again. Then I noticed the drapes."

"I didn't know if you were coming tonight."

He indicated for her to come back inside. She complied. He shut the door.

“You didn’t get my message?”

“I did. It’s just later than normal.” Seeing him in the light, she realized he looked tired and thought how he rarely appeared anything but ideal. Things must really be rough with work. She wanted to talk to him about it, but in the past, he didn’t, or wouldn’t, try to explain things.

“I came to let you know I’m flying to New York tomorrow. I have a business deal which apparently will fall apart if I don’t get personally involved.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Damn it, Claire, I don’t know for sure.” He told her to come to him, and she did. He held her so close that she needed to look up to see his eyes. He lowered his face to her hair. With her head against his chest, she heard him sigh. “This has been a pain-in-the-ass deal. It’s been in the pipeline for years. The time alone has cost me millions what with research and analysis. Now it seems like everything is falling through.”

Claire didn’t know anything about the deal. She did know this was more than he’d disclosed to her at one time. She wanted to help, to make him feel better. She didn’t want to do anything because he *owned* her, but because she wanted to. As terrifying as Anthony Rawlings could be when he was strong and controlling, she didn’t like seeing him meek and worn down either. “Tony, is there anything I can do?”

He moved her away, to see her face. “Are you asking me? I don’t think that has happened before.”

She leaned back into his chest. “I want to help you relax before this big meeting.” She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek and neck as her hands unfastened his belt and slacks. She pulled his hand and led him to the bed, where he sat. Claire knelt in front of him, his hands held her face, and she moved toward him.

The entire night, Claire was in control. She did what she wanted, what she believed would help him. Her pace was slow and more thorough. Tony tended to move fast, rough, and hard. Claire moved steadily, softly, and completely. He’d told her exactly what he wanted and how he wanted it for over three months. She knew what he liked. The most surprising part to Claire was that he allowed it. He would sometimes grab her and push, deeper and harder. Then he would allow Claire to take over again.

Lying together in Claire’s bed, Tony surprised her again. “Thank you.” He rolled to face her. “Thank you for giving yourself. You keep me totally amazed.”

They were both almost asleep when Tony announced, “You’re coming with me to New York tomorrow. You can use that new credit card again while I have my meetings. And after tonight, I may need more of this, depending on how the meetings go.” Claire had a million questions, but stayed silent. Tony

continued, “No, I *will* need more of this, no matter how the meetings go.” They fell asleep.

A little before 6:00 AM, they boarded Tony’s private jet. Catherine woke Claire about 4:30 AM. Since she and Tony fell asleep after mid-night, wake-up came very early. When Claire woke, Tony was no longer in her suite. She showered while Catherine packed her luggage. There would’ve been a time when Claire would’ve been horrified to have someone else pack her belongings for a trip, but today it reassured her. Catherine seemed to know exactly what Claire needed and when she needed it. Allowing Catherine to take care of her needs had become second nature.

Claire’s light yellow slacks and a flowing white blouse were laid out. She obediently put them on. Her luggage was packed. She had a new Prada purse containing her wallet, ID, and credit card, as well as cosmetics, tissues, and other needed items. Carlos came to her suite to take her belongings down to the waiting car.

Before they left Claire’s suite, Catherine informed her she would be staying with Mr. Rawlings at his Manhattan apartment. And although she may be tired this morning, do not let it show, she must maintain appearances. Mr. Rawlings would be off to his work as soon as they arrived in the city. She would then be able to rest at the apartment. Claire nodded her understanding.

While Eric drove them to the local private airport, Tony spoke more directly and less compassionately than the night before. “You’ll be at my apartment while I’m working today. Eric will drive you there after he takes my associates and me to our meeting.” Claire smiled and said that was fine. She didn’t have a choice. She knew that, and so did he. “Upon reaching the airport, we will be met by Brent Simmons, the head of my legal team; Sharon Michaels, his associate; and David Field, one of my lead negotiators. They’ll join us on the flight to New York. I’ll introduce you. Brent is already aware of you. Once we board my jet, you’ll sit away from us while we begin our preparations.”

Claire said she understood. “Tony, I don’t want to get in the way. I’m here because you want me to be.”

“Yes.” He was looking at his iPhone, which had just buzzed. “That’s true. It’s my choice, and I want you here. I believe your presence will benefit me.” He became engrossed in his texting.

Benefit him? Why couldn’t he just say, I want you here? Her stomach tied in knots as she wondered what Brent Simmons knew about her. Did he know what she did? Did he think she was a companion or an employee or worse? As they rode in the backseat of the Mercedes Benz, Claire decided this was time for a *mask*. Finding it through all the apprehension surging through her mind was difficult, but she did, and put it on.

Claire didn’t know what to expect from a private jet. On the outside it

seemed smaller than she anticipated. Once they climbed the steps, she was pleasantly surprised by the spacious interior. To her left was the door to the cockpit and to her right was an open space with a table and four chairs. Beyond was a sofa along one wall facing three reclining chairs along the other. Everything was secured and contained seat belts like you would expect on a plane. The chairs and some of the walls were luxuriously covered with white leather and accented with wood like trim. There was additional space behind the far wall. Claire guessed that it contained a bathroom, maybe more.

Tony introduced Claire to his associates and motioned for her to take a seat on the sofa near the wall. Everyone was polite and friendly. She went to the sofa as she was told. Tony, Mr. Simmons, Ms. Michaels, and Mr. Fields sat around the oval table. Eric joined them on the plane after loading their luggage into a compartment below. Surprisingly, he sat in the copilot's seat. His talents suddenly impressed Claire—obviously, the world's most versatile chauffeur.

Claire watched and listened as Tony and the others discussed the impending deal. She honestly didn't care about the deal other than its impact on Tony. She liked to watch him work—his expertise, intelligence, and control. He respected the knowledge and wisdom of his associates, asked questions, and listened intently to their responses and opinions. With that said, Claire knew when the time came for decisions the only opinion that mattered would be his.

After they were in the air and the discussion at the table became mundane, Claire thought about napping and remembered Catherine's advice. To stay awake, she looked in her purse—another treasure hunt. First, she opened her wallet. Staring back at her was her picture from her Georgia driver's license. She read the identification card and saw her Atlanta address. Compartmentalize. Her picture didn't look like her. The picture was taken two years earlier and her face had changed: slimmed, tanned, and just changed. Her height, five four, was the same; her weight, one hundred and twenty-five, was closer to actual. That hadn't been the case four months ago. The listed weight was accurate when she was sixteen and like with everyone else it had inched up through the years; however, now it seemed accurate if not erroneously high. Next, Claire spotted the American Express platinum card with *Claire Nichols* embossed on the front.

When Tony first gave Claire the card, she didn't want to use it. She thanked him for the confidence and faith and tried to explain there was nothing she needed. She had all the clothes she could possibly wear. She actually had many she'd never worn. Food came to her three times a day, and she had a roof over her head. She had no interest in jewelry; having her grandmother's necklace was all she wanted. She loved to read, but so far the library contained more than she could hope to read.

Tony wouldn't accept any of her excuses. He told her to ask him when she wanted to go shopping. She didn't ask. After a week, he apparently gave up. One evening, over dinner, he proclaimed, "Eric is taking you into Davenport tomorrow to shop." Claire remembered suddenly feeling ill. She didn't speak at first and only stared. "Claire, did you hear me?" He knew she did; he wanted verbal confirmation.

"Yes, Tony, I heard you. I thought we discussed this and decided I have no pressing need for anything."

"I'm pretty sure we discussed it, and I said you're going—tomorrow."

"But, don't you need Eric tomorrow?"

His eyes darkened as his tone slowed. "Are you arguing? You were a confident woman when I met you. You've learned your lessons well. You need to get out in the world, and for the record, this conversation is now over, unless you feel it would be beneficial to argue?"

Claire wanted to complain and explain that she worried about the Charles Jacksons of the world; however, she'd made that mistake before. She swallowed. "What time does Eric need me to be ready?"

The trip to Davenport was unnerving. Eric picked Claire up in a black BMW. She sat in the backseat feeling awkward without Tony. Driving away from the house, she told herself Tony was right. She had been a confident woman, and besides, one day she would be leaving here. She also knew the truth. This was a test to determine if she could be trusted out by herself. She'd learned from earlier *glitches* the best way to pass a test was to avoid it. Tony made it clear—avoiding this was not an option.

Eric took her to the *River Walk Shoppes*, higher-end boutiques in the Quad Cities. She entered each shop and took her time looking around. At first, her senses were on high alert, afraid of everyone that approached. She soon realized no one paid that much attention to her. The clerks were attentive, and she was shown everything and anything she wanted. People didn't browse these shops if they couldn't buy.

Claire saw no reporters. No one stared or asked questions. By the time she made it down the street to a small coffee shop, she felt better about her outing and even drank coffee sitting at an outside table. She sipped the aromatic rich brew and watched people as they rushed down the sidewalks. She missed being around people; however, the idea of speaking to anyone frightened her. What if she said something wrong?

By the time Eric returned to pick her up, she found a few books on butterflies and some casual clothes for her busy event-filled days. It wasn't a lot, but she did what she'd been told to do and honestly enjoyed it.

Tony seemed disappointed that she hadn't bought more, but also pleased she'd done as he instructed. He then expected her to give him a fashion show of her finds and suggested next time she buy some items he would like too.

That meant fashions with much less material.

Once the jet landed the five of them entered a waiting limousine. The four continued to discuss their impending meeting. Claire sat silently listening—trying to go unnoticed. It was 9:20 AM and their meeting was to start at 10:00 AM. Eric rode in the passenger seat next to the driver. In no time they were in the throes of New York City grid-lock traffic. The car traveled in short, accelerated movements.

Claire had experienced this traffic from the back of a taxi when she lived with Emily and John and knew it could stifle travel and wreak havoc on schedules. Tony didn't seem concerned. Their car pulled up to their destination with minutes to spare. The four associates got out and proceeded through the big glass doors. Claire found herself alone in a large limousine. She didn't know where she was going or how long she would be there. Her life was no longer in her hands, and she was somehow coming to terms with that.



PEERING AROUND THE marble floored foyer, Claire knew his apartment wasn't like any she'd seen before. Her anxiety eased with the housekeeper's warm greeting. "Ms. Claire, welcome. My name is Jan. Let me show you to Mr. Rawlings's room. We'll put your belongings in there and show you around."

Claire thanked Jan and followed her up the ornate staircase which ascended to a railed landing on the second floor. The apartment included a massive sitting room complete with fireplace, a dining room, a kitchen, and an office on the first level. Claire called it the first level, but in actuality it was seventy-six stories from the ground. The sitting and dining rooms had floor to ceiling windows looking out over the city and toward the water. She'd spent many days and nights in New York City, but had never seen a view as spectacular as this.

Tony's bedroom was large and decorated in dark masculine colors. A large high bed with a leather headboard and complementary leather furniture filled the room. Jan carried Claire's hanging bag, and two other staff members assisted with the rest of their luggage. Once things were put away, Jan asked Claire if she would like some lunch or if she would rather rest. Claire decided a little lunch before a nap would be good.

Tony arrived at the apartment at about 7:00 PM. He wasn't alone. Brent Simmons was with him. They arrived conversing about something that happened during the day. Their conversation continued into the dining room, where they opened briefcases, laptops, and resumed their debate. Jan asked Mr. Rawlings if he would like dinner. He told her to just bring them

something they could eat while working.

Claire hoped for a night out under the New York lights. Instead, she settled for dinner alone in his bedroom and a night with her book. Wearing a black silk nightgown, she fell asleep before Tony ever made it to bed, and he left before she awoke. If the covers on his side weren't rumpled, she wouldn't have known he'd been there.

In the morning she found a note next to the bed:

Eric is available to you all day. Have a good day in the city. Be back by 6:00 PM. Don't disappoint me.

There was also cash, with a separate note:

FOR TIPPING, REMEMBER—APPEARANCES!

Okay, she thought. I'm stuck in New York. I might as well enjoy myself.

After her shower, Jan served her a wonderful breakfast and promised to notify Claire as soon as Eric returned from taking Mr. Rawlings to his office. By 10:00 AM, Claire sat in the back of the limousine with Eric driving her to some shopping therapy. She decided if Tony wanted her to shop so badly, this definitely was the place to do it. She always enjoyed shopping in New York City, but this would be a new experience. The vastness of the city, along with the quantity of people, gave Claire the feeling of anonymity—something she didn't have in Davenport. No one would even notice her here. She could do as she pleased.

"To Fifth Avenue and Fifty-first Street, please," Claire instructed.

Eric didn't hesitate. Claire decided she'd busy herself with *Versace*, *Prada*, *Bendel*, and *Louis Vuitton* for at least four or five hours. Eric gave Claire a card with his cell phone number and explained that she needn't worry about carrying any purchases. Tell the clerk to call him, her driver. He would pick up everything she bought. He dropped her off near East Fifty-First and Madison and promised to pick her up near the *Plaza Hotel* at East Fifty-Eighth Street at 2:00 PM. At that time, he would be happy to take her to her next destination.

Claire stepped from the car. Her high-heeled sandals hit the concrete and her chiffon sundress blew slightly in the breeze. She felt like a model doing a

magazine shoot. It didn't seem real. She kept telling herself: play the part. The summer heat radiating in waves off the pavement and the sounds of the city invigorated her as she fought the crowds of people along the sidewalk.

First, she entered *Versace*. The ornate limestone facade with the large glass doors, and an unlimited amount of money in her purse gave her a rush of adrenaline. It felt different from exercise. It was the strange sensation that she could buy anything and everything she wanted. She did her best to feign the image of someone accustomed to spending. It didn't take long before she believed it as much as the store's associates.

She tried very hard not to notice prices as she chose dress possibilities. She liked a cotton pique sheath dress and a gathered bodice sheath dress. They accentuated her trimmer figure. As she looked at herself in the mirror, she judged her image by would Tony like this? She decided he would. According to the associate she also needed shoes. When all was said and done, and she paid for her two outfits, she almost lost her composure. The associate smiled and said, "That will be thirty-six hundred and fifty seven dollars. Would you like to place that on an existing account?"

Claire worked diligently to keep her mask intact. Despite the dramatic increase in heart rate, she replied, "No, I'll pay for it now and my driver will pick it up. Let me give you his number, and he'll work out the details." She handed the associate her American Express.

"Thank you, madam, I'll be glad to take care of that for you." She rang the transaction. This kind associate definitely needed a tip—appearances.

Claire preceded north, next stop *Cartier*. She was determined to make it back to the apartment with items to show Tony. She decided on a nice little pair of sunglasses for only five-hundred-dollars. She thought about the ten-dollar sunglasses she wore all four years of college. Her shopping adventure continued. The crowds of people talking, the cash registers ringing, the smells of exhaust, the sights of tall buildings as she looked up to the sky, all worked together to create the feeling of elation.

By 1:00 PM Claire was exhausted. She purchased a few dresses, some shoes, a few new lingerie items, and sunglasses. She successfully spent over five thousand. It truly seemed ridiculous, but she was determined to make Tony proud. She didn't want to shop anymore. She stopped at the *Trump Tower*, less than two blocks from her pick-up destination, for lunch. She'd been there before and remembered the *Trump Café*. The people and beauty of the glass caught her attention as she entered the atrium, but her mind focused on food.

In the past four months she hadn't made one decision about food. Now, she salivated at the idea of ordering anything she wanted. There were even desserts. She took a few minutes wandering around the cases—so many choices. The aroma from the grill caused her to think of hamburgers in the

summertime. She could almost taste the foods as she inhaled their delicious scents. She silently debated her options.

Claire found a table near the window and ate her spinach salad, iced tea, and yogurt. It was still her choice, but eating healthy made more sense. She ate and watched. New York had always been fun, and even today, by herself, she found it fun. She glanced at her watch: 1:40 PM. She finished her lunch and walked toward the *Plaza Hotel*. Tony wouldn't be waiting, but Eric would. And she didn't want Eric to tell him she was late.

When Eric pulled the car to the curb, Claire was ready; however, she waited for Eric to park, get out, and open her door. She'd learned to perform her part well. Once back on the road, he inquired as to the next destination.

"I believe I'm tired and would like to go back to the apartment. Oh, did you pick up my purchases?"

"Yes, ma'am," Eric replied, and continued to explain that they were in the trunk. He would have someone take them to Mr. Rawlings's room immediately upon arriving at the apartment.

Claire sat back, closed her eyes, and let herself be taken back to Tony's apartment. It wasn't until she was almost back that it occurred to her: Emily and John were only three hours out of the city. She could get there by train. If she had Eric drop her off near a station, she could get to their house and be back in the span of a day. She used to ride the train all the time. No one would ever know. She couldn't do it today, but excitement brewed as she began to work out the details in her head for tomorrow.

Napping soundly on his large bed, late in the afternoon, Tony's voice brought Claire back to reality. "We did it! The deal is complete."

She pushed the sleepy fog from her mind and tried to concentrate on his words. "That's great. I'm happy for you."

"I believe a celebration is in order!" Smiling at his enthusiasm, Claire began to get out of bed.

"Where are you going?" His intimidating tone narrowed her focus.

She watched his accomplished expression quickly morph into a new menacing gaze. Claire felt a chill, despite the warmth of the blankets. "I thought you wanted to celebrate. I need to dress."

"Yes, you do, but first, you need to undress." Tony removed his Brooks Brothers suit jacket and silk tie, allowing them fall to the floor, and unbuttoned his shirt. "Our celebration will begin here."

Claire hadn't expected him to return this early and was napping in shorts and a camisole. Her instincts told her the vigor and energy acquired from his successful business dealings would be unleashed here and now. Thankful

she'd napped, she obeyed and removed her shorts and top.

Apprehensively, Claire watched as Tony approached. His clothes created a trail from the doorway to near the foot of the bed. Adjusting her eyes to the dim light, she beheld his completely nude body. She'd been groggy when he first entered the room, but something about his demeanor alarmed her, like the warning rumble of thunder indicating an imminent storm. Now, fully awake, her body quivered. Coming toward her, she beheld his wide chest, defined, and covered with dark hair, his trim abdomen, his narrow hips and waist. There was a light trail of hair, leading to where... Claire could plainly see he was ready to celebrate. Everything about his presence said *power*.

She steadied herself as Tony pushed his body against her petite form. Moving fast and rough, he pulled her into his embrace. Forcibly engaging her lips, she tasted coffee and attempted to slow his actions—trying to control his explosion of energy. It was a matter of momentum. Claire was helpless to slow this force of nature. Her only defense was to move with it. Anticipating his actions, she expected to be lifted onto the bed. Instead, he turned and pushed her to the bed. Her cheek felt the softness of the satin covered, down comforter. His plans were unexpected, and he hadn't prepared her. She stifled the urge to cry out in pain, as her fingers gripped the cover, forming fists. Dominating, Anthony Rawlings showed no meekness, only total control.

His voracious need was only momentarily satisfied. He instructed Claire to kneel, held her head, and dictated her movements until he was ready again. Insatiable, the afternoon went on and on. He took his time. His authoritative tone resumed, as did instructions and directions. Eventually, he led her to the shower. They needed to get ready to go out. The soap, the multiple shower heads—he continued.

Finally, gratified—Tony took shampoo and began to wash Claire's hair. After ravaging her body, he reverently caressed her chestnut trusses. Suddenly, his movements were tender and gentle. Outwardly, she responded appropriately, but inwardly she burned with loathing. One day she wanted to help him, to be with him, the next he treated her like a whore. It made her furious and her heart ache, but she stopped the tears. He'd already taken too much. She wasn't giving him those too.

That night, dressed in a sleek black strapless dress with black heels, Claire was escorted by Tony to *Daniel*, a four-star restaurant in Manhattan, located on the Upper East Side. It was known for its elegant ambiance and delicious French cuisine. En route, Tony reminded Claire about his rules: do as she was told, keep up appearances, and the severity of punishment for public failure. Perhaps he sensed her unspoken revulsion and her overwhelming desire to flee, and he felt the need to reiterate the consequences if she tried.

When they arrived to *Daniel*, they went to the lounge where Tony ordered cocktails. They sipped drinks while Tony chatted about his amazing rescue of

this sensational deal. Claire felt like she was spending the evening with two different men. He could chastise her in one breath and be refined and charming in the next. While talking about his deal he said he didn't like to talk about money, but today he made more than most people do in an entire lifetime, quoting, "Hell, more than most *families* do in their lifetimes."

When the maître d' informed them their table was ready, they moved to the exquisite dining room. Again, Tony ordered their meal. Claire's attention was completely centered on him. He required that—maintaining appearances. That evening, Claire discovered Tony spoke French. Since she did not, she didn't know what was said to the waiter. When the bottle of wine arrived, after sipping on cocktails, Claire tried unsuccessfully to hide her surprise. Tony explained, "This is a special occasion."

The waiter poured a small amount of wine into a glass and offered it to him. He approved and two glasses were poured.

If the prelude hadn't been so tempestuous, the dinner would have been more pleasurable. Claire remembered Tony saying he didn't approve of alcohol because it diminished the senses. Currently, feeling her body, head, and heart ache, she welcomed the diminishing effects. Of course, she didn't show her uneasiness with the return of the Anthony Rawlings she'd known. She obeyed the rules and remained the perfect companion.

On the way back to the apartment, Eric drove them around Manhattan to enjoy the lights, sights, and sounds. New York City was truly spectacular, and it had been so long since Claire had experienced so many people and so much energy. If Tony weren't running his hand up her thigh, it would have been more enjoyable.

Tony informed her they would return to Iowa in the morning. As they were about to fall asleep, he asked about shopping. Her body exhausted, her head spinning from the alcohol, she replied, "It was nice. May I please show you the purchases in the morning?"

They both fell asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival.

—Sir Winston Churchill

HIS ALARM SOUNDED, and Mr. Rawlings called for the car. It would be ready to take them to the airport at 6:00 AM. Claire knew she'd rather be back in her suite, waking at 8:00 AM, working out, eating, and being on her own schedule. When she worked at WKPZ, she needed to wake before 3:00 AM every morning, but back then, she went to bed much earlier and most importantly—alone.

A little before 5:00 AM, she sleepily entered the shower. Turning her face to the hot spray, she desperately tried to revive her senses and dull the aches in her body. The water began the process, but the real awakening came as she heard the glass door slide, and saw Tony enter the steamy stall. His only expectation was to get clean; however, the act—the sharing of this personal space non-sexually—was more intimate than Claire anticipated or desired.

Once on the jet, she asked about his associates. Tony explained that Mr. Simmons and Mr. Field stayed behind to complete the contracts, and Ms. Michaels had left on another company jet, yesterday. During the two-and-a-half-hour flight, it was only the two of them in the cabin. Tony busily read his computer screen while Claire watched the clouds under the plane and contemplated the trip—disappointing and short. She thought pensively about her missed opportunity to contact Emily and John. She hadn't spoken to anyone from her past for almost four months. Did anyone wonder what happened to her? Were they concerned she'd dropped off the earth? But then she thought about Tony. He'd taken her out and introduced her to the world. She couldn't be a missing person or the police would have gotten involved. She wasn't sure how this publicity thing worked. Maybe Emily knew she was seen out with Mr. Anthony Rawlings. Claire berated herself. She'd worried

more about *not* disappointing Tony than thinking to contact her sister.

Suddenly, Tony broke the silence. The domineering man from the night before was gone. His tone was friendly and inquisitive. “Now, tell me about your shopping trip.”

Claire did her best to respond with the appropriate tone and inflection. “It was amazing. New York is such a bustling city. I wasn’t worried about people, or should I say reporters, approaching me.”

“That concerns you?”

“Yes—after that scene at the benefit, I’m terrified someone will approach me. I know how much appearance and privacy means to you.”

Satisfied, Tony smiled smugly. “Very well, that’s interesting. Go on, what did you buy?”

“Well, first I went to *Versace* and found a couple of dresses and some shoes. I think you will like them. I made my way along Fifth Avenue and bought some sunglasses. Oh...” She pulled the glasses out and put them on. “...they’re here in my purse.”



TONY SMILED AND removed them from her green eyes. He liked her eyes and didn’t want them covered.

Claire continued chattily, “I also found some lingerie.” She smiled coyly. “Which I believe you’ll like.”

His eyes were soft, and he was fully focused. Her excitement amused him. “It sounds like you did well. Do you mind telling me how much you spent?”

Claire’s eyes dropped to the floor. Tony gently lifted her chin to resume eye contact. Her emerald irises shimmered as she flashed a smile and spoke. “About five thousand.”

He laughed.



HIS REACTION SURPRISED her. She waited to see if it was a laugh—leading to something else, but no. It was just a laugh. Finally, he responded, “Good job, Claire. You may get the hang of this yet. I look forward to my private fashion show tonight when I return to the house.”

It bothered Claire that he could treat her in such a demeaning manner in the bedroom, or wherever he chose, and then turn around and act like nothing happened. She needed to work on compartmentalizing the sex away from the rest of her life. A much more difficult task than it sounded.

Once they arrived back to Iowa, they entered Tony's waiting car, and Eric drove them back to the house. Tony needed to get a few things before heading into the office in Iowa City. He would be leaving tomorrow for ten days in Europe, and he had some loose ends which required his immediate attention.

After the car entered the gates to the estate, they took the long winding drive approaching the mansion. Claire usually saw the house from the back. Although, she rarely left the property, when she did, it was usually at night. Now seeing it in daylight, the beautiful combination of river stone, limestone, and brick, combined with the Romanesque style architecture, gave her a new appreciation. Tony had told her he'd built the house about fifteen years ago, but it looked older. It didn't look outdated or antiquated. It looked as if it had been designed for an earlier time. Claire couldn't help but ask. "Tony, you said you built your house about fifteen years ago?"

"Yes," he answered, as Eric came around the front drive. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm not used to seeing it from the front. It's beautiful!" He thanked her. She continued, "But, it looks older than fifteen years to me—the style I mean."

"I patterned it after my family's home from when I was a child."

Claire knew he'd lost his parents and didn't want to stir up bad memories, but her curiosity got the best of her. "I thought you built your fortune from nothing. How did your parents have a house like this?" They were now getting out of the car.

"It was my grandfather's, not my parents'. My father was weak; however, my grandfather's house and money were all lost over twenty-five years ago. My grandfather trusted the wrong people."

Claire wasn't sure what that wealth of information meant. Catherine told her that Mr. Rawlings didn't allow many people to get close. She was sure this family history had something to do with that. As they walked to his office, she tried for a little more information. "It truly is amazing. Did you pattern the inside after it, as well?"

"Mostly, I even found and purchased some of the original artwork and antiques; however, I wanted my home equipped with all the modern conveniences and security equipment. Every inch of this house is under constant surveillance. I won't make the same mistake my grandfather made."

Claire considered what he was saying; he meant every inch of the perimeter. He was stopping someone from getting in who wasn't supposed to be there.

Standing behind his desk, punching some buttons on his computer and rummaging through papers, Tony continued, "Haven't you ever wondered

how the staff knows exactly when to enter your suite?"

Claire's knees wobbled, and she needed to sit down. "You mean *my* suite is under surveillance? Like there are cameras?"

Tony looked up from the papers and met Claire's eyes. Seeing the repugnance, he smiled. His words slowed, adding malice. "Yes, of course. It's all video recorded and saved." Claire sat on the nearest chair. Suddenly, making the most of her newfound discomfort, he added, "Perhaps we could have a premier viewing, critique, and work on revisions."

She detested his existence. "Tony, please tell me you're joking, some sort of sick joke."

His vile smirk gave spark to his darkening eyes. "But, my dear Claire, I am *not*. Now the staff doesn't have access to the view of your bed. Only I have that. They do have view of the sitting area and the doorways to and from your dressing room and bath. That's how they've been able to come and go without you seeing them."

"But why? Why would you do that? Why would you keep it?"

Tony picked up his needed papers and a flash drive and moved to leave his office. "Because I can. I can watch and decide what I like and what I believe can be improved. You'll understand after you get a chance to view it. Maybe tonight, but now I must be going." He started to walk toward the hall doors.

Thinking her legs couldn't support her weight; Claire stayed seated. The thought of him watching them, of her watching him with her, made her physically ill. She seriously believed if she stood she wouldn't be able to control the revolt currently occurring in her stomach.

Tony reiterated, "It's time to exit my office." He watched as she sat motionless and heartlessly added, "And in case you were wondering—yes—this room, too, is under surveillance, except for my desk. I do have a great view of the sofa and this open area." He nastily grinned and gestured to the setting of one of her worse nightmares. Something she'd pushed away. Now, she knew he had it on video and watched it! "Claire, I need to go. Get out of the chair, now."

Absently, she stood, thinking only about keeping her breakfast down. Claire tried desperately to keep all other thoughts out of her mind as she left his office. Before she knew it, she was back in her suite. Her head spun. She wanted to flop on the sofa and stop the thoughts bombarding her consciousness, but he could see her.

Was there anywhere he couldn't see her?



THAT NIGHT THEY dined on the back patio. It was shaded and the night air felt warm. The yard looked picture perfect. Even with the recent heat wave which had been accompanied by a drought, his lawn was lush and green thanks to the marvels of a sprinkling system and ground's crew. Tony was doing what she despised: talking about his trip to Europe, the time in New York, *anything* except the cameras and videos.

Claire couldn't understand how he could behave one way, say something, and then act as if it never happened. She, however, was having difficulty thinking of anything else. Her appetite gone, she barely ate any of her dinner.

Once they were done dining, Tony led Claire to the movie-theater. It was her retreat—a place to escape and watch singing and dancing. Tonight, Tony didn't intend to watch a musical. He programmed the video system and entered a passcode. Suddenly, the screen was full of dates and locations, such as: *2010, May 05, S.E. suite*. He had the ability to scroll to different dates and different locations. It wasn't just her room. There were locations like: garages, kitchen, foyer, stairs, theater, pool, S.E. 2 floor hall, S.E. 1 floor hall, etc.

In some humiliating form of torture, he chose: *2010 March 20, S.E Suite*, and then programmed the time. He scrolled up and the time decreased: 9, 8, 7. He returned to approximately *8:00 AM* and hit *enter*. There on the movie screen, bigger than life, was Claire's suite. *She was wearing a white robe and lay curled up on the floor near the hall door*. Claire didn't need to watch, she knew too well what would happen. She also knew the Claire on the screen was covered in bruises, her hair was a mess, and she could see the demolition of the room. Now she heard a *beep* and the door opened.

Claire jumped, also hearing the sound and seeing Tony enter. "Good morning, Claire." Claire looked at Tony.

"Good morning, Anthony. I want you to know, I've decided to go home. I'll be leaving here today."

Tony then spoke, his black eyes shining as he smiled. "Do you not like your accommodations?" His smile widened. "I don't believe you'll be leaving so soon. We have a legally binding agreement..." Tony took a bar napkin from his suit pocket. "...dated and signed by both of us."

Claire didn't want to watch anymore. "Please, Tony. I don't want to see this." She covered her eyes.

Tony physically removed her hands from her eyes. "I promised a viewing. I said you will watch, and you *will* watch."

The video had progressed in real time. Claire looked up in time to hear her own voice obviously filled with alarm.

"It is not the end of this discussion. This is ludicrous. An agreement doesn't give you the right to rape me! I'm leaving."

Knowing what was to come. Claire closed her eyes as she heard Tony's hand contact the screen Claire's left cheek.

Unknowingly, her own fingers drift toward her left cheek. Opening her eyes she saw herself fly across the floor, and Tony walk over to that Claire. She closed her eyes again, hearing the voice on the screen with the cruel tone. “*Perhaps in time your memory will improve. It seems to be an issue. Let me remind you again, rule number one is that you do as you are told. If I say a discussion is over, it is over, and this written agreement which states whatever is pleasing to me, means consensual, not rape.*”

The real Claire still had her eyes shut. She knew the Tony on the screen was straightening his jacket. She could hear him continue in a disturbing, authoritative voice. “*I have decided that it would be better if you did not leave your suite for a while. Don't worry, we have plenty of time, 215 thousand dollars' worth of time*” She opened her eyes again to see the screen Tony step on broken crystal and speak again in a tone that made the real Claire shiver. “*I'll tell the staff that you may have your breakfast after you clean up this crystal.*” Tony left Claire's room.

“Please stop the video!” Claire cried. She couldn't help it. “Please, I can't watch anymore.”

Relishing Claire's suffering, Tony said, “Oh, there're so many videos. We can watch for hours.” He hit some buttons and went back to the menu. “For example...” The screen read: *March 19, 2010*. “...how do you suppose your suite got into that condition? I'm sure we could find out.”

“Please!” she pleaded. Her head hurt and stomach twisted in knots. She couldn't stand this. She tried desperately to make it stop. “Please... you're leaving tomorrow. Wouldn't you rather spend tonight making movies instead of watching?”

Her eyes were red and puffy, and her nose ran from crying.

Tony smirked at her desperation. His tone dripped with ruthlessness. “Maybe we should watch some more—find out where you need improvement.”

“I'll do anything you say—anything you want me to do differently—just tell me. Just *please* don't make me watch.” Claire was now on the floor in front of Tony, kneeling, crying. She hated that she'd been reduced to begging, but these videos ruined her whole compartmentalization. How could she keep these awful memories hidden if she was forced to watch them?

His dark eyes pierced her soul. His voice was cold as ice. “You *will* do whatever I say, even if it is to watch, but...” He hesitated to add emphasis. “...I don't want to spend my last night, for over a week, here with you in this condition.” He stood, causing her to fall back onto the floor. “I'll be in your suite in a few minutes.”

Claire stood.

Tony continued, “Go up and get ready. Wash your face! You look like hell, and as far as attire... I'm thinking some new lingerie.”

When she started to leave the theater, Tony gripped her arm. She stopped, met his gaze, and listened to his steely tone. “Claire, what do you say?”

She looked at him as they stood silently for a moment, and Claire’s confused mind spun. She couldn’t fathom what he wanted. When it hit her, fire ignited in her moist eyes. She swallowed her protest and managed to articulate, “Thank you, Tony.”

Loosening his grip, he responded, “You may demonstrate your gratitude when I get upstairs.”

Claire continued to stand, afraid to move. Her mind was too garbled. She didn’t know what to do or say. All she could do was pray that she would never see another of those videos. As if sensing her bewilderment, Tony remained in control of her motion. “You may go to your suite now.”

It was after sunrise when Claire felt Tony get out of her bed. She listened as he picked up his clothes, and she knew he was dressing. Next, she heard him open a drawer and rifle through it. She opened her eyes, and in the dim light, saw him writing a note. When he turned to look at her, she closed her eyes and feigned sleep. Doing her best to keep her breathing steady, she reminded herself, he wouldn’t be back for over a week.

At that moment in time, she detested everything about Anthony Rawlings.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lust and greed are more gullible than innocence.

—Mason Cooley

NATHANIEL DIDN'T MIND the commute between New York and New Jersey, especially when he drove the winding drive toward his home. Each time the beautiful combination of river stone, limestone, and brick came into view, he momentarily remembered the two-room apartment he'd shared with his wife. For a young soldier recently home from fighting the Japs, it was ample. Being a soldier and a veteran were the only attributes Sharron's family saw in him. They were the only reasons they allowed their daughter to marry Nathaniel Rawls.

Today, as he stepped into the marble entry, he wished her high-and-mighty father could see his daughter now. Oh yes, Nathaniel Rawls did make something out of himself, and now, with Clawson's ideas, there was so much more to be made. If his father-in-law were still alive he would gladly shove this up his—

"Good evening, Nathaniel." Sharron's greeting came from the archway to the sitting room. She had his bourbon waiting. Dinner would be precisely at 7:00 PM. Everyone knew that. Perhaps it was the military training, but punctuality was never questioned. "How was your day?"

"It's better now." He took the glass she handed to him and kissed his wife's cheek. The sparkle of his wife's eyes reflected the flames from the large fireplace. "How was your day, my love?"

Sharron chatted about the pressing concerns regarding the household staff, while Nathaniel thought about Rawls Corp. Of course, he responded and acknowledged her concerns, but his mind swirled with Clawson's ideas. Just before 7:00 PM they heard Samuel and Amanda descending the grand stairs. They all congregated in the dining room.

He may think about work, but dinner was not the time to discuss it. Even

though Nathaniel and Samuel had spent the day together debating ideas, Nathaniel and his son spent dinner talking with their wives, discussing weather, politics, sports, movies, etc...

A man's home was his castle, and Nathaniel loved the castle his queen and family were able to enjoy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

—Albert Einstein

C LAIRE WAITED ABOUT ten minutes after hearing the door to her suite shut. During that time, she lay still, barely breathing, and pretending to sleep. She didn't want to face him, talk to him, or even see him. Though appearing peacefully asleep, her mind was a whirlwind of questions: How long until I'm sure he won't come back? Can he see me? Is he watching? Oh God! What did he write?

Finally, her curiosity won. She got out of bed and started to walk to the table to read his note. Suddenly, the thought hit her like a physical strike. She remembered the cameras and the staff. Reaching for her robe from the floor, she secured it around her nude body. Sitting on the table where he'd left it, was his note:

I believe we have a blockbuster on our hands. It's hard to say, until we thoroughly review the footage I plan to return a week from Wednesday. Eric is available if you want to visit the Quad Cities. I trust last night's film reminded you of my rules. Don't disappoint me.

Never in her life had she remembered being so overwhelmed with emotion. Her entire being emitted loathing, directed completely and totally toward one man: Anthony Rawlings. She hated him, his sadistic ploys, and nasty reminders. Claire picked up the note, crumbled it into a ball, and threw it against the wall. It created significantly less mess than the vase of flowers had

five months earlier.

Her mind tried desperately to compartmentalize the videos. She wanted to put them away—someplace she would never find them. Think of something else, she told herself. It was too difficult. She climbed back into bed and smelled his aftershave. Turning over the pillow, the cool side smelled fresh. That, with the realization he wouldn't return until a week from Wednesday, gave her a sliver of peace. She tried to concentrate. What day is it now? Sunday. She felt her muscles relax. It was Sunday, his day to be home—but he was gone. Her eyes closed as tears began to slip onto her pillow. She drifted away to another place.



“Ms. CLAIRE? Ms. Claire, you must wake.”

Claire tried to focus. She'd been somewhere in a dream. Now hearing Catherine's voice, she rolled over and saw her standing at the edge of her bed.

“Catherine, what are you doing?”

“Ms. Claire, it's after 1:00 PM. You need to wake and eat. You've already missed breakfast and now lunch. I'm worried about you.” Claire saw Catherine's concerned expression and heard her fretful tone.

From the moment Tony left the room and Claire read the note, she'd been crying, even in her sleep. Now, opening her puffy eye lids caused pain, which added to the ache in her body, head, and heart. She'd never felt more alone and isolated than she did. “Thank you, Catherine, for your concern, but I believe I'll stay in bed today. I'm not feeling well.” She tried to sound strong, but with the words came more tears. The salt stung her already swollen eyes. Claire wanted to concentrate on Catherine, but her mind wouldn't stop thinking of Tony and what he'd done. Not wanting Catherine to see her in this condition, Claire rolled her face into her pillow, making her words muffled. “Please leave me alone.”

Catherine didn't leave. Instead, she sat on the edge of Claire's bed and tenderly stroked Claire's hair as her head moved with the sobs. Catherine remained silent and comforted her until the sobs subsided and Claire caught her breath. “Ms. Claire, you'll feel better if you shower and eat. Please let me help you.” Catherine's concern and affection reminded Claire of her mother or grandmother; however, she knew if one of them were present, they'd tell her to run not shower.

Claire didn't want to eat, shower, or even get out of bed. Her only desire was to be out of *his* house. At that moment, she didn't care if it was by car or death. She just wanted out. The feeling of helplessness sat heavily on her chest. She had tried to survive this ordeal. She had even convinced herself she

could handle whatever he sent her way. This new situation was too much. He broke her. Since March, she maintained her spirit, despite the loss of her body. Yesterday, he took that too. She turned to look Catherine in the eye and asked, “How have you been able to work for *him* all this time?”

Catherine stopped stroking Claire’s hair and gently took her hand. “Mr. Rawlings is a good man, Ms. Claire. He truly is.”

Claire shook her head as the tears and sobs resumed. “No! No, he isn’t! I’ve never met a more sadistic, cruel, and bad man.” She closed her eyes, enduring the sting of her tears, the pounding in her head, and taste of her runny nose.

Catherine handed Claire a tissue. “Mr. Rawlings hides his feelings with certain behaviors. He’s afraid to face his own emotions, and he uses this dark persona as a cover. It’s not who he truly is. I’ve known him a long time.”

Claire’s words came between whimpers. “Catherine, I can’t.” “I can’t get up.” “I can’t face the staff.” “They all know.” “They’ve all seen me... seen him... I just can’t.”

“No, Ms. Claire. Only I have access to view the inside of your room.” Claire pulled her hand away and rolled from her gaze. Catherine reached out to lightly touch her shoulder. “I only use that access to know when to send the staff inside or to check on your safety.” Claire continued to face away from Catherine. “And now, I’m concerned about you. Ms. Claire, please let me help you. It’s a beautiful day outside.” Claire didn’t move. “Would you like your lunch in here or downstairs?”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t want lunch. Thank you for your concern, but I’m too... too...” She turned to face Catherine. “...I don’t know what I am!” Her voice trailed away. “I don’t even know *who* I am, anymore.”

“Ms. Claire, you’re a beautiful, strong woman. That’s what Mr. Rawlings finds so attractive. He’s astounded by your strength and resilience.”

“That isn’t true! He hates strength in anyone but himself. He has to have total control.” Claire replayed scenes from the past that caused her body to shudder.

“Miss, you’re partially right. Mr. Rawlings doesn’t want to let anyone else have power over him. Therefore, *if* he admits he has feelings toward you, he gives up control, and if I may, that scares him.”

Claire really didn’t think that anything scared Anthony Rawlings. “I don’t want his feelings. I want out! I want to go to Atlanta and forget I was ever here.” Her voice steadied. “I promise, I won’t tell any of his secrets. I just want to go home.” Tears flowed with increased intensity. Her next question was barely audible. “Do you think he’ll ever let me go?”

Catherine looked into her eyes. “Mr. Rawlings is a man of his word. If he said he’ll release you when your debt is paid, then he will.” The obvious question was when would that be? “Now after you shower, would you like

your lunch in here or downstairs?"

Claire began to get out of the bed as Catherine helped with her robe. "I'll shower, but I'm really not hungry."

"It's sunny and beautiful outside; the sun will make you feel better. I'll have your lunch brought to the pool." Catherine started for the door, but stopped, and added, "Unless, you need my assistance?"

"No, thank you. I'll be all right. I'll be down to the pool in a little while."

Claire slowly walked into the bathroom, turned the shower on as hot as possible, stood under the stream, and let the flow hit her face and skin. It didn't stop her head from aching, but it washed away the scent of him. As the steam built and her skin turned red, she found herself sitting on the bench, liquid needles hitting her hair, and tears flowing.

She couldn't be sure how long she sat in that position, but the temperature of the water began to cool by the time she snapped back to reality. Drying her skin, she noticed new bruises. Both of her hip bones and her left forearm were red and tender to the touch. As she placed her sunscreen, she found some more bruises on her legs. Momentarily, she considered the need to camouflage them while at the pool, then she realized, why. Maybe the staff didn't have access to the videos of her bedroom, but what about the pool, his office, and any other place he chose to require her services?

She combed her wet hair, put on a bikini, a beach cover, flip-flops, and found her new sunglasses. Her eyes looked scary in the mirror. The sunglasses would definitely help. On her way to the pool she stopped in the library and grabbed an older magazine, *People*. Some light nonsense reading to help her mind stray.

As soon as she stepped outside of the house, Claire realized Catherine was right about the weather: lower humidity with bright sunshine. When she reached the pool, Cindy brought a tray with her lunch: a turkey sandwich, mixed fresh fruit, and an iced tea, and asked if Claire needed anything else.

"No, Cindy, I'm fine. Thank you for lunch." The sound of defeat thickly flowed through her voice. The sight of the food made her ill. It reminded her of dining. Dining of Tony. Tony of his rules, instructions, and video surveillance. She began to shove the tray off the table but stopped. Someone would need to clean it up. That seemed unnecessary. Claire picked up the glass of iced tea and walked toward a chaise lounge.

Remembering scenes on *that* lounge chair, she chose another.

The sun felt wonderful on her skin and the tea tasted refreshing. Her head still ached and eyes hurt. She suddenly wished she'd asked Cindy for some headache medicine. Thumbing through the magazine she looked at pictures of smiling, pretty celebrities. She read an article about a little girl saved by her dog—sweet.

Then she read the latest gossip: who was with whom and who was

splitting from whom. It was then she saw the picture, in a section called *Star Tracks*. It was her! The photo showed her and Tony sitting in the private box at the symphony, her smiling at him, and him holding her hand. It contained the title and caption:

MYSTERY BEAUTY?

Anthony Rawlings, forty-five, confirmed bachelor, billionaire, and red-hot sexy, has been seen at numerous events in the last month with this beautiful woman. Sources say her name is Claire Nichols, but who is she? Mr. Rawlings's publicist would not comment regarding speculation that there could be someone special in his life.

Claire stared at the photo in disbelief. Tony was forty-five, really? And who cared that she was at the symphony? Well other than her, since it was her first time allowed out of the house in two over months. Has Emily seen this? What about her friends in Atlanta?

The stupid magazine was supposed to take her mind off everything, not make it public. Claire flipped the magazine over. It was dated June 14. Today was Sunday, but what was the date? It was August, August 8, and Tony won't return until the eighteenth. Thinking of it that way made it seemed even longer. She smiled, dropped the magazine on the ground, and closed her eyes. The clock by the pool house read 3:15 PM when Catherine woke her again.

"I brought you something special, Ms. Claire." Claire opened her eyes to see Catherine holding a tall glass containing something resembling a smoothie. "It's my secret recipe: banana, strawberry, and yogurt."

Claire appreciated Catherine's persistence and took the drink. Her concoction tasted sweet and felt cool in her throat as she swallowed. The nutritional ingredients provided her body with the sustenance it needed. While she drank, Catherine pulled up a chair and chatted. Claire knew she was being watched, not by a depraved voyeur, but by a friend. It was a simple act of compassion and concern. Catherine didn't talk about anything that happened. She just talked. Once Claire finished, Catherine left with the glass.

Closing her eyes, Claire recognized a new sense of emptiness and relief. Four months of despair and misery had been washed away through gallons of tears. She remembered her grandmother's saying: sometimes we all need a

good cry. To that end, Grandma would read a sad book or watch a sad movie. Claire watched the movie.

Although the sun still shimmered on high, it began to move toward the front of the house, casting shadows on the pool and deck. Claire decided to go back upstairs, but realized she had no privacy in her suite.

At that moment, she noticed the trees. Her mind worked slowly; it had been through quite an ordeal in the past twenty-four hours. Staring at the green leaves and thick forest, she saw freedom. Not freedom to Atlanta or completely away from Tony, but freedom from cameras, instructions, rules, and freedom to relax. The realization energized Claire like nothing else had all day. Tomorrow, she was heading into the woods.

Monday morning Claire woke with a start. She'd been dreaming, but she couldn't remember about what. She just knew her heart pounded, she gasped for breath, and she felt like she was suffocating. As her mind cleared and she looked around her suite, she saw reality. She was alone, the night had been peaceful, and today was a new day. She quickly showered and dressed for her exploration. When she stepped from the closet/dressing room, because she vowed to never be unclothed in her main room again, her door closed.

"Wait please," she shouted toward the door.

"I'm sorry, miss, I should have been faster."

"Oh no, Cindy, you're fine. I just need a favor."

"Anything, what can I do for you?"

Claire explained she planned a day trip into the woods. She needed a packed lunch and some water bottles. Cindy listened intently and promised to help.

Claire sat down to her breakfast. It wouldn't take much for Claire's appetite to disappear, just a few thoughts of reality. So she chose not to do that. She'd get those thoughts into that compartment no matter what. Instead, as she ate and thought about her impending adventure—about hiking boots and bug spray.

There was a knock on her door. Claire called for the person to come in.

Catherine's expression matched the concern in her voice. "Ms. Claire, could you please explain to me what Cindy is asking?"

Claire told Catherine about her plans to explore, how she didn't want to return for lunch, and she knew Catherine wouldn't want her to skip a meal. Therefore, she would need a packed lunch and some water bottles.

Catherine seemed apprehensive. "I'm sorry, but what if you didn't come back?"

Although that sounded wonderful, Claire was surprised by Catherine's concern. "Catherine, I have no intention of that. First, I wouldn't do that to *you*. I can only imagine Mr. Rawlings's reaction if I didn't return, and second, *his* reaction. I can truthfully say, if I left, I'd be looking over my shoulder for

the rest of my life.” Which, she didn’t say audibly, she believed deep in her soul, might not be very long. “I just want to explore and be outside, away from everything. Mr. Rawlings has given me permission to go into the woods. I’ve done it before. I just want to be out longer, without concern for curfews. Besides, we both know this conversation is being recorded. I promise to return. If I don’t, he’ll see I lied. You just believed me.” Claire reached for Catherine’s hand. “I promise I’ll be back.”

There was a spark in Claire’s green eyes, the same eyes which, only yesterday, were red, swollen, and lifeless. Catherine told Claire she would have her lunch and water packed in a few minutes, but asked that she be back by 6:00 PM for dinner. Claire promised she would. As soon as Catherine left the room, Claire went to the dressing table and found her watch. She didn’t want to disappoint her.

That morning, Claire abandoned her strategy of dissecting the woods. She remembered the large clearing with the flowers and headed in that direction. In the past, she only went as far as the clearing; today she planned to go beyond it. She found the clearing right where she thought it would be. The heat of the summer transformed the green grass into long brown straw. Only the weeds were green. Claire didn’t mind. The weeds had pretty, colorful flowers. Unlike Tony’s flowers, which were sentenced to his yard, gardens, or clay pots, these flowers grew free wherever they wanted. Furthermore, weeds were survivors. When all else died, the weeds remained. Yes, Claire liked weeds.

She glanced at her watch. She’d reached the clearing by 10:00 AM.

When she left the house there was a slight chill, so she brought a sweatshirt. With steadily increasing temperatures, now it’s only purpose was to sit upon. She laid it out in the middle of the clearing and sat. A faint breeze blew her hair and caused the leaves of the trees to rustle. Even though it was only the beginning of August, due to the recent dryness, the leaves were beginning to change.

That bothered her. She moved—or was brought—to Iowa in March. At that time, the leaves hadn’t formed, and now they were beginning to change. Time slipped away from her, and she couldn’t hold on. It made her think of a soap opera her mother used to watch. The opening said something like, “Sands through the hour glass...”

She laid her head on the hard ground and gazed at the open sky. There were a few white fluffy clouds. The expanse of the sky glowed blue and clear. The longer she lay immobile, the more she blended into the surroundings. First, she noticed the butterflies which fluttered just above the grass. Then, she saw the chipmunks. One would run around a tree, the next would run up the tree, chasing and being chased. Eventually, she sat up, opened one of her water bottles, and continued to sit and contemplate.

Once she stepped through the trees, leaving the confines of Tony's backyard, Claire believed she escaped the range of his top-notch security. It felt like being released from prison. Even the air smelled sweeter as she inhaled and relaxed. She smiled at the irony; she definitely felt more secure without security.

Claire didn't look at her watch, enjoying her *freedom*. After much consideration, she decided to head west-northwest. There was no reason for that direction—more of a yearning—but it was solely hers, so she did it. She walked and walked. Close to the earth, she experienced a coolness that comes only from the shade of very tall trees. When she looked up, the trees reminded her of a kaleidoscope. The blue sky radiated beyond the ever-changing design of leaves. Since she hadn't checked the time when she left the clearing, she didn't know how long she'd walked when she reached the shore.

The lake wasn't big, but then again it wasn't small. She could see the other end, a distance away. Nothing but nature surrounded the water in every direction. Looking down as she stood on the shore, her boots stood upon thousands of small smooth pebbles. Suddenly, she wondered if she could skip one. Remembering from childhood, she knew it needed to be smooth. It took her three tries, but she did it. It skipped four times, each hit going a little deeper, creating a slightly larger ring upon the water. The rings grew until they faded into the waves of the lake. For the first time in days she felt hungry.

Catherine never disappointed when it came to food. Claire found a sandwich—turkey or chicken—she would soon find out, fruit in a small sealed cup, and some carrots. She sat at the water's edge, broke off some of her bread and threw it in the water. The crumbs floated, rising and falling with the water. Suddenly, each crumb became surrounded by four or five minnows. They jumped and nibbled. Once they ate all the bread, Claire broke off more and fed them again. This time, more minnows came to the feast.

The sounds of the lake exemplified peace. Claire closed her eyes and lost herself in the rhythm. Small waves lapped the earth making a consistent beat: *swoosh, swoosh, swoosh*. The leaves rustled, creating a gentle on again, off again, reverberation. The sun moved steadily toward the other end of the lake. Claire's new sunglasses were a smart accessory for her adventure. It wasn't just the sun, but its reflection off the water, that sparkled and shined, as prisms of light and color danced off the waves. She could sit and watch for hours. Occasionally, there would be a splash, and Claire would see the telltale rings left behind from a fish that jumped out of the lake only to go back down.

Just before Claire decided to check her watch, she saw—about one hundred yards down the shore—a doe and a fawn. They cautiously approached the lake's edge. The doe kept a watchful eye on the surroundings while the fawn concentrated on drinking the cool clear water. She didn't want

to move or disturb them, but the sun continued to lean west.

With a heavy heart, she looked at her watch. It was 4:30 PM. It took forty-five minutes to get from the clearing to the house, but she didn't know how long it took to get from the lake to the clearing. Tony wouldn't be home, but Catherine had been so kind and supportive. She didn't want to disappoint her either.

Slowly, she stood, having no idea how long she'd been sitting on the shore. Her muscles ached. She wondered if the cause could be sitting on the smooth pebbles or perhaps the activities of Friday and Saturday night. When those memories entered her mind, she felt her stomach knot. Eight more days. She knew without a doubt where they would be spent.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Survival is not so much about the body, but rather it is about the triumph of the human spirit.

—Danita Vance

WEDNESDAY ARRIVED SOONER than Claire hoped. Since the discovery of her lake oasis, she spent every day there and returned to the house by 6:00 PM, as promised. Truly, the first night was close. She even needed to run part of the way, but she made it. Now, she knew the way and knew each direction took an hour and forty-five minutes to walk.

As the week progressed, Claire took more supplies: a blanket, a book, and her lunch with water to drink. She even started wearing her bathing suit under her shorts so she could sunbathe on the shore. The bathing suit was a lot like underwear. This rebellious act brought a smile to her face.

Nearing the lake, she began to recognize the sights, sounds, and scents—a clean fresh aroma penetrating deep into her lungs. As the days passed, she soaked in the serenity of this secret haven and her strength and resolve returned. When Tony left for Europe, she'd felt as low as she had felt since her arrival, actually in her entire life. She wanted out and would have been willing to die to accomplish that goal, if only the means had been present.

Now, she was thankful that they weren't. When he returned, he'd be the same, but she would be different. He hurt her—not just physically—but also emotionally, down to her core. Since her arrival, he humiliated her routinely and seemed to enjoy humiliating her. Forcing her to view herself in those situations was agony. Previously, she tried to put away the memories, to create a separation between her daily life and her daily duties. To some extent, she'd been successful. This compartmentalization facilitated her survival. His appalling videos documenting his brutal treatment and merciless instructions exposed her to herself. It broke her.

The lake, nature, sunshine, and freedom, rejuvenated her. She felt like the *Six-Million Dollar Man*: stronger, faster, and better. She would gain sustenance and strength from the memories of the crystal waves shining and flashing in the sunlight. He could say, do, or make her do anything, anywhere, and her mind would be hearing the leaves rustle, birds sing, and waves lap the shore. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but she also knew the routine. There would be breaks when he needed to travel and hopefully be gone—faraway, for long periods of time. She would live for those breaks, until the time came when her debt was paid and she'd be the one to leave.

It didn't surprise Claire that Catherine didn't know the time of his arrival. It was part of his game, a test to learn if she'd read his note, if she'd be prepared. Claire knew what she needed to do. When he arrived she planned to be ready, and she was.



WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, CLAIRE ate lunch in her suite and sat on the sofa reading a book, a crime novel, except it was funny, the fifth in a series. She didn't know for sure how many there were, but she enjoyed reading them. Since she didn't know when he would arrive, she didn't want to risk being away from her suite. Claire painstakingly chose her attire: white capris, a black and white top which accentuated her figure, and black sandals with a shorter heel. Since March, her hair had lightened and grown quite long. She styled it half up and half down, with the ends curled, and her make-up was flawless. If he didn't show up until later, she had another outfit prepared. Claire planned to meet him head-on. The miserable wretched woman he left was gone.

The door opened without warning. Claire's heart skipped a beat, but she controlled her breathing, and remained still. She appeared relaxed as she looked up from her book. Tony walked in and greeted her. "Good afternoon, Claire."

Slowly, she placed her bookmark in her book, laid the book on the end table, and stood. Her smile radiated as pleasant a welcome as she could muster. Her mask was not only on, but polished. "Good afternoon, Anthony." Their eyes met. "It's nice to have you home. How was your trip?"

She didn't walk toward him, but stood straight, tall, and defiant. He stepped forward. As their proximity decreased, he watched for her reaction. With their bodies nearly touching he looked down into her eyes. She stood her ground, smiling, waiting for his reply. She knew asking for a verbal answer to her question wasn't a good idea; so she remained silent and maintained eye contact.

"My trip was long. I'm pleased with your greeting. Does this mean your temper tantrum, from before my trip, has reached its conclusion?"

She could smell his cologne and feared if she inhaled too deeply, their chests would touch. "Yes, I believe it has. I apologize for my behavior. It was childish and unnecessary."



HE GRINNED, TRYING to decipher if her words were sincere or if she was playing him. His tone and words tried to enlist her motivation. "As I recall, a great deal of your behavior was far from childish." He paused. No reaction. "But my memory could be failing me, it has been a long trip. I know how we could find out..." Another pause. No reaction. "...or review?"

Claire didn't react. She didn't take his bait. Instead, she responded, "You're right, it was very adult. I'd be glad to do whatever it is you tell me to do again. I believe I have a debt to repay. My goal is to make that happen sooner rather than later. Fulfilling my contract is the means to that end."

He pulled her against him and looked down into her eyes. He saw a fire, one which ten days ago had been dowsed with tears. She smiled, said all the right things, but her eyes were fighting. He bent down and kissed her. It started slowly, but soon became hard and forceful. She hesitated for only a split second and responded with equal force. Tony hadn't intended for their reunion to go this direction. He'd expected someone different.

About 6:30 PM he used his cell phone to call the kitchen and have dinner brought to her suite. The flight was long. By 9:30 PM he was sound asleep in her bed.



FOR A FEW moments she sat up in bed and watched him. She still loathed him, but Claire felt she'd won this battle. She stood strong and quieted the fury in his approach. She gave in without incidence, making him less aggressive. The final outcome would be similar no matter the mode, but this way it happened without violence and without video replay. To Claire that was a victory. She read her book for a few hours before joining him in sleep.

The next morning, when she awoke he was gone. She knew the tedious schedule of her daily duties had resumed. She didn't mope. Instead, she headed to the exercise room and worked out, back to her suite and showered, then ate breakfast, and learned of Tony's location. Today, he was at the office, not home. She sighed with relief. That meant she had until 5:00 PM to do

whatever she wanted. Already 10:00 AM, traveling to and from the lake, a three-and-a-half-hour journey, would monopolize her day. She would need to get up earlier on days she wanted to go there. Perhaps, that would be something she did on days he was out of town. Claire would miss her lake, but she was determined she wouldn't risk losing her piece of paradise. She'd wait until a better time to go. Of course, that didn't mean she couldn't go into the woods for a walk. So she did. Just getting away from the cameras felt liberating.

She spent at the pool, returned to her suite, showered, and was ready for instructions by 5:00 PM. Catherine brought word: Mr. Rawlings would be home, and they would dine in the dining room at 7:00 PM. Claire didn't need Catherine's help with appropriate clothing. Dining room meant formal. She knew how to follow the rules.

At 6:45 PM Claire went down to the sitting room and waited for dinner. A little after 7:00 PM Tony joined her. "Good evening, Claire."

"Good evening, Anthony." They walked to the dining room.

"I went to your suite expecting to find you there."

"I apologize. I was told dinner would be in the dining room at 7:00 PM, I didn't want to be late." She emphasized her obedience to his rules. Tony pulled out a chair, she sat. She couldn't help notice his eyes—black as night. She knew her impudence had an effect on him, and she needed to be cautious. She was walking a slim hazardous line.

"Your punctuality is dutifully noted. It seems my absence has helped you remember who's in charge and what guidelines you are to follow."

"Yes, your absence was advantageous on many counts." She placed the napkin on her lap. Tony's eyes were piercing. After a prolonged silence, Claire decided to lighten the mood. "I believe it helped me recognize I owe you much, not just the money to repay my debt, but the confidence you've shown in me." He was listening, "The confidence to trust me with your intimate beliefs." She paused and waited. He didn't comment. "I will not betray that confidence."

Cindy and Carlos entered the dining room, placed plates with food, and poured water and tea. Claire and Tony remained silent until after the staff exited.

"Claire, if you're sincere, you never cease to amaze me. If, however, you're playing me, you will regret it." His eyes were intense, probing for answers to her motivation.

"Tony, what would I gain by playing you? I'm aware my present, future, and release are solely in your hands. I'm sorry for my behavior before you left." She was pretty sure she sounded earnest.

Tony seemed satisfied. He didn't tell her it was all right; instead, he changed the subject and they ate. After dinner they went out to the gardens for

a stroll. It was there he asked about her hikes in the woods. How far did she walk? Where did she go? How long was she gone? Claire didn't want to tell him about the lake, but she was afraid to lie. He saw on the video surveillance she left the yard at one time and didn't return until another.

She told him about the multiple clearings, insects, flowers, and animals, and the lake. He seemed surprised. He said he'd seen it years ago on his flyovers, but it had to be six or seven miles from the house. Suddenly, she worried. "Is it still on your land?"

Appreciating her concern, he told her yes, she'd stayed on his land. While they conversed, his eyes lightened. He reached into his breast pocket and brought out a black velvet box. "I found these for you in Italy. I thought they made a nice complement to your necklace."

Claire opened the box. Inside, she discovered a pair of pearl earrings. The large cream colored pearls were almost identical in size and color to the one on her grandmother's necklace; however, they were offset by white gold circles. They were pretty, but different. Claire tried to understand his meaning.

Tony explained, "Your necklace is a cross, which is an X on its side. Now your earrings are O's—X's and O's." He smiled.

It wasn't as if she suddenly liked him, she didn't; however, she appreciated the thought he put into his gift. It was a sweet and unexpected gesture. "Thank you, Tony. It was very kind of you to think of me during your busy trip."

They made it through this storm. Leaving wasn't an option, but they seemed to reach an understanding. Tony knew he was in control. He didn't need to prove it. Claire knew she was in control of her actions, she could choose to fight or complain. Her plan was for self-preservation until she was free. This had been a good old-fashioned thunderstorm: loud and boisterous but no real damage.



DAYS PASSED AND turned into weeks. It was the end of August and Claire's schedule remained constant. The only variable was Tony's work location. Before he left for Europe, he offered Eric for her use. Since his return he hadn't mentioned her leaving the property. She hadn't been off the estate since New York, and that was a month ago. Truthfully, she didn't miss the cities. She missed the lake. She kept praying for him to be called away for a few days; it didn't happen.

Something else that hadn't happened since Tony's return was his threat of video screening. Other than the first night back, trying to bait her, he hadn't

mentioned the videos. It was as if they no longer existed. Claire knew that wasn't true, but the illusion helped her compartmentalize.

Sundays usually involved staying at home, in his office, her suite, at the pool, anywhere that allowed for relaxation. Tony often needed to read or talk to Brent Simmons about something, but he slated Sundays for his time to do as he pleased. It was Sunday, August 29 when Claire decided to ask Tony for a favor.

He told her once that if she wanted something, she needed to ask. They were lounging at the pool, enjoying the last few days of the season when she asked, "Tony, I have a favor to ask of you."

He lay on a lounge chair, his dark hair soft and wavy after drying in the sun, relaxing following a recent encounter in the pool. His swim trunks revealed his firm, defined, tanned body. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, and he didn't move; however, he replied, "Go ahead."

"I'd like to call my sister."

Slowly, he sat, removed his sunglasses, and shot his piercing eyes her direction. "I believe this has been discussed, and you know my decision. I've determined it's better if you don't have contact with your family."

Although it was meant as a final statement, she persisted. "I remember you saying that; however, a lot of time has passed. I won't say anything you don't want me to say." She could sense Tony was becoming more irritated, but she bravely added more information. "Her birthday is August 31."

He took a breath, exhaled, and lay back down. Claire waited. He didn't answer. Putting her head back on the chair, she contemplated how she should revisit the subject without being disrespectful of his answer or lack thereof.



TONY CLOSED HIS eyes against the sunlight. He thought about the framed pictures hidden in the closet in his suite: the ones from Claire's Atlanta apartment. He'd wondered how long it would take for her to ask to contact her family. It took five months. No doubt, if the means had been available she'd have contacted them sooner.

If her family consisted of poor farmers from Indiana, the call wouldn't be much of a risk. Actually, Tony wasn't concerned about her sister. It was her brother-in-law, John Vandersol, an accomplished attorney that was a potential threat. From humble beginnings, utilizing his intelligence and intuition, he had become an associate at a top-notch law firm in Albany, New York. This was a firm that rarely hired outside of Ivy League schools. The man was even under early consideration for partnership. Tony didn't feel comfortable with Claire having contact with him.

As far as Tony was concerned, the past five months had taken favorable, unexpected turns. Claire's behavior was a pleasant surprise, much better than he'd anticipated while planning her acquisition. Truthfully, while wanting to keep her and use her for himself, he hadn't been sure it would work. *Plan B* had always been, and supposedly still was, still an option, but now that she'd been seen with him in public, it would be difficult to remain completely detached. He didn't want the addition of Emily, and especially John Vandersol, to upset his perfect equation.

While Tony contemplated, a rush of fury swept his consciousness. He realized she was questioning—no, arguing—his decision. Not only was she arguing, but he was considering her request. It was the damned pictures in the stupid frames. A small part of him cared that he'd taken all that away from her. That hadn't bothered him five months ago. It had actually been quite the coup, but now... hell, it was just one call. Maybe *if* he could control the content. Reassuring himself: of course *he* could control the content. He controlled her. He could control a telephone call. Tony decided first he would see how badly she wanted to make this call. He would stand back and watch, see how far Claire would push, observing her resolve in the face of much adversity, as she attempted to manipulate him. Yeah, no lie, that courage turned him on. Finally, he said, "I'll think about it."

He didn't bring up the subject again on Sunday. Monday came and went, they spent time together but he didn't bring up her request. Tuesday was Emily's birthday. He could sense Claire's impatience. Her self-control since Sunday was impressive. He wondered if she would just abandon the idea if he didn't bring it up.



CLAIRE WASN'T SURE if Tony thought that by avoiding the subject she would forget her own sister's birthday. She didn't. She'd been good and hadn't pushed. She rationalized, he's busy, maybe he forgot. She decided to wait through dinner, if he didn't mention it, she'd bring it up.

They ate on the back patio with a slight breeze blowing her hair. The evenings were becoming increasingly cool and Claire regretted not bringing a sweater or light jacket to dinner. When they'd finished eating, Tony began to stand. Claire bit her lip and spoke. "Tony, today is Emily's birthday." She'd created an illusion of equality in her mind and didn't want to beg.

He resumed sitting and leaned into Claire, his voice sounded threatening: slow and deliberate. "So you've decided this subject is worth risking reprimand? I believe my last answer was I would think about it."

Claire swallowed with her head high and looked directly into his dark

eyes. “Yes, I feel talking to Emily *on her birthday* is worth the punishment you believe I deserve for pursuing the subject.” Tony didn’t speak but intently maintained their gaze. She waited for his response. Finally, she spoke again. “Tony, *may I* please call my sister for her birthday?”

“I have her telephone number in my office. You may call her from there.” Claire’s heart jumped and her eyes sparkled. She started to stand, but he indicated for her to remain seated. “First, I will define the rules of this call.” She nodded and listened. “You will speak to her on a speaker phone, with me present. Before you call, we will discuss the limitations of your discussion.” She hated his tone, the one he used when he felt the need to show his authority, but his words were saying she could talk to Emily. The rest didn’t matter.

Claire replied, “I understand. Thank you, Tony.”

Walking down the marble corridor toward Tony’s office Claire thought about her sister. They hadn’t spoken in over five months. She fought the incredible urge to run the length of the corridor and grab his telephone. Once in his office, Tony instructed her to sit near his desk. She could see the phone. The anticipation was agony. He sat back in his leather chair and proclaimed, “Do not tell Emily or John that you have been or are living in my home. You may mention that you live and work in Iowa, near the Quad Cities, if you are pressed. I recommend you keep the conversation focused on Emily and avoid discussing yourself. If she brings it up, you may admit to accompanying me to various events. Let me emphasize, any subject of you or me is not to be initiated by you. If the subject of getting together comes up, be evasive. The shorter the conversation is, the better the chance you won’t make a mistake.” To emphasize her compliance, he added, “Disobeying these rules is *not* an option. The consequence will not be pleasant. Do you have any questions? Do you understand my rules? Are you ready to call?”

“I don’t have any questions. Tony, I promise I understand the rules, and oh, yes, I’m ready!”

He removed a piece of paper from the top drawer of his desk and dialed the phone. Then, as if just occurring to him, he added, “There’s a block on this line. My number will not appear on their caller ID.” He hit the speaker button. Claire’s heart leapt as she heard Emily’s line ring.

It rang and rang until John’s voice came over the speaker, but it wasn’t really him. It was their voicemail. Her heart sank. Looking to Tony she asked, “May I leave a message?” He nodded as John’s voice continued. “May I tell her I’ll try to reach her again?”

The recording beeped. Finally, Tony nodded.

Keeping her tone as light as possible, considering the disappointment of reaching their voicemail, Claire said, “Hi Emily and John. It’s Claire. I wanted to call and wish Emily a happy birthday. I’m sorry I missed you. I

hope you're having a great day. Things are very busy, but I'll try to reach you again. Happy birthday!—”

Tony hit *disconnect*. Claire didn't want to stop talking. She lowered her head and felt the tears. Resolved to accept the outcome, she looked up into Tony's gaze. “Thank you for allowing me to make that call. Do you need me right now or may I go to my room?”

“You may leave.”

Dejectedly, she rose.

Tony continued, “I'll be up to join you later. I have some work to complete first.” Claire verbally acknowledged his plans and continued to walk toward the grand double doors. As she reached for the handle, he continued, his initial authoritative tone mellowed, “Claire, New York is an hour later than Iowa. Perhaps they went out to dinner and a movie. You may try again later.”

She didn't turn back around. She didn't want him to see the tears cascading down her cheeks. Though fighting sobs, she feigned resolve and articulated, “Thank you.”

As she stepped into the cool corridor and closed the door to his office, Claire melted onto the marble floor. The staggering disappointment momentarily debilitated her. Eventually, her resolve grew. She regained composure and obediently walked to her suite. Truthfully, she appreciated his offer.



ABOUT NINE IN Iowa, they went back to his office to try again. To expedite the process, Claire looked to Tony and proclaimed she remembered the rules and wouldn't fail. Through the speaker, the phone began to ring. It only rang once when the voice of a woman on the other end answered. “Claire, is that you?”

Claire's heart soared. “Yes, Emily, it's me. Happy birthday, sis!”

Emily's voice hadn't changed. Claire heard the excitement of their reunion coming through the speaker. “Thank you. Hearing from you is the best birthday gift ever. Where are you? Are you all right? Why haven't you called us?”

Claire looked from the phone to Tony and then back to the phone. Tony's eyes spoke volumes. “Hey, slow down. I have a new job that keeps me very busy, but I couldn't miss talking to you on your special day. How are you doing? How is John? How is his law firm?” She'd done it. She succeeded in getting Emily to talk about them.

Emily said she was fine. School had recently started, and she thought this was going to be a good class. John was fine, just very busy. The law firm was

good. He was an associate now and the more hours he billed the better chance he had of making partner. Claire could have spoken with her for hours. They had so much catching up to do. Instead, Claire apologized and told her she needed to run. She loved her and please give John her love. Emily said, “I would, honey, but John is right here, and he’d love to talk with you!”

Claire looked at Tony. His eyes darkened as his head slowly shook.

Claire replied, “I’d really like to, but I really need to run. Have a great birthday. Bye.” Again, Tony pressed *disconnect*.

Claire stared at the telephone for the longest time. This was one of those junctures. She could be sad the conversation was short, or she could choose to be happy there had been a conversation. She decided to pick *B*.

Standing to leave Tony’s office, she looked up to see him leaning back in his chair. His eyes devoured her as he unbuckled his belt. With sickening comprehension Claire understood. In his mind he’d shown a kindness, now he expected gratitude—*quid pro quo*.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

If life were predictable it would cease to be life and be without flavor.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

“*W*e’ve been invited to a Labor Day barbecue, tomorrow.” Sitting on the sun porch, reading her new novel, and enjoying the Sunday afternoon, Tony’s casual announcement surprised Claire. The warm gentle breeze and faint smell of cut grass gave way to a rush of anxiety and disbelief. “We? Who would invite me?”

“Courtney, Brent Simmons’ wife,” Tony said while lounging on the loveseat with his laptop on his outstretched legs. His light brown eyes gazed at Claire as she questioned him.

“Why? What does she know about me?”

“Well, Brent met you when I brought you to New York, and Courtney knows I’ve been seen with the same woman on multiple occasions. Since they’re probably my closest friends, she wants to meet you and invited both of us to tomorrow’s barbecue.”

Despite her sudden rush of anxiety at meeting his *closest friends*, Claire knew her fate wasn’t in her hands. “Are we going?”

“Yes. It starts at noon, and we’ll leave here by 11:30 AM.”

“I guess it sounds like fun.” Her tone was tentative. She wondered what these friends would think of her. Did they know him well enough to know the truth about her? If they didn’t, how should she act? Her stomach began to knot with unanswered concerns. “Please let me know if there’re different instructions for an intimate barbecue versus a public event.”

Tony set his laptop on the table and contemplated Claire’s honest question. His words sounded instructive, but his tone wasn’t authoritative, just matter-of-fact, as they gazed at one another. The late summer breeze caused strands of her long golden brown hair to float around her beautiful face. Her

green eyes saw only him as her expression reflected her sincere interest in his advice. “You’ve done well at public events. This will be different. I believe there’ll be four or five couples present. You met Brent. His wife is Courtney. They have two children who are grown and live away. Brent’s law partner, Thomas Miller, will be there. His wife is Beverly. She owns a renowned design firm in Bettendorf. Brent is a few years my senior. Thomas and Beverly are closer to my age, they have no children. Another guest will be Elijah Summer and his long-time companion MaryAnn. Elijah is another client of Brent and Tom’s. He’s made a fortune in the entertainment business and enjoys telling stories about some of his more famous clients. Personally, I believe he enjoys hearing himself talk...” Tony paused and smiled. “...much more than I like to hear him talk. And the last couple will be Timothy Bronson and his wife Sue. Tim’s a junior vice president at my local office. He’s young, but has proven himself. I asked Brent to invite him to make him feel involved.”

That was all helpful information, Claire desperately tried to remember names: Brent and Courtney, Thomas and Beverly, Elijah and Sue. No, Elijah and Mary Ann, Timothy and Sue, but that really didn’t answer her question. Claire thought to herself, there were wives and long-time companions, what did that make her? “Tony, who am I?”

“You’re a *rumor*.” Perhaps it was the calm setting of the sun porch or their recent understanding, whatever the reason, Tony spoke thoughtfully. He explained he’d spent his entire life working, accomplishing goals, and fulfilling self-made agendas. He’d been in relationships, most very short-lived. He believed strongly in appearances and had not been willing to risk the perception people have of him on a woman. Claire thought about his words and his honesty, and right or wrong, she believed him. He continued, “You told me that you wouldn’t betray my confidence.”

“I did, and I still mean that.”

“I believe you know what could happen if you did.” Feeling the prickling sensation which accompanies chills along your arms and legs, Claire believed she did know, but she didn’t confirm that verbally. She allowed Tony to continue talking. “And therefore I’ve allowed you to become part of my life.”

She thought he honestly meant that as a compliment, and she should be flattered; however, it felt more ominous. She wondered and worried about her release. This quiet peaceful setting wasn’t the time or place to voice her concerns. Instead, she decided to put it away and deal with it later.

He said, “Since you have been seen with me at various events, and I’m rarely seen with the same woman over time, you’re a rumor. There have been countless speculations about you. Everyone, like the man at the benefit, wants to know who you are and what you are to me.”

Claire admitted, she too, would like the answer to those questions. “I saw

our picture in a *People Magazine* from your library.”

He said their picture had appeared in many publications. His publicist had kept information limited to the basics: her name and that she lived in Atlanta. The people at this barbecue were part of his inner circle and wouldn’t betray his trust. Other than Elijah Summer, their jobs and livelihood depended on Tony. Elijah was a more public person, but he respected Tony and wouldn’t compromise their mutual friendship.

She tried one more time, “And I am...”

“Persistent.” His eyes were soft and light with a contented expression. He spoke as he moved from the loveseat to the floor of the sun porch. “Well, I would say more than an acquaintance...” Kneeling in front of her, he gently spread her knees and moved his hand under the hem of her skirt. Their eyes met as the sides of his lips turned upward into a devilish grin. “...shall we say companion?”

If that were a question, she didn’t answer. Her attentions were turned to his actions, as his touch directed her from the chair to the straw rug. The windows and doors were open, and they were exposed to the world. It was his house. He didn’t care. Although the porch’s rug was rough, his movements were calm like his tone. The staff didn’t return until they were done.



LATE SUNDAY NIGHT, Shelby on the Weather Channel, said a cold front would pass over Iowa. Claire awoke and opened the drapes to find condensation on the windows with crystal clear skies beyond. Stepping onto her balcony, she looked at the trees and smelted the fresh autumn air. The cool concrete beneath her bare feet and the goose bumps on her arms and legs confirmed the decrease in temperature. Wrapping her arms and her thick cashmere robe around her body, she entertained fleeting memories of autumns past. She always loved summers but autumns were special too, with cookouts and football games. Today the change of season brought sadness: another reminder of time slipping away.

While in the shower, she contemplated the impending barbecue. It was a new situation—a new test—and as such, made her anxious. She hadn’t received a direct answer to her question; so Claire decided to approach the people at the barbecue as she was told to approach Emily. She would try to turn conversation away from herself and divulge as little information as possible. Evasive answers would be best. There was a time she loved parties, getting together with people, laughing, talking, and sharing. Now, she was petrified of saying or doing something wrong.

Stepping from the shower, Claire discovered her clothes on her bed.

Sometimes that upset her. Other times, like today, it was reassuring: one less decision to mess up. She did her hair, make-up, and dressed. At 10:30 AM she was ready, an hour before they were to leave.

The balcony held two chairs. She sat plaintively and watched the trees through sun-glassed eyes. The bright sunshine caused a rapid increase in temperature as the trees rustled in the gentle breeze. Vibrant hues of yellow and orange were beginning to emerge from the green canvas. Her mind wandered through the woods to her lake. She hadn't been back since Tony's return. That was to say—physically. Mentally, she could be sitting on the shore, watching the minnows or listening to the water rhythmically lap the shore at any time. As a matter of fact she was sitting on the shore, in her mind, when Tony materialized behind her. "Oh, good morning, Tony. I didn't hear you enter."

He eased himself into the other chair. "Good morning, where were you?"

"I've been here. I have nowhere else to go."

"You seemed far away."

"I was thinking about the trees." Being partially honest. "Their leaves are already changing."

It was as if he never really looked at them. So he did. "I guess they are. That happens." He didn't concern himself with matters he couldn't influence. "Are you ready for our outing?" She said she was, and they proceeded down the grand stairs. "I have a car out front. We can go."

When Tony opened the door she saw a small Lexus SC 10 convertible, but no Eric. Tony opened the passenger door, and she got in. He went around to the driver's seat. She couldn't help but smile at him. He wore jeans that accentuated his trim waist, a button-down shirt, white, which showed his tan, his powerful chest, and shoulders. His hair was perfect. As she beheld his profile she saw the "red-hot sexy" *People Magazine* mentioned.

Glancing at her as he started the car, he noticed her smile seemed different. "What?" he asked.

"I guess I forgot you drive, without Eric I mean."

Tony smiled. "I love to drive; however, it's more advantageous to be driven and accomplish work during my commutes."

The convertible felt liberating with the wind and air invigorating their senses. Thankfully, Claire decided to wear her hair in a side braid. She laid her head on the headrest and watched the road twist and turn, the vibrant sapphire blue of the sky and the autumn colors making picture-perfect views as Tony drove the narrow country roads. Claire inhaled the aromatic autumn air as memories of pumpkins and leaves filled her subconscious.

The car slowed to a stop along a quiet side road. Tony gently touched Claire's braid. "Good choice of style." He smiled. "I'm needed in Chicago for a couple of days next week." He continued to play with the end of her braid.

Claire thought about her lake. "I've made you an appointment at a very exclusive spa in my apartment building." Her attention refocused on him and his words. "Your hair needs trimming, and you can have a manicure, pedicure, full body massage, and sauna—whatever you desire."

She started to respond, "Thanks, but no thanks."

He stopped her and went on. "I just trust that it won't need to be canceled."

Confused, Claire asked, "Why would it need to be canceled?" As the words escaped her lips she wondered why she cared, she actually didn't want to go to a spa. She wanted time alone to go to the lake.

Moving his hand from her braid, he gently removed her sunglasses and lifted her chin, holding her eyes to his. She watched as the dark deepened. "If today doesn't go as I believe it should, a massage may not be possible. We wouldn't want appearances to be questioned." There was no ambiguity to his statement. Claire received his meaning loud and clear. The autumn air suddenly chilled.

Maintaining forced eye contact, Claire responded, "Tony, I fully comprehend the importance of appearances. I won't let you down."

He handed her the sunglasses, moved his hands back to the steering wheel, and put the car in gear. "As long as we're clear: public failure is *not* an option."

Claire reassured him, they were clear.



THE SIMMONS' HOME was grand, probably about a quarter of the size of Tony's, but large by normal standards, with a good deal of land. The Lexus moved slowly through the gates and up their drive as Tony turned to view Claire. She felt his gaze and maintained her mask. By all outward appearance she looked beautiful and content: the ingredients to the perfect companion. She saw his grip on the wheel relax and knew his brown eyes were muted.

They parked on a brick circle directly in front of the home beside many equally nice automobiles. The front door opened as Tony opened Claire's door. He gently put his arm around her and led her toward the entry. Claire remembered Brent, but Courtney wasn't what she had imagined. She looked younger than a woman with two grown children. She was slender, with short brown hair, soft blue eyes, and a refreshingly engaging smile. Instantly, Claire liked her. Brent may owe his livelihood to Tony, but Courtney obviously felt very comfortable around both of them.

Courtney immediately hugged Claire. "You must be Claire. I'm so excited to finally meet you. My dear, you're more beautiful than your pictures!"

Claire felt overwhelmed. She introduced herself and called Courtney Mrs. Simmons. When she looked to Tony, he was already in conversation with Brent.

"Oh, goodness, call me Courtney. We'll let those two get their business out of the way so we can have some fun. I'll take you around and introduce you to our other guests." Tony didn't seem to object, so Claire allowed herself to be ushered off.

The house was stunning, yet homey—not like Tony's. Children had played on these floors, a family laughed and loved within these walls. Each room contained priceless memories. Courtney walked Claire through her home toward the kitchen. Designed very modern, brushed stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, and tall cabinets were accentuated with intricate tile. Golden lighting fixtures hung at appropriate intervals, not for light but ambiance. The kitchen wasn't only functional, but was also intended as the centerpiece of the home. The stove was located on a large island that contained a wraparound bar with six tall stools. Out from the kitchen Claire could see a large family room leading to a sun porch and their backyard.

Claire couldn't see beyond the porch, but she did notice the suddenly silent room of guests. She couldn't help but feel their eyes on her, assessing and evaluating. Keeping her mask in place she moved forward. She hadn't expected to face these people without Tony.

Courtney didn't leave Claire's side as she introduced her to the others. First, she met Tom and Bev. Claire did her best to be polite and social. "It's so nice to meet you. I believe Tony told me that you..." Looking at Tom. "...and Brent are partners?" They continued with some polite conversation. Claire asked Bev about her design business. Years of bartending taught Claire the art of small talk.

Next, were Sue and Tim. "Tim, I've heard wonderful things about you." Claire watched as Sue's smile widened and Tim's expression softened. He seemed stressed. She understood; working for Tony could do that to a person. She hoped some positive reinforcement would help.

Then it was on to Eli and MaryAnn. It didn't take Claire long to understand what Tony meant by Elijah enjoying his own stories. Lastly, Courtney introduced Claire to the couple with Eli and MaryAnn, Chance and Bonnie. Claire wasn't prepared for this couple. She wondered if Tony knew they were there. Courtney explained that Chance was an associate of Eli's in town for a visit; so of course they were welcome to join them. Chance seemed nice enough, but Bonnie made no secret of her evaluation of Claire.

Courtney offered Claire a drink. Requesting water, Courtney obliged but suggested Claire considered something a little more fun. "We have some fantastic sangria."

Just then Tony and Brent joined them in the kitchen. Tony looked so

relaxed wearing jeans and holding a beer. It almost made Claire laugh. Appearances were everything.

Brent did his own barbequing, and the men joined him out on the patio. The women gathered around the island as Courtney busied with side dishes. They all offered to help, but she wouldn't hear of it, confessing she hadn't prepared a thing. Her cook did it all yesterday, and now, she was only putting them into the appropriate dishes. The conversation quickly went to cooking. Some enjoyed it; others did not. Did Claire enjoy cooking? She told them she did. Did Tony like her cooking? She laughed and said she hadn't prepared many meals for him. She left out the part about her not cooking in over five months because she'd been held hostage.

It seemed like Bonnie tried to ask more *Claire* specific questions, but Courtney did a fantastic job of moving the conversation. *Claire* had apparently made a quick friend of Sue by complimenting her husband. Sue ran flank for Courtney, helping Claire avoid the invasive inquiries.

Sue looked about Claire's age, mid to late twenties, very pretty, blonde and tan. It was nice to talk to a female who was her contemporary. While the men cooked, Claire learned that Sue had a degree in art appreciation and worked part-time at the art museum in Davenport. Tim didn't feel Sue needed to work. Financially, she didn't; however, Tim worked long hours, and she needed something to do with her time. After she mentioned the long hours, Sue immediately added, "But he's glad to do it." It took a minute, but Claire realized the additional information was because she was the boss' *companion*.

The dinner tasted fabulous. Claire hadn't eaten normal food in five months. Everything was always healthy. She wanted to devour the entire platter of hamburgers; however, she chose the barbecued chicken, or Tony did for her. She managed some of Courtney's homemade side dishes and savored every bite.

The conversation remained benign and chatty. Bonnie didn't only question Claire any chance she could, she also approached Tony. When they were introduced, Chance had the good sense to address Tony as Mr. Rawlings. Bonnie wasn't as astute. Of course, Tony told Chance that at gatherings of friends he could call him Anthony.

Tony had been right about his inner circle. Even Eli was annoyed at Bonnie's abrasive curiosity. Claire didn't need to lie or deceive. Bonnie continually found herself cut off before Claire had a chance to respond.

After they ate, the men retired to a lower level. Claire would later learn that it contained a beautiful handcrafted bar, pool table, and large television. The women took a bottle of wine and sat on the sun porch. The sunshine with the cool air felt wonderful. To be sitting with five other women chatting felt like a performance—unreal. Their conversation ran from books, to movies, to sexy movie stars. MaryAnn shared some inside scoop on some of Eli's

clients. Sexy stars led to sex. Claire politely excused herself and asked Courtney about the ladies' room.

It was on her way back to the porch when she overheard MaryAnn and Bonnie in a room off the main hall. "Bonnie, what's your problem? You're embarrassing yourself with your persistence about Claire and Tony."

"I'm an inquisitive person. I want to find out what the rest of the world wants to know. Why is he, Anthony Rawlings, interested in her? She's a nobody."

"Frankly, Bonnie, it's none of your damn business. It's none of any of our business. Tony's a private man, and as far as a *nobody*, I guess that depends on who you ask. Tony must think she's somebody. If he wants Claire in his life good for him."

"Hell no! Good for her!" Bonnie exclaimed. "The guy is drop-dead gorgeous and has money to burn. He hardly takes his eyes off her. Do you think she paid for those clothes she's wearing? The blouse alone is over five-hundred dollars. She's getting herself a sugar daddy. Look how young and skinny she is. Why she—"

"Stop it. Stop it now, or we'll tell Courtney we need to leave. I'll tell Eli what you've done, and you and Chance will go back to California. Perhaps you can get started on Chance's job search." MaryAnn's control of the situation made Claire smile. Bonnie told MaryAnn she would stop. Claire let them proceed to the porch and waited a few minutes before joining the group. Once there, she smiled at MaryAnn but didn't glance toward Bonnie.

The men and women came together outside for some conversation, dessert, and drinks. Claire passed on the dessert and sat with Tony's arm around her shoulders. Brent had a fire pit built into his patio. The cool autumn evening, crackling fire, warmth, and distinct aroma created a pleasurable atmosphere. At about 6:30 PM Tony whispered to Claire that they should leave. Everyone seemed genuinely saddened, Claire included.

It had been a nice day, better than anticipated.

As they said goodbyes, Sue handed Claire a piece of paper. Surprised, Claire opened it. It was a telephone number. "Call me, we can do lunch." Claire smiled and said she would try.

They went to the car and drove away. Perhaps they drove a mile—maybe two—when Tony stopped the car on the side of the road and put out his hand. He didn't speak, but she knew what he wanted. She placed Sue's telephone number in his palm. "Tony—"

With the same hand that held the little, white piece of paper he roughly covered her mouth. "Not now. We'll discuss it when we get home." He let go of her face and resumed driving.

No words were uttered during their drive home. Claire's internal monologue however, raged: this is ridiculous. Sue was being friendly. I had

no idea she would do such a thing. What is the big deal? Why does he have to react so fast and so violent like a freak'n tornado?

Tony pulled the car to the front door. He didn't open Claire's door. Instead, he told her to go to her suite. He'd be up later. He had things to do—like cancel a spa appointment. His tone was curt, and his eyes dark. She wanted to run. Instead, she got out of the car and walked boldly into the house, through the large doors, up the grand staircase, and down the southeast corridor to her suite. Once she closed her door, she felt her heart race, and her internal monologue continue: this was such a nice day. I met Tony's friends, and they were nice. I wanted to tell him about what I heard. I wanted to tell him what a great time I had.

Claire knew what Anthony was doing. Starting in the car, he was contemplating—overthinking—and overanalyzing the entire situation. She knew if he would just let her, she could explain. Oh God! She wanted to lie down, scream, and cry. But, she also knew he could watch her every move. She refused to give him the satisfaction, refused to let him know how worried she was about his decision. Truthfully, she was worried—actually, terrified. Every bone in her body feared the possible return of his other persona.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There are two things a person should never be angry at, what they can help, and what they cannot.

—Plato

C LAIRE SAT AT her table, writing. Tony couldn't see what she was writing. The cameras didn't have enough zooming capability. Her body language didn't look nervous. It showed a proud and defiant pose. He watched as she wrote, sitting straight, her neck tall and proud. The only hint of uneasiness could be the way her feet fidgeted under her chair.

From his office screens, he could access different views of the room. From another view, she sat farther away, and he saw her bed in the background. Of course, there was the view that kept the bed centered, but the table wasn't visible from that camera.

Trying to contemplate his options and the consequences of her actions, Tony closed his eyes and reviewed the day. When he entered her suite, he anticipated anxiety, but found calm. Then there was that smile when they got in the car. God! Her smile when it was real melted him. Her emerald eyes could glisten and shine. Of course, he didn't see her real smile much. He did today, and seeing her with his friends, she was perfect.

He told himself the reason he had trouble keeping his eyes off her was strictly because he needed to monitor her behavior. It had nothing to do with how beautiful she looked. Now, as he watched the screens, he wondered what she was thinking. Was she thinking about him, about her future? It was all up to him. She knew that. He knew that. The power didn't give him the satisfaction it once had.

Damn, why in the hell did Sue give her that phone number? What did they talk about when he was away? His head filled with unanswered questions and plausible scenarios. She wanted to leave him. Why wouldn't she? Did she initiate a plan? Why wouldn't she follow his rules?

His internal monologue momentarily caused him to lose focus of the screens. Now, as he scanned, she was gone. He scanned the other views until he noticed the open door to the balcony. He could only see the back of her head. He needed another camera installed.

Over an hour had passed since they came home. Making Claire wait for him was part of his plan, but watching her, it seemed she controlled her nerves better than he. Maybe he needed fresh air too. No, he needed to make a decision. It was his mantra. She knew the rules. It didn't matter if you do something ninety-nine percent right; perfection was required. The fact remained she must have broken his rules. He needed to make a decision. Behaviors have consequences. Consequences can be unpleasant. Tony told himself he had warned her. *She* chose not to listen.



SHE INHALED AND exhaled. The country air filled her lungs with cool, refreshing strength. Claire thought about the people she'd met and about talking and laughing. It was fantastic. Courtney's reassurance and Tony's unusually kind smiles relieved her initial anxiety. She knew it was a charade, but it was fun, getting out around people. Then the telephone number came. It boggled her mind that something so incredibly simple could cause such ridiculous repercussions.

She thought about Tony. He would enter her suite soon—of course without knocking—and he would have some verdict regarding her insubordination. The fact that she wasn't insubordinate wouldn't alter his decision. She wondered if he handled business issues this way too, without input. With her mind scrambling, she asked herself, do I have any options?

Her wild emotions caused a rush of adrenaline concealing the cool night air from her consciousness. His impending decision terrified her, his smiles today gratified her, and his physique in jeans aroused her. How could her body defy her mind so severely? Claire believed her body was the true offender of insubordination!

Thinking about Bonnie made Claire laugh at the irony. She thought Claire was securing a *sugar daddy*. The reality couldn't be farther from the truth; however, at that moment, instead of wanting to explain, she was honored to be associated with Anthony Rawlings. Irrational best described her thoughts. Maybe if she could get her body and mind to work together she could devise some kind of plan. The sound of the suite door closing brought her thoughts to the present.

Tony didn't speak, but his eyes did: acknowledging Claire on the balcony and bidding her to enter. She did. Determined to continue the bogus act of

strength, she walked within inches of him and stood her ground. He didn't greet her; instead, he lifted her chin. His eyes looked as cold as the feel of his icy hand. Claire knew without a doubt, this would *not* be good. "What did we discuss just before we arrived at the Simmons?"

Her eyes flashed fire, but her words sounded respectful. "I told you I wouldn't let you down, and I didn't."

"Actions have consequences. I've told you that. Why is that difficult for you to understand?"

"Tony, it isn't. If—"

He stopped her, not with a gentle finger to the lips, but with a slap to her left cheek. Claire stopped speaking, her eyes moist; nonetheless, she refused to look away or back down.

"Actions have consequences. I've been thinking quite a bit about an appropriate punishment."

Claire decided she had nothing to lose—punishment was coming. She might as well push her luck. "Tony, if you would please let me speak. I know your decision is set, but allow me to talk."

He nodded and told her to make it quick.

"I was nervous about going to this barbecue today, but I had a wonderful time. Courtney was the perfect hostess and very charming. Everyone was nice to me. I really didn't know what to expect." She tried to hurry. "Well, everyone except Bonnie. By the way, I overheard Bonnie and MaryAnn talking and everyone there had your back. That includes me. Sue, well Sue is lonely. She told me Tim works long hours, which she mentioned he enjoys, but she's lonely. At some point, she asked me for my number. I don't have one, as you know, but I thought that sounded dumb. Everyone has a cell phone. So I just said I didn't have it with me, and I didn't know my number. I never call myself. So I'm guessing that's why she gave me her number. I really didn't know she was going to do it. If I had, would I have had her do it right in front of you?"

Tony hadn't stopped her, so she decided to keep rambling, pacing a little. "When Courtney introduced me to Tim and Sue, I told Tim I'd heard good things about him from you. I can only guess that made Sue and I instant friends. Women love to hear good things about their husbands. I would have told you if I'd gotten the number without you knowing. I have no way of calling, and if I just didn't call, it would appear rude. I know how you feel about appearances." She didn't know what else to say, but at least she had said her piece. "I really did well today. This was just a misunderstanding, and your friends were very nice."

She stood and maintained eye contact. Tony continued speaking as if no words had been uttered. "I've decided you may choose. Perhaps you would like to know your choices?"

Claire's heart sank as she lowered herself into a chair at the table and looked away. Nothing she'd said mattered. He hadn't listened to a word. Defeat filled her voice. "Tony, your decision is made. I don't care." She silently smirked at the piece of paper on the table when she saw the title she'd written: *positives from my day*.

"The first option is a two-week timeout in your suite."

What? That never crossed her mind. There was no way, she couldn't take that. She glared at him.



TONY WATCHED AS Claire stood and met him face to face. God, her strength captivated him. Her voice sounded resilient. "Then I choose number two."

He didn't respond. The silence grew. He wanted her. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, he'd overreacted, but that wasn't him. He couldn't.

"Very well, undress."

She didn't hesitate; she obeyed his command. She started by unbuttoning her blouse, one button at a time. Then she shimmied out of her slacks. She didn't argue or complain and maintained eye contact the entire time. Tony's arousal was becoming difficult to conceal. As her body trembled slightly before him, his demeanor dissolved.

"Come here." She did. He held her shoulders and looked into her green eyes. "Damn you, Claire." He pulled her close. "I make snap decisions based on the visible evidence. Appearances are important. I assumed you had something planned with Sue, something I hadn't approved. I was wrong. Your speech..." He lifted her chin, gently this time, as his tone softened. "...was very brave." He watched her expression. "It helped me see I'd jumped to the wrong conclusion." He put his head down on her hair.



CLAIRE EXHALED AT the unexpected revelation: Anthony Rawlings was apologizing. She stood still while he encircled her with his arms. Her trembling ceased and she let her face fall against his chest, inhaling the scent of smoke on his shirt. She felt his erection against her hips and the tension began to build within her depths. Tony's tone, now mellow, eased her stressed muscles, "Up until the moment Sue handed you that note, I was extremely proud of you. You were amazing. Courtney told me that about ten times." Claire lifted her eyes to see his expression. It was smiling like his tone. Claire smiled and felt her body relax against his. "There's something I'd like us to

do."

The relief of his apology overwhelmed her. Her body continued its disregard for reason. She wanted him to take her and didn't hesitate. "Whatever it is, yes."

"Your hair smells like smoke. I'd like us to shower." Claire took Tony's hand and led him to her shower. Once there, she helped him undress, and he started undoing her braid. Under the warm spray of the shower he wet her hair, added shampoo, and gently massaged. "Your hair is beautiful, but it really needs trimming, and the weather is getting colder, so maybe some highlights. I believe you'll enjoy the spa. It has a great reputation."

She turned to face him. "You didn't cancel my appointment?"

Smiling tenderly, he said, "No, I guess I hoped something would change my mind." After working the cream rinse into her hair, he took the shower gel and began to lather Claire's back. Wrapping his arms around her, he lathered her breasts and stomach. With each stroke control became more and more difficult for him to maintain. That's all right, Claire wanted him too.

His tender touch caused an ache deep inside of her. Turning her around, he lifted her body as she wrapped her legs around his torso and his mouth excitedly nibbled her breasts. His tongue created intense sensations as it tantalized her hard round nipples. She gripped his wide shoulders and let her fingers run through his wet hair. His strong arms and body kept her pinned against the wall of the shower. His fingers tantalized until her moans brought him to the edge of explosion. The more he enticed, the more she yearned.

As he filled her completely, thunderous convulsions overtook her body. She expected his actions, but the fulfillment made her back arch and sounds escape her lips. Their bodies moved as one, not because of instructions or demands. Instead, the cause was erotic carnal physical instinct. In time the ardent passion moved from the shower to the bed. He received his desires, but only after assuring Claire did also, many times.

At some point during the night, Tony asked Claire what she overheard. She told him. At first, she didn't want to say anything about her looking for a sugar daddy, but why hide anything now? Tony laughed.

He was happy to learn about MaryAnn, and that Courtney and Sue were so helpful throughout the day. She told Tony how much she liked seeing him in jeans. "Definitely sexy." Claire told him. He told her he preferred her without jeans or anything else. That started them again.

Claire's spa appointment would be the following Wednesday. Initially, she didn't want to go, but now she thought about Chicago and Tony's apartment. "How many apartments do you have?"

"As many as I need. I don't like hotels much." They both drifted off to sleep.



TONY WOKE BEFORE his alarm. Hearing Claire's soft and delicate breathing, he saw her covered only by a sheet and curled into a ball on the far side of the bed. With the pale light of the lingering moon, he noticed her chestnut hair fanned around her head, damp and wavy, her body petite, soft, and supple. He carefully lifted the blankets and covered her. As he watched, the warmth of the blankets allowed her to unconsciously relax and settle into a deeper slumber.

This was not his plan. Things had been in the works for so long and now emotions were wreaking havoc. It was supposed to be easy. Her only purpose was for physical enjoyment, release of energy, and personal pleasure. He'd watched her for so long. He told himself he deserved that. Yet somehow, now while at work, in a meeting, on a plane—anywhere, without warning, he would recall something she said or did, and a smile would come to his lips. Tony even noticed strange looks from Brent, a visible sign his thoughts were revealing themselves.

This was wrong. Tony didn't want to have feelings. The sex was great. It was okay to want her, dominate her, and control her. It was *not* okay to want to be with her, *please* her, and *love* her. Yet every one of his senses desired Claire. Watching her sleep, he wanted to see her emerald-green eyes that flared when she was upset, her neck that straightened with defiance even when her words accommodated his demands, and her body that filled his every waking thought. He wanted to touch her skin, warm, soft, yet firm, and her long silky hair. He wanted to taste her. He wanted to smell her scent when he first came home: clean and fresh with her chosen perfume and the aroma of her after sex: warm, moist, and exhausted. He wanted to hear her. At this moment, he heard her faint breathing, but he also liked to hear her endless talk. He knew she longed for companionship and camaraderie. He also knew he was currently her only choice. He tried desperately to appear uninterested, but her voice filled him with an intense desire he'd never experienced. That desire had a sexual component, but it also contained a desire to fulfill her yearnings. Anthony Rawlings never previously considered fulfilling someone else's desires. His entire adult life had been about *his* wants, goals, ambitions, and needs.

As his mind pondered these dilemmas, he thought about her just a few feet away. He wanted her again. He knew he could wake her, and she would accommodate his demands. Laying his head back on the pillow he remembered the sex they'd experienced and wondered, when did this happen? He no longer wanted to dominate, but to satisfy.

This situation was completely unplanned. His entire life, business,

everything was calculated. How could this happen?

He hadn't realized until he heard himself apologize. When he entered her suite, he knew what he was going to say. It wasn't what he said. Anthony Rawlings could count on one hand the people to whom he'd apologized. Now this woman, a piece of his plan, was on that shortlist.

At the Simmons' she performed beyond his expectation. Then his overreaction almost ruined everything. Claire's strength: standing up to him, explaining the situation, and then not complaining, yet complying with his punishment, touched him. But when she was relieved by his realization instead of upset by his overreaction, she melted him.

In reflection, he berated himself. He should have stayed indifferent, dominant, and in charge. The words from his past echoed in his memory. "Only the weak apologize." He reconsidered waking her, fulfilling the indifferent domineering qualities that would prove he wasn't weak. Then he saw her peaceful expression and thought of her giving and surrendering herself over and over. Quietly, he got out of bed, put on his jeans, and left her suite.

Stepping into the corridor, he decided to workout.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There is something perverse about more than enough. When we have more, it is never enough. It is always somewhere out there, just out of reach. The more we acquire, the more elusive enough becomes.

—Unknown

CLAWSON EXPLAINED ONE more time. “It’s very easy. Textiles have made you a fortune, a fortune you can now plant and invest to grow a lot more. This is 1977. The real money isn’t in creating. It’s in owning and selling. See these figures?” He handed Nathaniel the reports. “You have capital not only in profit margins, but also in secured retirement plans. That money’s just sitting there, waiting for those employees to get old. Hell, many of them won’t be eligible for retirement for another twenty years. Use that money, invest it. Grow it. Right now it’s just rotting away in these accounts.”

Samuel stayed quiet as long as he could. His father’s dark eyes were starting to flash dollar signs. “Clawson, the problem with your plan is that our employees own that money—not us. They’ve entrusted us to keep that money for them, so it will be available when they retire. And it’s growing interest.”



“WITH ALL DUE respect, Mr. Rawls, have you seen the interest rates? Your employees will have their money, because you aren’t going to lose it. You’re growing it. Then when the day’s done, they’ll have their retirement, and Rawls Corp. will have additional profits.” Clawson spoke to Samuel, but hoped Nathaniel was the one listening.

He was. Nathaniel said, “Jesus, Samuel, have you looked at these reports? Where are the figures on Hong Kong Industrials?” Clawson handed Nathaniel

the reports. "Since the exchange-trade options change of 1973, it's a cake-walk to manipulate these options. We set our strike price. If the stock price starts to move out of the option near expiration, we set the cap."

Clawson smiled. The old man was finally getting it. "You have the capital to do that."

Samuel threw a report on the table. "It *isn't* our capital."

Looking first to the suddenly disorganized stacks of papers, then to his son, Nathaniel's brown eyes darkened. "Like hell it *isn't*. It's my Goddamn company. I built it from nothing. Do you think those employees you're so damned concerned about would have a job if I didn't work my ass off thirty years ago?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Who will tell whether one happy moment of love or the joy of breathing or walking on a bright morning and smelling the fresh air is not worth all the suffering and effort which life implies.

—Erich Fromm

C

WEEK AFTER the barbecue, they flew to Chicago. Tony absorbed himself in his work and his laptop as Claire sat quietly and thought about the city. It had been a frequent haunt during her college days, with Valparaiso being only an hour and twenty minutes from the Loop. She and her sorority sisters would spend entire afternoons or evenings enjoying the sights. They'd shop, dine, or go to the theater and knew their way to all the best deals.

Claire recalled the fun as they rode the L or the train around the city. Sometimes they'd go with guys to a baseball game, usually the Cubs. Since she'd never really been a baseball fan, she liked warm evenings with a group of friends, enjoying hot dogs and cold beer and watching people at Wrigley Field. They would all pile into someone's vehicle and road-trip. It really didn't get better than that. They were even known to blow off classes for a day at Wrigley. Claire rationalized it as academic research. Her major was meteorology and baseball was outdoors. It all made sense.

Friends made Chicago and baseball fun. To Claire, the guys, all from the same fraternity, were more like brothers. After a brief romance her freshman year, she decided to concentrate on school instead of love. Suddenly, Claire realized her reminiscing made her sad. She wondered where those friends were today. She'd become so busy concentrating on her career that she lost touch with most of them. Maybe if they'd stayed connected, they would have noticed her missing last March.

As the jet approached the private airport, Claire saw the skyline against the blue of the lake. She told herself to put the sadness away.

Compartmentalize. She wondered, when driving there in an old minivan, she knew fun times were ahead. Now leaving the private jet and entering the backseat of the leased limousine, what was in store?

Eric chauffeured the limousine as they drove toward the lake at 7:30 AM. Claire could see the buildings, smell the exhaust, and feel the vibration of the road as the car turned north on Lake Shore Drive. She felt more at home than she had in months. She wanted to talk about everything they passed: *McCormick Place*, *Soldier Field*, and *Grant Park*. As they approached *Millennium Park*, she thought about the concerts which took place all summer long.

Despite her new enthusiasm, she didn't speak. Tony was occupied on his cell phone. He'd been in a conversation with someone ever since they landed. His voice sounded amicable, but she could see his body language. It told another story. Listening to Claire give a tour of Chicago wouldn't help his disposition. She also worried, he may not approve of her comfort level with Chicago. Originally, she didn't want to join him on this trip. Now she couldn't wait to enjoy the city.

The limousine pulled up to the *Reliance Building* and Tony gathered his briefcase, laptop, and cell phone. Eric came around and opened the door. Still talking on his phone, Tony nodded to Claire and got out. She found herself in the familiar situation: being chauffeured to a completely unknown destination.

Before the jet arrived, Tony informed Claire she could rest at his apartment. He hadn't mentioned the location or when he'd return. She took a deep breath and waited while Eric moved the car through the crowded streets. In a short time, the limousine idled in a line approaching the front entrance to the *Trump Tower*.

Eric lowered the window separating the two compartments and gave Claire the first information on her destination. "Ms. Claire, Mr. Rawlings' apartment is the eighty-ninth floor of *Trump Tower*. Security has your name and will allow you access. As you enter the main doors, walk to the left. You'll see a security desk. They'll help you reach the apartment. I'll park the car and bring your and Mr. Rawlings' bags up as soon as I can. The staff of the apartment will be available to assist you once you reach the eighty-ninth floor. Do you have any questions, miss?"

"No, thank you, Eric. I'll be fine." Then she waited while he stopped the car and came around to open her door. After only having five hours sleep, Claire felt like a mouse placed in a maze. Would she be able to find the cheese?

The cool lake breeze hit her legs as she stepped from the car and proceeded into the *Trump Tower*. She thought about her appearance: the blouse, skirt, sophisticated heels, and hair pulled up and back. She didn't resemble the college girl who used to roam these streets with her friends.

Today, doors opened and the bellman nodded as she passed. She looked like she belonged in a limousine. The guard at the security desk didn't question her as she spoke with confidence, "Hello, I'm Claire Nichols. Please show me to Mr. Rawlings' apartment."

"Yes, Ms. Nichols, we've been expecting you. We hope your flight was enjoyable. Please follow me this way." The guard tried his best to make small talk, but Claire's mind lingered six years behind.

Once the elevator reached the eighty-ninth floor, Claire tipped the guard, thanked him, and entered the open door to the apartment. Immediately, a charming gentleman greeted her. "Hello, Ms. Claire. My name is Charles. I'm very pleased to meet you." He showed her to Mr. Rawlings's room. "Miss, would you be interested in some breakfast, coffee, or anything else?"

Tony's room reminded her of his apartment in New York, more of the masculine natural colors. The shades were drawn and the room felt dark and dreary. She knew on the other side of the shades the sun shone brightly and asked Charles to open them. The view, as he opened the drapes, took her breath away. The windows faced north toward the lake. Far above most of the city, she stood close to the window and looked down at the buildings. Just a little to the left she saw *Navy Pier* and out on the lake she saw boats. The beautiful vista hypnotized her. She loved Chicago. And there it was—eighty-nine stories below.

"Ms. Nichols, will you be staying or going out?"

Pulled from her trance, she knew her desire and reality differed. She and Tony hadn't discussed her activities. "I believe I'll be staying here, for now, and I'd like some coffee please."

Charles returned with coffee and their luggage. If she were back in Iowa, she could be on her way to her lake; instead, she was sequestered in Tony's apartment. She lay down on his big luxurious cold bed, covered herself with blankets, and fell asleep. When she awoke the clock said 12:30 PM. Tony might not be back for at least five hours. If only she could contact him, find out his plans. Instead, she investigated his apartment.

Not surprisingly, it was magnificent and apparently took the entire eighty-ninth floor. Like his New York apartment, there were floor-to-ceiling windows throughout the dwelling. She found an office that contained computers and telephones, no doubt Tony's *home* office in Chicago. She opened the office door, looked around, and closed it. Under no circumstance was she permitted in his home office without him. There was no reason to believe the rules would be different here.

It occurred to Claire that perhaps Eric would be able to contact Tony and find out his expectations. Charles informed her that Eric was with Mr. Rawlings. He didn't know when they planned to return.

Next, Charles served lunch, which bore a striking resemblance to her

everyday lunches in Iowa. Knowing there were restaurants with various delicious foods only an elevator ride away, Claire's appetite disappeared. She settled onto the sofa in the living room with a book; however, the stunning view and the undeniable yearning to be in the city made concentration difficult. Finally, at 4:30 PM, Charles announced Mr. Rawlings called and the two of them had dinner reservations for 6:00 PM and tickets to the 8:30 PM show of *Wicked*.

Preparing for the evening, Claire opened her garment bag to a Nicole Miller taupe strapless dress with sequins. She'd never seen the dress before, but knew it'd fit perfectly. The matching *Gucci* shoes and handbag completed the ensemble. There was even a small jacket with matching sequins, just right for an autumn evening. She piled her hair on top of her head with large spiral curls dangling down her neck.

As she completed the finishing touches to her make-up, Tony entered the bedroom, greeted Claire, and went to the adjoining bath for a quick shower. She smiled at his chatty tone. It was as if other people were near, and his eyes were milk chocolate. When he emerged from the bathroom, the aroma of aftershave filled the bedroom, and he was clean-shaven, with wet hair, and a towel around his waist.

Watching him, she momentarily thought about an ongoing conversation she'd been having lately with herself. It usually started with thoughts of him: pleasant thoughts. Then she'd think about the way he made her feel or how much she liked to see him happy. Then it would turn to questioning, something like: are you completely crazy or only unstable.

She didn't know how she could feel this way about *him*. After all, he kidnapped her and hurt her—but when he was good... Claire tried to remember, there was a song or something that said: *when he is good, he is so good*. And that summed it up.

She pondered the many puzzling sides of his enigma as she watched him in the mirror. First, looking at him as he removed the towel, her pulse quickened and she forgot about her primping. No one could deny his incredibly handsome physique. Hell, he was gorgeous. Despite the almost twenty-year age difference, she observed his defined muscles, broad shoulders, and firm abdomen. Momentarily, she fantasized about the feel of his skin against hers. Second, he was undoubtedly an extremely successful businessman who desired to keep his personal life private. Third, he utterly and completely believed in appearances. Fourth, he had an insatiable sex drive. In that arena Claire had come to terms with his varying approaches—anywhere from tenderness to domination. The side of Tony that bothered Claire the most was his unpredictability. His temperament could shift without warning, making an Indiana tornado seem docile.

Due to his position, his desire for privacy and appearances were

understandable. It was the swiftness with which he could go from serene to furious that concerned her. Nevertheless, as Claire watched him dress, smelled his cologne, and heard him chat, her body tingled in anticipation. She looked forward to being on his arm and enjoying Chicago's nightlife.

Their dinner reservations were for *Sixteen* a fine restaurant on the sixteenth floor of the *Trump Tower*. They were escorted to a premium table with an amazing view of the Wrigley Clock Tower. Tony ordered their wine, appetizers, and meals. The reputation for outstanding cuisine proved true; everything tasted delectable. They chatted throughout the meal, mostly about Chicago and its many possibilities. Claire didn't complain about spending the day in the apartment, but she mentioned that after the spa she'd like to do some shopping. After all, wasn't it Tony who kept encouraging her to shop?

After dinner, Tony suggested they walk the short distance from *Trump Tower* to *Cadillac Palace Theater*. Having wanted outside all day, Claire thought his idea was fantastic and enthusiastically agreed. Feeling the warm city breeze, walking arm in arm down South Street through the crowds of people, gave her a rush of anonymity. They talked and laughed as the evening faded into night. Claire's deprived senses filled with sounds of traffic, the feel of a crowd, and visions of buildings transforming into monuments of architecture as darkness descended and lights illuminated.

Claire could have walked forever. Even the sensation of her shoes hitting the hard concrete delighted her, but their journey ended too soon. Upon entering the theater, she saw the show bill high above their heads. She'd long been a fan of the *Wizard of Oz* and immediately became excited about watching the performance of *Wicked*.

Of course, they were seated in prime seats. Claire remembered seeing shows in the same theater, years earlier, sitting somewhere near the top of the balcony. Currently, they had an excellent view of the stage and orchestra. For the next few hours, Claire became lost in the performance: the acting, dancing, and singing. When Elphaba sang *Defying Gravity*, Claire was absolutely mesmerized. Her life disappeared into the performance. Every now and again she would notice Tony watching her—not the show. She chose to ignore his gazes and enjoy the show. She believed her behavior was appropriate and knew, without a doubt, if it weren't, he would let her know.

After the show they walked back to *Trump Tower*. Tony talked about Claire's appointment scheduled for 9:00 AM. She had a massage, facial, and hair services scheduled, but if she wanted more she only needed to let them know. Everything would be billed to Tony's apartment. Her only concern would be generous tipping, and he would give her all the cash she needed. The spa was actually in the tower and Charles would be available to help her find it. They would provide lunch if her services took that long, and they probably would.

That night Tony's bed wasn't cold like it had been earlier in the day. Claire believed his business in Chicago must be going well. That night he was generous, demonstrative, sensual, and erotic. Perhaps he felt apologetic for his quick judgment the week earlier. Whatever the motive, Claire loved the results!

In the past, during the nights Tony stayed in Claire's bed, it seemed like they slept on polar-opposite sides. Tonight's finale concluded differently. They fell asleep with Claire's cheek on his chest, his arm around her bare shoulder, and her arm over his tight abdomen. She felt his warmth as his chest hair tickled her nose. Her head rose and fell with each of his breaths, and the sound of his heartbeat in her ear. She inhaled his intoxicating scent and drifted into a deep, peaceful sleep.

The next morning, she awoke alone. Due to the heavy draperies, the dark room made it difficult for Claire to assess time. The clock read 7:10 AM. She hadn't heard Tony get out of bed, shower or dress, and had no idea how long he'd been gone.

Putting on a robe, she went to find coffee. At home it would have been brought to her immediately upon waking. Then she thought—no, hoped, perhaps this room didn't have the quality surveillance of her room in Iowa. In the dining room, Charles poured coffee and informed her that Mr. Rawlings left thirty minutes earlier for his Chicago office.

Sipping the rich bold liquid, Claire's mind recalled the pleasures of last night. Not just the sex—which was great—it was the memories of his voice and expressions. Blissfully walking back to the bedroom, Claire told Charles she would wait until after she dressed for breakfast.

Back in Tony's room she found his note:

I am sure you remember that your appointment is at 9:00 AM, don't be late. I plan to be back to the apartment by 6:00 PM. You mentioned shopping last night at dinner. I have left you your credit card and ID. There's also ample cash for tipping and incidentals. After your spa day, Charles will help you with transportation to shopping.

Do not forget my rules. I trust you know better than that.

He never began his notes with a salutation or signed them. Claire looked in the envelope under the note. It contained her ID and credit card, as well as

over a thousand dollars in different denominations.

Claire thought it was unnecessary that Tony kept her ID and credit card. It wasn't as if she had the opportunity to use it whenever she wanted, and the amount of cash seemed excessive, until she saw the small sticky note on one of the bills:

\$100 PER STYLIST THAT ASSISTS YOU

Claire decided maybe some instruction was helpful. She wouldn't have considered tipping that much.

She arrived at the *Day Spa* ten minutes early. They greeted her and ushered her to one of the treatment rooms. Instead of music, the air permeated with sounds of nature and the aroma of scented candles. Indirect lighting helped to complete the relaxing atmosphere. To begin her day of pampering they directed her to a large whirlpool tub. Once submerged, the assistant added a special mixture of oils and powders based on Claire's answers to some preference questions. After the tub, Claire was led to the massage table, where they asked her to lie with her face submerged in a hole.

Suddenly, besieged by a rush of unpleasant memories, she did her best to control her emotions and lie down. The masseuse began with Claire's shoulders and commented on the tightness of her muscles. It didn't take long for the combination of the bath oils, ambiance, and magic of the masseuse's hands to ease the tension. At the conclusion of the massage, every muscle in Claire's body felt loose and relaxed.

Next, they proceeded to the hair salon. Apparently, when making Claire's reservations a highlight procedure was requested. Never in all of her life had she colored her hair. The apprehension brought back some tension to her shoulders; however, she knew Tony was the one to plan her treatment, so the idea of changing it was more unsettling. While the color sat on her hair, they treated her to a facial which claimed skin rejuvenation. After they washed and conditioned her hair, the stylist began trimming and styling.

When Claire's chair spun around, she gazed at her auburn tresses which now contained generous caramel and light blonde highlights. It all blended beautifully, and the length hadn't really changed. The result looked healthy, shaped, stunning, and different.

Next, they offered Claire a menu. She enthusiastically ordered her own lunch, deciding on a sushi variety plate with a side salad. Claire decided Tony must not like sushi. She hadn't eaten any in months. It tasted wonderful. Following lunch she chose to receive a manicure and pedicure while the cosmetic specialist completed her make-up. Claire yearned to walk around

outside, yet she was truly enjoying the pampering. Smiling, she recalled Tony's enthusiasm about her spa experience.

It was nearing 2:00 PM when the receptionist brought Claire the telephone. "Ms. Nichols, you have a call." At first, she just stared. Other than Emily over a week ago, Claire hadn't spoken on a phone for almost six months. She immediately believed this was a test.

Looking at her nails under the dryer, she said, "Thank you, could you please ask who it is?"

The receptionist inquired and continued, "Mr. Rawlings would like to speak with you."

Claire carefully took the phone. "Hello, Tony?"

"Very good, Claire." She smiled. "I'm on my way to the airport. I need to make an emergency trip to New York." Tony's voice sounded informative but preoccupied.

"All right. Will I be going too?"

"No, Eric will be back in Chicago this evening and accompany you home. Just continue your plans and be back at the apartment by 6:00 PM. Charles will see that you get to the airport for your flight."

Claire wanted to ask about the shopping. She felt pretty and didn't want to spend the afternoon in the apartment. However, he did say to continue her plans. She chose to believe that included shopping. If she didn't ask, she could plead ignorance when questioned.

"Okay, I will." She didn't want to say anything inappropriate with people listening. "Do you know when you will be back?"

"Not for sure. I believe Saturday. I need to go. We're at the airport."

"I will see you then. Have a safe trip."

"Claire..." He paused. "...don't disappoint me."

"I won't Tony. I'll see you Saturday." The telephone disconnected from his end. Claire handed the telephone back to one of the clinicians and inspected her nails. Holding the phone hadn't caused any damage. Her fingers and toes glistened shiny red, and her make-up had been expertly applied. Claire stepped in front of the mirror. She wished with all her might that Tony could see her now. She felt stunning.

There were a total of six assistants that worked directly with Claire. She went to the front desk, signed the charge slip, and gave the tip money to the receptionist, with an additional fifty for her. Claire smiled and thanked her for bringing her the telephone.

Back at the apartment Claire changed clothes, wanting to get outside and enjoy the shops before she needed to return at 6:00 PM. Looking out of the windows, she could tell the day was warm. The waves on the lake also told her that the breeze was strong. But of course, that was why they call it the windy city!

She had a little over three hours to shop, and she wanted to make every minute count! All of a sudden, time slipped back six years. She needed to shop fast in order to get back to class. The biggest difference between then and now was her goal: instead of bargains, she looked for the buys that would please Tony.

Charles offered Claire a driver, but she wanted to walk. The busy city and warm weather created an exhilarating atmosphere. She longed to be outside and on her own short schedule. *Cartier* was her first stop. She found another pair of sunglasses. They were like the ones from New York, except black, which would be better for winter.

Although that was her thought, she wondered if she would really be with Tony all winter. *Compartmentalize*. Right now, her plan was to enjoy this afternoon and some shopping, the rest would work itself out.

Her familiarity with the magnificent mile proved advantageous to her goal. She didn't have Eric to pick up packages, so she didn't buy anything too bulky; however, she managed some smaller bags from *Saks*, *Anne Fontaine*, *Armani*, and *Louis Vuitton*.

Claire approached the *Trump Tower* and her watch said she had thirty minutes to spare. She stopped in the coffee shop for a quick café mocha. In Iowa, she mostly drank plain coffee with cream: very high quality and amazingly delicious. This afternoon she was living and decided a little chocolate would hit the spot.

Sitting at the table surrounded by her packages, sipping her café mocha, Claire's mind wandered. Her life seemed to have taken a turn. The last few weeks were much better than months earlier: so much better than she could have predicted. She talked with Emily—if only for a few minutes. She thought about the rules: speaker phone, limitations, and the brevity of the call. It took a magnitude of compartmentalization to concentrate on the affirmative aspect of the conversation. Nonetheless, she spoke with her sister and that made her happy. Then there was the barbecue—minus the unfortunate misunderstanding—which was a success. Tony introduced her to his friends, and they were nice to her. The date with Tony the night before was romantic: dinner, walking, the play, and the activities until they fell asleep. Now, she was sitting in Chicago—a destination she loved.

Smiling, she sipped her café mocha and thought about him. She hated him one day and then allowed her hair to change colors because he requested it. The more she thought about it, maybe *allow* wasn't the appropriate word. Really, did she have an option? How could he hurt her one day and then make her feel so fulfilled the next? Her internal debate continued.

As she thought of Tony, feelings of lust pushed away the old feelings of fear. Remembering the sensation of his touch, sound of his voice, and taste of his skin, she wanted to believe this was a significant improvement. She

wondered how she could be having these feelings, how she could enjoy his presence, and even look forward to being with him. She'd read about *Stockholm syndrome*. Maybe that was it. She knew it didn't make sense, but she couldn't deny the way she was beginning to feel.

Preoccupied in her thoughts, she didn't notice the woman approaching until she stood directly above her. "Claire? Claire Nichols is that really you?"

Claire looked up in disbelief, realizing that someone actually addressed her. She recognized Meredith Banks immediately. She was a sorority sister from Valparaiso. It made sense. Valparaiso was nearby.

"Hello, Meredith, how are you?" Her voice reflected her genuine excitement and surprise at seeing someone from her past. They'd roamed these streets together, in another life.

"Gosh, I'm great. How are you? You look amazing. I haven't heard from you in ages!" Meredith looked at the other chair. "Do you mind if I join you for a few minutes?"

Apprehensively, Claire looked at her watch. She needed to be upstairs by 6:00 PM. It was 5:40 PM. She considered appearances. It would be rude to not allow her to sit.

Claire motioned with her hand. "Yes, please do."

The two ladies talked about what brought them to Chicago. Meredith noted, looking at the booty surrounding Claire's chair, she was obviously doing some shopping. She even noted it was higher-end shopping than they did in college. Claire laughed it off, saying even these stores had great deals. She couldn't help think about Bonnie who'd gauged the value of her clothing and wondered if Meredith was doing the same thing.

Meredith asked if Claire saw any shows while in town. Claire told her she saw *Wicked* and enjoyed it very much. Did Claire remember the fun shows they used to watch and the concerts? Meredith mentioned she was in town for work. Where was Claire working? She seemed to know Claire had been in Atlanta. Claire wondered if they had spoken while she was there. They must have. Meredith lived out west these days, in California. Did Claire ever make it out that way? Where was she living?

Claire did her best to be evasive, yet friendly. This was her sorority sister being friendly—not some paparazzi. Finally, Meredith started talking about her husband. She married Jerry from the fraternity and their group. Did Claire know that? No, she didn't. How long had they been married? And Anne and Shaun were engaged! If Claire would give Meredith her address, she was sure that Anne would want to invite her. Meredith wondered if Claire was married. Was she seeing anyone? Hadn't she heard rumors?

That word sounded an alarm. *Rumor*. Wasn't that the word Tony used to describe her, a rumor? Claire laughed again. "Oh, Meredith, didn't we learn years ago you should never trust rumors."

Checking her watch again, it was 5:55 PM. “It was great seeing you, but I really do need to go. We should catch up sometime.” Claire tried to not be rude, but she didn’t want to talk any longer. She went directly to the security counter, where the guard recognized her and helped her with her bags as they went to the residential elevators.

By 8:00 PM, Claire sat in Tony’s jet by herself, flying back to Iowa. Eric copiloted. She tried not to think about her conversation with Meredith. She decided compartmentalization was best. She would think about it another time. Instead, she decided to think about Thursday and Friday with Tony out of town. Smiling, she told herself, *I’m going to my lake!*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Experience is the most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God, do you learn.

—C. S. Lewis

THURSDAY MORNING, CLAIRE woke to the unfamiliar sound of rain. With the dryness of the summer, at first she questioned the *pitter-patter*, but as her mind cleared, the noise made sense. Going directly to the window, she saw droplets of water on the window, gray clouds, and puddles on the ground. She had been so excited about the lake, but she didn't want to walk five miles—each direction—in the rain and mud. Disappointment overwhelmed her. How could it rain on the one day she wanted sun? With Tony gone, the day dragged on endlessly.

The next morning, she lay in bed and listened for the sound of rain. Straining her ears, she only heard silence. Tentatively, looking out the window, Claire beheld the crystal clear blue sky. The rain had washed the dust and dryness of the summer away, leaving everything looking fresh and clean. The bright sunshine glistened on the moist leaves.

Wearing her robe, she went out onto the balcony and immediately realized the drop in temperature. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself and gazed out over the polychromatic woods. The crisp autumn fragrance penetrated deep into her lungs. She knew it would be muddy, but she didn't care. She'd wear an old pair of shoes and make her way to her lake.

Getting ready that morning, her reflection caught her by surprise. The new blonder hair made her skin tone lighter and eyes deeper green. It wasn't as if she suddenly looked like Marilyn Monroe, but her reflection looked more blonde than ever before. Claire wasn't sure what she thought of her new look, but she did know Tony wouldn't be back until tomorrow. So she pulled the lighter hair back into a ponytail.

As she got ready for her adventure, Claire realized she didn't own

anything *old*—as in old shoes. Everything was new or looked new. The clothes which were in her closet almost six months ago were gone, now too large. Whether she shopped or not, her wardrobe never waned. Currently, sweaters and jackets multiplied while she slept.

Luckily, her feet hadn't changed size. So the hiking boots she requested months ago were waiting and ready. Claire decided she'd just clean them when she got home. Catherine didn't approve of Claire's plan, saying the ground would be muddy and slippery. What if she fell and twisted something? Claire promised she would be safe. She explained that it had been so long since she hiked in the woods; she wanted to stay out as long as possible. She would return, she simply didn't know when.

Catherine promised dinner upon her arrival, no matter how late. She also provided Claire with a packed lunch, complete with water bottles and a thermos of warm coffee. A little past 10:00 AM she left the backyard.

Although it had been almost a month, Claire knew each turn to find her lake. At almost noon she reached her destination. The shore looked exactly like she remembered, except the trees surrounding the lake were now multicolored with rich vibrant reds, yellows, and oranges. Green had definitely become the minority. Certain varieties of deciduous trees were completely bare. Claire suddenly wondered what made some trees lose their leaves earlier than others. She had some research to do.

The scent of autumn filled the air, thick, poignant, fresh, and spicy. After yesterday's wind and rain, the morning air was still and the lake was calm: the surface resembling a giant mirror. The colorful trees on the shoreline reflected off the water. The simplistic beauty made Claire wish she had a camera.

The sounds of nature were everywhere: bees or yellow jackets buzzed in the autumn sunshine, birds sang, and forest rodents scurried through the fallen leaves. Claire watched as ducks swam on the beautiful smooth lake, leaving wakes as their trail. Some floated near the shore, occasionally dipping their heads under the water, filling their stomachs for their flight south. September was almost half done. She would head south too, if she could. Pensively, she thought about Atlanta.

When Claire dressed, she put on jeans, a workout t-shirt, and a jacket. Now that the sun glowed strongly from high above, the warmth allowed her to remove the jacket. By late afternoon, she even took off her boots, rolled up her jeans, and waded into the water.

Part of her recognized the possibility she may not be back to the lake before winter, and she wanted to experience as much as she could. Of course, she hoped her debt would soon be considered paid. More realistically, she realized her duties now included travel. If she were expected to accompany Tony out of town, she wouldn't be home to explore.

The cold water made her feet tingle. She watched as her polished toes

stepped on pebbles and squished the underwater terra. When she stood still, the minnows swarmed, investigating the bright red toenails. Some even nibbled at her toes; it tickled.

Claire had eaten her lunch midafternoon, but her stomach told her she needed dinner soon. Finding some coffee in the thermos—no longer warm—she pretended it was a Frappuccino, without the crushed ice. It helped to fill the void until she reached the promise of Catherine's dinner. The daylight hours were decreasing, and before she knew it the sky began to redden.

Glancing at her watch, it was after 7:00 PM. She wondered where the day had gone, as the most beautiful scene unfolded before her eyes. Sitting on the shore she watched the sky as the sun settled over the lake. She couldn't make herself get up and go back to the house as the lovely postcard picture transformed into a stunning explosion of crimson.

The setting sun caused the few cumuliform clouds to change from white to gray, to pink, and then to a vibrant red. The radiance beamed onto the leaves, altering their color. The scene continued to improve in brilliance, and the beauty continued to grow. Claire sat patiently and watched with a new sense of contentment.

Once the sun reached the line of trees at the far end of the lake, the darkness quickly extended over the land. Claire remembered Catherine and knew she'd be worried. The idea of walking back to the house in the dark woods should have frightened her, but it didn't. She knew her way.

When she stepped into the clearing, the illumination from the moon allowed her to see her watch: 8:30 PM. She wasn't making bad time, but it would be almost 9:30 PM before she reached home. The air had cooled but still tasted fresh and clean. She inhaled and set off as fast as she could. Direction wasn't the issue; it was safety. The ground not only had limbs and roots as obstacles, but the rain left muddy areas which made her slip. One time her left foot slid, making her right knee muddy. When she stepped into the backyard, her eyes focused on her watch. It was 9:35 PM. The last leg of her trip took longer than normal. Although, her stomach growled for dinner, her first priority was removing the muddy boots, jeans, and taking a shower or a nice bath.

Leaving her boots on the back stoop, the carpeted floor of the southeast corridor felt soft under her feet and quieted her steps. As she opened the door to her suite, her thoughts ran between removing her muddy jeans and a warm shower. Navigation through the dark room was easy, and she even considered leaving the light off. Then she remembered Catherine. Turning on the light would let her know she'd returned. As she reached for the light switch, she sensed his presence. Before she could speak an arm came down over her neck, and her head turned sharply upward as her ponytail was pulled back.

It all happened so fast, she gasped.

His fierce voice through the darkness was unmistakable. “Where the fuck have you been?”

She tried to respond, but the arm around her neck restricted her air intake. She couldn’t breathe, much less speak. He let go of her, momentarily, while he spun her around. She faced him as he gripped her shoulders with a force she’d never experienced. His warm breath hit her face with each word. “I asked you a question. Where the fuck have you been?”

Coughing at the sudden intake of oxygen, she tried to respond. “Tony, I didn’t think you were coming home until tomorrow.”

That wasn’t an answer to his question. Although the lights were still off, with the bright moonlight streaming through the unblocked windows, her eyes quickly adjusted. With diminished light, distinguishing color was difficult; Claire didn’t need to see color to know his eyes contained none. He released the grip on her shoulder with his right hand and struck her. His left hand stopped her from falling. He supported her, only to confront her again. “I’ve asked you a question twice. I will *not* ask again.” Once again, his hand contacted her cheek, harder this time.

“Tony, please stop.” She gasped for breath as her temple and cheek stung. “I was hiking in the woods.”

He let go of her shoulders, and shoved her onto the sofa. He followed and loomed over her body as she lay against the cushions. “Do you expect me to believe you were in the woods until this time of night?”

She tried to explain, “I was in the woods.” “The sun was setting.” “It was so beautiful.” Her words came in gasps.

Finally, he yelled, “Shut the fuck up! You were out there because you knew I was coming home and you didn’t want to face me after what you did.”

Claire’s mind spun. “I don’t know what you mean. You told me you were coming home Saturday, this is still Friday.” Tears infiltrated her words. “I haven’t done anything.”

Tony slapped her again. “Liar!”

Claire fought the sobs and fear, as she watched him methodically walk to the light switch illuminate the suite. Immediately, she noticed that his suit coat was missing, and his shirt and slacks were wrinkled. His chest visibly expanded and contracted with each labored breath, and his eyes were not only black—but violent. In the past he’d been upset but in control. Tonight rage replaced self-control. Instinctively, Claire knew he’d crossed some invisible threshold. She just didn’t know why. She did know, the reason scared the hell out of her.

The room echoed with silence as he walked to her dining table and picked up papers. That quiet shattered as his booming voice demanded. “Then tell me. Tell me how *this* is a misunderstanding.” He shook the pages in his hand while his words came too close together. “I jumped to conclusions last time.

Tell me how I'm doing that now.”

Claire feared talking, but she did. “Tony, I’m sorry. I really don’t know what you are talking about.”

He threw the pages at her, and they scattered on the floor near her feet. When he didn’t move, she bent down to pick them up. Although, her vision was now blurry from tears, she tried desperately to blink and focus on the pages. They were typed, and appeared to be from the Internet. The last two pages contained pictures: pictures of the two of them at the symphony, at some event she couldn’t distinguish, in New York, and walking down the street in Chicago, arm in arm. Then there were pictures of Claire in college with friends and one of her and Meredith sitting at a table talking.

The breath in her chest suddenly dissipated. Her eyes focused on the words:

Questions Answered—the Mystery Woman in Anthony Rawlings’s Life Agrees to a One on One Interview.

Claire’s eyes grew wide and immediately overflowed with a flood of tears. She couldn’t believe what she’d read. Oh my God! “Tony! Oh my God. I did not agree to an interview.”

“So, you’re telling me that this picture of you talking to this woman...” He pointed to the picture as he stood over Claire. “...is a print shop fabrication, and just like at the barbecue, this is a colossal misunderstanding?”

His closeness filled her with dread. It was her talking to Meredith. She tried to explain, “It is me, but—” His hands picked her off the sofa and pinned her against a wall. Claire attempted reason, “Tony, I wasn’t giving an interview.” She hit the wall with enough force for a picture to fall. His grip hurt her arms. She tasted the salt of her tears as her ears reverberated with his booming voice and rang from his repeated slaps.

His face descended. “Then what the hell are you doing?” He shook her again. “Claire, I trusted you! You told me I could trust you, and I believed you! I sent you to a spa day! This is how you show your gratitude—by breaking *all* my rules—by public failure?” He released his grip; Claire fell to the floor like a rag doll.

Scurrying to pick up the papers, Claire asked, “What is this?”

“It’s an exclusive Internet release of an upcoming story. Shelly, my publicist, found it today and immediately forwarded me a copy.” He hovered over her, before turning abruptly away. Trying to regain control of his anger

and of himself, Tony went to the bookshelf, picked up a book, and threw it into the fireplace. His words came slower. "It's scheduled to run simultaneously in *People* and *Rolling Stone*." His eyes penetrated her soul. "I flew home as soon immediately."

Claire wondered how long he'd been waiting and brewing in her suite. She desperately tried to read:

BYLINE: MEREDITH BANKS

Well, you believe you know Anthony Rawlings, forty-five-years-old and self-made billionaire?

Or, maybe you would like to know him? You may be too late. Since May of 2010, Anthony has been seen out on the town with the same mystery woman. Up until now we haven't known much about Anthony's special woman. That was until she agreed to sit down with old friend and freelance writer Meredith Banks. The woman in Anthony Rawlings's life is Claire Nichols, twenty-six-years-old and originally from Fishers, Indiana, just outside of Indianapolis.

Claire graduated from Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana in 2006 with a bachelor's degree in meteorology. Ms. Nichols and Meredith were in the same sorority from 2003 through 2006. It's believed that this longtime friendship is why Claire finally agreed to sit down and discuss her relationship with one of the world's top bachelors.

Claire looked up and saw Tony on the sofa watching. Her entire body trembled as nausea erupted in her empty stomach. "Tony, I went to school with Meredith. She came up to me the other day and started talking. I didn't know she was a reporter. I wasn't giving an interview; I didn't say anything about you." In desperation she added, "Your name was never mentioned!"

He didn't speak. Instead, he nodded toward the pages. She continued reading:

Anthony Rawlings has long been considered a wonderful catch for that one deserving woman. In the past, he's dated such women as supermodel Cynthia Simmons and recording artist Julia Owens; however, his previous relationships didn't last long. That is until now—now that Rawlings and Nichols have been together. These two were first seen together in late May (see picture) at the Quad City Symphony not far from the large wooded estate

of Anthony Rawlings. Since that time, they've been spotted by curious onlookers at various charity events, as well two of the nation's largest cities: New York (see picture) and Chicago (see picture).

The question all eligible bachelorettes are asking—why Claire? What makes her the woman for a man like Anthony Rawlings? Perhaps it's her youth, her beauty, or her style.

While Claire would neither confirm nor deny that she and Anthony Rawlings were involved. She didn't deny living in the Iowa City area. Could that address perhaps be the same as Mr. Rawlings'?

Social Security records indicate that Ms. Nichols' only employment has been as a bartender, since losing her job in 2009 at WKPZ in Atlanta, Georgia. WKPZ was purchased by TTT-TV, resulting in the layoff of many employees, yet despite this loss of employment, Ms. Nichols was seen shopping in Chicago at such stores as Saks Fifth Avenue, Anne Fontaine, Cartier, Giorgio Armani, and Louis Vuitton. It's also rumored that Ms. Nichols spent the better part of the day enjoying all the comforts money could buy at one of Chicago's most exclusive day spas.

Claire used to spend her days in Chicago (see picture) with many different men from Valparaiso University. Now it seems she is enjoying the better life with only one man. (see picture). The performers will be happy to know that Claire and Anthony enjoyed the performance of "Wicked."

The final bit of evidence confirming their involvement came when Ms. Claire Nichols was ushered to the eighty-ninth floor of Trump Tower—the private city dwelling belonging to none other than Mr. Anthony Rawlings.

Emily Vanderson, twenty-nine-years-old, sister and only living relative of Ms. Nichols, was asked about her knowledge of Claire and Anthony's relationship. Mrs. Vanderson stated that she'd recently spoke to Claire and she sounded well. Anthony Rawlings was not mentioned during their conversation, and Mrs. Vanderson had no further comments.

Sorry, ladies, it seems that Ms. Claire Nichols is holding on to Anthony Rawlings. What will she tell us about this private man? We are anxiously waiting to learn.

Claire's hands trembled. Although she'd finished reading, she continued to look down, as she searched desperately for something to say, some explanation. Finally, she set the pages on the floor and kept her eyes down. There was nothing to say. The article didn't reveal any information, although the sensational title alluded it would. Tony knew that. He flew all the way home. He'd obviously read the article multiple times. It was her in the picture. She was talking to Meredith. It wasn't what it seemed, but in her head she

could hear his voice.

Now, she heard him stand as he walked toward her. "Appearances, Claire. How many times have I told you? Appearances mean everything. There's a picture of you sitting with her, the author. It doesn't matter if what she writes is accurate. It's believable because she's seen talking to you."

He wasn't yelling; he'd regained some control, yet the aura of rage remained. Claire felt his penetrating stare and didn't want to look into his black eyes.

"Get up."

Claire knew she should, but she didn't move. She couldn't. Her body was paralyzed with fear. She had no defense. She'd disobeyed his rules.

His volume increased. "Claire, get up!"

The tears dripped off her nose. "Please, Tony..." She sobbed. "...I'm so sorry."

Defenseless to stop his actions, her body rose as he lifted her by her arm. His voice exuded wrath. "The entire way home I prayed that somehow this was another misunderstanding. You wouldn't do this after I put my trust in you, but I knew if it wasn't a misunderstanding, if you'd truly disobeyed there had to be consequences. There had to be a punishment for this blatant disregard for the most fundamental of rules!"

She saw his hand move and instinctively veered to avoid another blow. The miss of her cheek infuriated him. His control vanished. He swung again. This time, his hand caught her pearl necklace. The fine chain proved no contest for Tony's anger and power. The pearl charm flew as the broken chain slid from around Claire's neck. The next impact put her back on the floor, and she tasted blood. Claire started to reach for her face, to learn the source of the blood, when his booming voice proclaimed, "I believe some time away from people, some time alone, will help you remember who and who not to talk to."

She pleaded for him to stop. She was sorry. She tried to turn and to twist, yet he continued to hurt her. She tried to yell, but sobs replaced pleas. Claire tried to protect her face and her body, yet she couldn't get away. Time had stopped moving. She wondered how long this had been happening. It could have been only seconds or maybe hours. Claire didn't know.

Suddenly thrown backward by a forceful blow, his voice drifted far away. Though her entire body cried out in agony from the abuse, this was different —more—a sudden onset of intense pain. She tried to get up, to speak, but she couldn't.

Then the stillness grew and everything—Tony, her suite, her tears, her fear, and the pain—all faded away into darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Enjoy the little things in life, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things.

—Author anonymous

SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER why she was afraid, only that she was terribly afraid and alone. Then with time, the dark and cold that enveloped her being began to dissipate. She heard music and felt warmth. Keeping her eyes shut, the darkness continued, but the familiar music grew louder and more comforting. Bette Midler sang *Wind Beneath My Wings*. Claire remembered that her mom loved that song. She'd turn up the radio and sing every word. Mom used to say, it isn't about the sound of your voice, but the happiness that makes you sing.

"Shirley, do you know where my wallet is?" Jordan called from down the hall.

"Mom, Claire, took my Pop-Tart." Emily's voice sounded different, so young.

Claire opened her eyes and saw a scene, like a movie, except she was there and not there. She also saw her mom, dad, and sister. Claire watched herself, but the Claire she saw was young, maybe five or six-years-old. Their small house was chaotic and full of affection.

She watched as her mom made Emily another Pop-Tart, scolded Claire, and gave her a loving kiss on top of her head. Dad walked into the kitchen wearing his police uniform. Claire couldn't believe how young everyone looked, how warm and full of love she felt watching this scene from her childhood. Dad walked behind Mom and put his arms tenderly around her. She noticed Emily and Claire playing with one another and their breakfast. They weren't seeing the devotion and adoration Claire now saw between her parents. Mom giggled as Dad kissed her neck, and she handed him his wallet from the kitchen counter. He whispered in her ear, Claire strained to hear.

“What would I ever do without you?”

“Well, you aren’t going to get the chance to find out. I plan on sticking around forever.”

As they looked at one another, the two little girls at the table started to distract them with their giggling, bickering, and suddenly the spilling of a glass of orange juice. Little Emily and little Claire both became silent, neither one would tell on the other. Claire heard her dad’s voice. “Girls, see what happens when you mess around.” His voice wasn’t angry. He cleaned the juice with a paper towel, and Mom helped with a wet cloth. “Try to be careful, you sillies.” He kissed their foreheads as he turned to leave, taking the time to hug their mom.

The scene began to fade. Claire didn’t want to leave the warm feeling. She took one last look at the sisters eating their cereal and laughing. The spilled juice was forgotten. The darkness returned. Coolness—

“Ms. Claire. Ms. Claire, can you hear me?” Although the familiar voice teemed with concern, the warmth she felt from her childhood was gone. Claire didn’t want to go to the voice. She wanted to go back. She wanted more sleep, more tranquility...

“Come on, Claire, the movie starts in half an hour.” Grandma’s voice came from the bottom of the stairs.

Claire opened her eyes and wondered where she was. It was her grandparent’s house. She must be staying over. Now she wondered if Emily was there too. She could see herself, no longer a child but an awkward teenager. Grandma called up the stairs again. “Claire, your sister said she’ll pick you and your friend up. Hurry down.” Grandma’s expression reflected concern for Claire’s movie. The real Claire wondered if the teenage Claire would see Grandma’s distress.

Young Claire stomped down the stairs. “Fine, I’m ready, but I called Amy, and now she can’t go. I don’t want to see *A Bug’s Life* with Emily. John will be there. He’ll think it’s stupid.”

“Let’s call Emily, and we’ll tell her Grandpa, you, and I are going to the movies.” As Claire watched she prayed her counterpart would accept Grandma’s offer. She also wondered her age, probably fourteen or fifteen-years-old. Then she remembered Grandpa died when she was fourteen-years-old, so if he was going to the movies, she had to be younger. Teenage Claire made a face at her grandmother’s suggestion.

“Where are we going?” Grandpa’s green eyes shone, and his voice

boomed jovially as he joined them from the other room. Claire's heart ached to see her grandparents, yet at the same time it swelled with affection.

"To the movies," Grandma said, smiling at Grandpa. Her grandparents were having an entire conversation through their sparkling eyes and facial expressions. Young Claire didn't notice—too self-absorbed.

Grandpa put his arm around Claire. "Great, I've been trying to get Grandma to go to the new *Lethal Weapon*. You know, I love me some police drama."

Grandma smiled at him. "Oh no, that's rated R. Claire would rather see *Ever After*."

They were doing it, pulling Claire out of her funk. She wasn't budging willingly, but they were doing it.

"Oh, no, Grandma, I don't want to see *Ever After*. It's a Cinderella story. That's stupid." Grudgingly, smiling at Grandpa, she said, "I want to see Mel Gibson's butt!"

Her grandparents smiled at one another and continued the amorous charade. "I don't think Shirley and Jordan will approve," Grandma said, as she grabbed the newspaper. "Let me look at the movie times for *Ever After*."

Teenage Claire looked over her grandma's shoulder. "Grandpa, *Lethal Weapon* starts in twenty minutes. If we hurry we can make it." Her sulking forgotten, she believed she'd just gotten her way.

Claire filled with warmth as she watched herself be lovingly manipulated.

Grandma next words surprised Claire. "Hey, I'm going too. I don't want to miss Mel's butt."

Just before the scene began to fade, Claire saw Grandma wink at Grandpa. The last thing she saw was the three of them going out the door to the movie.

Claire wondered why she hadn't remembered this before. Then she realized, it wasn't unusual. She was raised by an amazing family with unconditional love and consideration. Somewhere along the way, she'd forgotten how that felt: a warmth which surrounded everyone within a happy aura. The darkness returned as Claire clung to the sense of serenity and warmth.

Gradually, the darkness intensified, and the warmth melted away. In the cool darkness she heard voices again. She waited.

"Claire, talk to us. Open your eyes." It wasn't a command. Tony's desperate voice was requesting.

She didn't want to open her eyes. She wanted to feel the warmth—to sleep.

"Ms. Nichols, Ms. Nichols." The deep unfamiliar voice no longer spoke to

her, but to someone else. “We’ll need to begin intravenous feeding if she doesn’t regain consciousness soon. The medicine to keep her unconscious should be out of her system. She’s responding to some commands, but we can’t be sure of her condition until she fully wakes. Sometimes the body will do this on its own: shut itself down to heal and to avoid the pain.” There were voices and then she heard the unfamiliar one speaking again. “Her pain seems to have subsided with the medication. It should help her wake.”

Claire didn’t want to listen to them anymore or know who they are talking about. She just wanted to sleep, to feel warm, and go back to her memories.

“Get up, sleepyhead. You have a room of your own.” Claire heard her own voice. It sounded happy and playful; however, she couldn’t see herself or to whom she spoke.

“But, I like this room better. I like this bed better.” The other voice teased and laughed.

“Really, a twin bunk bed? That’s what you like?” They both giggled.

“As long as you’re here.”

Claire saw the two of them, a big mound under the covers, laughing and playing. As the covers moved she recognized herself and Simon, Simon Johnson. She hadn’t thought of him in years. She’d made herself compartmentalize him away.

Their hair disheveled, they looked too young for such activities. This was her freshman dorm room.

“Claire, I want to marry you.”

“Yeah, right.” She didn’t believe him. Her plans didn’t include marriage. Young Simon, however, meant every word he said. Now as Claire watched she wondered, what if?

“No, really. We can wait until we’re through school, or we can run away today. I’m not busy. How about you?” He pretended to be playful, but his tone held more than a hint of sincerity.

“Give me a rain-check, okay?” Claire nibbled his ear. “I think my dad might be upset if I decide to throw away a year of school to get married during spring semester.”

“I want to marry you, not stop your dreams. We can still finish school, and you can be a famous meteorologist.” Simon didn’t get upset. He smiled tenderly and continued, “A famous meteorologist named Claire Johnson.” He playfully nibbled her ear and let her take a turn on his. They lay in that little twin bunk bed and talked for hours.

As Claire watched memories flooded her consciousness. The two of them had shared so much of themselves: their dreams, ambitions, troubles, failures,

hopes, and accomplishments. Nothing could stop the mutual admiration and affection of their first love. She watched as they finally got out of bed and dressed: wearing sweatpants and Valparaiso University sweatshirts. Claire put her hair in a ponytail.

Looking at her now, Claire chastised herself. She needed a shower, some make-up, and definitely a brush. Simon didn't notice. Compliments came between hugs and kisses. He told her he thought she looked beautiful and doted on each word. They were both completely in love. They discussed the finer dining establishments near campus: *Taco Bell*, *McDonald's*, *Pizza Hut*, or *Wendy's*.

With a warm loving kiss they mutually decided it would be *Taco Bell*. No pretense. No rules. Only warmth and an undying need to be together. As they left the dorm room, Claire looked at the mess: clothes on the floor, bed unmade, a pizza box next to the trash can and she saw the comforts of home.

The scene vanished, fading to black. The feeling of love remained.

After watching, all she thought, please don't fade. I want to keep this going. However, it did. It faded.

Slowly, the scene evaporated, slipped away into cool darkness. Claire felt so cold. She wanted a blanket, something, anything with heat. Please! She'd beg if necessary. The cold was so cold! Her body trembled uncontrollably.

"Claire, the doctor said you may be able to hear us when we talk. Catherine and I've been talking to you for days, for over a week. He said you'll wake up when your pain decreases and you're ready. Please be ready soon. This liquid crap they're putting in your arm may have nutrients, but you're wasting away. Catherine has had the cook prepare all the foods you like, every day, just in case you wake and want something." Tony's voice sounded close. She sensed his distress and concern.

Claire had to wonder, if I open my eyes will he be right there. Did he say over a week? I have been asleep for over a week? How did that happen? Why was a doctor here? Claire couldn't remember the whys or how. All she could remember were her parents, her grandparents, her sister, and Simon. Those memories filled her with hope and promise, and yet, Tony sounded like he needed her.

She knew she needed to go to Tony. She didn't want to make him wait, but she was so tired and weak. Maybe a little more rest before she opened her eyes. Someone must have put blankets on her because she felt warmer. Along with the warmth Claire felt the stiffness of her dress. It was sea foam green.

She was seeing herself in a full length mirror, as Emily watched. They were in a big dressing room.

"I love it!" Emily observed Claire from all sides. "It's perfect for my wedding."

"Seriously, Em, you want me to wear green?" Claire's tone sounded joking, it wasn't. She remembered not liking the dress, but of course, she would wear it, if that was what Emily wanted.

"Yes. With your eyes, it's stunning."

Claire watched the two sisters and again became self-critical, the Claire she saw looked too heavy, and her hair was too thick and bushy. Emily was seeing someone different as she played with Claire's hair, twisting it and talking. "With your hair up and some dangly earrings. I know you can wear Grandma's necklace. It has a pearl, and I'll wear Mom's strand of pearls. They'll look great! That will be my something *old*. You'll almost be as pretty as me."

The mention of Grandma's necklace triggered something sad, yet Claire couldn't remember why the sadness came. She couldn't seem to remember—

Emily, being three years older than Claire, was the bride, and yet she also had the responsibilities of the mother-of-the-bride. Their mother should have been there, but she wasn't. The girls only had each other. It was Emily's wedding, yet *she* encouraged Claire.

Claire smiled at her sister, and her green eyes sparkled. "Yeah, you wish. I just want you to know John secretly loves me! We wanted to tell you, but you know?"

"Honey, he isn't secretive about that. He loves you. You're his little sister."

"Yeah, I know. I have to beat the men off with sticks. Okay, I'll wear green, but for my wedding I'm finding you the gaudiest bubblegum, pink dress you've ever seen!" The two sisters laughed. Emily helped Claire out of the dress, and they continued their shopping. They had so many things to do before the wedding. Together they'd do it all.

Just like the little girls with the juice, they were there for one another. After their parents died it was the two of them against the world. John understood and never tried to come between them. Even when Claire moved in with them as newlyweds, they welcomed her.

Briefly Claire saw their home in Troy, New York. Not large. It could be better described as crowded. Seeing it again, from afar, filled Claire with affection and warmth. John worked long hours, and Emily had her teaching responsibilities, but they still managed to make Claire feel welcome. She

suddenly wondered if she'd ever thanked them. She couldn't remember...

The scenes faded faster now. The warmth and strength evaporated. The blackness returned and pulled her in. Claire instinctively wanted to get away from the blackness.

The serenity transformed into coldness. She opened her eyes and saw it. The cold blackness staring back at her. She gasped and closed her eyes, but then she heard the voices coming from different directions. "Claire, are you awake?"

"Ms. Claire, please come back to us."

Tony spoke fast. "She opened her eyes. I saw it, just a second ago." She felt his hand on hers, so warm compared to the cold. "Can you hear me?" He continued speaking to Catherine, "Go get the doctor. He's getting something to eat in the kitchen. Let him know she's finally waking." With a different tone, one of desperation and affection, he pleaded, "Claire, please open your eyes."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Do you know what happens to scar tissue? It's the strongest part of the skin.

—Michael R. Mantell

C LAIRE INHALED. HER chest felt tight, and there was a deep ache on her right side. She tried to remember. How did she get this way? She felt so weak. She tried to move her hand to touch Tony's; even the attempt exhausted her. There was an odd feeling on her left arm. She turned her head to see what was making her arm feel strange. Everything blurred out of focus. The light in the room was so intense. She couldn't see. Tony noticed her eyes squint, immediately got up from the side of her bed and closed the drapes.

He returned and picked up her hand. His voice was soft. "It was too bright in here. I closed the drapes for you. Is that better?"

Claire tried to respond; she couldn't speak. Her mouth was too dry. She moved her head ever so slightly, indicating yes, *it is better*. The movement of her head made her dizzy, while the inability to speak frightened her, causing her eyes to moisten. When her lids closed a tear escaped, sliding down her cheek.

"It's okay, you don't need to talk." Tony's tone was kind and loving. "Please open your eyes again. It's so good to see your beautiful emerald eyes." He held gently to her hand.

Claire opened her eyes and looked at the needle taped to the bend of her left arm. As if reading her mind, he explained, "That's how you've been eating for almost two weeks, and it has some pain medicine too, to make you more comfortable."

Claire started to remember. She was in the woods. She came home and Tony—oh, God! Tony! The memory made her eyes open wide with panic.

She remembered.

Tony's voice continued, gentle and comforting, "Can you remember what

happened? You had an accident.”

Claire tried to say, no, *you* did this, but she couldn’t.

It may have been the dryness of her tongue or the horror of the images, but she just stared as he continued speaking. “You had an accident in the woods. When we found you, your jeans and boots were all muddy, and you had multiple injuries. Did you fall? Did you slip? Did someone or something out there hurt you? We’ve had the woods searched. Nothing was found.” He leaned toward her. “Claire, we’ve been so worried about you.”

The stiffness in her neck made turning painful, and the dizziness made focusing difficult. She heard Catherine. Someone was with her. Was it the doctor?

Whoever he was, suddenly, he was right in front of her: an older man with a very pleasant, encouraging, deep voice. “Ms. Nichols, I’m Dr. Leonard. I’ve been taking care of you since Mr. Rawlings found you in the woods. Can you talk to me?”

Claire lifted her right hand to her throat. The slightest movement tired her.

“Catherine, could you please get Ms. Nichols some water?” Catherine hurried for the liquid. Claire watched Catherine return with a glass and a straw. She handed it to the doctor, who put the straw to Claire’s lips. “Drink slowly; your stomach has been empty for a while.” Claire began to sip, as the water cooled and refreshed her parched throat. While she continued to drink, the doctor spoke to Tony. Each sip soothed, while at the same time, created a buzzing sound which filled her head. She could see the doctor’s lips moving, as well as Tony’s, but she only heard the *buzz*. When he removed the straw from her lips, the buzzing ceased.

“Please, that was so good,” Claire spoke. The room went silent. Everyone turned to her.

Tony spoke first. “Claire, thank God. How do you feel?” As he leaned over her, she realized she wasn’t in her bed. It was a hospital bed. That made sense. She wondered how she’d sat up,. But she wasn’t in a hospital room; it was her suite.

“I feel... I feel... tired... and kind of dizzy.” Her voice quivered with uncertainty and pain.

Dr. Leonard asked Tony and Catherine to allow him to examine Claire alone. Catherine agreed and began to leave, but Tony stayed, saying Claire wouldn’t mind him being there. Claire started to agree that Tony could stay, when Dr. Leonard continued, “Mr. Rawlings, I realize you hired me; however, as a medical doctor, I need to see and talk to Ms. Nichols alone. You’ll be welcomed back as soon as we’re done.” Tony stared at Dr. Leonard. The doctor continued, “Mr. Rawlings, she is *not* related to you. We must allow her some privacy.”

Claire watched and thought Tony can handle this—it’s his battle.

However, surprisingly, he didn't batte. Instead, he replied, "I'm sorry; you're right. It's just that it's been so long since she's been awake. I don't want to leave her." Standing, he continued, "I will. I'll be right outside the door. Please call me when you're finished." He then leaned over, kissed Claire on her forehead, and left the room.

The doctor spoke soothingly as he helped Claire remove her nightgown and removed tubes. Claire mindlessly thought the doctor's breath smelled like coffee. She liked coffee. He pushed on her side and asked, "Does this hurt?" Next, he touched her face, her cheek, her temple, and asked if any of it hurt? He examined her head, touching her skull, front and back, and near the neck. Then, he focused on her arms and legs. Lastly, he touched her back, pushing harder in some spots. Claire saw the remnants of bruises on her arms, legs, and midsection and felt them elsewhere. Her back and midsection hurt the most from the doctor's pressure, and her face felt tender. Looking at her legs covered in brown and yellow marks, she wondered if her face looked as bad as her legs. After he finished with his examination, he helped her put her nightgown back on.

"Ms. Nichols, I need you to be completely honest with me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I'm getting very tired."

"Please, tell me what you remember from the night of your accident."

"Dr. Leonard, I'm very tired, and my memories are fuzzy." As she spoke her head continued to buzz. Her throat once again felt raw. The combination made talking difficult.

"It's all right. Let me put your bed back." He pushed the button to recline the bed and continued to inquire, "Now, please, what do you remember?"

The fatigue overwhelmed Claire. Abruptly her stomach revolted against the water. Initially queasy, she instantly knew she would be sick. "Doctor, I'm going to get sick..." She sat up. He grabbed a basin, and the water she drank came back up.

"Miss Nichols, it's okay. It's normal. Your stomach has been empty for too long."

The vomiting made her shake, and suddenly her head and ribs throbbed. The fierce pain caused her to cry.

"Ms. Nichols, your pain medicine has started to wear off. I'll get you some more, but I want you to be thinking straight. Please tell me what happened." He was persistent.

Claire felt faint, and her body felt limp. She wanted food, but her stomach wouldn't even hold water. The doctor wanted to know what happened—and she knew. When she closed her eyes and felt the pain, she saw Tony. She saw his rage, his fury, his unwillingness to listen. She remembered every terrifying minute until she blacked out. It happened two weeks ago, yet she still felt the

agony.

The weakness, combined with the unsettled stomach, told her it wasn't going to end anytime soon. Claire wanted to go back to her visions. Nevertheless, the doctor waited for the answer to his question. He gave her some more water but instructed her to only rinse and spit into the basin. It helped the terrible taste go away.

Once her mouth again felt moist, she spoke. "I went for a walk in the woods. I like the woods. It rained the day before, and the ground was slippery in some spots. I made it into the woods fine, but I let it get dark. I watched the sun set. I remember it being crimson and beautiful."

She laid her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes. Softly tears trickled down her cheeks. Dr. Leonard was determined; he asked her to continue.

She did, but with closed eyes. "So it was dark by the time I headed back to the house. I remember getting to the clearing, which is about forty-five minutes from here. The sun—I mean the moon—was bright. I tried to get back. Catherine had dinner waiting for me." Her eyelids were heavy, and her words slowed and slurred. She never remembered feeling so incredibly tired. All she wanted to do was sleep. Please God, she prayed, let me sleep.

"Ms. Nichols, did you make it back to the house?" Dr. Leonard spoke softly.

"I don't remember."

Her decision was made. Telling the truth wouldn't do any good. Actually, it would be a direct violation of Tony's rules. She wasn't allowed to discuss private matters. She'd learned her lesson well. As her ribs, head, and stomach ached, the lesson was reinforced. "I remember slipping in the mud. There were roots and limbs. It was very dark under the trees. After that, I just don't know."

"Please know, Ms. Nichols, anything you disclose to me is said in confidence. I'm bound by complete patient-doctor confidentiality," he spoke quietly. Despite her physical exhaustion, Claire's mind was astute. She knew every word they uttered was recorded and possibly overheard as they spoke.

"Doctor, I'm not sure what you're asking me or what you're implying, but I can't remember what happened that night. Perhaps I hit my head?" Her eyes were open and brimming with tears. The exhaustion was debilitating. "Please, may I rest?"

Her eyes closed and she slipped away.



HOURS LATER, CLAIRE opened her eyes to see Catherine holding a glass of her

famous banana strawberry yogurt smoothie. She told the caring woman she was afraid it would make her sick—like the water. Catherine explained the doctor had put some medicine in her IV. It would help with the pain and nausea. Claire reached for the button to sit herself up, but before she could get to it, Tony did. His presence caused her to involuntarily tremble. His eyes weren't dark; instead, they were soft like brown suede. He gently touched her face. "You need to listen to Catherine. Please try to drink the smoothie. You need to get better, and to do that you need to eat." She looked at him and wondered if he knew about her recent *confidential* conversation. He continued to plead, "Please, Claire."

She drank some of the smoothie, closed her eyes, and fell asleep.

The next time she woke, her suite burst with flowers. They looked beautiful, and their aroma permeated her dreams. Over the next few weeks, they were constantly replaced. It seemed as if they never wilted. They were meant to make her feel better, but mostly they reminded her of the funeral home after her parents' death.

She even received *Get Well* cards and flowers from the Simmons', Millers, and Bronsons. Apparently, Tony's secretary, Patricia, called Sue to apologize: Claire had been so busy recently, and with her *accident* she hadn't been able to call, but she would when she felt better and got the chance.

It made Claire feel so much better knowing that even though she'd almost died, appearances were maintained.

Claire recovered slowly and gradually. Dr. Leonard continued to treat her, coming to the estate every day during the first week after she woke. After that, the length between visits steadily increased. He never questioned her memory again. He did push her to recover. He pushed her to eat, walk, and go outside. He wasn't the only one pushing. Catherine pushed. She pushed Claire to eat, shower, and do her hair and make-up.

The prompting seemed necessary. Claire would have lain in bed all day if they would let her. The only motivation she possessed was to return to the visions she'd experienced during her unconsciousness. Unfortunately, they didn't reappear in any of her dreams.

It wasn't that she felt sad. She didn't. She didn't feel scared, and with enough medication she didn't feel pain. Accurately, she felt *nothing*. Consciously or unconsciously, she'd compartmentalized everything away. Nothing remained. With each prompt she obeyed. She ate. She walked, with difficulty at first. Her muscles had lost tone in just two weeks, and her weight dropped below anything she ever remembered. She showered, at first with assistance and then on her own. She conceded to Catherine's pleas for hair and make-up; however, every activity tired her. Therefore, sleep became a natural and accepted escape.

The one person who didn't pressure Claire was Tony; however, he was

omnipresent—every day. Catherine told Claire he hadn't left her side while she was unconscious. Now, he went to work but returned every evening. He spent most of his time in Claire's suite, sometimes with his laptop, reading a book, talking, always willing to listen, and every night sleeping. While Claire stayed in the hospital bed, he slept in a recliner that was brought to her room. Once she made the transition to her big bed, he asked if he could sleep with her.

Claire said, "Yes, but..."

"I just want to sleep near you, if that's all right with you?"

Dr. Leonard hadn't given her the go-ahead on all normal activities. She'd suffered a concussion, which attributed to her unconsciousness and headaches; however, it was her broken ribs that caused the problem. Claire couldn't lay in certain positions. Her own weight caused intense pain. She knew Tony's weight would be agony. She didn't assume she had a choice in his sleeping location and truly didn't care, as long as she could sleep. He didn't complain.

Each milestone: getting out of bed alone, walking to the bathroom alone, walking to the dining room, or going into the backyard received a gift. Some were simple tokens: a book, a journal, or a scarf—apparently very *in style* this season—but others, like for her first dinner in the dining room, were extravagant. The dining room warranted a new *journey* necklace, with three diamonds in increasing sizes to represent past, present, and future. The entire carat weight was easily over three. It was remarkable, but Claire missed her grandmother's necklace. Although she didn't mention it, she remembered it too had been a casualty of the *accident*.

It appeared the giving of gifts gave Tony pleasure; so Claire accepted them. The journey necklace representing past, present, and future didn't bode well. She knew even in her fragile state she didn't want *any* of the represented time periods. The jewelry was so excessive Claire began to think of it as costume. It made accepting it easier. She tried to act happy about the gifts and the attention; however, she felt like his eyes had been—void of emotion. There was nothing inside of her.

Catherine knew Claire liked being outside and encouraged Tony to take her out into the yard. The scene didn't help her state of mind. The blue skies rarely shone, and the green of spring and summer had disappeared, like brown withered leaves blown away in the cool autumn wind. With the foliage gone, the outside was gray. All that remained was the black and white photo of landscape Claire saw when she was first brought to the estate.

One day, while walking the perimeter of the backyard, wearing warm coats and soft gloves, she asked Tony, "Do you have any idea when my debt will be paid?" The question obviously caught him off guard. She witnessed the fluctuation of his eyes. The intensity changing until it finally settled on

light brown.

"My dear, Claire, the last time you were on your own, which was for only a day, look what happened. I think you need me. I don't want you to have more *accidents*." And then he added, "Do you?"

Remembering to answer audibly, Claire shook her head, looked down and whispered, "No."

They didn't discuss her accident. They discussed travel. The idea of leaving the estate frightened Claire. She felt confident she could avoid *accidents* if she stayed put. Tony said that when she was better he'd like to have her join him while he traveled. He talked about Chicago, New York, Phoenix, San Francisco, and overseas destinations. Claire asked if she needed a passport if they flew on a private jet. Tony said he would have Brent work on getting her one.



ON A SATURDAY, in mid-November, two months after her accident, Claire was technically pronounced physically well. She'd become stronger with time. Her bruises had disappeared, ribs totally healed, headaches less frequent, and she could eat—although she had no appetite. Dr. Leonard visited the estate the day before and released her from his care.

Tony decided they should go on a drive. Claire hadn't left the property, or even the immediate house, since early September. Faced with the reality of getting into the car caused an explosive and unexpected trauma.

That morning, she obediently dressed in the clothes she found laid out for her, which had happened every day since she was well enough to dress. The sun shone and the temperature felt unseasonably warm. She anticipated going outside, but when Tony announced he had the Lexus out front, Claire panicked. Her reaction was quick and unpredicted. Not wanting to go, she started to cry and shake. For the first time since the *accident*, Tony pushed. He didn't ask, he declared, they were going for a drive.

It was the best thing he could do. She needed to get out, but Claire couldn't think straight. She sat on the front steps and refused to get up. Finally, Tony reached for her arm. She reacted in a way she hadn't since the first days of her arrival. Her entire body filled with anguish. Violently trembling, she started to scream. "I remember everything! I know the truth! Please do not touch me!" Her torment erupted as her volume increased. "I hate you! Leave me alone!"

He looked at her with disbelief, and she stared at him with vengeance.

Her screaming caused Catherine and Cindy to come running. By the time they arrived, Claire's words were unintelligible, overlapped by sobs and

whimpers. She sat on the steps, shaking, holding her knees, and rocking back and forth. Eventually her sobs subsided into freely flowing tears. She didn't speak as Catherine gently helped her to her feet and calmly walked her to the car.

They began the drive in silence. Tony didn't do or say anything. He drove and let Claire cry. It had been two months since her *accident*. She hadn't cried or said a word. Suddenly it all exploded.

Dr. Leonard had given his clearance. Tony had been patient. Claire knew what he wanted, and she was petrified to be with him again. He drove them to a meadow. She'd never been there before or even seen it. It was very secluded. Claire's crying subsided. Tony tenderly helped her out of the car, and while holding her hand he offered his overdue apology. "Claire, I'm sorry."

She looked up at his eyes, they glistened light brown. "You're sorry? Why are you sorry?"

His tone was remorseful and sincere. "I'm sorry for your *accident*." She didn't respond and looked away from his eyes. He continued, "Yes, I admit what happened that night was me. I admit I lost control, something which doesn't usually happen. I admit I feel terrible, and Catherine has made me feel worse. I admit I was beyond furious with you and the article by Meredith Banks. I wasn't thinking straight." His eyes were getting darker. "I trusted you. I believed you wouldn't betray my confidence and then—" His shoulders stiffened and then relaxed. "Claire, I would do anything to have that night to do over."

They stood by the car, no longer touching. The breeze gently rustled the tall grass, blew wisps of hair around her face, and filled her lungs with the smell of impending winter. Claire watched his expression as he spoke. It had been so long since she'd felt anything. Suddenly, she fought the rapid mixture of emotions stirring inside of her.

Tony watched as her eyes, which had been dull and dead, now contained a small spark.

"Tony, I remember. I remember what you were doing and saying. I remember you saying I would need to be alone for a while, to think about who to talk to and who not to talk to." Tony nodded his head. He'd said that. Claire's eyes brimmed with tears. "Is that still coming?"

He reached for her shoulders. He intended to be gentle, but Claire backed away, tripped, and fell onto the ground.

His eyes said tender but she remembered anger. She didn't know what to think or feel. Not feeling was so much easier. Confusion, apprehension, anger, and dread all bubbled up inside of her. From Tony's expression, they also showed in her eyes.

He followed her to the ground. "Claire, please stop." He knelt beside her.

"No. That isn't coming. I don't think you need any more reminders on how to behave. Do you?"

Barely audible, she replied, "No. No, I don't."

"Claire, may I please touch you?"

Her trembling resumed. Sobs again resonated from her chest.

His voice, still gentle was also firm. "You know I don't need your permission to touch you. I don't need your permission to do anything."

Claire's eyes closed as she tried to swallow her sobs. She nodded her head, knowing too well her permission wasn't necessary.

"But, I'd like to have it. Please, may I have your consent?"

She braced herself and opened her eyes. She looked at him, his expression, and his eyes. She closed her eyes again and meekly replied, "Okay."

He scooted next to her, sitting on the cold hard ground, and softly placed his arm around her back. She tried to hide the tension, but she couldn't control her anxiety at his touch. He gently bent down and tenderly kissed her lips, very lightly brushing his lips against hers. She didn't back away. His mellow tone whispered near her ear. "Have I told you how much I like the highlights in your hair?" She shook her head. He lightly stroked her hair. "I think you're amazing. You're so strong and resilient. I don't deserve your forgiveness for what I did, but you deserve to hear me ask for it."

She didn't want to look at him. Her emotions were too raw. She wanted to forgive him.

He didn't touch her; instead, he moved himself in front of her so they were eye to eye. "Claire, I'm sorry I hurt you." She felt the tears as she tried to maintain eye contact. He gently took her hands. "I ask that one day you'll consider forgiving me."

He kissed her hands.

When she looked into his eyes, she saw sadness and remorse. The swirl of emotions that had so violently erupted at the estate now settled into her chest. She wanted the sadness to go away. He'd been so patient. He was being so tender. She didn't forgive him, but she began to respond to his advances. It started with kissing. He kissed her, and she began to kiss him. Then she felt his warmth as her hands caressed his arms and shoulders.

Tony bulged with excitement, yet he didn't rush or push. He stayed compassionate and tender.

"Tony, I'm scared," Claire confessed.

"I promise I'll be gentle." Although she had every reason to not believe him, she did.

"Can we please go home to a nice soft bed?" He quietly stood and helped Claire to her feet. She took the hand he offered and walked back to the car. This time, she got in willingly.

When they pulled up to the house, Claire leaned over. "I really want this, but please be gentle."

He parked, walked around to her door, and helped her out of the car. They walked up the front steps hand in hand, where only a few hours ago, had been the scene of her hysterics. When he opened the door, he scooped Claire into his arms. Instead of going up to her suite, he carried her to *his* room. While he held her, she closed her eyes and nuzzled his neck. The aroma of his skin and cologne intoxicated her.

She had never, in all the time she'd been there, been in *his* bedroom. It was grand, almost royal. The walls were covered with cherry paneling and ornate carpentry. One wall was covered with a large screen framed like a picture, like the one in his office. His bed was massive: tall and larger than a normal king-sized. There were even steps to reach the height of the mattress. He gently placed her on his bed.

She watched as he slowly removed her shoes. Then, he unbuttoned and tenderly removed her jacket, her blouse, and her jeans. He removed his own clothes while she observed his every move. He was gorgeous, and his moves were slow and sensual. He softly kissed her, causing her to lie back. She looked up at the beautiful ornate ceiling. She felt his lips move down her body. They lingered at her neck, at her breast, stopping to lick and suckle her nipples. Claire's back arched, and she pressed her breasts toward Tony.

He continued to touch her warm body, taste her skin, and inhale her scent.

She hadn't realized it before that moment, but after experiencing satisfaction routinely, the void of the past two months left her wanting. Her body was now alive—on full alert—with every nerve electrified. He fondled her breasts and gently twisted her nipples. When she moaned in ecstasy, he stopped. "Did I hurt you? I'm sorry. Do you want me to stop?"

She pleaded, "No, God no. Please don't stop."

He allowed his lips to move from her breasts to her flat stomach and over her protruding hipbones. As he tenderly spread her legs and kissed her inner thighs, she feared she would explode before he reached his destination. Next, his mouth affectionately awakened her desires. He satisfied every need she'd ever had and ones she'd forgotten. He moved slowly and deliberately, sensual and romantic, compassionately and lovingly.

He was patient and remorseful. His pleasure came by pleasing her. Now, it was his turn to experience a favorable consequence. His actions had taken everything away, and now his actions brought everything back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nothing is more common on earth than to deceive and be deceived.

—Johann G. Seume

THE ASHTRAY OVERFLOWED with cigarette butts. Samuel Rawls and Jared Clawson sat while Nathaniel Rawls paced. The large polished conference table was barely visible beneath the magnitude of papers. The players no longer worked from the New Jersey office above the textile factory, as they had five years ago. Instead, the view from the conference table or large mahogany desk was now that of Cedar Street in the heart of Manhattan's financial district.

"Rawls stock is up another five-eighths after heavy trading. The rumors that circulated today about the quarterly report helped with that increase," Clawson said, as he leaned back in the comfortable leather chair, adjusting his suit jacket.

Nathaniel's track around the large office included peering out toward the NYSE and circling the desk to see the large computer screens which relayed up-to-the-minute stock information. Exhaling a large gray cloud, he asked the question that sat heavily on his and Samuel's minds, "But what happens when it's discovered the rumors and reality are different?"

"Shit hits the fan." Clawson smiled. "So we don't tell anyone."

Samuel rubbed his throbbing head. "What do you mean we don't tell anyone? The quarterly earnings report will be released tomorrow. The investors will find out that our capital is down. That last string of investments wiped out millions."

"Numbers are funny things. I have a copy here of an alternative report. The numbers are all legitimate, but the information is written with a positive slant." Clawson distributed the report. The room filled with uncomfortable silence as the two Rawls men read the new report.

"Where's the original report?" Nathaniel bellowed. Immediately, Clawson

pulled the requested pages from the cluttered table. The elder Rawls took the two reports and sat heavily at his desk. Page by page he compared the figures. Samuel and Clawson watched as the tips of Nathaniel's lips moved from south to north. The telephone rang, breaking the silence. Instead of answering, Nathaniel hit the button on the intercom. "Connie, I said *no* calls!"

The voice from the box spoke apologetically, "I'm sorry, Mr. Rawls. It's your personal line. I'll take care of it." Immediately, the ringing stopped.

The sight of Nathaniel's smile had differing effects. Clawson resumed his leaned back position and lit another cigarette. Samuel leaned forward and held his head in his hands. Confronting his father in front of Clawson wasn't a good idea, but it had to be done.

This whole damn thing was getting out of hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It is difficult to know at what moment love begins; it is less difficult to know it has begun.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*H*IS HEAD RESTED on his arm as he listened to her breathing and watched her sleep. The discussion in his head had raged for hours. Sensing her warmth, inhaling her scent, and wanting to taste her lips, the voice of love prevailed.



CLAIRE FLOATED IN that place before consciousness, having difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy, unsure of what she was feeling. The epiphany came with the realization: she was *feeling*. It'd been so long since she felt anything. She felt warm, safe, and secure. Her mind tried to convince her it was a dream, but she remembered feeling the same way before she fell asleep. She questioned herself, is this real? Her soft skin rolled on the silky sheets and felt radiating warmth. Hesitantly, she opened her eyes. Right in front of her, close enough to touch, was Tony's firm broad chest. Again questions, is he really here? He usually left her bed before she woke. Why is he still here? Now, as Claire rolled onto her back and saw the beautiful ornate ceiling she wondered, where is here? This isn't my room.

With a rich raspy tone, he greeted her. "Good morning, Claire." His smile revealed the winner of his internal monologue: adoration and love showed through. He leaned down to kiss her forehead.

"Good morning, what are you doing still in bed?" The room was quite dark. "Or is it morning? It's so dark." The eyes watching her weren't.

"I've been watching you sleep." He slid his arm under her back, placing

her head upon his shoulder. His hard strong shoulder made the perfect pillow as his arm gently surrounded her warm body.

“Why would you do that? I need a shower and probably look awful.” She buried her face into his chest, allowing his hairs to tickle her cheeks and inhaled deeply. His aroma was exhilarating.

He took her chin, turned her face toward his, and gently kissing her lips. “I’ve been watching you, because you’re so beautiful. Your face is flawless.”

Claire tried to look away from his eyes. They were light, honest, and real. The candidness made her uneasy.

“Please don’t look away. I see you now and think about what your face looked like, what I did to you. I’m not going to keep bringing this up, but I want you to know how much I regret what happened, and to let you know how amazing I think you are. You went through so much. I don’t want anything like that to ever happen again.”

She couldn’t stop the tears from trickling down her cheeks. She wanted to hide her face, but he held her chin firmly. “Tony, I’m glad to know you’re sorry. I’m sorry too.” He let go of her chin, but she continued their gaze as she spoke. “I’m sorry about Meredith. I really didn’t say anything to her. She walked up and recognized me. Like the article said, we were sorority sisters. I never suspected she was a reporter. She asked if she could join me. I didn’t want her to, then I thought about your rules about appearances, and I decided telling her *no* would be rude. I’m sorry I made the wrong decision.”

He rolled her over onto her back. The skin of his chest pressed against her bare breasts. Looking up into his face, she saw only a slight darkening of his eyes. His features reminded her of those of a model: prominent cheek bones and strong jaw line. His gaze went on for an eternity before he finally spoke. “I can’t promise I’ll never get upset. I can probably promise I will; however, I promise I’ll do my best to never hurt you like that again, but I need something from you.”

She assumed it involved gratification, and she didn’t mind. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to make me a promise.” Claire raised her eyebrows. “A promise, that you’ll do your best to follow my rules. That you’ll do your best to never give me cause to hurt you again.”

“Tony, I promise I’ll do my best to make you proud, and I accept your apology. You don’t need to keep apologizing.” Looking at his expression she read a mixture of emotions: gratitude, adoration, and relief.

“Have I told you how amazing you were? I’ve watched you with Dr. Leonard fifty times. You were in such pain. God, even water made you sick, yet you were perfect and made me so proud. I have listened to your answers over and over. I understand his concern. Our story didn’t hold water. I was just so worried about you, lying on the floor, and I couldn’t get you to wake. I

had to get you some medical help. I was upset about what I thought you'd done. The longer I waited for you to get home that night, the more betrayed I felt, and I lost control." Claire saw such honesty in his eyes. It was like a window exposing his soul: one she didn't think he allowed many people to see. "When you quit moving I realized what happened, and I became more upset about what I'd done. Suddenly, getting you help was more important than appearances." He gently smoothed her hair. "You had the chance to tell someone about me, and what I did. I deserved that and more, but no, even in your condition you were perfect." He lowered his face to her collar bone. His rough beard growth pricked her skin. "I don't deserve your forgiveness, but..." Looking again into her emerald eyes, he continued, "Thank you for giving it to me."

When he started to kiss her, her body obediently responded; however, her mind thought about the cameras and surveillance. She knew they were there. *Compartmentalize.* She had a lot to put away. She needed bigger compartments.

Claire felt his hardness on her leg as his lips moved down her neck to her collar bone. Her breasts pressed upward in anticipation of his mouth, and her nipples hardened as his lips lightly brushed their tips. Trying to suppress her heated desires, Claire asked for a favor. "Tony, while we're asking for things, may I have something from you?"

"I have something for you right now," he said between kisses, inching his way down her body, gently spreading her legs.

"And, I want that." Claire smiled, as she lifted her head to catch his eyes. "But first, can I have a promise?"

Tony moved up, kissed her lips, and asked what she wanted him to promise.

"You're right, there was pain, but what haunted me for two months was the threat of you locking me in my suite. Please don't use my honesty against me. I don't want to be locked up alone again. It was unbearable. I know you don't have to, but I'm asking you, please promise you'll never threaten me with that or do that to me again."

"Claire, I promise I'll not lock you in your suite again, and if we each keep our promises, maintaining them all will be easier."

"Thank you," she sighed. His promise removed a tremendous weight and allowed her body's yearning desires to come to the forefront. "Now, what did you say about having something for me?"

His gaze held her captive. She felt her cheeks rise and her eyes glow. Despite everything, she knew the smile she exposed was real, and it was exclusively for the man above her. When Tony grinned back, she couldn't help but notice that his expression was a little more mischievous than it had been. Her entire body trembled in anticipation.



BREAKFAST WAS SERVED in Tony's suite. They ate with wet hair while wrapped in thick soft white robes. Claire's appetite had returned with a vengeance. She ate eggs, turkey bacon, toast, and fruit. She even thought about hash browns and decided maybe she should tell Catherine she liked hash browns. Tony's voice took Claire's attention away from her food. "I have a confession. I think I'm an example of my own rule." Claire told him, she didn't know what he meant. He explained that although he's thrilled with the outcome of yesterday's drive, it wasn't his goal.

Claire smiled and responded, "Well appearances..." Looking at their wet hair and robes. "...would say differently." She used her toe to rub up and down his leg. "I'm happy with the outcome too, but what was your goal?" He told her it was simply to get her to leave the estate to go somewhere. He wanted to get her away before they needed to go somewhere. Claire reflected on the past twenty-four hours. Okay, he'd done that too. "Why? When do we need to go somewhere? And where do we need to go?" Her toe still wandered.

"If you keep that up, we'll be late." Tony's voice didn't sound concerned. He glanced at the clock by his bed: 11:17 AM. "Well, we're supposed to be at Brent and Courtney's for dinner at 3:30 PM."

Claire thought a moment, they had four hours. "I really would rather stay here, but I suspect I don't have a choice. How many people will be there?"

Tony confirmed she was correct; they were going and it would just be the four of them. Courtney had been asking Tony to bring Claire over since the beginning of October. They sent her flowers and cards, they must have known about her *accident*. Claire liked Courtney, and Tony obviously trusted them. She could do it.

While she thought about the Simmons' and refocused on her breakfast, her toe was stopped in its exploration and lifted. She gazed toward the sensation and found Tony on the ground, holding her foot.

He slowly put her toe in his mouth and began to suck. He watched for her reaction as her brain forgot the breakfast and impending dinner. The slight gasp that escaped her lips brought a devilish grin to his.

She immediately felt the sensation from her toe ignite pulsations elsewhere. His lips moved from her toe, to her foot, to her ankle, and slowly up her leg. When he opened her robe and pulled her toward him, Claire's body tingled in anticipation. Too soon he gave her unimaginable thrills.

Finding their way back to his bed, Tony supported himself above her lean, blossoming body and with a raspy voice he inquired, "Claire, what do you want?"

She looked in his eyes, again still so light and real. He'd never asked her what she wanted. As he kissed her neck, her body responded; her back arched, pressing toward him, silently begging for his touch.

He continued, "I want to hear you. No forcing and no directions. I want to hear what *you* want?" His desires were clear and rubbing across her thighs.

"I want you," Claire whispered.

That wasn't enough; Tony wanted to hear more. "Tell me what you want. I need to know you want it as much as I do."

"Oh, God, Tony, I want you." Her desires gave strength to her voice. "I want you inside of me." With her body on the brink of explosion, she implored, "Please, please, Tony, take me."

As she held tightly to his broad shoulders, her eyes closed, and he fulfilled her desires. Claire wanted every bit of him—every inch—and now that he was there. It was her turn to lose control. Without effort, her body responded to his every touch. There were no thoughts, only carnal desires as he, more than once, elicited earthshaking convulsions. There was no question, this was consensual, and Claire was getting exactly what she wanted, what she'd asked for, and still wanted more.



TONY DROVE TO and from the Simmons' in one of his Mercedes. It was a great ride from the back when Eric drove, but it was even better from the passenger's seat: smooth and quiet. Tony tuned the satellite radio to a classical station. The warm car, soft music, and smooth ride almost had Claire napping. Her energy wasn't at its pre-accident level, and her eyes began to close. Catherine told her one time not to act tired, but she wasn't acting.

Tony glanced her way and said, "It's all right. Why don't you lay the seat back, and I'll wake you when we arrive." She did.

They had a good time with Brent and Courtney. Courtney told Claire a thousand times she needed to gain some weight. The unfortunate accident in the woods left her too thin, but she quickly added, "You're still beautiful." After the delicious dinner they retired to the lower level; the Vikings and the Packers were playing. Apparently, Brent and Tony were Vikings fans. Claire wondered how she didn't know that.

While they watched the game and argued with the television, Claire and Courtney chatted. It was nice to talk to someone else. Courtney made Claire feel warm and secure. She didn't pry, but wanted to know about Claire's accident and recovery. Apparently, Brent told her how upset Tony had been. He couldn't believe something like that could happen on his land. Did they ever find out if someone had been out in the woods?

The football game didn't turn out like the men wanted. Undaunted, they all sipped red wine and played cards. Claire hadn't *played* a game in so long. It was truly enjoyable. When they left the Simmons' home, after 11:00 PM, Courtney hugged Claire, and said, "Now you promise to eat." Claire nodded. "We're so happy you're feeling better."

On the way home Tony praised Claire for all she did and said. He also informed her he needed to be in New York the following week. It was up to her if she joined him; however, she may not realize Thursday, of next week, would be Thanksgiving. He couldn't promise he would be back. He may have to stay until Friday. He'd like her to join him, if she were up to it.

Claire knew the intense therapy of the last two days had helped revitalize her. "I may need naps, but I want to go."



DURING THE WEEK between the Simmons and New York, Claire made strides in her recovery. It was as if a black veil had been lifted. For weeks—even months—the entire world was gray. The release of suppressed emotions, and Tony's promise, removed the veil. The trees were still leafless and the grass still lacked color, but the world was once again alive.

Instead of sleeping to get energy, Claire began moving. First, she walked around the house, then swam in the indoor pool, and enjoyed the hot tub. She even ventured to the theater room, and she made herself watch a movie. It was a musical, *Hairspray* with John Travolta. She smiled. It was her first trip to the theater room since Tony had taken her there.

Monday evening they flew to New York watching the sky grow dark as they headed east. Eric drove them directly to Tony's apartment, and Jan waited for their arrival with dinner. From the spectacular view of the seventy-sixth floor, the city vibrantly glistened with lights and activity. They ate in the dining room and watched little cars drive on busy little streets far below.

That night, exhausted from traveling, they settled into Tony's bed and he handed Claire a black velvet box. Her shoulders slumped. "Tony, please stop. No more black velvet boxes. I have plenty of jewelry. I love it all, but I don't need it. I feel bad about you spending all this money on me."

"Well, first, if you haven't noticed, money isn't an issue, and what good is money if it doesn't buy the things I want? Besides, this is a special gift."

Claire raised her eyebrows.

He continued, "Somehow, with all that's happened in the past two months, I made an awful mistake." She feared he was talking about the accident. "I realized it when I was getting your ID and credit card."

Now she knew what he meant; he'd missed her birthday. "It's all right.

I've received plenty of gifts lately." She tried to give him back the box.

"No!" he declared. "It's not all right. You had a birthday, your twenty-seventh, on October 17." He firmly, yet tenderly, held her hands with the box in them, while his tone softened. "The other gifts were because of your accomplishments." *And your guilt*, Claire added mentally. "This one is for your birthday."

She looked helplessly at the box. He continued, "Okay, I'm a cheapskate." With a frisky grin he added, "I'm re-gifting, again."

Looking at the box Claire pondered the possibilities of his *re-gifting*. Her eyes opened wide as she lifted the velvet lid to reveal her grandmother's necklace. It looked perfect, absolutely no evidence of the *accident* it had endured. She beamed at Tony, closed the box, and put it on the bedside stand. Scooting close to him, she rested her head on his chest as her green eyes gleamed with moisture. "I think you're doing a great job of enticing me to feel better. I wonder sometimes how I got here." The fatigue made her head pound. When she closed her eyes moisture escaped as tears onto Tony's chest. Her shields were down and mask was gone. "I know I'm here because you *own* me and my debt. Sometimes I feel that way, but other times you make me feel special." She nuzzled into his warm embrace. Her words slowed as fatigue prevailed. "I don't know any more if you're using me or if you care about me, but I know what I hope."

He listened as her words ran together.

"I want you to know it didn't start this way, but I'm willing to do what you ask, not because of my debt, but because I want you to be happy." She couldn't give him gifts in black velvet boxes. She could only give herself.



HE KISSED HER hair and tasted her scent, mixed with hairspray and perfume. Holding her soft body against his, he replied, "Thank you, for making me happy." Caressing her silky shoulder, he wanted her—all of her.

She mumbled into his chest. "Thank you, for helping my necklace, too." Within seconds her breathing became rhythmic and she drifted to sleep.

Tony watched as her head rose and fell with each of his breaths. "God help me, I do care about you." Gently pulling her closer, he tenderly moved her hair away from her angelic face. Seeing her sleep, peaceful and trusting, his thoughts of waking her for his desires were quickly replaced. Instead, he held her close, closed his eyes, and joined her in sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Love comforteth like sunshine after rain.

—William Shakespeare

T

UESDAY MORNING BUSTLED with activity. Tony left early for meetings, and Eric chauffeured Claire to the spa for a highlight treatment. During the two months since her last appointment, she'd barely ventured outside. She needed sun and blonde to maintain her hair. The sun wasn't going to happen, but the blonde could. Claire agreed to a hair appointment and a manicure but declined other services. The idea of having a massage, someone touching her, made her very uncomfortable.

After her appointment, she had Eric bring her back to the apartment where she rested until Tony returned in the evening. He informed her they had plans for the following evening. He also asked if she went shopping. She explained, "I waited for you here. My head ached and I think traveling wore me out. I was just too tired."

The answers didn't please him, but he didn't complain or argue.



WEDNESDAY LATE AFTERNOON, Claire prepared for their plans. She didn't know what he had planned or where they were going, only to be ready by 5:00 PM. The night before, Tony had looked through the closet and inspected the clothes Catherine packed. After only brief scrutiny, Tony announced that nothing she brought would do for their plans. He wanted her to wear something special, something she chose, and everything brand-new.

Her assignment took her the better part of the day. She left the apartment early in the morning and visited Manhattan, Soho, and the Upper East Side. All of her work eventually paid off. She'd done it. Actually, she'd gotten her

new outfit and a few more items. Due to her post *accident* leaner body, she decided some new slacks, jeans, and sweaters were in order. She refused to even calculate the total of her expenditures. Tony would know with a click of his computer, but she wasn't concerned. He liked her to spend money. With Eric available to get her packages, the shopping was getting easier. Her new outfit consisted of a black one-shouldered silk crepe dress with a long-sleeved overlay from a quaint little boutique in Soho. The *Valentino* bow pumps were a perfect match from *Nordstrom's*. The *Kate Spade* shoulder bag and stretch wool long coat came from *Saks*. Due to the cool November temperature the associate recommended hosiery. When Claire was shown the thigh-high sheer hose, she knew she'd be able to cover her legs and follow Tony's rules at the same time. Of the extra items she found, her favorite was a cashmere hoodie, dusty rose and amazingly soft. It'd be perfect for snuggling up at home with a book on a cold winter day.

Something about the thought of *home* meaning Tony's house perplexed Claire. She decided it was what it was. As he'd put it: her actions in Chicago resulted in the consequence of *needing* him to keep her from having more accidents. It wasn't up for debate. She also knew things could be considerably worse than snuggling with a book, by the fire, in her suite, in her cashmere hoodie, and some comfortable jeans. She did her best to compartmentalize. It made the fire, book, and hoodie all very pleasant.

Tony entered the bedroom as she stood before the mirror wearing a black silk robe and working on her hair. She knew, during her recovery, he'd only visited his district offices via Internet. He'd sent Timothy to do some of his bidding, but his presence had more influence. Some things needed to be dealt with in person. If his mood was any indication, the business dealings were going well.

Her hair was pinned up and she'd been curling the ends when Tony came up behind her and kissed her neck. The contact ignited an immediate fire within her soul. Although her busy day had only allowed a short nap, his kiss sparked her to full alert.

"Good evening, Claire. I trust you were successful today with your shopping endeavors?"

She happily reported that she'd done very well—even finding some extra items.

His grin showed his approval. "I can't wait to see tonight's ensemble."

Claire watched in the mirror as Tony disappeared into the dressing room to prepare for his shower. Seconds later, her insides tightened as he returned to the bedroom completely nude. Momentarily, their eyes met in the reflection. Seemingly distracted from his shower, Tony moved behind Claire, wrapped his arms around her and maneuvered his large hands beneath her flimsy robe. As he caressed her soft skin, he neared his lips to her neck and

whispered, “Do you think joining me in the shower would be detrimental to your hair and make-up?” He nuzzled her neck.

She inhaled his intoxicating scent as his chin’s stubble triggered goose bumps on her arms and legs. “I think it would,” she answered, unconvincingly.

“Then perhaps we should plan it for another time?” His hands didn’t obey his words and continued to fondle.

“Or... we could postpone your plans?” Claire closed her eyes, tilted her head against his chest, and massaged his strong arms. As she turned to face him, she smiled at his physical reaction to their proximity. Obviously, he was happy to be near her.

Though his gravelly voice resonated in her ears, it successfully elicited pulsations elsewhere in her body. “Oh, God, I want to, but we have plenty of time for that. Tonight, I have special plans for you.” He slowly stepped back, but before he released his touch, he said, “And, so far you look amazing. I believe I like your outfit now better than the one you bought.”

With her robe now lying in a black silk puddle on the floor, Claire’s cheeks blushed, and she flashed a modest smile. “It’s November. I believe I’d get cold as we walk the streets of New York.” Her voice reflected Tony’s playfulness.

“Perhaps, but if I have anything to do with it, cold is *not* what you would be feeling.”

After a lingering kiss, Claire watched him disappear into the bathroom. Shaking her head, she retrieved her robe and secured the tie. It truly amazed her how he was able to flip a switch and immediately send her entire body into mayhem. Though she tried to concentrate on her breathing and resume her work on her hair, her thoughts continually went to the next room: thinking about Tony’s steamy shower and slippery soap suds.

When Tony re-entered the bedroom, Claire was dressed. His gaze lingered. “I think you look stunning.” His expression didn’t seem to be in full agreement with his words. Lifting the hem of her dress, his fingers traced the top of her new hosiery, and his grin broadened. “My! What will they think of next? Very good.” He lightly kissed her lips.

Claire smiled. He was so predictable. Well, sometimes.

By the time they reached the front doors of the building, Eric had the limousine warm and ready for their adventure. Once in the back of the car, Claire asked Tony about their plans. He would only disclose that their first stop was dinner. The cold crisp night air formed crystals on the windows of the limousine, making the lights of the city shimmer. The crystals seemed to flash rhythmically with intensity mimicking the hum of music coming from the cabin’s speakers.

It didn’t take long, considering the traffic, to reach their destination: the

Crown Plaza Hotel on Broadway, in the heart of New York's theater district. Once inside, Tony directed Claire to *Brasserie 1605*, a beautiful restaurant bustling with patrons. The hostess immediately ushered them to a romantic table with a stunning view of Times Square. The waiter seemed to know their timetable better than Claire, providing exceptionally efficient service. Tony ordered a bottle of wine, approved a taste, and the waiter poured two glasses. They enjoyed delicious grilled sea diver scallops for their appetizer and seared Atlantic salmon as their main course. Claire thought everything tasted scrumptious. Along with other sensory organs recently reawakened, she had a newfound appreciation for food. She enjoyed the aroma as the plate appeared in front of her, the taste on her tongue, and the texture as she chewed. Tony watched happily as she delighted in each bite of her seafood.

His mood amused Claire. It seemed different, in a positive way. He talked excessively, yet not about anything in particular. She asked when they were going back to Iowa, and he said he did need to have a few meetings on Friday. So, they could leave Friday night or wait until Saturday. Claire felt bad about not being with Catherine on Thanksgiving. She would love to be with John and Emily, but knew better than to ask. Catherine had become her closest family. She hoped Catherine had someone to visit for the holiday.

Tony wouldn't give hints about their next destination. Being in the Theater District, Claire guessed they were on their way to a show. Smiling, he refused to tell her which one. After dinner Eric appeared to chauffeur them to the *Broadhurst Theater*. The title on the marquee read *The Merchant of Venice* with Al Pacino. Claire had heard it was one of the hottest tickets in town. They, of course, had amazing seats. She'd never been a Shakespearean fan, yet in no time at all, she became completely engrossed in the play. By the time it ended she'd laughed and cried. The entire cast's performances were riveting, taking her to another world for two hours and completely draining her with the range of sweeping emotions. She was ready to go back to the apartment.

Eric waited for them as they left the theater. Tony didn't ask Claire where she wanted to go next. She assumed they'd be heading to the apartment; therefore, when Eric went another direction she was surprised. They headed north to Fifty-Ninth Street, and Eric stopped at Seventh Avenue: at *Central Park*.

The cold crisp air awakened her as they moved from the warm limousine to the waiting horse-drawn carriage. The horseman was prepared for the brisk weather with blankets, and Eric supplied mittens and scarves. To keep warm, they snuggled under the blankets, held mitten hands, and observed the beautiful park with lights lining the paths and illuminating some of the trees. The large strong horse pulled the carriage slowly and steadily around the eight hundred plus acres. The methodical trot rhythmically created a cadence for

their dialogue. Their noses and cheeks reddened in the cool air as they cuddled, talked, and enjoyed the incredibly romantic setting.

Gently holding Claire's mitten hand, Tony spoke honestly with love. "Claire, you know I've dated many women." She said she'd read about some. "There have been women who've wanted to date me solely for my money, and I admit to taking advantage of that." His honesty had her full attention. "You know I'm a private person. Truly there are few people who have seen the real me. There are all sorts of psychological reasons for why I am the way I am. They probably stem from childhood and traumas early in life, but the past is that, and the reasons don't matter. What matters is that unlike many of my business associates or acquaintances, you've met the real me." That thought made her feel slightly uneasy. "There are sides to me that need subduing. Honestly, I've never cared to try, but I do now, and I believe it's possible."

She continued to listen. His soft brown eyes held her gaze as he continued, "Claire, the other night you asked me if I cared about you. Honestly, with our initial arrangement, I never intended to, but without a doubt, I do." She saw something new in his expression, something she didn't recognize. He asked, "Do you care about me? Do you enjoy being with me?"

Claire considered her answer. Honesty was the best policy, no matter the consequence. "Tony, I do care about you. I want you to be happy, and I would do anything to help that happen, and on a night like tonight, or even a quiet night at home, I enjoy being with you." She smiled. "...more than enjoy." Her emerald eyes shimmered in the cold air. "However, honestly, there are times I don't. There are times I want you away from me, or vice versa." She maintained eye contact and watched for his reaction.

He smiled and leaned closer. His kiss was forceful, yet passionate. It wasn't the reaction she'd expected. The relief overwhelmed her as she kissed him back.

When he pulled away, his tone was sincere. "You are the most amazing woman. I have vice presidents, presidents, and chairmen of boards who have never experienced me as you have. None of them would have the courage to answer that question as honestly as you just did." She exhaled. "It's your strength and determination that have infuriated me. That strength and resilience has also made me fall in love with you."

Perhaps it shouldn't have been a shock, but it was. He said that he loved her. He had her complete attention, and yet her internal monologue almost drowned out his voice: Love, really? He just said he loves me? Do I love him?

"Claire, I experienced life without you, after your accident. I don't want to do that again, but I want you to make your own decision. Tonight I would like to present you with two options: your freedom. You may leave tonight and

your debt is paid, or..." He removed a diamond solitaire ring from his jacket pocket. "...you could agree to marry me and spend the rest of your life with me, not out of obligation or contractual agreement, but because you want to be with me."

Her heart beat rapidly, and her lungs momentarily forgot to breathe. She stared at Tony and at the ring. With only the illumination of the streetlamps, she saw the brilliant solitaire diamond. It was surrounded by a delicate diamond border with additional diamonds on the platinum band. She'd never seen anything so beautiful, and Tony was offering it to *her*. Her mind couldn't stop spinning. She knew she should answer, speak, say something, but words failed her.

He continued, "You told me yesterday no more black boxes, so I took it out of its box." He grinned. "Could we see if it fits?"

Claire nodded and extended her left hand. Tony smiled as he removed the fuzzy mitten and placed the ring on her fourth finger. She was suddenly glad she agreed to a manicure.

"It seems to fit." Tony looked into her emerald eyes. "The question still seems to be unanswered. Do you want to keep it on and stay with me? Will you please be Claire Rawlings?"

She weighed her possibilities. He could be the most romantic man in the world. He was incredibly generous with his money, both to her, for whatever she needed, and others, thus much philanthropic recognition. He was the most amazing lover. She'd never in her life experienced sensual highs like she had with him. He was the only person whom she could talk with freely. He knew all about her, because he knew her private information, *but*—that was the word that haunted her—*but* he could be dark, mean, cruel, controlling, and sadistic. He was the reason for that private information. "I-I'm so surprised..." She stuttered. "...are you seriously asking *me* to marry you?"

He grinned and bowed his nose to hers. "Yes, my dear, this entire night has been leading to this proposal. I've watched you, with me, in private, in public, with my closest friends, and I want you there always. I love you."

Again, internal debate: Love? He keeps using that word. Love, do I love him? I think I do. When did that happen? Oh my, Claire needed to think about this. The napkin thing happened too quickly, this needed contemplation. "Please," she implored "Please, let me think. I promise you an answer soon."

He waited patiently. The carriage steadily moved through the cold crisp air. She saw her breath as she looked at her hand and at Tony. She thought about his patience as she healed from her injuries, about him risking public exposure with Dr. Leonard, about how he made her feel when she saw him walk into a room. Her contemplation took a while. They sat back in the carriage. She rested her head on his shoulder and thought. He didn't say a word or push. Instead, he waited and tenderly held her hand.

She could decide to leave, and do what? Go back to Atlanta. Did she still have an apartment? He waited. There was a side of him that frightened her, but the idea of living without him somehow frightened her more. *She needed him.* He told her that. More importantly, she loved him. She really did. Sometime during the last eight months he'd become her everything. Now when faced with the possibility, Claire couldn't imagine her life without him in it.

Finally, she answered, "God help me, yes. Tony, I'll marry you." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her tenderly. When their lips separated, Claire confessed, "I love you, too." She watched his eyes glisten with the reflection of the white lights. It was a gaze she could watch forever. As the carriage continued through the park, Claire scooted closer, laid her head back on his shoulder, and looked again at her left hand.

Tony's voice broke the momentary stillness. "If you don't like the ring we can look at others. It's from Tiffany's. We can go Friday and exchange it."

"Oh, no! I love the ring, besides you chose it. It's exquisite. I'm just so surprised." She thought of something. "Does Catherine know you were planning this?"

Tony said she suspected, but he hadn't told anyone. He didn't know her response. "I never go into a meeting that I don't know the outcome. I'm always prepared for every situation. Tonight I wasn't sure. You asked about your debt being paid a few months ago. I thought perhaps you would take that option." He leaned down to kiss her hair. "I can't tell you how happy I am you didn't. I know Catherine will be too."

When the carriage arrived back at Seventh Avenue, Eric had the limousine warm and waiting. As Tony helped Claire down from the carriage and led her to the car, and he told Eric, "My fiancée and I are ready to go back to the apartment."

"Yes, sir. Congratulations, Mr. Rawlings, and to you too, Ms. Claire."

That night after some of the most wonderful lovemaking Claire had ever experienced, she began to consider the reality that she was getting married, and that meant a wedding. "I don't know how to plan a wedding to someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"You know what I mean. This won't be your everyday Indiana or Iowa wedding. You're Anthony Rawlings. We can't go to dinner without photographers. A wedding will be a national spectator event."

He chuckled. "My dear, that's why there are wedding coordinators and planners. We'll hire the best. They'll assist in everything."

That made Claire feel better. She wondered: if the wedding were a catastrophe; wouldn't that be a public failure?

"By the way..." Tony added, "...how do you feel about a Christmas

wedding?"

Her mind went into overdrive. "Christmas? As in four weeks from Saturday?"

"I can't wait any longer than that to have you be my wife: Mrs. Anthony Rawlings."

She knew from experience his mind was made up. With queasiness deep in the pit of her stomach, she replied, "I feel that you must hire the world's best wedding coordinator and planner."

Claire tried to sleep, but the panic of planning a wedding in four weeks made her suffocate. She lay next to her fiancée and attempted to make sense of everything. Maybe she needed to compartmentalize. One thing at a time: wedding, reception, dress, and maid-of-honor. "Tony, I'd like Emily to be my matron-of-honor."

He was almost asleep, and his voice sounded far away. "We can discuss it tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

This is the finest measure of thanksgiving: a thankfulness that springs from love.

—William C. Skeath

THEY TALKED INTO the early morning about the wedding. Therefore, Thursday morning, Claire slept soundly until after 9:00 AM. Sensing she was alone in the big bed, she focused her gaze on her left hand. On the fourth finger was a spectacular engagement ring. Smiling, she marveled at the reality. It wasn't a dream. She was really marrying Anthony Rawlings. Until last night, Claire hadn't allowed herself to think of Tony in terms of emotions or endearments. She knew she was having feelings, but she wouldn't let herself elaborate; however, when he said he loved her, it opened a floodgate. She thought about her feelings and how she missed him when he was gone. How she enjoyed having him around to talk with. How he could make her feel special, and how she thought about him when they were apart. She realized, to her own amazement, she really did love him! She couldn't contain her smile; this revelation was so astounding!

Claire wrapped herself in a thick long robe and walked downstairs to the dining room. As she approached, the rich poignant aroma of fresh coffee filled her lungs and brought her senses to life. Jan had coffee warm and ready. Tony wasn't there. When she inquired, Jan informed her, "Mr. Rawlings is in his office. Ms. Claire, if I may? Congratulations."

"Thank you, Jan. I'm sorry you have to work on Thanksgiving," Claire offered, as Jan poured her coffee.

"It's all right, miss. I'm looking forward to having guests this afternoon for dinner. We rarely entertain here."

"Guests? I'm sorry. If Mr. Rawlings mentioned guests, with the excitement of our engagement, I've forgotten. Do you remember who's joining us for Thanksgiving dinner?"

"I'm sorry. I don't believe he told me names. I know there'll be two, and they're scheduled to arrive at 1:30 PM." Jan convinced Claire to eat an English muffin and grapefruit. After breakfast, Claire went to Tony's office door and heard him speaking. She may be his fiancée, but interrupting him uninvited in his office didn't seem like a good idea. Perhaps some rules would change, but she knew if they did he would choose which rules and when.

Claire went back to their bedroom, showered, and thought about how glad she was she'd bought new clothes. If she needed to be the perfect companion for some business associates, she felt better in well-fitting clothes.

She chose a black pair of wool slacks and a pink knit sweater from *Neiman Marcus*. The black boots she decided to wear had high heels; Tony wouldn't seem as tall. Dreamily, she thought about fuzzy socks and her new hoodie. Being Mrs. Rawlings would teach her to keep up appearances.

Actually, being Claire Nichols taught her that.

As she straightened her hair, Claire marveled at the new even lighter shade. The auburn showed through enough to be considered low lights, but she was definitely now a caramel blonde. Although Catherine packed many pieces of Claire's new jewelry, she wanted to wear her grandmother's necklace and the *O* earrings Tony brought her from Europe. She shook her head as she remembered the scene in the gardens that seemed so long ago. Once she was completely dressed, she relaxed on the bed and let her mind wander.

I'm going to marry Tony. I'm going to marry Tony in four weeks. I need a wedding dress. I need to call Emily. There are guests coming to dinner. Perhaps after dinner I can approach the Emily subject with Tony. Where will we marry? Who will we invite? Suddenly, a nice destination wedding anywhere, seemed like a good idea.

Her mind went from the wedding, to Thanksgiving. She could hardly believe it was truly Thanksgiving. She'd arrived at Tony's house on March 20. Now she'd be eating Thanksgiving dinner with him and some associates and planning her wedding. She imagined drowning in chocolate sauce, too much of a good thing!

As a means of escape she let her mind float to childhood Thanksgivings. They usually went to her grandparents' home, where Grandma made all the traditional foods. She remembered helping her grandma and mother bake pies. At Thanksgiving they usually had pumpkin, apple, and sometimes pecan and always too much food. Even when she lived with Emily and John, she baked pies and helped Emily with cooking. Part of her wanted to go down to the kitchen and offer to help; however, she instinctively knew it wouldn't be appropriate.

Claire was somewhere deep in her memories when Tony entered the bedroom wearing slacks and a burgundy ribbed turtleneck sweater that looked

wonderful stretched across his broad shoulders and chest. He wore suits so often, Claire liked seeing him in something other than a jacket and tie. He smiled and came closer. "Good morning, my fiancée." He kissed her lips. "How are you feeling today?"

Claire propped herself up. "Good morning, to *my* fiancé. I feel well. I was just thinking about Thanksgivings when I was young. Did you eat all the traditional Thanksgiving foods when you were young?"

Sitting next to her on the edge of the bed, his eyes darkened. "Claire, don't talk about the past. We have a future ahead of us, let's look ahead."

"I'm sorry, I guess I'm reminiscing." She touched his arm. "Tony, who's coming to dinner?"

"First, let me tell you..." Suddenly, his voice brimmed with excitement. "I've been on the telephone all morning. Patricia is going to contact Shelly, and a public statement regarding our engagement will be released tomorrow. Also, you have an appointment tomorrow at a very exclusive bridal boutique in Manhattan for a wedding gown. They're expecting you, the future Mrs. Anthony Rawlings. They want to meet your every need." He kissed her lips and continued to hold her gaze with his chocolate brown eyes. "I want you to have the wedding and the dress of your dreams. Patricia will also choose a wedding planner and coordinator to meet with us when we return to Iowa. Since Christmas is on a Saturday, the wedding will be December 18, which too is a Saturday. I hope you don't mind, but with the wedding only three weeks away, I decided to have it at the estate. Now we don't have to worry about booking a place, and security is already set. We just need to decide how many guests and where on the estate to hold the ceremony and reception. I did reach Catherine. She's thrilled and told me to tell you so."

Claire felt inundated: information overload! She laid her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes. "Maybe this is all happening too fast." Tony didn't say anything, but when she opened her eyes she saw the change in his expression and reached for his arm. "Tony, it isn't that I don't want to marry you. I do, but three weeks, that seems very rushed."

He scooped her into his arms. "I promise you, money can make anything happen. Don't worry about it. We'll marry on December 18, and it will be amazing."

"I just worry about disappointing you."

"Claire, this is your wedding. I want you to be happy. I also know you're not back to yourself. I don't want you to overdo. Just enjoy all the things your money can buy and watch the wedding take shape. It'll be spectacular."

"My money can't buy us a piece of gum."

He laughed and kissed her. "My dear, in three weeks and two days you'll be able to buy a gum factory if you want. I want you to share all that I have. You'll have everything the world has to offer."

Claire struggled with the meaning of his words. “Tony, I don’t want your money. I haven’t done anything to deserve part of your fortune. I’m happy to share your name. I don’t need any more.”

“My love, you’ve done more than you’ll ever know, and I’m pretty sure you’ll do more.” While he leaned down to kiss her, his hands were busily undoing the buttons on her slacks.

“Don’t we have guests coming?”

“They aren’t due until 1:30 PM. I’m pretty sure we can be successful, multiple times, before then.” He said with a sultry grin, as he removed her slacks. Straddling her legs he removed his sweater and undid his slacks. She watched his seductive smile and his muscular chest as it moved with breaths of anticipation. The scent of his cologne penetrated her senses, and she knew if he bent down she’d be able to taste it on his neck.

“But, Tony—” He put his finger to her lips.

“Shhh. I have better things for those beautiful lips to do than talk.”



THEY LEFT THE bedroom together just before 1:30 PM. As they approached the steps Tony’s stance straightened as he said, “I’m sure you realize, but I’m going to say it for the sake of clarification. Just because we’re engaged, divulging private information is still forbidden.”

Claire looked up at his eyes and wondered what he possibly thought she would say to his associates. “I promise, I know that.” They continued to the front stairs, and muffled voices came from the sitting room below. “Now who am I meeting?” As she asked, the voices came into range, her eyes moistened, and she looked to Tony for confirmation. “Is it really them?”

He gently held her shoulders. “Yes, I invited them to surprise you for Thanksgiving, but now you have even bigger news to share.”

“I can tell them about our engagement?”

He smiled. “Of course, didn’t you say you wanted Emily to stand with you?” She wanted to run down the stairs or cry out, but his grip on her hand tightened. “Claire, follow my rules.”

“I will,” she replied, and obediently fell into step with her fiancé.

When the soles of their shoes hit the marble floor, John and Emily turned toward them. They’d been enjoying the view from the sitting room windows. Her family looked just as Claire remembered: John tall with dark blond hair and playful blue eyes, and Emily with the Nichols brown hair, cut short and sassy, and Claire’s sparkling green eyes. Claire ran to Emily and hugged her.

“I didn’t know you were coming. It’s a wonderful surprise. Oh, Emily, it’s so good to see you!” Then she hugged John. “And, John! Oh, let me introduce

you to Anthony.”

Emily told Claire it was good to see her, too; however, she and John made eye contact, sharing an expression of concern. Claire looked so different. Nonetheless, they proceeded politely as Claire made introductions. “Anthony, this is my sister Emily, and Emily, this is my fiancé, Anthony Rawlings.” Tony emitted charm as he and Emily shook hands.

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Rawlings.” Emily seemed to slowly make sense of Claire’s words. She looked at her sister quizzically, and asked, “Did you just say fiancé?”

Claire continued with introductions. “And Anthony, this is Emily’s husband, my brother-in-law, John Vandersol. John, please meet my fiancé, Anthony Rawlings.” The two men shook hands and exchanged greetings.

Gracious as ever, Tony said, “Please, we’re about to be family, call me Anthony.”

Claire smiled and they all sat down to chat before dinner. Jan entered the room to offer hors d’oeuvres and drinks. Claire showed Emily her engagement ring and told them about Tony’s romantic proposal in *Central Park*. John and Emily were speechless, perhaps in shock. Tony was very attentive, holding Claire’s hand, putting his hand on her shoulder or thigh as she rambled on—cautious to not divulge any forbidden or personal information.

During Thanksgiving dinner, Claire learned Emily had attempted to reach Tony around her birthday. Emily didn’t know what else to do. She had no way to reach Claire, and she’d seen pictures of the two of them together in magazines. Apparently, it wasn’t easy to get calls or e-mails through to *Anthony Rawlings*. Just recently, an e-mail finally reached him, and he called. It was during that telephone conversation, about a week ago, that Anthony invited them to New York City for dinner.

Claire apologized for her inconsiderate behavior. She should have stayed in touch better. Life had been a whirlwind since she started working with Tony. The important thing was that they were together now. Claire asked her family if they were driving home to Troy or staying in the city. John said they decided to spend some time in the city. After all, it was a three hour drive home.

Tony then surprised Claire again. “Well, Emily, Claire has a reservation tomorrow at a bridal boutique in Manhattan. I’m sure she’d love to have you join her to look at wedding dresses.”

Trying not to stare at Tony, Claire looked to Emily. “Yes, I’d love to have you join me, if the two of you don’t have plans.”

Emily looked at John. “Of course, I’d like to help you.”

“Emily” Claire proposed. “I would also like you to be my matron-of-honor. Would you please stand with me at our wedding?”

"You want me? Of course, I will." Emily sounded cautiously enthusiastic.
"But, did you say the wedding will be the eighteenth of December?"

"Yes, it will. That's all the more reason to find some dresses soon." Claire smiled at her sister. "Hopefully they'll have some bright, pink, puffy bridesmaid's dresses." Emily laughed.

From her peripheral vision Claire saw Tony's fleeting expression of disbelief. She turned to her fiancée and smiled. "Tony, it's a long-standing joke. Emily made me wear a green dress at her wedding. Since pink is my favorite color, I've long threatened to have her wear the puffiest, bubblegum pink dress I could find when I married."

He exhaled and smiled, obviously relieved she wasn't serious.

Once they finished eating, Tony invited John to the living room for the 4:00 PM football game. He asked the ladies if they'd like to join them, but Emily said she would rather catch up with her sister. Tony kissed Claire before leaving the room. It appeared very sweet, but Claire saw the warning in his eyes.

Jan poured the ladies coffee and cleared the table. Claire and Emily sat at the table, drank coffee, and tried to catch up. Once they were alone, Claire knew the conversation would be more difficult to dodge.

Emily was full of questions. How was her little sister, a meteorologist in Atlanta, suddenly engaged to one of the wealthiest men in the country? How did they meet? Where has she been living? Why hasn't she been in contact? Why is she so thin? Why is her hair blonde? Did she really like living this way, being waited on and having house staff do everything? She always liked cooking. Now she says she hasn't cooked, why? What is Anthony like? Why were they marrying so fast? Is she pregnant? Isn't he much older than her? Did she love him?

Claire did her best to be evasive with some answers and more detailed with others. Above all, she told Emily she did love him. It didn't start that way. It was strictly a working relationship. Tony could be a wonderful, kind, romantic, and gentle man. She also told Emily that Tony was very private and begged her to not repeat anything about their relationship to the media or anyone else. Claire didn't understand at first how tenacious the media could be, but the longer she'd been with Tony, the more apparent it had become.

Claire asked again, "Please, Emily, not for Tony, but for me, please don't share private information with anyone else."

Emily said she understood. She was very happy to hear Claire sound so happy and excited about Anthony and their wedding; however, what about her weight? She was too thin, and what about meteorology? Did she plan to ever work again in her chosen field?

Claire was tired of all the questions. Formulating answers made her head hurt. She wanted to hear about Emily and John.

Emily proceeded to tell her stories about John and the law firm and about her class and teaching. She also talked about some of their friends in Troy and Albany, people Claire knew when she lived with them. Emily even talked about some friends back in Indiana. Claire laughed as they remembered stories from childhood. The names were people Claire hadn't thought about in some time. Her mind wandered, thinking about the guest list for the wedding. She wondered if she had anyone to invite, other than Emily and John. When she thought about college friends it reminded her of Meredith. Claire knew Meredith hadn't intended for her sneak interview to produce such drastic consequences; nevertheless, it did. Perhaps college friends were better not invited.

The ladies joined the men when they thought the game was nearing its end; however, it was far from over. It was getting interesting. Both men seemed to be cheering for the Saints. Claire had wondered how John and Tony would get along. They were both incredibly strong willed. Tony was not accustomed to being anything less than the alpha male. Thankfully, John seemed to respect Tony, after all he was *Anthony Rawlings*.

Claire loved and respected John. Ever since the death of her father and her grandfather, John was the man of their family, an omnipresent influential part of her life. Now, seeing him next to Tony, she reconsidered her assessment. Tony dominated in structure, probably four inches taller, and in demeanor, more self-assured.

They both shouted at the screen as the Saints regained the lead with less than two minutes to go. Then, the room fell silent when it appeared the game would be tied with a field goal. The Dallas kicker missed the field goal—wide left, and the men simultaneously stood and cheered. Seeing these two men united in a common goal, Claire felt her chest swell with delight. After the game they sat in front of a warm fire and enjoyed the lovely view of the city and delicious dessert. As Claire sipped coffee, forgoing dessert, Emily told Tony all about the pies Claire used to bake. She explained what a great cook and baker Claire was. Tony seemed very interested in this new information.

They discussed the plans for the next day. Tony needed to work, and John graciously agreed to stay at the hotel and do some work also. Tony explained that Eric, their chauffeur, would bring Claire to the Vandersol's hotel and pick Emily up for the bridal boutique. Emily offered to take a taxi—it was no problem, but Claire and Tony insisted. It was settled. Claire would be at the *Hyatt Regency* at 9:00AM to pick her up. Their appointment was for 10:00 AM.

Tony then asked if he and Claire could join them for dinner Friday night since they planned to go back to Iowa Saturday morning. Claire now understood why Tony was so vague about their travel plans. John and Emily agreed.

Before they left, Emily hugged Claire like she didn't want to let go. "I've missed you so much. We're all we have left. Let's not stay out of touch again." Her green eyes shone with sincerity.

Claire's began to tear. She wanted to say so much, but knew she was supposed to be elusive. Before she could speak, Tony injected, "Emily, we have a wedding in three weeks. I bet you'll be tired of hearing from Claire after that!" He laughed.

They all laughed.

Tony offered John and Emily, Eric for the ride back to their hotel, and John politely declined. After Jan retrieved their coats, John and Emily left. When the door shut, Claire turned to Tony. "Thank you! Thank you so much. This was absolutely the best Thanksgiving ever. I can't believe you surprised me like this."

He smiled, but she saw the message in his eyes. "Your sister is extremely inquisitive."

Claire agreed, "I know, my head hurts from working so diligently on appropriate answers."

Kissing her cheek, Tony suggested, "My dear, you should take an aspirin and retire to our room. I'll be up shortly. I have some pressing matters in my office that I must attend."

"I will," she replied obediently; however, first, Claire went to the kitchen to thank Jan for her hard work. She told her that she really appreciated all Jan did to make their Thanksgiving special. Jan seemed genuinely touched and surprised by Claire's appreciation. While walking up the stairs, Claire thought about the estate and the top-notch surveillance. Her stomach twisted as she wondered if Tony's *pressing work* was to review video footage of her conversation with Emily in the dining room. Claire told herself if it was, it would be all right. She'd followed all his rules.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A sister shares childhood memories and grown-up dreams.

—Author unknown

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RIDAY MORNING, TONY left the apartment early, so Eric could drive Claire and Emily to the boutique. On her way to Emily's hotel, Claire contemplated her fiancé. By the time he came to bed the night before, she was sleeping. She faintly remembered him kissing her and turning out the lights. Maybe he hadn't been reviewing surveillance. Maybe he was doing actual work—on Thanksgiving night? No matter, she was relieved that when he came to bed, he wasn't upset. This morning, before leaving, he hugged her tight and told her to have fun with her sister choosing her wedding gown. Claire wanted to believe her life was as it appeared.

Traffic to the hotel was crazy. Until Claire saw the multitude of people, she'd forgotten all about *Black Friday*. The department stores were inundated with hoards of shoppers. Seeing the mayhem around her, made their destination of a private boutique all that more appealing.

The associates at the boutique would be totally devoted to them. None of this mad rush she witnessed from the windows of the limousine. Smiling faintly, she fondly remembered Black Friday shopping with her mom and Emily when she was young. To save twenty-five, fifty, or hundred-dollars, they would wake at 3:00 AM and stand in multiple lines. Although it sounded unpleasant, the memories were warm.

Eric approached the *Hyatt Regency* a few minutes before 9:00 AM. Emily wasn't waiting. "Miss, would you like me to go to the front desk and inquire of Mrs. Vandersol?"

Claire thought a moment. "No, we'll give her a few minutes, and then I'll go in." Emily hadn't read the *Anthony Rawlings's rules of punctuality* memo. Claire decided she deserved some slack. Five minutes after 9:00 AM, Emily emerged from the lobby. Eric quickly got out of the car and opened the door.

Emily entered the limousine and hugged Claire. She looked around at the leather seats and splendor.

“Seriously, this is how you get around New York City?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t feel ostentatious? Perhaps you haven’t heard, but our country is in the midst of an economic downturn.”

Eric pulled away from the curb, and they entered the magnitude of cars. It wasn’t the stop-and-go traffic causing Claire’s neck muscles to tighten, more the sudden onset of defensiveness. “Emily, please don’t judge me or Tony. I want you to be part of our wedding. Let’s have fun looking for dresses.”

Emily exhaled and sat back on the seat. “Claire, I want to. I really do.”

Claire could tell there was a *but* coming—

Emily continued, “But, John and I sat up for hours discussing you and Anthony.”

Sitting straighter, Claire asked, “What did the two of you decide?”

“We decided we love you. We’re so happy Anthony invited us to get to see you, but there is one of our concerns.” Claire raised her eyebrows. Emily inquired, “Why did Anthony need to invite us? Why couldn’t you?”

Claire’s head almost touched the ceiling, she sat so straight. Looking Emily directly in the eye, she replied, “Emily, that’s ridiculous. I could. I told you things have just been busy. With his schedule, we’re all over the place, as I’m sure you’ve read about in the media. I didn’t even know until last week Tony was needed in New York.” Then to clarify, she added, “*He* didn’t know until last week. He has a lot on his plate.”

“Uh... hmm, please know we’re just concerned. It seems like you’re a different person.” The conversation paused and Emily continued, “That isn’t necessarily bad, but it makes us uncomfortable.” Claire was still Emily’s little sister; however, she was now polished and refined. The stylish, elegant, and worldly woman commuting in limousines didn’t seem like the woman of months before. Emily continued to explain her concern, “I’ve tried to learn about *Anthony Rawlings*. Everything I found about him on *Google* is business related. He has an impressive reputation as a businessman, but I can’t find anything about him personally.”

“Emily, he’s an impressive private man, too. I must emphasize *private*. He asked me to join him in his private, personal life. I want you and John there. You must respect the importance of his confidentiality.”

They sat in standstill traffic. “Okay, we can do that. We still worry about you. Don’t you get to have a life too?”

Claire felt her blood pressure rise. She needed to defend the life she’d despised for months. It was time to utilize the compartmentalization. Bring out the *good* stuff. “Just because I haven’t contacted you, doesn’t mean I don’t have a life. I do. I have a very full and rewarding life. I live in a

beautiful home. We attend a number of events and functions. I've met wonderful friends in the Quad Cities area." She surveyed Emily's reaction. "I'm not doing meteorology, currently. But I'm working with Tony. As I said, he's a very busy man, with a busy schedule." She didn't need to offer more explanation.

The car moved again. Emily stared incredulously. "Are you living with Anthony? How long have you been living with him?"

Claire exhaled; as much as it killed her, she knew she couldn't spend her day like this. It was too much work, and although it was early, her head pounded. "Okay, Emily. I'm sorry this didn't work." Claire pushed the button and opened the window to the front of the car. "Eric, we have a change of plans. You may drop me off at the boutique, but Mrs. Vandersol will be going back to the *Hyatt*."

Emily stared at Claire in disbelief.

Eric answered, "Yes, miss."

Claire shut the window, sat back against the seat, and didn't speak or look at Emily. She should be sad, but truly she was mad. Claire realized she'd behaved like Tony. Perhaps she was being too cautious about his rules, but she knew too well behaviors had consequences. Given the choice, she'd choose to err on the side of Tony.

"Claire, I'm sorry. You're obviously a strong independent woman. I think of you as my kid sister, someone who needs us to look out for her. Anthony Rawlings is lucky to have you in his life. I still don't understand how it all happened, and I don't care how wonderful *he* is. He's the fortunate one in this relationship. I love you and want to be a part of your wedding. If this is what you want, we'll support you 100 percent."

Claire was too emotional to be completely like Tony. Overwhelmed with a sense of relief, she reached over, hugged Emily, and smiled. "Good! Let's put this behind us and have fun looking at dresses!" Pushing the button again, she said, "Eric, we're both going to the bridal boutique." She closed the window.

"One more thing though." Concern showed in Emily's green eyes. Claire exhaled; she didn't want to hear *one more thing*. "John is planning to speak to you tonight about your prenuptial agreement."

"What? I don't know anything about that. He should talk to Tony." Claire thought about that scenario. "On second thought, *no*. Tell him not to worry about it. I totally trust Tony, and I honestly could care less about his money. It's really not an issue. Just tell John to forget it."

Emily said, "I will, but I can't make any promises. John's an attorney, and he thinks of you as his kid sister. He only wants what's best for you."

The entrance to the boutique was a grand ten foot high door surrounded by limestone. Above the door was a street number, but no visible store name. There were no gowns in the window or advertisements evident. It was a

completely different experience from when they'd shopped for Emily's dress. Claire knew from past boutique shopping to enter the boutique you needed to ring the bell; however, Eric had called ahead and as he parked the car at the curb and opened the door for Claire and Emily, the door of the boutique opened.

A woman in her fifties or sixties dressed in posh business attire rushed out to welcome Ms. Nichols to their *modest boutique*. She introduced herself, Sharon Springhill. As she ushered the women into the shop, she gushed, "Ms. Nichols, we're so happy to receive Mr. Rawlings's call, yesterday. Since that moment we have worked diligently to create a collection especially for you. We truly hope that you, the future Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, will find the dress of your dreams today."

Claire did her best to play the person she'd become. Looking at Emily and sensing her sister's uneasiness, Claire decided this was an opportunity to educate her. "Ms. Springhill, I'm very excited to be here today. Mr. Rawlings told me the wonderful reputation of your boutique. I appreciate you taking the time to personally assist me on this holiday weekend."

Ms. Springhill thanked Claire for the kind words. (*Emily witnessed Claire's ease with the situation.*)

"Now, Ms. Springhill, this is my sister, Mrs. Vandersol. She will be my matron-of-honor. Perhaps Mr. Rawlings informed you that our wedding will be on December 18. I'm hopeful you'll not only be able to assist me with my dress, but also one for my sister." (*Emily would experience the treatment Claire endured.*)

Emily was immediately met with her own entourage of associates. Claire smiled at her sister as their eyes met, and Emily shook her head. Mrs. Springfield offered the women coffee, water, tea, and champagne. Next, they were escorted to seats in front of an open area that reminded Claire of a dance floor in a hotel reception hall.

Ms. Springhill explained that she put together a collection especially for Mrs. Rawlings. It included many of the top wedding gown designers: *Vera Wang, Oscar de la Renta, Manuel Mota, Monique Lhuillier, Maggie Sultero, Winnie Couture, and Mieko*, as well as others. "Please sit back and relax while models display the most extravagant and stunning wedding gowns you've ever seen. Feel free to make any requests. If you choose, you may see any gowns again, and please touch the magnificent fabrics." Her enthusiasm flowed through her words, "Ms. Nichols, once you narrow the selection, you may try on those gowns. We'll then take your measurements so that the gown of your dreams will be tailored specifically for you. Also, if you desire a certain gown but would like something changed, the designer can be contacted and every effort will be made to accommodate your desire."

Mrs. Springhill continued, "After the wedding gowns, we'll gladly repeat

the process for Mrs. Vandersol. Is there anything we can get you to make you ladies more comfortable?”

“No, Mrs. Springhill. We’re very excited to see the gowns.”

The decision proved incredibly difficult. Most of the gowns were exquisite. Actually, some were a little strange, Claire and Emily exchanged glances; however, most were elegant. There were glamorous gowns with bold contrasts in volume, rich fabrics such as lace, organza, or heron, and the finest accessories. Some were covered with drapes bound with precious-stone details, natural folds, pleats, ruffles, or tulle.

There were fashionable gowns with very thin and light materials in fluid, sheer, and mermaid-cut styles. These were made with soft fabrics like chiffon, pleated chiffon, or morbid tulle. They accentuated curves, had impeccable details such as asymmetrical necklines, floral appliqué, feathers, or rich gemstone embroideries.

The *Oscar de la Renta* and *Monique Lhuillier* gowns were created in an attempt to recreate a world of dreams and pure fantasy. These wedding dresses had flattering strapless necklines, meticulously enhancing the waist, and skirts with spectacular volume. They included stunning A-line and mermaid styles, lined with thousands of feathers, cascading ruffles, and magical applications. Claire thought they would make Cinderella or Belle proud.

The sisters watched models for two hours, and Claire felt overwhelmed. She created a short list of over ten dresses. Ms. Springhill suggested Ms. Nichols and Mrs. Vandersol enjoy a light lunch while they view the ten dresses again.

While dining on chicken salad on a bed of lettuce with a side of fruit and iced tea, Claire narrowed the race to four gowns which varied significantly in style and were created by top designers. Before Claire would try on the four dresses, they needed to see the matron-of-honor dresses. The dresses they viewed were mostly black or silver, but Ms. Springhill promised any color that Claire desired.

Claire smiled and turned to Emily. “That’s wonderful! We’ll be able to get pink!” Ms. Springhill didn’t know she was teasing. The two sisters snickered.

They narrowed it to a satin *Oscar de la Renta* gown with a tighter skirt, a *Valentino* gown with a lace overlay, and a *Monique Lhuillier* gown that would be perfect with Claire’s second choice. They realized Claire must choose her wedding gown first and then the matron-of-honor’s dress would be chosen to complement.

At 2:30 PM they began trying on gowns. When Claire looked at her watch, she had a sickening feeling the process was taking too long. She worried Tony would wonder where they were, or perhaps think they went somewhere else. Hoping to avoid suspicion, Claire decided to check in with

Eric and let *him* know it would be a while before they needed to be picked up. She used the shop's telephone to call. Emily offered her phone, since Claire left hers at the apartment, but Claire decided the shop's phone would be better. The boutique's number would appear on Eric's caller ID. She worried if she called Eric on Emily's phone her location maybe questioned. And if she used Emily's phone, Tony might assume she used it for other calls. It bothered her that every move needed to be scrutinized for possible misinterpretations. She told herself perhaps they didn't, but better safe than sorry.

"Hello, Eric, this is Claire."

"Yes, Ms. Claire, are you ready to be picked up?"

"No, that's why I'm calling. This has been a very difficult process. I assume we'll be here another hour or perhaps two. I'll call you when we're done."

"Yes, Ms. Claire. I will be there when you're ready."

Emily could overhear her every word. Claire wanted to ask Eric to call Tony, to let him know they were still at the boutique; however, she worried it might raise Emily's suspicions. So instead, she said, "Thank you, Eric."

Claire found herself in an uncomfortable situation regarding the measuring for her gown. She had so many things to think about, the lack of undergarments slipped her mind. Claire asked Ms. Springhill what undergarments were usually worn with these dresses and told her she would like to purchase some now so the dress would fit as close as possible to how it would on her wedding day. Apparently, this wasn't an unusual request. Ms. Springhill brought her a strapless body-shaper. Once that was on, Claire allowed the attendants to take her measurements. The entire conversation went unnoticed by Emily. She was occupied with attendants measuring and catering to *her* every need.

Claire tried on each gown, entered a large mirrored room, and stood on a platform. She could see herself from all directions. More than anything Claire wanted Tony's opinion. He once said Catherine knew what he liked. Claire wished Catherine was there now, but she wasn't. Instead, Claire had Emily, who repeatedly told her how beautiful she looked in each dress, which wasn't helping. Claire told herself repeatedly, my wedding will happen in three weeks—I need to make a decision.

The service and choices were fantastic. Spending time with her sister was wonderful. The stress; however, caused her head to ache.

Claire narrowed the list to two: the chiffon *Oscar de la Renta* gown—and the *Vera Wang* gown. Perhaps it was the issue of a December wedding in the Midwest; however the *Vera Wang* gown had a beautiful lace overlay that provide long lace sleeves as well as a long delicate train. Sleeves for a winter wedding in Iowa appealed to Claire.

Ms. Springfield knew Claire's measurements and promised she could

produce either gown in time. Nevertheless, with such an accelerated timetable, she ever so politely emphasized the importance of a quick decision and informed Claire that she'd need to return for additional fittings. Claire replied that would be fine, but secretly wondered if Tony had anticipated that.

Next, they concentrated on Emily's dress. Claire decided she really liked the *Valentino* dress with the lace overlay. It would complement either bridal gown. The next hurdle was color. There was a sudden realization that color had multiple implications: the decorations, the flowers, and the invitations usually all contained the same color scheme. Claire took color swatches and promised Ms. Springhill the color decision by Monday. Claire felt the impending tears. She had so many things to consider.

At almost 4:00 PM, Eric arrived to retrieve them from the boutique. Claire was exhausted and overwhelmed. She hadn't spent that much time out and away from *home* since her *accident*. Her head pounded violently to the point of nausea, and she wanted a nap. True to her new persona, Claire didn't show Emily or anyone the way she felt.

Emily tried to pretend she didn't notice as Claire tipped the staff at the boutique. After models, the tailor's assistants, and of course Ms. Springfield, the total was over a thousand dollars. This didn't include the cost of a dress. Once in the car Emily genuinely expressed her elation at their shopping experience. "Claire, that was amazing! I've never been treated like that before." Emily seized Claire's hand. "Can you imagine if some of those girls from high school could see you now?"

Claire feigned a smile. Things like that no longer seemed important. "It really isn't that big of deal."

"Oh, my God, Claire. You just tipped half my house payment!"

"Really, Emily, please, it isn't that important." Emily's reaction made her uncomfortable.

"You know, Claire, the only people who say money isn't important are people who have it." She then asked Claire about her dress. "I want to wear the dress you like, but I'll be honest, with flying to Iowa, staying there for I don't know how long, and other expenses, I don't know if we can afford a dress from there. I noticed there were no price tags. That's never a good sign."

The pounding in Claire's head demanded her attention; she wasn't thinking as she answered. Looking into the car's refrigerator for something to drink and eat, Claire casually replied, "Emily, I don't want you to worry about it. Tony will pay for the dresses. I can talk to him about flying you to Iowa and a place to stay too."

She didn't mean to, but she'd offended Emily. "Thank you, Claire, but my husband and I can afford to pay for ourselves."

"Oh, please, Emily, I'm not trying to upset you. I know you can, but we're springing this on you without warning. You can do whatever you want

regarding the flight and stay, but please let Tony take care of the dress. He said he wants me to have my dream wedding. So please let him take care of the dress.” Then she added with her smiling mask secured. “And, as I remember, you and John paid for my beautiful green dress some years ago.”

Emily grinned. “You’re right, we did. Of course, it was about a hundred and fifty dollars. You *tipped* almost ten times that today.” She exhaled. “I’m just not used to this new Claire. Give me a little time.”

Claire handed Emily a bottle of water and offered her some blueberries as she silently prayed: please, let some food and water help my head. The water tasted cool and refreshing. Her mind drifted to coffee. She fantasized about the amazing fragrance and knew immediately it would make her feel better. She decided she would ask Jan for some coffee when she got back to the apartment.

The traffic flowed much better than it had early in the morning. Before they reached the *Hyatt*, Emily received a call from John. He asked Emily when she’d be back. She told him they were close, and it had been a long day. John reminded her they were supposed to have dinner with Claire and Anthony, and asked if she knew any of the details? Emily said she didn’t, but Claire promised to call them as soon as she got back to the apartment.

Emily gave Claire her cell number as she got out of the limousine and told Claire it was a great day, and she looked forward to their dinner tonight. They hugged and Emily went into the hotel. As Eric pulled away, Claire laid her head against the seat and tears leaked from her eyes as they closed. Her head throbbed, and she felt utterly spent. Somewhere between the *Hyatt* and Tony’s apartment building Claire fell into a sound sleep.

“Ms. Claire, we have reached Mr. Rawlings’ apartment.” She heard Eric’s voice. Claire opened her eyes but was immediately disoriented. Trying to familiarize herself with her surroundings, she soon realized she was in the limousine, outside Tony’s apartment building. The cool November air from the open door helped Claire focus. She entered the building and went up to the seventy-sixth floor. As the elevator opened, Claire’s face suddenly flushed and her heart rate increased. Standing at the open door to his apartment was Tony.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I think I've discovered the secret of life—you just hang around until you get used to it.

—Charles M. Schulz

SEEING YOUR FIANCÉ across the room should make your heart race. Seeing her fiancé standing in the doorway did that to Claire; however, instead of accelerated by love, she presumed it was anxiety. Upon entering the building, her watch read 5:30 PM. Her thoughts churned slowly through her aching head. Obviously, he finished his work. She wanted to get home first. She had Eric. How did he get home?

“Good evening, Claire.” His expression indifferent, she couldn’t read him.

Her mask was secure. The nap had helped her headache. No longer did it pound; now it only gently ached. “Good evening, Tony.” She reached up to kiss him, and he bent down to accommodate her.

“You look beat. Did you find a gown?” He led her into the apartment. Claire exhaled and tried to explain the complexity of the day. The boutique was wonderful, too wonderful, with a selection that was too large. He helped her with her coat, gave it to Jan, and escorted her up the stairs to the bedroom. Halfway up the stairs, Claire remembered coffee.

“Oh, just a minute,” she said to Tony. Then she called down the stairs, “Jan?” Claire stopped and went back down the stairs. Again she called, “Jan?”

The housekeeper returned to the foyer. “Yes, Ms. Claire?”

“I need something from my coat pocket, please.” Still holding her coat, Jan handed it back. Claire removed a small piece of paper from one of the pockets. “Thank you, could you please bring coffee upstairs?”

Jan replied affirmatively and disappeared with Claire’s coat.

Claire proceeded up the stairs to Tony where he waited patiently, silently watching her. She handed him the piece of paper. He took it, unfolded it, and

asked, "What's this?"

"It's Emily's cell number. She gave it to me so I could call her with details of tonight's plans." Tony's expression didn't change as he wadded the paper, put it in the pocket of his slacks, and continued to escort Claire up the stairs. She wasn't sure what his actions meant; however, his lack of response probably meant the end of *that* conversation. "I'm sorry I'm so late. I had no idea this would be such a long day."

Tony said that it was all worth it if she found her wedding gown. She told him she had it narrowed to two. The boutique had her measurements, and all they needed was a call to let them know her decision; however, Ms. Springhill emphasized she must do it soon. Claire told Tony she would appreciate his opinion. He told her he trusted her judgment.

She sat on the edge of the bed, exhaled, and lay back. The coolness of the room combined with the firmness of the bed helped Claire relax. She closed her eyes and hoped the coffee would help her head.

"Eric told me you fell asleep after Emily left the car." He sat next to her on the bed, stroking her hair.

Claire breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't seem upset. The tension in her head began to subside. "I'm sorry if that was wrong, but my head hurt so badly, I could hardly focus on Emily."

"Of course, it's fine. You're alone and exhausted. I told you, I don't want you overdoing. You aren't a hundred percent yet." He kissed her head. "I spoke to your brother-in-law and moved our reservations back to 8:00 PM. Maybe you should continue your nap for a little while. We don't need to leave until 7:30 PM."

Claire thought about it. Dinner wasn't for another two hours, but she decided a shower would be more beneficial; she'd already had a nap. They talked as Jan knocked on their door and entered with a coffee carafe, cream, and two mugs. She sat them on a table near the windows and inquired if they needed anything else. Learning they didn't, Jan left.

The open drapes exposed a spectacular view filled with darkness, even though it wasn't even 6:00 PM. The New York City lights glittered below, evidence of inhabitants racing from place to place. Claire held her mug of coffee, inhaled the rich aroma, and fell silent, mesmerized by the sight. This time of year, with shorter dreary days, had always been a difficult time for her. She loved sunshine; it made her joyful. This year she'd missed most of the autumn sun and now the bleakness of winter was rapidly descending.

To her, dark was contrary to light. Therefore, instead of joy, it brought sorrow. That's why she liked Atlanta. Standing at the window, looking at a magnificent skyline, and sipping her warm mug of coffee, Claire thought about being sad. Immediately, she began to chastise herself. She should be happy about her wedding and her reunion with Emily; however, what she

really wanted was to be back in Iowa. She didn't want the pressure of choosing a dress and dealing with Emily's constant questions. She no longer yearned for the warmth of Atlanta, but she longed for the warmth of her fireplace and lack of pretense.

In the reflection of the tall window, Claire saw Tony approaching. He stood close behind her and put his arms around her waist; she rested her head against his sturdy chest. Tony's voice sounded soft and affectionate. "What are you thinking about? You seem far away."

"I don't want to say. You'll think I'm ungrateful." She put her mug down on the table and turned to face him. Tony lifted her eyes to his. "I appreciate honesty above all." He wasn't being authoritative, only candid. Looking into her tired eyes he lightly kissed her lips. "And let me decide what I think."

She continued to hold his gaze. The brown of his eyes that matched the color of her coffee, lightened by cream, gave her strength to be honest. "I want to go home." His expression changed slightly. She knew he was contemplating her definition of *home*. "Tony, I want to go back to your home. I want to be back in Iowa."

He smiled and hugged her. "Why would that make you ungrateful?"

"I loved your surprise. Seeing Emily and John has been great, but things have changed. Emily asks so many questions and seems so dismayed by my life. It feels as though we're no longer connected. She said I've changed. I don't know. I just know I'd rather be home."

Tony had released her chin, and Claire's face rested buried in his chest. The thumping of his heart filled her with security. As she closed her eyes and listened to the steady beat, she couldn't see his face or his satisfied smile.

She continued, "If we could, I'd cancel our dinner plans for tonight."

He lifted her chin again and said, "You know that isn't an option. We've made a commitment and we'll honor it, but I'm happy to know you want to be home with me, to *our* home. We'll be there tomorrow."

Claire nodded her head and said that yes, she knew. After a few moments, she picked up her mug of coffee and went to the bathroom for a shower.

Once there, she noticed the large garden tub. It wasn't as though she hadn't seen it before. It had been there all along, but it looked very inviting. Starting the warm water she decided to find out where they are going. When she opened the door to ask, Tony was sitting on the bed with his back to her. He had her purse open, the contents strewn on the bed, searching for something—perhaps something Claire had that she shouldn't have had, maybe evidence of her being somewhere with Emily, instead of the bridal boutique. There was nothing. She'd followed his rules. Claire considered saying something, confronting him about privacy; instead, she quietly closed the door and thanked God she'd given him the paper with the telephone number.

Eric pulled up to the restaurant on the Upper East Side at approximately 7:45 PM. Claire was very pleased with Tony's plans for the evening. First, the quaint, casual seafood restaurant was away from the hustle and bustle of the busy streets, and second, it wasn't as elegant as their normal dining establishments. Claire also approved of Tony's choice of attire, they both wore jeans. When they left the bedroom, Claire told Tony again how much she liked him in jeans. He reminded her how much he liked her out of them. Their eyes sparkled.

Although their reservation had been moved to 8:00 PM, and although the *Hyatt* wasn't far, Emily and John weren't there yet. Since their table wasn't ready, Tony and Claire went to the bar to wait. Tony directed Claire to one unoccupied stool at the end of the bar. She sat while he stood beside her, ordered himself a designer beer and Claire a glass of Zinfandel.

Sitting at the bar reminded Claire of the *Red Wing*. Compartmentalize. Truly, she felt much better than she had earlier; perhaps it was the nap, the bath, the coffee, Tony's understanding regarding her long day, or just some time to relax away from questions. Whatever the cause, her spirit felt revived and ready for the evening. They chatted about the different bottles of liquor lining the bar. While Claire recalled some of her bartending knowledge, she talked about most of the liquors from the first-person. She commented on drinks she liked, ones she didn't, and why. Tony seemed amused that she'd tried so many. "After all..." he said. "...you've only been legally drinking for six years."

Claire smiled and repeated the word *legally*. They were chatting and laughing when John and Emily approached.

Proceeding with the customary round of hellos and handshakes, Emily and John ordered drinks, stood conversing about nothing in particular, and before long their table was ready. John, Emily, and Claire went to the table while Tony stayed back to pay the bar tab.

Once the hostess took them to their table, Claire excused herself to go to the ladies' room. As she exited the bathroom, which was located down a narrow hall, she was surprised to find John waiting for her. "Well, hi. Did you think I was lost?" Claire started to pass him, thinking they were going back to the table, when John reached for her arm and stopped her.

"Claire, I really need to talk to you without Anthony present."

Her stomach twisted. "No, John, you don't."

He spoke soft and fast. "Yes, I do. Tell me you haven't yet signed a prenuptial agreement."

"I haven't."

"Good, I want to review it first. Emily said you don't think it's necessary, and I should drop it, but I'm your brother. I've known you since you were a little girl. Let someone who has your best interests at heart make sure you're

represented.”

“Thank you, John. I believe Tony has my best interests at heart. I don’t care about his money, I trust him, and I—” Claire saw the change in John’s expression. *Oh God!* She knew by the increased twisting in her stomach Tony was behind her. When she turned, she looked directly at his chest. He was *right* behind her.

Continuing Claire’s sentence, Tony said, “And I believe this conversation would be better held in a private setting.” His voice exuded displeasure; however, they were standing in the hallway of a public restaurant. Claire knew that in this setting he wouldn’t be loud, rude, or aggressive.

She looked up to see his face and watched the brown disappear behind the expanding blackness. “Tony—” Claire started to speak, saw his warning expression, and immediately stopped.

Tony continued, “Shall we *all* go to our table? I believe our waitress would like to introduce herself. John, you and Emily are welcome to join us in our car. We’ll be glad to drive you back to your hotel following dinner. At that time, *if* you choose, you may continue your legal counsel.”

Claire prayed he would *not* choose to continue. She knew from experience, there were some things not worth pursuing.

John looked from Tony to Claire and back to Tony. Sounding strong and defiant, he replied, “That would be fine, Anthony. I appreciate the offer. We’ll be glad to join you.” He then lightened his tone. “Emily told me you have a very nice car.” They all walked toward the table.

“Thank you, it isn’t mine. I lease cars in the city. Too many accidents with all the traffic...” And the conversation continued benignly to the table and throughout dinner.

Claire knew Tony, and she knew he was angry. To the casual onlooker, he appeared fine. He excelled at the art of maintaining appearances. He chatted, listened, laughed, and watched. Every now and then, his and Claire’s eyes would connect. She wanted to tell him she was sorry. She hadn’t asked for the counsel, but of course, she maintained her mask and didn’t approach the subject. Emily didn’t know about the hallway conversation and innocently conversed.

By the end of dinner Emily and Claire decided Claire would wear the *Vera Wang* dress. She liked the lace sleeves, and they agreed it would be best for a winter wedding. They also decided on the dress for Emily. Tony had printed off all the contact information for the boutique, and Claire gave it to Emily. She explained that unfortunately Emily would need to return to the city one or two more times for fittings. Emily said it would be all right.

John asked what time in the morning their flight was back to Iowa. Claire looked at Tony. She didn’t want to say, “Oh, we can go anytime. It’s Tony’s jet.”

He answered, "We plan to leave early. This wedding is coming together very fast. Our wedding planner will be at the house tomorrow at 2:00 PM. Luckily, we gain an hour on our way back." Claire sighed. He was good. She also decided he either genuinely started to relax or he could fool her too; regardless, he appeared very accommodating.

After their appetizers, salads, and main entrée, they all had coffee. Surprisingly, after the uncomfortable hallway confrontation, the dinner went well. Earlier, back at the apartment, Claire had shared Emily's comments regarding the cost of the wedding with Tony. He hadn't said much other than to acknowledge her concerns, but apparently he'd developed a plan. "John and Emily, I want to thank you for joining us this Thanksgiving. It means so much to Claire. She's told me about the loss of your family. The two of you are important to her." Claire listened intently, as did the two of them. "I can be impulsive. I must admit, after so many years of bachelorhood, I'm delighted to have met the one woman I want to spend my life beside." He looked at Claire and smiled. She smiled in return. "That's why Claire agreed to such a fast wedding. That can be difficult on those people closest to us. You may have had plans for that weekend, and I doubt you were planning a trip to Iowa." He had everyone's attention. "Therefore, I would be honored if you'd allow me to take care of your travel plans to and from Iowa. I'm speaking for Claire, but I believe she'd like you to be there a few days before the ceremony. Our home isn't near hotels. Please know you're invited to stay with us. We have room." He sounded gallant and magnanimous.

Claire reached for his hand under the table and squeezed. He squeezed back and held her hand. She didn't know how John would respond, but she was exceedingly pleased with her fiancé. Tony added, "And while I have your attention, I want to give Claire her dream wedding. Please allow me to take care of any wedding apparel and accessories."

At first, Emily and John said nothing. Claire knew it was killing John. He was a successful attorney, but they had education loans they were still paying. They had a mortgage, car loans, probably credit cards. Tony had more money than he could spend in a lifetime. She prayed they would accept.

Finally, John spoke. "Anthony, thank you very much. It's difficult for me to accept your generosity."

Tony had one more ploy. "John, haven't I heard stories about Claire living with the two of you for a year after college?"

John said, "Yes."

"Perhaps you could justify this as an overdue rent payment?" Tony smiled. Claire wanted to cry; instead, she beamed at John and Emily. They had to see how wonderful Tony could be.

John and Emily exchanged glances. Finally, it was Emily who accepted. "Thank you. You have our numbers. Please let us know the details." The

conversation was done. As they all stood to leave, Claire thought about the bill; apparently, it was taken care of without anyone realizing, one less confrontation.

Since Tony had contacted Eric, he had the car waiting outside. Claire hoped the polite attitude of the dinner would continue into the car. The women got in first, followed by John, who sat by Emily, and Tony, who sat by Claire. As soon as Eric pulled away from the curb John began speaking. His voice was strong and direct, as if he were addressing a jury or judge. “Anthony, I apologize for ambushing Claire in the hallway, and Claire, I apologize for making you uncomfortable.” Emily completely unaware, looked at John with horror in her eyes. Claire exhaled and sat back, thinking only, oh God, he is going to pursue this. She deferred to Tony. “But I’ve known Claire since she was a small girl. I’ve done my best to look out for Emily and Claire, especially since the death of their parents. I love her like a sister.” He smiled at Claire, then looked back to Tony with all seriousness. “I’m an attorney, and I believe Claire deserves rightful representation regarding the legal ramifications of your marriage.”

Claire remained silent. Tony spoke, “John, I definitely appreciate the fact that Claire has someone else who cares about her well-being. I must emphasize, she will be *my* wife and *I* will look out for her. I can assure you, we have an entire team of attorneys who will represent her in any necessary legal circumstance.”

John continued, undeterred, “With all due respect, your legal team will look out for *your* best interests, as they should. Claire is obviously in love with you and trusts your decisions.”

“Are you implying you do not trust my decisions?”

“No, I’m not implying. I’m saying as Claire’s brother-in-law and attorney I should review the prenuptial agreement prior to her signature.”

Claire didn’t feel good about this discussion. Maybe she could help. “Thank you, John, for your concern. I do trust Tony—” She immediately knew she shouldn’t have spoken.

Tony continued, “Your concern is admirable, and your persistence is commendable. As Claire’s attorney, not her brother-in-law, I’ll inform you that we do *not* plan on having a prenuptial agreement. I want Claire to have half of everything. I don’t plan on divorcing her, leaving her, or her leaving me. I believe she should be my partner in every way with everything. As of December 18 she will have half of everything I possess.”

John sat in silence and stared at Tony. He obviously hadn’t expected that information. Finally, he spoke. “Have you consulted your team of legal counsel?”

“Excuse me? Are you asking as Claire’s attorney?”

“No, I’m asking as your future brother-in-law. I know Claire. I know she’s

a wonderful woman who's in love, but as an attorney, a man of your wealth should not enter a business deal without a contract, and you should not enter a marriage without a prenuptial agreement."

Tony smiled, amused. Claire knew, amusement did *not* necessarily imply a good thing. Maybe it was all a figment of her imagination. Perhaps she would wake and this would all have been a nightmare. Emily sat in awe, dumbfounded by the verbal debate transpiring before her.

Tony decided the conversation was over. "John, thank you, for your advice. Thank you, for your legal consultation. Your care and concern for Claire is duly noted and welcomed. I look forward to more lively debates with you in the future. May I make one suggestion?"

John said yes; however, his answer was inconsequential. The statement formed as a question was purely rhetorical. Tony would offer his suggestion either way.

"These conversations should and *will* take place in private."

John agreed.

They sat in silence for a while. Finally, Emily broke the uneasy stillness. "Claire, it's been so nice to see you. I'm going to miss you." She reached out for Claire's hand and squeezed. "I can't wait until we're together again for the wedding..." She turned to Tony. "...if we're still welcome?"

He smiled. Claire didn't need to see, to know his eyes didn't. "Of course, we look forward to your visit."

Once Eric reached their hotel, he opened the door, and Tony got out. Emily and John both hugged Claire on their way out and Emily whispered, "Please, call more."

Claire feigned a smile and nodded. She wasn't sure she could speak without emotion. Both John and Emily shook Tony's hand as they went into the hotel.

After Tony got back in the car and Eric shut the door, Tony laid his head back on the seat. Claire knew she should remain quiet; however, she wanted to tell him how pleased she was with all he'd said. She did trust his decisions, and she didn't care about the money. Nevertheless, one glance toward her fiancé reaffirmed her silence. Tony was obviously not happy.

As the car pulled away, Tony squeezed Claire's hand and spoke, his tone was neither warm nor playful. "I believe it's good you took a nap this afternoon."

Eric drove them to the apartment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Prolonged endurance tames the bold.

—Lord Byron

DURING THE EIGHT months Claire had lived on Tony's estate, she never saw visitors, business or personal. The house remained busy with staff and employees: people who clean, cook, and fulfill other responsibilities filled the house. The grounds often bustled with gardeners and maintenance workers, but there were never *guests*. That was why, as they approached the house, winding up the drive, it seemed strange to see multiple cars parked on the brickyard in front of the main steps.

On the plane and again in the car, Claire received the rules speech. It seemed incredibly redundant. She'd heard it hundreds of times—literally. She knew the words by heart: follow my rules, do as you're told, do not divulge personal information, actions have consequences, appearances are of vital importance, and public failure is not an option. Apparently, being Tony's fiancée didn't exempt her from the rules, it made them all that more critical.

Shelly, Tony's publicist, released the prepared statement to the press. It simply read:

Anthony Rawlings, entrepreneur and world-renowned businessman happily announces his engagement to Claire Nichols, originally from Indiana. The two plan a December wedding. Details are not available at this time.

The press release made the engagement public. Claire now directly

represented him. Changing her mind at this point would be unacceptable and a public failure. She didn't plan on changing her mind; however, if she needed a reason for changing her mind, last night would have been it. Apparently, Tony's newfound gentleness and affection evaporated during his discussion with John. Claire told herself that it was a momentary setback. The discussion upset Tony. John's behavior had consequences. Claire willingly accepted her brother-in-law's consequences in his stead. She knew how to compartmentalize, and even believed she was getting good at it. From experience, she believed with the morning, the new caring Tony would return. She was mostly right.

When they entered their home, Catherine met them at the door. Her smile beamed from ear to ear, and she hugged them both. Claire truly loved her. She was the heart of their home. Tony obviously respected her opinion, and she his. Catherine's approval pleased Claire. It was probably the one that mattered to her the most, other than Tony's.

"Ms. Claire, I'm so happy. I've known for a long time that you're exactly what Mr. Rawlings needed in his life." She beamed at Claire as Tony listened.

"Umm, am I what anyone needs?" His tone and face smiled. Catherine hugged him and told him that many people need him. Then, she informed him he had guests in his office.

Claire suddenly thought about her restrictions regarding his office. Why could others be in there without him, but she couldn't? Walking toward his home office, she debated. The answer was painfully obvious. Everyone else in the world had access to telephones, computers, and the Internet—except her.

The double doors to Tony's office stood ajar, and his conference table was cluttered with books resembling photo albums and an open laptop computer. Two women and a man were arranging the materials and speaking to one another. Claire and Tony stood silently, hand in hand in the doorway and observed.

Finally, one of the women looked up and acknowledged Tony. "Mr. Rawlings, hello. Let me introduce you to your wedding planner and consultant."

Tony stepped toward the attractive, tall, professional-looking brunette. She looked about the same age as Claire. As she stepped forward, Tony turned toward Claire. "Patricia, let me finally introduce you to my fiancée, Claire Nichols. Claire, this is my number one assistant, secretary, and right-hand man/woman, Patricia." His introduction revealed his admiration for her abilities.

They both extended their hands. Claire spoke first. “I’ve heard so many wonderful things about you. It’s very nice to finally meet you.”

Patricia’s greeting sounded less gregarious. “Hello, Ms. Nichols. I’ve heard about you.” Claire definitely detected animosity, but chose to wait and let the chips fall. Patricia continued with the introductions. “Brad Clark and Monica Thompson, may I introduce Mr. Anthony Rawlings and his fiancée, Claire Nichols. Mr. Rawlings, Brad is your wedding consultant, and Monica is your wedding planner. They come highly recommended and have some wonderful ideas to share.”

Claire and Tony shook their hands and told them how happy they were to meet them. Tony looked at his watch, 12:30 PM. They were due to arrive at 2:00 PM. In Tony’s book, they had made bonus points. Claire, on the other hand, had anticipated lunch. She was less pleased, but smiled and preceded with their meeting. Brad and Monica showed Tony and Claire to Tony’s conference table.

Brad and Monica began by explaining how honored they were to be chosen to assist with their wedding. Then they presented a very informative Power Point presentation with endless available options. They also displayed photos of their previous work: examples of decorations, cakes, receptions, etc. They asked questions, both of Tony and of Claire. What did they want their wedding to say? How many guests did they anticipate? Where on the estate would the wedding and reception be held? What would be the time of the ceremony? What colors did they want? What type of food? What type of music?

While the questions were tedious, Claire couldn’t help notice Patricia’s stares. She was excessively attentive to Tony. “Yes, Mr. Rawlings.” “I can get that for you, Mr. Rawlings.” “Let me take care of that, Mr. Rawlings.” For the first time since John’s consequences and the multiple rules discussions, Claire was happy to be the future Mrs. Anthony Rawlings. It even amused her that as an adult, the cattiness of another woman could readjust her attitude. Claire found herself holding Tony’s arm, looking at pictures of cakes, lights, tables, and flowers and saying all the right things. While he smiled affectionately and she radiated happiness, Patricia sat on the sidelines taking notes.

Tony then asked Claire to show Brad and Monica around the main level of *their* home so they could brainstorm. Brad and Monica promised they would get back to them on Monday with possibilities for the ceremony and reception. As Claire walked them from room to room, she saw the mansion from a new perspective, through their eyes. She saw it as an exquisite home with magnificent architecture. It hadn’t been that to her. It had been a prison, but things had changed. Last night and again today, Tony referred to it as *their* home. Claire smiled at the thought this is my home.

Tony and Claire promised to get a guest list together very soon. They,

with the help of Brad and Monica, decided that being a Christmas wedding red, green, and black would be the colors. The question still remained which of those colors would they chose for Emily's dress. There would be Christmas lights, lots of lights, starting from the gates and going up the drive to the house. The house would be decorated very chic Christmas. The number of guests would determine the setup of the wedding and reception. The music during the wedding would be provided by a string quartet and a harpist. Brad and Monica promised to put together some demo CDs and Tony and Claire could choose the music.

When they suggested that the reception could be on the grounds, perhaps in the backyard, Claire thought it sounded cold, but Brad promised a tent decorated and heated. He even had pictures of previous tent receptions. With the decorations, tables, and people, it didn't appear like a tent, only a reception hall. The next question was the cake. They must have looked at fifty different pictures of cakes. Regarding flavors, Tony said he liked traditional white. Claire went out on a limb and said she liked chocolate. She hoped for some taste testing. Monica smiled and explained they had many other options such as carrot, red velvet, caramel, chocolate raspberry, and more. Claire felt once again overwhelmed by too many choices.

The next debate involved the menu for the reception. Since Claire had only chosen two of her own meals in the last eight months, she asked Tony if she could take a break and get something to eat. She didn't feel well, possibly low blood sugar. He kissed her cheek and said she should rest. He'd take care of anything else. Patricia added, "I'll be here to help."

"I'm sure you will." Claire replied as she kissed Tony and went to the kitchen to find Catherine and some lunch. They were about done for today. Brad and Monica would return Monday late afternoon when Tony returned home from work. At that time, more definitive plans would be made and others finalized. It was fun talking possibilities without considering the financial ramifications. Tony was right; the wedding would be planned and accomplished by December 18. Money could make anything happen.

Their kitchen was more industrial than cozy. Claire had never eaten in there before, but with people everywhere, it seemed like a safe, isolated location. Sitting at a small table near the windows, Claire looked out over the backyard and garages. She was there eating a sandwich when Tony found her.

"What do you think about the plans?" His voice sounded light and brought her back to reality. She'd been letting her mind wander. It hadn't been any place in particular, just a happy place. She was thinking about lights, Christmas trees, her wedding dress, Tony in a tuxedo, and a warm feeling. She remembered the warmth of her visions while she was ill, and her current thoughts were giving her that same feeling. It was a nice change to have reality be her warm place.

Claire smiled as he approached. "I think they sound wonderful. I can't believe they aren't freaking out about the deadline."

"What did I tell you?"

She smiled. "We don't have enough time to discuss all the things you've told me."

"You seem happy." Grinning, he stole the other half of her sandwich. "I meant about what money could do to help our wedding proceed as you want." He took a bite of the sandwich.

"You said it would, and it obviously does. I'm still slightly in shock." Claire took a drink of water and caressed Tony's arm. Looking into his brown eyes, she said, "It's a good shock." He took her water and started to kiss her neck. Claire asked, "Do you realize you have taken my sandwich and now my water?"

Tony cooed, "I think maybe you have taken something of mine."

He was standing near her chair as she put her arms around his waist and looked up at his face. "I did? What did I take?"

As he bent down to kiss her, she stood to meet him halfway. He softly kissed her lips and her neck as his hands became tangled in her hair. "I believe it was my heart."

Claire's body forgot the demands of the previous night. Actually, it began to make demands of its own as he tugged her hair with his fingers, causing her face to look upward. For a brief moment she considered asking about Patricia; however, it was a fleeting thought. There was a more pressing issue at hand. Still, she inquired, "Is everyone still here?" as she pressed back.

"Brad and Monica left. They'll return Monday to give us more information. We can make more definite decisions then." She kissed his neck as he spoke. A low growl resonated from his throat, and his voice took on a gravely quality. "...and Patricia is collecting names for our guest list. She's still in my office. I told her I needed to check on you to make sure you were feeling all right." His chocolate eyes hid behind closed lids.

Claire couldn't resist. "I'm feeling very good. How do you think I'm feeling?" He murmured agreement as she spoke between kisses. "So explain" "why I can't be in your office alone" "and she can?"

He pulled her closer. "Because, I said so." His hands caressed the soft skin under her sweater.

"I hated that answer when it came from my parents. I don't think I like it from you either." She wasn't arguing or complaining. On the contrary, she was agreeing with everything.

"Okay, how about because you don't need to worry your pretty little head about anything in there? The telephones, Internet, computers... all you need to worry about is me."

"Oh, and I do! I worry about you constantly." She nuzzled his chin and

listened to his heart pound rapidly in his wide chest. “So you don’t worry about Patricia’s pretty head?”

His voice sounded far away. “Does she have a pretty head? I haven’t noticed.” He couldn’t have said anything that would have pleased Claire more at that moment. She suggested going to his room or her room, he mentioned the attributes of the kitchen floor, when Catherine made a loud coughing sound.

“Excuse me, Mr. Rawlings, Ms. Claire. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons are here to see you both.” Claire looked at Tony with desperation. “What happened to never having visitors?” She smiled and tried to straighten her hair and sweater. Tony suddenly turned away from Catherine, looked out the back window, breathed deeply, and tried to adjust his appearance. Claire decided she should address Catherine. Tony was having difficulty speaking. “Thank you, Catherine. Can you please tell them, Mr. Rawlings and I’ll be there in a few minutes?”

“Yes, miss, I’ll show them to the sitting room.”

Claire went to Tony and whispered in his ear. “Sorry.”

He turned to her, grinning, his voice adoring and playful. “You aren’t, yet. But give me some time.” There was a time when those words would have terrified her. Today wasn’t one of them. The wedding planning, being home, and the fanciful foreplay set a stage. The stage felt warm, like her visions.

“I look forward to that promise.” She leaned against a counter and waited for him to contain himself. She tried, but couldn’t remember one time in the past eight months when he’d been in this predicament. Trying to contain her grin, she found it amusing.

They walked hand in hand to the sitting room. When they reached the archway Brent and Courtney stood to greet them. Courtney ran to Claire and hugged her. Next to Catherine, it was the best response she received from anyone regarding their engagement. She really felt like she was being hugged by a friend. Claire couldn’t help feeling happy. It was a real happy, one that suddenly seemed to be recurring. She liked it. Courtney pulled Claire’s left hand to see her ring, and led her to one of the sofas. She wanted to hear all about New York, the proposal, and everything! Claire looked to Tony, but he and Brent were involved in a discussion which led them toward Tony’s office.

Claire curled up on the sofa with her arms wrapped around her knees and chatted with her friend. It wasn’t uncomfortable or difficult. She didn’t feel threatened by Courtney’s questions or the pressured to feign her answers. She didn’t feel the need to minimize Tony’s extravagant proposal. She felt warm and accepted. Catherine brought them coffee, and Courtney listened as Claire told her about New York City, from shopping for the perfect outfit to the cool crisp evening in Central Park, she retold the entire day. It all was so romantic! She wouldn’t repeat his proposal, but it was wonderful. She couldn’t believe

he really proposed.

Courtney could hardly contain her excitement. "We've been friends with Tony for a long time, and both Brent and I have noticed something different with Tony lately. The way he looks at you, we've never seen that look in his eyes before. It's wonderful to see him in love."

The simplicity of chatting, giggling, and sharing, delighted Claire. Sometime during their conversation she thought she heard voices: loud voices coming from the direction of Tony's office. Courtney heard them too. They shrugged and went on with their chat. Courtney told Claire she'd be willing to help her in any way. She would be glad to taste-test food or desserts, listen to music, tie bows for chairs, address invitations, whatever Claire needed. She was officially at her disposal.

The men returned to the sitting room. Their disposition wasn't as jovial as the ladies; however, they acted affable. Courtney finally asked, "Is everything all right?" Tony said it was and Brent agreed. The ladies were having too much fun to let the men change that. Courtney continued to ask about the wedding. Would it really be in three weeks? Did they like the coordinator and planner? When Tony wasn't around she wanted the scoop on Claire's dress. Then she told Tony about her offer to help Claire. She was so excited. They left about two hours after they arrived.

Claire started to go upstairs to her suite when she remembered Patricia. Had she left? Tony said she had when Brent arrived. Patricia took information home and would bring him a guest list to evaluate Monday at the office.

"Can we please eat in my suite?" Claire asked. "It's been a great day and I'm tired."

During dinner Tony told Claire he and Brent exchanged words during the afternoon. Brent was Tony's head legal counsel, as well as his best friend, Claire was surprised. "What happened?"

Tony explained, "Brent borrowed a page from your brother-in-law's advice book."

Claire sighed. "The prenuptial agreement again."

"Yes, Brent also insisted we have one."

"I don't presume to know anything about your belongings, but if everyone thinks we should have one, let's just do it."

She didn't realize the conversation had become intense, but before she could blink he grasped her shoulders and lifted her from her chair. With his proximity too close, his harsh words came in warm breaths against her cheeks. "I am sick and tired of everyone telling me what to do. I've made my decision. That's what I told Brent and what I'm telling you. There will *not* be a prenuptial agreement and do you know why?"

Claire met his gaze. "Tony, please. You said you wouldn't hurt me again." He released her arms and she fell back to her chair.

“And you promised to not give me cause.”

She thought about his question, she hadn’t answered. Not answering could be considered cause. “I don’t know why we shouldn’t have a prenuptial agreement other than you don’t want one.”

“That is part of it.” He paced. “The other part is...” He knelt by Claire, his face once again too close to hers, his eyes shining black, and stared right at her. She didn’t look away, as he continued, slow and malevolent, “...I know I won’t leave you, and I know you won’t leave me. Will you?”

She was faced with one of those junctures: be frightened by his tone, proximity, and allow his sudden unpredicted change in disposition to ruin a day that she truly enjoyed, or attempt to defuse the situation before it got out of hand. She chose the second. She answered his question with a voice which sounded both calm and composed. “I agreed to be *Mrs. Anthony Rawlings* just three days ago. It has been a whirlwind since then, and my wedding is in three weeks. We’re both overwhelmed. Tony, I would never think of leaving you.”

His eyes still flashed, blackness intensified. “Do you have any idea of the consequences if you did decide to leave me?”

With continued eye contact and composure, she replied, “I would rather think about the consequences of staying with you and learning what makes you happy.” She smiled. “And learning what you want of me, and when you want it.” His eyes lightened and flickered brown. “Perhaps you could give me some hints?”

He was calming. She watched the tension and fury leave his face. Continuing with the composed but now playful tone, she added, “As a matter of fact, I think you promised me something this afternoon in the kitchen.”

It worked. He mellowed. She didn’t make the first move, wanting him to believe he was in control. When he didn’t speak and stood, she thought perhaps he was leaving her suite and this conversation was done. Instead, he scooped her out of the chair and carried her to the bed.

He wasn’t his old self, and he wasn’t his new gentle self. He was somewhere in between, but closer to gentle than the night before. Claire felt satisfied. She’d done it. She mellowed him. Her response resulted in the consequence she hoped. She was determined, she’d figure him out. In the meantime, this was a little thunder, no storm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.

—Aristotle

T

HE NEXT TWO and a half weeks flew by in a flash.

Sometime during their first night home, Claire awoke and heard Tony's breathing in her bed. The drapes were open, and the moonlight illuminated her suite. She looked around and snuggled into the soft covers. She was in her suite in her home, not in New York. In three weeks, it would actually be half hers. The monetary value wasn't what enamored her. It was the fact that he wanted it to belong to her. She possessed memories she refused to revisit. She also possessed a promise of a future. As she cuddled under the fluffy down comforter next to her warm sleeping fiancé, she knew she would hold tight to that promise.

They met with Brad and Monica on the Monday following Thanksgiving. Claire knew they were definitely worth the expense, whatever that may be. Tony told Claire not to worry about it. Their ideas were amazing. The wedding would take place in the grand entry, with Claire descending the staircase. It would be decorated with lights and sheer tapestries. The reception would be in the backyard, in a large floored, heated tent accessible to guests from the sun porch. There would be many Christmas trees and millions of clear lights. There would be evergreens and red flowers. Emily would wear black and carry a red bouquet. There would be an open bar and hors d'oeuvres and then a full sit-down meal of multiple courses. The cake was chic and decorated with real flowers. The flavors would include white, chocolate, raspberry, and carrot. Claire was especially excited about the string quartet from the Quad City Symphony, the place of her and Tony's first night out.

Tony gave them the list of guests Patricia had compiled. He asked Claire about guests over and over. She repeated, she only cared about Emily and

John and Tony's close friends. She saw the difficulty Emily had with Claire's new lifestyle and feared her old friends wouldn't feel comfortable. She mentioned Meredith as an example of why her friends from before should not attend; Tony couldn't argue her logic. The guest list consisted of the few people who called Tony, Tony and 150 of his not so close business and political allies. People, he explained, who should be invited whom he liked, needed, or who needed him.

Brad and Monica had a draft of the wedding invitation:

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO THE PRIVATE: WEDDING CEREMONY OF:

*Ms. Claire Nichols and Mr. Anthony Rawlings.
The ceremony will take place at the Iowa City estate of*

MR. AND MRS. RAWLINGS: ON DECEMBER THE EIGHTEENTH TWO THOUSAND AND TEN,

*at precisely five thirty in the evening.
A dinner and dance reception will immediately follow at the estate.*

Patricia volunteered to receive and compile the RSVPs. It would all be handled at Tony's Iowa City office.

The string quartet would begin playing at 5:00 PM with the ceremony at 5:30 PM. There would be valet parking and a coat check since winter coats were predictable. The reception would include a live jazz band and dancing. There would not be a DJ, but there would be an emcee to make announcements and talk to the guests. Each guest, or couple, would receive a gift basket in appreciation of their attendance from Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings. The baskets would include a bottle of fine wine, two crystal wine glasses, some fine chocolates wrapped in red and green foil, and a note thanking them for their attendance.

When Brad asked Claire if her father would be giving her away, she told

him her father was deceased. He asked if she had anyone else to give her away or did she plan to walk down the stairs and aisle alone. The question prompted Claire to think of John. She didn't ask; she just looked at Tony.

Tony sighed and responded, "She'd like to have her brother-in-law give her away." Later Tony told Claire he liked the idea. Perhaps if John gave her away, he'd accept that she was his wife first and foremost. Tony, Brent, his best man, and John would all need matching tuxedos. Tony liked *Armani* and said he'd contact the men to have the tuxedos tailored. It didn't take Tony and Brent long to reach a mutual understanding regarding the prenuptial agreement. Tony agreed not to have one. Brent agreed to accept Tony's decision.

Once Tony and Claire approved Brad and Monica's designs and blueprints, the work began. First thing Tuesday morning, crews of workers descended upon the estate. There were trucks with cherry pickers putting lights in trees, and electricians connecting wires to ensure illumination. A construction crew worked in the backyard constructing the large tent, with more electricians for lighting and heating.

There were people in the house putting up decorations. Catherine was uneasy with the multitude of people. She made sure everyone knew she was in charge of the house and everyone answered to her.

Claire did her best to stay out of the way. Tony left each morning for work. He had a wedding in less than three weeks and the pesky challenge of a multibillion-dollar industry which needed his attention. He even needed to make some day trips to places as far away as Dallas, Los Angeles, and New England.

Claire also needed to make a few more trips to New York for dress fittings. Tony hadn't planned for that. It was Courtney's offer of help in any way that reduced his anxiety. He required Claire to be the one to call Courtney and inquire. Courtney sounded thrilled. They'd use Tony's jet, as long as he wasn't using it. If he needed to travel, there would be Rawlings Industries jets available. Eric would accompany them.

Tony also allowed Claire to contact Emily and John after the meeting with Brad and Monica. She let Emily know that her dress would be black. Emily sounded elated to learn it wasn't pink. Claire also asked John if he would do her the honor of walking her down the aisle and giving her away. He responded, "Claire, I'd be honored to walk you down the aisle, but know I'll never give you away."

Of course, Tony was listening as she spoke and rolled his black eyes. She didn't let her voice falter and thanked John for his constant devotion. Claire also reminded Emily to contact the boutique regarding her fittings and told them that Tony or his secretary, Patricia, would be contacting them about their travel plans as well as John's tuxedo.

Everything was falling into place.



ON THEIR FIRST trip to New York, Claire and Courtney left Iowa early on Wednesday morning, the December 8. With an hour time difference, it took three and a half hours to get to New York City. They left at 6:00 AM, which both ladies said was too early. They arrived before 10:00AM EST and went directly to the boutique. The dress was ready and in need of alterations. Claire's shoes were white Mary Jane-style beaded four-inch heels. They looked magnificent with the dress.

When Claire exited the dressing room, Courtney screamed. At first it shocked Claire, but then she started laughing. Courtney was a riot. Claire had so much fun with her. Courtney went on and on about how stunning, beautiful, and stylish Claire looked. She promised Tony would be spellbound from the moment he saw her.

After the boutique Courtney told Eric she and Claire were going to the *Astor Court* at the *St. Regis Hotel*, one of the top New York tea rooms, for lunch. She also told him he didn't need to worry about picking them up until after 3:00 PM. They had some shopping to do. Claire tried to argue. She didn't want to discuss her uneasiness, but she knew she'd only received permission for her gown fitting, not shopping. Courtney wouldn't discuss it. With no way to contact Tony, Claire felt increasingly ill.

Once they arrived at the tea room, Courtney casually mentioned, "Tony and I agreed when we spoke the other night, you need a new dress for the wedding rehearsal, and this afternoon would be a great time to find one." Claire relaxed. She wished he'd said something, but if he knew about it, she felt better.

Without saying all of that to Courtney, Claire smiled and said, "Well, all right then, let's have some lunch and find the best rehearsal dress in the city!" She'd shopped many times with her credit card, but shopping with a friend and her credit card was much better. Courtney helped her find a beautiful red *Valentino* cotton tweed dress with an asymmetrical bow. The V neck would show off her journey necklace, and of course she needed new shoes for her new dress. The *Salvatore Ferragamo* leather peep-toe pumps were a perfect complement. Not only did she look stunning, but the color was also perfect for the whole Christmas theme. Claire enjoyed shopping with someone who seemed comfortable with the higher-end purchases.

The rehearsal would be at Tony and Claire's house, but Courtney insisted the rehearsal dinner be at her and Brent's house. After all, it was the groom's parents' responsibility, and they were Tony's oldest and dearest friends. They

would be honored to host this special event. Claire thanked her for her kindness, and told her she would talk to Tony and get back to her as soon as possible.

When Claire returned home she was relieved to arrive before Tony. When 7:00PM came and he arrived for dinner, she found herself nervous about the additional shopping and luncheon. He didn't alleviate her unease when he asked about her day. How did she like her dress? Oh, she liked it very much, and Courtney liked it too. Did they come right back to Iowa after the boutique?

Claire hesitated and watched. Tony's expression didn't reveal any knowledge of her activities. She suddenly worried Courtney told her it was okay just to pacify her. Bravely, Claire put on her mask, bit her lip, and casually continued, "Oh no, we didn't. Courtney prearranged *with you...*" She added. "...to make a day of it."

While Claire answered Tony looked at his plate and then moved only his eyes slowly toward Claire. "Excuse me?"

Her heart raced. "Why didn't you tell me you arranged for us to shop for my rehearsal dress?"

He smiled. "Courtney drives a hard bargain. She's hard to resist."

The ladies scheduled their final visit to the boutique for Saturday, December 11, one week before the wedding. They planned to arrive at the boutique by 10:00 AM, have a final fitting, and return at 3:00 PM to try on the dress again with the final alterations and bring it home to Iowa. This trip also had surprises planned. On Friday evening as Tony and Claire ate, his iPhone rang. He answered and handed Claire the phone. It was unusual for her to receive a call, and especially unusual for her to talk on a telephone without it being on speaker. She answered tentatively, "Hello? This is Claire?"

"Hi, it's Cort."

Claire understood why Tony allowed her to talk; he trusted Courtney. Her voice comforted Claire. Courtney went on to let Claire know Sue, MaryAnn, and Bev were joining them for New York City tomorrow. Since they had time to spare between fittings, the women planned on taking Claire out for a bridal shower luncheon. Stunned and startled, Claire was thrilled. She hadn't even considered a shower, after all Tony could buy anything she needed, but it was part of the wedding tradition. She told Courtney it sounded wonderful and asked if she could hold a minute. Claire hit the mute button on Tony's phone and looked at him across the table meeting his intense gaze.

"She wants Bev, MaryAnn, and Sue to join us tomorrow." His eyebrows rose. "They want to take me to lunch for a bridal luncheon." She smiled.

"And do you want to do this?" He tormented her, making her request his permission. She knew Courtney was waiting.

"I do." He didn't speak. "I think it would be nice to have a shower." Still no response. "May we have the shower?" He smiled and nodded. She excitedly hit the *mute* button, and spoke in the phone, "Courtney, I think that sounds wonderful. Will we all meet at the airport or do they need to be picked up?" When she hung up she handed Tony back his phone and said, "Thank you! This is so wonderful. I never expected a shower!"

The plane ride was joyous with talk of the wedding and excitement over Claire's dress. The merriment continued when she exited the fitting room as all the ladies went crazy about the dress and how beautiful Claire looked. A few minute alternations needed to be completed. Eric hadn't been available to join them on their excursion, so they traveled by taxi. Claire liked that. Having all of them pile into one cab reminded her of her past life.

At noon they arrived at *King's Carriage House*, a wonderfully quaint English-style restaurant located in a brownstone on the Upper East Side. They had reservations and were taken to the second level where the walls were painted a deep rich red and large chandeliers glowed. The intimate tables were richly arranged—very girlie. It exuded the feeling of a shower and alone would have thrilled Claire, but the real surprise came in seeing Emily sitting at their table. She ran to hug her sister and asked how she knew. She explained Claire's good friend Courtney planned the entire thing. When Claire hugged Courtney, Courtney whispered in Claire's ear, "Tony gave me her number." Claire had a marvelous afternoon!

After the luncheon Emily accompanied them back to the boutique where they all saw her in her matron-of-honor's dress. Claire surprised her with a gift of a pair of black *Jimmy Choo* satin pumps with a jewel bow. They were perfect for the dress and the wedding; however, it was as Claire came out of the dressing room in the wedding gown one last time, completely altered and ready, that everyone, even Ms. Springhill, applauded. Claire was elated with the final result and felt so pretty.

At 5:00 PM, the ladies flew back to Iowa with Claire's gown, shoes, and undergarments, including slip and veil. Emily would arrive on Wednesday evening. It was a great afternoon, and they ended it with a bottle of champagne and some snacks on the plane ride home.

When Tony entered the suite that evening, she sprung up and encircled his neck with her arms. "You're awful!" And she kissed him passionately.

Surprised, he replied, "Okay, remind me to be awful more often. What did I do?"

"Only assist in giving me the best bridal luncheon ever, which included my sister!" He looked at her suspiciously. She quickly replied, "Oh, don't start. Courtney told me you were the one who gave her Emily's number. You, who acted like you didn't know anything about others joining us. You're really rotten, and I love you more every day." She kissed him again. He

grinned and returned the kiss.

When he asked to see her dress, she said, "No."

He expressed astonishment at her denial.

"You can't see it until next Saturday."

He conceded to see what she would wear under her dress. Claire grinded. They were alone in her suite. Seductively, she began to unbutton her blouse, one button at a time.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Love one another, but make not a bond of love, let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.

—Kahlil Gibran

EMILY ARRIVED ON the Wednesday evening before the wedding. Tony sent his private plane to pick her up in Albany; however, John was involved in a hearing and wouldn't be available until Friday. John apologized to Claire for the mix-up, but he couldn't change the trial date. Claire decided it was all right. She was happy to have Emily all to herself. Nevertheless, as she sat in the back of one of Tony's cars at the airport waiting for Emily's arrival, she worried about Emily's reaction to flying in a private plane.

The interior of the BMW was warm and permeated the smell of leather which was significantly better than the cold Iowa chill outside the windows. It had snowed the past three days, and everything was brilliantly covered with a beautiful clean white blanket. Once the door of the jet opened and stairs descended, Claire got out of the car. Though she wore jeans, a furry jacket, and snow boots to stay warm, she still felt the brisk air. Keeping her leather gloved hands deep in her pockets, she watched as the crew cleared the runway and the pavement as the snow continued to fall.

Emily descended the stairs and hugged Claire. "Hi, sis, are you by yourself?"

"Carlos drove me here, but Tony's still at work."

They got into the warm car while Carlos retrieved Emily's luggage and placed it in the trunk. Emily smiled and said, "You know, when you and Anthony offered to arrange our travel plans, I was kind of expecting a ticket on United or something." Claire didn't speak, she waited and Emily continued, "But, I'm not complaining; however, I am anxiously anticipating your home."

Claire sensed Emily's honest attempt at acceptance. Relieved, Claire excitedly spoke, "Good. I can't wait for you to see it. Right now, it's very busy and cluttered. There have been hundreds of workers preparing for the ceremony, but we can get away from all the people and have some time to ourselves. Have you eaten?" It was 7:30 PM in Iowa and the sky was very dark, yet the snow which continued to fall made it appear brighter.

"I had a few snacks on the plane."

"Good, we'll eat when we get home," Claire replied.

The estate looked stately on any given day. In the snow it appeared splendid. With the addition of a million white lights lining the drive, trees, and bushes around the residence it was grand. Claire was very pleased to have Emily visit. She never would have dreamed of asking Tony to allow her family to stay. Therefore, his invitation wasn't only unexpected, but remarkable. Of course, there was plenty of room. With Tony, room wasn't the issue. It was privacy.

During the past two weeks, privacy was at a premium. There were workers everywhere. When you turned a corner on the main level, you never knew who you might encounter. For that reason, Tony and Claire spent most of their time hidden away in her suite.

While the car wound up the driveway Emily speechlessly watched as the estate came into view. The house glowed from the decorations for Christmas and the grand event. Carlos stopped in front of the house where a grounds worker busily cleared the walk for Ms. Claire and her guest. When Emily reached for her door handle, Claire touched her hand causing Emily to hesitate. Moments later, Carlos got out and went around and opened their door and then opened the door to the house.

Once inside, Catherine greeted them. Claire happily introduced two of her favorite people. She hoped Emily could sense the exceptional relationship she had with Catherine. Catherine informed them, "Ladies your dinner can be ready at any time. Mr. Rawlings is delayed due to weather; however, he recommended that you eat without him."

Claire thanked Catherine and told her she would show Emily to her room, let her freshen up, and they would return in fifteen minutes.

Emily and John were given a room down the hall from Claire's suite. It was a room with one of the doors Claire was surprised to see many months ago. These bedrooms were rarely used by anyone and kept immaculate just in case they may be needed. It was a suite about half the size of Claire's, with a queen-sized bed, bedroom furniture, a sofa and chair, a small gas fireplace, attached bath, and walk-in closet. There were large windows looking out onto the backyard; however, all that was visible now was the top of a very large tent.

Claire showed Emily her room and told her Carlos would have her

luggage there soon. Then she showed Emily to her own suite, just a few doors away, in the same corridor. Emily tried to be polite, but she continually repeated *this is beautiful*. Once in Claire's suite, Emily asked, "Is this Anthony's room, too?"

"No. He has his own room on the first floor." Claire smiled. "But, he does visit." She sensed Emily's surprise. The fact she and Tony didn't share a bedroom had just earned Tony a few points in Emily's book.

As they finished eating their dinner in the formal dining room, Tony arrived home. He behaved as polite and gracious as possible: kissing Claire and hugging Emily. He told Emily how happy he was she arrived safely in spite of the weather. Luckily, the snow was scheduled to stop tomorrow and the forecast was clear for the weekend. Then he turned to Claire. "But, you know those weather reports: you can never trust those meteorologists." She playfully threw her napkin at him and he smiled. When he sat, Catherine brought him his dinner. The ladies sipped coffee while Tony ate.

After dinner Tony offered to take the lead on a house tour. Secretly, Claire was delighted. She'd been concerned about the magnitude of a tour. It was much easier to defer to Tony. As they walked from room to room and level to level, Emily told them how much she loved their home and jokingly asked if maps were available at the guest relations desk. Tony and Claire laughed, saying it wasn't that big. She'd know her way around in no time.

Tony added, "It did seem to take Claire a few weeks before she found her way around."

Understandably, his statement caught Claire by surprise; however, he didn't notice Claire's response. He was busy watching for Emily's reaction. Her obvious lack of understanding satisfied his unasked questions.

Her mask secure, Claire said, "Well, I finally learned the secret. Everything is connected to the main house, and if you need anything just ask."

Her response received a twinkling eyed grin from her fiancé.

Emily retired after the tour and promised to be more fun tomorrow. After a day of work, travel, and the magnitude of her surroundings, she was exhausted.

Claire hugged her sister. "Oh Emily, we're so happy you're here."

It wasn't long after Claire readied for bed that Tony joined her. Claire couldn't help but inquire, "Explain that comment, please."

Tony laughed. "My dear, I was just checking your reflexes."

"Well, you nearly caused whiplash."

Grinning he remarked, "Perhaps there are other reflexes we could

investigate?"



JOHN'S HEARING ADJOURNED at 12:00 PM on Friday. He offered to fly commercial, but the earliest he would make Iowa City would be after 10:00 PM. Tony graciously provided a Rawlings Industries jet which allowed him to arrive in Iowa City by 3:30 PM. Although, Emily prepared him for the house and its amenities, he repeatedly expressed his gratitude to Tony and Claire for the flight and told them their home was stunning.

Truly, it was a beehive of activity with people everywhere making last-minute adjustments and preparing for the event. There were even people in the kitchen beginning to prepare the food, and the tent had been transformed into a picturesque banquet hall.

Claire and Emily readied themselves for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. Tony had accepted Courtney's kind invitation and agreed the rehearsal dinner could be held at the Simmons'. The rehearsal was scheduled to begin at 6:30 PM, with dinner at 8:00 PM. It was late, but everyone needed to get to the Rawlings home after a long day of work. The intimate guest list for the rehearsal included the minister, musicians, Brad, Monica, Patricia and a guest, the Vandersols, the Simmons' and their children, the Millers, the Bronsons, Elijah Summer, and MaryAnn Combs. Of course, these guests would be at the wedding tomorrow, but this informal private gathering would allow them more relaxed friendly conversation than would be possible at the big event.

Everyone congregated in the grand hall by 6:15 PM. Obviously, this group of friends respected Tony's affection for punctuality. Since Tony wanted to make an entrance with his fiancée, Claire waited for him in her suite. When he arrived, he greeted her and said, "Ms. Nichols, you're stunning this evening." Just before entering the hall, he beamed and whispered, "Tomorrow at this time you'll be Mrs. Anthony Rawlings."

She kissed her fiancé and smiled. "I can't wait."

There was a brief discussion by the head of security about some issues for the wedding. In an attempt to limit pictures all cell phones, iPods, iPads, cameras, and any recording equipment: visual or audio, would be confiscated at the door and returned upon leaving the ceremony. The only recording of the wedding would be done by the hired photographer and cinematographer. Those photos would be reviewed by Shelly prior to release; however, as Tony and Claire's personal friends, the head of security asked everyone present to be observant. If they noticed any prohibited recording, please notify security personnel immediately. They would be everywhere. Claire felt like she was back stage at a rock concert.

The minister took a few minutes to discuss the important meaning of marriage and its significance. "Many people enter into marriage in this day and age without the understanding of eternity. When two individuals are joined in the sight of God, those two become one. They are one for eternity."

Claire turned to Tony. She was in awe. How did she end up in the grand foyer of Anthony Rawlings's estate, holding his hand, looking into his chocolate eyes, and listening to a minister talk about their marriage?

The minister continued, "After speaking with Anthony and Claire, I believe they are fully aware of the commitment which they are about to make, a commitment to God, to friends, to family, and to one another. So to you, the intimate group of friends who Anthony and Claire have chosen to share in their special day please join me in a prayer. Let us ask God to provide for Anthony and Claire, not in a monetary way. Let us pray that God will provide them with love, understanding, and patience. That He'll provide each of them with the qualities necessary to take what they begin tomorrow and continue it into eternity. Let us pray." Claire closed her eyes, Tony tenderly squeezed her hand, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

Brad and Monica then took control. They told Claire, John, and Emily to go upstairs. Tony, Brent, and the minister went to Tony's office. The string quartet began to play. Brad and Monica wore earphones and microphones and directed the participants. First, they instructed the men to leave the office and walk to the back of the grand hall. A raised platform surrounded by sleek Christmas trees and lights had been constructed in front of the large windows. The only decorations on the trees, besides the white lights, were deep red crystal globes. The windows behind the platform exposed snow covered trees with more lights. The quartet was positioned slightly off to one side of the platform and the harpist was on the other. Once the men were in place, Emily was directed to descend the stairs and make her way down the aisle to the platform. After she arrived at her destination, the quartet concluded and the harpist began the traditional wedding march. Although it was the rehearsal, Claire and Tony's friends rose to their feet and Brad motioned to Claire and John to descend the steps.

John offered Claire his arm, kissed her cheek, and began to take her down the stairs. Before they reached the first step he stopped, leaned near, and whispered, "Claire, we love you. We only want you to be happy. Tell me he's good to you, and that he makes you happy."

With tears in her eyes, she said, "John, he can be." She remembered her mask. "He does."

John tried to smile and patted her hand. They descended the stairs and made their way to the platform. After another song by the string quartet and a verse from the minister, the minister asked, "Who gives this woman to be wed?"

John spoke loud and clear. "With great love and respect, her sister and I agree to share this magnificent woman." He kissed Claire's cheek and gently lifted her hand from his arm and placed it in Tony's hand.

Shit, was the only word that came to Claire's mind. She looked up at Tony. He was looking at her, but his face didn't register John's words. Apparently, he had a mask too. Claire was certain if Tony were a cartoon character there would be smoke coming from his ears. She mouthed, *I'm sorry*. He squeezed her hand gently, and they both smiled. The minister continued speaking.

They all four rode together in the limousine to Courtney and Brent's house. Claire explained to Emily that in the late morning there would be a masseuse, manicure technician, cosmetologist, and hair stylist all coming to do miracles on them. Catherine and Courtney would be in Claire's suite to assist them both with their dresses.

Tony upheld appearances much more proficiently than John. He remained polite and friendly to both Emily and John and was loving and attentive to Claire. Once they reached the Simmons' house, Tony was the totally devoted bridegroom and the man of the hour. John was friendly, but quiet. His unhappiness made Claire uneasy, and she privately begged Emily to do something. "Don't let him ruin my special day."

Emily promised to try.

Courtney provided a wonderfully delicious Italian dinner with antipasto salad, bread and oil, red wine and pasta. The festive mood and atmosphere filled Claire with hope and joy. Tim and Sue were chatting with Tony, as Claire walked up and overheard them discuss Tim's role during Claire and Tony's honeymoon. At first, she stood politely by Tony, but when they paused, Claire tried to be sneaky. "Now, Tim, tell me again how long you'll need to be at the helm?"

Tony laughed and pulled her close. "Good try." Then addressing Tim, he continued, "You're one of the few privileged individuals to know where we'll be, in case of an emergency. Most people, including my beautiful new wife, do not know our destination. So, don't let her try to worm it out of you." He smiled. "...or you, Sue, if Tim has shared."

"Oh, you're so mean." Claire feigned a pout. "How will I know what to pack?"

"Another 'A' for effort. Catherine has taken care of it for you." Claire smiled at the Bronsons. They smiled and put their fingers to their lips. They wouldn't spoil Tony's surprise.

The dinner party began to wind down about 10:30 PM, at which time the gentlemen announced it was time to celebrate Tony's last night of freedom. They headed to the lower level for cognac, cigars, and some serious poker. Brent announced Tony should be prepared to lose more than his freedom.

He'd be losing some serious money during their tournament. "Ladies do not wait up."

It was MaryAnn who replied, "Don't worry about us. We're doing our own celebrating back at Claire's house. My driver's ready, and Catherine has martinis waiting at the indoor pool and hot tub."

Tony and Claire kissed good night and were told they couldn't see each other again until the ceremony. While getting their coats, Emily whispered to Claire, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. You really do have a life and wonderful friends." Claire hugged her sister.

The ladies all went back to the estate, put on bathing suits, and partied in the hot tub. Claire decided Courtney and MaryAnn were teenagers in adult bodies. Tony worried so much about appearances, yet watching these two reputable women dance and sing in their bathing suits, Claire believed a little *cutting loose* was acceptable. Just because she believed it, didn't mean she felt comfortable enough to do it. The reason her bachelorette party was at *her* house wasn't lost on her. She didn't want Tony watching her dance and sing inappropriately when he reviewed his surveillance. Claire enjoyed watching and sipped her drink.

Late into the night, the subject of sex came up. It was Emily who, after consuming a few too many martinis, asked Claire, "Are you really okay with marrying a man so much older? What if he can't keep up?"

Claire smiled bashfully. "I don't think that's a problem." She tried desperately to change the subject.

Emily slept that night in Claire's suite. John returned to the estate after staying at the Simmons' home with the men for the bachelor party activities and slept in their room. Claire and Emily wanted some *sister time*. It was like being little girls again. They giggled until early morning. At almost 11:00 AM, Catherine came into the suite and woke them, bringing lots of coffee and breakfast. After they each showered, the parade of pampering began.

The forecast was correct: the sky was a brilliant sapphire blue with reflective colorless snow covering everything. The grounds crew diligently worked to clear the drive and plenty of parking spaces. The temperature was cold, in the mid-twenties, yet the sun shone all day.

Claire didn't want to risk seeing Tony and chance *bad luck*. Therefore, she didn't leave her suite until it was her time to walk down the aisle. She and Emily received massages, manicures, and facials. While the beauticians worked tirelessly on their hair, Catherine brought them more food. Claire said, "I'm too excited to eat."

Catherine wouldn't listen. "Ms. Claire, I will not be responsible for you fainting during the ceremony. You must eat."

Emily smiled, happy that Claire had Catherine to take care of her.

By 4:30 PM Catherine, Courtney, and Emily began to help Claire get into

her dress. First, was body shaper, then, the long slip which provided the fullness necessary for the satin gown. The bodice was fitted and altered to perfection for Claire's slim, petite figure. The dress was strapless and went over the slip. The accessory which persuaded Claire to choose this dress was the intricate lace overlay which created transparent three-quarter-length sleeves and a long train. The lace of the veil complemented the overlay. The beautician created a sweeping hairstyle that made the perfect niche for the veil to attach.

The lace overlay created an off-the-shoulder look which truly didn't need jewelry; however, Emily had a string of pearls. "They are the pearls mom wore in her wedding and the ones I wore in mine."

Claire fought the tears knowing they were her something *old* and something *borrowed* from the wedding tradition. She also wore a *blue* garter and supposed her dress was *new*. After Claire dressed, the photographer entered her suite to take some special photos of her and her ladies.

Prior to the ceremony there was a knock at her door. Courtney went to the door. Claire could hear Courtney. "Tony, you're incredibly handsome but you cannot be here."

The first thought that ran through Claire's mind was *Tony knocked!* He'd never knocked on her door.

She heard his voice, every nerve in her body electrified with the realization that she would really be his wife. She heard his deep baritone voice. "I have a special gift for Claire, it's her something *new*. Please be sure to tell her the box is *blue* velvet on purpose." Courtney must have questioned Tony, because he explained, "She'll understand. I promise."

Claire smiled as she thought, I really do love him!

Somehow he knew she'd wear pearls. Perhaps he'd expected her grandmother's necklace; nonetheless, she opened the blue velvet box to beautiful dangling pearl earrings hanging from platinum ear clips covered in small sparkling diamonds. With her hair style and the veil, the earrings were perfect. The ladies in her suite went crazy. The consensus was the earrings were perfect and so was Tony. At that moment, Claire believed so too. She wanted to believe it, with all her heart. And her heart did. But it was her mind that held too many memories, ones that she'd successfully compartmentalized away. Away—not gone.

It wasn't for lack of trying.

When Brad knocked on the door of her suite, Catherine and Courtney hugged her and sped off to their seats. Claire looked at herself one last time in the full-length mirror. She liked what she saw and prayed Tony would too. She and Emily proceeded down the hall to the main stairs where she could hear the music from the quartet.

They heard a rumbling of whispers. Suddenly, Claire thought about the

guests. Who were they? She really didn't know any of them. She'd heard names and some she recognized. Some were political figures, some were business people she'd met at benefits, and some were names she'd heard in the media. Then she remembered their friends, the people who made last night incredibly memorable. Their friends were the people who supported both of them and were not solely present because of Anthony Rawlings. It was the others, the ones she didn't know, that scared her. She felt like they were all judging her. She wanted to be perfect for those people so Tony would be proud. The multiple acetaminophens helped to keep the headache at bay.

Brad listened to his ear piece and waited for the deviation in music. The hum of voices disappeared. Claire couldn't see the guests or the men exiting Tony's office, but she knew that was what was happening. Emily kissed John and Claire before she descended the stairs. John took Claire's arm, kissed her cheek, and said, "I won't disrupt your day. You look amazing, and I want you to know how much I love you. You aren't just my sister-in-law, you're my little sister. Please remember you can always count on Emily and me." He squeezed her hand. "Always know you're loved."

Claire kissed his cheek and thanked him. Brad gave them the signal, and they started down the stairs.

When John was asked who gives this woman to be wed, he replied, "With great love and admiration, her sister and I."

The next thirty-five minutes passed as if a dream. Claire saw faces. She saw the smiles of her new friends and of her sister, but what she noted above all else was Anthony Rawlings. When she reached the aisle and beheld him, he was watching her and waiting.

He had eyes only for her. He stood incredibly, handsomely in front of the guests, hands resting casually at his sides, shoulders broad, impeccable *Armani* custom tuxedo, a gratified smile, and eyes encircled in chestnut brown, yet still absorbed light. Standing next to him in front of everyone, she felt drawn into the darkness searching for light and warmth. When his eyes sparkled, she felt weak.

I'm marrying him. He is marrying me. I'm now his wife. At that moment she realized that this was a contract now recognizable by the world. It wasn't two signatures on a napkin, but a real legal marriage contract. He now truly owned her.

There was nothing she could do about it. He gave her one chance to escape, and she didn't take it. She made a decision, and that decision would have consequences. Now as the world watched, public failure wasn't an option. The world saw the most amazing wedding ceremony money could buy with a stunning woman happily marrying a handsome man. In contrast, Claire saw a napkin. She knew too well appearance meant everything. As the music played and the minister spoke, she worked desperately to re-

compartmentalize the flood of thoughts and emotions beseeching her mind. She smiled lovingly, answered the minister obediently and behaved appropriately. The kiss at the conclusion of the ceremony was romantic, and the minister's announcement of *Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Rawlings* was met with ravenous applause. Everything appeared perfect.

The reception was an equally flawless exhibition. Brad and Monica thought of everything: the ambiance was romantic, with impeccable decorations. Claire and Tony dutifully greeted each guest and thanked them for their attendance on their special day.

Throughout the entire evening Tony was wonderful. He told Claire he loved her, how beautiful she was, how honored he was to have her as his wife, and how he couldn't wait for the reception to be over so he could show her. Under it all, Claire continued to have feelings of misgivings. She worked diligently to keep them all buried under layers of make-up, hairspray, crinoline, slips, satin, lace, pearls, and pretense.

Everyone enjoyed themselves. Claire even saw John and Emily laughing with Tom and Bev. Once the first course was served, Brent stood, lifted a glass of champagne, and offered a toast to the newlyweds. "May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen? I want to take this opportunity to welcome Claire Rawlings to our world. Claire, Tony has been my friend, my confidante, and my boss..." The crowd giggled. "...for a very long time. I've watched as he has succeeded in business and failed in love..." Another snicker. "...but recently, Courtney and I have watched as Tony has experienced success in the area of love. Claire, when you're present his smile is brighter and his eyes have a spark. Perhaps you haven't noticed, but sometimes Tony's eyes can seem dark. That isn't the case when he's with you. You are the light of his life. You have given Tony the part of his life that was missing, and as we look around, it's obvious that not a lot was missing." There were smiles and agreement all around. "Now with you by his side, I believe my good friend is truly a man who has everything. Thank you, Claire. We're so happy to welcome you, and we look forward to an eternity of a happier Tony Rawlings."

This precluded a standing ovation, lifting of glasses, and claps of agreement. After they cut the cake and gently fed each other a bite, Claire chocolate and Tony vanilla, the conductor fired up the jazz band. The music resonated soulfully, rhythmical and lively. The lights of the tent dimmed and the dance floor glittered with intensified brilliance. Tony led Claire onto the dance floor hand in hand. His eyes, soft as crushed velvet, beheld his beautiful new wife. She was lost in his gaze of complete love and adoration. Swiftly, her doubts and fears faded away. He had the most amazing ability to dissolve her heart and soul. Gallantly he took her hand, encircled her small waist with his strong, powerful, yet tender embrace, and her body

immediately molded to his. They moved in sync. He turned, twirled, and spun her around the floor. The bustled wedding gown swayed to his slightest inclination. They had only danced together a few times, but their bodies moved together on numerous occasions. She became lost in his stare, and without thought or consciousness he had complete control and dominance over every aspect of her being and every movement of her body. With each crescendo of the music, Claire's heartbeat accelerated.

Soon, the dance floor was surrounded by guests watching the newlyweds waltz. Tony tall and dark, Claire petite and light, their contrast intensified the beauty and sensuality of the moment. Claire didn't notice the gathered crowd until the music reached its final *fermata*. Up until that moment, her brilliant emerald green eyes could only see her husband. When the music stilled, he gently kissed his bride and the guests applauded. Claire blushed and smiled.

The band began again and Tony charmingly bowed and asked Emily to dance. John nodded to Emily and extended his hand to Claire. Whispering in Claire's ear, John said, "You're beautiful in love." The four of them danced for a few minutes until the emcee asked the guests to join them. Promptly, the floor burst with couples.

Sometime after 11:00 PM, Claire and Tony, no longer in their wedding attire, kissed their friends and family goodbye and said adieu to the others as they left to begin their honeymoon adventure. Once again, Claire was being led by Tony to an unknown destination.

After their flight reached its cruising altitude Tony began to seduce his wife. He caressed, kissed, and tantalized her. He told her in a raspy, sensual tone he loved her, how amazing she had been and she was. He also told her what she already knew. "Mrs. Rawlings, you are now mine—completely. You belong to me."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Tomorrow is a mystery. Yesterday is history. Live today, it's a gift, that's why they call it "present."

—Unknown

C LAIRE AWOKE TO the sensation of their plane decelerating on a runway. She'd been somewhere in a dream as her body lay upon the leather sofa wrapped in the soft cocoon of a luxurious blanket. The sudden increased roar of engines combined with the screech of brakes transported her to the present. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep or if they'd reached their mysterious destination, but she remembered the excitement in Tony's eyes as he talked about their romantic journey. Willingly, she continued to allow herself to be taken to places unknown.

Looking down at her left hand, she saw the familiar engagement ring now with its new mate. Her wedding band glistened with embedded diamonds matching the circle around the large solitaire. They were truly beautiful. Pondering the past nine months, it boggled her mind to think she was wearing such an amazing set of rings and more importantly their meaning: she was married. She was married to Anthony Rawlings.

Slowly, she turned to see her husband. His bare feet were elevated as he lounged in a reclining chair. Watching him, she marveled at his relaxed pose, a stark contrast to how he usually looked when they flew. His attention was focused on the laptop resting on his long legs. Her cheeks and the tips of her lips moved upward as she noticed his jeans. They were the ones he'd worn when they left the reception. It seemed they were both wearing what the other preferred. He in his jeans and her out of hers. She snuggled into the soft blanket and closed her eyes. The engines hummed as she felt the plane taxi toward its stop. Claire recalled the past twenty-four hours and admitted Tony was right. Brad and Monica had created the perfect ceremony and reception. She remembered the estate and decorations. Even the snow obeyed, as if

requisitioned, to complement the final product. She thought about their friends, her family, and the guests. She recalled John's kind words and Brent's welcoming toast.

Smiling, she remembered Tony, incredibly handsome in his tuxedo and incessantly complimentary of her and her gown. Cinderella at the ball couldn't have felt more special. Like Prince Charming, he only had eyes for his bride. That admiration continued onto the jet. Once the cockpit door closed and the lights dimmed, his devotion grew to fervent passion.

Suddenly, Claire realized the implication of her blanket. If they'd reached their destination, she needed to dress and quickly. "Are we at our honeymoon?"

He turned from his computer and smiled. "You didn't need to wake. You look so beautiful and peaceful."

Keeping the blanket wrapped around her, she went to him and knelt beside his chair. "I think I was worn-out." Her emerald eyes glowed as she put her arms around his exposed midsection. Looking into his milk chocolate eyes, feeling his warmth, and inhaling his scent, she thought to herself, he's really my husband.

Tony's eyes met hers, then scanned toward her blanket. Smiling, he said, "It was a busy day, Mrs. Rawlings." The *Mrs. Rawlings* made Claire's eyes sparkle. He gently kissed his wife and playfully attempted to see under her blanket.

"And an eventful night, Mr. Rawlings."

"It isn't over. We're just stopping in LA to refuel. We have much more flying before we reach our destination."

This made Claire think. "So, we're going to Hawaii?"

"Would you like to go to Hawaii?" Claire said she would, she'd never been. He loved to make her squirm. "Well, we'll have to find out where we end up, won't we?" He kissed her again.

The plane was now standing still. Eric and the pilot entered the cabin and bid hello to Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings. Apologizing for the interruption, they promised to be airborne in less than thirty minutes. Tony told them it was fine, just please do whatever was necessary, as soon as possible. They had a honeymoon to get to. The two men promised they would and opened the outside door to the cabin. The rush of fresh air was no longer cold. They definitely weren't in Iowa anymore.

Tony placed the laptop on the floor and invited Claire to his lap. She climbed up, rested her head on his strong chest and listened to the beat of his heart as he spoke about Los Angeles. His hands tenderly explored under her blanket, gently caressing her soft skin. He asked if she'd ever been there. Claire said no, she'd been to northern California, San Francisco when she was young on a family vacation. She remembered going to Alcatraz. Her dad,

being a policeman, thought it was neat. But she didn't. She recalled during the tour actually going into cells. There were audiotaped voices and sounds of cell doors closing. She didn't like it at all. He hugged her. "I promise not to plan a visit to Alcatraz in our future. How old were you when you went there?"

"I think I was twelve." Claire looked up at his face. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was just wondering." Tony went on to tell her about Eli and MaryAnn's home in LA, actually in Malibu. Tony said he'll need to bring Claire to one of their parties. He wasn't much into the whole Hollywood scene, but even he had to admit, Eli and MaryAnn could throw an awesome party. Eli's guests usually included people Claire had seen in movies or on TV. Eli could be an ass, but he was great at what he did, and there were multitudes of people who would kill to attend his parties. Tony described MaryAnn and Eli's house as an architectural marvel situated on Malibu beach, hanging off a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

"I would love to see it sometime. Do you stay with them when you travel to LA?"

"No, I-I mean we..." He smiled. "...we have an apartment in Hollywood, not far from Malibu."

Claire smirked. "Maybe sometime you could tell me how many apartments we have?"

"We have many residences. It'll take time to familiarize you with all of them."

She couldn't wrap her mind around the idea. She had places in Iowa, New York City, Chicago, Hollywood, and other locations.

"They're not all as grand as New York and Chicago. I spend more time there."

"Yeah, well you never saw my apartment in Atlanta," Claire replied. "I'm pretty sure compared to it, they're all palatial."

Claire and Tony were talking and laughing when the door reopened. She quickly closed the blanket as the pilot announced they were ready to leave. She began to stand when Tony pulled her toward him.

"Umm, don't you think I should be in a seat belt when the plane takes off?"

Reluctantly he released his hold, but not before opening her blanket and grinning. Claire kissed him, moved to the other chair, situated herself, her blanket, and buckled the seat belt. Within minutes they were airborne, and she drifted to a fitful sleep.

Still at cruising altitude Claire awoke with Tony sleeping soundly in the neighboring recliner. Finding her air legs, she eased her way to the back of the cabin, which held a small shower and dressing room. From twenty thousand feet the view out the window held only blackness separated by a scattering of

stars differentiating sky from sea. She found an overnight bag, undoubtedly packed by Catherine. It contained shower, hair, and cosmetic supplies, as well as a black negligee and a summer blouse with capris. She smiled. The negligee would have been nice, but Tony didn't seem to mind the blanket.

After a quick shower and fresh clothes she felt more alert. Her watch read 8:20 AM, but a glance out the window told her it was still dark wherever they were. They'd been traveling over eight hours; she assumed they'd be in Hawaii soon. Finishing her make-up she smiled, thinking of sunshine and beaches. She didn't know how long they would be in Hawaii or on which island. The idea sounded wonderful and Tony enjoyed surprising her, but she wistfully thought about being involved in the planning.

Walking unsteadily back into the cabin, Claire found Tony sitting at the table with his laptop and coffee. He turned to watch her enter. "Good morning, Mrs. Rawlings, you look beautiful. I wish you would have awakened me. I could have joined you in the shower." He grinned over his cup.

"I don't think we both would fit. Besides, you looked too peaceful." She sipped the warm auburn liquid and allowed its robust aroma to revive her senses. Tony explained they'd be landing on Oahu in Honolulu in an hour. It would only be about 3:00 AM, but they would deplane, find some breakfast and walk around before continuing their flight. She asked, "Continuing? We aren't staying in Hawaii?"

"No, Hawaii is just a fuel stop, but we'll need to revisit sometime for you to sightsee. It's a lovely place." His eyes taunted. "But not as lovely as where we're going."

"And we are going where?" Claire asked, intrigued. Tony's eyes sparkled, the black almost completely overtaken with the soft brown hue. His grin mischievous, he didn't answer. "And how much longer until we get there?"

"Mrs. Rawlings, you're very inquisitive. What if I told you that we won't reach our destination until tomorrow?"

Claire thought about that, twenty-four more hours of flying and realized he wasn't talking about twenty-four hours. He was talking about the next day. "Well, Mr. Rawlings, I'd say, it sounds like we are crossing the International Date Line." She smiled smugly.

He looked at her with admiration, and addressed Eric, who was refilling their coffee cups. "My wife is not only beautiful, she's also incredibly intelligent." He kissed her head as he stood. "I believe I'll freshen up before we begin our descent."

With that, he disappeared behind the wall at the back of the cabin. Claire noticed his laptop open on the table. A quick *Google* search of land west of the International Date Line would've been beneficial. The screen was, of course, locked, so she'd just need to rely on her memory. Then she wondered

if they were staying in the northern hemisphere or heading south? Sighing, Claire sipped her delicious coffee. She'd have to wait. She didn't have a choice.

Before they left the plane, Tony told Claire to get her purse from her overnight bag. Jokingly, she asked if she needed it to pay for breakfast. No, she needed her passport. "When did I get a passport?" He reminded her they'd discussed it months ago and Brent had filed the necessary paperwork. Apparently, this all happened while she was recovering from her accident. She couldn't remember any of it, yet there it was: her picture, her signature, and her name *Claire Nichols*. Tony promised to apply for a new one with her real name *Rawlings* as soon as they returned to Iowa and a new ID. He smiled. Her new credit cards had already been requested.

Hawaii was anticlimactic. She smelled the humid sea air as they descended the steps to the solid ground. The gentle tropical breeze enticed her skin, but they didn't see anything other than the inside of the Honolulu International Airport, as they searched for and found a restaurant that served breakfast.

After eating, they needed to pass the TSA desk. Eric handled the inspection of the plane and bags. Tony and Claire needed to show their passports. When they were with the TSA agent she asked their destination. Claire didn't know. Begrudgingly, Tony answered, "Fiji. Nadi, Fiji."

Claire remembered Fiji was a group of islands. She wasn't sure how many, in the South Pacific. As they walked back to the plane she squeezed his hand and smiled. He wasn't pleased his surprise was spoiled, but she knew where they were going, and it made her happy. They had six more hours of flight.

They landed in Nadi, Fiji, at 10:30 AM Monday, December 20, after flying over eighteen hours. As their plane approached Nadi, Claire watched out the window, mesmerized by the turquoise water and sparkling white beaches. If Tony were upset about the TSA agent, witnessing Claire's anticipation returned his own excitement.

Once they landed, Eric loaded their luggage onto a small plane with a propeller and pontoons. He wished them an enjoyable honeymoon and promised he would be waiting when they returned. Apparently, their final destination could only be accessed by air.

Tony and Claire then took a forty-five-minute flight to a private island. Their altitude was low, allowing them to enjoy the sights: dolphins swimming, gorgeous secluded white sand beaches, palm trees, and tropical rain forest vegetation. Outside the open windows of the plane was a true paradise, an oasis away from the rest of the world. Claire had never seen anything like it, and told Tony over and over how amazing it all looked. They landed on a crystal-clear aquamarine lagoon lined with a horseshoe of pristine

white sand.

Waiting on the beach was their personal staff: two chefs, maid, hostess, and boat captain. Claire had become accustomed to being waited upon, but these individuals *lived* to please Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings. The staff gathered their luggage, and they all walked a winding path to their *bure*, a Fijian word for straw hut. The humid tropical breeze blew Claire's hair as her sandals sank into the white sand. Holding her husband's hand, they approached their temporary dwelling.

It was the most luxurious straw hut Claire had ever seen. Situated on a cliff above the water, they had stunning views of the ocean. First, they entered a gracious living room with a cathedral thatched ceiling, woven bamboo covered walls, and polished mahogany floors. Each room of their bure contained ceiling fans as well as the possibility of air conditioning. Claire couldn't fathom why anyone would possibly want air conditioning. There were huge bi-folding doors which opened the entire frontage to private decks overlooking the water or tropical vegetation. Each deck contained lounge furniture for relaxation. The front deck even had a private infinity pool. As they stood in the living room and looked, the pool appeared to extend into the lagoon and beyond into the ocean below. The staff took their luggage to the large master bedroom complete with a four-poster king-sized bed. Roaming from room to room, Claire found a luxuriously designed bathroom which opened to a private outdoor lava rock shower and generous soaking tub designed for two. Thankfully, surrounding the outdoor shower and tub were lush tropical plants. After the tour of their temporary home, their hostess, Naiade, asked if they were ready to dine. Claire was famished. Tony informed Naiade they would be pleased to dine on the deck.

The only thing missing from their bure was technology, which was just fine with Claire. She was accustomed to the lack of connectivity; however, Tony was relieved once he learned he had access to the Internet with his laptop. He explained, he needed to stay in contact with Tim, Brent, and others from his businesses. He reminded Claire, "You, my dear, only need to stay in contact with me." Pulling her close, he added with a grin, "I promise to help."

She pressed herself closer and kissed his neck. "I think I can handle it."

"Be careful, Mrs. Rawlings, we may miss our meal."

Claire smiled. "I believe we have plenty of time for that. Right now, I'm hungry!"

Apparently, they could make suggestions to their chefs at any time. They decided for the next ten days seafood would be the entrée of choice. They both enjoyed trying native dishes. Naiade told them about some activity options, including: unlimited access to a boat with a private captain, where they could enjoy a ride to watch marine life, island hop, or snorkel. A living barrier reef was nearby. They could also kayak or hike into the jungle.

From the dining deck they enjoyed an amazing view of the ocean, with a wonderful sea breeze. The chefs prepared yellow fin tuna, fresh fruit, organic vegetables, and freshly baked bread. It all smelled and tasted scrumptious.

It was early afternoon locally when they finished their meal and Claire was exhausted. She'd just traveled over eighteen hours, lost an entire day crossing an imaginary line, and gotten married. It was enough to tire anyone. Tony recommended relaxing in the outdoor soaking tub which opened to the endless blue sky. Over the next ten days, they would discover it was even more enticing under the stars and moon.

Tony may have suggested the tub as a place to relax, but Claire anticipated he had other plans. The tepid tub water, gentle sea breeze, sound of the waves lapping the beach, and romantic atmosphere combined to help increase Claire's energy level. Tony said he understood they'd been traveling a long time, but to him it wasn't tiring, it was confining. He wanted to release some penned up energy. Appreciating the amorous setting, Claire knew she would've been disappointed with anything less.

Tony didn't disappoint. Soaking in the warm water with him behind her, she rested her head against his wide chest. He began by massaging her shoulders, relieving the tension of the trip. As his hands moved, Claire felt the energy she'd thought gone begin to build inside of her. His lips found the nape of her neck and ignited goose bumps upon her arms and legs. Between kisses he whispered, "Thank you for being my wife. I love you."

He held her and caressed her skin. She in turn stroked his arms. Looking down she saw her rings sparkling under the water. When his hands discovered her breasts, they throbbed in anticipation; her nipples became hard and needy. His touch moved to her stomach and below causing Claire's energy to return with a vengeance. She couldn't control herself anymore. When she turned to face him, the warm water lapped the sides of the tub. Their mouths heatedly nibbled at one another's as their tongues intermingled. Every action was consensual.

Claire wanted him as much as he wanted her. As the breeze rustled the orchids and surrounding vegetation, he filled her with more than energy. Like on the dance floor they moved together, their bodies became one—like their names. The exuberance of his sensuality carried Claire beyond revitalization to ecstasy.

As his fingers instigated passion, his lips alternated between suckling and asking questions, did she like her honeymoon destination? She did, very much. Was she happy with the way their wedding turned out? She was. It was perfect. Was she happy to be Mrs. Anthony Rawlings? She was. How happy? How pleased? How grateful? Eventually they made their way to the king-sized bed. Even with the ceiling fan and sea breeze they both dripped with moisture.



BEFORE TONY JOINED his wife in midday slumber, he watched her sleep. She was exhausted, yet she had just gone with him to the other side of heaven. After all of the sex they'd experienced, it was difficult to believe it could get better, but it did. Lying on the bed she emitted warmth and the most amazing scent. He gently moved her hair from her moist shoulders and revealed her sensuous neck and beautiful face. Tenderly he kissed her lips, tasting her sweetness. Even in slumber he saw her smile.

That night they dined on the deck by torchlight, overlooking a magnificent horizon, and watching the sun settle into the ocean. The chefs created an amazing dish from fresh seafood, organic fruits, and vegetables all from the islands. This dish included green pacific lobster and fresh snapper. They also chose wine from an extensive list.

After dinner they strolled hand in hand along the beach, feeling the soft powdered sand beneath their feet. The humidity decreased with the setting of the sun as the breeze created the perfect temperature. Their only light came from the moon as its rays glistened off the water. Others had been on the same beach and stayed in the same bungalow, but it felt as though they were the first.



THE DAYS MERGED together; waking to the sounds of tropical birds and sea breezes, going onto one of the decks, drinking coffee, and eating breakfast. Next, they would dress in bathing suits, walk the beach, and swim in the lagoon. Or perhaps lounge by the pool or in the pool. They would eat lunch and then resume their busy relaxation schedule. The mornings and evenings would have cool breezes, but the middays were steamy and tropical.

They discussed their options for activities and decided *together* how to spend their days. They utilized the boat and captain on multiple occasions. He took them snorkeling and they learned that different times of day brought out different aquatic life. One evening, at sunset, they floated while all around them dolphins jumped and played. If the captain hadn't warned them, Claire may have tried to touch one. They seemed so close and tame. The captain told them to be careful, appearances can be deceiving. That seemed like good advice.

On a few occasions the captain took them to uninhabited islets only accessible by boat. The chefs would prepare a special lunch complete with fresh fruit and wine. And on the completely secluded beach, with a blanket and their picnic basket, Tony and Claire would find some way to spend the hours before the captain returned. Claire looked at all the clothes Catherine

packed. She literally spent her days in bath robes, bathing suits, beach covers, and a sundress for dinner. There was no need to wear clothes or any occasion to do so. Actually, they spent a great deal of their time without any clothing. Situations wouldn't usually start that way: a swim in the lagoon, sunbathing on the beach, or a night swim in the pool, but would often conclude that way.

The sun brought back Claire's bronze skin from summer. It started to subside with the beginning of autumn. Her *accident* accelerated the process, leaving her complexion pale. Tony told her she looked beautiful, the fair complexion made her eyes standout, the emerald green more intense. Seeing herself now, she believed the tanned skin with the blonde hair looked healthier. Her eyes still looked prominent. If she needed to be blonde, she liked herself better with a tan. Unlike her tan during the summer, this one lacked lines.

Other than the staff, Tony and Claire didn't see anyone during the entire ten-day stay. They were completely secluded and tucked away from the world. Christmas came and went. They wished each other a merry one, but there were no evergreens or snow. To Claire that was wonderful. She would take warmth and sunshine over cold and snow anytime. Besides, there were plenty of decorations at home for the wedding. Tony apologized for not having a gift for her on Christmas morning. She told him it made her happy. He had given her too many gifts; besides, the honeymoon was her gift and she loved it. She repeatedly explained she didn't care about monetary things. The more she protested the more Tony pointed out the advantages. He wanted her to realize she had it all and the ability to get anything else. The world was hers for the asking.

The tropical climate was well known for its fruit, and the chefs made it available at all times. There were papayas, pineapples, bananas, avocados, pears, mangoes, and limes. They prepared them in salads, side dishes, entrees, and constantly available fresh. Together the newlyweds learned how incredibly sensual fruit could be.

Tony teased Claire's lips with the sweet aromatic juice of a freshly cut pineapple or papaya. Gently placing it on her tongue, closing her eyes, she would suckle the juice from his fingertips. Often as the fragrant fruit passed her lips, the juices dripped down her chin. Gallantly, Tony would attempt to remove the sugary nectar with his tongue. At times he'd *accidentally* drop the sticky fruit and it would fall on Claire's breasts or stomach. He'd then eat it directly from her bare skin. The result was sultry and exhilarating. The outdoor shower was an excellent steamy setting to wash away the tacky, clammy sweet liquids; however, it always began a new adventure.

On more than one occasion he tested her endurance. His encouragement was always gentle, affectionate, and sensual. At times his physical touch caused such erotic convulsions she felt she would never experience such a

high again. And, then she would. Claire contemplated Emily's question the night before her wedding. If he were this unquenchable at forty-five, she shuddered to think how he had been at twenty-five.

Tony mentioned on multiple occasions he was thrilled to have Claire as his wife, but with this title came responsibility. She had done well, *most of the time*, in the past. Now, it was different. She was no longer an enigma or a rumor; she was Mrs. Anthony Rawlings. Her actions, words, and appearance reflected directly upon him. He loved her and wanted her as happy as she was here in paradise, but the real world was coming. He wanted her prepared.

For ten days of complete togetherness, no possible threat of the outside world, chance of public failure, opportunity for breaking rules, or risk of negative consequences, Claire enjoyed the light hue in Tony's eyes. She gave herself freely and kept him satisfied. She found a place of contentment with her situation and happiness in her decisions.

Sometimes while lounging, she would think about the *out* Tony offered in Central Park. She wondered would she be happier? Where would she be? And the biggest unanswered question, would he really have let her go? Then she would open her eyes and see a lush tropical paradise, incredibly handsome generous husband, and recognize her decisions led her to this consequence.

Thursday afternoon, December 30, Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings rejoined Eric at Tony's plane in Nadi. This time they traveled back in time, arriving back in Iowa City Thursday night. Glistening under a blanket of white snow, the house looked regal as they approached. The decorations were gone, but the houselights shone upon the brick and river stone facade. It was magnificent and welcoming. Paradise was just that, but now they were home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

There is a wisdom of the head, and a wisdom of the heart.

—Charles Dickens

SAMUEL THOUGHT IT a farce, the nightly meal with everyone present, his parents, wife, and son. Yes, they lived in the same house, but the formal meals seemed pretentious. It reminded him of the TV show *Dallas* with Nathaniel the reigning omnipotent patriarch.

Amanda looked to her husband as the dinner concluded. Samuel leaned over and affectionately kissed his wife's cheek. "I need to speak to my father for a few minutes. I'll be upstairs in a little while."

She smiled. "All right, I'll be waiting."

"I won't be long." He saw the unspoken question in his wife's eyes. Then he whispered, "I'll fill you in later, I promise." Amanda's eyes smiled, as she looked into Samuel's face. In a family like theirs, so much had to be said without words, they all knew the rules. Nothing was ever questioned in front of Nathaniel. Samuel was thankful Amanda was willing to deal with her father-in-law's rules. Having each other made it worth it; Amanda and Samuel adored one another.

"Anton and I will be upstairs."

Their son, home from boarding school, watched his parents. "I'll be up in a minute, Mother, I need to do something." Amanda smiled at her husband and son. Anton had grown so much during the past semester. Only fifteen, he stood half a foot taller than her and was still growing. His eyes could shine, but on occasion they also showed his grandfather's darkness. His parents wanted more than anything to keep that blackness away.

Amanda nodded. "All right, maybe we can watch a movie when we all get to our suites? I have some new videos." She began the ascent up the grand stairs. Samuel straightened his neck and walked down the corridor toward his father's office. The double doors stood as a barrier to the inflexible man

within. Inhaling deeply, he formed a fist. Respectfully, he knocked on the grand double doors and listened for the words from within. “Come in.”

Samuel knew this wasn’t going to go well. His father knew his displeasure with the recent direction of Rawls Corp. Now the recent *positive slant* and the unexpected shareholder acceptance were too much. These ideas from Jared Clawson had to stop.

One idea reaped Rawls millions. The next cost them millions. Currently, the balance sheet was in their favor, but the risks and the possible legal repercussions weren’t worth the benefits. Stepping into the large office, Samuel silently prayed he would be able to make his father see his point of view.

The man behind the desk sat bold and defiant. “I wondered how long it would take you to confront me.”

“I didn’t think we needed an audience.” Samuel closed the double doors, unaware they were slightly ajar.

“Always worried about others’ opinions.” Nathaniel grinned. “Obviously, a trait you received from your mother. I don’t give a damn what others think.”

“Perhaps you should.” Samuel offered.

“Speak your mind.”

“You know my thoughts. You need to get rid of Jared Clawson. You need to stop these alternative means of financial gain.”

Nathaniel’s laugh rumbled through the office. “I *need*?”

“Father, I’m sorry. Maybe *need* isn’t the best word. You *should*.”

“You’re *sorry*? You’re a weak piece of shit!” Nathaniel stood and walked around his grand desk, facing his son. “Haven’t you learned anything? Don’t apologize! Apologies are for cowards, they make you appear weak.”

Standing tall, Samuel continued his mission. “This situation is getting out of hand.”

Nathaniel laughed again. “Out of hand, like we’re making millions upon millions, and that’s bad?”

“We were doing well before, and it was legal.”

“So what part of these profits don’t you like? Your wife’s enjoying the money and your son’s enjoying the best education. You, your wife, your son will never know what it’s like to be without. Tell me again what you don’t like.”

“I believe they would’ve been happy with our earnings before. Amanda and Anton don’t need excess, neither do I...” Samuel watched his father turn back toward his plush leather chair. “...and neither does Mother.”

Changing directions, Nathaniel abruptly turned and struck his son’s left cheek. “Don’t you *ever* tell me what your mother needs. You have no idea what she’s been through. You’ve never lived as we did. Money is good for one thing: it buys what you need, what you want, and because of my

decisions, you and Anton will never worry about money. Do not ever tell me what to do with my business and don't apologize. I raised you better than that!"

Samuel knew there wasn't an answer for his father. He turned to walk away.

"Where are you going, boy?" Nathaniel bellowed.

"I'm going upstairs to my wife. Do you have a problem with that?"

"You're going upstairs, to the upper level of *my* house. No. I don't have a problem. Do you?"

"No, Father, I do not." Samuel exited the office.

Before he shut the large doors, Samuel saw Anton's expression as he hurried down the corridor. The teenager had witnessed the entire scene. Samuel hoped when they were up in their suite, they could talk about it. His son would know discussions were welcome.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

THE VIEW THROUGH the windshield of Tony's new *Mercedes-Benz CLS-Class Coupe* reminded Claire of space movies: the snowflakes were like stars being passed at warp speed. The snow, wind, and subfreezing temperature accentuated the reality that they were no longer in paradise. She settled into the heated seat, rubbed her leather gloved hands, and watched the snow covered terrain. The glistening sparkles would've been pretty if not for the blowing and accumulation. Tony didn't mind. He was enjoying his new car, which had arrived at the estate while they were gone. To Claire's relief, it handled amazingly well on snow.

Although almost 8:00 PM, she felt as though she was finally waking. The jet lag was difficult to navigate. Both she and Tony had slept late following their arrival back to reality. Now as they headed to Tom and Bev's for a New Year's Eve celebration, she thought about their return.

When they entered the estate, Catherine's welcoming smile was the best sight Claire could imagine. They immediately embraced. The peaceful stillness of the mansion, barren of decorations and workers, was comforting. She and Tony ate a light dinner and fell sound asleep.

It was during the morning, while more awake, they discussed their bedroom situation. Now that they're married, should they move into one room? When Tony asked Claire's opinion—a benchmark moment—she replied she liked maintaining two rooms. The most important thing was sleeping together, the location was irrelevant. Claire said she liked her suite. Truth be

told, she did. Yes, she knew it had surveillance and memories, but it was also where she felt safe and at home. Maybe she'd come to terms with the recordings. She felt, well, secure. If Tony could watch her every move, he wouldn't question her actions. She also mentioned, "Besides, my suite doesn't match yours in terms of technology." His had the big multifaceted screen and God only knew what else. "And you wouldn't be able to access all your stock market data from here."

Since their big storm last summer, Claire hadn't been required, or asked, to watch more videos, but she believed Tony did. She also believed he could access his videos and anything he wanted: from his office, bedroom, movie-theater, or anywhere else he chose. This hadn't been confirmed, but somehow she suspected it was true.

His reply was why, even now as they drove, Claire was still stewing.

"I think that sounds reasonable. I don't believe we'll be running out of room anytime soon." As Claire watched the honeymoon hue of Tony's eyes fade into darkness, he continued, "However, regarding the technology you mentioned, I believe it would be prudent to maintain the past restrictions involving my office and bedroom. I don't think you need unsupervised access to computers, Internet, or telephones."

"Tony, I'm your wife. What do you think I'll do?"

"I think it's best to avoid possible glitches." He lifted her chin. "Do you agree, or would you like to discuss it further?"

Claire stared into his eyes, squared her shoulders, and straightened her neck. "I agree. Excuse me. I need to take a shower." He released her chin and she walked away. She'd learned months ago she didn't like glitches and pursuing a closed conversation wasn't prudent; however, every bone in her body wanted to pursue it. She really didn't care about the technology and didn't want to access it. Claire wanted the ability to access it!

Ten hours later, as they rode to Tom and Bev's party, she contemplated the closed conversation. Now that she was Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, didn't that give her some kind of clout? Some perks? Could she possibly revisit the subject without fear of retribution? As she debated this internally and watched the glistening flakes sparkle in the illumination of the Mercedes' beams, she wondered if her life had changed.

She was Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, but was that really different from being Ms. Claire Nichols?

"Which do you prefer?"

Tony's question pulled Claire from her thoughts. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear your question."

“I asked if you prefer the view in Fiji over the frozen splendor of Iowa.”

Claire laughed. “I don’t think you need to ask, do you?”

“Probably not, but I’m trying to get you to talk.”

“I’m talking.”

“Yes, you are, but you haven’t really been talking since this morning. Would you like to discuss the cause before we get to Tom’s?”

Claire thought about the question. Yes, she wanted to revisit the subject, but should she? “I don’t know.” Her feet were cold and the fashionable boots weren’t helping. She tried to get them under the blow of the Mercedes’ heater. “If I say yes, am I opening a closed subject?”

“Yes, I guess you are. Is it worth it to you?”

The interior of the car was warm, yet Claire pushed her gloved hands deeper into the pockets of her fur jacket and considered the implications. Did she really care anymore about technology? Was it worth pushing this discussion? She knew immediately the answer was no. “I think my decision is to not reopen the conversation; however, I want you to know, it isn’t the technology I long for. It’s the *ability* to access it.”

Tony smirked. “Claire, your talents were wasted in meteorology. You would’ve made a wonderful businesswoman. You just said you didn’t want to pursue the subject, yet you managed to enlighten me about your motivation. Once again, I’m impressed.”

His condescension didn’t help her disposition. The snow was coming at the windshield with enough velocity to make her feel as though they were flying through space at hyper-speed. Her lips pressed tightly into a line. Finally, she asked, “What kind of response do you expect?”

“Honest, as always.”

“Okay, seriously, who do I have left to contact? I don’t understand why you feel the restrictions are still necessary. God knows I know the rules.” The branches of the pines lay low with inches of heavy accumulating snow. Keeping her gaze to her right, Claire saw the laden evergreens through the side window. They were nearing the Millers’ home and the sound of soft music filled the air. Tony didn’t respond. After all, this discussion was closed. The familiar sense of powerlessness filled Claire’s chest. She wanted the unspoken tension to end. She reached over and touched his arm. “I love you. I’ll do whatever you want or expect of me. I admit I’m not pleased by your verdict, but I’m okay. Let’s spend tonight with our friends and welcome the New Year.” At least she’d explained her view; that was something.



THE MILLERS’ HOME was magnificent. Beverly had fantastic taste in decor. It

was ultramodern yet amazingly inviting. The unique style was a combination of stone, brick, and wood, accentuated with glass and chrome. Despite the numerous windows, the house was warm. They could watch the snow and wind and stay snug inside.

Perhaps it was the fire in the fireplace or the wine in their glasses, but the gathering radiated warmth. Their friends happily celebrated their return. They wanted to know all about the honeymoon. Claire told them that it had been wonderful. Tony had literally taken her to paradise. Everyone complimented their wedding. They were a beautiful couple. Sue mentioned how beautiful their pictures were in the press-release. Claire had forgotten about press coverage until that moment.

"I haven't seen the released pictures. Do you have copies?" Bev said she didn't but she'd be glad to pull them up online. Claire glanced at her husband, although he didn't speak, his eyes did. Claire knew she shouldn't, but she agreed. "Thank you, I'd love to see them."

Instead of bringing out a computer, Bev removed a remote from a drawer and pointed it at the large television on the wall. The New Year's countdown from Time Square changed to a homepage. Bev entered *Anthony Rawlings* into the search engine. Nine months ago the procedure would've seemed mundane but now it fascinated Claire. She would've loved to take the time to read the multitude of pages that appeared as options. Bev reduced the search by entering *wedding*. Claire briefly saw an accompanying article; but within seconds, Bev clicked, and their pictures appeared on the screen.

Claire stared. There they were in their wedding attire. There were three different pictures: a head shot, a full-length frontal view, and one of them dancing. Everyone watched Claire as she beheld herself on the screen. She looked at Tony and her; they looked like models. Tony was tall, handsome, and buff, with his dark hair, dark eyes, and dark tuxedo contrasting dramatically with Claire. She looked petite, blonde, and striking. Her hair was so light she assumed some of her friends from before may not recognize her. Next to Tony, she seemed small. Tony was right about her eyes. In the head shot, her green eyes shined vividly. She'd seen her dress in the mirror, but seeing it on the television screen and looking at it from afar, it was obviously eye-catching, elegant, and spectacular. She smiled. It had been a good choice.

Claire realized everyone in the room was watching her, especially Tony. Most were happily awaiting her response. Tony seemed less pleased with the entire situation, but she knew he wouldn't say anything there. It would be a matter better discussed in private. Finally, Sue put her hand on Claire's knee and asked, "So what do you think?"

Claire giggled. "I just can't believe my wedding's news." Everyone snickered. What did she expect? She married Anthony Rawlings. Claire looked up at him. He had eyes only for her—dark eyes. Daringly, she got up

and walked to her husband. Lifting herself by her toes, she reached his cheek and gave it a kiss.

He obliged, bending down to allow his cheek to meet her lips. Addressing the group, Claire nonchalantly replied, “I guess I just forgot who he is, but I have a lifetime to remember.” She kissed him again.

They toasted the New Year with champagne. Brent, Tom, and Tim especially wished Tony a profitable year. If his year were lucrative, theirs would be also. It was after 1:00 AM when the party broke up.

Within the car, the coldness of the leather transcended Claire’s slacks. She wanted the heater to warm the seat as well as the interior of the car quickly. The roar of the window defroster in the stillness of the night told Claire the poor *Mercedes* was trying its best. Tony was scraping the snow from the windows and talking with Brent while Tim did the same. Everything was blanketed with several more inches of white. Thankfully, it had stopped falling. Absently, Claire wondered how often Tony needed to scrape his own windows. She knew she was trying to divert her thoughts from the reprimand she was about to receive.

Her husband remained pleasant and attentive during the party, but his expression as he opened her door let her know that *this* subject wasn’t closed. Claire pondered that thought. Wasn’t it really the same subject as earlier? So shouldn’t it be closed?

Each time she exhaled she noticed the faint white crystals which formed and hung in the air. She straightened her posture and squared her shoulders; she was ready. The windows were clear, and she could hear Tony and Brent’s voices. His door would open at any moment. With each passing minute her demeanor moved from anxious to indignant. All she had wanted to do was see their wedding pictures. Why was that such a big deal? After all, it was her wedding. The fact the pictures were available online shouldn’t matter.

Once on the road, the only sounds were those of the tires on the snow and the hum of the heater. Claire waited. After a significant silence Tony spoke. “Do you remember I told you I received e-mails from Emily and she’d like you to call?”

“Yes, and you said I could call her tomorrow.” Claire felt a sudden panic.

“I was just wondering. Your memory seems to be failing you.”

“May I still call my sister?”

“Yes, I keep my word.”

Claire exhaled. This Tony was more indirect than the one she was accustomed to. Maybe that was the advantage of being his wife. She’d been looking for that *perk*. “Thank you.” She glanced toward her husband, his jaw muscles defined as he clenched. He was waiting for her to approach the subject. Reluctantly she did. “What did you think of our wedding pictures?”

“I think you were absolutely stunning, and I’m a lucky man.”

That wasn't the response she anticipated. Yes, she was annoyed that this was a big deal; however, her intuition told her to back off. "I'm sorry about encouraging Bev. My curiosity got the better of me." Apologizing seemed like the best option, even if it only sounded sincere.

"It isn't just what you did. It's what you said."

Claire couldn't remember what she said, so she asked. "What did I say?"

"You said you forget who I am."

"I forget that marrying you is newsworthy. I love you for you. I forget that you are Anthony Rawlings. To me, you're Tony."

His grip intensified on the steering wheel and she felt his tension radiating through the interior of the car. "I've told you over and over, you must remember who I am. If you forget who I am, you'll forget who you are, and the significance of your behavior." It was a different version of the *appearance speech*. He was right; he'd said it over and over. She listened, replied at all appropriate times, and was thankful it was only the abridged version.

Tony returned to work on the January 1, from his home office. He had a lot of things to do. Apparently, he had tried to keep up-to-date while in Fiji, but *someone* kept him distracted. With him working in his office and her free to do as she pleased within the house, Claire soon realized how event filled the last month had been. She was suddenly overwhelmed with the sensation of solitude.

Claire arrived at Tony's office before lunch to make her call. She expected the *limitations lecture*. Surprisingly, he didn't give it. He dialed the telephone, turned his back and worked on his computers while Claire waited to speak. John answered. She prayed John wouldn't say anything to upset Tony. "Hi, John. It's Claire. Is Emily there?"

"Hi, Claire. Welcome back to the United States. You are back, aren't you?"

"We are. We returned on December 30." She was sending out mental signals: put Emily on the phone!

"So, was it as beautiful as the article described?" Tony turned to Claire. She needed to conclude with John and move on to Emily. She looked at him pleadingly: she knew.

"I didn't read the article, but it was amazing. Tony definitely took me to paradise for our honeymoon. Hey, is Emily there?"

"Oh, yes. She's right here. Good to talk with you. Please, tell Anthony I said hello."

She made eye contact with him, *hi*. "I will, thanks, John." She heard Emily take the receiver. Apparently, they weren't using a speaker phone.

"Hi, Claire. How is my jet-set sister?" Claire smiled. Emily was trying her best to accept Claire's life.

"I'm wonderful, glad to be home. How are you?" Tony turned back to his work. Emily explained that she and John were well. They wanted to thank Claire and Anthony again for the transportation. A *Rawlings Industries* jet took them back to Albany on Sunday following the ceremony. She also thanked them for allowing them to stay in their home. It was amazing! She asked Claire more questions about the honeymoon. Claire made it sound magical but not too over the top. Tony politely kept his back to Claire during her conversation. She knew he was listening to every word but appreciated the gesture.

After ten minutes Claire's internal clock told her time was running out. "Well, it sure was good to see you two and to talk to you—"

Emily interrupted, "I wanted to let you know John's been offered a job with a different company."

This shocked Claire. She didn't know he'd been looking for a different job. Emily said he hadn't. It was a surprise to them too. Claire asked if it was in Albany. No, it's either in New York City or Chicago. The company had offices at both locations, as well as others. Claire knew that meant Emily would have to leave her teaching job. Emily said she knew that. They were weighing the pros and cons. Financially, if he took the job, she wouldn't need to work. It was a tremendous increase in pay. Claire was happy to hear that, but she knew how much Emily loved teaching.

Claire also added the *pro* that Chicago was much closer to her and Tony. She asked if John would be doing the same type of law? Emily said it was international corporate. He'd studied it, but for the last four years he'd practiced mostly corporate domestic. Tony pointed to his watch.

Claire told Emily she was interested, and she'd try to call again to see how things were going. She also warned. "Please think it through. Don't just jump for the money."

Emily said, "That's easy for you to say."

Claire understood, but wanted them to be happy first and foremost. Emily asked when she would hear from Claire again, and if there was a better way to contact her than Tony's private e-mail?

Claire told she was still trying to understand the whole *Mrs. Rawlings* thing. So many people trying to interview her and the like—well she was sure Emily understood. So yes, Tony's private e-mail was best. They bid each other goodbye and Tony disconnected the line.

Claire thought about the call as she stood to leave Tony's office. "Thank you, I appreciate the chance to talk with her." She turned to let him work.

"Claire, wait a minute." Her first thought was that he expected some sort of gratitude. She turned back to him with fire in her eyes.

He casually leaned on his desk. "She was fishing."

Confused, the fire still flickered. "Fishing for what, information about our

honeymoon? Honestly, Tony, she's my sister. Maybe she's just interested in learning about me from me, not some magazine."

Impatiently, he asked, "Are you done?"

"Yes." He indicated for her to sit. She did. "She was fishing to find out if you knew about John's job offer."

"That doesn't make sense, how would I know—" She looked at Tony and her heart rate increased. "Why? Why would you offer John a job? I know you don't like him."

"I don't like his strength and determination. He pursued the prenuptial agreement in *my* limousine even though he knew I didn't want him to. He even had the balls to offer me advice. Then during the rehearsal, he stood in front of me and our friends and had the audacity to *not* give you away."

"I knew that upset you. We just never discussed it, before now." Tony nodded. "Then please explain why you'd offer him a job?"

Tony smiled a devious grin. "I didn't. Tom did. He contacted John while we were away. They've had two meetings in New York. John does have an amazing résumé for someone who went to law school in Indiana."

"It's one of the top twenty-five law schools in the country." Claire immediately regretted defending John.

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Rawlings. I'll let Tom know that he may contact you if a cheering section is needed for Mr. Vandersol." Claire apologized and asked Tony to continue. "He graduated *magna cum laude* from Indiana University School of Law and was hired by an East Coast firm that predominately hires from within the Ivy League. He's worked very hard, and after only four years as an associate, he's on the fast track for partnership consideration."

Claire wasn't sure if it was Tony or Tom, but someone had done their homework. "All right, he has a good résumé, but you just said you don't like him."

"Actually, Mrs. Rawlings, I said I don't like his strength and determination, or more accurately, they infuriated me." He smiled again. This one wasn't devious, more mischievous.

Claire suddenly experienced *déjà vu* and smiled back. "Tony, John isn't me. He doesn't know you as well as I do."

"That's good. I'd prefer to keep it that way."

"I mean, I don't want you to be upset if he refuses your offer." Tony lifted his eyebrows. Claire continued, "John's worked very hard to achieve what he has in life. He may not accept your offer as being based on his résumé, but as being based on a familiar relationship."

"You know him better, but Tom's made him a very impressive offer. Those student loans, mortgage, and other debts you mentioned would no longer be an issue. Emily wouldn't need to work, and they could live

anywhere they wanted.”

“Emily likes her job. She loves teaching. Our mother was a teacher, up until the day she died. Emily enjoys doing what she does.” Claire realized she wasn’t facilitating the conversation. “But, I’m sure the loss of debt would be appealing. Emily could always find another teaching job. She does have over six years of experience. I just don’t want you to be disappointed if he refuses.”

“It’s interesting the lengths some people will go to reduce their debt.”

Claire chose to ignore that comment. “Has Tom given him a deadline? And what was the point of me talking with Emily but not knowing about John?”

“Tom asked for an answer by the end of January, and I was curious.” This time Claire raised her eyebrows. “I wondered if Emily would come right out and ask you about the job, and I figured if you knew about it, she’d think you persuaded me to offer it to him, or more accurately, persuaded me to persuade Tom.”

Claire thought for a moment. “Well, I can honestly say it never occurred to me to ask for such a thing, and obviously Emily doesn’t realize, I don’t have that kind of influence over you.”

His smile flashed, more unscrupulous this time. “Why, Mrs. Rawlings, I believe you’ve been known to be quite persuasive.”

The enlightening conversation was done. Claire had a lot to consider. She didn’t feel good about the probability of John being employed by *Rawlings Industries*; however, she’d been honest, both to Emily and Tony. That’s all she could do. Honesty was always the best policy—right?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Part of the happiness of life consists not in fighting battles, but in avoiding them. A masterly retreat is in itself a victory.

—Norman Vincent Peale

THE NEW YEAR began, and the routines of the past year continued. Tony left in the morning for work, Claire stayed home swimming in the indoor pool, working out in the gym, reading books, watching movies, and waiting for his return. She still relied on Catherine to inform her each evening of Tony's plans. One change was that if he were in town, he *always* came to her suite. She may even be asleep, but he slept with her. Another change was that he personally informed her of any events, gatherings, or activities they would attend as a couple. Claire felt this was an improvement from Catherine's last-minute information.

Together they attended two formal events in January. The University of Iowa held a banquet, preceded by cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, to recognize platinum donors. Mr. Anthony Rawlings, of course, was one of them. They also attended a political fund-raiser for the Iowa City District Attorney's Office where a speaker spoke about the role of private industry in the nation's financial recovery. Claire played her part well. She remembered all the rules of her first outing at the symphony. Now, as Anthony Rawlings's wife, she didn't need to be the perfect companion. She needed to be the *perfect wife*. She projected the persona well: beautiful, polite, contented, and appreciative.

Claire had been a newlywed over a month, and most of that time was spent wandering around her home. The continual snow and cold even restricted her from getting outside into the woods. She wondered about Courtney or Sue. Perhaps they didn't want to see her. She hadn't seen or talked to anyone since Emily, January 1. The walls of her beautiful home were closing in upon her.

When Tony worked from home, Claire joined him in his office. It wasn't a

requirement. She thought of it as a getaway from her normal routine. He mostly worked from Iowa City, but he also went out of town a few times. He said he wanted her with him on these business trips, but things were too busy. There would be no time for social activities, and she'd be bored. He decided it was better for her to stay home.

Claire felt increasingly claustrophobic, and Tony seemed completely unaware of her plight. Claire decided perhaps this qualified as one of those: I'm a busy man. If you want something, you need to ask me—situations. One night, after Tony returned from a short stay in Chicago and the two lay in his dark suite, Claire decided to ask, "I would like to go with you on your next business trip."

"I told you things are busy you'd be bored."

"I'm bored now. I've barely been out of this house since our honeymoon. I'm going crazy." She expected some realization, an apology for being so involved in business that he'd neglected his wife, perhaps some sweeping request for forgiveness. That wasn't what she received. Abruptly, he turned. With his face only inches from hers, she felt his warm breath on her skin.

"Really? You're bored?"

Resiliently she answered, "I am."

"And you didn't catch the end of the conversation?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't. I'll stay out of your way, and we don't need to go out on the town. I just want to get out of this house."

"You've received many invitations for outings." He remained too close.

"What? What kind of invitations? And why didn't I know about them?"

Tony explained, "You didn't know about them, because I chose not to pass them on to you." Claire waited while he continued, "During our wedding preparations you were extremely busy. Sometimes you weren't home when I returned. I didn't like that." His cadence slowed. "Besides, on New Year's Eve, you seemed to have memory issues. I decided going out as *Mrs. Rawlings* alone, wasn't something you're ready to do."

Claire felt the anger building within her chest and feared if she spoke, her words would fan her husband's fury, not subdue it. Therefore, she concentrated on keeping her lips pressed together as he continued, "And, I like knowing you're home, safe and out of trouble. I have too many things on my plate right now. I don't need to worry about you having another *accident*."

She had remained silent as long as she could. Claire asked assertively, "From whom?"

"Excuse me?" Tony understood her tone. He wanted clarification on her meaning.

"The invitations I've received, who are they from?"

"I believe your ability to understand has diminished with your memory. I said I chose *not* to forward them to you. I decided you will stay home, safe.

Good night.” Tony lay back on his pillow.

She lay still for what seemed like hours. Finally, his breathing slowed and became rhythmic. For the first time since he’d proposed, she didn’t want to be with him. Claire decided since they were in his suite, she could go to hers. She waited until she felt certain he was asleep, and then gently lifted the covers. Feeling for her robe, she heard his booming voice rip through the darkness. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m aware the conversation is done and that I have no control in my own activities. It’s all in your hands. But at this moment, I’m also aware you don’t consider me a spouse or a partner. I’m going to my suite to ponder this information.”

“No, you are not.” Without a doubt, a conclusive statement.

At a little over 6’4” Tony’s arm span was immense. Perhaps if she hadn’t been tying her robe and putting her feet into slippers, she might have had better balance. Nevertheless, in less than a second he grasped her arm and her world tilted. She was once again lying on his bed. The weight of his upper body pinned her to the mattress. Memories of their wedding pictures came to mind. She felt small and defenseless.

“Tony, remember your promise.” Her voice sounded falsely formidable.

“Which has *always* been contingent upon yours.” Her chest suddenly became heavy, not from the weight of his body, but from his words. He continued, “You’re right.” She didn’t speak, unsure of her correctness. “The conversation *is* done and I *am* in total control of your activities, including where you will sleep, and which invitations you’ll accept.” The tears began to pool in her eyes. “However, you’re also mistaken. I don’t *consider* you a spouse. I *know* you are *my* wife. You belong to me.”

Her shoulders ached from the pressure of his forearms. His words weren’t a revelation: Claire knew she was his possession. He continued moving closer with each word. “You are staying here tonight. You are not leaving me, my bed, or my presence.” The tears flowed. “Now it’s time for you to respond appropriately.” His weight shifted slightly.

Claire remembered times in the past when she hadn’t replied quickly enough or to his liking. She focused her energy on keeping her body from trembling; however, she couldn’t concentrate on that and tears. So her words became muffled sobs. Swallowing hard, she tried to strengthen her voice. “I will not leave you.” “Even if I left your bed tonight,” “it would’ve only been because I’m upset,” “not because I want our marriage to be over.” She took a ragged breath, imagined his dark eyes, and thanked God the room was dark.

“Continue.”

“I will *not* leave your bed. I’ve agreed in the past,” “I agree now and forever” “to submit to your authority.” “I’m sorry if I’ve given you cause to break your promise.” Inhaling, she tried desperately to defuse his temper. “If

you recall, this entire incident started because I asked to be with you when you went away. I don't want to leave you. I want to be with you."

"Your ability to respond appropriately has benefited you on multiple occasions."

He released her shoulders and laid his head on his pillow. She stopped sniffling and tried to regulate her breathing.

"Now, take off that robe." As she obeyed, he added, "I believe we'll experiment with some other forms of response." He rolled back toward her. "However, you *are* my partner. I don't want you to do anything you don't want to. So perhaps you would rather go to sleep?"

Claire knew this was one of those offers you can't refuse her grandmother used to talk about. She answered, "No. I'd rather respond to you." She successfully avoided the trembling and almost stopped the tears. The end result was that her head pounded to the beat of her heart, currently too rapid.

"This time, it'll not be verbal." His hands seized her petite frame as his domineering tone claimed her spirit. "As you may recall, this conversation is over."

Claire closed her eyes and nodded. She did her best to ignore her headache and respond to her husband. Just before they drifted to sleep, Tony offered more information. "Courtney and Sue have called multiple times. I'll think about their invitations. Emily has called and e-mailed. John called. He respectfully declined Tom's offer. I believe Emily can wait."

Claire's heart sank. This new information no doubt influenced Tony's temperament. She wanted to believe Tony's offer to John was made in good faith based on John's credentials. John's refusal didn't surprise Claire, though she was sure it did Tony. He didn't often experience rejection. This wasn't the first time she received the consequences of John's actions.

What concerned Claire the most was her relationship with her sister. Would she be allowed to speak to her or see her? She kissed Tony and sounded as compliant as she could muster. "Thank you, I would really like to see Courtney and Sue." Claire wanted to move away from him, to the far side of the king-sized bed, or better—upstairs, but she rested her head on his chest. "I promise my memory is better."

"I'm glad to hear that." He slowly embraced her shoulder as his voice softened. "I need to be in Phoenix next week. It's been in the seventies there. Perhaps you can join me."

She nodded her head. "Thank you, I'd like that."

They fell asleep.

The next day, using Tony's iPhone, Claire was allowed to call both Courtney and Sue. She didn't utilize the speaker phone, and although present, Tony didn't question the content. Both ladies wanted to catch up and hear all about married life. Claire said she would love to. She'd check her calendar

and get back to them. She also apologized for not returning their calls sooner —things were just so busy.



MUCH EARLIER THAN normal, the sound of Tony's alarm woke them on February 1. Their flight to Phoenix was leaving at 7:00 AM. The trip was only planned for one night, but Claire didn't care. They were leaving the estate, and that was enough to propel her from bed to the shower. She would stay at their apartment while Tony met with associates. If all went well, they'd dine out tonight. He described this apartment as one of their smaller ones. As she showered, she wondered what *small* really meant.

Steam filled the bathroom with a muggy fog. She secured the luxurious lavender towel around her body as Tony entered. "We aren't going to Phoenix."

Her shoulders slumped. "Why? Did I do something?"

Tony hugged her warm body as water dripped from her hair onto her shoulders and the floor. "No. We can't go anywhere. Eric just called. We should've looked out the window."

He took her to the tall French doors leading to her balcony. When he moved the drapes she could only see white. At least twelve inches of new snow had fallen on the ground, trees, balcony rail, everywhere. With the addition of the eight to ten inches of old snow, there was now almost two feet, and it continued to fall, accompanied by wind. Barely seeing beyond the balcony, she saw drifts transforming the backyard into an ocean of white waves. Heaven knows how deep the snow was in the bigger drifts. Claire sat on the bed with large droplets gliding down her back, discouraged, and sighed.

Sitting next to her, Tony rubbed her leg. "Think of it as a snow day. Didn't you like those when you were a kid?"

"Yeah, because I didn't want to go to school, but now I want to go."

He hugged her shoulder. "You want to go to school?"

Exhaling loudly, she said, "I want to go anywhere."

Tony lifted some of her hair. "Well, I'm afraid you'll catch pneumonia if you try to go somewhere."

She laid her head back on the bed, pressed her lips into a tight line, and looked up at the ceiling. If she opened her mouth she would scream. She was trapped!

Leaning over her, he grinned. "How about we celebrate our newfound free day?"

She knew what he was thinking, and she didn't want to celebrate. Telling

him *no* was supposed to be her option; however, it hadn't been tested, and Claire didn't think she was emotionally strong enough for the trial. Despondently, she asked, "How do you want to celebrate?"

Still leaning over her, he said, "How about you take me to your lake?"

"What?" Claire's thoughts spun: the lake would be frozen and was about five miles away. Would they freeze? It was out, out of the house! "Are you serious?" Her eyes sparkled as she tried to read her husband's expression.

"If it makes that spark come back to your emerald eyes, I'm serious" He kissed her forehead. "We have boots, coats, and gloves, everything needed to ski. It was one of our honeymoon options. So let's get you dry, us fed, bundled, and find this lake I've heard so much about."

"It's about five miles away. Don't you need to talk to the Phoenix people, let them know what happened?"

"Are you trying to discourage me? I'll contact the Phoenix office. We can communicate later in the day. It's still very early there, and I know I'm older, but I really think I can make five miles." He smiled with milk chocolate eyes. "Besides, we also have cross-country skis. Do you think you can get us there on skis?"

In the midst of a Midwest blizzard, Claire was filled with more warmth and excitement than she'd felt in sometime. Their discussion a week ago left her uneasy. She didn't like the way he'd treated her, or the way it made her feel, but once it was done, she hesitated to revisit the subject. Now, he wanted to go to her lake. "I bet it's prettier in the summer, but I'd love to get out. I know I can find it."

They ate breakfast, and Catherine made them thermoses of coffee. She chided both of them for even thinking about going out in the snow; however, with Tony by her side Claire knew it didn't matter. She was going to her lake, a place she hadn't been since her *accident*.

They dressed in layers, wrapping themselves head to toe, complete with hand and foot warmers, and were out of the house before 8:00 AM. The wind had subsided but the snow still fell.

It had been many years since Claire had cross-country skied; however, the motions swiftly returned as the long slender skis and poles allowed them to glide over the twenty-plus inches of snow. At first, she worried about navigation, but with most of the ground level obstacles covered it wasn't difficult. Skiing was much faster than walking. They reached the clearing in less than thirty minutes. Claire told Tony all about the flowers, butterflies, and animals present in the heat of the summer.

They wore tinted goggles to shield the brightness of the snow, but she sensed his serenity as he listened to her stories. They arrived at the lake shore approximately forty minutes later. Claire wasn't cold. She was exhilarated from the fresh air, exercise, and scenery. Green leaves and blue waters were

her preference, but the snow covered the evergreens and glistening ground were beautiful. The frozen lake covered with peaks and valleys of drifts reminded her of a large flat cake with vanilla frosting. She felt as warm as if it were August.



TONY WAS COMPLETELY enthralled by the glistening vista before him. He'd never taken the time to experience his own property. It wasn't something he cared about or gave much consideration, until now. As they stood and watched, three deer: one six-point buck and two does, galloped at full speed from left to right across the lake. Tony stared at Claire. If the deer could do it, they could too. Skiing on the lake was effortless compared to the woods: no hills, valleys, or trees—only open space. The wind and snow had ceased. The farther west they traveled, the more of the shoreline they could see. Everything looked virgin, completely unspoiled.

After the snow ceased, other animals ventured out of their warm homes. They saw foxes and multitudes of squirrels and birds. Tony said he thought all birds went south for the winter. Claire explained not all birds migrate. She told him that in Indiana the cardinal was omnipresent. She remembered always being excited to see one in winter, it looked so red and vibrant in contrast to the stark gray of winter. Tony continued to ask questions and listen to his wife.

It was almost one when they arrived back at the house. Catherine was elated to see them. She'd been worried. She promised she would send lunch, but first wanted them to get warm. Entering Tony's suite they found his large fireplace roaring with flames and radiating tremendous heat. Claire laughed as Tony removed his ski hat. His hair was messier than she'd ever seen and his cheeks were pink and frigid. Her giddiness amused him. He offered to help remove her winter gear. It didn't take long to realize Fiji had been a better honeymoon destination. Snow activities required too many clothes.

When their food arrived Tony covered Claire with a blanket from his bed. She lay on the rug in front of the fireplace with the soft down comforter and Tony wore only a pair of gym shorts as Cindy wheeled in their lunch. Cindy started to put the warm foods and drink on the table, when smiling at Claire, Tony told Cindy she could leave. Cindy thanked him and left the cart.

Claire smiled at her husband, bare chested, setting their lunch on the table. "Sometimes I think you're the most amazing man I've ever met."

He poured two cups of coffee and carried them to his wife. Joining her under the comforter he prompted. "And other times?"

Answering honestly, she said, "Other times, I don't like you." He looked

at her with astonishment. She kissed his lips. "Today is definitely a *like* day."

His smile warmed her heart as he said, "I'm glad."



WHILE EATING LUNCH Tony asked Claire about the don't like days. She thought about playing it off, lying, or telling him she was joking. Then she decided to be truthful. "I love you. I really do. I sometimes feel like the luckiest woman on the planet, but other times I feel like a five-year-old." She waited. Did he understand what she was trying to say? His eyes weren't darkening; he was listening. "I know you may not think so, but I really don't have any intention of causing you harm. Why would I? You told me your grandfather trusted the wrong people. Was your grandmother one of them?"

Tony seemed slightly shaken by the mention of his grandfather. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm going to assume she loved him and he loved her. If they didn't they wouldn't have married." Tony nodded his understanding. Claire continued, "I realize there are people who may try to hurt you or your business, but I'm not one of them." She wasn't sure how she could explain her feelings to him. She looked directly into his eyes. The mention of his grandfather minutely darkened them. "I don't have a problem with you being in control of our lives. I trust you. I just wish you trusted me, so I could feel like a wife instead of a child or a possession."

She'd been happy, but this conversation was making her sad. "I'm sorry. I'm ruining this wonderful day." She looked down at her lunch and her cold soup. Closing her eyes, she heard his chair move. Claire didn't want him to see the tears escaping her lids. She didn't look up.

Anthony Rawlings gently took his wife's hand and helped her rise from her chair, then tenderly lifted her chin. Seeing her tears, he said, "Claire, it seems to me that you apologize a lot."

She started to say she was sorry, but snickered at herself instead.

"See? See that smile you have? You can't, but I can. It's beautiful, even with your hair a mess, which it is, and your smile, doesn't stop at those perfect lips. It extends to your pink wind-burned cheeks and most dramatically, it extends to your bright, emerald green eyes." He was bending with his nose millimeters from hers. "I apologize for not causing that smile to come out more."

Claire felt her resolve melt as her knees weakened. Thankfully, she was being supported by his strong, steady arms.

Tony continued, "You're right about so many things. Listening to you talk today about the different trees, snow, a blizzard, animals, and birds. You know

so many things I've never attempted to learn, and you know me better than anyone. I've tried to keep my past that: the past. But you've managed to take the bits and pieces I've offered over the course of a year and weave them together into some psychological basis for your comprehension of me. I must reluctantly admit you're correct." She wanted to say something, but he kissed her tenderly and continued, "You have not intentionally given me reason to do anything but trust you, and yet, I know I have not always behaved well. This may come as a shock, but I have issues with control." She couldn't help but smile. "There's that smile."

Tony led her to the sofa in front of the fire. Wearing a soft bathrobe she sat in front of him and leaned her head on his t-shirt covered chest as they both faced the fire. The beat of his heart and the sound of his breathing echoed in her ears. The fire radiated warmth and his skin the aroma of exercise. She felt safe and secure, but at the same time, she had the feeling of living in a house of glass. The security could crash into broken pieces at any second. He asked her what she was thinking. She answered and he didn't respond for a long period. She was apprehensive to turn and see into his eyes.

Finally, he spoke again. "Perhaps I'm afraid of losing you, afraid if you truly know me you won't want to stay with me."

She wasn't sure, but due to his voice and breathing, she wondered if he was having difficulty staying composed. She wanted to alleviate his discomfort, tell him it was okay, he didn't need to say anything else. She didn't turn around as she spoke. "Tony, I'm pretty sure I know you. I'm also sure I'm still here."

"Because, you haven't had the opportunity to leave." His arms were tenderly wrapped around her.

She caressed them gently with her small hands. "No, not because of that, and not because of the gifts, or the trips, or the money. I'm still here because I made a commitment to you. I did that in Central Park and again in our home, because I love you and want to be with you."

He hugged her. "Mrs. Rawlings, I love you too. I want to trust you more and be less controlling. What I don't want is to ever hurt you like I did. If you're kept safely away from the world, there's less of a chance that anything will happen which could cause me to react as I did before."

"I used to feel that way, like I wanted to stay here and not risk the chance of upsetting you. I do not want to upset you, but Tony, that isn't a life. Having me home waiting for you because I have no choice and having me home waiting for you, because I want to be, are two totally different things." She waited, but he didn't respond. So she continued, "If you would trust me, I'll do my best to follow your rules. I'll discuss things with you prior to doing them. I'll check with you before I go anywhere. I understand the importance of appearances and the significance of consequences. I don't want to upset

you. I do want the opportunity to upset you.” Claire decided this conversation was easier without looking into his eyes. She could imagine small black irises with large velvet borders; however, she was certain her imagination and reality differed.

“Tell me what you want. What freedoms have I taken, that you’d like returned?”

She told herself, here is your chance, respond appropriately. “I’d like access to my own invitations. I won’t accept or decline without speaking with you, but I would like the knowledge there are other people out there who care about me. I’d like to be able to speak to my sister without being afraid you won’t let me or be upset by my conversation. I’d like the ability to leave the estate just because. And again, it wouldn’t happen without your consent but just to know I can.” She listened to his breathing. The only alteration occurred when she mentioned Emily. “And I’d like you to be able to contact me directly about our evening plans, not to be told by Catherine. It makes me feel juvenile.” She’d done what she could. She’d been as honest as she could. Now, she exhaled and relaxed against his sturdy chest. She couldn’t think of anything else to say. She’d wait.

The outdoor adventure was exhilarating: cold air, brilliant snow, and muscle exertion from skiing. The warming up process had been remarkable: crackling fire, soft rug, and tender lovemaking. The lunch was warm: soup, *Panini*, and hot coffee. Now they’d shared, talked, and been totally honest with one another. Feeling drained, Claire’s body melted against his. She waited for his response, knowing her fate didn’t rest in her own hands. She had no choice but to trust the man who had her wrapped affectionately in his arms. Closing her eyes she listened to his heart, his breathing, and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Nobody can go back and start a new beginning but anyone can start today and make a new ending.

—Maria Robinson

GRANDMA NICHOLS ONCE said the only constant in life is change. Claire prayed those changes would be good. After their heart-to-heart, she began to see small signs that gave her hope.

The afternoon of their talk, she awoke on the leather sofa in Tony's suite. Hugging the warm comforter, she gazed around. The diminishing daylight accentuated by the glow of the crackling fire illuminated the room. She was alone. At first, she assumed her husband was in the adjoining bath or dressing room, but open doors and silence soon told her otherwise. This had never happened. His suite had technology. She'd seen him use it. The large framed screen could access the world at a click of a remote.

Tentatively, Claire rose and walked to his bureau. The top left drawer contained that key to accessibility. She didn't want to point and click. She needed to know if she could. The internal monologue began: can Tony see me? He'd never talked about cameras in his suite. Did they exist? Is this a test? A trap? She asked for the ability to upset him. Claire decided she needed to know if she'd been granted that chance.

Her hand trembled as she gripped the slender handle. What if the drawer was locked or the remote was gone? Calling upon her courage and strength, she pulled. Through the darkness and into the cavernous depth, she saw it: silver with black buttons. The remote was there, available to her. Emotions swept through her: relief, she was getting the chance she requested. Happiness: he was trusting her. Sadness: she couldn't touch it. Fear: would he catch her? She listened for the sound of footsteps, or worse, doors opening. The only sound came from the fireplace. Claire carefully closed the drawer,

walked back to the sofa, and collapsed onto the soft cushions. The flames flickered as the scene melted before her moistening eyes. She pulled her knees into her chest and watched the blaze before her. Fear and sadness pushed relief and happiness away. Summoning the happiness, she told herself: this was a good thing. She attempted to regain her composure before she left his suite.



ABOUT A WEEK later, she sat perched on a high stool with her *Gucci* heeled boots teetering on a wooden rod, listening to her friend's voice: more evidence of progress. Claire loved Courtney's company. She could talk enough for the both of them, making Claire laugh in the process. Today, Courtney was talking about the *Red Cross*, the amazing job it did responding to natural disasters and helping the citizens of Iowa and the United States. She explained the financial problems facing the organization with donations decreasing and needs increasing. Courtney was the fund-raising chairman for the Quad City Chapter. She asked Claire to help with her committee, believing they had the connections to individuals and businesses who were surviving the economic slowdown. They could use those connections to help raise money. She asked Claire which fund-raisers she thought would be most profitable. They discussed the pros and cons of an auction, banquet, sports, tournament, or raffle, there were so many possibilities. Courtney wanted to exceed last year's goal.

The pub where they sat was electric with energy. Located on the University of Iowa's campus, its tables overflowed mostly with students coming and going. The hum of voices combined with the sound of moving chairs caused Claire's toes to wiggle with excitement. She hadn't been around this many people in so long. She longed to absorb all the vitality. Claire told Courtney with a degree in meteorology, the idea of assisting with a charity which aided with the disasters she used to forecast, appealed to her.

Courtney gave her a folder of information. It contained a calendar of scheduled committee meetings and a list of committee members' names, e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers. As Claire ate her salad, she scanned the contents. This volunteering would be more time consuming than she'd realized. That was great. Of course, she knew she would need to run it all by Tony, but how would it appear if Mrs. Anthony Rawlings wasn't willing to help charities? Besides, he'd allowed this outing, knowing Courtney intention... more evidence.

Courtney stood to get them both more coffee, and Claire looked around the restaurant. She couldn't believe her exhilaration at being out with a friend.

Between Courtney and the surroundings, she feared her chest would pop. The people at the other tables looked so carefree. They probably took their freedoms for granted. Claire knew she used to. Exhaling, she thought about her husband. He was trying to consider her requests. She smiled as she remembered him telling her to call Courtney.

Everything seemed normal as he entered her suite and talked about his day. It was as he entered the bathroom for a shower that his words stunned her. “Claire, I almost forgot, Courtney would like you to call her. My iPhone is on the bookcase. Her number is in the address book under Courtney S., help yourself.” Then he turned and closed the door. Claire stared. Was it really him? The other times she called from any phone he’d dialed. She worried perhaps she imagined the whole scene. Her legs wobbled as she walked toward his phone. Slowly, she picked it up and went through the address book. She scrolled until she saw Courtney S. There were many names. She continued to scroll and saw Emily V., John V., and John V. Home. She scrolled back to Courtney S. and hit the dial icon. The screen indicated the call was in progress. It didn’t last long and Claire believed her clammy hands and shaking knees weren’t detectable on the other end. Most excitedly, she’d made a call which led to this lunch.

When Courtney returned, she set the mugs on the table. Their salads were gone and the *Red Cross* had been thoroughly discussed. It had been fun. Now they were having some more coffee and chatting before returning home. Gently, Courtney reached out and held Claire’s hand. Suddenly, Claire felt uneasy. With as much practice as she had maintaining eye contact in difficult situations, she looked away from her friend. Courtney’s pale blue eyes showed too much concern.

“I’m so glad you’ve agreed to help me.” Courtney spoke softly and slowly.

Claire’s uneasiness made her want to pull her hand away. Instead, she smiled. “I’m happy I can help you and others.”

“Claire, you don’t need to be perfect all the time. You don’t need to say everything perfectly, look perfect, and be perfect. Life isn’t a test you must continually pass.” Claire stared silently at her friend, afraid her voice might crack as the energy of the room evaporated. “I just want you to know, Brent and I have known Tony for a long time...” Claire swallowed. She’d heard this speech from everyone who knew her husband and entitled it the *Great Man Speech*, usually accompanied by *he works so hard...* “...and he can be a

pompous, condescending, controlling ass.”

Claire’s eyes grew wide and her head dropped. She didn’t cry. She laughed, suddenly and uncontrollably, bordering on hysteria. It wasn’t good for appearances. Apparently, her laughter was contagious because Courtney started laughing, too. People looked at them. Fleetingly, Claire didn’t care. After a few moments, she regained enough composure to ask, “Excuse me? What did you just say?”

“Honey, you heard me. I’m pretty sure you know exactly what I said.” Courtney squeezed Claire’s hand again. “Don’t get me wrong. I love your husband, but, let me be honest, sometimes I hate him too.” Claire nodded. She completely understood. “It’s all right; however, it’s not all right for you to feel alone.” Claire listened. “Your husband loves you. I see it in his eyes when he looks at you. I’ve never seen him look at another woman the way he looks at you. He also has demons, ones I can’t even begin to understand. He also has serious issues with control. He can drive Brent crazy sometimes.”

Claire’s uneasiness returned. “Courtney, I think maybe we shouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Tony would say we shouldn’t be having this conversation. What do you say?”

Claire didn’t know what to say. Part of her wanted the conversation to end. It made her uncomfortable. The other part of her wanted to talk, to open up and feel connected to someone in this world. Someone besides Tony. “I think maybe it would be better not to speak about Tony.”

“All right, I respect you. I respect you for marrying Tony and for your inability to talk.” Claire tried desperately to maintain her mask. “I’ve tried my very best to make you comfortable. I want you to feel relaxed with me.”

“I do, Courtney. I consider you my friend.”

“Honey, I am your friend. You’re my friend, and Tony’s a dear friend, too. But that doesn’t mean I don’t worry about you.”

“Thank you, but you don’t need to worry about me. I’m fine.”

“Yeah, I recognize fine, and sometimes when you’re with us, you are fine. Other times you only seem fine.” Claire didn’t know what to say. “It must be difficult to suddenly be thrust into Tony’s world. He puts a lot of significance on appearance. Well, maybe he hasn’t mentioned that to you.” Courtney started to stand to leave.

Tears began to escape down Claire’s cheeks. Her voice was barely an audible whisper, “Courtney, please sit back down.” Courtney did. “If Tony knew we were having this conversation, I wouldn’t be able to have lunch with you again and perhaps it could affect Brent’s job. I know they’re best friends, but with Tony, I’m not sure there are boundaries.” Courtney was at least twenty years Claire’s senior, yet she listened earnestly, recognizing the sincerity of the younger woman’s tone.

"So my intuitions aren't unwarranted?" Claire shook her head, and Courtney spoke softly. "Claire, are you all right?"

"Courtney, I think we need to go back to your SUV. I'm uncomfortable having this conversation, and I'm definitely uncomfortable having it in a public place."

They stood, put on their warm coats, gathered their purses, and walked to Courtney's SUV. The break in the conversation and fresh cool air gave Claire time to regroup. Alarms sounded in her head. If she chose to continue this discussion she'd be breaking rules: number one, do as you're told. She'd been told on multiple occasions the importance of appearances and not divulging private information. This was her first time out alone as Mrs. Anthony Rawlings. If she wanted to be involved with the *Red Cross* and wanted more freedoms, breaking rules would *not* facilitate those goals. They walked to the car in silence.

Sitting in the passenger seat, Claire buckled her seat belt and straightened her posture. She knew what she would say. "Courtney, thank you for your support. You're right. I've been overwhelmed by the responsibility of becoming Tony's wife. He's been supportive and understanding and is helping me recognize the significance of and the obligations accompanying that title. I'm sure he'll be happy to know you're willing to help me, too."

Courtney understood. Claire had just ended the conversation. "I'm glad you're feeling better about it. Just know that sometimes women pick up on things men don't, even *very observant* men. I hope it'll help you to know I'm quite perceptive, and I'm here for you whenever you need me."

Claire thanked her again and asked her a question about the *Red Cross*. While driving, Courtney asked if Claire and Tony had special plans for Tony's birthday, this weekend. Claire was taken aback. She didn't know it was her husband's birthday; however, he hadn't known it was her birthday either.

"I don't believe we do. Tony seems to be very low-key about birthdays."

Courtney declared it was settled, they would do something together. She told Claire about a bar in Rock Island with live music, good food, and a fun atmosphere. Courtney thought it would be good for all of them. Claire promised to discuss it with Tony and let her know. They debated the best day; Tony's birthday was on Saturday. Either Friday or Saturday would work for the Simmons. When Claire got out of the car she invited Courtney inside. Courtney declined.

Claire leaned over and hugged her. "Thank you for everything." She looked directly into Courtney's caring blue eyes. "I'm looking forward to helping you and you helping me." She grabbed her *Prada* handbag and the charity information.

Catherine let her know Mr. Rawlings would be home for dinner in her suite at 7:00 PM. Suite meant casual, but Claire decided she wanted to make

the night special. She wanted him to know how grateful she was for the small freedom. She also knew she'd experienced an excellent opportunity to upset him and avoided it. She wouldn't share that information, but in her mind it gave them more reason for celebration.

Tony was pleasantly surprised by Claire's appreciation and enthusiasm. When she showed him the schedule of committee meetings he said it would be a week-by-week decision. Circumstances can change; however, he didn't anticipate any *glitches*. She didn't either.

During dinner she mentioned, "I learned a secret about you today."

"I wasn't aware I had any secrets from you."

Claire smiled. "I learned Saturday is your birthday."

His eyes darkened and his jaw clenched. "I thought since I missed your special day, we could miss mine."

"Well, Courtney thinks we should all go to the *Rock Island Brew Company*."

"I know the place. I've been there."

Claire waited for him to agree to the celebration. Finally, she asked, "I promised Courtney I'd get back to her about it. Would you like to go Friday night or Saturday night?" His agitated expression made her uncomfortable. She realized this was a subject he didn't want to continue. "Or, would you rather I told her we'll celebrate on our own?"

"I will think about it and get back to Courtney." The discussion was done, and Claire didn't know their plans.



THE NEXT EVENING Claire sat surrounded by papers when Tony entered her suite. Dressed and ready for dinner, she was completely absorbed in the financial information of the *Iowa Red Cross*. He looked at her mess and placed two large leather-bound photo albums on top of her papers. Claire looked at the albums and then at her husband. "Good evening. What are these?"

He bent to kiss her and the tips of his lips moved upward. "They're proofs of the most beautiful bride I've ever seen." Quickly, forgetting the mounds of paper, she began looking through the albums. The only pictures she'd seen were the ones on New Year's Eve. The first album began with pre-wedding poses. The estate, the men, the women, everything and everyone looked beautiful. Then ones of Claire and John prior to walking down the aisle. Tony watched as she turned each page; she was afraid to linger on the photos of John and Emily. She would look at them later. The next, were a series of Claire approaching Tony and him waiting. She had to admit she looked

beautiful. Tony added adjectives: stunning, amazing, gorgeous, and striking. They both appeared to be brimming with love and adoration. There were photos from multiple directions: some very artsy.

Their food arrived and they still had a full album to view. After dinner they spent the entire evening on the sofa in front of the fire, going over and over each photo. They talked about the people, decorations, and ceremony. There were numerous posed photos of the two of them in the grand hall and at the base of the stairs. She laughed at ones where the photographer put her up a few steps, trying to make her taller. “You know, if you’d married one of those models you dated they wouldn’t have had to do that.”

He kissed her tenderly and gazed at her with soft brown eyes. “I didn’t want to marry any of those women. I’ve never wanted to marry anyone but you.” He could melt her heart so easily.

The next photos were of the reception. They both agreed the guests seemed to enjoy themselves. Then pictures of them dancing. Claire remembered her overwhelming desire as Tony directed her around the floor. “I love watching your eyes sparkle as you look at these photos.” She told him how much she enjoyed their reception, especially the dancing. “Well, it won’t be the same, but we can try to relive that dancing on Saturday for my birthday.”

Claire smiled. They were going to celebrate. “I don’t know how I can possibly choose which pictures I like best.”

“Then don’t choose. You can have them all.” Placing one arm around her and flipping the pages back, and added, “This one of you on the stairs, with your gown all around you, I want that one. I want it enlarged over the grand fireplace in the sitting room.”

Claire wrinkled her nose. “That’s silly. I don’t want to see me great-big every day.”

“I don’t care. I do, and I will. Actually, I think I’ll contract an artist to paint it.” He leaned back and smiled. Claire just shook her head. Stopping him from doing something he wanted to do was beyond her ability.

Next, she saw the family photo of her, Tony, and the Vandersols. “Tony, can we have copies of some of these made for Emily and sent to them?” She only said Emily on purpose, but the them should have been her.

He sighed. “Yes, that can be done.”

Claire knew she should drop the subject, but sometimes she couldn’t stop herself. “Has Emily tried to contact me anymore?”

“Yes.”

Claire didn’t reply. He knew what she wanted. If she persisted it would be arguing or pleading. If he changed his mind, he would let her know. Besides, they were having a nice evening with the wedding pictures. She directed the conversation back to the album. “Look at this picture of MaryAnn and Eli.

They were hilarious!” The Vandersol conversation ended.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Trust not too much to appearance

—Virgil

THE BIRTHDAY WAS a success. Tony and Brent joked that with late-night partying they shouldn't drive an hour home, so everyone rode together in the limousine. *The Brew Company* was vibrant with music resonating from multiple sections of the large warehouse style building. The main stage had a *Tribute to Jazz* performance. Courtney reserved a premium table and told the restaurant they were celebrating a birthday. The people at *The Brew Company* didn't know his name, only that Tony was the guest of honor. Claire, Courtney, and Brent laughed as the singer acknowledged him with a rendition of *Hey Big Spender* and wrapped him in her feather boa. Watching Tony's tolerance, Claire decided she could learn a lot from Courtney. He seemed to accept things from her Claire wouldn't dare to attempt.



A WEEK LATER, Tony invited Claire to Chicago for two nights. Even though she needed to cancel a committee meeting, she wanted to go. It was even her idea to go to the spa and lighten her dark roots. Brent and David Field, whom Claire met what seemed like a lifetime ago on her first trip to New York, were with them as they flew to Chicago. Claire sat on the sofa while the three men discussed their impending meetings. To pass the time, she looked through her purse and was pleased to have her new ID and credit card. Claire didn't care about their money, but shopping was one of the few pass times Tony granted without hesitation.

Her old driver's license was a Georgia issued ID. She thought it was

interesting to see the difference in different states licenses. She soon realized the variances didn't stop with the issuing state. The new one contained her name: Claire Rawlings, and printed at the top was *VALID IDENTIFICATION*. Her Georgia ID had said *VALID DRIVER'S LICENSE*. She hadn't noticed it before. It wasn't something she should bring up with Brent and David present but decided it was worth discussing when they were alone.

Claire spent the afternoon at the spa lightening her hair and receiving a manicure and pedicure. When she arrived back at the apartment, Charles informed Mrs. Rawlings, Mr. Rawlings would be detained until after 9:00 PM. He could happily serve her dinner at a more appropriate hour. She declined. "Thank you, Charles. I'll wait for Mr. Rawlings."

While dining, Claire sensed Tony multitasking. He was eating and conversing with her, but his mind was elsewhere with Brent and David on some big deal. He talked about the next evening. Hopefully, they would be able to go out to dinner and perhaps to a show. It all depended on his meetings. Claire said it sounded great, but she understood if his work went late. She planned to spend the entire day shopping and knew they were scheduled to go home on Thursday.

As Claire contemplated the best way to bring up her question, Tony did it for her. "You're going shopping tomorrow? Did you see your new ID and credit card? They should be in your wallet."

"I did, and I was wondering why my new ID isn't a driver's license?"

Tony momentarily stopped eating and looked at Claire as if she'd asked why is the sky blue or why do birds fly? It seemed as though the only word missing from his next sentence was *Duh*. "Because you don't drive." His tone wasn't cruel, perhaps cold.

She thought carefully about her response. "I haven't driven since I've been with you, but I used to drive and enjoyed it."

"You now have access to a driver. You didn't before. Correct?"

"Correct. However, you have a driver and you still drive. The Simmons' have a driver and Courtney drives."

Tony's annoyance with this conversation came through loud and clear, his words were flat with restraint. "Claire, this is a ridiculous conversation. You have a driver or you're with me. You have no need to drive."

"Tony, you are obviously busy with work. We can discuss this later."



THROUGHOUT THE PAST year there were numerous instances when Tony purposely baited Claire. He liked to observe her reactions. Initially, it was done maliciously. It intrigued him to see how far he could push. Lately, it had

become a private game. He found her self-control and resilience incredibly sexy. The restraint she demonstrated to refrain from arguing, when clearly her body language screamed fight, was stimulating.

This evening Tony was not playing a game. His mind was set. Claire would not be driving. The fact they were even discussing the subject seemed absurd. "Let me help you. It *has* been a long day and this discussion is over. It does not need to be revisited."



SHE THOUGHT ABOUT saying, "Fine, I'm going to bed."

Before she could, he continued, "I would offer you the opportunity to decide on your own if it is worth continuing, but I have decided not to take that risk. It isn't."

Her chest expanded and contracted as she released a sigh. Looking at her husband, she kept her lips together and remained silent. He watched her neck stiffen and eyes flash. He waited. After a prolonged silence, confident of her compliance, he continued, "Now, tell me about your day at the spa."

Claire did her best to feign enthusiasm and replied, "It was very nice. They always do a great job and make me feel special." Thinking: as opposed to how I'm feeling right now.

A wall of glass extended from ceiling to floor behind Tony. Through the night sky, Claire saw the head and tail lights of vehicles moving around the windy city. Somewhere deep in her soul she wondered will I ever drive, again?

Chicago was uneventful. She shopped without accidentally providing an interview. They dined at a steak house not far from the Tower and went to the *Cadillac Palace Theater* for *Les Miserables*. Claire saw the same musical many years ago from the nosebleed section. It was one of her favorite live shows, a winner of seven Tony Awards, she didn't mind seeing it again. It amazed her they could get such exceptional seats. The night before Tony didn't know if they would be attending a show. *Les Miserables* had been sold out for months, yet they were seated in a premium box enjoying the outstanding performance.

Apparently, Tony's dealings were successful because they and Brent were able to go back to Iowa as planned. David stayed behind to finalize some contracts. Reading her book, Claire observed Tony with Brent, sensing a difference from the accustomed friendly casual interaction. Watching and listening to them discuss business issues reminded her of Courtney's comment: he can drive Brent crazy sometimes. She hadn't seen it before, but understood it now.

Tony's repertoire of personalities included an overpowering domineering force which apparently was reserved for those closest to him. Claire had plenty of personal experience with this personality, but she'd never had the opportunity to observe it directed at someone else. Today she witnessed Tony's manipulative rule being unleashed on Brent. It wasn't pretty. She understood how Brent could relay things to Courtney, because that's what real couples did, and Courtney could hate and love Tony at the same time. Pretending to be absorbed in her book, Claire didn't want to be included in the conversation, or for her presence to make Brent uncomfortable. It obviously wasn't affecting Tony.



THE LAST WEEK of February, Claire and Tony prepared for an interview with *Vanity Fair Magazine*. Shelly, Tony's publicist, made a point to come to their house and explain to Claire that this interview was important to Mr. Rawlings's public relations. There were many speculations in the media about the two of them, their fast wedding, and lack of prenuptial agreement. This would be their way to shape and control the information. Claire thought it was a nice gesture. Truthfully, if Tony told her to do the interview, she would do it. What surprised Claire was the extent of planning and preparation which went into it.

Shelly agreed to *Vanity Fair* because of their willingness to work openly. They gave her a list of questions. She deleted, added, and tweaked them until both parties were satisfied. Then Tony and Claire were given the questions and time to work on their *spontaneous* answers. Next, with Shelly's assistance, they practiced and modified their answers. She arranged for cosmetologists, beauticians, and clothing designers to assist them before the photo shoot. Shelly promised to be present throughout the entire interview and photo session. She would step in and stop any unapproved questions. This was better than Mr. or Mrs. Rawlings refusing to answer a question or appearing unaccommodating. The article would then be reviewed and approved prior to publication.

Claire thought the whole thing was hilarious. Did all people go through this before an interview? There was a time in her life when she read a celebrity interview and assumed it was as it appeared. Being Mrs. Rawlings continued to teach her so much.

The day of the interview finally arrived. The people who came to make Claire and Tony beautiful arrived early, before 7:30 AM. By the time Shelly arrived they both looked like models. Just another day sitting around the house! Claire thought as she looked in the mirror at her professional make-up

and styled hair.

Catherine assumed the challenge of the house. It sparkled. Even the weather received the perfection memo. Not realizing it was late February, the sun shone through a sapphire blue sky, and a fresh layer of snow blanketed the gray dingy ground, adding luster to the outdoors.

Anne Robinson, the reporter from *Vanity Fair*, arrived promptly at 9:00 AM accompanied by a photography crew. The Rawlings were only introduced to the lead photographer, Shaun Stivert. The plan commenced with photos first, while Claire and Tony looked fresh and beautiful. Then they progressed to the interview. The whole process was more work than Claire imagined.

Shelly was true to her word and omnipresent. She didn't hesitate to say, "No, I think this would be better," or, "We went over this. You know that won't be discussed today." Claire studied her lines well, knowing what to say and how to say it. Tony practiced too. Claire thought they both sounded sincere and spontaneous. The *Vanity Fair* crew finally left after 1:00 PM with Shelly not far behind. Before she left, she said, "I think that went very well. I'll let you know as soon as I have an approved copy."

Once everyone was gone, Claire relished the quiet house again, while her head pounded behind her eyes. The headaches weren't as frequent as they were right after her *accident*; however, when they struck they could be debilitating. Sleeping in a very dark room was the best remedy.

Following the interview Claire accompanied her husband to his office. He hoped to accomplish as much work as possible from home. Driving into Iowa City would be counterproductive this late in the day. Claire closed her eyes and enjoyed the peacefulness as Cindy placed their food on the long shiny table. After pouring their coffee, she asked if they needed anything else.

"No, you may go." Tony replied, before he turned to Claire and asked, "How do you think it went?"

She opened her eyes to focus. "I really think it went well. It was more draining than I expected. I can't wait to see the final article."

"Shelly said we should have a draft by next week. It's supposed to be the cover story for the April publication. So it won't hit the newsstands for a while." Claire shook her head. She couldn't believe her marriage would warrant a cover story for anything, much less *Vanity Fair*. The food and coffee helped her head, but she suspected it'd gone too far. A nap was the real remedy. Once they finished eating, Tony walked over toward his desk.

"Do you need me? I'd like to go upstairs. The morning wore me out," Claire asked, as she stood to leave.

He picked up a manila folder and handed it to her. "I'd like you to stay here while you look at these." She took the folder to the sofa and sat down. The content of the folder was a mystery. She suddenly had visions of Tony with the Meredith Banks interview. Sometimes compartmentalized memories

would sneak out.

She opened the folder to find over an inch thick stack of papers. They were printed e-mails. Her mind moved slowly, exhausted from the interview process and dulled from her headache. Confused, she asked, “What are these?”

“Your invitations.” Granting her another freedom, he watched as she read. She looked at the top e-mail:

To: Anthony Rawlings, anthrawl265@rawlingsind.com
From: Courtney Simmons, courtsim768@rawlingsind.com
Date: February 25, 2011
Subject: For Claire, attachment

Please let Claire know that our meeting is scheduled for next Wednesday at noon, but I would like to get together before that so we can brainstorm. We need to get the fund-raising calendar set by the next meeting. Attached is a file she needs to review. If one of you could let me know when a good time to get together is I would appreciate it. —Courtney

(Paper clipped to the e-mail was a five-page report)

Claire didn’t know what to say, finally she weakly managed, “Thank you.” He didn’t reply, but watched and continued to evaluate her response. She went back to the stack. The e-mail under Courtney’s was from Emily. It too was dated February 25, 2011; however, it was a series of correspondences.

February 25, 2011

Hi, it is me again. I realize that Claire is busy with her new responsibilities, but I would like to talk to her. I’m usually home most evenings. It has been almost two months. I have sent many e-mails and tried numerous times to call. Thank you, Emily.

February 11, 2011

Mrs. Rawlings is unable to respond to your request at this time.
Patricia M.

February 9, 2011

Hello, this is Emily Vandersol, again. Could you please inform Mrs. Rawlings that her sister would like to speak to her? Thank you.

February 2, 2011

Mrs. Rawlings is unable to respond to your request at this time.
Patricia M.

February 1, 2011

Hello, Emily Vandersol here. I'm the sister of Mrs. Rawlings. I'm not sure who is replying to these e-mails. I have attempted to reach Mr. Rawlings to no avail. Please inform Mr. Rawlings or Mrs. Rawlings that my husband and I would like to talk with them. We would be happy to meet them if they plan a trip to New York, or a telephone call would be acceptable. I look forward to your response.

January 23, 2011

Mrs. Rawlings is unable to respond to your request at this time.
Patricia M.

January 22, 2011

Hello, Anthony, are you receiving my e-mails? I know that you have learned of John's decision. I would like to talk to you and Claire. We need to be sure this job thing doesn't affect our family relationship. Let me talk to you about John and his reasoning. Please pass this on to Claire. I will be home all weekend. She can call anytime. Thanks. Em.

January 17, 2011

Mrs. Rawlings is unable to respond to your request at this time.
Patricia M.

January 15, 2011

Hi, Anthony and Claire, I had hoped we could talk, but I haven't been able to reach you. John is meeting with Tom on Monday. It would be nice if I could talk with Claire and settle a few things before John's meeting. I hope you check your e-mails on the weekend. I will be waiting for your or Claire's call. By the way, I saw some of your wedding photos in the grocery store this morning. You two looked wonderful. Please call.

January 4, 2011

Mrs. Rawlings is unable to respond to your request at this time.
Patricia M.

January 3, 2011

Hi, Anthony, I need to speak to Claire again. I'm not sure if she told you, but I brought up John's job offer the other day. I've been thinking about it, and feel guilty. It wasn't fair of me to talk to her about it. I know you all have a lot going on. John wanted to know if she had anything to do with your offer. I could tell she really didn't know about it. I need to tell her I'm sorry for putting her in a difficult position. I appreciate what you are offering John. I am trying to stay out of his decision process. But I would like to talk to Claire some more. It was so nice to see more of her during the wedding. Please ask her to call me, and tell her I love her. The photos of you two on the news were amazing. Thanks again for the transportation and the stay in your home. It was beautiful.

Thank you, Emily

This history was stapled together. Claire's eyes were wet by the time she finished Emily's last or first e-mail. She looked up at Tony. He still didn't speak. His dark eyes glared. Claire wondered what she was supposed to do with this information. Perhaps it was her head, but she truly didn't know how to respond. So she asked, "Thank you for giving me my invitations. Now what am I supposed to do with this knowledge?"

"Tell me what you want to do." His tone was hard.

Claire rose and approached his desk. "I want to call her." She saw the deliberation on his face. She remembered a time when she was unable to read his expression. Her ability wasn't comforting. Claire tried desperately to

modulate her voice. “I’ll do it here on the speaker phone. I don’t care if you listen to every word and tell me what to say. I just want to call her.” He still didn’t speak; nevertheless, the intensity in his eyes multiplied. “Tony, may I please call her?”

“It’s almost 3:00 PM, which would be 4:00 PM in Troy. Would she be home?”

It wasn’t an answer, but it wasn’t a denial.

Claire thought about it. School finished at 3:15 PM, at least it used to. “She might.” As if thinking out loud, she added, “And as a plus John won’t be.”

He didn’t respond to her last statement, instead he began to talk about her e-mails. She sat as he explained that the folder included multiple e-mails from people she didn’t know. Since their marriage, many people have attempted to contact her for various reasons. Patricia replied to everyone: Mrs. Rawlings is unable to respond to your request at this time.

Tony continued, “Your preparation for the *Vanity Fair* interview and execution today impressed me. I also appreciate you made requests a month ago and have been patient. I believe you deserve to be rewarded. Therefore, regarding your e-mails, from now on, before Patricia replies you will have the opportunity to review them. We will discuss them. Together we’ll decide responses. Of course, I’ll have the final say; however, I believe you’ve earned a voice.”

Claire realized Tony believed he’d presented her with a freedom. She couldn’t help think it was, instead, only a glimpse of what she was missing. The forbidden opportunities would now be staring her in the face. “Thank you, understand.”

He turned to his computer screens, and she watched the back of his head for what seemed like hours. He knew what she wanted. She’d made her request. Now he was making her wait. How would she respond? He’d provided a token of his approval. Would she submissively accept or would she pursue the idea of calling her sister?

Claire closed her eyes and tried to stop the pounding in her temples. Perched on the chair’s edge near his desk, she refused to budge. The folder, the gift he’d given her, sat closed on her lap. She didn’t care about people she didn’t know, and her head hurt too much to read anymore. She waited as his fingers flew between the keyboard and mouse. Sitting silently and expressionlessly she remembered Courtney’s kind words: Life isn’t a test you must continually pass. Claire absentmindedly rolled her shoulders and straightened her neck. If her only possibility of calling Emily was passing this test, then by God, she wasn’t moving from this seat.

Finally, he turned to face her. “Why have you not called until now?” He presented his question with harsh overtones.

Thinking out loud, she said, “I’ve been busy. I can tell her about the *Red Cross* and preparing for our interview.”

What followed were not suggestions, but orders. “*You will be* apologetic and explain that *you* have been meaning to call. Seeing her recent e-mail reminded you, *you haven’t*. Your reasons sound valid. I’d prefer you didn’t discuss the job situation. It’s done, and of course, there are no hard feelings.”

The directives should have been upsetting, but she’d played this game before. They were the means to her goal. “Yes, I promise.”

He dialed the phone, put it on speaker, and didn’t bother to turn away. The phone rang three times. Claire’s hopes began to sink until finally Emily answered.

“Hi, Emily, it’s Claire.” Emily’s voice brimmed with excitement. Claire’s sounded happy and apologetic. They spoke for about ten minutes. On a few occasions, Tony indicated that the subject needed to be changed. Claire attempted to keep the discussion away from the job, but Emily was determined to discuss it, explaining how John was currently very close to being named partner. He didn’t feel right abandoning the firm that had taken a chance on him when he first graduated. He’d worked hard to get to his position and didn’t feel right working for family; however, he was very honored Anthony would consider hiring him. They also discussed Emily’s class, and she asked about the interview Claire mentioned. Before they hung up Claire promised to do a better job responding to Emily’s e-mails.

It amazed Claire how one phone call could make her both happy and sad. Maintaining her *happy* voice during the call almost reduced her to tears on its completion. Her energy was totally depleted. “If it’s all right with you, I’ll take the folder upstairs and look through it. We can discuss the e-mails after dinner.”

“That’s fine, you may go.”

Once upstairs, Claire decided to nap instead of looking through the folder. It’d been a long day. The contrast between the interview and her reality intensified the pounding behind her eyes and more recent nausea. She took some acetaminophen, crawled between the soft cool sheets, and allowed the tears from the phone call to flow. Sleep was a welcome escape.

It wasn’t long after she fell asleep when Tony woke her. He wanted to thank her again for her performance during the interview. He also believed she wanted to thank him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

This only is denied even to God, the power to undo the past.

—Agathon

ON MARCH 15, Tony brought home the final copy of the article approved by Shelly. It was scheduled to be published the end of March, officially the April 2011 issue of *Vanity Fair*:

***Anthony Rawlings Introduces the World to the Love of his Life, His Wife
Claire Rawlings—Let the Rumors Cease and Learn how She has Changed
His Life***

By: Anne Robinson Photos by: Shaun Stivert

***You don't marry someone you can live with, you marry the person who you
cannot live without.***

—Unknown author

On a beautiful snowy day, in the Midwest, Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Rawlings sat down with *Vanity Fair* and addressed the questions, rumors, and realities of their acquaintance, courtship, engagement, and marriage. The exceedingly private man and his beautiful new bride graciously opened their home to our photographers and interviewer. (Photo of Tony and Claire dressed in casual elegant slacks and sweaters, sitting on a sofa in their gorgeous sitting room.)

The home of Anthony and Claire Rawlings is a stately 6,000 plus acre estate near Iowa City, Iowa. Their residence is a spacious elegant home secluded within the private gates of this countryside.

Built by Mr. Rawlings approximately sixteen years ago, it resembles a 1940's Romanesque-style mansion. The main house is centered upon a round

brick drive. Projecting from the main structure are wings of additional corridors and rooms. Upon entry you may feel you have entered a museum; however, the warmth and love radiated by the newlyweds soon help you to realize you have entered a family home; a quality Mr. Rawlings states was missing until recently.

It was late May of 2010 when Anthony Rawlings first introduced the city of Davenport to the then Claire Nichols. They attended the Quad City Symphony. Mr. Rawlings was asked to attend the event because of a generous donation made to both the Quad City Symphony and the Support the Arts Foundation. Mr. Rawlings has long been known for his generosity and pursuit of philanthropic endeavors. He is a firm believer in the arts and continues to support endeavors that promote artistic pursuits. As a local celebrity, Mr. Rawlings is often seen attending functions in and around the Quad Cities (as well as in cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles).

It was his companion on that evening that was unfamiliar. He has been seen on various occasions with different women, some with names we recognize, such as Cynthia Simmons and Julia Owens. Truthfully, throughout his forty-six years he has been seen with many beautiful women; however, it was apparent to those present on that evening in May, that this was different. Many on-lookers reported “glances” and “hand holding” that were not witnessed before.

When discussing their first public “date,” *Vanity Fair* noted that the new Mrs. Rawlings couldn’t help look at her husband with blushed cheeks and a bashful smile. She stated that she recalled the standing ovation he received and how handsome she thought he looked. But she hastily added that at that time, neither of them was looking for a long-term relationship.

Anthony said that he recalls seeing Claire when he picked her up for the symphony. He even recalled her outfit, a black dress with a beaded bodice, and that her hair was up with curls. (Anthony gently played with his wife’s hair as he described the style.) He remembered that she was stunning and he was proud to accompany her to the event.

VF: Now, ladies, ask your husband if he remembers what you were wearing on that first date! I had to think that Mr. Rawlings should have realized at that moment his heart was lost. I wanted to know how the two of them got to that first date. How did they meet?

Anthony told the story of meeting Claire in Atlanta, Georgia—

VF: Was it “love” at first sight?

They smiled at one another. Claire shook her head. “Probably not,” and she added, “Anthony is a complicated, private man. You can love the wrapping paper, but with him it takes some time to find out what is inside. I wouldn’t give my life to someone without knowing what is inside the package.”

“What is love? Love is when one person knows all of your secrets, your deepest, darkest, most dreadful secrets of which no one else in the world knows. And yet in the end, that one person does not think any less of you.”

Mrs. Rawlings added she has seen the inside of the package and loves it more than the wrapping paper.

VF: *Mrs. Rawlings, can you share some of your findings with our readers? What have you found under that amazing wrapping paper?*

Blushing slightly at the inference, she quickly recovered. “Well, he isn’t exactly how he appears.” Anthony seemed to be interested in what she was about to reveal. Claire continued, “For example, he has been known to hold webinars and web conferences from home in a shirt, tie, suit jacket, gym shorts, and sneakers.” She smiled at her husband, who playfully shook his head.

He responded, “Great. Now I’m going to have to stand before each webinar to alleviate the participants’ curiosity.” He smiled broadly.

When asked if anything else surprised her about Anthony, after some reflection she answered yes. He is a Vikings fan. They both grinned. Being originally from Indiana, Mrs. Rawlings said she couldn’t imagine she would marry anyone who isn’t a Colts fan. Anthony made a comment about real football teams that play outdoors, and Claire was quick to mention two recent trips to the Super Bowl. Their playful banter was enjoyable to observe.

VF: *Have you two had any arguments, disagreements, or fights?*

“No!” They answered simultaneously and laughed. Anthony took the lead on this question. “Of course. I can’t imagine spending quality time with someone and always agreeing. That is not what I want in my life. There are multitudes of people in my life that will agree with my every thought. Claire has stood up to me in ways that captains of business have not. Her strength and determination are what I fell in love with.” Tenderly wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he added, “As well as her beauty and intelligence.”

After smiling at Anthony, Claire added, “I have been told that some of those qualities can be infuriating.” This reporter enjoyed Anthony’s dismissal of that comment.

VF: *Will either of you share the story of the proposal?*

Claire volunteered, “Oh, I will. He was amazing. First, it was dinner in Manhattan. He took me to the theater district. We dined at the *Crown Plaza Hotel* and our table had a view of Times Square. I had no idea what his plans were for the evening, he enjoys surprises. After dinner we went to see *The Merchant of Venice* with Al Pacino, fantastic by the way. Afterward, I was honestly tired and ready to go back to my hotel. But instead we went to *Central Park*.” Laughing she recalled, “It was very cold that night, the night before Thanksgiving. It hadn’t snowed, but it was very cold; however, he

planned for that with mittens and blankets". After each sentence she looked into his eyes. Even this reporter saw the twinkle in her green eyes as she recounted his proposal. Claire went on to say, "I did not expect a proposal. I was completely shocked. But there he was, in a horse-drawn carriage in *Central Park*, under the lights, with a diamond ring."

Vanity Fair will add that her *diamond ring* is actually a designer original Tiffany & Co. 4.3 carat brilliant center stone bordered by a delicate diamond bead set in mil-grain detail in platinum. The matching wedding band is also platinum, with delicate inset diamonds. While actual value would not be released by Mr. Rawlings or Tiffany & Co., New York, where he is said to have purchased the set, due to the size, clarity, and unique cut, it is estimated above 400 thousand dollars.

VF: *Did you say yes immediately? (Now come on, ladies, think about what you would have done.)*

Claire sat back. "No." At this Anthony smiled and put his hand on his wife's knee. He goes on with the answer. "No, she didn't. She made me wait for what seemed like an eternity." But leaning over to kiss his bride, he added, "She finally relented. And I was elated."

The worst thing you can do for love is deny it; so when you find that special someone, don't let anyone or anything get in your way.

VF: *Now some people have questioned the quickness of your nuptials. What do you have to say to those critiques?*

Anthony answered, "I guess they have never been as in love." Claire continued, "We didn't want to wait. We made our decision. We wanted our family and friends to share in our happiness."

VF: *The personal accounts were extremely complimentary. How did you pull off the wedding of the century in less than a month?*

Mrs. Rawlings replied, "With the best wedding planner and coordinator in the world! They were amazing. We never worried about a thing."

According to the press releases the wedding was magnificent. The bride was gorgeous in an exquisite *Vera Wang* gown, reportedly from an elite Manhattan boutique. The groom was dazzling in a custom *Armani* tuxedo—(Photo of Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings in wedding attire standing at the base of the grand stairway, decorations can be seen behind them. Note: multiple wedding pictures and decorations can be seen in a collage of pictures at the end of the article.)

VF: *Addressing Claire Rawlings, how has it been to be thrust into the public eye?*

Claire blushed and glanced at Anthony. "May I say first I don't feel that

I'm a celebrity? I've done nothing to warrant celebrity status. That's why when you ask your question, the first response I think of is, it's been unreal. I still find it amazing that anyone would think my clothes, shopping habits, or hairstyle newsworthy. It's something that I'm learning to handle. Anthony has been superb at buffering the media as much as possible."

Claire added, "*You* can be overwhelming at times." Addressing this reporter, she continued, "*You* meaning the press." Smiling a lovely smile. "Not *you*; however, if being married to this marvelous man means seeing myself on an occasional magazine..." She leans toward his protection. "...it's more than worth it." Mr. Rawlings included that he desired to shelter her from too much unwanted exposure. After all, he prefers to remain as private as possible.

As the couple walked hand in hand to share a tour of their home it wasn't hard to imagine that a splendid wedding ceremony could easily occur within these walls. The grand hall is breathtaking on this February afternoon. The two-story winding staircase ascended to a railed landing which appeared to extend down various hallways. The ceiling, at least another story high, holds a magnificent chandelier that illuminates the foyer.

The intricate marble flooring extends behind the stairs to a window-lined sitting room. These areas were all utilized during the ceremony. Beyond the sitting room, which also contains a magnificent fireplace, is a comfortable sun porch that Mrs. Rawlings says is one of her favorite rooms in their home. She enjoys reading and sunlight very much. Even in the winter months, if it's not too cold she can enjoy the sun's rays on the porch; however, it is in the summer with the windows open and the fresh breeze that the room is ideal.

Not far from these exquisite rooms is a grand dining room that the newlyweds claim to utilize regularly. Mr. Rawlings commented that just being with his bride is a special occasion worthy of formal dining. Beyond the sun porch this reporter could see the expanse of their backyard. Apparently, during the wedding it contained a large tent that created the hall for their reception. On this day it was snow covered and pristine. The yard is encased by trees. Currently, the trees are bare and one can see into the depths of the forest, but Anthony explained that within months the green leaves will obstruct the view and the lawn will appear an oasis in itself. He also pointed out the deck, pool area, and patio. He is proud of the house. He offers that he helped design it from memories and ideas from other dwellings. He believes the result is exquisite, and this reporter agrees wholeheartedly.

Mr. Rawlings also showed *Vanity Fair* his home office. As an entrepreneur who began his fortune with the Internet, it seems only appropriate that his home contained high-tech electronics. Not only does his desk contain multiple computer screens, but behind his desk on the wall was also a collage of screens, second only to the ones this reporter has seen in

television studios. His office is decorated in a masculine tone of wood and leather. When asked if he often works from home, Anthony responds that he does when he can. It gives him an excuse to be close to Claire when she is not out and about. (Photo of Mr. Rawlings behind his impressive desk, working on his computer with screens illuminated behind him.)

Mrs. Rawlings took that opportunity to tell *Vanity Fair* a little about her recent philanthropic endeavor. While working as a meteorologist, Claire saw the damage and devastation that natural disasters can wreak upon our country. She never imagined that she'd be in a position where she could make a difference to people, but now she is. Claire has recently begun to work with the *Red Cross* of Iowa, the Greater Quad Cities, and of the United States. She's been diligently working to facilitate their fund-raising efforts. The economy has had a dreadful effect on the *Red Cross*'s reserves. These are essential for the organization to be able to continue their efforts on a daily basis and especially in case of disaster. The sad reality is that the reserve is dwindling. With Anthony's connections and her understanding of disasters and the resources needed, she hopes to be of help to the organization. Anthony's admiration for his wife's endeavors is evident in his expression as she discusses the work the *Red Cross* can do, if adequately funded.

The tour continued to the lower level of the main house, where a large welcoming entertainment/recreation room exists. There's a pool table, game table, comfortable sofas and chairs, a large flat-screen television with four smaller screens surrounding it, and a handsome handcrafted mahogany bar with intricate tile in the mini kitchen behind the bar. Adjoining this room is a theater room complete with plush seating for six, and a screen large enough for twenty-six. The other direction from the recreation room leads to an exercise gym, with every piece of exercise equipment you would want or need. Mr. Rawlings explained that he likes to workout. He finds himself needing to burn off energy after a day of business dealings, which usually occur while seated. *Vanity Fair* notes that he appears fit, as does Mrs. Rawlings. She led our crew to her favorite workout, an indoor lap pool complete with spa and sauna. Claire Rawlings said she prefers the outdoor pool, but during the colder months, which are numerous in Iowa, the indoor pool is an ideal alternative.

Back in the sitting room, *Vanity Fair* tries once again to learn more about this stunning couple. (Photo of the couple with warm coats standing on the front steps of their home and another of them sitting on the floor before a roaring fire in a grand six-foot tall fireplace. Note the portrait of Mrs. Rawlings in her wedding gown above the fireplace.)

VF: *Mrs. Rawlings, how do you feel about living in Iowa after living in Atlanta, Georgia?*

Rubbing the sleeves of her soft cashmere sweater, Claire responded, "I

would gladly live any place with Anthony; however, if he chose some place warmer it would be all right.” They both smile. “Seriously...” she continued. “I grew up in Indiana. Iowa isn’t much different. The Midwest is a beautiful area. I love sunshine and warmth, but the change of seasons and newness of each spring is in my blood. From my short experience with Iowa, I think it is a wonderful state with wonderful people.”

VF: *It was rumored that you, Anthony, wanted to surprise your wife with your honeymoon destination. Is that true?*

Smiling with a smirking grin, he answered, “Yes, I tried diligently to surprise Claire for our honeymoon. And I almost succeeded.”

VF had to ask, “Almost?”

Anthony looked at his wife, she continued the story. “He would have succeeded had it not been for the TSA agent in Hawaii.” Mrs. Rawlings was obviously amused by the story. “I wasn’t the least bit upset. I’d sought to learn the destination for some time. No one would betray his confidence, no matter how much I tried. So after arriving in Oahu, Hawaii, all I knew was that we had farther to fly and we were crossing the International Date Line.”

Anthony chimed in. “Actually, she figured that out from a hint...” And he winked at Claire.

She continued, “So when the agent looked at our passports and asked our destination, I wasn’t able to answer.” Smiling, she added, “But Anthony had to. And it was then I learned that we were going to Fiji.” (Photo released by the Rawlings of the two of them dining on a torch-lit deck with a magnificent sunset and the ocean in front of them.)

VF: *Mrs. Rawlings, were you pleased with your husband’s destination choice? Some women would want to be more involved in the planning.*

“That may be true, but my husband planned ten days in paradise. It was amazing. I’ve never experienced anything like it. It was a tropical oasis. I know we have pictures for your publication, but honestly photos can’t do it justice. The climate, atmosphere, cuisine, beach,” and leaning close to Anthony, smiling into his big brown eyes, “his company, all made it a dream. I’m not sure heaven can compare.”

VF: *So you did not mind not being involved in the planning?*

“If all his decisions are as amazing as our honeymoon, I do not mind at all.” He kissed her cheek.

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

-MAYA ANGELOU

Anthony added, “I have had many years of living on my own, making my own decisions, and doing everything for my benefit. I have learned that people remember most how you make them feel. I try to work my business with that in mind. When I negotiate with someone, they will forget what I say or what I do, but they will not forget how I make them feel. Do they feel important to the deal? Do they feel central to the transaction? I wanted our honeymoon to be special because it would benefit me.” His smile looked mischievous to this reporter. “However, I wanted it to be special so that Claire would feel special and know how important she is to me.” He no doubt had her full attention during his statement, and this reporter would guess during their stay in paradise. Mr. Rawlings seems to have the gift of making everyone feel special. Claire agreed he has made her feel special since they first met.

VF: *Vanity Fair would like to thank you for taking the time to allow us into your home. Now is it true you have other homes besides this one?*

Anthony answered, “Due to my multiple business sites and intensive travel schedule we do own a few apartments here and there. It makes traveling much easier.” (Insert text box of real estate holdings of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Rawlings.)

VF: *Mr. Rawlings, your answer about “we” owning brings VF to another more controversial subject. May I ask about the debate regarding the lack of a prenuptial agreement prior to your marriage?*

“I would prefer you didn’t; however, the only way to stop the rumors is to address them. First let me say there was no debate. We did not consider a prenuptial agreement, much less debate one.” Taking his wife’s hand in his, he continued, “I’m elated to have the world get to know my wife. Mrs. Claire Rawlings is an amazing woman. She did not know who I was when we met. She has told me exactly what she thinks of me or of my actions and not always in a complimentary manner. She did not anticipate a marriage

proposal on that *cold...*" He smiled at Claire. "...night in Central Park. I trust her implicitly. I have worked my entire life to build a business empire. It means nothing without someone with whom to share. I did not feel it was fair to ask her to sign a piece of paper that would restrict her partnership with me in any way. She is my wife and I am her husband. It may not be PC to say this today, but we believe in forever, in trust, and in love. A piece of paper is not going to matter when we are old and gray. We decided together that our commitment to one another is stronger than any legal agreement." Mrs. Rawlings squeezed his hand. "Like it is said in a movie, *she completes me.*"

VF: *Thank you again for the brief glimpse into your life. Below is a quote that was recited during your wedding ceremony. To our readers, it was meant as a dual statement to both of them, from each of them.*

I love you not only for what you are, but for what I am when I am with you. I love you not only for what you have made of yourself, but for what you are making of me. I love you for the part of me that you bring out.

-ROY CROFT

(Photo collage at the end includes photos of home: grand hall, sitting room, library, office, dining room, recreation room, exercise room, theater room, and indoor pool. Also included are wedding photos: of ceremony, reception, with cake, talking with guests, and dancing. There are a few of Fiji, the private island where the couple stayed, the beach, infinity pool, lounging decks, and outdoor shower.)

Claire read the copy and imagined the photos which would be inserted. It truly *appeared* perfect.



THREE DAYS LATER, on the March 18, Tony surprised Claire with a long weekend getaway to Lake Tahoe. The beautiful snowy mountains filled with skiing, roaring fires, and hot coffee made for a great escape. The ski resort,

literally a mile above sea level, had crystal-clear air that permeated deep into their lungs. The mountains provided the most amazing skiing with over a hundred inches of base and freshly fallen powder. The tall majestic evergreens bowed to the weight of the snow which layered each branch. Their small, private chalet held amazing views, warm fires, and no cook. For the first time in a year, despite limited supplies, Claire managed to keep them from starving. With the intensity of their exercise, both indoors and out, she was pleased he liked her cooking. A while ago she'd heard some advice: eating was important to keep up their strength.

Warm, naked, and covered with a soft blanket, she rested her head against his chest. Claire contemplated the significance of *this* weekend as they rested in the afterglow of their love and the glow of fireplace. Three hundred and sixty-six days ago she'd been a different person, in a different life. It wasn't that her life now was bad. It was just that the transition had been unplanned, unwanted, and well—brutal. She needed to hear her husband's answer to the question lingering in her mind. “Tony, why are we here *this* weekend?”



THEY BOTH WATCHED the crackling blaze as his strong arms encircled her petite body. He took a deep breath and replied, “I didn’t want you home in your suite this weekend. I wanted you outside in fresh air.” He felt her chest lift, then drop, and heard the soft sniffles. Damn—the crying was what he’d been trying to avoid. Nuzzling his face in her hair, he kissed her head. “If it hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t be here now. There’s a reason for everything.”

He tenderly turned her to face him, and then rolled her over onto her back. Her blonde hair fanned out onto the rug like a halo. He looked down at her angelic face. Even with the moisture, her eyes were stunning. The tears only made the green more intense in the firelight. Tony couldn’t help himself. She was beautiful, sensual, and he wanted her. His bare chest pushed against her supple breasts. He tenderly caressed her pink cheeks and soft shoulders as he looked into her eyes. “I’m not sorry we’re together, but I’m so sorry when I think about... remember the things I—”

Claire stopped him. Shaking her head, she put her fingers to his lips. He stopped talking and kissed her hand, gently sucking the tip of each finger. “Please, Tony. Don’t. I don’t want to remember or think about that.” Her voice sounded amazingly steady despite the tears which now streamed from the corners of her eyes. “I want to think about now.”

“But you should know—”

“All I know is that I love you today. I hated you then. It’s too much of a contrast for my mind to comprehend. I want to concentrate on today.”

“I love you today, too. Tell me what I can do to help. Claire, anything you want, it’s yours.”

“I want you. I want you to love me and fill me with so many good memories that I don’t have room for the others.” She kissed her husband. “Tony, fill me completely.”



CLAIRE WASN’T THINKING. Her body was in control; more accurately, out of control, moving in sync with desire. She didn’t think, because she feared if she did, it would be about the past and not the present. Instead, she surrendered her body and her mind to her husband. There was a time she’d tried to keep her mind, but no longer. He possessed both.



HIS LIPS FOUND her soft skin and watched as her eyes responded. He wanted to see the spark, to have it be there. Briefly, he thought about the saying: the end justifies the means. If that were true, then he wasn’t sorry. In his arms, beneath his body, responding to his touch was the woman he’d watched for so long. He suckled her hard nipples, and she moaned deeply, wanting, no, needing *him*. At that moment in time, *sorry* was not his most prominent thought.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Nothing improves memory more than trying to forget.

—Unknown author

*T*WAS HAPPENING again. The satin sheets dripped with sweat as Claire gasped for breath. Trembling, she concentrated on inhaling and exhaling, all the while convincing herself she could breathe. This was only a dream, or a nightmare. Once over, she couldn't remember the scenes, just the terrible feeling of helplessness. She always woke when she heard the *beep*. It was the same damn *beep* she'd heard when she first arrived; the sound meaning her suite was locked. When the dreams first started, she could roll over, find her sleeping husband, curl up next to him, and fall back to sleep. Now regulating her breathing, Claire knew that wasn't possible. Like so many times before, she needed to get out of bed and complete her new routine.

The steady breathing from a few feet away told Claire Tony was sleeping peacefully. Quietly, she lifted the covers and eased out of bed. Her hands shook as she tied her robe and tiptoed to the hallway door. "This is dumb," she whispered, as her feet crossed the lush carpet; however, it was now her reality. She knew sleep wouldn't be possible without completing this new drill. Gripping the metal lever, she pulled, and the door opened easily. She closed it and proceeded to the balcony. Moving the draperies aside, the French door opened without hesitation. The rush of fresh air filled the room and her lungs. She walked through the opening and gently closing the door behind her.

Her perspiration-drenched body relished the cool night breeze. Standing at the rail, she inhaled the spring air and lifted her hair to dry the moisture from her neck. It wasn't that she wanted to remember the feelings of a year ago. Truly she didn't. When she stepped onto a patio, terrace, or into the backyard and memories would start to resurface, she could stop them. It was at night,

while she slept that the compartmentalization of her internment would come rushing back. Then in the minutes or hours which followed, she would attempt to calm her lingering fear. It was the one she tried to keep away, the terror that at any moment, without warning, history could repeat itself. The sickening realization that she would be completely helpless to stop it was what robbed her of sleep.

The cool cement under her feet brought her back to present. She shivered, pulled her cashmere robe tight, and wished she'd grabbed slippers. But, her trembling wasn't caused by the cold. She knew it was her dream. Looking up she noticed the clear black velvet sky peppered with stars. Absentmindedly, she thought: that's why the temperature dropped.

Sighing, she fell into a chair. This knowledge would never matter again. Her job was her name: *Mrs. Anthony Rawlings*. Meteorology was gone, forever. She'd left the suite in such a panic she hadn't looked at the clock. It really didn't matter; sleep was out of reach. Pulling her legs into her chest and covering them with her soft robe, she began her mental therapy session. Her still rapid heart rate told her tonight it would last hours instead of minutes.

Self-therapy consisted of a mental list of reasons her nightmares were ridiculous and she had no basis for her fears. Claire believed if she could convince her conscious self, her subconscious self would be forced to agree. When she allowed her mind to go back to the spring of a year ago she could rationalize that now her life was significantly dissimilar. She now had more liberties than she'd experienced since her arrival.

Tony stayed true to his word about her e-mails. He even decided she needed her own address: clarawl1084@rawlingsind.com. This made printing easier. He was also correct about the numerous requests for interviews, money, and endorsements she received daily from people she'd never met. Having Patricia respond to those requests was easy. She also received personal e-mails, and now she had a voice in the responses. Overall, when asked, Tony agreed to requests regarding Courtney, Sue, Bev, or MaryAnn. If he had other plans for the day in question, as occurred from time to time, his plans trumped, but the act of requesting was the crucial portion of her negotiations. If she wanted to reply to someone or to go somewhere, as he had said many months ago, she simply needed to ask. She'd become accustomed to this component. It was a daily reminder of Tony's authority.

Regarding that authority, it hadn't asserted itself as it had a year ago. She reasoned, perhaps it was because her behavior didn't warrant that type of implementation. No matter the cause, life was undeniably better.

Watching the moonlight on the budding trees, Claire recalled the outings she'd recently enjoyed. They included lunches in Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, *Red Cross* meetings in Davenport, and shopping in Chicago. A few weeks ago MaryAnn suggested a catch-up day in New York, as she and Eli

were there for business. Tony reviewed all of the e-mails before Claire, and she didn't expect permission to spend the day in New York, but she asked. Surprisingly, he acquiesced. Smiling and feeling her pulse slow, she remembered flying off to a beautiful April day in New York City in a Rawlings company jet with Courtney and Sue. All of the women had a marvelous time, and Claire made it home before 7:00 PM. He was home first, but she was home for dinner. He wasn't unhappy.

Calming, as the gentle breeze blew her hair, she listened to the voice in her head and remembered a recent unexpected freedom. Secretly coveting the chestnut hair which kept trying to return, she informed Tony she needed an appointment to maintain her blonde. He said they had no overnight plans in the near future, so she should just go. If he had the private plane she could take one of the company jets. Just plan to be home before dinner. Shocked, she remembered questioning. "Are you saying I can go by myself?"

"My dear Claire, is there any reason you should not?"

She assured him there wasn't. He, or Patricia, arranged the appointment. Claire went to the airport and boarded a company jet by herself. She landed in Chicago, took a waiting cab to the *Trump Tower* where she spent the rest of the morning being pampered. Then she ate lunch and shopped for a few hours and came home. Blushing in the cool night air, she thought about being back in her suite before 6:00 PM and how she did her best to show her husband the meaning of a statement she'd made months earlier: coming home to a wife who wants to be home is better than coming home to a wife that has to be home. He caught on pretty quick. The first indication was the spark in her emerald eyes, and the next clue involved a black satin robe and a warm waiting tub of water. Truth be told, she couldn't remember eating dinner at all that night.

Claire's heavy eyelids reminded her she should be sleeping. Slipping back into her suite and under the warm blankets, she thought about the man lying next to her. He continued to be a paradox. The man Claire met when she first arrived hadn't shown his personality since her *accident*. She knew he was still here. That knowledge alone was motivation to obey his rules. She'd been told too many times his promise to keep that personality away was contingent on her ability to behave appropriately. The stress of that reality and unpredictability loomed omnipresent.

The man who worked to court her, to convince her she was important, desirable, and loved, still existed in a muted form. He was still attentive, present, and always sexual, but he was busy with work and often preoccupied. That was understandable. He was a successful man with many fires to tend.

It was his need for complete supremacy over every aspect of her life that felt stifling and unbearable. Claire theorized this was the cause of the suffocation which usually accompanied her nightmares. He had companies,

peoples' jobs and livelihoods on his list of responsibilities. The fact he controlled her comings, goings, e-mails, hair, and often attire seemed ridiculous.

Attempting to stop the rise in blood pressure, she reminded herself that no matter what, she loved him. He could infuriate her one moment and make her feel less than human, and the next, he could make her feel like the world spun only because she mattered to him. It was just that those two contradictory emotions could come too close together and in any order. As Claire reminisced, she recognized that similar to a year ago, her mood, liberties, and sense of self-worth seemed to have a common denominator: Anthony Rawlings.

As that realization struck, he rolled toward her, wrapped her in his arms; and though still sleeping, murmured, "My love, you're so cold. Come closer." She melted against his warm chest. At this moment in time, he made her feel safe and loved. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

As the spring blossomed into summer, their biggest source of dissension continued to be her family. Though she loved to hear from Emily, seeing her name on an e-mail made her stomach turn. It almost always came accompanied by dark penetrating eyes.

She would sometimes choose to have Patricia reply instead of herself. There were days and circumstances when the communication wasn't worth the conflict. It depended on Emily's words, some motivated Claire's determination more than others. Her calls with Emily were always monitored. It was a reality she didn't dispute. If she did, it would result in loss of all communication. He didn't need to spell that out for her. She knew it as well as she knew that her *freedoms* lay vulnerable to his whims.

Since the call following the interview, Claire spoke with Emily about every three to four weeks. She heard from Emily at least once a week via e-mail. After Claire had her own e-mail address, Emily's notes were more informative. Claire would hand-write her response. It was approved or edited and then sent by Patricia. If Emily questioned Claire's ability to do anything, she'd profess her freedoms as Tony evaluated every word.

That same Tony was the one who surprised Claire with the long weekend at Lake Tahoe. And over Memorial Day weekend he arranged for a getaway to San Francisco. While there, they met Eli and MaryAnn for dinner at an exclusive nightclub with a glorious view of the bay and bridge. The next day, after a romantic drive down Highway 1 in a leased convertible, they strolled hand in hand on the beach at Big Sur. The force and spray of the waves pounding the huge rocks along the ocean shore astonished Claire. It wasn't like the Gulf of Mexico or even the tranquil waters of Fiji. Instead, it reminded her of the beach scenes in movies. During these excursions, he made her feel like a star. Their final day in San Francisco they went

sightseeing; no trip to Alcatraz was planned or even discussed.

He also had a two-week business trip to Europe planned for the end of July. This time he wanted her with him. Uncharacteristically, he asked her to help make the sightseeing plans. They would visit Italy, Switzerland, and France. He had meetings but promised free time for his wife. Claire spent hours in their library looking at books on destinations, museums, and points of interest. The Internet would have been easier but she found incredible pictures and information in the resource books.

The work with the *Red Cross* slowed. Their calendar was planned and their goal set. It was now a matter of implementation. Courtney had other members on her committee. They divided the events. Claire was chairman of a silent auction scheduled for October. She drafted letters requesting donations, and Patricia sent them out to prominent associates of Mr. Rawlings. The letters requested donations from *Mrs. Anthony Rawlings*. Tony had already brought many positive responses home. Claire secured a ballroom in Bettendorf where the auction would be held simultaneously with a wine-tasting event. She even arranged for the wine and catering to be donated, believing a little wine might help increase bids. Courtney seemed genuinely pleased and appreciative of Claire's help.

The summer heat created the climate Claire enjoyed the most. She contentedly spent many of her days at home by the pool or at her lake. When summer began Tony hesitated to approve her journeys to the lake. He'd been there. He knew how far it was from the house. What if a real accident occurred? At first, she relented to his decision, but then she decided it was worth the struggle. Her lake had been her refuge. She wanted it back.

Determinedly, one Sunday in early June, Claire pursued the liberty to hike. Tony finally acquiesced, saying he wanted to be mad, but it was the memory of her excitement during their February visit that made him relent. She asked him to join her. He had other plans for their day, but agreed. They brought a blanket, a picnic packed by Catherine, and water. When they reached the shore, Tony seemed to understand why she loved the site. It was nothing like it had been in February. The colors of the summer starkly contrasted the whiteness of their last visit. The lake sparkled and glittered with hues of blue created by the reflection of the sapphire sky. The trees surrounding the lake were lush, full, and green.

The ones in the woods had been also, creating a maze Tony hoped Claire could truly navigate. He listened to the sounds of the lake shore. In forty-six years he'd never stopped to listen to waves lap the earth. The consistent beat, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, combined with the gentle breeze of the trees soothed him in a way he couldn't describe. He laid out the blanket on the shore under the shade of a tree and invited Claire to join him. She unpacked their lunch and they sat in silence.

At first, Claire worried, afraid he might be upset by her impudence. Then she stopped worrying and looked at him, really looked at his face. He was peaceful. She thought about who she saw: Anthony Rawlings, multibillionaire tycoon and entrepreneur, a man in complete control of everyone and everything. Claire hoped perhaps she was witnessing this lofty man seeing himself as part of a grand picture. Maybe for the first time he wasn't seeing himself as the center. Not wanting to break the spell, she let him sit undisturbed.

Sometime later, Claire had lost track of time, Tony finally spoke. "This is beautiful. This is here on our property and I've never seen it—not like this." The sun sparkled and shone as prisms of light and color danced off the water. Having taken the sandwiches out of the basket, Claire broke off a piece of bread and threw it into the water. Tony laughed as minnows swam to devour their newfound feast. She smiled at her husband. Her smile radiated into her eyes; she could feel it. His milk chocolate eyes looked from the water to her. He leaned toward her. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For showing me what I've been missing. I've been so goal oriented, so driven, I've missed so much." She scooted closer and offered him his sandwich. "I'm really not hungry, yet. Are you?" His hands were exploring her collar bone, causing goose bumps to rise on her arms.

"I think I can wait."

The soft blanket, soft sand, and gentle breeze created the perfect bed. Their actions weren't hard and rough, but tender and thorough. Keeping rhythm with the waves Tony took Claire beyond her refuge to a place of ecstasy.

The hours of daylight almost reached their peak. The summer solstice was near. Between exploring the lake, shore, wildlife, and one another, they found themselves still on the shore as the sun began to set. It was all right. Claire knew this time there would be no punishment or *accident*. This time she was safe. They sat and watched the crimson ball as it bled a cherry glow across the sky, slowly fading behind the line of shadowed trees at the far end of the lake.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power of our will.

—Epictetus

C LAIRE'S EDUCATION REGARDING the responsibilities of Mrs. Anthony Rawlings continued during the summer months. She now had the responsibility of entertaining Tony's business associates. As a bachelor, these gatherings weren't expected; however, now with a wife by his side, Shelly felt this personal touch benefited Mr. Rawlings. *They* hosted multiple dinner engagements. On the Fourth of July, they held a large barbecue/pool party for many of Tony's associates at the estate in Iowa. Guests included those she'd met briefly at her wedding and those that she'd never met. Tony introduced her to everyone, and she remembered names and faces remarkably well. Her job description remained the same as fourteen months earlier: be perfect. To accomplish her goal, she needed to be beautiful, polite, contented, and appreciative. Now there was another requirement: be a most gracious hostess. Surprisingly, Claire didn't find these new duties difficult. For most people to pull off a dinner, barbecue, or pool party would require planning, cleaning, cooking, setting up, and tearing down. For Mrs. Rawlings, that wasn't the case. Everything happened without her input. Invitations went out, RSVPs counted, meals planned, house or apartment cleaned, food prepared, tables and decorations set, the food served, and miraculously everything cleaned by the next day. She needed only to be present, ever attentive to her guests, and most importantly, attentive to her husband.

The first entertaining experience occurred at their New York apartment. *They* hosted an intimate dinner party for ten. It was true, Claire's nerves were shaken prior to the hors d'oeuvres. Perhaps it was Tony's pep-talk about appearances, responsibility as his wife, and the unacceptability of public

failure; however, wearing the clothes he chose, hair styled as he suggested, and appearing as dutiful as she could muster, the evening progressed surprisingly well. Her talent for remembering names, faces, facts, and the intuition to know when not to interrupt *business* talk, yet understand when to augment small talk, succeeded in making everyone feel comfortable. After the guests left, Tony gently wrapped his arm around her waist and whispered in her ear. "You were magnificent."

It made all the difference. From that point on, when she learned of an impending gathering, she had but one solitary goal: to please her husband. On some occasions, they would be at opposite sides of a room and she would look up from a conversation to observe his eyes. The presence of brown rimmed pupils would strengthen her resolve to perform her role to perfection. On those occasions she would discover the black voids, she would excuse herself from her current activity and attempt to learn the source of his unhappiness. Once discovered, it became her responsibility to right the wrong. Assuming this responsibility of Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, familiarized her with many of his associates and made her feel less alone. She met the people Tony dealt with on a daily basis. In reality she may have been a beautiful accessory, but she believed she provided an important asset to his public relations. The added bonus was that she continued to amaze Tony by excelling at any obstacle put before her.

A week before they needed to be in France for Tony's meetings, he informed Claire they would spend a few nights in New York City before their trip. He could work from the New York City office and it would decrease their travel time to Paris. Claire's research discovered many sights she anxiously anticipated seeing in France. They would arrive in Paris where he had two days of meetings. She wanted to see the *Eiffel Tower*, the *Louvre*, *Muse'e d'Orsay*, *Notre Dame Cathedral*, and the *Arc de Triomphe* among other places. She told Tony multiple times how excited she was being involved in planning their activities. Next, he promised her two nights in the south of France, one of his favorite destinations. He had special plans for this destination. She read about Cannes, the French Riviera, and Monaco, but willingly trusted his decisions.

Next, they would be off to Italy. His meetings there were in Rome and Florence. They would have the opportunity to visit museums and monuments in both cities. Her two requests were the *Vatican* and the *Galleria dell' Accademia*, the museum which housed Michelangelo's David. Tony promised that David didn't have anything she hadn't seen before.

He wanted her to see the island of Sicily. The water, he said, was beautiful. The blueness rivaled Fiji. He mischievously smiled and let her know how nude sunbathing was acceptable in the Mediterranean.

"I don't think I like the idea of nude sunbathing among multitudes of

people.”

With a naughty smirk Tony agreed. “I believe you’re right my dear.” He slowly unbuttoned her blouse. “Besides, I don’t believe I want others seeing what is mine, and I have the pleasure of seeing whenever I chose.”

His last meetings were in Switzerland. He needed to be in Genève and Interlaken. He explained if she enjoyed the beauty and splendor of the Rocky Mountains at Lake Tahoe, she would marvel at the Swiss Alps. They were magnificent. He knew she would love all the nature had to offer in Switzerland.

As Tony spoke about their trip he expressed his desire to spend more time in Europe. “I want to show you so many places. We aren’t even planning for Venice. A gondola ride is one of the most romantic adventures, and what about London? Don’t you want to see *Buckingham Palace*? ”

“We have forever to visit those places.”

As he spoke about cities and sites, his eyes danced with enthusiasm. His excitement to share something with her meant more than the trip itself.

The Tuesday before their scheduled departure they sat in her suite with Claire reviewing e-mails and Tony working on his laptop. She only needed to discuss e-mails she felt deserved personal follow through of any kind. She read each one and eventually came to one from Emily. She’d expected to see it. The last one had been about a week ago. This one contained new information. It wasn’t just the “I want to see you” text.

To: Claire Rawlings clarawl1084@rawlingsind.com

From: Emily Vandersol johnemvan@aol.com

Date: July 19, 2011

Subject: Hi.

Hi, Claire, How are you and Anthony? We are doing very well. I’m on summer break, which you know. Would be great to see my little sis, but anyway, know how busy you are. How have those dinner parties been going? Still cracks me up. You being the one hosting parties! Would never have guessed it. Anyway, didn’t you say you two were going on vacation? I heard something on the television about you being on another private island. Really? Have you been gone? I never know what to believe. But I wanted to let you know John and his associate just had a big win in court recently. They made a huge impression on the partners. Not to mention some big money for them, too. We’ve been invited to multiple dinners and John has had some “lunches” with a few of the partners recently. It is looking like all his hours

and hard work will be paying off soon. Would love to hear from you. Please give Anthony our love. How is Iowa? I have some time, maybe you and I could visit in person? Or are you too busy for your big sister. (I'm trying guilt.)

Love ya, Em

Claire read it, sighed, and wrote on the top: *Patricia, please respond* and then moved on to the next. She sensed Tony's eyes penetrating her consciousness. He'd read it. She didn't need to discuss the contents. She wasn't requesting anything. Lifting her gaze she saw his eyes and answered, "I don't want to deal with it, okay? I'm too excited about our trip."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, that's fine. I just thought you might want to see her and John while we're in New York before our trip. It sounds to me like a celebratory dinner for your esteemed brother-in-law is in order."

Claire looked at Tony in disbelief. "Are you suggesting we meet them this weekend before we leave for Europe?" She watched for his reaction, there was none. He continued reading on his laptop and making notes on his iPad. "Please don't tease me."

His smile appeared genuine. "I'm not teasing. If it'll make you happy as we head out on our European adventure, I can suffer through a few hours of Mr. Wonderful."

She got up from the table and went to him on the sofa. "Really? Can I please call her and see if they're available?"

"Yes." His hand touched the hem of her light pink sundress. "However, I can think of something I'd like to do first."

Claire reached for his laptop and set it on the floor. Climbing on his lap she giggled, "Really? I can't think of anything—"

Her world tilted as he pushed her onto the sofa and followed on top of her. The rest of her sentence, as well as dinner, and the phone call would need to wait.



THEY ARRIVED IN New York on Thursday night and planned to leave Sunday for Paris. Tony thought Claire might need to shop before their trip, but she assured him she'd done enough research to learn she could do plenty of shopping in Paris, Italy, and Switzerland.

Tony laughed. "That even scares me, Mrs. Rawlings. I believe you're getting too good at this shopping thing."

They arranged to meet John and Emily Saturday afternoon at a restaurant

in Newburgh, a scenic little city on the Hudson River, midway between New York City and Troy. Tony admitted their apartment could lend itself to a longer visit than he wanted. Claire knew this was difficult for him and appreciated his honesty. Besides, she liked the idea of a public setting. Tony would never do or say anything in a public place to jeopardize his image. She knew no matter how the dinner progressed, she would reap the consequences, negative or positive; however, seeing Emily and John for the first time since their wedding was worth Tony's chosen aftermath. She could endure the night. Tomorrow they were leaving for Europe.

When they stepped outside their New York City apartment, the air between the tall buildings hung heavy and moist intensifying the July heat. Automobile exhaust filled their lungs as the motionless air refused to transport the odors away. The summer sun penetrated the dark lenses of her sunglasses, causing Claire to squint after exiting the dim cool lobby. Although, she used to like the city, she now thought pensively about the tranquility of the Iowa countryside.

During the hour and a half drive, Tony worked on his latest project while Claire appreciated the tinted windows and air conditioning of the limousine and tried to read. She had packed many books for their trip. Between flights, drives, and waiting for Tony, she anticipated significant amounts of downtime. Though she tried to read, the words on the page didn't make sense. She read and reread, but her thoughts were miles ahead at the restaurant. It had been seven months since they had been together. She wanted it to go well; however, she overwhelmingly feared it would not.

Trying desperately to ignore the onset of another headache, she anticipated problems. What if John said something? What about the job topic? What if Emily pursued her earlier concerns? Her mind raced through these situations and more. She contemplated possible solutions. It didn't always work, but having contingency plans made Claire feel better.

They were an hour out of Newburgh when Tony broke the silence. "Claire, please stop."

Shocked, she turned to him. "Stop what? I'm reading."

"No, you're not. You're sighing, fidgeting, and stressing about things over which you have no control."

"I'm sorry. I just want this afternoon to go well."

"Are you planning to do or say something wrong?"

"No! Of course not."

"Let me tell you about this current project."

She really wasn't interested, but he rarely offered to share. She closed her book. "All right."

"These are perspectives on a company. Actually, a family owned business in Pennsylvania. At one time it employed over seventy-five people. Today it

employs forty-six. I don't care about this company or the employees, but I am significantly invested in their major competitor."

Clare definitely didn't see the connection to their lunch, but she nodded and replied, "Okay."

"When founded, the original president made wonderful decisions. In the past five years, the reins passed, and the decisions have been less fortuitous. The chairman is now seeking to sell the company, recognizing the economic climate. They need money to continue. Banks aren't lending money. If he doesn't sell, the doors will probably close in the next two years." Still lost, she maintained eye contact and nodded. He went on. "I'm considering a very low-ball offer. The benefit to me is to reduce the competition. If my offer is accepted, the doors will close immediately. According to my accountants, the company in which I'm already invested is projected to increase sales by over 18 percent immediately upon the close of this company. This means I reap benefits. They project my venture in this company will be recouped in profits in less than two years. The long-term benefits are increasingly fiscally rewarding. What do you think the employees of the Pennsylvania Company are hoping will happen?"

"They either want their company to go on as it is, or to be sold to someone who'll keep it running."

Tony said, "Good, why?"

"So they'll keep their jobs."

"The people on the manufacturing floor, custodians, secretaries, and other auxiliary employees played no part in the decisions which now have direct consequences on their lives."

"Yes, but they have families, debts, and responsibilities." Claire thought about Tony's daily decisions and their far-reaching impact. "And I'm sure they're all worried."

"Exactly, just as you're worried about this afternoon. What can the people in that plant do to help their situation?"

Claire thought about it. "Nothing. It isn't in their hands." The reality made her sad. Not for her. Her situation suddenly seemed trivial, but for those forty-six people.

"Correct again. You've done all you can do." He was now talking about this afternoon. "You've done much more than I ever imagined. Continue to behave as you have. If Emily or John do or say anything, it's their doing, not yours."

She thought about John's words in the past and how she'd experienced consequences, just like those people were about to receive. Tony started to read again, but Claire had questions. "Tony?" He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. "Sorry, but I have some questions."

"Go ahead."

“So are you saying the actions of the people who don’t have control, have no consequence?”

He closed the screen of his laptop. “Are we talking about Pennsylvania or here?”

“Let’s start with Pennsylvania.”

“No. Their actions may have great impact. A lot depends on the goal of the person who has control. Let’s say someone else with capital decides they’re interested in this company. More than likely, they’ll either personally visit, or as I did, send an envoy to investigate the company. If those employees are hardworking, loyal, *and* if this investor is interested in keeping the doors open, their actions will be an important piece of the equation when decisions are made. Their attitude could actually determine if their company will remain open. On the contrary, if the employees are dissatisfied and disgruntled, investors interested in maintaining the company will shy away.” Momentarily lost in thought, Tony continued, “One of the issues which affect these situations is the knowledge of the employees, or the people seemingly out of control. It’s interesting how many people live their lives completely unaware of decisions unfolding around them.” Claire listened as Tony went on and worried about these forty-six people and their families. “Now if they are aware and proactive, they may try to recruit investment on their own. I have controlling interest in a few such companies, funded by Rawlings Industries yet run and invested in by the employees. They now benefit from not only paychecks, but also dividends. It creates a wonderful incentive for hard work and dedication.”

Thinking out loud, Claire said, “So if I decided I was tired of shopping for clothes and wanted to shop for companies, I could go to Pennsylvania, offer them a little more than your low-ball bid, and keep the company going, assuming the employees are hardworking, loyal, and want to keep the doors open.” She smiled as she spoke.

Smiling in return, he said, “Well, yes, Mrs. Rawlings, I know you have the capital; however, if you use my bid as a baseline, you’ll end up arrested for insider trading. You can’t make an offer based on the offer of a competitor, unless it has been made public. Mine has not.”

With nothing more than concern in her voice, she asked, “How can you make a deal without considering the people and lives it affects?”

“It’s called business. It’s how we have what we have and will have much more.” He wasn’t gloating or harsh, just stating facts. “Closing that business is my concern, the people are not. If my bid is accepted, their presence is no longer needed.”

“So, there are times when innocent people reap the consequences of others due to no fault of their own.” Claire spoke from experience, yet now seeing the principle from a different perspective.

“Yes. It happens all the time.”

“All right, tell me about our situation. You’re comparing the two. You were saying my actions have no effect on the outcome of this afternoon, so not to worry about it?”

“No. I said not to worry about it. Your actions have already had a great effect on this afternoon.”

Claire saw his eyes, brown and genuine. She wanted more information.

“Please, Mr. Rawlings, tell me what I’ve done to affect this afternoon.”

He sighed. “Claire, why are we going to Newburgh?”

“To see Emily and John.”

“That isn’t the entire answer.” He waited.

“We’re going because of me?”

“Of course. Do you, on *any* level, believe this is my first choice of a Saturday afternoon activity?”

She knew it was not. “But it was your suggestion. We wouldn’t be going if you hadn’t allowed it.”

“You’re right, but we’re going because *you* want to. We’re going because you have patiently accepted every challenge, every test, and every ordeal which has come your way. And for the record, not all have been my doing, merely a byproduct of being Mrs. Rawlings. Apparently, it can be a difficult role.” She knew that too and smiled. He continued, “You’ve not just accepted, you’ve conquered.”

She didn’t know what to say. He complimented her regularly, but she was never certain of his sincerity. He reached out, squeezed her hand, and continued, “You have exceeded any and every preconceived idea I have ever had about you. The one limitation I’ve placed on you that I recognize has caused you anguish is your sister. Truly, I have no ill feelings toward Emily. She can be excessively inquisitive, but you two share a bond.” He watched her eyes. “I told you months ago I’d try to be a better husband. I’ve spent most of my life only concerned with myself. I’m truly trying, even if it does not always appear so.”

She prayed her smile radiated into her eyes, but she could feel the moisture, too. “Tony, I love you. I know you’re trying. I’m contented with the strides you’ve made. That doesn’t mean I don’t hope for more. That may make me ungrateful, but I do. I think you’re amazing. That’s why I want you, Emily, John, and me to be a family. I want them to know the remarkable man I married.” She kissed him, and he kissed her, too.

She still wasn’t confident in the outcome of their family reunion, but her expectations had improved, as had the feeling in her head; the ache had subsided. When they arrived, Emily and John were already seated at a private table with a wonderful view of the Hudson River. They greeted one another with hugs and handshakes. Tony watched as Claire’s eyes sparkled when she

talked with her family.

Tony was civil, refined, and mannerly. To the unknowing observer he may have even seemed cordial and friendly. Claire was glad John and Emily qualified as unknowing. Tony was a master at appearances and was even the first to extend his hand and congratulate John on his accomplishments. “We’re still sorry you didn’t decide to join us at Rawlings Industries. I believe that despite what your sister-in-law said, you would’ve been a real asset.”

Claire smiled and shook her head at John. “I didn’t say a word. I was as shocked as you when I learned of the offer. Tony and Tom did their homework. Nevertheless, we definitely respect your decision and are thrilled with your success.”

John respectfully thanked them both. The job offer was a huge compliment, and he was honored. He also accepted their congratulations on the result of his trial, but as far as partnership, nothing was currently set. He added with a grin. “The jury’s still out.”

Tony’s comment pleased Claire and cleared the air, allowing her to breathe easier. The four of them had a nice dinner. Claire told her sister and brother-in-law about their upcoming trip to Europe.

Emily said she spent a long weekend in Fishers, Indiana, visiting some old friends. She named a few and told Claire how they all sent her their best. The mention of her past life darkened Tony’s eyes a few shades. Claire didn’t pursue the subject, only smiled and nodded acceptably. Emily also commented on Claire’s hair: did she like it so blonde? Of course, it looked beautiful. Emily actually said that she looked *stunning*, but so different. Some of their old friends asked if it was really her in the pictures. The name was right. She just didn’t look the same. Claire wondered if that meant she wasn’t stunning before.

Claire asked how they liked the wedding pictures she sent. They both said they liked them very much. Emily even said she bought some new dresses to wear with her wedding shoes. She’s never owned shoes like those and planned to get Anthony’s money’s worth out of them.

Tony smiled at Claire and commented. “What a great idea. Maybe Claire could decide to wear some of her shoes more than one time.” They all laughed. The mood was jovial. The dinner tasted delicious and catching up was fun.

In the car on their way back to Manhattan, Claire told Tony, “Thank you, but I’m glad that’s done. It’s too much stress for me. Besides, I’m too excited about our trip!”

His eyes lightened again.

If that night needed to qualify as a type of consequence, Claire would call it positive. The next day, they flew east across the Atlantic.

CHAPTER FORTY

Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.

—William James

*J*N PARIS, TONY booked their suite, more like an apartment, in the *Second Arrondissement* located in the heart of Paris. Many of the major attractions Claire wanted to visit were within walking distance. Tony gave her complete freedom to roam the city while he was in his meetings. At first, she worried about the language barrier; after all, he spoke French like a native; however, unlike the rumors she'd heard, as long as she attempted to speak their language, the French were polite and fluent in English.

She did her best to frequent the shops along *Rue de Faubourgs Saint Honoré*, but she found the styles too bold for her liking. After his business was complete, they experienced Paris together. They took romantic walks along the Seine and in the *Tuileries Gardens*. They also dined on amazing cuisine. The cultural differences fascinated her. Dinner didn't begin until 8:30 PM, but earlier than that they could experience *l'apéritif*, from 6:00PM to 8:00 PM, where cafés and bistros offered their best cocktails or wine by the glass. Tony's understanding of the French was not limited to their language. He was also well versed in their wines. Apparently, the French consider wine to be an adjunct to each meal and snack. It reminded Claire of college.

Paris claimed to be capital of romance, but Claire would suggest the *Côte d'Azur* or the French Riviera seek to take the title. Located in the southeastern corner of France on the Mediterranean coastline, it boggled her mind to think she was actually there in the playground for the wealthy. She didn't realize Tony planned this portion of their trip with no business obligations, no meetings, commitments, or other recipients of his attention. He was totally devoted to her.

The French Riviera was a major yachting and cruising area. Unbeknownst

to Claire, they reserved a private one-hundred-foot luxury sailing yacht, complete with their own captain and first mate. It would be their hotel for two nights. They boarded their yacht in *Beau lier-sur Mer*, a beautiful Mediterranean resort village.

They spent the next seventy-two hours lounging on the sea decks, enjoying the interior cabins, and cruising up the coast toward Italy. Some of the ports they viewed from their deck, others they stopped and explored. Cruising on a private yacht in the Mediterranean was amazing. Claire's favorite port was Monaco. The entire experience seemed surreal. Being the second smallest independent state in the world, the entire city-state was less than one square mile. They were able to walk the hilly streets and enjoy many attractions. There were museums and palaces, as well as shopping. Tony relished Claire's unabashed enthusiasm for Monte Carlo. Claire believed that *Le Musée Oceanographic* or the palace above the sea was one of the most beautiful places she'd ever seen. She didn't want to leave; however, their yacht was docked in the scenic harbor and waited to take them north to Italy.

The last port before Italy was Menton. It was nicknamed the Pearl of France and was famous for its gardens. Tony's zeal at sharing nature with Claire amused her. His research told him that *Jardin Serre de la Madone*, often known as the *Serre de la Madone* (Hill of the Madonna), was a garden noted for its design and rare plantings. It wasn't difficult for Claire to show the enthusiasm Tony expected.

Next, they flew to Sicily for the weekend. Landing at a small airport in Catania, Sicily, Tony arranged to have a *Maserati Gran Turismo* waiting. Actually, it was the *Gran Cabrio*, the open-air version of a small dynamic sports car. The rag top allowed them to tour the countryside and see everything as it came into view. Driving around Sicily and driving around Iowa proved dramatically different. Claire learned very quickly speed limits exceeded those found in the United States and didn't seem to be strongly enforced. The one-lane winding roads always had someone wanting to pass or needing to be passed. Tony loved the challenge. Riding around the island with him that weekend made Claire feel like she truly put her life in his hands as never before.

The desire to drive never occurred to her the entire weekend.

Their hotel was in Taormina, located on a plateau below *Mount Tauro* on the east side of Sicily, on the coast of the Ionian Sea. Their suite rested high on a cliff with a splendid coastal view from their private glass railed balcony. It was known for its ancient Greek splendor, medieval charm, and unique views of Mount Etna. Tony was right about the water. The shades of blue and green were comparable to the waters in Fiji.

There were beaches nearby which offered the sunbathing Tony mentioned; however, Claire suggested they spend their time seeing other

attractions. They spent hours walking the endlessly winding medieval streets and tiny passages. Thankfully, most were inaccessible by car. They discovered garden treasures hidden behind stone walls and terraces overlooking the coast. The *Greek Amphitheater* built in the third-century BC offered breathtaking views of *Mount Etna* and the sea. The history and age of the amphitheater had Claire talking about the youth of America.

Tony listened to her enthusiasm and watched her energy as she held his hand and walked through miles of history. The sightseeing was new to him. He traveled for business, not pleasure. Claire's presence made all of this new and fun for him too. One of his goals for their trip was making her happy. Another was creating good memories.

The evenings in Taormina were enchanting. Together, they strolled the illuminated streets and indulged in delicious cuisine. They watched in awe as lava left a stream of steam and light in its wake as it flowed along the snow covered slopes of *Mount Etna*.

Hesitantly, granting Tony the pleasure of driving, they drove to *Mount Etna*, where they hiked. Claire was fascinated to learn ancient Greeks believed the mountain was home to the one-eyed monster known as the Cyclops. Her father loved mythology. He'd read stories of Cyclops to her as a child. It astounded her that she was actually walking around the foothills of a mythological site. With *Mount Etna* being an active volcano, the height of the summit changed with each eruption. The lava created beautiful solidified structures. These structures were called gorges, and at *Alcantara Gorge*, Claire and Tony walked around and touched the basalt gorges and columns which were formed after thousands of years of rushing waters. They waded in the *Alcantara River* and experienced the coolness of the water coming from the snow topped peaks.

On Sunday night they flew to Florence where Tony had more meetings. Not reading any of her books, Claire kept busy with museums and sidewalk cafes. While sitting and enjoying a coffee at a sidewalk café, Claire noticed the signs advertising Wi-Fi. She saw people with their laptops and the wall of available computers. This vacation had allowed her more personal freedom than she'd experienced since originally arriving at Tony's. He hadn't mentioned any restrictions, yet he had mentioned restrictions to Internet use thousands of times at home. Claire decided she would spend her time in Italy seeing Italy. She could access the Worldwide Web from Iowa and hoped someday that would be an option. Today, she would enjoy Florence.

While wandering the *Galleria dell' Accademia*, the museum housing Michelangelo's David, Claire lost all track of time. The museum was large with a magnitude of amazing exhibits. The art fascinated her. She lingered at the impressionistic paintings. The greatness of the exhibits caused her to forget about everything except the treasures she was seeing and experiencing

firsthand.

When she realized the time, an immediate rush of panic nearly knocked her off her feet. It was 4:30 PM and she was supposed to be back at their suite by 5:00 PM. Her minute recollection of Spanish did little to help her navigate the Italian street signs. She'd walked to the museum, stopping at others on the way. The sidewalk cafés and narrow streets all looked the same. Normally, she had an uncanny sense of direction, but seeing the minutes tick away on her watch made her lose any navigational skills she'd previously possessed. She practically ran the streets filled with people, trying desperately to find her way back to their hotel. At 5:30 PM she reached the *Relais Santa Croce*. Entering the exquisite lobby, she did her best to regain her composure.

With only twenty-four rooms, the staff excelled at name recognition and attention. The concierge immediately greeted her in broken English, "Good evening, Signora Rawlings, your husband, he awaits you in your suite. May I carry your baggage?"

Claire's heart sank. She knew Tony's meetings were nearby. Now her fears were realized. At first, she told the concierge no, thank you. Then she decided perhaps having someone enter the suite with her was a good idea. She handed him the few bags she carried and they proceeded to the Rawlings suite. The concierge assisted her by using her key to unlock their door. The double doors opened to the sitting area, complete with fireplace and windows overlooking the historic center of Florence. Tony wasn't there.

The concierge placed Mrs. Rawlings's bags on the sofa and thanked her. She reached into her purse for a tip when Tony appeared from the bedroom. He smiled gallantly at the concierge, thanked him, and handed him a generous tip from his money clip.

Thanking Signor Rawlings, the concierge bowed and left.

Claire's heart began to pound in her ears as she and Tony stood silently for what seemed like an eternity. She'd used all her resolve maintaining her facade with the concierge. She hadn't witnessed the other Tony in quite a while. She worked diligently day and night to keep him away. But now she was late. She broke his punctuality rule, and there was no need to explain. She knew her reasons wouldn't matter. So she stood tall and resolute. Her eyes weren't full of fury; they brimmed with tears. He just watched and said nothing. The pupils of his eyes were taking over, yet his expression wasn't keeping up. Claire waited.



TONY WATCHED HER. He'd been worried. What if something happened to her? He didn't even know where to begin to look. When he heard her arrive his

immediate feeling was relief: she was okay. But then he saw her, knew she was safe, and relief faded into displeasure. It wasn't conscious, but he felt it happening, and he didn't want to give in to it. Her expression looked so frightened, yet she stood so strong and proud.

There was a time he would have enjoyed quelling her resolve; but right now, all he wanted to do was make her feel safe. Finally, without speaking Tony indicated they sit on the sofa. Claire sat and waited. He broke the silence. "Tell me what you saw today and what caused your delay." He didn't yell or strike. Claire's obvious relief led to a sudden loss of control. Tony reached for her, and she started to involuntarily tremble. "Claire, it's all right." His tone comforted her as he pulled her close.

"Tony, I'm so sorry. I was at the *Galleria dell' Accademia*; which was amazing. When I realized the time, I immediately left the museum. But I couldn't understand the signs, and the streets all look the same." Her words ran together small sobs between. "I knew the hotel was within walking distance, but I suddenly couldn't remember the direction."

At first, he didn't speak, only holding her. Then he said, "It's a foreign city. Mistakes happen. I was worried something happened to you. I didn't want you to have an accident." His voice was tender, yet his words...

Their discussion continued to the bedroom. She finally regained her composure. He tried his best to show her she was safe and loved. She showed him her relief at his reaction. Later after they'd soaked in the large marble tub, they dressed for a romantic dinner and walked through the streets of Florence. Although the streets were packed with people, as they walked arm in arm it felt like their private journey. The romantic city, beautiful structures and tepid night breeze combined to enhance the evening.



IT WASN'T LONG until they arrived at their next destination, Rome. Tony had meetings scheduled for one of their two days. They stayed at *Rome Cavalieri-Waldorf Astoria*, in a luxurious suite with a magnificent view of the city highlighted by the dome of *Saint Peter's Basilica*.

Claire was relieved to learn her tardiness in Florence didn't cause the loss of her roaming pass. Although Tony continued to allow her to sightsee alone, he reminded her multiple times to keep track of time. She spent the day walking and busing around the city while Tony attended to business. The ancient history that accompanied everything in Rome fascinated Claire.

She visited the *Coliseum*, the *Forum*, and the *Pantheon*. She enjoyed a latte in *Piazza Navona* and watched as couples threw coins into the *Trevi Fountain*. The sights were breathtaking and remarkable, but the entrenched

fear she felt in Florence affected her. She enjoyed everything, but now it felt tarnished. She didn't want to feel that way, but sometimes memories and emotions would overcome her. Not wanting Tony to see the change, she dutifully put on her mask and performed to the best of her ability. The sights were still amazing and spectacular.

The next day, at Vatican City, they walked hand in hand through the atrium of *Saint Peter's Basilica*. They viewed the Vatican grottoes, Saint Peter's Treasury, Saint Peter's Square, and the Vatican gardens. As they walked the steep road back to their hotel, Tony confessed, "With all of my traveling, I rarely sightsee. Today, when you said you wanted to spend the entire day at the Vatican, I thought you were crazy. I expected to be done in an hour or two." Claire watched as he spoke. "But it was incredible. I just want you to know I understand how you lost track of time in Florence. I get it."

She didn't speak; she squeezed his hand. Something from her past came to mind, and she smiled. He once said she was trainable; perhaps he was too. It just took longer with him.

The last country on their journey was Switzerland. Tony had meetings, first in Interlaken and then in Genève. They spent one night in Interlaken. The Swiss Alps were the epitome of pure unsullied nature and grandeur. The small town of Interlaken was surrounded by crystal-clear lakes, sparkling streams, and waterfalls. And ever present were the *Monch* and *Jungfrau* mountain range of the Swiss Alps. Claire felt like she was in the middle of a postcard.

While Tony met with investors, Claire chose to relish the relaxing scenery and take in the atmosphere. She wandered the streets, enjoyed the cafés, and rested in the beauty of the tranquil landscape. Their two weeks were action packed. She could have spent her time any way she chose, the options were numerous; however, she enjoyed some downtime to reflect on all they'd seen and to relax in the natural splendor.

Her memories overflowed with sights and sounds of ancient cities. She could close her eyes and recall the amazing art and architecture. Inhaling the sweet Swiss chocolate as she sipped her coffee and nibbled on the candy bar, she remembered the amazing cuisine and delicious wines. She thought about her husband. He'd spent the entire two weeks open and understanding. She never anticipated the freedoms she'd been granted. Her stack of books remained unread. Even when she was late, his voice and expression were more of care and concern than of anger. Her thoughts moved from his voice and expression, to his strong, safe embrace. They'd made love at every stop.

She recalled the yacht with the rhythmic rocking from the sea. Smiling, she thought lustfully about wanting him, how on many occasions it was her who initiated their carnal encounters, and he who responded appropriately. Claire slowly realized he was doing what she'd asked: filling her with good

memories. She finished her chocolate and smiled contentedly.

Early Saturday morning they boarded a train to Genève. Tony had one more meeting. It was his last obligation of their trip. After it concluded, they'd spend the last night in Genève and fly home in the morning. Claire couldn't believe how quickly the fourteen days had passed. She felt completely exhausted and yet exhilarated. The first time she remembered Tony traveling to Europe he'd stayed for eight days. Claire remembered when he arrived home he had said he was tired. She understood. Being absent from Iowa for over two weeks, she was ready to get home. Their destinations were spectacular; however, Claire longed for the serenity of her own bed and suite.

Before they went out for their final night in Europe, Tony insisted they take some time to visit famous boutiques and shops on *Rue du Rhône*. Claire repeatedly told him she needed nothing. As if unable to hear or comprehend, he led her to an exclusive jewelry store. He wanted her to have something to remember their *time*, so he purchased a sparkling diamond watch. She wondered about a possible double meaning.

After a nine-hour flight, they arrived home. She couldn't remember being more tired. Their flight from Fiji was longer, yet they predominately rested in Fiji, or at least spent time horizontal. She felt like she had been literally sightseeing, walking, and hiking for the past seventeen days. Their dinner in New York seemed forever ago. Still, she knew it was not.

Before they went to bed, Tony brought Claire a large stack of e-mails from his home office. She chose to not look at them. She'd do it tomorrow. They both collapsed into her bed. She thanked Tony repeatedly for the trip of a lifetime and the wonderful memories. She drifted into a dreamless sleep with her head resting on his shoulder, listening to his breathing.



THOUGH EXHAUSTED, HIS arm embraced the soft warm body that nestled against his side. Her steady breathing told him she was sleeping. Closing his eyes he could hear her voice thanking him for the memories. Inhaling the scent of her hair he recalled their unforgettable trip and marveled at the intense satisfaction blooming within his chest.

Before he drifted off to sleep, Tony whispered, "I plan to go into the office tomorrow."

Stirring only slightly, Claire murmured, "All right, I'll see you tomorrow evening. I plan to sleep through your alarm."

He smiled at her honesty as they both floated into blissful slumber.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

It's not a question of enough, pal. It's a Zero Sum game, somebody wins, somebody loses. Money itself isn't lost or made, it's simply transferred from one perception to another. Like magic.

—Gordon Gekko, Wallstreet

*A*NTON STOOD SILENTLY outside the grand doors of his grandfather's home office. Even though the double doors were tightly closed, he could hear the voices from the other side. His father insisted Anton be excluded from the conversation within. As far as Anton was concerned, that was ridiculous. Something big was happening, and it had to do with *his* name and the company he'd been told would be his. Samuel could shelter him from the discussion and knowledge of the business dealings, but Anton wasn't ignorant. He could read a NYSE ticker. Rawls Corp. stock had plummeted from 79.8 to 56.4 at the close of trading. The news release proclaimed rumors of wrongdoings within the corporation. The four men within the office weren't drinking beer and playing cards. This was deadly serious. It felt like everything was crashing down around them. Someone opened a dam and the water couldn't be stopped.

Inside the cherry-paneled, regal office, Nathaniel questioned Clawson. "You said *no one* would ever know. What the hell happened? Where did these allegations come from?"

"Mr. Rawls, I don't know. We've covered our tracks for almost ten years. You've made a bloody fortune. Maybe the feds got nervous because you were making too much profit."

"What the hell is that, too much profit?" Nathaniel couldn't sit. He paced every inch of the plush carpet. "Have they investigated Trump or Gates? I'm nowhere close to those men."

"It doesn't matter who else has been investigated." Samuel tried to bring the men back to the task at hand. "What matters is that we get our ducks in a

row and meet the investigation head-on.”

Clawson gazed over to his assistant, Cole Mathews. Mathews was busy organizing stacks of paper and utilizing a shredder to reduce the paper overload. Clawson addressed both Rawls men. “Cole and I are making sure there is no evidence linking Rawls to any of the allegations.”

“You said no one would know. Why is Mathews shredding papers? There shouldn’t be anything that needs to be shredded.” Nathaniel watched as Mathew’s green eyes briefly met his. He seemed to be working as fast as the shredder would allow.

Samuel spoke above the grind of the shredder. “Instead of shredding, we need to be open to the investigation. Be honest, take our fines and penalties and move on.” He might as well have been talking to the walls. His father and Clawson were devising a strategy as Mathews shredded without pause.

Cole Mathews entered their inner circle about two years ago. He didn’t talk much, but was a whiz at research. Tell him a stock or a company, and bingo, he would have more insider information than one would believe humanly possible. Suddenly, Nathaniel regretted not having Clawson and Mathews sign some kind of power of attorney or non-disclosure statement, a way to distance him from them.

These two men helped make him mega-wealthy. At this moment, if possible he would hang them both out to dry to save himself and his family. Hell, Samuel wouldn’t even meet his eyes.

Briefly, Nathaniel thought about the recent news. The space shuttle *Challenger* had blown up during takeoff. That was a damn shame. Just maybe that news would overshadow the unfortunate false allegations regarding Rawls Corp.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The sudden disappointment of a hope leaves a scar which the ultimate fulfillment of that hope never entirely removes.

—Thomas Hardy

ON THE DAY following their return, Claire woke late, relishing the large empty bed. After Cindy brought her coffee and food, she sat on her balcony, ate breakfast, and enjoyed the summer day, truly contented to be home. August in Iowa reminded her of Indiana, and even though the temperature and humidity continued to increase, the summer's climax was rapidly approaching. Before long, the balminess would diminish and evidence of autumn would materialize.

Claire intended to appreciate the remaining days of summer. She took the folder of e-mails to the pool. Knowing that Tony read them before delivering them, she decided to separate the ones she felt needed responses and expedite her evening request session. Eighteen days' worth of e-mails took quite a bit of time. She started by removing the ones she didn't intend to answer. Next, she reread the ones from acquaintances. What did they want? Could she help in any way? If not, they went into the *Patricia, please respond* pile. If she believed there was something she could do, she put them in a pile to discuss with Tony.

Next, was the pile of friends and family. It was considerably smaller. Most of them knew she and Tony were out of the country. Most of her friends wanted to know about the trip and schedule get-togethers. Courtney wanted to do lunch as soon as Claire recovered from her traveling. MaryAnn's e-mail apparently went to both Tony and Claire. She invited them to a movie premiere party at their home in Malibu in October. Claire checked her calendar. It was the weekend after the *Red Cross* silent auction. She added those to the "discuss with Tony" pile. The last few pages were from Emily. She definitely preferred sitting in the sun, drinking iced tea at her pool, in her

bathing suit, and reading Emily's e-mails to doing it under Tony's glare.

The first one was a note about their get-together. Emily and John enjoyed seeing them and thanked them for dinner. Apparently, John spoke to the waiter about paying the bill prior to their arrival, but somehow it never came to the table. This caused Claire to smile. She hadn't noticed. Emily wished them a good time on their trip. She anxiously waited to hear all about it. The second came a week later. It began with: "I know you are still in Europe, but I wanted to tell you..." The firm set an arbitrary date of November 1. At that time, there would be a review of the associates' production, hours billed, and fees recovered. She was optimistic about John's final numbers. He spent every waking hour working. But cautiously, she said if he didn't make the cut, it wasn't the end. He would still be an associate and considered for partnership during the next review process. She asked Claire to call when she got home. The third e-mail was dated yesterday. It began, "Are you home yet?" She asked multiple questions about their trip and talked about her impending school year. Apparently, the economic state of the country was affecting the finances of her school as well as others everywhere. Even though she worked for a private school system there were severe budget cuts which would affect her classroom directly. It made Claire wonder if she could use some of her *capital* to make a donation. She decided to put these in the *Tony* pile. She wanted to call and perhaps pursue the donation.

Lunch arrived at the pool. Settling into the lounge chair, with a book that made the trip to and from Europe but never opened, Claire was filled with comfort, peace, and contentment. She was home. Jet lag settled in and soon she fell into a deep sleep, sleeping through most of the afternoon. Catherine woke her at 4:00 PM and she went to her suite to prepare for Tony. At 5:00 PM, Catherine informed her that they would dine on the back patio. Her life's routine had resumed.



AUGUST FADED INTO September, and before she knew it October knocked on the door. Claire and Courtney were very busy finalizing their efforts for the silent auction. The donations, facility, caterers, and wine distributors all confirmed; the guest list approved and invitations mailed. Excited about the impending event, Claire felt it was her debut to the philanthropic world. Tony not only participated in this world, he excelled. She wanted Mrs. Anthony Rawlings to be equally synonymous with charity as Mr. Anthony Rawlings. It was the first time Claire informed Tony they would be attending an event. He smiled and told her he would check their calendar.

During the auction planning her hostess duties didn't cease. Various

dinners occurred at various locations. They also attended functions and events together. Her biggest decisions involved wardrobe and hairstyle, and often those choices were made for her. That made the *Red Cross* function all the more important to Claire. She knew she had more to offer.

Not long before the auction, Tony and Claire attended a forum in Chicago where Tony was the keynote speaker. He was asked to give a speech about success. The theme of the conference was “Risk versus Failure in the World of Business.” He never practiced his speeches or ran ideas by her. So, as Claire sat next to her husband at the head table and he addressed the audience, his words were new to her, too.

When she first met him, really met him, she didn’t like the *business* Tony. He was the one who used to visit her suite; always professionally dressed, impersonal, methodical, detached, and other adjectives not as complimentary, but now she enjoyed watching and being beside Anthony Rawlings esteemed businessman, while he shined in his element. He radiated an aura that said: I am successful. By some, it might have been perceived as conceit. Claire probably thought of it that way at one time, but now she found it attractive. In the past, she disliked or hated his ingrained confidence and authority, but now she could look at it differently. It was sexy. Watching and listening to him, she comprehended the importance of her role.

Many times following the dinner and speech, the organizers would schedule a question-and-answer symposium. These were informal, with various people approaching Tony and asking him questions. Many of the attendees were young entrepreneurs looking for advice. According to Shelly, Tony’s participation was essential for public relations. According to Tony, his participation was hell. Claire’s duty included politely interrupting participants, so he could move on to the next and eventually leave.

During these Q & A sessions, multiple people approached Tony. Claire tried to appear attentive, yet unobtrusive, until it was time for her to interrupt. Honestly, she didn’t pay attention to the individuals. They blended together in her mind. During this particular conference, a question came from one of the participants which caught them both off guard. A man, younger than Tony, closer to Claire’s age, dressed in an expensive suit approached Tony.

“Hello, Mr. Rawlings. I’m pleased to meet you. Your speech was remarkable and inspiring.” Tony shook his hand and politely thanked him, and then the blond man with big soft blue eyes continued, somewhat timidly, “I have an unusual request. May I speak with your wife for a few minutes?”

Claire hadn’t looked at the man until that moment. She was gazing into the crowd. His words made her turn, first to Tony, seeing his surprised expression, and then to the man. Her mask momentarily shattered. She recognized him immediately and suddenly wondered why she hadn’t recognized his voice. The mayhem in her head tied her tongue until Tony’s

eyes brought her back to reality. Placing her hand gently on Tony's arm, she hesitantly spoke, trying desperately for a sturdier voice.

"Oh my." "Anthony." "Simon." Tony watched as she stuttered through introductions. "Anthony, may I introduce Simon Johnson. Simon and I were students together at Valparaiso, a million years ago." Her speech flowed too rapidly. "Simon, may I introduce my husband, Anthony Rawlings."

The two men locked eyes and shook hands again. Tony was polite. Claire watched his eyes, as if a switch had been flipped from light to dark. Turning to Claire, he responded, "I believe that's Mrs. Rawlings' decision."

There were other people waiting to speak with Tony. Claire excused Simon and herself, allowing Tony to speak to the others. She and Simon walked away. As they walked, Simon absentmindedly put his hand in the small of her back. She immediately stepped away from his touch. They sat at an empty table.

Simon spoke softly. "Claire, I apologize if I've put you in a difficult position. It's just that I have wanted to speak to you for a long time."

"Like eight years?" Even she was surprised by her unfriendly tone.

"This is the third event I've attended where you and Mr. Rawlings have been present. I finally summoned the nerve to speak to you."

Remembering a previous reunion, she said, "First, Simon, tell me you're not a reporter or talking to me for a publication of any kind."

His blue eyes looked startled and then softened. "No, Claire, I just want to talk to you. It must be difficult not knowing who you can trust."

She breathed easier. "It is. I've made a few mistakes I don't plan to repeat."

"It's a mistake I made that I want to talk to you about, too."

She looked at him. He hadn't changed since their freshman year of college, but alas he had. He was older, more mature, and more confident. His blond hair still needed trimming and his gleaming eyes were still as bright. She couldn't forget the passion she'd witnessed in those eyes.

"I've seen your picture so many places recently. I felt that I needed to talk to you at least once and explain what happened during the summer of '03."

They met at Valparaiso their freshman year. Simon's major was computer programming while Claire's was meteorology. Living in the same dorm, they ran into one another often. Their mutual attraction blossomed into young infatuation and rapidly into romance. They were each other's first love. The new, unfamiliar emotions overwhelmed them both. Simon proposed to Claire daily. She had other plans for her life, plans of a career and national success which didn't include marriage. During the summer they visited each other's hometowns, met the families, and did all the things young lovers do. Claire's mother commented how plans can always be modified. She liked Simon. Their sophomore year was to include Greek life, parties, studying, and time

together, but somewhere between meeting the family and classes resuming, Simon disappeared. He called a few times, wrote a few letters, and vanished. Claire knew college had been a financial strain on his family. That was why when out of the blue, during the summer, Simon had received an offer for a dream internship and he had, had to accept. An opportunity like that was unheard of for a sophomore. His computer talents exceeded many of the older students. The internship was in California, and he couldn't miss the opportunity. It was supposed to be just one semester. She waited for him to return. He didn't. Their correspondences became less frequent and then nonexistent.

She moved on. Forgetting him wasn't possible, but successfully compartmentalizing him was. Over the years, life's challenges and routines filled her consciousness. Only sometimes in unconsciousness did he return.

"That isn't necessary. We have both moved on with our lives." Claire began to rise. "It was nice to see you."

He touched her hand gently. "Please, Claire, I need to tell you." She sat timidly. "Do you remember that I went to California?" She nodded. "At first, it was an internship, but then they offered me a job. I'm not sure you remember, but college was difficult for my parents to afford, and the offer was too good to pass. I wanted to go back and finish my degree, but there I was, twenty years old, being offered my dream job."

Claire remembered the letter she received saying he wouldn't be returning from California. It broke her heart. She wanted to join him, but he didn't ask. "I'm glad it worked for you. Are you still living in California?"

"Yes, I am, and the company I went to work for interestingly is a subsidiary of Rawlings Industries."

Claire's heart started to race. If Tony knew, Simon would lose his job. She saw the darkness, she wanted to protect him. "Are you still there?"

"No." She sighed with relief. "I was with them for over five years, but I left long before you met your husband. I read the article in *Vanity Fair*." She smiled. "I have my own company now."

"That's great. I hope you're happy."

"With business, I am. I should thank Mr. Rawlings. The start I received from his company made a big impact. Today I create some of the games people play on their phones. I'm doing well."

"I'm truly happy for you." She glanced nervously back at Tony. "I do need to get back to Tony."

"My mother has been keeping up on you, relaying information to me. She liked you a lot."

"I liked your mom, too. Please, tell her I said hello and to not believe everything she reads." Claire's eyes saddened with memories.

"Before you go, I wanted to let you know, even now with my success, I

regret not coming back for you.” Claire didn’t speak, she couldn’t. “I thought about it constantly, but the job required a lot of travel. I was in China when your parents died. If I had been stateside, I would have been there for you. I just had to tell you, I didn’t leave you because of anything you did or said. Claire, you have remained perfect in my memories. I wish things had been different.” She felt a rush of sadness at what may have been; nonetheless, Simon continued, “I even followed your career. I knew you were in Albany and then in Atlanta. I remembered you wanted a career. I thought maybe after you achieved success we could try again.” Claire looked at the table. This was making her uneasy. She needed to go back to Tony. “But I want you to know I’m happy for you, and I’m happy you’re happily married.”

The increasing feeling of anxiety made her stand. “Thank you, Simon. I wish you continued success. Please give my best to your family. I must get back to my husband.”

“Do you have your phone?” Claire’s expression became confused. Simon smiled.

“I’m making you sad, which wasn’t my intention. I wanted to show you my latest game. It’s fun, and I hope it’ll make you smile. Do you remember staying up all night playing video games?” She did, but it seemed like another person, in another life.

“I created this most recent game with someone from my past in mind. Kind of a tribute, I guess.”

“I don’t have my purse. It’s at the table.” She silently berated herself. He was being so open and honest, and she was lying about a phone!

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a smart phone, and started touching the screen. “Here it is. You can download it for a dollar ninety-nine.” Smiling, he added, “Which I believe is within your price range.” Claire looked onto the screen. The goal of the game seemed to be to find something, but in order to accomplish this goal, you had to rummage through clothes, old pieces of pizza, pizza boxes, soda pop cans, etc. She smiled, as he explained, “Each level has a new item to discover. It’s very popular with the college and post-college demographic. It’s made me millions.” She really smiled at him. He actually made that kind of money with games. “I’m glad I saw your smile. Claire, you’re beautiful, but I miss the brown hair.”

“Bye, Simon. Good luck to you.” She nodded. He looked like he wanted to hug her or shake hands, some type of contact, but she turned away. Immediately, she made eye contact with Tony. He’d been watching. She resumed her position beside her husband.

Acknowledging her return, he flashed his charming smile, nodded, and greeted her. “Mrs. Rawlings.”

When they stepped out onto the sidewalk, the Chicago lights sparkled in the clear September night air. Tony’s hand gently rested in the small of

Claire's back. The temperature was still warm, but she felt a shiver. Eric opened the door of the limousine, and Tony helped his wife into the car.

Lost in her thoughts, Claire watched as the lights of the city passed the windows. Her mind was back at college. The memories of the messy dorm room, the clutter, and now the game brought a warm feeling. She was happy for Simon. He succeeded in accomplishing his goals. She remembered his aspirations: not of wealth but happiness and family. She recalled he wanted to be able to help his parents. She hadn't asked if he was married. She hadn't even looked to see if he was wearing a wedding ring, but with all her soul she hoped he was.

"Mrs. Rawlings." Tony was addressing Claire. She turned to face him. He was uncomfortably close. "What is your name?"

Bewildered she just looked at him. He reached for her chin and held it so they were looking at one another. "Your name—what is your name?"

Annoyed and alarmed, she replied, "Tony, what are you doing?"

He didn't loosen his grip. "I'm asking you a question, one that you seem unable to answer."

Mystified by his behavior, she answered his question, "My name is Claire, Claire Rawlings."

Slowly and deliberately, he asked, "Explain to me, *Mrs. Rawlings*, how you can be sitting with me, your husband, wearing the rings I purchased, in the limousine paid for by my hard work, and thinking about another man."

He still held her chin. "Tony, please let go of my face. You're hurting me."

As he released her chin, his hand slid behind her neck, tightly holding her head and pulling the hair hanging down her neck. He continued, "Do I need to repeat every question or do you think you may be able to answer at least one the first time?"

Flashing, her green eyes spoke alarm, and the stiffening of her neck spoke resolve. "Seeing Simon caught me off guard. I haven't thought of or heard from him in eight years. Do you not think that deserves some reflection?"

His grip tightened. "No. I believe the past is just that. It's done and now it's time to concentrate on the present." Her neck hurt. He had her head positioned so their eyes made contact. His shone black. Hers weren't apologetic, but full of fury. She didn't respond. He continued, "At present I believe you need to concentrate on showing me *my* wife is first and foremost concerned with pleasing *her* husband."

He used his other hand to shut the window between them and Eric. Next, he unzipped the slacks of his tuxedo. Shocked and repulsed, Claire started to protest. She soon found speaking impossible. Holding her neck, he silently directed her head, resting his head on the seat, his fingers entwined in her hair. When Claire tried to push away, Tony seized her hand and twisted it back. He

did not release the pressure and movement on her head until he was finished.

As they walked through the lobby of the *Trump Tower*, Claire did her best to appear composed. Tony placed his arm around her waist and tenderly whispered in her ear. “I have more ways you can demonstrate your devotion, Mrs. Rawlings. We’ll review when we reach our apartment.”

The last thirteen months dissolved into nothingness. She wasn’t Claire Rawlings—wife. She was Claire Nichols—whatever *he* wanted her to be.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Any idiot can face a crisis. It is day to day living that wears you out.

—Anton Chekhov

T

HE SILENCE WITHIN the limousine intensified with each mile, as Tony and Claire rode from Bettendorf toward home. The silent auction unofficially raised over a half of a million dollars *net*. The cost of the event had been less than ten thousand dollars due to Claire's clever procurement of donated services and goods. The noiselessness of the ride was a stark contrast to the convention center.

Before they left the conference hall, Courtney spoke ecstatically about Claire's ability. "This turned out so well! I just can't believe the final figures. Honey, together we are going to raise money for every organization west of the Mississippi."

Although she felt uneasy regarding her future philanthropic activities, Claire hugged her friend and wore her smile. "Oh, goodness, we'll have to see."

"Well, enjoy this success for a little while, because I have plans!" Courtney's enthusiasm was contagious. Claire smiled and nodded her head.

Mrs. Rawlings' more recent hostess duties aided her efforts. She shrewdly mentioned the auction, both for donations and possible attendance, whenever possible. She found it interesting how Tony's business associates were willing to participate in one or both when personally approached. The fact that they were in her home, eating her food, and receiving her attention didn't hinder her efforts. The current president of the *Red Cross* of the Greater Quad Cities thanked Mrs. Rawlings and Mrs. Simmons profusely.

Many of Tony's associates, from out of town, attended the event. Claire hadn't realized when she invited them that this had an additional impact on the Quad Cities. These important people needed places to stay and food to eat while in Bettendorf. According to Courtney, the media estimated their event

reaped over a quarter of a million dollars windfall to the Quad Cities. Claire hadn't seen the coverage. She didn't like television, and any other form of communication was still forbidden.

As a matter of fact, since the Chicago Symposium, Claire had lost many of her newfound freedoms. She still saw e-mails, but only after responses had been sent. No longer a *freedom*, they were merely a blatant illustration of what was now prohibited.

During the final preparations of the auction, it was undeniable that Claire and Courtney needed to communicate and see each other; however, contact and endeavors with others had dramatically decreased. Tony decided Claire needed *time* to decide what was really important to her.

The night in Chicago was reminiscent of her first encounters at the estate. Tony was excessively domineering, controlling, and demanding. Even the sadistic, cruel sexual tendencies, from before her accident, reappeared. Once back at the apartment, Claire tried to reason with him. "Please think about what you're doing." It was as if his black eyes couldn't register her voice. She pleaded, "Tony, remember your promise. I'm your wife. Think about what you're asking me to do."

Unaffected, his demands continued, "You are my wife; however, I'm not asking."

When she awoke the next morning, feeling the too familiar aches from a year before, she dreaded his presence. Lying silently, she listened for his breathing. Relieved, she heard the sound of his shower in the adjoining room. Slowly, she sat up and thought about her options. Up until seeing Simon, things were progressing well. Even in Italy when she broke his rule, he responded with kindness, not cruelty, yet on this morning as she listened to the running water, Claire debated leaving him, the apartment—everything.

She didn't know how. Where could she possibly go where he couldn't find her? She fell back against the soft pillows and allowed herself a few tears. Momentarily, she had difficulty filling her lungs with a sufficient amount of air and remembered her nightmares. This wasn't a dream or a nightmare. It was her reality. Although she didn't want to see or talk to him, she recognized the helplessness surging through her veins. Her only way forward was through the man in the next room. Slowly, she eased back the blankets, squared her shoulders, and walked toward the mirror. The steely determination propelling her feet didn't come from courage, more from a sense of powerless necessity. The reflection before her had been worse. It'd been much worse. Yet seeing the red and blue markings made her stomach twist. She reached for her robe and covered the evidence.

Minutes later, Tony stepped into their bedroom. The man before her seemed completely ignorant of the previous night's events. He casually kissed her cheek and said, "The shower's all yours." She just stared. Who is he? He grinned, "I would have stayed longer, if I'd known you were awake."

Later that morning, he helped her prepare to leave Chicago and kindly discussed daily pleasantries.

The incident forced Claire to recognize that she'd deluded herself into believing the other Tony was gone. He wasn't gone. In fact, he was incredibly close to the surface. That morning she had no idea with whom she was flying or even with whom she shared a home. Every night, she'd wait as her stomach twisted into knots, wondering who would walk through the doorway.

Claire expected the recent events to increase the frequency of her nightmares. Surprisingly they diminished. Her theory: her consciousness now shared the stress that only her unconscious had endured.

After the repercussions and some passage of time, she tried to talk to Tony about Simon. He didn't care or want to hear her perspective. His only notion remained: at a public event she left his side, her husband, to spend time with her ex-lover. To Claire that was a ludicrous observation. Her interpretation went more like: at a public event, to allow Tony the ability to be accessed by fans, she escorted Simon aside and discussed issues with him for a sliver of time. The dissimilar interpretations didn't have common ground presently or in their future. The subject was closed.

As they rode home from Bettendorf, Claire wondered what Tony thought of the silent auction and what consequences she'd now endure that her presence wasn't required in a public venue. It wasn't until they were almost home that Tony finally spoke, taking her from her thoughts. "Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"The auction was a complete success."

"Thank you. I'm pleased. Courtney's happy. I wanted to make you happy, too."

"And now you don't?"

"No. I do." She was sincere.

"I've told you before. You continually surprise and amaze me with your abilities." And, as an afterthought, he added, "Some more than others."

Claire didn't react, that was what he wanted. Instead, she sat dejectedly and thought about the date, October 8. Her thoughts went many different directions. She thought about the auction, someone bid seventy thousand dollars for the two-day use of Tony's plane and pilot. It was a great donation; he'd thought of it. Other donations like stays in resorts, entertainment

packages, NBA, and NFL tickets helped in surpassing their goal.

She also remembered they were supposed to be in Malibu the following weekend for Eli and MaryAnn's party. She'd been looking forward to it since they received the invitation. The Simmons and the Millers were all going. The film was a thriller. Claire knew of the actors, but she mostly looked forward to seeing their home.

Another thought was her family. John's deadline was less than a month away. She hadn't spoken to Emily since before *Simon*. So many other freedoms had disappeared. The idea of talking to her sister seemed preposterous. Claire didn't have the resolve or strength to follow through on such a request.

Selfishly, she thought about her upcoming twenty-eighth birthday and contemplated the truth of her life. She rode in her limousine, to her estate, with her wealthy, handsome husband. Amused, she decided that was the *Vanity Fair* version. For the unabridged version: she was secluded in Tony's limousine, she would prefer to drive her own car, to his house—her prison on multiple occasions, with her husband who was handsome and cruel, sadistic, manipulative, and controlling. Even Tony's success as a businessman had lost its luster since talking to Simon. Tony ruined lives, futures, and dispensed consequences to make money. Simon had fun and made games. People spent less than two dollars for one of his games, but with enough people, that added up. The reality saddened her. She didn't know for sure, but predicted there were forty-six people in Pennsylvania without jobs.

Her life wasn't worse than that of many others. On the contrary, it was better in many ways. She realized injustice was a widespread problem, yet many of the same questions remained: how did she end up here? How had her life's goals been so radically modified?

When she took the time to think about it, none of it made sense.



ON OCTOBER 14, in a Rawlings Industries jet Claire happily flew across the continent with the Simmons, the Millers, and Tony. A week earlier she would've considered the likelihood of their California trip occurring improbable; however, she'd spent the last week at home with her devoted husband. Each evening, the man she married returned home from his office.

The stress of his unpredictability was making her insane. Since the auction, he'd been attentive, loving, and caring. With the weather turning cooler, the days shorter, and the stress of the dual Tonys, Claire believed she was teetering literally on the edge of sanity. A strong wind was all it would take to blow her one way or the other. Iowa had its share of storms, strong

winds, and tornadoes. They were all unpredictable. It made an ironic parallel for her life.

Courtney remained true to her observant promise. She *knew* something was askew with Claire and Tony. She didn't know what. Claire thought the less she knew the better. Tony didn't understand their connection. Claire tried to facilitate his misconception by complaining about Courtney. "She's fun, but she talks so much..."

It was a ploy she prayed would work. She really needed Courtney in her life. Their plane touched down in Los Angeles on Friday night. The party was the following evening. During their flight they shared wine, laughed, and shared stories of Eli's previous parties. Apparently, the sky's the limit regarding behaviors with the Hollywood scene. Claire waited anxiously to experience it for herself. The Simmons and Millers were dropped off at a five-star hotel while the Rawlings went to their apartment.

The LA housekeeper met them at the door, while a driver took their luggage to their room. Tony explained they would like a light dinner, as soon as possible. Claire wasn't hungry. Her head ached. She only wanted to unpack and go to sleep. Once alone, Tony assumed his alternate persona. "Tomorrow evening we will be in an overtly public arena. It wasn't long ago when a *glitch* occurred in a setting such as this."

She didn't want to hear him. "Tony, please don't start this again." The flight, wine, and aching head contributed to Claire's irritability. Her insolent retort stunned him momentarily. Recovery didn't take long. As she carried clothes to the dresser, he seized her arm and turned her to face him.

"Claire, I do *not* appreciate your flippant attitude. There'll be many more journalists present than you've experienced at one time."

His grip hurt. She looked directly into his eyes and stood tall, as he glowered over her. "I assure you my attitude is *not* flippant. It's just that you are increasingly repetitive. I know the speech and I know—" She didn't get the chance to finish her sentence.

It was the first strike since her *accident*. She remained standing, but temporarily dazed—more by disbelief than pain.

He spoke again, as if he hadn't just shattered his promise and her security, leaving her house of glass lying in a pile of shards. "You have a responsibility and I expect you to behave appropriately." He let go of her arm, walked to the suitcase, and pulled out Claire's hiking boots. "By the way, would you like to know why these are packed?"

Her mind wheeled as he changed subjects. She was having difficulty keeping up. Refusing to cry, she exhaled and took the bait. "Why do I have my hiking boots?"

"As a surprise for your birthday, I made reservations for Sunday and Monday night at the presidential suite of a very exclusive hotel, inside

Yosemite. I thought you'd enjoy the Sierra Nevada Mountains and National Park. After last year, I didn't want to miss celebrating your birthday." His tone became stern. "However, instead of surprising you like I hoped, our romantic birthday getaway now rests in your hands."

Claire tried to follow his words: her hands? What did he mean?

"If your memory isn't failing, if you can remember my concerns and rules, and if you can obey the few requests I've made, then we'll be able to keep the plans for your birthday. If, however, you're unable to handle your responsibilities, I'll have no choice but to cancel the reservations, and we'll concentrate on ways to help facilitate your memory for the future." He stared at his wife as she sank to the edge of the bed. "What is your choice? You want to be a partner. Tell me what you want to do: go to Yosemite, or go home and review appropriate behavior?" This was another of those offers you can't refuse type questions.

God she hated the dance: a blow to the cheek one minute and discussing a romantic getaway the next. It was the one step forward, two steps back waltz. She wanted to scream. Sitting on the side of the bed, Claire allowed herself tears and swallowed. Her voice revealed her distress, yet she tried to sound composed. "I've never been to Yosemite. I've heard it's beautiful. That sounds like a wonderful birthday."

Unmoved by her tears, he stood waiting for a response to his question. Seeing her husband's stare, feeling a too-familiar twinge of panic, Claire realized she hadn't answered his question. "I'd like to go to Yosemite. I'll do as you say."

He moved closer, took her hands, and helped her stand. Their chests touched as she looked up at his still too-dark eyes. She didn't look away. "Claire, I don't want to break my promise, but at the risk of sounding repetitive public failure is *not* an option."

"I understand. I'm sorry for making you break your promise. I'll do better."



THAT NIGHT WHILE lying in bed next to his sleeping wife, Tony remembered a scene from his childhood. It was one of many that shaped so many of his decisions. His grandfather's booming voice: "Boy, you will *not* be joining us at dinner this evening."

Surprised, he noticed the absence of his place setting. Anton asked why. His grandfather didn't speak, but removed a letter from the breast pocket of his jacket and placed it on the table. Anton retrieved the letter and unfolded the page. It was his grades from the last semester of classes. He'd taken

seventeen credit hours: a very full load for a freshman. There were five A's and one B+, in Calculus. That seemed good to him.

He remembered still not comprehending his grandfather's tone. "You plan to succeed in this world, boy?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Then don't let this happen again. Failure has consequences. Perhaps some time alone, eating in your suite, will help you remember perfection is the minimum requirement for success." His grandfather then turned his eyes away and took a drink of wine.

"Nathaniel, perhaps he did his—" His grandfather's dark eyes stopped his grandmother's plea. She looked down at her plate. The subject was closed. Tony looked at his parents. They too were looking down.

He remembered walking out of that dining room vowing to make Nathaniel proud. It wasn't easy, but today he believed he'd seized opportunities and created others. If his grandfather were alive, which he should be, Tony believed he would be proud.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Tony left the apartment early to golf with friends. During her morning shower, Claire noticed tenderness on her right arm. While drying, she saw a large purple hand print. Claire's concern wasn't that she endured her husband's wrath. It was that the physical evidence would be visible. She felt relieved to find Catherine had packed blouses with sleeves. She rationalized if the purple bruise was seen, it would break multiple rules: appearances and private information. Most importantly, Tony wouldn't be happy. Thinking ahead, Claire checked her party dress: sleeveless.

Once the ladies were all together, Claire summoned her brightest smile and asked, "So is anyone up for a little shopping on Rodeo Drive? I think a new dress for the party is in order!" It didn't take much convincing to entice the others to join her on three blocks of the most famous and expensive shopping in America. Apparently, her mask wasn't without cracks. Courtney tried on multiple occasions to isolate Claire and ask her what was happening. She said she felt something amiss.

Claire smiled brightly and looked her friend in the eye. "It's just newlywed stuff. We're both new at this marriage thing. We're working on it." Sensing Courtney's disbelief, Claire continued, "Really, everything is fine."

Tony mentioned Claire's shopping talents had improved; he was right. She found two dresses that her friends adored, one from *Armani* and the other *Gucci* from *Saks*. Of course, each needed shoes and a bag. She reasoned that two would allow Tony to make the final decision. Claire laid the dresses on

the bed, with their shoes and handbags, and enthusiastically asked Tony which one he wanted her to wear. He liked that she shopped with her friends. The reason was never questioned; however, a decision would be difficult without a fashion show. Claire obliged. Tony chose the *Gucci* deep-blue long-sleeved classic wrap dress. He particularly liked the ease at which it unwrapped.

The six of them arrived at the party to a crowd of celebrities and press. Claire stayed by her husband's side, as they chatted with people she'd only seen on screen. She was surprised how normal they seemed. Perhaps a few were boorish or narcissistic, but as a whole they were unpretentious and humble and treated Tony with respect. Claire didn't realize until listening to his conversations that he also capitalized in forms of entertainment: television stations, news stations, and movie studios. This connection was the impetus for his friendship with Eli. She'd thought they made unlikely friends.

Now it made sense.

Claire hadn't anticipated the grandeur of Eli and MaryAnn's home. Bev's design house had been instrumental in the decor. Every inch screamed California: open spaces, stunning views, clean lines, and affluence. Being built into a cliff with a spectacular ocean view, Claire wondered if they ever worried about earthquakes. She decided not to ask.

Aside from a few excursions with Courtney or MaryAnn, who was determined to introduce her to the Hollywood A crowd, Claire stayed dutifully at Tony's elbow. He amiably included her in his conversations and introduced her to everyone. Anthony Rawlings and his bride—how cute they were. Still honeymooners and inseparable, it was the talk of the party.

Following a Sunday brunch with their friends, Tony and Claire flew to Fresno. He had arranged for a rental car. She wondered how many people *rented* cars valued at over a hundred thousand dollars. He said it wasn't quite the *Maserati Gran Turismo*, but he liked driving the *Corvette ZR1*. The man who delivered it, claimed it could go from zero to one hundred miles per hour in seven seconds. Claire said, "Seriously, I believe him. We don't need to test it."

Yosemite was as beautiful as she'd heard. The famous stone mountains, waterfalls, lakes, and giant sequoias thrilled her. Her love of nature overpowered her recent unsettled sentiment toward her husband. With the stunning surroundings and his amorous temperament, she could forget his other persona, or at least, she could compartmentalize it away and focus on *this* Tony.

On her birthday, after climbing a steep trail to the base of Nevada Falls, Tony surprised Claire with a picnic lunch he'd hidden in a backpack: complete with blanket and bottle of wine. She wanted to hate him, his behavior and rules. At times she could, but other times he could be so

romantic, tender, and affectionate.

After they ate, he handed her a burgundy velvet box, and cooed, "Happy birthday, Claire." Displaying his devilish grin, he added, "I remembered, no black velvet boxes."

She shook her head thinking: damn, he's good. She accepted the box and opened it, to discover a stunning pair of diamond stud earrings. She had a fleeting memory of earrings long ago, ones her parents had given her for her high school graduation. They weren't near as big or impressive. Momentarily, she wondered where they were.

"Thank you, Tony. They're amazing." Her words were sincere and appreciative. The diamonds glistened in the rays of sunlight and truly were the prettiest diamond earrings she'd ever seen. The only prettier diamond would be the one on her left hand.

Tony tenderly kissed her. "Happy birthday, love. I'm glad we're here."

She nodded. So was she.

On Tuesday afternoon, Eric waited for them in Fresno with Tony's jet. They arrived home late Tuesday night. The time difference worked better traveling west.

Although the clock read after 10:00PM, Claire decided to press her luck. "Tony, I've had a wonderful birthday. Yosemite was beautiful and my earrings are stunning." She was wearing the earrings, her journey necklace, and her new diamond watch from Europe. "I have one more birthday request."

He hugged her close. "And that would be?"

The past few days had been good. She momentarily hesitated, but decided to proceed. "I'd like to talk to my sister." She looked up into his eyes. What color were they?

He sighed. "Let's go to the office and call before I change my mind."

She lifted herself on her toes and kissed him. "Thank you." She was barely able to contain her excitement at the ability to call. The fact it was on speaker was expected. When Emily answered, she sounded sleepy. Claire apologized, told her she had just gotten home from out of town, and wanted to call. Emily quickly recovered. They chatted for nearly fifteen minutes before Claire realized her time had expired. Of course, Claire apologized for not calling sooner: things were so busy with the auction. She told Emily about the Hollywood party and about Tony's surprise birthday trip.

Emily thanked them for the donation to the school district. It'd been made anonymously, but she guessed it was from them. She also told Claire she was worried about John. As the deadline approached, he spent too much time at the office. He was currently there even though it was after 11:00 PM. He would probably be gone before Emily woke in the morning. Apparently, some auditor reviewed their information: their hours worked, hours billed, fees recovered, etc. John hadn't disclosed everything to Emily, but she had a bad

feeling. Something didn't feel right. She promised to keep Claire informed if she got the chance to talk to her. Claire told her she would try. She said goodbye and Tony hit *disconnect*.

Hugging her husband she whispered, "It's been a great birthday. I might not be as tired as I thought." Both of their smiles were genuine.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Perspective is the most important thing to have in life.

—Lauren Graham

C LAIRE ONCE AGAIN had a voice in her e-mails. Of course, a voice was only one part of the equation. Presentation was also a crucial component. In preparation for her oration, she straightened her three stacks of papers. The first one was her *Patricia respond pile*: responses that didn't require a personal touch, rarely was this pile even discussed. The second pile, the one she'd mentally labeled: *Ask Tony*, was the one which usually dominated their discussion. Often, those were her only two stacks. Some days she didn't feel there were any requests that warranted the stress of the second pile, and then other days Claire felt the need to include a third category: *Correspondence*. Most often, this was her written response to someone's correspondence, but on occasion, like today, it was an unsolicited outgoing e-mail. Sometimes her messages were sent as she wrote them. Other times, *they* made changes. It was all part of the intricate deliberation and negotiation.

Today's unsolicited e-mail was to Emily and had been written and rewritten about six times. Pacing around the suite, Claire wondered if she worded it well and more importantly, if Tony would allow it to be sent.

John's deadline had been November 1. Today was the November 4, and Claire still hadn't heard from her sister. Claire was hopeful that the message she'd prepared could be sent. After all, Tony was the one who suggested she call Emily on the November 1. Of course, she jumped at the chance, but no one answered. When she didn't get an answer on November 2 or 3, Claire couldn't help worry.

With Claire's revelation that her subconscious and conscious were sharing the same concerns, and her newfound *time* around the house, Claire continually practiced self-therapy sessions. She entertained the idea that her

concern about John was in actuality a defense mechanism: a way for her to think about someone's situation besides herself. Truly, she didn't worry about herself. She was mostly concerned about the man she'd married. The loving persona was back in many ways: complimentary, caring, and compassionate. Control continued to be an issue. He expected obedience and submission. As long as she complied no consequences occurred. She spent endless hours spinning that into a positive paradigm.

If it were truly positive, would it require hours of spinning?

Having little else to do, she dressed for dinner and read a book while awaiting Tony's arrival. As usual, he was expected home at 7:00 PM; however, unexpectedly he entered her suite about 5:30 PM. When she looked up from her book and smiled, Claire immediately recognized something amiss in his expression. Her heart raced, as she wondered, what have I done?

He didn't speak, put some papers on the sofa, and knelt before her. The papers reminded her of Meredith's interview, but she could sense he wasn't enraged. Distressed would be a better assessment.

"Tony, what is it?" As he lowered his head to her lap, Claire thought he appeared as shaken as she'd ever seen him. Lifting his face, she asked, "Seriously, Tony, you're scaring me. What's the matter?"

"I came home as soon as I saw the news release. I knew you'd want to know. You probably don't believe me, but I *am* sorry."

Claire looked into his eyes and saw sincerity. With trembling hands she reached for the papers. She had no idea what she was about to read, but it didn't take a psychic to know it was bad:

TRAGIC ACCIDENT CLAIMS LIFE OF YOUNG GAMING PHENOMENON

Simon Johnson, 28, of Palo Alto, California died Wednesday, November 3, 2011, after a tragic accident.

Claire put the papers down and ran to the bathroom, suddenly ill. She hadn't seen Simon in eight years, hadn't consciously thought of him. Now he was gone.

The vomiting caused her to tremble. Once she was done, she turned to see Tony standing in the doorway: watching *his* wife. She didn't know how he'd respond to her reaction, but she assumed he'd think it was inappropriate. Suddenly, Claire didn't care. Dejectedly, she sank to the floor and surrendered to whatever was coming her way. Her tears pooled as the cool tile soothed her

pounding head. Though she heard Tony's approaching footsteps, Claire knew she was too weak to defend herself. She closed her eyes and waited for his booming voice.

It didn't come. Instead, Tony silently knelt beside her, helped her stand, and tenderly carried her back to the suite. When he laid her on the sofa, he sat and placed her head in his lap. For the longest time, they didn't talk. He stroked her hair as she cried. She cried for Simon, not a lost love. She was married to someone else. Claire cried for a life lost too young. The article said he was twenty-eight. She was twenty-eight. Wasn't that was too young to die?

Finally, she managed to ask, "How did he die?"

"The article said his plane went down in a remote area over the mountains." Her sobs resumed. "The authorities found the crash site, no survivors. It came across my news feed, and I rushed home."

Claire regained enough composure to sit. Looking to her husband, Claire tried to explain, "He was a friend. I'm not upset because a longtime ago, he and I were involved. He was just too young to die."

Tenderly hugging her, Tony said, "I really understand. I overreacted before." He gently moved her hair away from her face. "The article said he was recently engaged." That news restarted Claire's tears. She wanted him to be married and loved by someone.

When she calmed, Tony brought her tissues, and she read the rest of the news release:

Officials found the crash site of Mr. Johnson's personal aircraft in the upper elevations of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. Mr. Johnson's flight plan indicated he was on his way home to Palo Alto after a meeting with investors in the Los Angeles area. Mr. Simon Johnson, self-made millionaire, was best known for his gaming creations. His creative start occurred with Shedis-tics, a Rawlings Industries subsidiary in Northern California. Mr. Johnson began his own gaming company, Si-Jo, in 2005. Mr. Johnson, originally from Indiana, was scheduled to wed Ms. Amber McCoy of Palo Alto, California, on April 21, 2012. Information regarding services has yet to be released by family.

Claire put down the pages and laid her head on Tony's chest. He put his arms around her as she drifted between sobbing, crying, and dreaming. When she awoke, her head pounded, and her eyes felt swollen and tender. Tony was still there, holding her. She got up and went to the bathroom, washed her face, and came back out. "I think I'm done. Thank you for being so understanding."

He motioned for her to return to the sofa. When she did, he put his arm around her. "Did you know he worked for one of my companies?"

"He told me that in Chicago, saying how strange fate can be. He said he wanted to thank you for the great start."

"You didn't tell me."

"I didn't have the chance."

Tony didn't respond. What could he say?

The next day, Tony worked from home and Claire rested on the sun porch, feeling her emotions teetering between sad and empty. Despite the recent drop in temperature, merciful sunshine made the porch comfortable. The trees were once again bare, and the grass had resumed its winter gray cast. Claire thought the entire situation seemed unreal and wondered about Amber McCoy and Simon's parents. She couldn't imagine what they were going through.

Hoping the sunlight would improve her mood; Claire lay on the loveseat and contemplated life and death. Death seemed peaceful and predictable. She was pondering similar thoughts, thoughts she hadn't entertained in over a year, when Tony found her staring into space. His tone was sympathetic and tender. "Claire, there's a private memorial for Simon on Sunday, in Madison, Indiana."

Claire turned to her husband. Her make-up was done and her hair styled, nevertheless, her eyelids were swollen, and her eyes were distant. "Okay." She contemplated his statement and weighed her response. "We should send flowers."

"No. We should attend."

Claire sat up. "No! We shouldn't." Tears once again threatened. "Tony, I haven't been to a funeral since my parents died. I can't go to Simon's."

For the second time in two days Anthony Rawlings knelt before his wife. His tone was incredibly sweet and supportive. "I have his parents' number. I really think you should call. I'm not telling you to. I'm saying it would be a good idea. The service is private. If they invite you or us, we should attend."

Claire shook her head. Speaking without crying wasn't an option. He handed her the telephone number, kissed her gently, and went back to his office.

It may have been half an hour, it may have been three hours, time had temporarily lost its meaning. Eventually, Claire knocked on Tony's office door. Together they made the call. The person who answered her call hesitated before putting Mrs. Johnson on the line. "This is a difficult time. May I ask who's calling?"

"My name is Claire, Claire Rawlings." She remembered Simon had a younger sister and wondered if she was who was speaking. The voice asked her to hold. Soon Simon's mother was on the line. Claire began, "Mrs.

Johnson, I'm not sure if you remember me."

"Of course I remember you. Thank you for calling."

Claire offered their condolences. Although Claire had prayed Mrs. Johnson wouldn't extend an invitation to the memorial service, she did invite both of them. Before the conversation ended, Mrs. Johnson added, "Simon and I were very close. I know how much you meant to him. If possible, could you and Mr. Rawlings arrive early?"

Claire looked at Tony, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged. Claire replied, "If you'd like us to, we will."

"Thank you, the service will begin at 2:00 PM, but the family is having a private viewing at noon. I'd appreciate it if you and Mr. Rawlings could arrive at 1:00 PM."

Claire said they would, and Tony disconnected the line.



THE FLIGHT TO Louisville, Kentucky was quiet. Being incredibly supportive, Tony didn't work, read his laptop, or do anything that wasn't focused on Claire. His excessive attention added to her discomfort. Once they arrived in Louisville, a driver took them to Madison, a small quaint town on the Ohio River. It was Claire's first visit to Indiana in years.

The funeral home resembled a colonial mansion: brick with large white pillars. Arriving early, they sat in the car and waited. Claire knew she was fidgeting. She couldn't help it. The entire scenario was unnerving. Finally, Tony grabbed her hand and squeezed. Claire exhaled and looked at her husband. Astounded by his sensitivity, considering this was Simon, she vocalized her thoughts. Her words came unfiltered. She didn't have the energy to consider the possible ramifications. "Why are you being so supportive?"

"Because I wasn't able to support you when your parents died."

Her mind spun. "What? I don't understand."

He held her hands. "Claire, you had to go through your parents' deaths alone. Emily had John, but you didn't have anyone. You said you haven't been to a funeral since then. I couldn't comfort you then, please let me do it now."

She did. Not because he wanted her to, but because she needed him to. She needed the feeling of love and support he described and melted into Tony's embrace. When the time came, they walked into the funeral home hand in hand.

Claire recognized Mrs. Johnson immediately: a lovely blond-haired woman with Simon's big blue eyes. Realistically, she wasn't much older than

Tony. Claire tried to act resolved, but her emotions were too fresh, too near the surface. The two women embraced and wept. Mrs. Johnson then directed them to a private room where they were joined by Simon's father, sister, and another woman. Claire assumed the slender pretty brunette with brown puffy eyes was Amber McCoy.

Being incredibly resilient, Mrs. Johnson asked them to sit. Once they did, she spoke. "Thank you for coming today, Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings, I know Simon would be pleased."

They both acknowledged her with pleasantries. Claire immediately added, "Please, call me Claire."

"Claire, Simon told me he spoke with you a few months ago. I asked you here early, because I wanted to let you know how important that was for him." She reached for Claire's hand. Claire nodded as Mrs. Johnson continued, "You had no way of knowing how much and how long he'd pined for you. There was a time he believed if he left you alone until you achieved your career goal you would be ready to see him again, but seeing you, talking to you, and learning that you weren't what they say..." She hesitated. "...well, just learning you are still the Claire he remembered, and most importantly, that you're happy." Mrs. Johnson smiled at Tony. "He was finally able to move on."

Claire listened, both with concern for Simon's mother and Tony.

Mrs. Johnson motioned toward the slender brunette. "This is Amber. She and Simon were recently engaged."

Claire and Tony both said hello.

Simon's mother continued, "Simon loved Amber very much, but he had to let you go. I want you to know, you'll always be special to our family because our son loved you." Claire's chest heaved as she silently wept. Tony comforted her. "You had no way of knowing his feelings. He never conveyed them. Don't ever think we have ill feelings toward you. How could anyone hold something against someone, when they didn't even know it was happening?" Once again, she squeezed Claire's hands. "I just thought you should know the importance of your short talk. He walked away knowing you were happily married, and knowing he could move on. Thank you."

Claire tried to smile. "I'm thankful we had the opportunity to talk." For the first time since her consequences, she truly was.

Then, Mrs. Johnson addressed Tony. "Mr. Rawlings, God is so funny."

Tony replied, "I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"Mr. Rawlings, if there was one man my son idealized, besides his father, it was you." Tony's eyes reflected the appreciation she sent his way. "He received his start, at his dream job, in one of your companies. When he first started working for Shedis-tics, you made a few visits to their office. You probably don't remember, but on one occasion you spoke to Simon about one

of his projects. He talked about it for months. He aspired to be like you. Now you and Claire are happily married. I just think God has a sense of humor.” She looked lovingly at both of them, introduced them to the rest of the family, and added, “Please sit toward the front. It would mean a lot to Simon and it means a lot to me.”

They did.

Throughout the memorial, Tony held Claire’s hand. Later when she tried, she couldn’t remember the service. Between Mrs. Johnson’s words and memories of her parents’ funeral, her energy went to appearing composed, fighting the pounding in her head, and not fainting.

On the flight home, Claire thought about Mrs. Johnson’s words: Simon aspired to be Tony. She thought about her assessment of Tony: he ruined lives with his business decisions. He wanted complete control over everyone and everything, and he could be incredibly cruel. She wondered if perhaps there wasn’t more to her husband; maybe there was a part of him she hadn’t been seeing. If Simon aspired to be Tony, maybe there was something to aspire to.

With her head on his lap, she looked up at his face and recognized his expression. She knew he had thoughts in a million different places. She watched his strong jaw clench and unclench, his dark brown eyes, furrowed brow, and perfectly combed hair...

Perhaps Tony helped lives too. After all, Mrs. Johnson believed he did. Maybe Claire needed a different perspective. Grandma Nichols once said: sometimes you can’t see the forest for the trees. Could she be too close? She knew Tony intimately, knew his flaws. Was he a different man from a distance? The voices in her head debated. Other people thought that Tony was a kind, wonderful, and generous: a benevolent businessman. Claire knew he was capable of being loving, tender, sensual, and lavish. She also knew a side of him that didn’t fit either description. Looking up, she saw her husband absently staring into space, as he continued to stroke her blonde hair. Claire appreciated his efforts over the last few days. He was trying. She exhaled deeply and closed her eyes.



TONY REMEMBERED CLAIRE’s expression during the funeral: so overwhelmed with grief, the kind of emotion that was only visible with the loss of someone you dearly loved. Of course, she had lost two someones.

In his mind, he saw the church overflowing with people. Even though Officer Jordon Nichols’ death had not been in the line of duty, he received full police honors. There were uniformed police everywhere. Apparently, Shirley Nichols was also well loved and had many bereaved friends and students.

Blending into the crowd wasn't difficult. Now as Tony stroked Claire's silky hair, he realized that was the day his plan had taken a turn. Originally, he had different designs, but watching Claire flanked by her sister, Tony knew he needed to know her. Actually, reminiscing, he knew before then that he didn't want anyone else knowing her.

The internship was an easy ploy to rid her of Simon. Watching the sadness from Claire and Simon Johnson's family, there was a part of Tony which hated what happened, but it was Simon's fault. He should have just left Claire alone, but no. His actions in Chicago resulted in the consequences today in Madison.

Tony beheld his wife's sleeping face on his leg. That day, so many years ago, she'd been all alone. Today, he did what he wanted to do then. It was him not Emily and not John. Claire needed *him*. This wasn't an occasion for smiles, but knowing she was asleep, he grinned.



As THEY LANDED in Iowa, Tony gently woke his wife. It was only 6:00 PM, but the sky was dark and spitting snow. They hurried from the plane to the warm waiting car. Once they were within the warm confines of the *BMW*, Tony asked Claire a question. "Where would you like to go for our anniversary?"

Obediently, she replied, "Some place sunny and warm." The desire she didn't say aloud was alone.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Anyone can give up. It's the easiest thing in the world to do. But to hold it together when everyone else would understand if you fell apart, that's true strength.

—Unknown

NOVEMBER FLUCTUATES BETWEEN autumn and winter. Technically, winter doesn't begin until after the winter solstice, but as it approaches, the days dramatically decrease in length and the darkness increases. Some days in November include brilliant blue skies and crisp, intense sunshine. The contrast and fluctuations in weather and life created the unpredictable pressures defining Claire's existence. She stressed when Tony was good because she knew it may not last. She worried when he was bad because she knew how bad he could be.

During a private girls' lunch, Courtney approached the subject again. Since the completion of the silent auction, the frequency of their lunch dates had decreased. Claire desperately missed them. Therefore, following Simon's memorial, she was elated to receive another invitation accompanied by Tony's eagerness for her to accept. He said, "I think you need some fun."

She couldn't have agreed more.

The two ladies spent the afternoon in Bettendorf eating, shopping, walking, and talking. Courtney knew about Simon. She knew an old friend of Claire's had approached her at one of Tony's speaking events, and that Tony wasn't pleased. She didn't know the entire story. She also knew about Simon's sudden death and Tony's remarkable support.

Courtney made Claire laugh, and in Claire's precarious state of mental health, that was monumental. Courtney talked about the impending holidays. She expectantly waited for her children to return home from their points of interest and settle in for holiday celebrations. Claire liked the Simmons children, who weren't really children. They were in their twenties, one still in

graduate school, the other beginning a career as an investment banker in St. Louis. Neither was married, but their son Caleb had a steady girlfriend. Courtney liked her and hoped Caleb would propose soon. She and Brent wanted to be grandparents. It seemed strange to Claire that she was only two years older than Caleb and yet, Courtney was her best friend.

Another exciting topic for Courtney was her impending trip. It seemed that Tony finally recognized Brent's hard work and awarded him a substantial Christmas bonus. He told Brent before the holidays so Brent could plan a nice surprise for Courtney; however, Brent didn't want to risk Courtney's disapproval. So he included her in the planning from the beginning. They were going to go to Fiji, a trip similar to Tony and Claire's honeymoon. Refusing to miss Christmas with their children, Brent and Courtney weren't leaving until after the first of the year. Courtney asked Claire a lot of questions about Fiji. Courtney's excitement was contagious. Claire told Courtney everything she could remember, mostly the destination equaled paradise and don't worry about packing too many clothes, they didn't seem to stay on in paradise.

Courtney understood Claire's privacy issues. Most of their confidential discussions occurred while walking or driving. Claire couldn't risk someone overhearing. "Honey, I'm really worried about you. I know losing a friend is hard, but it just seems like you have been going down since before Simon's death."

Claire didn't even try to act fine. "I just don't know. I feel empty and tired all the time."

"If there is anything I can do for you..." She squeezed Claire's hand... "I'll do it."

"I think afternoons like this are the best medicine."

Courtney agreed laughter would help. So they laughed. They walked in shops, read funny cards and plaques, and had fun.

When Claire returned to the estate that night, she felt lighter. She tried with all her might to continue the feeling into her home and her suite. The fact Tony tried to help, wasn't lost on Claire. He immediately showed her an e-mail from Emily and volunteered, "She wants you to call early before John gets home. I think you should call before dinner."

Together, they went to Tony's office and Claire tried again. She'd been trying to reach Emily since the first of November. It had been nearly two weeks. This time Emily answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

Talking on the speaker phone, Claire replied, "Hi, Emily, it's Claire. We've been worried. Is everything all right?"

"I don't think so. I asked you to call early so I could talk before John came home."

"I was out with Courtney today. I called as soon as I got your e-mail."

That was all true.

“John isn’t home yet. Is Anthony there?”

Claire hesitated, should she lie or be truthful? “He is. Do you want to talk to him?”

“I don’t know, maybe he can help.” Tony looked at Claire and raised his eyebrows.

Claire offered, “I could put you on speaker phone, so he can hear too.”

Emily said that would be a good idea. Tony pushed a button to create an audible change and said hello. When Emily said hello, they heard her voice crack.

Claire inquired, “Emily, what’s wrong?”

“You know the deadline for partnership decisions was the first?” Claire said she did. Tony acknowledged her audibly too. “Well, it’s been extended,” Emily added.

Claire broke in, always the optimist. “So, that’s not necessarily bad. They’re still undecided.”

“But now the auditor, the person verifying all the accounting information, is questioning John, a lot. John has been asked to verify everything. He’s rummaging through old records and spending hour after hour documenting and authenticating his previous work.” Claire and Tony were engaged in concerned eye contact.

Tony responded first, “Emily, I’m sure it’s some kind of formality. John works for a very prestigious firm. They just want every *T* crossed and every *I* dotted.”

“Anthony, I hope you’re right.” They could hear her sniffles. “He pretends to be unconcerned, but I can tell that isn’t the case.”

Claire offered, “He’s probably sick of the controlling procedure and stress.” She could relate. Trying to rationalize and validate every move you make can become tiresome.

“I believe he’s offended. Claire, you know John. He’d never do anything that wasn’t completely honest and honorable.”

Claire debated her response. She feared adding to John’s fan club; nevertheless, before she could formulate her answer, Tony replied, “We did our research prior to offering John a job. I know he’s one of the most honest and honorable attorneys anywhere.”

Claire scanned her husband’s expression. She only saw sincerity. She added, “I second that, Em. It’ll be okay. Let them scrutinize John’s records, there’s nothing dishonest or deceitful to discover.”

“Thank you, really, both of you. John didn’t want me telling you. That’s why I haven’t answered your calls, but I really wanted you to know.”

Claire felt her internal time clock ticking. “Emily, please keep us posted

—”

Tony interrupted, "If I can be of any assistance, perhaps we can get together for Thanksgiving again this year?" Claire watched her husband with astonishment as he continued speaking. "We could meet in New York City or, maybe closer to Troy, if that'd be easier for you."

Emily thanked them both. She'd think about Thanksgiving. She appreciated Anthony's offer of help. It was nice to just talk with them. "I promise to keep you updated. I better go in case John gets home soon. Thank you."

They hung up.

Claire had been upset with Tony for almost two months. She despised him for his reaction in Chicago. His behavior that night had repulsed her. She detested the way he treated her in California. On some level, she even loathed the fact Simon idolized him. Yet he had tried on numerous occasions to make amends. Only superficially had she accepted his pleas. Those shallow recognitions were mainly a form of self-preservation, a ploy to pacify him, but at that moment, as he disconnected the line, she overwhelmingly, without reservation, appreciated and cherished her husband.

The realization almost immobilized her. Every ounce of her being had been opposed to him: similar to like ends of magnets. Her self-therapy suddenly realized that all of her energy had been consumed continually fighting the repulsion and forcing herself to be near him. No wonder she was so drained; however, as he hung up the phone her magnet flipped. Suddenly, instead of repulsion, she felt attraction. The relief engulfed her, and her mask evaporated. Claire's expression became sincere. "Thank you, Tony." She went to him and hugged him.

He seemed to recognize the difference in her touch as he looked down into her green eyes, and said, "I need to keep working."

She didn't understand, thinking he was saying he had work to do. She pushed away to let him continue his business, when he gently pulled her back into his embrace. Claire looked up into his soft brown eyes, as he said, "No, Claire. I need to keep working to be a man you're proud to call your husband."

Claire buried her face in his chest. Without a doubt, there would be mascara on his very expensive suit. He lifted her chin. "I need to work to be the man Mrs. Johnson thinks I am."

Later that night, they laughed, cuddled, and talked. Their interaction hadn't been playful for months. Claire was giddy from the release of tension and stress. For the first time in ages, her head didn't pound. She wasn't worried about John. He was beyond reproach. Everything there would resolve itself. The looming question had been here. Unexpectedly, she believed it too had been resolved. Realistically, the resolution wouldn't be permanent, but she would enjoy the reprieve.

Emily e-mailed them the following week, declining Tony's Thanksgiving invitation. She sincerely appreciated his offer, but John barely took time to eat. He worked continually to rectify the inquiry.

Tony saw Claire's disappointment and offered a trip anywhere for the holiday. Claire decided she'd rather stay home and celebrate an old-fashioned Thanksgiving with her husband. She wanted to cook him a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. He looked concerned, but agreed with one stipulation, she would allow him to plan a getaway for their anniversary and Christmas. Claire agreed.



GIVING THE ENTIRE staff the day off, they lived through Thanksgiving dinner and even survived the carbohydrate overdose. Claire cooked turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, yams, yeast rolls, pumpkin pie, and vegetables. Tony obligingly ate some of everything, saying he liked it all; however, the exorbitant amount of calories contained within the meal far exceeded their usual diet. They both feared they would explode before the pumpkin pie with whipped cream was served.

Although she enjoyed cooking, Claire forgot how much she disliked cleaning. Tony encouraged her to leave it. The staff would take care of it the next day. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, Claire heard her mother and grandmother: leaving the mess for someone else was unacceptable. Claire told Tony to watch football, and she'd take care of the kitchen. To Claire's surprise, Mr. Anthony Rawlings joined his wife in their kitchen and scrubbed pans, counters, and stove tops. Watching him, Claire decided, he was even sexier washing dishes than he was in blue jeans.

After Thanksgiving, the house burst with Christmas decorations. Catherine told Claire that prior to her presence there hadn't been any decorations. Claire found that hard to believe. She hadn't asked for them; nevertheless, she did enjoy them.

This year's display wasn't as extravagant as it had been for the wedding, but it was festive. It was the perfect setting as they entertained friends and some of Tony's business associates. Claire was happy to open the house for others to see its merry charm.

On the Saturday before their anniversary, they boarded Tony's plane, and flew west. This time Hawaii was their destination. On their trip to Fiji, Tony had promised Claire the opportunity to enjoy the Hawaiian Islands. Being a man of his word, they had a ten day trip planned. Reminiscent of their honeymoon, they stopped in Los Angeles to refuel and continued another six hours to the island of Oahu, landing in Honolulu.

The difference with this trip was Claire knew her journey's end. She understood that when they landed in Honolulu they needed to board an inter-island flight to take them to the island of Lanai. It was a romantic getaway, not as secluded as their private island in Fiji, but an island paradise nonetheless. Tony had asked Claire what she wanted, She'd said sunshine and warmth. Tony delivered.

Claire hadn't told Tony, or anyone, that she wanted to go alone. Nevertheless, Lanai was as secluded as you could get, and Claire was happy to be *alone* with her husband.

This time they had an exquisitely spectacular suite in a resort, complete the panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean. Without a doubt, Claire's favorite amenity in Hawaii was their large private lanai which included a cabana bed, an intimate dining table, and lounge chairs. Tony explained that they'd have the suite for the entire stay, but they would also spend a few nights on other islands.

Since Tony now understood that Claire enjoyed sightseeing, he planned excursions for Kauai, Oahu, and the Big Island. Kauai's spectacular cliffs, canyons, rainforests, and picturesque beaches took them two days and one night of exploration. Claire treasured being on *Lumahai Beach*, the place where *South Pacific* was filmed. In her mind, she could see Mary Martin singing. Tony also arranged a private sea tour. They saw spinner dolphins, monk seals, green sea turtles, as well as natural wonders, the *Na Pai Coast*, open ceiling cave, and *Honopu Valley Arch*.

The day they spent on Oahu, they arrived early on an inter-island plane, rented a car, and Tony drove them around the island. They reverently visited *Pearl Harbor*, walking hand in hand and reading plaques and names. Tony drove them up Pali Highway through trees and dense forest vegetation until the city below disappeared, and they found themselves in the clouds. It was *Nuuanu Pali Outlook*. They could see the *Koolau Cliffs*, amazingly lush coastline, and mountain peaks all from the stone terrace one thousand feet above the Oahu coast. The view was spectacular.

That evening, they returned to Lanai for more private and sensual explorations. Neither of them moved fast or needy. Instead, they both were thorough, sensual, and loving. The sea breeze and sound of the surf provided the ultimate aphrodisiac, and their lovemaking went on and on.

On the Big Island they enjoyed a two-hour helicopter tour of *Volcano Park*. This was a first-time experience for both of them, and they found the process of creation and destruction thrilling. Claire couldn't help remembering the volcano on *Mount Etna* in Sicily, also active. In one year she had witnessed two active volcanoes erupting violently, yet without peril. Something told her she was pushing her luck. The pilot explained to them that Pele, the Volcano Goddess who lives in the volcano, was very unpredictable.

It could continue to erupt for another one hundred years or it could quit tomorrow. Claire nodded her head. She understood unpredictability.

After the helicopter tour, they spent a few hours hiking trails which took them directly into volcanic craters, scalded deserts and rainforest, and a petroglyph. She had read about them, but to be in a volcanic tube exhilarated her. Another Big Island activity Tony insisted they complete was to walk on the *Black Sand Beach*. Claire didn't think she would like *black* sand. Sand, after all, is supposed to be white, but it was unusual and magnificent. Removing their shoes, Claire felt the warmth of the black sand under her feet. She'd expected it to be hot. Actually, she'd experienced hotter white sand in Florida, another unpredictable conclusion.

Christmas day they spent on Lanai in their suite. Claire was prepared for the holiday this year. She had a gift for Tony, an exquisite *d. Freemont Swiss* watch which she'd purchased on Rodeo Drive in October. If he'd seen the bill, he hadn't said a thing. On Christmas morning, he acted surprised and delighted. Claire knew how he appreciated punctuality.

Also planning ahead, Tony had a gift for Claire; however, his gift wasn't as extravagant. Actually, it was very basic and left her speechless. He placed his surprise in a slightly larger black velvet box, the kind that might contain a necklace. At first, she thought he forgot her comment about black velvet boxes, but his grin told her otherwise.

Slyly he said, "It isn't jewelry, so I thought I could use a black box, but if you don't want it—" He started to pull the box away.

Smiling, she replied, "No, I want it." She grabbed the box. Her curiosity getting the better of her, she lifted the lid to reveal a basic calling and texting only cellular telephone. In times past, she'd opened velvet boxes to lavish diamonds and gold which hadn't moved her like this inexpensive cellular phone.

With her emerald eyes glistening, Tony decided the accompanying lecture could wait.

Claire felt like she received the milestone of liberties. It was a wonderful Christmas. That night, lying on the cabana bed under the stars, they listened to the sound of waves in the distance. Completely relaxed, spooning in front of her husband, Claire's mind went back to a snowy afternoon in Tony's suite. That afternoon she'd made requests. She'd also made a request as they lay upon a rug in Lake Tahoe. Tonight, she realized, they'd all been granted. As her mind started to slip into sleep, she heard Tony say, "Merry Christmas, my love." She hugged his strong arms. "What are you thinking?"

Claire turned to face him. "I was thinking that I have everything—everything I asked for. Thank you." She kissed his lips. "I love you." They drifted off to sleep.



THEY ARRIVED BACK to Iowa on December 28 where snow blanketed the estate and the decorations glistened. Tony had a meeting in Chicago on December 29. Worn-out from their trip, Claire decided to stay home. She told Tony she'd try to appreciate the Midwest winter until he returned.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Sometimes it's the smallest decisions that can change your life forever.

—Keri Russell

TONY'S LECTURE REGARDING his gift came on the plane ride home. It started as operational instructions, which Claire considered this futile; she'd received her first cell phone in middle school and knew how to dial a number, answer a call, send a text message, and receive one. Nevertheless, his lessons did contain useful information: her telephone was linked to his computer and iPhone. If she received a call or text, he received a notification. If she sent a text or made a call, he received a notification. He even had an application allowing him to access telephone numbers and the entire content of text messages. Claire told herself: Compartmentalize. She had a cell phone.

He instructed her to only answer calls from numbers programmed into her phone with an asterisk. Examples: *Tony Cellular, *Home Private, and *Eric. There were other numbers programmed into her phone: Emily cell, John V. Cell, Vandersol home, Courtney S., MaryAnn F., etc. They could leave voicemails or texts and then *together* they'd listen or read and decide appropriate responses. Claire obediently listened and sighed. *This is ridiculous!*

"You asked for me to be able to contact you directly. This will accomplish what you asked."

She pressed her lips together. He's right. I did and it will. She wanted more!

Deciding to capitalize on the Christmas spirit, she pushed. "Maybe I could at least text Courtney and Sue back immediately? I mean, after all, didn't you say you can read the texts in real time from your iPhone?" Her husband made a fortune with the Internet, he had technology which allowed him to watch, listen, and monitor her every move. She knew that.

He contemplated his answer. “We’ll start with my rules. After a time, we can revisit them.”

She submitted. He hadn’t closed the subject. It was a minor victory, or a minor defeat. Either way, it wasn’t the end of the war.



THEY CELEBRATED NEW Year’s Eve at their home with friends. The Simmons, their son Caleb and his fiancée Julia, Tim and a six-month pregnant Sue, and Tom and Beverly all had a wonderful time. Together, they spent most of the evening in the lower level, playing cards and pool, drinking champagne, talking, and laughing.

Courtney couldn’t contain her enthusiasm regarding their son’s engagement. Julia appeared overwhelmed by her overly zealous future mother-in-law. Claire couldn’t help herself. She offered Julia some advice. “Smile and give in. It makes life a lot easier.” Although the young couple hadn’t set a date for their wedding, Courtney told Claire she may have more charitable responsibilities this year. Courtney planned on helping Julia as much as possible with the wedding. Claire read Julia’s expression and whispered in her ear, “I promise to talk to her later.”

Julia smiled. “Thank you.”

Tim and Sue’s baby was due March 20. All the women *oowwd* and *ahhhed* at Sue’s growing midsection. It made Claire think. She and Tony had never discussed children. About six months before she met Tony, she had the birth control insert implanted. In hindsight, that’d been fortuitous; however, considering Tony’s age, maybe it was a subject they should discuss.

Together, they all welcomed the New Year with enthusiasm. “To another great year for everyone and for Rawlings Industries!” Everyone tapped glasses.

Claire and Tony both told the Simmons how fantastic Fiji would be. Claire added, “We can’t wait to hear all about it.” Then she smiled. “Well, not *all* about it.”

Courtney blushed. Tony embraced Claire. She’d filled him in on her *packing advice*. They kissed.

Brent looked at Courtney questionably. She grinned, and said, “I’ll explain later.”

That made them giggle some more. The year began with a bang.



ALTHOUGH TONY CONTACTED Claire directly each evening, she didn't feel like she'd gained any liberties regarding communication. Emily had her number and would leave text messages and voicemails. Claire could read them or listen to them, but she couldn't respond until Tony's input was added. She learned deleting texts or voicemails was strictly forbidden. Apparently, it implied hiding. She didn't ask, but wondered *why*? If Tony had access to every text, why did he need to see it on her phone before she deleted it?

The Simmons left for Fiji, and Tony missed Brent. Claire found it amusing. He would never admit Brent's full worth, yet his absence left Tony lacking. She planned to share this secret knowledge upon their return. Courtney asked Claire to fill in with her multiple charities during her absence. Being January, the heart of her winter blues, Claire happily agreed to the additional tasks. Unfortunately, Claire agreed to help Courtney without first consulting Tony.

"I agree they're admirable charities. I don't think you need to be gone that much."

"It's only for two weeks, and I already said I would help."

"You agreed without discussing it. Did you forget about your responsibilities here? I certainly hope you're not having memory problems, again."

"I didn't forget, and I'm sorry. I just wanted to help a friend. I promise nothing will go undone here."

"You're right, because you won't be going, or do you not feel taking care of your husband is important?"

Claire knew her pleas were useless. "Tony, I'm sorry."

She called each organization. "I'm truly sorry. I won't be able to attend your meeting. It seems that I've double booked my calendar. If you could email the information, I'll forward it to Mrs. Simmons." Those calls were made on the speaker feature of her new phone with her husband present. Suddenly, her calendar was open to Tony's whims.

Although Tony would never admit it, Claire believed these consequences resulted more from Brent's absence than from her insubordination. Her attraction toward her husband was waning. Experience taught her it was a cyclical process. It would wane, and then it would wax. She encouraged herself to be patient for the wax.

This January was less snowy than the last, which helped Claire's disposition. Less snow meant fewer clouds, and more sunshine. The Iowa air still registered below freezing, but the view from her suite wasn't of frozen white tundra. The winter, combined with the feeling of unpredictability was predictably returning, giving her the *teetering on the fence* sensation from before. Continuing her personal self-therapy, Claire reminded herself Courtney would be back in another week and spring was only three months

away.

Admittedly, more of an attempt to pacify than an act of devotion, she tried desperately to alleviate Tony's concerns. She obediently waited for him each evening, dressed appropriately for his arrival, attentively listened to his day and concerns, discussed her e-mails, texts, voicemails, and expressed her undying affection. She even chose to not pursue the e-mails and text messages from Emily. That was, until she heard a recent voicemail. The distress in her sister's voice was unnerving. She respectfully asked Tony if they could call.

They did, from Claire's telephone. Having her cell phone saved the long walk to his office. They tried three times and didn't receive an answer. Tony willingly agreed to try again later. When they finally reached Emily, the information from the call was difficult for Claire to fathom. John had been accused of fraudulent billing. The Vandersols were devastated.

The next morning, Claire opened her eyes and realized she was waking in Tony's bed. The feeling of disorientation came more from her concern over her family, than from the dark surroundings. She rolled toward him, but he was gone. The clock read 7:03 AM. If she hurried to the dining room, she might catch him before he left for work. She wanted to thank him again for the ability to talk to her sister during this difficult time. Truth be known, she hoped her gratitude would facilitate her opportunity to support Emily in the future. She put on slippers and her cashmere robe and walked to the dining room. The rich aroma of coffee met her halfway down the corridor. Tony was at the head of the table, drinking coffee, his plate empty, and his laptop open.

When Claire entered the room, he looked up. "Good morning, my dear. You look beautiful this morning."

She made a face. "I think you need an eye exam." She gave him a kiss, and continued, "I just wanted to catch you before you left." Claire sat down at the table and Catherine poured her coffee. "I wanted to tell you how much I appreciated talking to Emily. It's a difficult time for them." She added some cream and watched the ivory liquid swirl into the black abyss. Then she looked up into his eyes, wondering if they were the color of the coffee with or without the cream, and added, "And I wanted to let you know I'll miss you." Claire smiled at his cream filled eyes as she spoke.

"Good news, I'm working from home today."

Claire's heart sank, she really wanted alone time to contemplate the John thing; however, her smile never faltered.

Tony continued, "So you won't need to miss me."

"That's great! Do you have a lot of work?"

"A few web conferences and phone calls, but don't worry, I know your schedule is free. I have some ideas for us too." The smile and the way his eyes shone made Claire question his ideas. She would be glad when Brent returned. This Tony made her uneasy. She detested the dual personalities.

Sipping her coffee, she replied, "All right, I need to work out and clean up. I came down here in a hurry to see you."

"When you're dressed come to my office," he said. As he stood to leave, he paused to touch her shoulder.

Obediently, she replied, "I'll be there as soon as I can."

He kissed her cheek. "Or you could visit before you dress?" His tone, suddenly playful.

She touched his hand. "If I do that, you may not get your work done." He reluctantly agreed and went to his office. She smiled at his attire: shirt, tie, NYU sweatpants, socks, and slippers. That comment to *Vanity Fair* had been truthful.

Claire's thoughts wandered as she sipped her coffee, ate her breakfast, and looked out the tall windows. For January, the sky was an amazingly clear sapphire blue. Suddenly, she longed to be outside and in the sunshine. The John situation had her heartsick. Maybe some fresh air would give her a new perspective and some ideas to help her family. The beautiful scene outside the window beckoned her to walk, roam, and get away—if only for a few hours. The snow of the last few weeks had melted, yet today it was cold enough to keep the ground solid. Perhaps she would have time for a hike before Tony's ideas. Maybe she could entice him to walk, too. He might have some ideas to help John.

Thinking about her walk, Claire finished her shower and left her bathroom considering the appropriate attire: jeans, a sweater, and hiking boots. Her plans didn't matter. She saw her clothes were laid out. Claire hated that. The assistance with her clothes occurred without predictability since her *accident*. On her bed were jeans, dressier than she would have chosen and a blue snug-fitting V-neck sweater, not exactly perfect for hiking, but with the addition of a coat and scarf it could work.

Then Claire noticed her jewelry on the dressing table. Seriously, it's morning! Who needs diamonds in the morning? Avoiding an unnecessary confrontation, she did as she was bid: dressed in the clothes and put on the diamond journey necklace, diamond stud earrings, and diamond watch.

Her new watch from Switzerland was beautiful, but it sat on her wrist as a constant reminder of punctuality. She'd been late twice. She didn't need a watch to remind her of Tony's appreciation. The first time taught her a lesson she'd never forget.

Luckily, there were no shoes set out. She could put on the hiking boots and hope for the best. Although she was pretty sure Tony's ideas didn't include shoes, hers did. Maybe he could find his hiking boots, too.

It was almost 10:00 AM by the time she reached his office. She knocked and waited for his permission to enter. She didn't hear him, but the door opened. When she entered, she saw him seated behind his desk with a shirt

and tie, looking so professional, she smiled and quietly sat on the leather sofa away from the webcams and waited for the web conference to finish. It had something to do with a company in Michigan that was losing money. The local government wasn't willing to give more tax breaks. Were they going to close it or keep it open? The discussion revolved around the potential for future profits. Claire didn't want to think about it. It would probably result in more unemployed people. She picked up a magazine and began quietly ruffling through the pages.

At 10:45 AM he finally finished. She waited for him to complete whatever he was doing on his computer. Once he was done, she heard his chair turn toward her. "Ahh, blue, my favorite color," he said eying the sweater, as she walked toward him. "You're beautiful in any color..." His eyes were appreciative of what he could see and what he couldn't. "...or in no color." He grinned and reached out to put his hands around her waist. "I have one more web conference at 11:00 AM and then two lunch phone calls. I'd like you back after that." It sounded like a request; it wasn't.

"It's so nice out. I'd like to go for a hike while you are working." Wording was such an intricate part of her negotiations.

"No. The phone calls may need to be postponed depending on the outcome of the next web conference. I'd like you here if I'm done earlier. We can lunch and discuss our possible afternoon activities." He'd turned back to his computer screen and read while he spoke.

Claire took a breath, leaned down, and gently kissed his neck. She'd been good. He knew she was upset about her family. She hoped she could press a little more. "Well..." Purposely exhaling on his neck. "...then may I just go out back? The sky's so clear and I could really use some fresh air."

He was obviously engrossed with his computer, but her approach earned her a seductive grin. "Okay, just be back by noon, and could you get me some coffee before you go?"

Claire started to ask where Catherine or another member of the staff was, but deciding that it would delay her trip to the backyard. She kissed his neck. "Yes."

In the kitchen she found coffee still warm in the pot. She added cream, carried it back to his office, and waited. It was now 10:57 AM.

Tony rummaged through some papers and simultaneously spoke on his iPhone. Hanging up, he said, "Tell Eric there are contracts at the Iowa City office. I need them here *before* 1:00 PM. He needs to get them immediately."

Claire thought about how Tony was trying to keep her busy at home. She really didn't mind; however, she wanted to go on her walk.

He must have read the question in her eyes. "And after that, go for your walk, just be back by noon."

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "Okay. I'll tell Eric and be back."

She hurried off to find Eric. Claire asked Catherine about Eric's whereabouts and explained she'd be in the backyard or gardens if Mr. Rawlings needed her before noon.

Catherine directed Claire to Eric's apartment, attached to the main garage. Claire started back toward the garages, a walk she rarely took. She didn't drive, and when she went anywhere Eric or Tony picked her up at the front door. The walkway between the main house and garages was beautiful. The windows on both sides continued the full length of the hall and were so clear they seemed invisible.

She looked at the sky and thought about her sister and brother-in-law. Emily sounded so distraught on the phone last night. The fact Tony reminded her to call was a miracle in itself. The fact she spoke on speaker phone was expected. Claire couldn't believe John was actually in jail. The charges of embezzlement and fictitious client billing were ludicrous. John would never cheat on a test; much less do any of these things. That was what made John such an amazing attorney, he was honest to a fault. Claire had tried to reassure Emily. She wanted to go to her and help; however, Tony would never allow that. Perhaps she could send money for John's defense. After all, wasn't Tony telling her all the time how much capital she possessed? If money wasn't good for accomplishing what you want, what good was it?

Her thoughts quickly changed to the beautiful cars as she entered the garages. Tony definitely liked his cars. Claire knew they'd multiple new ones since her arrival. It was too bad she didn't drive. Sighing, she thought, it has been almost two years.

Light filtered from under the apartment door as Claire knocked. Eric immediately answered. What she could see of his apartment looked like a nicely decorated living room with an attached dining area.

"Yes, Mrs. Rawlings. May I help you?"

"Eric, Mr. Rawlings said there are some contracts at his Iowa City office which he must have by 1:00 PM. If you go immediately, you'll be back in time." As Claire spoke, Eric grabbed his coat and hat. He unlocked a cabinet on the wall containing keys to all the cars, took out the keys to the *BMW 7 Series*, and shut the cabinet.

Hurriedly, Eric looked at his watch. "Ma'am, tell Mr. Rawlings I'll be back before 12:30 PM." He got into the car.

"I will, drive safely." Claire figured it could wait until she saw him at noon. As Eric pulled out of the garage, Claire noticed the key cabinet. It hadn't shut properly, revealing the keys to multiple cars. Suddenly nervous, Claire contemplated the keys. She should shut the cabinet and go out to the backyard for air, or she could take a set of keys and drive to as much air as she wanted. She wasn't thinking air for a lifetime, only enough air to breathe.

The decision took only seconds, yet it seemed like an eternity. She

reached in, grabbed the first set she touched, and hit the clicker. The lights on the *Mercedes Benz* flashed. In the midst of unpredictability, she'd done her best to be stable and obedient. This sudden impulsiveness filled her with excitement and fear. Before she could change her mind, she sat in the car, smelled the new car aroma, felt the leather steering wheel, and turned the key.

Her motivation wasn't to leave Tony forever. It was just that she felt smothered. The constant monitoring, censoring, and controlling added to her sense of psychological instability. The dual *Tonys* added another dimension to her suffocation. A brief reprieve or a momentary freedom would help her sanity. Besides, she told her husband a year ago she liked to drive. That was all she wanted to do—drive.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Do not bite at the bait of pleasure, till you know there is no hook beneath it.

—Thomas Jefferson

*T*HE DASHBOARD IN front of her looked more like something from a helicopter, dials and lights came to life. Claire tried to remain calm, telling herself, driving hadn't changed in twenty-two months. She just needed to put the car in gear and push the accelerator. Trembling at the prospect of the simplistic task, Claire almost ran into the garage door; however, she remembered to push the button, waited for the door to lift, and concentrated on breathing: slowly inhaling and exhaling. The door opened, and cautiously, she proceeded down the driveway. Claire prayed if anyone saw the car, they'd assume it was Eric. At the gates, she again pushed a button, the one she'd seen Eric push many times. At first, the gates seemed to hesitate, but then the iron fence swung wide.

Claire drove toward Highway I-80 and inhaled. It was the sweetest air she'd smelled in almost two years. The clock on the dashboard read 11:16 AM. She knew in forty-four minutes, Tony would expect her in his office. She reasoned perhaps the web conference would go long and he wouldn't notice her absence, or maybe, the phone calls would start and he'd be preoccupied. She knew the truth. Tony could do ten things at once. Come 12:00:01 PM he'd be irritated, by 12:15 PM he'd be fuming. Feeling her heart beat intensify, she wondered what would happen when they reunited. What kind of punishment would he decide was appropriate for this behavior? Feeling her wet palms slide on the leather steering wheel, Claire chose not to linger on the possibilities. The *Mercedes* was now headed east on Highway I-80. Her mind searched for possible destinations. Courtney? No, she was out of town. Emily? No, that would be the first place Tony would check. Utilizing her therapy skills, she convinced herself this was a deserved break. She also instructed herself to relish the overpowering sensation of freedom, a feeling

she hadn't known in twenty-two months. Slowly, she felt her senses awaken. The countryside looked brighter. The leather seats emitted a stronger aroma. The wheels on the pavement created a soft hum, and the vibration responded to *her* movement of the wheel. It all invigorated her.

The brilliant dash indicated a full tank of gas. Silently, she thanked Eric, momentarily worrying he'd suffer because of her actions. She concentrated on the majestic world outside the windows and watched the traffic which consisted mostly of large semi-trucks. At first, this made Claire uncomfortable, but the *Mercedes* could weave and pass easily. Before moving to Tony's, she drove a *Honda Accord*. It was a good car, but the *Mercedes* felt like driving a cloud. Then, the clock caught her eye, 12:11 PM. She started to wonder what was happening at home. Would he be looking for her or sending someone else to look? All Claire could do now was drive and think. She loved him, *but* the constant pressure was wearing on her.

She just needed a break.

Taking the bypass around Davenport, she decided to go south on Highway 74, away from New York City. At 3:30 PM she passed Peoria, Illinois. The emptiness in her stomach reminded her she hadn't stopped driving since she left the estate. She desperately needed a restroom and some food. In the distance she spotted golden arches. French fries sounded wonderful.

She hadn't eaten fast-food in almost two years. Claire turned the wheel and eased into the McDonald's parking lot. Contemplating her order, she realized she didn't have money. Oh well, the restroom was free. If she had planned this excursion, she would have grabbed a coat and her purse. More than likely Tony had her ID and credit card, but for appearances, she usually had cash in her wallet.

The overpowering aroma of fries, from the inside of the restaurant, lingered on her clothes as she got back into the car. Wondering about money, she saw her wedding rings. Of course! She wore hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of jewelry. She just needed to sell some.

How does one sell jewelry? And where?

Back on the interstate, Claire decided to take Highway 155 South to Highway 55. That wasn't a good decision, Highway 55 traveled slowly. When she finally reached Highway 55 the signs said: to Springfield and to St. Louis. It had been so long since she actually made decisions. She was lightheaded with independence or perhaps hunger.

Time passed. The sun started to fade and dusk loomed on the horizon. The loss of sunlight produced a similar effect on Claire's mind. Her lightheadedness dissolved into reality. She knew without a doubt she needed to turn around. Tony would be upset and there would be a punishment: a consequence for this action, but she couldn't keep going. First, she needed cash. Second, what would the press say? Tony wouldn't be happy if her

leaving became public. Trepidation filled every ounce of her being as she watched for a place to turn around. According to the sign, there was another exit two miles ahead.

Suddenly, questions swirled through her mind. Was there enough gas to get home? What will Tony do? Whatever punishment he chose, Claire decided she deserved. She'd been impulsive and broken his rules. The small break was exhilarating, but it was time to face the consequences. There wasn't another choice. If she had her cell phone, she would've called and told him she was on her way home. She planned to beg for his forgiveness and plead temporary, impulsive stupidity.

Lost in thought, she didn't see the flashing lights until they were directly behind her. Once she noticed them, Claire assumed they'd pass. She wasn't speeding, but the police car didn't pass. Did Tony send them after her? How did they find her? Pulling over, she remembered the GPS. Had she really thought she could go unmonitored? She appeared casual as the policeman approached her window.

"Ma'am, please show me your registration, proof of insurance, and driver's license."

"Officer, I believe I left my purse at home, by mistake. I can show you the registration and proof of insurance." She handed him the documents from the glove compartment.

"Ma'am, your name please?" The officer asked, while reading the registration and insurance card.

"My name? My name is Claire, Claire Rawlings."

Handing her back the registration and insurance card, the officer said, "Ma'am, I need you to get out of your car."

Claire didn't want to get out of the car. She wanted to go home. Her decision was made, and she needed to get home, soon. "Officer, was I speeding?"

"Ma'am, get out of the car, now." The policeman stared at her as he mumbled into his shoulder.

"Officer, I'm in a hurry. I don't have my purse, but I do have this watch. Perhaps your wife would like a very nice diamond watch." She was desperate to return to Iowa, to Tony but *not* in a police car.

Retrieving his gun from its holster, the police officer repeated his demand. "Mrs. Rawlings, I need you to get out of the car, and keep your hands where I can see them." Holding his gun in one hand, he leaned toward her door. "Unlock your door. I'll open it. Let me see your hands."

Claire couldn't believe this was happening. She just wanted a moment of freedom, and this policeman was treating her like a criminal. Had Tony accused her of stealing his car? That didn't seem like Tony. He wouldn't want the public scandal.

Claire unlocked the door and swung her legs out. *Officer Friendly* roughly grabbed her wrist and pulled, handcuffing her wrists behind her back. It made her shoulders and wrists ache. “What are you doing? Why are you doing this? I didn’t steal this car. It belongs to my husband. I have every right to drive it!”

“Ma’am, I have orders to take you into the station for questioning.” He walked her to his car, steering her with her hands.

“What about my husband’s car? He’ll be very upset if anything happens to his car.” Claire’s voice sounded as desperate as she felt.

“Another officer is on her way. She’ll drive your car to the station. It’ll be kept in impound until it’s picked up or you’re released.” He kept listening to his shoulder. “The other officer will be here in a few minutes.”

“We better not leave until she gets here. I’m serious about my husband. He can become very upset. You don’t want to be the person he gets hold of if anything happens to his car.” She didn’t want to be that person either. Sitting in the backseat of the patrol car, she heard the door slam and had the sensation of a popping balloon—once full, now completely deflated. Freedom was sweet and gone.

When they pulled up to the Illinois State Police Station 56, Claire watched the *Mercedes* drive around the building. Worrying about the car was silly, but she didn’t want to give Tony more ammunition for his punishment. The officer directed her into the station. Multiple uniformed and plain-clothed officers met them at the door. She was then directed to a dingy room where the smell of stale coffee and perspiration filled her senses. The only furniture was a steel gray table with two metal chairs. Claire sat in one of the cold chairs as the officer removed the cuffs. Rubbing her wrists, she looked at him and sounded convincingly resilient. “Sir, I am Mrs. Anthony Rawlings. I’m sure you have heard of my husband or at least had contact with one of his companies. I recommend you release me right now, and I won’t tell him about this incident.”

He didn’t respond and left her alone, where she waited. Feeling the twisting within her stomach, she knew what was coming. Tony was probably on his way. Flying would get him there in less than an hour. The next time the door opened, she would see his dark eyes. The only sound within the small room was that familiar pounding within her head. As she waited, she resolved herself to the consequences she’d face at home.

She broke the most important rule many times, and now it was public. There was no way this wouldn’t be on the news. She waited. The door opened. A female officer entered. “Mrs. Rawlings, would you like a drink, water, or diet soda?”

“Thank you, I’d like some water.” Then she waited, some more. The next time the door opened, she looked toward the table. Enough time had passed. This had to be Tony.

"Mrs. Rawlings, I'm Sergeant Miles and this..." Pointing to the man on his left. "...is FBI Agent Ferguson."

"Hello. I'm confused. Why is an FBI agent here?"

"We would like to ask you some questions about today." Claire nodded. "Ma'am, you must speak. Our conversation is recorded and movements can't be heard on an audiotape."

Claire hated recordings, audio or visual. "Yes, please go ahead and ask me anything. I was just driving my husband's car and forgot my driver's license."

"Ma'am, what time did you leave your residence outside of Iowa City?" Agent Ferguson asked as Sergeant Miles took notes.

Claire wondered if the audio recording wasn't thorough enough. "I left at 11:15 AM." That was easy. She'd looked at the dashboard clock.

"Did you see your husband before you left?"

"Do you mean did I ask my husband *if* I could leave? No."

"No, ma'am. I meant what I asked. Did you see your husband before you left your residence?"

"Yes. I saw him just before 11:00 AM. He was in his office about to start a web conference."

"A web conference?" Sargent Miles asked.

"It's a conference that's live on the Internet. You know, on the *web*." The officers continued to ask questions about times and people. Claire told them the house staff were all present, except for their driver, Eric. He left before her, going to Mr. Rawlings's office to retrieve some paperwork for her husband. Had Claire told anyone she was leaving the house? She shook her head, then remembered the audio tape, she answered, "No." Why would she drive over five hours without her purse or telling anyone where she was going? She really didn't have a good answer. She couldn't tell them she didn't have access to her own ID, and she wasn't allowed to go out by herself. If she did, she'd be breaking his rules, and when Tony arrived he'd be livid. Suddenly, she realized he was probably watching from behind a window right now. She felt her stomach twist. Her only choice was ignorance. "I don't know. The sky was so pretty, and Iowa can get so gray. I guess I just wanted to go somewhere warmer."

"Mrs. Rawlings, you should know your husband will survive." Agent Ferguson's tone was flat.

Claire didn't understand. Survive? Like he would crumble because she left him? "I'm not sure what you mean. Why wouldn't he survive?"

"Mrs. Rawlings, someone tried to kill your husband today. He was poisoned at approximately 11:15 AM this morning." Agent Ferguson answered as Sergeant Miles observed Claire.

She shook her head, trying to make sense of his words, but they didn't make sense. Tony was fine when she left—same as always. "You're mistaken.

Mr. Rawlings had a web conference at 11:00 AM, where he was speaking with many people from his corporation.” Her speech quickened as did her heart rate.

“Yes, he was supposed to be; however, after the web conference began his associates witnessed him take a drink from a mug and suddenly slump to his side. Many of the viewers attempted to reach him via cell phone, but he didn’t move. Luckily, one of the house staff heard the phones ringing and entered the office. They were able to fly him by helicopter to a hospital in Iowa City. His vitals are good, although he has yet to regain consciousness. The doctors believe he’ll make a full recovery. I’m here representing the FBI, because this is an attempted murder investigation which has crossed state lines.” Agent Ferguson spoke as if he was addressing a suspect.

“I need to get to him immediately.” Claire stood as she spoke. Sergeant Miles directed her back toward the chair. She was dumbfounded. “I’m sorry, are you accusing me of murdering my husband?”

“No, ma’am, your husband wasn’t murdered. You are being questioned regarding an *attempted* murder investigation.”

She was stunned. “You’re accusing me of hurting him? You should know, no one hurts Anthony Rawlings. If anything he’s hurt me, numerous times.”

“So, are you claiming self-defense?”

Claire’s neck stiffened, her voice became defiant. “I’m not claiming anything. I did nothing that needs claiming.”

“Mrs. Rawlings, do you have any idea what was in the mug that your husband drank from?”

She knew exactly what was in that mug: coffee, made by her. “Yes, officer. I would assume the mug contained coffee. Just before I left, I took him a cup of coffee.” Her stomach was now a tangle of knots.

“You and your husband don’t have household servants who usually prepare the food and drinks?”

“We do, but he asked me to get him coffee.” Claire definitely didn’t like how this was going. “I believe I need an attorney.”

“Ma’am, you haven’t yet been charged; however, asking for representation is your right. Be aware your husband’s legal counsel has sent word that representing you would be a conflict of interest. You’ll need to secure your own counsel.”

“I would like to call John Vandersol, my brother-in-law.” As the words left her mouth she remembered John’s incarceration. “No, wait, I can’t.”

Another officer entered the room and began to talk with Sergeant Miles. After the two whispered, Sergeant Miles spoke. “Mrs. Claire Rawlings, my commanding officer has informed me the prosecuting attorney of Iowa City believes there’s enough circumstantial evidence to hold you in this facility overnight and transport you back to Iowa City in the morning. The chief

prosecutor of Iowa believes he will have an official warrant for your arrest signed by the judge by the time you arrive.”

Claire heard the words but couldn’t comprehend their meaning. Her internal voice tried to replay the day: I dressed in what I was told, was in Tony’s office at the time he told me to be, and asked like a five-year-old if I could go outside. This morning I poured my husband a cup of coffee, the coffee he asked me to get. Now, I am about to be charged with attempted murder?

Another officer directed Claire to a cell. It was small, clean, and had a door that locked. Worried about Tony, she couldn’t sleep. There was no one at home that morning, except the two of them and the regular staff. Everyone on the staff had been with Tony for years, and he implicitly trusted them. None of them would hurt him. She worried. Had he regained consciousness? Was the poison in the coffee in the pot? Maybe it was in the cream?

Claire wanted them to try to find the real criminal before he tried to hurt Tony again. Claire knew when Tony regained consciousness, he’d tell them she didn’t—couldn’t—do this and take her home.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

No one can make you feel inferior without your permission.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Q

ESTERDAY, CLAIRE DROVE in a luxurious *Mercedes Benz* to St. Louis. The trip back to Iowa City, riding in the back of a police wagon, wearing handcuffs and accompanied by a uniformed officer, wasn't as comfortable. When they arrived, the county courthouse steps were filled with reporters and photographers. Claire tried to shield her face as people took pictures from all directions and shouted questions. "Why did you try to kill your husband?" "Did you do it for the money?" "Did you think you would get away with it?" Thankfully, the police rushed her through the crowd and into the building.

She couldn't believe what she heard. How could they possibly be asking such questions? Claire worried about Emily: first John and now her. What must she be going through? Claire reassured herself, once Tony wakes, he'll take care of everything.

The officer took Claire to another room with a table, and Marcus Evergreen entered. She recognized him immediately. He attended her wedding, and she accompanied Tony to one of his fund-raisers. Claire thought Tony donated to his campaign. "Mrs. Rawlings, I'm Marcus Evergreen, chief prosecutor for Johnson County."

"Yes, Mr. Evergreen, I believe we've met." Claire held out her hand. Mr. Evergreen didn't accept.

"Yes, I believe we have; however, this is a different situation and different circumstances. Mrs. Rawlings, I'm currently holding a warrant for your arrest recently signed by Judge Reynolds. Just so you know, before we reach the district courtroom for your arraignment, you're being charged with the *attempted murder* of your husband, Anthony Rawlings."

"I want you to know I didn't do such a thing. I wouldn't do such a thing."

How is Tony?" When Claire added the last question, Mr. Evergreen's eyes dropped to the table. Claire's heart sank. Oh my God, he's dead! No, then he would have said murder not attempted.

"He's awake and conscious. He's given a statement to the police, but he won't be here today."

Claire was relieved to hear he was conscious, but she needed him to be here. He would help and take her home. She wanted to explain things to him. There was no doubt he'd be upset about her leaving and driving. And there would be consequences; however, Claire was confident he'd know she would never try to kill him.

"I'm very happy he's better. Can you tell me what evidence there is against me?" Claire didn't know how this worked, but she thought she needed to find out.

"It will be discussed with you and your attorney after the arraignment." He left the room.

With her wrists once again in handcuffs, Claire was led into the courtroom. She watched the proceedings from a distance, seeing it all, yet not comprehending it as reality. Judge Reynolds spoke, asking questions of Mr. Evergreen. He explained how the state believed it had sufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Mrs. Claire Rawlings did willfully and maliciously attempt to murder her husband, Anthony Rawlings, in an effort to profit financially. Furthermore, Mrs. Rawlings fled the scene of the crime and was found near St. Louis. Mrs. Rawlings has access to a passport and the financial ability to flee. Mr. Evergreen asked the judge to suspend bail.

Judge Reynolds said, "Mrs. Rawlings, do you understand that you're being charged with a felony: attempted murder? And if convicted, you could be sentenced to a federal penitentiary for a length not to exceed 162 months?"

"Yes, Judge, I understand." That wasn't true. She didn't understand.

"Are you aware that you have the right to an attorney? If you cannot afford one, one can be appointed for you. You also have the right to a trial by a jury of your peers. You also are presumed innocent. It is the burden of the state to prove your guilt. Do you understand your rights?"

"Yes, Judge, I understand." Claire maintained eye contact with the bench. She had a lot of practice maintaining eye contact in difficult situations.

"Mrs. Rawlings, do you have an attorney?"

"No, Judge. I do not, and I can't afford one."

"The court will appoint one to you following the arraignment." Judge Reynolds reviewed the file before her. "Due to the publicity and significance of the victim, I'm setting bond at five million dollars. I'm also scheduling a preliminary conference for eleven days from today, Tuesday, February 1. Next case..." Her gavel struck the bench, echoing throughout the courtroom.

A guard escorted Claire to a holding cell. She sat in the ten-by-seven

cubicle waiting for her attorney. The seclusion should have upset her, but she was too confused to focus. They told her once her attorney arrived, her bond could be posted, and she could leave. Claire knew that wasn't going to happen. She didn't have enough money for a sandwich at McDonald's, much less two-point-five-million-dollars for bond.

It was after 3:00 PM before she was once again taken to the small room with the table. A short while later, the door opened and a young man, Paul Task, entered carrying a briefcase, laptop, and wearing a cheap suit. Claire's first thought was that he looked more like a high school student than an attorney.

"Hello, Mrs. Rawlings. I'm your attorney, Paul Task. I just want you to know that I'm so honored to work on your case. Mr. Rawlings has long been an inspiration to us in Iowa. Everyone has so much respect for him. Why did you try to kill him? Was it because you didn't have a prenuptial agreement? I mean, for the money?"

"No! I didn't do this. It's a terrible misunderstanding. I know once my husband is better he'll help me. He knows I wouldn't do this to him."

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Rawlings..."

After Mr. Task informed the court that Mrs. Rawlings wouldn't be able to post bond, she was officially charged with a felony. They took her personal property: her jewelry and clothes. They took her picture, her fingerprints, and did a chemical test on her hands. A female officer offered her a prison jumpsuit, underwear, and a bra: Claire accepted it all.

For the next five days Claire waited and responded appropriately to her counsel. She met daily with Paul Task and his associate Jane Allyson. They asked questions, and she maintained her innocence. She told them repeatedly the events of the morning in question. She never broke Tony's rules. When he came to save her, she would be able to tell him she maintained his confidence. She would explain to him, she drove away, but she had decided to turn around. She hadn't left him, only left the estate,, for a while. She would apologize, accept his punishment, and life could resume.

She spent untold hours wondering who poisoned Tony. The answer to that question could save her from 162 months in prison. Unfortunately, all the evidence pointed to Claire. She'd given Tony the mug of coffee at approximately 11:00 AM, in plain view of fifteen people via a Rawlings Industries web conference. He took a drink from *that* mug and suddenly lost consciousness. The video footage from their home security showed Claire pouring coffee in the kitchen and carrying the coffee to his office. The desk area wasn't covered by cameras, but Claire was seen walking away from the desk without the mug.

To make this evidence worse, there was video from the garage of Claire telling Eric to go to Iowa City to get paperwork from Mr. Rawlings's office.

Anthony's secretary, Patricia, provided a sworn statement that she didn't have contracts for Mr. Rawlings, and furthermore, she hadn't spoken to him that morning. Being Tony's primary source of transportation, having Eric gone would help ensure that the poison would have time to work. The same camera in the garage captured Claire taking the keys to the *Mercedes* and hurrying to the car. The significance of this car was that it was the only car in the garage registered under the name *Claire Rawlings*.

Claire was shocked. "It can't be registered in my name. I don't drive." Paul showed her a copy of the registration. The same one she handed to the policeman but hadn't read. According to the dealership, Mr. Rawlings came in himself last December and paid cash. It was his wife's Christmas present and had less than a thousand miles on it.

Her statement regarding *no valid driver's license* also proved erroneous. Apparently, she did have an *identification card* with the name Claire Rawlings, but her *driver's license* from Georgia under the name Claire Nichols was still valid. Paul couldn't understand how Claire wouldn't know.

She tried to explain, "Tony did everything."

Paul didn't understand, and told her it would be difficult to convince a jury.

With the court ordered preliminary conference six days away. Iowa furnished Claire with clothes for a pre-examination conference: a meeting that would set the tone and direction for the preliminary conference. The pre-examination was usually attended by the prosecuting attorneys, the defense attorneys, and the defendant, Claire; however, unbeknownst to the defendant, the victim requested to make an appearance. The judge agreed. The goal of this meeting was to determine if a trial could be avoided, and an agreement made. The victim convinced the judge, he could help facilitate that end.

Mr. Evergreen and two of his associates sat opposite Claire and her team, Paul Task and his co-council, Jane Allyson, at a large table covered in documents and laptops. The conference was about to begin when her heart skipped a beat. She saw him through the window of the door. She saw his profile: strong, handsome, and inflexible. She watched as he spoke to someone in the hall, turned the door handle, and entered.

Although Mr. Evergreen and Paul were talking, when the door opened everyone became silent. The entire room turned to acknowledge the entrance of Mr. Anthony Rawlings. Mr. Evergreen stood. "Mr. Rawlings, I thought we discussed this, and you weren't to attend this conference."

"Mr. Evergreen." As the two men shook hands, Claire involuntarily trembled. If only she'd known he was going to be there. "I appreciate everyone's concern for my safety. I'll repeat what I told Judge Reynolds, I don't believe my wife is a threat to my well-being. I believe if we can have a few moments alone, we can save the taxpayers of Iowa the cost of a lengthy

trial, and this court some time. Judge Reynolds has agreed to my request.” Tony’s command of this situation was obvious. It sounded as though he just asked the others to leave the room, but in reality it was a mandate.

Mr. Evergreen and his team began to move their chairs and stand to leave. Paul and Jane whispered to one another as Paul stood. He leaned to Claire. “I’ll confirm that this has received Judge Reynolds’ approval.” Then speaking to Tony and doing his best to appear professional; however, obviously intimidated by Tony’s mere presence: “Mr. Rawlings, I’ll need to confirm that Judge Reynolds has indeed approved this visit. In situations such as this—”

Tony’s height loomed over Paul as he interrupted and handed Paul a paper from his breast pocket. “Of course, Mr. Task, I would have expected no less. Here’s the good judge’s written approval.”

Paul took the paper and scanned its contents. “Mrs. Rawlings, it appears to be in order.” The men started to walk toward the door. Jane didn’t move. She was the only member of either team to notice Claire’s physical reaction. She sat, looking at her notes, at Claire, and at Tony. The silence intensified.

Finally, Jane rose and met Tony’s eyes. “Mr. Rawlings.”

“Ms. Allyson.”

They nodded.

“Mr. Rawlings, this is unexpected. I would like to speak to our client for a few moments and determine her desire regarding this meeting. If you would please step into the hall with Mr. Evergreen and his team, Mr. Task and I will discuss this new situation with Mrs. Rawlings.” Tony started to speak, but Jane continued with conviction in her tone. “And then if Mrs. Rawlings agrees to your meeting, it may proceed under her conditions.” Claire felt a newfound appreciation for her young co-counsel.

Mr. Evergreen placed his hand on Tony’s arm and nodded. Tony looked directly at Claire. His dark eyes took her breath away. She hadn’t seen those eyes in almost a week. They filled her with intense emotions: both love and hate. Slowly, his grin broadened. Claire knew immediately he was amused. “Why of course Ms. Allyson.” Everyone, besides Paul, Jane, and Claire, left the room. When the door shut, Claire remembered to breathe.

Paul spoke first, “Claire, you don’t have to do this, but if you don’t, it’ll look like you’re not interested in the taxpayers.” She wasn’t. “It isn’t just that. The fact he’s willing to talk to you, the person accused of his attempted murder,, makes him appear honorable and forgiving. If you refuse...” Claire listened, but her mind whirled. She believed Tony knew she wasn’t guilty. Maybe he wanted to take her home, drop the charges, and forget the whole thing. If she left with him today she would be out of that cell. She’d be home!

Jane touched Claire’s arm, and Claire turned to her co-council’s concerned expression. “Claire, I think it’s completely up to you. Everything Paul said is true, but none of it matters. You started to shake when he walked in the room.

If you want, Paul and I..." She looked at Paul, who didn't appear as strong as Jane. "...or just me, would be willing to stay in here with you."

Claire found her voice. "That isn't what he said. He wants to talk to me alone."

"Claire, what he wants isn't the issue." Her voice was strong and supportive. "What do you want?"

She looked into Jane's eyes. "I want this to be over. I didn't do it." Jane didn't speak, but lifted her brows. Claire straightened her back, stiffened her neck, and lifted her chin. "I want to talk to him."

Paul said he would get Mr. Rawlings. Jane leaned close. "Do you want me to stay?"

Claire exhaled. She had kept his secrets. She hadn't told people what she went through, and she needed him to know that. "No, I want to talk to him alone."

Jane smiled and squeezed Claire's arm. "It'll be all right. Just know, you must discuss any deal with us before it can be initiated. We'll be right outside the door."

Claire said she understood and suddenly thought about her appearance. Her defense counsel exited as Tony entered. They nodded to one another. Tony shut the door and turned to Claire. She watched as he walked to the table. He looked handsome, fit, and healthy. Relief filled her soul, seeing that the murder attempt hadn't caused him harm.

"Tony, I'm so glad you are all right." She reached across the table. He took her petite hands in his. Claire continued, "You know I would never hurt you?"

His eyes showed only the smallest amount of brown. "It certainly appears you did." She shook her head and felt tears. He continued, "You handed me the coffee. There was poison in the coffee."

"You told me to get you coffee. I've thought about it a million times. There must have been poison in the coffee already, or in the cream. I just don't know." She felt his stare as she continued to speak, "I don't know who would do this. The only other people at home were staff, staff you've employed for years, but it should be on surveillance. You have cameras in the kitchen—"

He interrupted. "All evidence points to you. Then, there's the way you ran to the car and drove away."

She lowered her eyes; she had disobeyed him. She knew not to drive. "I'm sorry." The tears teetered on her lower lids. "It was impulsive. I knew not to take one of the cars, but I saw the keys. I hadn't had the opportunity in so long. The sky was so blue, and you'd been... well, life had been unpredictable. I felt like I was suffocating and just needed a reprieve, a small break. Honestly, Tony, I was about to turn around to come home. I want to be

home. I want to be with you.”

He lifted her chin. “Claire, how are your accommodations?” The tears slipped off the lids and onto her cheeks. She didn’t reply. Her thoughts were again spinning. His voice was low, no one else could hear. “Consequences. Appearances. I thought you’d learned your lessons better.”

“Tony, please take me home. I promise I’ll never disappoint you again. Please tell them you know I wouldn’t, couldn’t do this.” His black eyes penetrated, but she pushed on. “I know there’ll be consequences and punishment. I don’t care, as long as you’re all right. I just want to go home. Please...” Begging wasn’t part of her plan, but Claire wanted to be home. “Please, Tony, they’ll listen to you.”

Expecting his expression to contain compassion, she was disappointed.

“The entire thing seems to be a colossal *accident*; however, I’ve done some research and it seems you can plead insanity and receive treatment instead of incarceration.”

She sprung from her chair and started to pace. “What are you saying? I’m not pleading insanity! That means guilty and crazy. I’m neither!” She turned to look at him. “And this wasn’t an *accident*. I didn’t try to kill you!”

He stood and moved very close, looking down at her. “I’ve found a mental hospital which is willing to accept you. I’ll pay the expenses so the taxpayers aren’t responsible for your lack of judgment.”

“I have been here for over a week. I’ve been questioned over and over. I haven’t divulged any private information. I have followed all the rules. The only rule I broke was driving a car. That’s it!”

“This plea will avoid a trial. The entire unfortunate incident is understandable. You came from a modest background. The life we shared had pressures and responsibilities. With entertaining, charities, and reporters, it’s understandable: you just couldn’t handle it.”

Claire sat down, feeling increasingly ill.

Tony walked over to her. He bent down to maintain eye contact. “I should have recognized the signs. Perhaps, I was too busy with work. When you recently canceled your charity obligations, I should have realized how overwhelmed you felt.” Claire listened as he spoke and experienced an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. It was his expression, a grin, one she recalled from a masquerade dinner almost two years ago. His expression spoke louder than his words. “You wanted out, and in a moment of weakness... no, in a moment of *insanity*, you decided the only way out was to try to kill me.” She watched and realized: this was a prepared speech. Oh my God! “I’m only thankful you underestimated the amount of poison needed, or you may have succeeded.”

The confusion in Claire’s mind began to dissipate, the fog cleared, and she saw Tony, his expression and his unspoken meaning. His speech continued,

"If you'd succeeded, I wouldn't be here to help you now." She suddenly realized he was done with her. It was like the workers in Pennsylvania, she no longer mattered. He didn't need her anymore! Tony pulled out a chair and sat facing Claire. "Aren't you glad I'm able to help you?"

The bewilderment turned to a reality which hit her hard: not a physical slap, but it might as well have been. He wasn't going to help her, instead of overwhelming sadness, two years of obedience and submission caused an overpowering rush of hostility. Tony's words continued, "And, Claire, I hear the rooms at the mental facility are larger than the cells at the federal penitentiary." His grin broadened.

She straightened her neck and met his eyes. No longer did tears flow. Her eyes sparked with anger. "Yes, Tony. I'm so thankful. Would you like me to show you how thankful I am?" Her insincerity and sudden animosity came through loud and clear.

Tony stood, straightened his jacket. "Utilize the time you have to think this over. Don't make another poor impulsive decision. This is your best offer." He knocked on the door. "Goodbye, Claire."

She didn't respond. The attorneys re-entered the room. Claire had new resolve. If he planned to leave her, she was going to start talking.

Mr. Evergreen spoke first. "Mr. Task, if your client plans to plead insanity, the prosecution will need psychological evaluations."

"Mr. Evergreen, I do not plan to plead insanity." Everyone turned to Claire. The last five days she'd hardly spoken. She continued in a determined tone, one that none of them had heard before. "I can assure you, I'm not the person that's insane, although I have cause. I am innocent. Now, if you'll excuse me again, I need to speak to my counsel."

She had entered this pre-examination willing to sit passively and wait for Tony to rescue her. Turning to Jane, the only counsel willing to confront her husband, she said, "Ms. Allyson, if we could postpone this pre-examination, I believe I have some evidence to share with you and Mr. Task."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

***Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim.
Accept no one's definition of your life. Define yourself.***

—Harvey Fierstein

THEY ONLY HAD three days to prepare for the new pre-examination. Claire spent hours with her attorneys uncompartmentalizing everything. She recounted everything she could remember from the last twenty-two months. Tony wouldn't approve; nonetheless, she was brutally honest, recounting details she'd tried to suppress. She explained the initial contact and contract. She said she suspected he'd used the date-rape drug Rohypnol to get her to Iowa, because she had no memory of traveling from Atlanta. This recount could have been demoralizing, but somehow it proved therapeutic: a catharsis.

Claire described the respected, adored businessman, Anthony Rawlings, as a cruel, vindictive, masochistic, and controlling human being. She did leave their home in a hurry. Justifiably, she did it to get a break from him: his rules, restrictions, and consequences. If he knew she'd left the property without his permission, she would've been punished. She explained his punishments ranged from verbal, to mental, to physical abuse. On one occasion, approximately six months after she arrived on his estate, he nearly killed her. She told about the isolation. She also told about the sexual exploits, video recording, controlling nature, domineering manipulation, and constant mental, and on again, off again physical abuse.

At times, her attorneys would stop taking notes and just listen. This was much bigger than anything they expected. Together, Paul and Jane worked to build a case: not of a woman trying to gain financially from the death of her wealthy husband, but of an abused woman wanting only to flee the situation.

Paul believed Claire had been living in hell, but there were points and events she would need to explain. She stated she was kidnapped, yet did she

ever try to call for help? Didn't she live in a multimillion dollar mansion? Did she expect people to believe she had no access to telephone, Internet, or anything? Didn't she marry this man she described as a monster? Didn't she accept gifts: clothing, money, jewelry, etc.? Didn't she accompany him on multiple extravagant trips? Didn't she sit with a reporter from *Vanity Fair* and give an interview about her wonderful husband and their amazing life together?

Claire understood how things looked. She knew about appearances, but she knew what she'd endured. She explained that even after things got better with Tony, there was always the underlying threat of abuse. Things did get better, after the near-death accident. He got better, and she believed she loved him, but always there were rules and reminders of consequences for her actions. Any failure to be perfect could result in punishment. The truth would set her free. Claire Rawlings was ready to tell the entire world the truth.

Her legal team prepared a preliminary brief. It informed the prosecution of their defense strategy. By no means was it all inclusive; however, it did emphasize the hostile relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings. It highlighted Mr. Rawlings's aggressive, intimidating, and controlling tendencies. Mrs. Rawlings' only intention on the day in question was to escape the harsh reality of her life. She didn't plan, nor did she execute, a plan to cause Mr. Rawlings harm.

The time for the rescheduled pre-examination meeting arrived. Mr. Evergreen and his team, as well as Paul, Jane, and Claire were once again seated around a large table. The only noticeable difference at this meeting was Claire's brown hair. Indulging Claire's request, Jane brought her a box of Chestnut hair-dye. Claire looked younger. The blonde was striking, stunning, and beautiful. Claire didn't feel any of those.

Mr. Evergreen addressed Paul. "How does your client plan to plea?"

"My client is not guilty and plans to plea as such."

"I'd like to ask your client some questions, to let her know what she'll be facing at trial. Mr. Task, Ms. Allyson, do you have any objections to this plan?"

Paul began, "Claire, this isn't a bad idea. This allows us to understand where the prosecution is coming from with their charges. It also lets you experience the questioning portion of the trial. The questions here are not asked under oath. You can refuse to answer, and your answers cannot be used against you in the actual trial."

"All right, please ask away." Claire's mind was made up. She was innocent, and planned to tell the world the truth of what she had endured. Having Marcus Evergreen, a contemporary of Tony's, sitting across the table was unnerving. After all, Marcus attended their wedding. Tony wouldn't approve of her telling him certain things. But she was innocent, and if Tony

wouldn't help her, the truth would.

Mr. Evergreen opened his laptop and began his questioning. "First, Mrs. Rawlings, as your attorney informed you this is not under oath, and your answers cannot be used against you at trial. You should also be aware my team and I have read Mr. Task's preliminary brief which discusses the relationship between you and your husband, as well as your allegations to his behavior. I realize Mr. Task and Ms. Allyson plan to use your allegations in your defense. This procedure is a snapshot of how I, and my team, plan to cross examine you. Do you understand?" Claire nodded. "Mrs. Rawlings, please answer all questions verbally."

Claire said that she would.

"Please state your name."

"Claire Rawlings."

"How long has that been your name?"

"Anthony Rawlings and I were married December 18, 2010."

"Mrs. Rawlings, I didn't ask when you were married, but rather how long Claire Rawlings has been your name." Mr. Evergreen continued with mundane questions regarding dates and times. Then his questions turned to her life before Mr. Rawlings. What did she do for a living? Where did she live? How did she and Anthony Rawlings meet?

"Why did you move into Mr. Rawlings's house?"

"I didn't move into his house. I was taken to his house," Claire corrected.

"Why were you taken to his house?"

"Mr. Rawlings and I had a business agreement."

"What kind of agreement did you have?"

Claire hesitated. "He hired me to be his personal assistant."

"And how much did he pay you to be his personal assistant?"

"He didn't actually pay me." Claire wasn't sure how to explain this so Mr. Evergreen or a jury would understand.

"You worked for free? Yes or no?"

"No. Actually he paid off my debts."

Mr. Evergreen looked curious. "Your debts? He paid off your debts? Did he pay off your car and maybe a credit card?"

"Yes."

"And do you have any idea the total amount of your debts?"

Did Claire know? Of course, she knew. Tony mentioned the amount hundreds of times during the beginning of their relationship.

"Yes."

"Well, Mrs. Rawlings, please share. What was the amount of debt Mr. Rawlings paid off for you?"

"He told me it was 215 thousand dollars."

"My! 215 thousand dollars to be his personal assistant. Was that all? Or

were there other benefits?"

Benefits? Claire didn't know what he meant.

He continued, "Did Mr. Rawlings provide you housing, clothing, or food?"

"Yes. I lived in his house. The staff prepared my food, and he had clothes for me."

"Now, Mrs. Rawlings, were these old clothes, or did he buy you new clothes?"

"They were new, but I never asked—"

"Please just answer the question. So the clothes were new. You lived in his mansion, and he paid off 215 thousand dollars' worth of debt. Tell me what you did as Mr. Rawlings's personal assistant. Did you answer his phone?"

"No."

He continued, "Did you answer his e-mails?"

"No."

"Did you coordinate his schedule?"

"No."

"Did you make him food?"

"No."

"Did you make him drinks?"

"No."

"Mrs. Rawlings, what did you do?"

Claire felt her face flush. "I was supposed to be available, whenever he wanted me."

"Can you please explain yourself?" Mr. Evergreen leaned into the table. "What do you mean *available whenever he wanted you?*"

Claire looked down. "I was supposed to satisfy his sexual wants and needs."

"Did you do your job?"

"I didn't have a choice." Claire was still looking at the table.

"Mrs. Rawlings, I asked if you did your job: yes or no?"

Claire looked the prosecuting attorney in his eyes. "Yes. I did what I was told."

"And, if my notes are correct, you and Anthony Rawlings married nine months after you began your job. Is that correct?"

"Yes. We discussed that."

"Yes, we did. I'm just trying to understand. At 215 thousand dollars, housing, food, and clothing for a period of nine months, I figure that Mr. Rawlings paid you nearly a thousand dollars a day for sexual pleasure. You must be a great lay!"

Claire glared at the prosecutor.

Jane and Paul exploded. "That was unnecessary!"

Mr. Evergreen apologized and continued with his questioning. He asked questions about Claire's claim of imprisonment. Then he showed pictures of her with Anthony at various activities: dinners, fund-raisers, and outings.

Claire thought he had a picture of almost every time she was out of the house during the first six months of her imprisonment. "You don't understand. I was only allowed out—"

"Mrs. Rawlings, you'll have the opportunity to discuss your reasons for exaggerating the truth when your attorney is cross-examining you. This is my opportunity. I'll ask the questions." He went on in his condescending tone, asking about supposed physical abuse. Did she have any doctor's statements? Had she reported the abuse? Had she even told Mr. Rawlings she didn't like it?

This again got Jane and Paul out of their seats. Claire felt ill. Her head pounded and her blood sugar felt low. She leaned toward Jane. "Could we break for lunch?"

While Paul went to get sandwiches, Jane and Claire spoke privately. Claire had told them all the information before. She had explained how Tony controlled her. She hadn't been allowed to complain. She couldn't leave her suite for the longest time, and she was never allowed to leave the property without his permission even after they were married. But the way Mr. Evergreen twisted it, it seemed like she was some kind of prostitute. He made it seem like she was after Anthony's money from the beginning.

Jane reassured Claire that the defense had an opportunity to ask more questions following the prosecution. That would be their time to explain things to the jury. However, even Jane admitted concern about the pictures showing Claire and Anthony out in public. Claire didn't look like a woman being held against her will. Jane had photos on her laptop sent by Mr. Evergreen during the pre-examination. She pulled up a picture of Anthony and Claire at an upscale Manhattan restaurant.

Claire remembered that night: Tony had completed a big business deal and they had celebrated before dinner. She remembered hating him that night. However, the person in the picture didn't look like she hated him. The Claire in the picture was exquisitely dressed, beautiful, contented, and attentive: the perfect companion. The realization that she'd learned her lessons too well began to add to her pounding head.

Feeling more nourished, Mr. Evergreen resumed the questioning. "Mrs. Rawlings, you stated Anthony Rawlings was physically and mentally abusive, yet you decided to marry him. Isn't that true?"

"Yes."

"Now, can you please tell us who took care of the wedding? And if it was nice?"

"Tony paid for the wedding. He hired wedding planners. They did

everything, and it was beautiful. You should know, you were there.”

“Do you have any idea of the cost of your wedding?”

“No.”

“Well, for your information it came to over 350 thousand dollars. Your dress alone was over seventy-thousand-dollars.” Claire really had no idea. “And those figures do not include your rings or your honeymoon. Mrs. Rawlings, can you tell us where you went on your honeymoon?”

“We went to Fiji, to a private island.”

“The cost of this honeymoon, Mrs. Rawlings, do you know the cost?”

“No. It was never discussed with me. I didn’t care about the money!”
Claire suddenly felt tired.

“When you were apprehended, you were driving a very expensive car, registered to you, wearing multiple pieces of fine jewelry, and expensive clothes. Do you still claim you didn’t care about money?”

“I drove that car because I found the keys. The clothes and jewelry were all because Tony made me wear them. I didn’t even choose my own clothes that morning.”

Mr. Evergreen went back to his laptop. “Now back to your wedding. Did you know that you and Mr. Rawlings didn’t have a prenuptial agreement?”

“Yes. He told me we didn’t need one, if I ever tried to leave him, there would be unpleasant consequences.”

“Mrs. Rawlings, I’m asking the questions. Did you know that his legal consul wanted him to have a prenuptial agreement?”

“Yes. He told me that the decision was solely his.”

“Did or do you understand without a prenuptial agreement if you and Mr. Rawlings were to divorce you would have claim to half of his fortune?”

“I hadn’t given it any thought.”

“And, I suppose you hadn’t given any thought to the fact that if Mr. Rawlings died, you would have sole claim to his entire fortune.”

“Honestly, no.”

He then showed Claire a picture of an apartment house in Atlanta. “Do you recognize this building?”

“Yes.”

“I would assume you would. It’s the apartment in which you lived prior to moving into Mr. Rawlings’ mansion. How big was your apartment?”

Claire hadn’t thought about that apartment in almost two years. “It was a one-bedroom with an eat-in kitchen.”

“Now, Mrs. Rawlings, do you recognize this residence?” It was an aerial photograph of the estate. It showed the sprawling mansion, the various patios, the pool, the gardens, the long drive, and the massive expenditure of surrounding land.

“Yes.”

“Yes, it’s the home you and Mr. Rawlings shared. Is that correct?”

Claire wanted to be done with this. “Yes, it is”

“Mrs. Rawlings, how big is this house?”

“I don’t know. Do you mean in square feet?” She was becoming irritated.

“All right then. How many bedrooms?” Mr. Evergreen was smiling. Claire thought about it for a minute. “Honestly, I don’t know. Do you want the staffs’ rooms counted too? I don’t know.”

“So, let me get this straight. You’ve been held captive in this home for nearly two years and you don’t know how many bedrooms are there? Or perhaps you were enjoying the life of luxury too much to worry about such things?” Mr. Evergreen tapped his computer screen. “Well, let’s shift gears. Do you recognize yourself in this photo?”

Claire nodded.

“Can you please tell me where you are and what you’re doing?”

“I’m in Davenport, shopping.”

“You are shopping, but I thought you didn’t have any money?”

“Tony gave me a credit card.”

“Was this before or after you were married?”

“I believe that this picture was before, but seriously, you don’t—”

Mr. Evergreen interrupted her. “Mrs. Rawlings, allow me to ask the questions.” He paused. “So, Mr. Rawlings gave you a credit card before you were married. Who paid the bill?”

“He did.”

“Who is with you on this shopping trip?”

“Eric, Tony’s driver was there in the car.”

“So, if you were a prisoner, wouldn’t this have been an excellent opportunity to escape? After all, you were all by yourself in Davenport. Mrs. Rawlings, did you try to escape?”

“No. I was afraid.”

“Stick to the yes and no answers.” Mr. Evergreen looked at his notes on the screen. “Did you only use your credit card in Davenport?”

“No.”

Mr. Evergreen showed some more pictures: Claire on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, shopping at *Saks Fifth Avenue* in Chicago. He continued, “Mrs. Rawlings, did you use your credit card on these occasions?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you?” he asked, pointing at a photo.

“Manhattan.”

“So, you were shopping in Manhattan...” He shook his head. “...the inhumanity of this prison! How much did you have to spend, or let me ask, do you know how much you spent on this particular shopping trip?”

Claire did. “Yes, I spent five thousand but I was told to—”

"Mrs. Rawlings, let's continue. Did you have a credit card once you were married?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever have the opportunity to use it?"

"Yes."

He was looking right at her. "This money thing wasn't so bad now—was it?"

"I didn't want the money. I don't want the money. I told Tony I didn't care about his money—"

Marcus' associate showed Claire an e-mail address and telephone number, as Mr. Evergreen continued the questioning. "Mrs. Rawlings do you recognize this e-mail address?"

"Yes."

"It's yours. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is, but—"

"Mrs. Rawlings, whose cell phone number is this?"

"Mine."

"Mrs. Rawlings, I thought that you said you were isolated: no way to communicate. Let me see, I believe I have photos of you and your husband in Hawaii, Lake Tahoe, San Francisco, and yes, in Europe. Mrs. Rawlings, did you enjoy the south of France?"

Claire's head pounded with increasing intensity.

Mr. Evergreen went into a long tirade about how an unemployed *weather girl* deep in debt latched on to a lonely wealthy businessman with no heirs. This was an entrepreneur that not only made his fortune through hard work, but was highly regarded due to his benevolent endeavors. She then seduced him into employing her as a live-in prostitute and lured him into marrying her without a prenuptial agreement. Given the perfect opportunity, this tawdry woman put poison into her poor, unsuspecting husband's coffee. If that weren't enough, she sent his driver away on a wild-goose chase, and drove away. It would have worked, except with technology as it was, fifteen people witnessed the collapse, and help arrived in time. The prosecution had many character witnesses willing to testify to the generous spirit and good-heartedness of Mr. Rawlings. No one would back her slanderous accusations of this respectable man.

Hadn't she been told over and over again, appearances were everything? The small room became smaller. Claire's head and heart hurt. She saw the pictures and the expressions of her attorneys. She heard Marcus Evergreen's accusations and tasted the sour bile as her stomach twisted and turned.

CHAPTER FIFTY

We cannot change our memories, but we can change their meaning and the power they have over us.

—David Seamands

*H*E STARED AT the paint on the cinder block wall. Why did they always use the same pale green? If it was supposed to look cheery, it failed. Anton continued to watch the wall, even though he heard the door and knew the guard and prisoner had entered. He couldn't bear to see his grandfather being led around. Anton waited, hands in pockets, until he heard the door close again. Turning around, he met the eyes, the dark defiant eyes. If his grandfather were wearing a suit, and if the metal table were a mahogany desk, Nathaniel would look like the man in Anton's memory. Despite his circumstances, Nathaniel's expression hadn't changed. They may've put him in this damn prison, but they sure as hell weren't keeping his mind here.

"So, boy, did you learn his identity?"

Cole Mathews had worked side by side with Nathaniel Rawls for almost two years. The day before Nathaniel's arrest, he didn't show for work. He didn't call. He disappeared. Almost a year later, information only known by insiders, helped lead to Nathaniel Rawls' conviction. During the trial it was revealed that an FBI agent had been embedded into the inner workings of Rawls Corporation to investigate federal allegations.

Of course, to protect his identity, the name of the agent was never released, but this was 1988, and Anton Rawls knew his way around a computer, better than most. *Hacking* was such a negative term for research.

Anton placed the manila folder in front of his grandfather. “Yes, sir, I found his name and enough personal information to track him down.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down.” Nathaniel opened the folder and scanned the contents. “He has a wife and family.” He spent a few more minutes reading the pages. Then abruptly, Nathaniel shut the folder and slammed his hand against the table. “This son-of-a-bitch will pay!” His chair hit the wall as he forcefully stood. “Do you hear me, boy?”

“Yes, sir, I hear you.” Anton watched his grandfather pacing in his prison garb. “Not just him. Hell, no. He took away my world. He took my family. His damn kids, their kids, their kids... they’ll all face the consequences of his actions! He took everything.” Nathaniel’s eyes darkened as he moved closer to his grandson. “You know what?”

“No, sir.”

“You can’t lose everything, until you have everything to lose.” More pacing. “I had everything, and now look at me! That man and his Goddamn family will pay!” He moved very close to his grandson. “The day I get out of this hellhole, they will pay. Every one of them will regret the day he decided to bring me down.”

Anton noticed the difference in the sound of their footsteps. His hard soled shoes made a distinctively different noise from his grandfather’s rubber soled shoes which squeaked. “There’s more, sir.”

Nathaniel turned toward his grandson’s words. “What? What more did you learn?”

“He had help. He worked hand in hand with a securities officer named Burke; Burke fed Mathews the necessary information. If this securities officer hadn’t directed Mathews, Mathews wouldn’t have been as thorough in collecting evidence.” Anton watched the shade of his grandfather’s face grow in crimson intensity as he spoke.

“And, your father?” The blackness of Nathaniel’s eyes pulled Anton’s gaze to him.

Anton felt compelled to maintain eye contact and surrender the rest of his information. “He testified for the state.” Nathaniel’s pacing resumed. “It was done behind closed doors, but it isn’t secret. The media calls him the hero in our family.”

Nathaniel collapsed red faced and defeated into his chair. The realization that his son turned state’s witness was obviously affecting him. His tone mellowed, as he said, “Boy, you’ll survive.”

“Yes, sir. I will.”

“Being here today, discovering this information, and most importantly, having the balls to bring it to me are all evidence of your future. Your father has always been a disappointment, but I believe he was better at one thing than me.”

Anton sat in the metal chair facing his grandfather. He could hear the sincerity in Nathaniel's tone and words, and asked his grandfather to continue.

"Public opinion. I never gave a damn what anyone thought. I worked hard and believed I deserved all the money, possessions, and everything I earned—and wanted more. That was never a secret. Remember this: you can want the whole Goddamn world, but *never* show it." Nathaniel stared up at the camera in the corner of the room. "If they know what you want, they'll watch you and take it away. Keep up appearances, boy. If you do that, you can take everything you want. The whole damn world is yours."

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Happiness doesn't depend on any external conditions it is governed by our mental attitude.

—Dale Carnegie

C LAIRE HAD BEEN incarcerated for over three months and had come to terms with the realization it would not end soon. The claustrophobic cell and virtual isolation were her new norm. Surprisingly, like in traumas before, she was adapting. It was difficult at first, but with time she developed strength and resolve.

On April 18, 2012, the courtroom sat empty, except for the judge, defendant, and legal teams, as each word spoken, resonated throughout the cavernous room. Claire Nichols stood in front of the federal court judge and with the help of her legal team pled *no contest* to the charge of *attempted murder*. As the judge explained the consequences of Claire's plea, she listened, felt the smooth finish of the chair she used for support, watched the judge's lips, and silently wept.

This plea saved her the indignity of a jury trial. She didn't admit guilt, but would not, could not challenge the charges. Therefore, she'd take a lesser sentence, but she couldn't later decide to appeal. She would avoid Mr. Evergreen and his questions. She would escape the dark, penetrating eyes of Anthony Rawlings as she testified. She wouldn't need to explain to the entire world how she was forced to do things and how things were so different from how they appeared. She could just quietly go away.

The court of public opinion had not gone well, either. The people of Iowa City, of Iowa, and of the United States all found her guilty. They tried her as a gold digger; of course, most of the information hadn't come out. Even that shared with the members of both legal teams remained private. Anthony Rawlings made sure of that.

The federal judge sentenced her to seven years in prison, minus time

served, to be served in a moderate security federal penitentiary. The severity of her crime required a moderate security facility. Apparently, even her ex-husband testified to the judge, asking for a minimum-security facility: more evidence of his forgiving, kind character.

Counsel on behalf of Anthony Rawlings filed the necessary paperwork to dissolve the marriage between he and Claire Nichols. Of course, there was no contest. With a few connections, the court papers were expedited and the divorce was finalized on March 20, 2012. Since they didn't have a prenuptial agreement, Claire received no financial compensation for her fifteen-month marriage. After all, she was charged with his attempted murder. Why would she get any financial compensation?

According to the smut television shows which played in the common area of the prison, Mr. Rawlings was having no problem finding women to take her place. The world rallied around him and his unfortunate situation. Even Rawlings Industries stock soared.



THE SMALL WINDOW in the door of Claire's cell allowed a minimal amount of florescent light to penetrate, making the walls drab and colorless. Turning on her desk lamp filled the room with illuminated warmth. Her small cell at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women would be her home for at least another four years. Although she was sentenced to seven, with good behavior, she'd be eligible for parole in four years. Claire was good at following rules.

She had a twin-sized bed, dresser, an open hanging area, a few shelves, and a desk with a chair. It wasn't much, but she felt content. She'd experienced more, but that hadn't worked well. Existing in a comforting sameness day to day helped Claire survive. There were no surprises. Everything was predictable. Day after day, the same routine: wake, dress, and breakfast, then back to her cell, alone, until lunch. Lunch was followed by a one-hour block of free time: either in a large gymnasium, the prison library, or an outside court. Claire loved the outside. She went there whenever the weather permitted. Then back to her cell until dinner. After dinner, there was optional common time, if she'd earned that privilege, for another hour. Claire earned it, but opted for her cell. Companionship required trust in the other person. Claire's trust no longer extended beyond herself. She stayed in her cell until her buzzer rang. The buzzer indicated it was time to shower. Following the shower, back to her cell, lights out at 11:00 PM. Simple and predictable. Claire had suffered enough unpredictability.

She spent her free time reading. Emily tried to send her books as often as possible. Having a sister and husband in jail was hard on Emily. She was

asked to leave her teaching job in Troy. The private school system needed to maintain its reputation, and apparently some large donors were concerned about her influence on young children. She went back to Indiana to familiar surroundings and taught for a public school system near Indianapolis. The money wasn't as good, but at least she could survive.



IT WAS A two-hour drive from Iowa City to Mitchellville. Brent Simmons should have utilized a driver. It was four hours he could have worked, but he chose to drive. He wanted to be alone and come to terms with the assignment ahead of him. Claire Nichols needed to be informed of a possible pending civil lawsuit. Brent knew as the head legal counsel for Rawlings Industries, he could have sent someone else. He wanted to send someone else; however, Tony made it clear that wasn't an option.

The July sun brightly shone on the pavement ahead of Brent. Momentarily, he was distracted by the illusion of shimmering liquid in the distance. He didn't want to face Claire, to see her in the correctional institution. He knew she didn't belong there, and he hadn't helped her. She probably, justifiably, felt abandoned. She was. Brent's mind went back to January, to that terrible phone call telling him and Courtney that someone tried to kill Tony. They were planning to return from Fiji in three days, of course they flew home immediately.

When they found Tony, still hospitalized, he looked and sounded healthy. His disposition wasn't, especially when he informed them that all the evidence pointed to Claire. Devastated, Courtney argued with Tony. After she left the room, Tony informed Brent that they were not allowed to visit or help Claire after what she had done.

That didn't go well with Courtney. She went anyway. Somehow Tony found out, and Brent had hell to pay.

Brent wasn't directly involved in the criminal suit. Actually, the State Of Iowa accused Claire Rawlings of attempted murder, not Tony. But Brent was involved in an expedited divorce. Marcus Evergreen, chief prosecutor for Johnson County, had information Brent needed for his petition. Mid-February, Marcus' secretary utilized a courier to deliver a flash drive to Brent. It contained the documents he needed. He planned to leave it at the office, but at the last minute decided to take it home, to look it over.

Courtney was out to dinner with friends when Brent pulled up the drive on his home computer. There was only one folder: "Rawlings, Claire." He

opened it. It contained multiple files. The one he needed was “Rawlings vs. Rawlings.” It should have been the only one on the drive. It wasn’t. The one entitled “State of Iowa vs. Rawlings: Preliminary Brief-Task” sat right in front of him. It was unethical and probably illegal, but he opened it. Young attorneys get wordy. Paul Task’s preliminary brief was 147 pages! Brent grimaced and shook his head at the inexperience of Claire’s attorney. He started to close the file when he focused on the words—suddenly transfixed.

Two hours, and three Blue Label’s straight-up later, the entire brief was read. The descriptions and accounts of Claire’s life while with Tony were nauseating. It was stated more than once that this was only a sample of the treatment she endured. There was more. How could this be going on and they not know? Brent panicked, thinking he shouldn’t have read it and should delete it.

Nevertheless, instead of deleting, Brent made an electronic copy on a personal flash drive and printed a copy. Then he deleted it from the original drive. If questioned, he would deny it had ever been present. He wanted to punch Tony, but Brent knew he could never let Tony know he’d read the brief.

Planning to keep it to himself, he decided to hide the paper copy in his safe and put the pin drive in a special box in the drawer of his desk. Before he had the chance to follow through on those plans, Courtney came home. She knew immediately something was amiss and assumed Tony was responsible. Maybe it was the whiskey combined with helplessness for Claire, but Brent handed Courtney the paper copy. In hindsight, it was a mistake which almost cost him his twenty-eight-year marriage. When she finished reading, he asked two simple questions. “Do you believe it? Do you think she’s telling the truth?”

Courtney erupted! She believed every word and wanted Tony’s head on a platter. She also wanted Brent to quit his job, move far away from Iowa City, and most importantly: help Claire.

Downtrodden, Brent explained none of that was possible. “We can’t.”

“Why not? She told me at the jail she didn’t do it! I knew something was wrong. I kept asking. Why didn’t I push more? God! It said he hurt her in California. We were with them! Brent, think about Claire—her age. What if those things you read happened to our daughter?”

“I would kill the bastard! But, they didn’t, and not only is he my boss, now he’s Caleb’s boss. Don’t you think, in light of this new information, it’s coincidental that he recently offered Caleb such a great job? Now, not only does he own us, but also our son and future daughter-in-law.”

“This is America. Just quit!”

“Courtney, I can’t. You don’t walk away from Tony. Ask John Vandersol.” Brent hadn’t meant to divulge that information; it just slipped. Courtney sat dazed. She poured herself another glass of Cabernet and reread the brief. The

next day, while Brent was at work, Courtney left. He came home to a note: “If anyone asks, I’m taking care of my sick mother. Do not attempt to call or communicate. I will not be available.”

Brent tried numerous times. Over a week later she returned. Brent remembered worrying what she would say. He fully expected: You’re weak and I’m done. I want a divorce.

Instead, Courtney apologized. “I wasn’t there for Claire and apparently can’t be there for her now. I can be here for you. You shouldn’t have to face that bastard every day without support. I love you and will support you, but know this: I want out of here and away from him. From this point forward we slowly, inconspicuously move our assets away from Rawlings stock and work to liberate our family. That will start with Caleb before he gets in too deep. Do you agree?”

Brent did. He wanted out, too. The first time Courtney needed to see Tony face to face, Brent worried. She did fine. Courtney said if he could muster a false smile, and Claire could do it, she could too. They were already laying the ground work for Caleb’s move to another place of employment.

As Brent got out of the car and walked into the institution, he worried about Claire. What would she look like? Had she been able to survive? How? He hated Tony and damned him with each echoing step down the long, tiled halls.

A guard took him to a small dingy room, illuminated with a florescent glow, containing a steel table and four chairs. Brent set his briefcase on the table and waited. Looking around, he noticed the conspicuous camera in the corner. It reminded him of the videotaping mentioned in the preliminary brief and of his conversation with Tony:

“You want me to go tell Ms. Nichols (Tony didn’t like to hear her first name) you’re considering a civil lawsuit against her? For what?”

“Slender and deformation of character.”

“Why, what did she say?”

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t need to know. Just do your job.” Tony’s voice was flat and authoritative.

In actuality Brent was fishing. Would Tony share the information Brent already knew? He also wondered if Tony knew that he knew—apparently not. “Tony, there’re many members of the legal team who weren’t as involved with Ms. Nichols as I. Perhaps one of them could inform her of the impending suit?”

“No, it’ll be you.” His tone was firm and his eyes intense. “Have you ever noticed the nice cameras in those visitor rooms? Those tapes are available for

a price. I assume you'll not relay information to her that isn't related to the suit. As a reminder, this will not be a friendly visit."

Brent said he understood.



CLAIRE WAS READING in her cell, on that July afternoon, when her buzzer sounded. The sound meant she needed to go to her door. She'd be receiving something, usually a package. This time a guard informed her she had a visitor. Her presence was immediately required in the visitor area.

Claire had only received two visitors since her arrest. The first was in Iowa City, before she gave her plea and was transferred to the correctional institution. That day, following a guard, she found her best friend. Courtney was in Fiji during Claire's arrest and came to the jail as soon as they returned to Iowa.

Visibly distraught as Claire was escorted by a guard, Courtney apologized to Claire, for not being a better friend. If she had pursued her concerns more perhaps Claire wouldn't have felt the need to resort to such drastic measures in order to get away from Tony. Claire assured her: "I did not try to kill Tony. Please don't believe everything you hear or see. Remember Tony's regard for appearances. Many times, things were not as they seemed."

Courtney said she understood and would try to help her, but—Brent, his job...

Claire hadn't heard from her since. Honestly, she understood.

The only other visitor since her incarceration was Emily. Claire knew the trip to Mitchellville, Iowa was difficult for her. When Emily had time to travel, she wanted to visit John in New York.

Now, Claire curiously followed the guard down the halls and through multiple gates: each one locking, unlocking, and making the electronic *beep* sound. Wearing her prison clothes, she entered a room to find Brent Simmons. It had been so long, she momentarily thought she was seeing a friend. Brent's expression instantaneously told her otherwise. After Claire sat where the guard indicated, he stepped from the room, leaving Brent and Claire alone.

She knew this was business, but he was her friend. She couldn't stop herself. "Brent, how are you? How's Courtney? When is Caleb's wedding?"

Stone faced and sober, Brent replied, "Ms. Nichols, I've been instructed to inform you of an impending civil suit in which you'll be named the defendant."

Creating an equally professional persona, Claire responded, "Okay, thank you for informing me. May I ask the grounds for this suit?"



"MY CLIENT HAS reason to believe you've spoken slander against him. This defamation of his character is considered a ploy to damage his personal and professional reputation." Brent said what was needed, with the demeanor necessary, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Claire looked different from what he expected. It wasn't just her hair and the clothes, she had confidence and strength. These qualities had never been evident before. He recalled seeing her for the first time on Tony's plane to New York. She looked nervous and insecure, yet tried to appear otherwise. Now after almost six months, three in a federal penitentiary, Claire seemed independent and strong. He knew it wasn't where she'd been, but where she hadn't. She hadn't been under the gaze of the black eyes. Just like actual black holes, they sucked strength, confidence, and assurance out of anyone close enough to be pulled into their orbit.

Claire laughed and replied, "Thank you, Mr. Simmons. I'm very concerned that your client will want my allegations made public, as would happen in such a suit."

"Ms. Nichols, damage to my client's professional reputation could result in a loss of income. A civil suit is meant to subsidize any loss of income."

Smiling, she said, "And of course, I have the necessary capital to subsidize your client's income."

"It's my responsibility to inform you such a suit is under consideration, and if filed, you could be found liable." Brent stood to leave.

"Brent, can you please talk with me for a minute?" He continued to gather his belongings.

"Mr. Simmons?" They made eye contact. "Your wife told me one time that life was not a daily test. She said perfection was not always necessary. I want you to know that I know. I know better than anyone else, today you passed a test." Brent felt a minuscule amount of moisture leak from his eyes as he ever so slightly nodded his head in agreement. Looking down he started toward the door, but Claire's confident tone stopped his movement. "Mr. Simmons, two more things..." He turned back toward her. "...should the subject arise, I welcome the suit. It'll give me the opportunity to make my allegations again, perhaps to a larger forum." He nodded with a knowing smile. She was right; Tony would never risk that exposure. "And the other thing, I truly love and miss your wife. If she cares, please tell her that I really am fine—more fine than I used to be."

"Thank you, Ms. Nichols. You have been notified."

"Yes, Mr. Simmons. I have. Thank you."

He knocked. The guard opened the door; he left.



THE GUARD TOOK Claire back to her cell. Walking through the halls, through the various locked gates, Claire couldn't help feeling sorry for Brent. He was just north of fifty, but the lines and definite circles under his sad eyes made him look much older. She knew from experience, his prison was more of a hell than hers.

About three weeks later she received a short note in the mail. The return address was a PO Box in Chicago. She didn't recognize the name: J. Findes, but the note filled Claire with love and support. It wasn't much, but it was something. To Claire, that was a lot!

**I care. I'm glad: I'm sorry. I miss you too, and I hope to be able to do
more.
love you!
Cort**

Claire kept the note and read it daily. Over time, more notes arrived: Sue and Tim had a healthy baby boy, Caleb and Julia's wedding was to be in June of 2013—little bits of information always signed with love.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

You have to accept whatever comes and the only important thing is that you meet it with courage and with the best that you have to give.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

*W*HEN THE PACKAGE arrived in October of 2012, Claire assumed it was from Emily. After all, the label had her return address; however, when she opened the box, she knew otherwise. It contained old magazines, newspaper clippings or photocopied clippings, and some photographs. Everything in the box was meticulously organized and in chronological order. The first item was a note, not signed but it didn't need to be:

Consider this information perhaps the only act of complete honesty I have ever shown you. I didn't need to do this, but I chose to educate you some more. Hopefully, you will understand that you were but a piece of the puzzle. All behaviors, good or bad, have consequences, and even the truth can't fight appearances. As I assume you have plenty of time available to you, read it all. You will find it enlightening. In another life, under different circumstances, it may have been different. You taught me much. I believe you learned lessons, too.

PS. I told you once, your appropriate responses benefited you. The consequence could not be improved, but you did have a positive effect on the actions, for that we should both be thankful. I am.

Sitting the box in the corner of her cell, Claire began with the first item dated 1975. It was a copy of an old newspaper article which talked at length about Rawls Corporation, a privately owned company specializing in textiles. The owner, Nathaniel Rawls, was interviewed because Rawls Corporation had just gone public. It opened on the NYSE at fifty cents a share. In the first day, it raised to eighty-nine cents a share. Claire didn't understand the significance of this information, but Tony told her to read it *all*, so she did.

As she viewed the next item, she realized the significance. It was a magazine article from *Newsweek*, 1979. What caught her attention was the picture of a house. It looked very similar to Tony's. Standing in front of the house was a family. The caption read: *Nathaniel Rawls, wife Sharron, son Samuel, daughter-in-law Amanda, and grandson Anton*. The boy looked to be twelve to fourteen years old. Even at that young age, she could see his dark eyes. The article expounded on the success of Rawls Corporation. A recent stock split confirmed what everyone was saying: this was an up-and-coming company. Nathaniel's family enjoyed a lavish lifestyle brought on by his success. The Rawls family lived the American dream. They had it all.

The 1982 *Time* magazine article only had a picture of Nathaniel and was entitled: *Continued Success*. It quoted a lot of important investors stating the attributes of Rawls Corporation, which was now expanding its ventures with continued success, run mainly by Nathaniel, but also by his son Samuel. There was a quote from Nathaniel about grooming his grandson to take over one day.

The next was *Newsweek* 1986. It wasn't just a story, it was the cover. In large letters, with a picture of a house of cards, it read *The House of Rawls Falls*. The story was short, considering it had been a cover story, the gist of it explained the plummet of Rawls Corporation stock due to allegations of wrongdoing. The magazine couldn't say too much, due to an ongoing federal investigation; however, as investors pulled their money, the corporation was folding before their eyes.

There was much more information in the following article, from *Newsweek*, dated 1987. There was a picture of Nathaniel Rawls wearing prison garb entitled *Nathaniel Rawls Convicted*. Based on evidence from a two-year undercover FBI investigation and testimony, Mr. Rawls was found guilty of multiple counts of insider trading, misappropriation of funds, price fixing, and securities fraud. The family's assets were being sold at auction to help recoup investor loss. Distraught investors were quoted as saying: "We lost everything, and it is good to see the entire family lose everything." The Rawls had been living the high life: homes, vacations, and belongings. Now they had nothing.

A short newspaper clip dated 1989 indicated Nathaniel Rawls dead at sixty-eight years of age. Mr. Rawls died after only twenty-two months in a

minimum-security facility. The cause of death was a massive heart attack.

The buzzer *buzzed*. Claire didn't want to stop reading. She thought she should grasp some revelation, but other than that Tony's name had been Anton Rawls before Anthony Rawlings, she didn't see it. She had to follow the rules. So she put the articles away and turned off her lights.



HER JOURNEY RESUMED the following morning after breakfast. Copies of court documents from *New York State vs. Nathaniel Rawls* were the next items in the box. Though lengthy, after time, Claire realized a few key testimonies aided in the conviction of Mr. Rawls. First, from his son Samuel, who had turned state's witness. Second, from an undercover FBI agent embedded in the corporation for two years, and lastly, a securities investigator. Accompanying these documents was a report stamped *Top Secret*. It gave the unreleased names of the strategic individuals: securities investigator was Jonathon Burke, and the FBI Agent was Sherman Nichols—Claire's grandfather.

Though warm in her temperature controlled cell, Claire suddenly felt a shiver. The next discovery was a newspaper article also dated 1989: Samuel and Amanda Rawls found dead in their rented Santa Monica bungalow, bodies discovered by their twenty-three-year-old son. Based on the evidence from the scene, it appeared to be a case of murder/suicide. Claire thought back. Tony mentioned his parents' death was an accident. That seems to be an all-encompassing word.

NYU News, 1990: While completing their master's degrees, Anthony Rawlings and Jonas Smithers file the necessary paperwork to begin their own corporation: Company Smithers Rawlings—CSR. The article said CSR was set to be an intricate piece of the Internet pie.

New York Times article, 1994: Anthony Rawlings buys out his friend and partner Jonas Smithers for 4 million dollars. CSR was now Rawlings Industries. The *New York Times* predicted it was on its way to being an Internet giant.

Newsweek, 1996: Rawlings Industries begins to diversify. Anthony Rawlings stated that he was determined to not have *all his eggs in one basket*. Recent diversifications have included entertainment and transportation.

Time magazine, 2003: One of the men mentioned as a runner-up for *Man of the Year*—Anthony Rawlings. This designation came mainly because of his dedication to people—evidenced by Rawlings Industries' recognition as one of the top ten philanthropic companies in the nation. Mr. Rawlings was quoted as saying, "I plan to spend my life and fortune looking for

opportunities to better other's lives. Every person is important."

Indianapolis Star and News, 2004: Obituary of Jordan and Shirley Nichols. Claire felt ill as she read the accompanying article with a different mind-set than that of a grieving child. It talked about the unfortunate *accident* which claimed their lives, about her father's police service and full police honors as tribute, and her mother's devotion to her family and teaching. The accident was believed to be caused by wet roads and newly fallen leaves. Photographs taken at the gravesite were clipped to the obituary. One was of John embracing Emily—*John and Emily* was handwritten on the back, and another of Claire sitting alone—*Claire* handwritten on the back. Claire immediately recognized the handwriting. Words came back to her: "Because I wasn't able to support you when your parents died. You had to go through your parents' death alone. Emily had John, but you didn't have anyone." With a sudden sickness Claire realized Tony was there and saw her grief first hand.

Valparaiso University Newsletter, 2005: during the time Claire was a student. The picture showed Anthony holding a giant check for five-million dollars. His donation to the university made additional scholarships possible.

Again, the buzzer *buzzed*. Although Claire had to wait to continue this journey, she was slowly understanding that her encounter with Anthony Rawlings in March of 2010 was predestined.

The next items were more actual snapshots: pictures taken at John and Emily's wedding, a few even zoomed in on Claire. She was wearing the ugly sea foam green, maid-of-honor dress. Emily and John looked so young and happy—2005 and *Claire* were written on the backsides in familiar handwriting. Was he there, too?

Albany Post, 2006: Appointments to a local law firm. The second name listed was *John Vandersol*. The article discussed John both professionally and personally.

Another 2006 article: *Rawlings Industries Continues to Diversify*. It discussed the continued success of any venture Anthony Rawlings embarked upon. Rawlings Industries' diversification included the recent purchase of TTT-TV a television broadcasting network.

Atlanta Daily Journal, 2009: TTT-TV acquired WKPZ. Although the acquisition resulted in multiple layoffs, Anthony Rawlings promised that as the economy improved, so would job opportunities. He stated that his dedication is to his employees. He is worried about each individual who was out of work.

Claire now saw. All of those people at WKPZ who were so nice to her, who helped her with her dream, all lost their jobs because of her.

People Magazine, August 2010: Claire knew it immediately. It was the article that almost cost her her life. She didn't need to read it, but she did: *Questions Answered—The Mystery Woman in Anthony Rawlings's Life Agrees to a One-on-One Interview*. These articles were no longer revelations, mere confirmations.

December 19, 2010: her wedding picture. It revealed a smiling her next to a smiling him. She recognized the picture, but the unfavorable article was new to her. It talked about how fantastic Anthony was and asked how such a smart businessman could be as gullible as to marry this woman with no prenuptial agreement?

Vanity Fair, April 2011: Anthony's and her smiling face on the cover. It hit Claire at that moment. The woman in that picture didn't even look like her. She was beautiful, blonde, sophisticated, elegant, and way too thin. Not until now, had she realized the magnitude of the transformation. She placed a picture of her from Emily's wedding next to the magazine cover. She didn't change. She was changed. Why hadn't she seen it before?

November 2011: Copy of the printed newsreel Tony brought home, *Tragic Accident Claims the Life of Young Gaming Phenomenon Simon Johnson*.

Albany Post, January 2012 Column listing arrests: John Vandersol, 32, charged with embezzlement and fraudulent client billing charges, arraignment pending.

Iowa City News, January 2012—Headline: *Anthony Rawlings Alive after Attempted Murder by New Wife*. No wonder so many reporters were on the courthouse steps!

Iowa City News, April 2012: *Claire Nichols (formally Rawlings) avoids trial by pleading no contest to the attempted-murder charge* accompanied by more unfavorable articles.

Iowa City News, July 2012—Headline: *Anthony Rawlings' Efforts to Save the Iowa Taxpayers Their Money* The picture, black and white, showed a warehouse full of tables lined with merchandise: jewelry, shoes, handbags, clothes, etc. The article explained how Anthony Rawlings, uncomfortable that the taxpayers of Iowa were held responsible for his ex-wife's pretrial expenses, held an auction of her belongings. It raised enough money to reimburse the state for her counsel and court costs. There was even an additional 176 thousand dollars, which was donated to the *Red Cross* of Iowa. Mr. Rawlings explained that this charity remained dear to him because it was Claire's pet charity. A strip of newspaper stapled behind the first, had another picture, a close-up of some of the jewelry. The picture was not large, but center frame was a black velvet box containing a white gold necklace with a large pearl centered on a white gold cross.

As Claire was about to close up the box, something caught her eye.

Folded in the bottom was a napkin. She pulled it out and unfolded it. On the napkin in scrolling red letters: *Red Wing*. Under the words on each side were signatures, Claire Nichols and Anthony Rawlings. Above the red letters: the date: March 15, 2010. She turned the napkin over, no other writing. There was no agreement, no definition of duties, and no life-changing contract—just a napkin with signatures.

Claire's mind swirled with possibilities: she could take this information and ask for a new trial. No, she'd entered a plea of *no contest* and by definition couldn't appeal. Tony knew that. Besides, the legal system and the court of public opinion didn't believe her before, they wouldn't believe her now.

She questioned why he would share the information. Obviously, he didn't view her as a threat. As Claire repacked the box, she contemplated and found a better reason. Tony spent years, no, decades, planning his vendetta. He liked recognition for his accomplishments. He required gratitude for his deeds. There was no one else with whom he could share his hard work. She wondered what sort of recognition he expected, perhaps a well done note?

She kept some of the photos and papers, put everything else in the box, rang her buzzer, and requested permission to incinerate the box. The guard consented and accompanied her to the basement. As they walked the passages, thoughts and ideas began to flow through Claire's mind. She believed her actions kept her alive. She also knew that obedience took more strength than retaliation. With each echoing step, her new knowledge empowered that strength.

She lived her life governed by her grandmother's and mother's words. Those words encouraged truth and forgiveness. The truth had not set her free. The thoughts of revenge weren't fueled only by her consequences, but the consequences of her parents, John, Emily, Simon, her friends at WKPZ, and even her grandmother's necklace.

Opening the incinerator, she felt the warmth. It reminded her of the fires in her suite, Tony's suite, and Lake Tahoe. Throwing the box into the flames, she watched the contents ignite. The flickering of the flames brought back the flames of her past: love, fear, contempt, desire, passion, pain, and sadness. As the fire consumed the memories, it fueled a new determination. Two and a half years ago, she had one goal: survival.

Now she had a new one: revenge.

Mr. Anthony Rawlings would learn that his actions had consequences. Claire contemplated her decision; according to Catherine, Claire had received the rare opportunity to truly know Anthony Rawlings. With that knowledge, she had four to seven years to plan his demise.

Turning back to the guard, her mind spun with possibilities.



IMMEDIATELY, THE UNIFORMED man noticed something different about the prisoner. It was her smile. How could he not notice? It extended into her emerald eyes.

EPILOGUE

In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.

—Robert Frost

SHE MASSACHUSETTS AUTUMN remained cooler than normal. Shivering, Sophia entered her art studio thinking about the events of the last few weeks. First, she presented a hugely successful gallery exhibit. Guests and investors from all over the East Coast were in attendance. Her dream was becoming reality as word spread about her art. Then, in the course of a day, her whole world fell apart.

The call came just as she left for her studio two weeks earlier. She almost didn't answer but decided to pick up after the fourth ring. The New Jersey police called to inform her a blue Toyota Camry was found by passing drivers. The accident must have occurred during the night. It was believed that perhaps her father lost control on the wet leaves, or it may have been an acceleration issue. She could request tests. The policeman offered his sincere condolences. Could she possibly travel to New Jersey and identify the bodies? Both her mother and her father were killed instantly.

Sophia had so many responsibilities, so many activities. The next week passed in a blur. There was the funeral planning and settling of their estate. That would take months or years. Sadly, she hadn't realized the debt her parents incurred helping her with her art.

Now, with a minute to herself, she couldn't stay home. She feared she would do nothing but cry. That was why, even on this cloudy Saturday afternoon, Sophia decided to go into the studio. Putting her purse in the office, she heard the bell on the front door. Damn, she'd meant to lock that. It wasn't that she was afraid. This was a great town. She just wanted some quiet time alone.

As she stepped into the studio, the man at the counter looked familiar. Maybe he had been at the gallery event, or she had seen him on TV? She

couldn't be sure, but his eyes were so dark and mesmerizing. "I'm sorry. I'm not open today. I just forgot to lock the door," Sophia said, as she approached the handsome stranger.

"That's all right. I can come back," the dark-eyed man said with an agreeable smile. "It's just that I travel a lot and happened to be in town. A friend of mine told me about your gallery. He was here a week or so ago and bought three pieces. I'm very interested in nature, and he said you have a wonderful selection."

Sophia exhaled and smiled. "Are you a friend of Jackson Wilson?" The man's smile widened as he nodded his head. "He's one of my biggest fans."

"I don't get this way often. Are you sure you couldn't give me a speed tour? By the way, my name is Anthony, Anthony Rawlings."

Sophia stuck out her hand. "Where are my manners? I'm so sorry. My name is Sophia, Sophia Burke. I'd be glad to give you a tour." She couldn't stop looking at those eyes.

"With one condition." Anthony said, his eyes shining. "You let me buy you some dinner and a drink after the tour."

Sophia gently took the man's elbow to lead him around the studio. After a few minutes of enjoying his charm, she decided why not? After the last few difficult weeks—what harm could one dinner and drink do?

YOU KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES... LEARN THE TRUTH!

Don't miss the continuing saga of Claire, Tony, and Sophia. Discover the secrets, ambitions, deceptions, and emotions that fuel their tangled web. Can Claire follow through on her plan? Is Tony's façade impenetrable? Did love ever truly exist? Will revenge prevail? What will happen to Sophia? Whose vengeance will triumph?

VOLUME TWO

TRUTH

All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.

—Galileo

By:

Aleatha Romig

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PROLOGUE

It has been said that something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world.
—Chaos Theory

THE TIRES OF their Chevy Equinox bounced along the worn pavement and dilapidated surface of Bristol Road. Peering through the windshield at the signs of a dying city, Rich Bosley wondered if this was how the *old west* had felt when the gold rush ended. Acres and acres of fenced concrete occupied each side of the decrepit street. At one time during Flint, Michigan's prime, cars filled these parking lots twenty-four hours a day. Three shifts of workers came and went from these factories. Today, it represented *urban decay* at its utmost.

In 1908, General Motors opened their newly founded headquarters in Flint. Generations of workers walked through the doors; each generation believed theirs would do better than the previous one. The tides turned with the oil crisis of the seventies and the nationwide plant closings of the eighties.

But, like rain to the parched ground, *optimism* returned to Flint at the turn of the century. GM had invested 60 million dollars to upgrade the plant. Over 2,000 hourly workers and 180 salaried workers frequented the building they passed. It was honest work for honest pay. This blue-collar haven once again bustled with activity.

During the latter part of the first decade, the auto industry suffered collapse. Some plants scheduled for closing were *saved* by private investors. Businessmen and women gave hope where hope was lost; however, these saviors required assistance. Workers agreed to lesser wages, and the dream for *better* became a need for *anything*. Michigan's government granted tax breaks in the supreme effort to keep the factories open and give people purpose.

When the tax breaks expired, the workers were asked to accept even lower wages. It was inconsequential; the economy couldn't support the product.

Only the bottom line mattered. With no incentive to keep the doors open, men and women in insulated executive offices, miles away, made lofty decisions. The result filled Rich's view: building upon empty building, decaying skeletons of what once was.

Rich thought about his father's recent proposal. The prospect of moving back to Iowa felt like defeat. After all, was the banking business better in Iowa than in Michigan? The economy *was* a national issue. Rich and his wife, Sarah, had faith in this city. They were willing to work to make it better for their son and children to come.

Rich peered to his right and smiled at his lovely wife engrossed in her magazine. "How can you read with all of these bumps?" Her normally styled hair hung from the opening in her baseball cap, and her business attire was replaced with jeans and a Tiger's t-shirt. It was their son's first year of baseball, rookie league. It was more about learning teamwork than learning baseball; however, if you ask the players, it was more about the sugary snacks that came as a bonus. Sarah provided homemade cupcakes—a home run!

"I'm just so amazed by this article."

"What are you reading?"

"*Vanity Fair*. It's the cover story from a couple of months ago. I forgot I'd left the magazine in here. I just found it."

Rich nodded; he wasn't interested.

Sarah continued, "It's about Anthony Rawlings and his wife. Didn't your dad go to their wedding?"

"Yes, I think so. It's one of the perks of being Richard Bosley, the great governor of Iowa. You get to schmooze with big donors."

"I remember him mentioning it. It sounds amazing." Sarah rambled, "The wedding was at their estate, so that means your dad went to their estate?"

"I guess. I'm honestly not impressed."

"Why not? It sounds like they're both involved in charity work. Did you know his wife was a bartender when he met her?"

"The man makes his money by harming other people."

"It doesn't sound like that. It sounds like an amazing love story. Can you imagine being an out of work meteorologist, working as a bartender, and falling in love with one of the country's billionaires?"

"Again, where did those billions come from?"

"It says something about the internet."

"Yes. According to my father, that's where it started. Anthony Rawlings has managed to take that start and feed off of the unfortunate circumstances of others. He's personally unemployed enough people to fill these factories."

"He also employs enough people to fill these factories." Sarah peered at the barren landscape. "I think people are just jealous. I mean, I could be. What woman wouldn't love to suddenly have Claire Rawlings' life?"

The sound of their son's voice refocused the couple's thoughts. Instead of dwelling on urban decay and the nation's economy, Rich saw the blond hair of hope in the backseat. "Dad, I need to pee." Ryan pleaded wide-eyed at his dad in the rearview mirror.

"Ryan, we'll be home in a few minutes. You can wait."

"No, Dad, I can't. I gots to pee now!"

Rich's eyes met his wife's. Her expression said everything he already knew; this wasn't the neighborhood to make a pit stop. If they could just drive a little further, then they'd be much safer; however, Ryan's voice whined, and his little legs fidgeted with need. "I see a gas station. Stop, *pl-ea-se!*" The last word elongated into three extended syllables.

Against his better judgment, Richard Bosley II turned the Equinox into a parking space outside of a Speedway and turned to his wife. "I'll go in with him. Besides, it's the middle of the day, and it doesn't look busy."

Sarah smiled and unbuckled her seat belt. "Okay, guys, let's get this over with and back on the road. We have a baseball game to watch. I recorded the whole thing. Ryan, wait until you see yourself get that great hit!"

A film of smudge and fingerprints plastered the heavy glass doors. Rich scanned the interior, looking for the sign indicating a restroom. The odor of hot dogs cooked to the firmness of rubber permeated their senses. Merchandise sat sparsely upon shelves that packed the room, leaving no discernible path. The dirt and scuffs upon the cracked linoleum were the true indicators of foot traffic. Looking to the cashier, Rich noticed the small, unsecured cubical. He scanned the glass square for help, but saw only empty chairs; then he noticed the open drawer of the cash register.

"Dad, I see the sign." Ryan's voice cut the thick, silent air.

Suddenly, a commotion of racket resonated from the hallway, containing the bathrooms. Some moments hang suspended in time as if the electrons slow, protons release their pull, and atoms no longer cement into matter; for example, the second a newborn baby releases its first cry. Some instants occur in a flash; like lightening refusing capture upon film. Others are an amalgamation.

A thick man moved toward them, his face concealed behind a black ski mask. Rich's first thought, it's July; why would you wear a ski mask? was only a blimp before the realization of their situation struck. "Run! Back to the car!" The words cascaded from his lips with alarm and authority.

Preoccupied with the search of her purse, Sarah's husband's tone propelled her to flight. She seized her son's small hand and spun toward the smudged glass door. The echoing pop of gunfire erupted so abruptly that she never saw her husband fall, and thankfully, neither did Ryan. The last thing either of them saw was the shower of red as their blood added another dimension to the filth on the floor and windows.



MONTHS EARLIER AND miles away, a business executive chose to close a stamping plant that was no longer showing profits. That one decision resulted in thousands of unemployed workers. One of which was a father with a sick child and no wife. In a moment of desperation, the out of work father decided his only option to pay the mounting medical bills and save his son was to commit crime. A few robberies later, with money too attractive and too easy to obtain, he had a new profession...

CHAPTER ONE

There is no limit to what a man can do, or where he can go, if he does not mind who gets the credit.

—Charles Edward Montague

OOKING AROUND HIS office, Richard Bosley contemplated his place in history. The stately office reeked of prestige. Impressive bookshelves covered the walls, and his mahogany desk created a platform of regality. The flags of both the United States and Iowa hung conspicuously behind his leather chair. Only fifteen months into his second term as governor, he had so many goals to accomplish. The voters rallied around him after the tragic death of his only son and his family. They put their trust in him, in his ideas, and in his values. Staring at the *family* photo of him with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson, he questioned his own values. Perhaps they'd been too lofty. Perhaps if he had stayed out of public office, things would have been different.

The cold March Iowa wind blew outside the window and created a low howl through the insulated panes. Seeing his reflection against the black night sky, Richard Bosley knew the truth: “what ifs” meant *nothing!* His family was gone, and his third round of chemo would begin tomorrow. The second round took his hair and energy, and the third may very well take his life. If it didn’t, the cancer surely would. Seeing his gaunt reflection and viewing his hands, he saw the gray pallor. His skin was merely an oversized casing, loosely hanging over his bones. It reminded him how life wasn’t fair; still, he prayed death would be.

Richard Bosley would officially resign as governor of Iowa at a press conference scheduled for tomorrow at noon. The lieutenant governor, Sheldon Preston, would immediately be sworn in office for the remaining term. Tonight, alone in the executive office, Governor Bosley chose to make decisions that mattered. He had nothing left to lose. To hell with the executive

board; tonight, the only opinion that mattered was his.

Who can truly say whether a good deed that's done for the wrong reason wasn't still good? Right now, his soul told him to take another look. Don't leave this place of power without knowing you've done all that you can do. Easing himself into the splendid leather chair, he decided to do just that. History would write itself.

The stack of petitions requesting pardons were discussed, debated, and decreased. The news of his impending resignation spurred many requests. The executive board reviewed the multiple *petitions for pardon* and decided upon ten. Ten applicants now serving *time* in one of Iowa's penitentiaries who would soon be free. Tomorrow, these ten people would be informed their verdict was overturned and that their sentence was over.

Governor Bosley eyed the stack of pages to his left. Within that stack were eleven *other* people. According to the board of review, these inmates would remain in prison. They would serve out their sentences as handed down by the mighty and lofty judges of this great state. With trembling hands, more from the chemicals within his veins than emotion, Governor Bosley reviewed the stack of prisoners destined to remain behind bars for the eternity of their sentence.

The lists of offenses varied: rapists, burglars, prostitutes, and others. Somehow through the diseased cells infiltrating his brain, Richard remembered his quest. One more time, he leafed through the stack. Finally, he found the name he sought. Yes, she'd been married to Anthony Rawlings. Hell, he'd attended their wedding. Suddenly, Richard Bosley's mouth formed a grin. There had been very few reasons to smile lately. The facial muscles would soon tire, but he enjoyed the brief euphoria.

He reread the file: Claire Nichols: *no contest plea* to the charge of attempted murder, thus not officially found guilty, good behavior since incarceration, no marks of disobedience, no prior offenses, sentenced to seven years, served fourteen months. With the multitude of sins represented by the prisoners already scheduled for pardon, Governor Bosley could question why the executive board allowed this woman to remain in prison; however, he already knew the reason. The *board* consisted of five individuals of political power—or at least political *promise* in Iowa—and each served a four year term. Everyone knew success in Iowa wasn't found by crossing Anthony Rawlings.

Richard Bosley found himself with the rare opportunity to avenge his son's death. Dealing with politicians and individuals like Anthony Rawlings taught him many things. Closing his eyes, he saw the esteemed businessman smiling, shaking hands, and making promises; however, Governor Bosley knew Rawlings' decision to close that stamping plant in Flint, Michigan cost dearly. It may not be Christian to seek revenge, but looking at the page before

him, he pondered how anyone but God could present him this opportunity.

Without a second thought, Governor Richard Bosley signed his name onto the bottom of the petition. He took the official Iowa stamp and made the document legal. Yes, the original ten names of prisoners receiving pardons were already released to the press. It would be all right; the newspapers would momentarily miss this great human interest story: *State Official Rights a Wrong and Releases Ex-wife of Top Executive from Prison*. Richard Bosley was confident the world wouldn't miss the aftermath, and yet, somehow, Mr. Rawlings's publicist would spin this story in his direction. However, just maybe, by avoiding the first published list of pardons, Ms. Nichols would have the opportunity to write her own story.

The following day, in front of local and national press, Governor Bosley signed ten petitions. Under the Iowa State Constitution, a *pardoned person* was entitled to an expunction of all arrest records relating to the conviction. A full pardon restored all citizenship rights forfeited by law as the result of a criminal conviction and officially nullifies the punishment or other legal consequences of the crime. The person will forever be regarded as innocent and regain the status as if he or she had never committed the offense for which he or she was convicted.

Most importantly, a pardon granted by a state executive was final and irrevocable. Governor Bosley placed the ten documents into the manila folder already containing one. Smiling weakly at the cameras, he stood and walked to the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, you witnessed my final act as governor of this great state. It's with a solemn heart today that I resign from this prestigious office..."

The clerk took the manila folder and placed each document inside its appropriate envelope. Counsel representing each individual would be contacted, prisoners would be informed, and if accepted by each prisoner, the pardon could not be overturned. Finally, the courts would be notified of each pardon. With so much activity and emotion, even the clerk didn't realize she had filed eleven pardons instead of ten.



DOWN THE STREET from the State House, in another office building, Jane Allyson Attorney at Law, paced nervously around her small office, willing her telephone to ring. This was her first petition for pardon. She'd waited anxiously for verdicts from juries: verdicts that determined the freedom and future of her clients. Somehow this seemed different—surreal. Her client had already lost her freedom and future by willingly pleading *no contest* to the charge of *attempted murder*.

Jane remembered standing next to Ms. Nichols with an overwhelming sense of helplessness—complete impotence—as they listened to the judge discuss the consequences of Claire’s plea. Early in law school, Jane learned to remain emotionally detached from her clients. She usually succeeded. It was a matter of survival. She wouldn’t be able to help the next client if her thoughts lingered on the one she failed; however, that day, a year ago, Jane wanted to sit and cry with Claire Nichols. It was all so wrong.

Time passes and seasons change. New clients come and go. Opportunities arise. Esquire Allyson now practiced with a firm in the heart of Iowa’s capital. Life was busy. Jane moved on, until three days earlier, when a courier delivered a certified letter labeled: *Confidential: Esquire Jane Allyson*. Within the envelope, she found the completed *Petition for Pardon* for Claire Nichols. No work on Jane’s part was required, except to sign as representing counsel. The attached typed note was short:

Ms. Allyson,

Perhaps you remember a client from about a year ago, Claire Nichols. Enclosed please find a petition for pardon to Governor Bosley. As you are probably aware, his time in office is short. This MUST reach his office today. All that is required of you is your signature. Enclosed please find a certified check to reimburse you for your undertaking.

Thank you.

Perhaps it was the check, \$100 thousand dollars made payable to *Cash*, or the unsigned note, but accepting this assignment screamed wrong. What attorney in her right mind would accept a task and payment from an unknown source? Her future as well and law license may hinge on this decision. Jane knew she should consult the partners of her firm. That was her intent until the small digital readout at the bottom of her computer screen caught her attention: 4:32 PM. The governor’s office was a ten minute walk.

Jane delivered the signed petition.

Now, she nervously awaited the future. The governor’s decision was made. Jane had watched his press conference on the web. Pacing her office, she continued to question the ethics and legality of her decision. If her telephone never rang, and if the pardon wasn’t granted, then no one would ever know she filed the petition. The check would remain in her file cabinet. No matter the governor’s decision, cashing the check seemed immoral and unethical.

On the wall, displayed in an impressive oak frame and matted against

distinguished slate backing was her diploma from the University of Iowa, College of Law. The official seal reflected light even through the glass. Could her decision to help this woman and accept this assignment void those years of education?

She continued to pace the carpeted floor. She had plenty of work she could be doing, but with the press conference an hour ago, she couldn't concentrate on anything except willing her phone to ring. If the call didn't come soon, it never would.

The memories of Claire Nichols' case flooded Jane's thoughts. The idea to request a pardon had never occurred to her, but it *was* a good idea. The part that scared her—hell, it must have scared the person who sent her the application—was Anthony Rawlings. The man was extremely influential, and there would be consequences if the pardon was actually granted. Jane pushed those thoughts away. She couldn't think about that now. She could only wait.

Lost in her own thoughts, the ringing of her telephone made her heart race and body flinch. Momentarily, she stared at the device. Was it her imagination? Were the sounds truly resonating from the small plastic telephone? Reaching for the receiver with a trembling hand, she utilized her courtroom skills and steadied her voice. "Hello, yes, this is Jane Allyson..."



JANE'S GRIP UPON the steering wheel blanched her knuckles. The drive from Des Moines to Mitchellville took less than thirty minutes, and at 2:15 PM the traffic wasn't an issue. The issue which lingered in Jane's mind was her continual work under the radar. No one on planet Earth knew what she was doing. It added to the mystery.

The dichotomous March sky stretched before her, gray upon gray. The shades weren't the same, yet they weren't different. Just clouds upon clouds. Turning east onto highway I-80, Jane thought about the prisoner, locked away from her life and loved ones, only a few miles ahead. In her briefcase, on the seat next to her, was the one-page document that would change Claire Nichols' life forever.

Three days ago, this document didn't exist. Jane Allyson wondered about the petition and the check. Right or wrong, she decided to keep the assignment to herself. In the world of money and influence, anyone could be tempted to inform Anthony Rawlings of her impending quest.

She wasn't accusing anyone, at any level, of wrong doing. It was only that Claire made claims, real valiant assertions and accusations. Like mist from a lake into the cool evening sky, her testimony evaporated. Over a year later, no one, not even nosy reporters, had the slightest inclination of the possible

alternate personality of Iowa's golden boy. Some small voice within Jane's soul warned her not to share her current activities. Once complete, she would request a meeting with the partners of the firm. Hopefully, they would understand. At this moment, Jane chose to worry about Claire instead of possible personal consequences.

Unbelievably, the list of pardoned individuals released to the media following the press conference didn't include Claire Nichols, yet the document was in Jane's possession. Pulling into the visitor's parking area, Jane Allyson tingled with anticipation. Fourteen months ago, she wasn't able to help her client, but today, she would.

The elation vaporized with an unexpected realization. Jane stood statuesque, her hand upon the door, immobilized by a thought, who has 100 thousand dollars available to free Claire from prison? She'd been so attached to the premise that it was someone who feared Anthony Rawlings. What if instead of someone who feared him, what if it was him? Could it be? But why?

By submitting the petition, instead of being a rebel, could Jane be a pawn? What if the freedom she was about to grant Claire was nothing more than an enticement to a web? Her hand held the door handle, and her stomach lurched. Jane couldn't let these thoughts stop her forward progress. Claire Nichols deserved freedom. Jane needed to intercede and assure Claire's freedom wasn't only from the state of Iowa, but *out of Iowa*.



AN EERIE FLORESCENT glow illuminated the small, dingy visitor's room. The artificial light added to the coolness of the metal table and chairs. Jane continued to check her watch. How long does it take to bring a prisoner to this room?

The answer was thirteen minutes. Nearly thirteen minutes after Jane's arrival to the small, colorless room, the door opened. Accompanied by a guard, Claire Nichols entered and sat in the opposing chair. She looked just as Jane remembered, with her brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. Although her complexion was pale, even without make-up, her eyes were still the vivid green. Though similar in stature to herself, the prisoner appeared more petite inside her Iowa issued jumpsuit.

"Jane, I'm surprised to see you. Why are you here?" Claire's inquiry sounded amazingly strong.

"Have you heard of a pardon?"

"Yes, it's something the president does before he leaves office. Why?"

"Because it's also something the governor does before leaving office."

Claire's green eyes narrowed as she searched for words. "I don't understand."

"Governor Bosley has cancer. He resigned from office today."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I believe he attended my wedding." She paused, momentarily contemplating the information. "What did you just say about a pardon?"

"Claire, he signed a number of pardons before his resignation. The one I came to talk to you about is yours."

Claire heard Jane's words. She tried diligently to process the information, but it wasn't making sense. Rather than words, tears formed.

Jane watched as her former client struggled with her new reality. "First, you must accept the pardon." Jane pulled the paper from her brief case and placed it on the smooth surface in front of Claire. "Once you do, you are free."

The prisoner stared at the document before her. She read her name and the charges. Governor Bosley's signature was present with the official state stamp of Iowa. Only one line remained blank: the line for *her* signature. When her eyes left the paper and returned to the woman who'd been her defense counsel thirteen months ago, they sparkled with moisture which now coated her cheeks.

Claire needed reassurance. Too many times in her life she'd been deceived. "Why do *I* have a pardon...and *free*...what does that mean? Free as in *free*, or free as in I must be watched and monitored..." Her voice faded into unsuppressed emotions.

Jane reached across the table and held Claire's trembling hands. "If you sign this petition, you are free. A pardon means all charges are gone. They are expunged from your record. You are forgiven, and you may leave this prison today and never look back." As the words tumbled from Jane's lips, Claire's resolve melted, her shoulders slumped, and her head bowed. It wasn't the sounds that indicated her sobs; it was the shuddering of her shoulders. Jane squeezed her hands. "You may go anywhere *YOU* want, whenever *YOU* want. Claire, where do you want to go?"

Her green eyes glistened as her gaze returned to her counsel. "Where do *I* want to go?" Claire's mind spun; it had been so terribly long since she had control of her future. Finding her voice she replied, "I don't know."

"I guess the first question you need to answer is: Do you accept the pardon?" Jane watched as Claire's chest heaved. In desperation, the woman in orange attire nodded as words continued to fail her. "Then you need to sign the petition."

Claire nodded again.

It took some time for Jane to calm her client. Once done, they secured her signature. There was processing to do, but before this day was done, Claire

would leave the penitentiary alongside Jane.

"When will I be released?" Claire found her voice, although more tentative than before.

"I'm not leaving today without you."

Claire's eyes beamed admiration toward her counsel. "What do I need to do?"

"Do you have anything in your cell that you want to take with you?"

Claire debated her personal belongings. Yes, there were pictures, letters, research, and some tokens. She nodded.

"Then you go back to your cell with a guard. I'll take this pardon to the warden's office. Someone will bring you to me in a short time." Claire continued to nod in agreement. "They'll return all your belongings from the day you were arrested, including your clothes. I brought some others in case the ones you wore that day no longer fit."

"Thank you." Claire looked down at the table. "I don't have any money to pay you for your work."

Jane thought of the cashier's check. "Let's get you out of here, and then we'll talk reimbursement." Jane's smile proved contagious. Claire returned the smile and squeezed Jane's hands. "Before you go back to your cell, who can I call? Is there someone who can meet you? Someone to take you somewhere? Or do you want to stay in Iowa?" Jane silently prayed her client wanted to leave and that she had somewhere to go.

"Where can I go?"

"Anywhere you want. Who can I call?"

Claire contemplated the question. She wanted to leave Iowa and all its memories as soon as possible. But who could help her? She had no money. Her sister would come, but it would take her time. Besides, Emily didn't have money either. Then she thought of someone—albeit an unlikely friend.

Many months ago, after receiving Anthony's box of secrets, Claire decided to contact Amber McCoy, Simon Johnson's fiancée. She felt a connection; two women done wrong by the actions of Anthony Rawlings. Today, Claire believed Amber was the one person who could help. "Amber McCoy, CEO of SiJo Gaming, in Palo Alto, California. I don't know her number."

Writing everything down, Jane answered, "Don't worry, I'll get in contact with her before you reach me in the main office."

"Thank you." Claire stood and walked toward the door. With her hand in mid knock, she repeated, "Really, Jane, thank you. I never expected this—never."

"We'll talk more in the car. Now, get your things, there's a big, wonderful world waiting for you." Jane watched as Claire lifted her head and squared her shoulders. Next, she knocked upon the door and was led to her cell. For a

few more minutes, Claire endured the indignation of her prisoner status. The guard didn't know she was now a free woman. Unlike the last time, as Jane watched Claire escorted away, this time, she took comfort in knowing it was only temporary.



JANE WONDERED WHY it wasn't more difficult. Removing a prisoner from a medium security penitentiary should be harder, yet with the governor's signature on a piece of paper, Claire Nichols was now riding in the passenger seat of her Toyota Corolla, wearing jeans and hiking boots from fourteen months earlier.

Claire chose to wear the blouse that Jane brought for her. It was slightly large, but nonetheless, as Jane viewed Claire in her peripheral vision, Claire didn't seem concerned. Instead, she appeared mesmerized by the landscape, occasionally sighing or dabbing her eyes. Jane tried to imagine Claire's state of mind. Of course her client was emotional. Her entire life had just abruptly changed—again. It would be a difficult transition for anyone.

Sporadically, Jane checked her rearview mirror. There were no signs suggesting they were being followed; however, if the benefactor of the 100 thousand dollars knew about Claire's release, Jane worried he or she might be waiting for their departure.

Breaking the silence, Jane said, "I didn't speak with Ms. McCoy, but her assistant said there'll be a ticket waiting for you at the American Airlines counter."



"I DON'T HAVE identification." The sudden realization frightened Claire. Could this oversight land her back in prison?

"Yes, you do. Iowa issued you an identification card identifying your personal belongings. You have all of that, don't you?"

Claire hugged her belongings. All of her possessions in the entire world were contained within the small nylon bag. Along with the items from her cell, Claire's bag held the blue cashmere sweater and the jewelry that she'd been wearing upon her arrest. At twenty-nine, it seemed like such a small accumulation. "I do. I didn't realize the identification card would work outside of prison."

As Jane turned the Toyota south onto Highway 235, she inhaled deeply and breached the uncomfortable subject. "Claire, I need to tell you something.

The petition for your pardon wasn't my idea."

The trance holding Claire Nichols' thoughts captive had now released its hold; she zeroed in upon her savior, the person who'd freed her from a life of solitude; however, after so much time alone, conversation was difficult. Claire desperately tried to fill the silence. If one person spoke, then it was time for the next. She could do it. "What do you mean?"

Jane told Claire about the anonymous letter, the almost complete petition for pardon, and the certified cashier's check. She didn't mention her fear as she entered the penitentiary.

Claire asked, "Who would spend 100 thousand dollars for my release?"

"I don't know."

Claire observed the expression, body language, and tone of the woman sitting next to her. It had been a while, but she believed Jane spoke truthfully. Her attorney didn't know who had planted the seed for her emancipation.

Jane continued, "I can tell you that initially, I believed whoever this was wanted you released without associating their name. I also believed they were protecting themselves from your ex-husband."

Claire ingested her words, it made sense. If Tony knew someone helped in her release, who knows what he might do; then she registered every word. "Initially? Jane, what do you mean *initially*?"

As Jane answered, her Toyota headed south toward the Des Moines International Airport. "I have to admit that I've had another thought." Claire didn't speak. She listened and watched. Jane continued, "What if the petition, letter, and money came from an unlikely source, someone to whom 100 thousand dollars was nothing?"

Claire's emerald eyes opened wider. The elation, which had filled her lungs, had evaporated. No longer involuntary, breathing required thought. She stammered, "You think it was T-Tony?" Claire fought an onset of nausea. "Why would he do that?"

"I really don't know. I just think the best thing is to get you out of Iowa, especially before the press frenzy begins."

Claire hugged her belongings close to her thumping chest. As she remembered the unrelenting press and more importantly her ex-husband, old fears caused her heartbeat to race. Looking again at Jane, Claire noticed Jane's eyes darting between the landscape ahead and the one behind in the rearview mirror. What if Tony or someone else were following her? Claire replied, "Yes, please, let's do that."



THE AMERICAN AIRLINES' agent at the counter didn't question Claire's Iowa

state issued identification. Within minutes, she handed Claire her boarding pass: a nonstop first-class ticket to San Francisco, departing in ninety minutes.

Each step toward the concourse removed a little of Claire's heaviness. Although the anxiety and apprehension she'd experienced under Tony's rule knocked at the door of Claire's heart and soul, she desperately tried to suppress those fears. Her counsel's attention and kindness helped to alleviate the burden. Claire truly didn't have time to process her sudden freedom. Turning toward Jane, she inquired, "Tell me again about the pardon. Do I need to check in with anyone?"

Jane explained, "Everything associated with the charge of attempted murder is now gone. The arrest, plea, incarceration—it's all gone. Your record will appear as though it had never occurred." She emphasized, "Claire, the last fourteen months never happened."

"Thirty-six," Claire corrected.

Jane looked into her client's eyes. She saw the victim's eyes from over a year ago: not the eyes of an attempted murderer. The sadness combined with confusion told Jane that release wouldn't be that simple. Removing Claire from the walls of Iowa's Correctional Institution for Women was easier than removing the past thirty-six months from her memories. There was nothing Jane could do or say to help ease her client's fearful thoughts. Getting Claire safely out of Iowa was her only goal. "Please take care of yourself," Jane said as she pulled an envelope and a card out of her purse. "Here's my card with my cell and office number as well as email. If I can be of any assistance, please don't hesitate to contact me. In this envelope are a few things that I believe should belong to you."

Claire took the items from her attorney and slowly opened the envelope. Staring back at her was fifty dollars in ten dollar bills and a cashier's check made out to *cash* for 100 thousand dollars. "No, Jane. I can't accept this. This is for you. It's your payment for helping me."

"The cash will help with incidentals until you reach your friend, and as for the check, it's a ridiculous amount of money for a few hours' work. You get settled. When you can, send me an appropriate payment for my services. Consider it seed money to start your new life."

"But we don't know who it's from."

"No, we don't. If perhaps it's from whom we suspect, wouldn't he be happy to learn it went to you?"

Claire's lips slowly turned upward; she shook her head. "No. No, he wouldn't." Claire scanned the mingling crowd for a familiar face. Exhaling with relief at the sea of strangers, Claire continued, "And for that reason, I accept." The two women embraced. "Thank you, Jane, for everything."

Claire straightened her shoulders and turned toward the gate. It had been some time since she'd flown commercial, but she knew Jane wasn't allowed

past security without a boarding pass. Thankfully, no one else would be either.



JANE WATCHED AS Claire passed the TSA agents and disappeared into the crowd of bodies. With an audible sigh, Jane thanked God that no one had recognized her client, and the reporters hadn't been notified. She had no idea how long it would take interested parties to learn of Claire's release and flight. However long, Jane hoped it was long enough.



CLAIRE NICHOLS SAT in a row of connected black vinyl chairs, holding all of her worldly possessions and soaking in the scene around her. There were people talking, reading, and even sleeping. Periodically, the dim background noise shattered with announcements over the PA system. They told of flights boarding and others delayed. No one noticed her. No one cared that only four hours earlier she'd been a prisoner of the state of Iowa. The buzzing in Claire's brain began to dull, and her pulse steadied. In another thirty-five minutes, she'd be boarding a plane. Claire hoped she wouldn't hear an announcement saying her flight was delayed. She may not remember her initial arrival to Iowa, but she was savoring her final exit. Returning was not on her agenda.

Her inner monologue was interrupted by the sound of her name. "Ms. Nichols?" A large security officer bent down to speak quietly near Claire's ear.

Startled by the man's closeness and words, she managed a response, "Yes? I'm Claire Nichols."

"I need you to come with me, please."

Oh God, no! Please, let me get on this plane. Involuntarily, moisture returned to Claire's eyes as the shrill sound of alarms reverberated within her head. Trying to speak steadily over the deafening panic, only she could hear, she uttered, "I'm sorry. I don't believe I can do that. I can't miss my flight."

"Ms. Nichols, if you will please come to my office, I'll explain everything."

Claire gripped her bag and contemplated her next move. She shouldn't have left Jane, not yet. She had Jane's card; she could call her. Her voice and tone exposed her apprehension. "I really don't want to go with you." People began to stare.

Speaking in a hushed whisper, "Ms. Nichols, your ticket has been

cancelled.” She shook her head in protest. “It’s all right.” Moving his lips near her ear, as to not be overheard, he whispered, “Please settle down, your ticket was cancelled because there’s a private plane coming for you.”

The security officer’s voice came through a long dark tunnel. The tunnel closed. Only blackness...

CHAPTER TWO

Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.

—Helen Keller

C LAIRE WOKE WITH a start; her eyes opened wide. The view was no different than from behind her closed lids—darkness. Utilizing her senses, she felt the softness of the sheets and luxurious pillows, smelled the faint aroma of lilacs, and heard nothing but silence. Her mind tried to replay the past twenty-four hours. There was too much to sort. Nevertheless, she knew without a doubt, this wasn't her cell.

Trying desperately for visual confirmation, she searched the penetrating darkness for light. Only a few feet in the distance, she located the illuminated display of a digital clock: 3:57 AM. For the past nine months, she awakened every morning at precisely 6:00 AM. Her mind slowly churned; she wasn't on the twin mattress, not in her cell, and most importantly, no longer in Iowa. She was in California. The two hour difference in time explained her early waking. It was almost 6:00 AM in Iowa.

Claire tried to close her eyes to enjoy the new comfortable surroundings, yet her mind swirled uncontrollably with a whirlwind of thoughts. Finally, she gave up and got out of bed. Although she wanted to go to the kitchen, she didn't want to wake Amber, especially not after everything she'd done. Thinking about her new friend, a smile spread across Claire's face. Truly, until yesterday, she and Amber had only met once face-to-face.

Wearing her new roommate's t-shirt and shorts; Claire made her way to the adjoining bath. Pausing at the door frame, she flipped the light switch and viewed the room where she'd slept. Compared to her prison cell, the room was palatial, containing all the natural furnishings of a bedroom. The queen-sized bed had a beautiful headboard covered in ivory fabric. Matching material graced taught boxed valances covering the top of each window. Long vertical wooden blinds kept the room dark, while sleek, modern bedside

stands, dressers, and a desk lined the walls. The light golden hue of the blinds contrasted beautifully with the darker wood slats covering the floor. Strategically placed beige shag rugs added warmth and undoubtedly muffling sound.

Turning to the tile covered bathroom, Claire smiled at the sink. It looked like a green glass bowl sitting upon a stand. Above the sink was a large framed mirror flanked on each side by lighted sconces. Claire paused, staring at her reflection. It looked different. Her eyes glistened with the realization: it was the smile! It had been so long since she truly felt like smiling.

Claire assessed herself; she didn't look as old as she felt. Although, the past three years had psychologically aged her beyond the chronological timetable, the more recent lack of sunshine undoubtedly benefited her skin. She remembered a time when she radiated with a bronze sun-kissed glow. She also remembered her hair lighter, both from the sun and highlights. Today, her pale china complexion was surrounded by chestnut waves as her hair hung upon her back. It hadn't been trimmed or cut in over a year.

Tip-toeing in stocking feet, Claire silently made her way into the hall. Near the entrance to her room were doors to other rooms. Last night, she learned one was Amber's office containing a desk, computers, and everything she needed to stay connected to her responsibilities at SiJo. Additional doors led to a den and an extra bedroom. Amber's bedroom was on the other end of the condo.

Claire continued down the hall, into the living room, and through the archway to the cool kitchen. Everything looked perfect. Although she could, Amber didn't employ a full-time household staff. She reasoned that she enjoyed cooking, and she often ate out. A cook would be underutilized. There was a woman who came twice a week to clean and do laundry.

Though early, Claire longed for real, non-prison coffee. She eyed the coffee maker upon the granite countertop. It was different than any she'd seen before, some kind of individual cup thing. Had making coffee changed that much in fourteen months? She tried desperately to decipher its operation. The metal stand by its side held multiple types of coffee and flavors in small sealed cups. After further investigation and exploration, she surrendered and sat at the kitchen table. The quietness of the apartment combined with the freedom to move about as she wished allowed Claire's mind to replay the past twenty-four hours. Staring through the windows into the dark predawn sky, she remembered...

When Claire regained consciousness at Des Moines International Airport, the security officer frantically tried to calm her nerves. Once in his office, he

handed Claire the telephone. On the other end, Amber McCoy responded to Claire's obvious distress, explaining, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. It's just after Liz, my assistant, told me she booked you a flight, I started thinking. Maybe I didn't need to take this precaution, but after all you've told me, well, I just thought it would be better if there weren't any record of your travel."

Listening to Amber's steady tone helped Claire regain her composure. "Oh, I think that makes sense. It was just when the security officer said private plane, I immediately thought someone else sent it."

"No wonder you freaked. I'm glad I was able to reach you. A SiJo Gaming jet will be there soon. Why don't you stay with security until it arrives? In no time, you'll be out here."

When Claire handed the telephone back to the airport security guard, the nice man offered to get her something to eat or drink. Sipping coffee and feverishly fighting to mend her frayed nerves, she thought about Amber's reasoning. It was the same reason Jane concealed her activities from everyone. Presumably, the reason Governor Bosley chose to withhold her name from the press.

The security guard at the Iowa airport walked Claire to the tarmac where small commercial and private planes were boarding and deboarding passengers. She'd never been there before. Tony kept his plane and other Rawlings Industries planes at a small private airport outside of Iowa City. The plane Amber sent had large blue and green letters advertising SiJo Gaming, the company started by Simon Johnson. Seeing the insignia reminded Claire of Simon's large blue eyes. A twinge of sadness seeped into her frazzled emotions as she pictured the man she saw only once since the end of their freshman year of college.

While flying across country, Claire tried to fathom her recent change of events. She was truly stunned by so many benefactors. It seemed as though not only were these individuals willing to help her, but it appeared these people saw through the façade of Anthony Rawlings. For so long, Claire truly believed his veneer was impenetrable.

Claire had contacted Amber McCoy after she received Tony's box of information. It didn't seem right for Claire to hide the possible cause of Amber's fiancé's death. She wasn't sure how Amber would react. If Claire's theory were correct, Claire was, in essence, responsible for Simon's death. If he hadn't tried to contact her, he might still be alive.

Claire realized her assumptions were astounding, but she had no proof. Nonetheless, as the two conversed, Claire spun an amazing tale of deceit and vengeance. Apparently, she'd been convincing enough to gain Amber's trust. In the months that followed, through multiple emails, even though Claire had limited computer access while incarcerated, they shared information and

research regarding the materials Tony offered in his box. Together, they were in the process of recreating much of the information.

The need to recreate was due to Claire's impulsivity. In a moment of weakness, she decided to throw most of the information into the prison's incinerator. Sometimes, she reasoned it wasn't weakness, but strength—the strength to rid herself of her past—a sort of cleansing. Fortunately, she'd chosen to save a few non-duplicable items, some pictures and the Top Secret report.

Claire wasn't sure what she planned to accomplish when she recreated the box of information. She'd planned to have more time; however, she wasn't complaining. Being released from prison almost four years early was worth the uncertainty regarding her intentions. She and Amber would continue to recreate the timeline and attempt to understand Tony's past in order to influence his future. Perhaps others would join their quest. Claire didn't know if Emily was up for the challenge.

Thinking about her sister, Claire knew she loved her; however, understandably Claire's arrest and confessions strained their relationship. The accusations and concerns Emily professed and Claire vehemently denied during her marriage were now realized. Claire's deceit cost them both dearly. Truthfully, Tony made the final call, ultimately responsible for Claire's incarceration, John's charges for embezzlement and fraudulent client billing, and every bad thing that happened on planet Earth in the last forty-eight years. Emily tried to support Claire while she was in the Iowa prison. Their interaction was superficial at best. Now that Claire was pardoned, reconnecting with Emily was high on her priority list.

As the small jet cleared the Santa Cruz Mountains, twilight descended upon Silicon Valley. The lights of Palo Alto greeted her, and the airport bustled with commuter planes. It was one of the busiest private airports in the country.

Wishing for invisibility from her ex-husband, Claire prayed one woman on one jet would go completely unnoticed.

When the door opened, letting the tepid air fill the cabin, Claire allowed herself to experience the relief associated with freedom. The change of scenery helped facilitate her emotional shift. Placing one foot in front of the other, she disembarked the plane. After three years of constant surveillance, the uncertainty of California's possibilities thrilled and terrified her.

Her future was in her hands: such a simple statement of independence. Nonetheless, it couldn't have been made twenty-four hours earlier. Claire thought about that; it couldn't have been made thirty-six months ago. Straightening her shoulders and lifting her head high, Claire scanned the concourse.

As if knowing Claire's need for immediate confirmation and reaffirmation,

Amber silently walked from an unmarked hanger. She looked much different than she did eighteen months ago at Simon's funeral. Not physically, as Claire recognized the slender brunette instantly. The difference was her presence, no longer grief-stricken; Amber radiated a casual confidence and a self-assured aura. Their eyes met, and Amber moved toward her.

On the concrete concourse, the two friends and strangers embraced. The day had already been extremely long. Emotionally overloaded, Claire was thankful for her new friend, and she was ready for quiet time. Amber understood and drove them to her condo, with minimal stops on the way for essentials.

Nestled near downtown Palo Alto, Amber's condominium blended perfectly into its surroundings with its stucco walls and orange tiled roof. They parked in an underground garage after waving to the security officer guarding the entrance. When the elevator opened to the fourth floor, Claire recognized the true grandeur of the building, with wide hallways giving access to multiple dwellings. Amber explained she'd lived there for years, loved the neighborhood, people, and city. As a bonus, SiJo Gaming was near. She didn't need to fight the daily San Francisco traffic.

Hardwood floors, taupe walls, and recessed lighting combined to make her condo warm and inviting. The two ladies settled onto comfortable stools at Amber's high kitchen table and became better acquainted. Claire gazed around the room and took in the simplistic chic style. The understated panache and flair appealed to Claire. It wasn't the grandeur of the mansion she shared with her ex-husband, yet nonetheless, it was lavish and elegant. The granite counters and table top felt cool and smooth. The high stools in which they sat allowed her feet to pivot upon the cast iron bar.

Their conversation proceeded benignly. Perhaps Amber could sense Claire's dazed realization; during the hours that followed, the two women connected. They shared sushi, wine, and discussed their common bond. As the hours slipped away and the outside darkness intensified, their interaction within became increasingly real.

Nineteen hours earlier, Claire woke in a prison cell. It was the day that wouldn't end. She was physically and emotionally spent; however, Amber must have realized there was a conversation they needed to undergo. Claire wasn't ready for Amber's question, "Did you love Simon?"

Recently, conversation hadn't been Claire's norm, so sitting with Amber and being asked something so personal, something that could impact their relationship, frightened her. Claire believed her answer could cost her the one person willing to help her plight. She hesitated before answering, "I hadn't seen Simon since our freshman year of college until he came to see me in Chicago."

"I know that. What I want to know is if you loved him."

Claire bowed her head. The day was too much—too many changes. She couldn't summon a mask to disguise her true emotions. Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes saddened, though too tired for tears. “I thought I did. When we were at Valparaiso, I believed in fairy tales. I believed in forever. When he left for his internship, I expected him to return. When he didn’t, I expected an invitation to join him. It broke my heart when I never got one.” Claire began to stand, believing Amber would no longer want her to stay. “When I saw him in Chicago, I remembered those feelings. Simon’s love was unconditional. You don’t know what I went through with Tony, but unconditional is not a word I’d use to describe it.” Claire hesitated, looked out the large window and saw the quiet tree lined street, four stories below, illuminated by old-fashioned light poles. Although Amber remained silent, Claire no longer held eye contact. “Seeing him that day made me sad. I didn’t know about you. Honestly, I didn’t ask if he were married or engaged. I just knew the love of someone like Simon was something I’d never experience again. I knew I’d missed out on something real, and I’d never know it.” Claire pushed the stool under the counter. “Thank you for getting me out of Iowa. Once I cash the check, I’ll reimburse you. I’ll try to find somewhere to stay tonight.”

“Why are you leaving?” Amber’s surprised expression echoed her words.

“After what I just said, don’t you want me to go?”

Amber walked around the table and faced Claire. The two women were so different, yet so alike: both brunettes, Amber a little taller with brown eyes, and Claire more petite with green eyes. Although both were under thirty, life had dealt them more sadness than they deserved. “No, I don’t.” Claire staggered backwards in surprise. She couldn’t take more emotion in one day. “Simon loved you. If his love was unrequited, then I could easily hate you, but if his love was reciprocated, and if you truly loved him in return, even ten years ago, then all I can do is all I can do.”

Claire stared at the woman before her. “I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying...” She reached for Claire’s hand. “...I want you to stay here, or at least in Palo Alto, and I want to help you find a life.” Amber widened her smile. “I want to understand more about your ex-husband, but not tonight. I want to help you do whatever you feel is necessary to repay him for his actions, whether that’s revenge or just showing him you can exist without him. I want to honor Simon by having the two women who loved him unite in a common bond.”

“Thank you, I’m sorry the two of you didn’t get the chance to marry. If I had anything to do with that, I’m truly sorry.” Claire held the chair for support.

“Simon had to do with that. Not you. It was just the man he was. Don’t

feel too guilty. We were friends and colleagues for years; our romance was blossoming. I've been blessed to have Simon in my life. Even without marriage, he provided for me forever. Please let me share some of that with you.”

“Thank you, but I never want to be dependent upon anyone again. I need to be my own person.”

“That’s great. If I can help you do that, then I’d be honored. Will you let me help you get on your feet?”

Claire thought about her life. Everyone she knew before her marriage was gone. Even her sister was alienated. The friends she acquired during her time with Tony were frightened or truly believed she tried to kill Tony. She and Courtney had clandestine contact. Tony’s influence knew few bounds. Had there been anyone who wanted to help her, just her? “Are you a patient person?” Claire asked.

Amber’s lips and eyes revealed a smile fighting for exposure. “I’ve been told I have problems in that area.”

Claire returned her smile. “I’m glad to hear you don’t have a halo. I was beginning to wonder.”

“Oh hell, just stick around. You’ll learn more about the horns that expose themselves occasionally.”

“I’m willing to accept your help to get me back on my feet. I hate that I need it, but I know I do...thank you.”

As Claire fell asleep that night, she marveled at her new situation. Life had dealt her many changes—this one left her exhausted, eager, and filled with warmth.

Those pleasant feelings continued as she once again sat at the kitchen table, trying to make sense of her life. A little after 5:00 AM, Amber sleepily found her way into the kitchen. “Good morning, I’m not used to having a roommate. The light startled me.”

“I’m sorry. The time difference made me wake early.”

“Don’t you want coffee?” Amber asked as she selected a small cup and placed it in the top of the machine. Next, she pushed a few buttons, and the machine came to life. Slowly, Claire walked over to the counter.

“I’m afraid you may have bitten off more than anyone can chew. Apparently, I don’t even know how to make coffee.”

Amber laughed. “These are kind of new. The hardest part is deciding your flavor.”

Claire explained she should call her sister before news of her release hit the media. Amber brought Claire her laptop. “This is to look up your sister’s

number. You're also welcome to use the telephone and call whomever you want." Claire considered the possibility of unlimited access. Undoubtedly, she would require help with more than just coffee.

Emily's number was unpublished, but Claire remembered it was listed on the information from the prison. Of course, Emily was her emergency contact. Listening to the telephone ring, she prayed she'd catch her sister before Emily left for work. It was after 8:00 AM in Indiana. As the answering machine began to speak, Claire hung up. She didn't want to leave a message. What if Emily's line was monitored? Claire knew she sounded paranoid, but how does the saying go? Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean someone's *not* out to get you.

While Amber readied for work, Claire continued to browse on the laptop. There was so much information literally at her fingertips. Amber's internet was much faster than the one at the prison. Claire was lost in cyberspace when a sound came from the living room. Someone had entered the front door of the condo.

Walking casually into the kitchen, in worn jeans, a white t-shirt, and bare feet was a handsome man. His blonde hair fell in messy waves, and his face held the telltale shadow of someone who'd yet to shave. Not knowing what to do, Claire quietly sat and watched as he walked in a sleepy haze toward the mysterious coffee maker. After engineering the machine like a pro, he turned toward the table and saw Claire. His smile extended to his cheeks, creating small lines around his light blue eyes. "Oh, hello, you must be Claire." He casually leaned against the counter and took her in.

Suddenly, she felt underdressed. Not like she needed to be formal, just more clothes than a t-shirt and shorts. Claire couldn't help notice his firm, lean body, long legs, and obvious level of comfort. "Yes, I am. I'm also at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I don't know yours." Other than guards, she hadn't spoken to a man in a long time. She suddenly realized this man must be Amber's new romance. She couldn't help but think Amber moved on rather quickly. It wasn't a judgmental thought, more an observation, especially after last night's conversation regarding their *common bond* with Simon. Claire also realized she should stop staring in his direction. He may be handsome, but the last thing Claire wanted to do was cause problems between Amber and her beau.

Offering his hand, he walked forward. "So sorry, my name's Harry. It's nice to finally meet you."

"Finally?" she responded as she shook his hand and recovered her own quickly.

"Well, I've heard all about you since you contacted Amber months ago."

As Harry spoke, Amber returned to the kitchen. She no longer looked like the stylish, casual woman of last night or the sleepy robe wearing woman of

earlier. Instead, she personified Ms. McCoy, CEO of SiJo Gaming. Everything from her attire to her long hair twisted into a knot at the back of her neck said *professional*. Truthfully, Claire wondered if she'd been met by *this* Amber at the airport, would she have felt intimidated. That thought faded faster than the smoke from an extinguished candle when Amber spoke. Her voice brimmed with unabashed joy and enthusiasm. "Claire, I see you've met my brother. Harry lives down the hall and thinks mooching off of me is easier than buying his own groceries." She smiled as she gave her brother a flittering kiss on the cheek.

He smiled in return. "I just really like your coffee maker."

"And my cereal, and my toast, and my..." Laughter interlaced Amber's words. Claire tried to soak in their joviality. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd experienced such a refreshing atmosphere.

Sipping her own coffee, Claire asked, "What do you do, Harry? You don't seem as ready for work as Amber is."

Amber laughed again. "What do you mean? That's about as dressed up as he gets."

"Hey, that's not true. I wear shoes—sometimes." He winked at Claire. She felt herself blush. She didn't know why, and neither of the others seemed to notice.

"Well, for the next few days, my job is *you*," he said, as he took his coffee to the table. Sitting in the chair opposite Claire, he gazed into her stare.

This time she blushed. "Me? What do you mean?"

Amber answered, "I hope you don't mind. I'd like to be the one to help you get things started here in California, but I've got a lot happening at work. There's a new launch about to take place. Harry on the other hand has more flexibility with his job. I asked him to help you do whatever you need."

Claire thought for a moment. "Thank you, Harry. I guess I need to decide what that is."

Sipping his coffee, he offered, "I'm in no rush, but, I was thinking you'll need more identification, so you should request a copy of your birth certificate. Once that arrives, you can do things like open a bank account. After that, the possibilities are limitless."

"A phone," Claire said dreamily. "I'd like to get a phone."

Harry and Amber smiled at one another. He replied, "That can be our first mission." Neither understood how monumental the common piece of technology would be to Claire.

Lost in her new thoughts, Claire continued, "And some clothes, but that can wait until after the bank account."

Amber offered Claire a loan to help her get started. Claire hesitated, but knowing she had the cashier's check, she relented, "After I get the birth certificate, can I get a California driver's license?"

“Can you drive?” Harry asked jokingly.

Claire nodded.

“Then, I don’t see why not,” Harry answered.

Claire’s emerald eyes glowed with anticipation. Who would have thought she’d have a new home in California? “So, how do I get the birth certificate?”

“How about we eat some of Amber’s breakfast foods first?”

Walking toward her bedroom, Amber called over her shoulder, “See what I mean?”

CHAPTER THREE

The secret to getting away with lying is believing it with all your heart, that goes for lying to yourself even more so than lying to another.

—Elizabeth Bear

JANE ALLYSON WATCHED the snow and rain pelt the window of her small, yet distinguished office. The mixture melted the scene of downtown Des Moines into a sad, impressionistic painting. She wanted to concentrate on cases at hand. She had more than enough work to keep her busy, but her mind continually went back to Claire Nichols.

Late the other evening, Jane's private cell rang. Only a week and a half since she'd watched Ms. Nichols fade into a sea of unknown faces, on the other side of security at the Des Moines International Airport, she heard Claire's positive tone. They didn't talk long, but Claire's unspoken message was louder than her words.

She was settled, making a life, and doing well. She also told Jane that she mailed her a check for her services. What she didn't say, but Jane heard loud and clear, was a regained resolve. Wherever Claire was, she was emerging from the depths of the past three years—a butterfly finally emerging from the encased cocoon.

It was like Jane could hear the determination her client held during her interviews at the courthouse in Iowa City in 2011. Although Jane moved on to other clients, she could close her eyes and see Claire Rawlings at the steel table, recounting her tortured life with Anthony Rawlings. At the time, Jane felt overwhelmed with compassion and respect for the petite woman. Many victims were unable to share details like the ones Claire described, especially against such a respected assailant, yet with each sentence, Mrs. Rawlings grew in stature.

None of it mattered. After the prosecutor, Marcus Evergreen, wove his

web around Claire's testimony, she wisely chose incarceration over courtroom drama and further public scrutiny. Despite her circumstances, when the judge proclaimed the final sentence, Claire Nichols accepted the words with dignity and strength.

During the recent telephone call, Jane didn't *just* sense renewed determination. She heard hope and optimism: qualities that Ms. Nichols had lost. They never discussed Claire's final destination. Jane believed it was better not to know—*plausible deniability*.

As she stared at the frigid Iowa morning, Jane didn't regret filing Claire's pardon petition. Jane believed, no matter the consequences, freeing Claire Nichols was the right motion. Thankfully, after some debate, the partners of her firm agreed, and her position within the firm was secure.

Earlier this morning, while readying for work, Jane saw Claire's face on the local news. Two weeks after the fact the news of her release was out. Jane couldn't contain her smile. She didn't know how Governor Bosley kept it quiet for so long, but Jane was thankful.

Word was that Richard Bosley was fading fast. His stage four B pancreatic cancer had metastasized to his bones.

Settling into her leather chair, Jane sipped warm coffee and contemplated her impending meeting. Her earlier joy diminished as she entered her office greeted with multiple urgent messages from Anthony Rawlings' secretary. Apparently, Mr. Rawlings learned of Claire's release last night. Although prior to the news release, it was two weeks after it had occurred. Jane smiled and thought, miracles do still happen.

Mr. Rawlings' secretary asked Jane to travel immediately to Iowa City for a meeting with Mr. Rawlings. Jane wondered how many people drop everything at such a summoning. Jane respectfully informed the woman that she was involved in very important cases and would need to check her schedule. After a prolonged silence, during which Jane stared aimlessly out her large window, contemplating the grey skies and chances of rain, Jane informed the secretary she would be available to make a trip to Iowa City, a week from Thursday. The woman was obviously dismayed by Jane's refusal to fall prostrate to the great Anthony Rawlings.

A few minutes later, Jane's phone rang. This time, it wasn't a request. Mr. Rawlings' secretary informed Jane that Mr. Rawlings would be at her office by 10:00 AM *this* morning. Jane thought about stalling the meeting, saying she was busy, but she decided she wanted to see her client's ex-husband for another reason. She believed Mr. Rawlings' demeanor would reveal if *he* were the anonymous benefactor.

If Jane sensed Mr. Rawlings wasn't Claire's savior, then she wouldn't mention the origins of the petition, and the benefactor would remain a mystery.

Tearing Jane from her thoughts, her assistant's voice broke through the speaker on her desk, "Ms. Allyson, Mr. Rawlings is here, accompanied by his attorney, Mr. Simmons."

Jane took a deep breath and exhaled. "Please send them in."

Seeing the strained expression on the entrepreneur's face, Jane knew immediately, Mr. Rawlings did *not* send her the letter. He obviously came expecting answers. She had to wonder, if it wasn't him, then who was it?

"Hello, Mr. Rawlings, Mr. Simmons." She nodded at the men as they entered her office. "Please have a seat." She motioned to the two chairs sitting opposite her desk. Although probably not as grand as theirs, this was her office, and Jane would take the seat of honor. Closing the door, she returned to her leather chair. "Now gentlemen, to what do I owe this honor?"

Mr. Simmons spoke first, "It has just recently come to my client's attention that on March 8th you filed a petition with Governor Bosley, requesting a pardon for Claire Nichols."

"Yes, that's correct."

"My client would like to know why this was filed, on what grounds, and who approached you to make this request."

"Gentlemen, Ms. Nichols was never convicted of a crime. She pled *no contest*. That was *not* an admission of guilt. She's had an impeccable record during incarceration. Truthfully, she's the poster child for pardons, and as for who hired me, I'm sure you're familiar with the term *confidential*."

"Why was I not notified?" Apparently, Mr. Rawlings couldn't restrain himself any longer.

"Why would you need to be notified?"

"For my safety. She tried to kill me!"

"Have you been threatened..." Jane leaned forward and continued, "...since her release?"

"No. I just learned of her release last night."

"It *appears* as though you needn't be concerned. She's had two weeks to finish what you claim she started." Jane grinned. "And it seems you're still with us."

Mr. Rawlings fought to keep his expression indifferent.

Mr. Simmons continued the enquiry, "Do you know where Ms. Nichols relocated? For my client's safety, he should be informed."

"I do not. As I'm sure you're aware, with a pardon, the criminal record is expunged. Ms. Nichols does not owe the court a thing. She is *free* to go wherever she chooses. Furthermore, she is *not* required to keep the court or the state of Iowa informed of her whereabouts. I took her to the airport and left her at the gate. There is *nothing* more I can tell you."

Mr. Rawlings counsel continued, "She had a ticket for San Francisco, but prior to boarding the plane, her reservation was cancelled. Do you know

where she went instead?”

Jane truly didn’t know about the cancelled flight. She was very glad she’d heard from Claire. If she hadn’t, that information would have been upsetting, but she could appear genuinely surprised. “I don’t know anything about her reservations being cancelled, and as I said before, I don’t know where she is now.”

“Ms. Allyson, she had a first-class ticket. Do you know how Ms. Nichols could afford such a ticket?” Mr. Simmons continued.

“As I mentioned, some things are confidential.” Standing, Jane said, “Now gentlemen, if that is all? I have work—”

Anthony’s voice resonated low and menacing, interrupting Jane’s dismissal, “Ms. Allyson, I’m not happy with the recent turn of events. I plan to learn of *all* individuals involved in this miscarriage of justice, and it’s obvious that you played a role.”

Still standing, Jane met Mr. Rawlings’ stare. This was her forte—why she became an attorney. “Mr. Rawlings, I was your ex-wife’s co-counsel during her trial. I represented her then, and I would gladly do so again. If you have complaints about her pardon then I recommend you take them up with Richard Bosley. His signature alone opened the door of her cell.” Jane’s words slowed. “And I’m certain that a man of your stature did not intend his concern regarding self-preservation to be interpreted as a threat. That would not coincide with your benevolent image and, I’ll add, is illegal.”

Standing, Mr. Simmons eloquently interceded, “You’re correct, Ms. Allyson. My client is obviously distraught over the recent turn of events. You can understand his alarm. After all, Ms. Nichols tried to harm him once. It’s only natural for him to be concerned she may try to do it again.”

“Yes, Mr. Simmons, I see how *your client* would be concerned that *my client* would cause him harm.”



TONY DIDN’T APPRECIATE Ms. Allyson’s veiled implication. He didn’t want Brent informed of Claire’s accusations. Standing, Tony summoned his most affable voice, “Thank you, Ms. Allyson. I’m glad you understand my concern, and I hope you didn’t misinterpret my alarm. If you remember anything else regarding Ms. Nichols’ departure or learn her location, I would appreciate being informed.” Tony extended his hand.

Jane took his hand and firmly shook it. “Mr. Rawlings, you will be among the first I call. Are we done?”

“Yes, I believe we are.”



AFTER THE TWO men exited her office, Jane collapsed into her leather chair and exhaled audibly. Well that was fun. She smiled to herself. Funny how one petition could continue to bring her pleasure.



THE EXERCISE ROOM in the lower level of the condominium sported the newest machines and guaranteed fitness in just minutes per day. Claire usually waited until after 7:30 AM for her morning workout. Most of the residents were professionals who utilized the equipment before heading to their respective careers. The small gym burst with fitness enthusiasts every day from 5:00 AM to 7:00 AM. Since she didn't have a job, waiting until the crowd thinned made more sense.

Flat screen televisions glowed with closed caption from every direction throughout the fitness center. She watched and read. Never again was Claire Nichols going to be uninformed about the world around her. The display on the elliptical machine read nine more minutes. She willed her legs to continue, yearning for her pre-prison tone.

Contemplating the day's activities, she made a mental *to-do* list. At 11:00 AM, she had an appointment in San Francisco with a jewelry broker. Since obtaining her birth certificate, she'd fulfilled many of her needs: driver's license, bank account, clothes, telephone, computer, cosmetics, a used car, and insurance. Truthfully, Claire was proud of her *new to her* Honda. It was the same make she owned in Atlanta, just a few years newer. Of course, she sent Jane Allyson a Money Order for her services.

Claire wasn't advertising her location; however, short of assuming an alternate identity, she knew she couldn't stay completely hidden. In an effort to avoid a trail of credit card receipts or loans, she utilized cash as much as possible. The recent expenditures took their toll on the money she'd received from the anonymous check. Although, she currently had no living expenses that would inevitably change. A one bedroom condo on the third floor would become available soon. Claire weighed the pros of living close to Amber and Harry, her only two friends against the cons of her unknown future employment.

Obtaining work was high on her priority list; however, it wasn't easy. She wanted to work in meteorology. Her lack of recent experience and desire to avoid any station or weather organization connected to Rawlings Industries severely limited her options. *Six minutes left on the elliptical.*

Without a job, she needed more money. One evening while talking to

Emily on the phone, the subject of her jewelry came up. When arrested, Claire was wearing diamond earrings, a diamond journey necklace, a diamond watch, and of course her engagement and wedding rings. If it had been up to her, she would have only been wearing the rings. Now as she struggled to complete the final five minutes on the machine, Claire smiled. If only her ex-husband knew how his insistence for her to wear the jewelry the day of her arrest would probably net her a fine profit. Today's meeting was to determine the value of her bounty.

Harry recommended Mr. Pulvara. The broker only deals in high quality jewelry, and wasn't a common pawn broker. It didn't take an expert to know Claire's jewelry was very high quality; however, Mr. Pulvara only sees clients through recommendations and by appointment. Thanks to Amber, she had both.

Claire valued Harry's recommendation. His connections in the Bay Area went beyond his real job as President of Security for SiJo Gaming. Amber joked about being her brother's boss. Nevertheless, with a degree in Criminology and five years of experience with the Bureau of Investigation and Intelligence, under the California Department of Justice as an investigator, Harry was more than qualified. *Two minutes remained on the elliptical display*; thankfully, the resistance lessened.

Claire returned her attention to the TV. Suddenly, her lungs deflated, not from exercise, but from the picture on the screen. She stared helplessly at her wedding picture, the one released to the media. Although closed caption flowed across the bottom, she couldn't concentrate. Finally, her mind focused, and she read:

"...Bosley, diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. It is unclear why Ms. Nichols's name was not released to the public. Governor Preston has promised a full investigation. Mr. Anthony Rawlings' publicist stated Mr. Rawlings is shocked by this turn of events. He has no comment at this time. MSNBC has not been able to reach Ms. Nichols for comment."

Her legs no longer moved; the machine moved her. She gawked at the television as the newscaster progressed with other stories. When her feet hit the solid floor, her muscles tightened. Claire knew she should cool-down properly, and although her legs yelled in protest, the voices inside her head conquered.

Claire looked to the mirrors completely covering one wall of the gym. Normally, she didn't like seeing herself hot and sweaty; however, today she

couldn't look away. Do the other people watching the same program recognize me? The bride in the picture beamed photogenic. Her porcelain complexion, blonde hair, and designer dress looked so different from the woman in the mirror. Other than her eyes, which Claire immediately diverted to the floor, the differences outnumbered the similarities.

Her thoughts swirled as she rode the elevator to the fourth floor. Entering the condominium, she called to Amber. No answer. She's probably already left for work. Claire sat at the kitchen table, ignored the perspiration dripping down her back and between her breasts, and booted up her new laptop. While the PC came to life, she searched for her cell phones. She actually had two! It was probably silly, but she had her real iPhone with a blocked number and a *pay-as-you-go* phone. The latter was used to communicate with Emily and Courtney. Claire was trying to stay under the radar. Her iPhone was on her bedside stand, but she couldn't find the other, which was strange. That phone being her primary source of communication with her sister rarely left her side. The two siblings were working on their relationship. They'd talked more during the past two weeks than in years.

Back in the kitchen, she drank a glass of water, made a cup of coffee, and began to read the homepage. Immediately, she saw two photos: her wedding picture and the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Her stomach twisted as she read the article. It divulged her public life during the last two and a half years: her marriage, lack of prenuptial agreement, lavish trips, high-end shopping, charge of *attempted murder*, plea of *no contest*, and sentencing. As she began the part about the pardon, she heard the front door. Turning to the source, Claire watched as Harry came toward her. His liquid blue eyes flooded with compassion. Obviously, he's seen the news. He held her other telephone in his outstretched hand.

Trying to sound strong as she took the phone, she said, "Thank you, I guess I left that at your place last night." Amber may have better food, but Harry had the better television. Last night, the three of them watched a Lakers game at Harry's. Claire wasn't really a basketball fan, which goes against her Indiana roots. It's just that the Hoosier glory days were before her time. She'd heard stories, but they never ignited a passion for the sport.

Her expression, the moisture in her eyes, and her obvious interruption from a work-out, told Harry what her words didn't. She'd seen the news. Handing her the phone, he said, "This keeps chirping, so I think your battery's about to die." He looked into her green eyes. "Claire, are you all right?"

She sat straighter. "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

His compassion changed to surprise. "Oh, I just worried that...well, when I saw the news...all right." He turned back to the coffee machine.

Claire checked the telephone: two text messages and one voicemail. She checked the texts. The first was from Courtney, sent at 10:45 PM last night:

“TONY JUST LEARNED YOU'RE OUT OF PRISON. YELLING AT BRENT. NOT HAPPY. WANTS ANSWERS. LOVE YOU. WILL TELL MORE WHEN I CAN. STAY SAFE.”

Claire stared at the screen. *Why didn't I see this last night?* She didn't hear it beep with the game. Fear swept through her in a wave as her heartbeat pounded wildly in her ears.

“Claire, what does it say?”

She looked from the screen to Harry and shook her head. She tried to hide her fear, but she couldn't hide the tears slipping from her eyes. She hit another button and continued to read.

Sniffing, she wiped her eyes, tried to appear composed, and read through blurred vision. The time read 6:00 AM—only two hours ago, also from Courtney:

“PRIVATE DETEC TRYING TO FIND YOU. KNOWS ABOUT CANCELLED TIX TO SAN FRAN. CHECKING OUT INDIANA. CHECKING EMILY'S PHONE RECORDS. HEARD TONY'S VOICE W/ BRENT. NOT HAPPY!!!! BE CAREFUL.”

Silently, Harry stood motionless, intently watching Claire's every move.

“I'm sorry,” she offered. “I need to check this voicemail.” She didn't want to answer his *what* question, and she hoped he'd leave her alone to listen. He didn't, although he went back to his coffee on the counter and gave her some space. Claire activated her voicemail and listened to Emily's voice:

“Claire, it's a little after 4:00 AM here. That's what? 2:00 AM there, I think. I know you're asleep, but you need to know, I just got a call at this hour, from some man named Roach. He said he's a private investigator working for a mutual friend. He said you may be in danger and needs to know your location, and for your protection. I didn't believe him. Please call and tell me you're safe.” Claire's tears multiplied as she listened, not only to her sister's words but to the fear in her voice. “He said he knows I've been talking to a disposable phone in California, and he asked if it's you. I just kept saying, I don't know where she is and that I have no other comment. Finally, I hung up on him. Can they really look into my phone records? I'll get one of those phones too. I'll call you later with the number, so even though you don't recognize it, please answer. I love you, and I really do believe all you've told me. Let me know you're safe. Bye.”

Warnings and alarms rushed through Claire's mind as time stood still. Her body involuntarily sought to run—the flight instinct; however, *that* monologue had been talked to death. Run where? She'd started a life, which meant that flight wasn't an option. Therefore, biology told her to fight. Not physically, Claire *knew* that wasn't possible. This scenario was what she'd hoped to avoid. The text messages and voicemail confirmed her fear.

Naively she'd hoped, no prayed, since she hadn't heard anything for two

weeks; maybe Tony would just let her go. It may have been fantasy, but the two week reprieve was heavenly.

Claire stood to go to her room. She would finish the article on her laptop, later.

Harry tried again, "Claire, please tell me what's happening."

"Nothing, I'm fine." She made to the hallway before Harry touched her shoulder.



THE MOMENT HIS fingers connected, Claire flinched. Straightening her spine, she spun to face him. A look of terror and panic filled her beautiful eyes. The expression shocked him. Harry expected sad or maybe mad, but what he saw was unbridled fear. It took his breath away. While an investigator for the Bureau, he'd seen that look. Without thinking, he asked, "What did he do to you?"

Her eyes muted; a haze covered the brief glimpse into her true feelings. Claire's countenance turned stoic. "Harry, I need to take a shower. Thank you for checking in on me. I'm fine, and I know you need to get to SiJo." Mustering a forced grin, she continued, "I hear your boss is getting upset about all your recent time off."

He wanted to question her. Inquisition procedures were his specialty; however, she wasn't a suspect. She was his sister's friend. No, his friend. During the past two weeks, they'd spent countless hours working as a team to put pieces of her life back together. He knew about the box of memories Anthony Rawlings had sent her, he knew she looked like a child at Christmas when she purchased a cell phone, and he knew she did *not* attempt to murder her ex-husband. Of course, that was just Claire's word, but Harry believed her.

He didn't know much about her life with Mr. Rawlings. Somehow, whenever the subject came up, she eloquently changed it. Now, the churning in his gut told him why. This petite, funny, friendly, pretty, delicate, and kind woman in front of him was hurt. Maybe, just maybe, it was only a broken heart.

It has been said people drawn to law enforcement have a sixth sense, an ability to see what others do not. Harry prayed he was wrong. His sixth sense said there was much more than a broken heart in Claire's past.

Harry pushed his questions aside. "Your right, I do need to get into the office. Are you still going to Mr. Pulvara's?"

"Yes, my appointment is at 11:00 AM. I really need to get ready."

"I'm sorry if I've overstepped some bounds. I won't push you; it's none of

my business.” The haze covering her eyes evaporated; the emerald green began to shine. Harry added, “If you need anything, you know my cell number.”

She smiled up at him and sighed. “Thanks, Harry, see you later.” She turned toward the hall, speaking over her shoulder. “Please lock the door on your way out.”



CLAIRE CLOSED THE bedroom door with the weight of her shoulders. The glossy wood felt smooth behind her head. She strained to hear the sound of the front door close and lock. The still coolness of her room filled her lungs. After enough time had passed, Claire allowed more warm tears to flow. Her trembling hand pushed the small button on her doorknob. She produced a mental checklist: security guard, locked front door, and locked bedroom door —was it enough? Suddenly chilled, Claire wrapped her arms around her torso and felt the shuddering of her chest as sobs resonated uncontrollably. After a few minutes, she blinked away the moisture, tried desperately to calm her unsteady hands, and sent Emily and Courtney a text:

“GOT YOUR MESSAGE. THANKS. I’M GOOD. CALL WHEN YOU CAN. I LOVE YOU TOO.”

Hot water pelted her upturned face as she stepped into the shower. The sensation of warmth flowed over her. Slowly, the heaviness washed away from her soul. By the time her feet hit the tile floor, her thoughts centered on the future. The past was gone. She had survived. She wasn’t the same woman Anthony Rawlings had taken three years ago.

As Claire exited the elevator with *her* cell phones in tow, she inhaled the unique scents of the parking garage. Easing herself into the leather driver’s seat of *her* car, she relished her new-found independence. Yes, life threw her some obstacles; she was stronger for them.

The GPS instructed her to turn right from the garage. The morning fog had begun to dissipate, revealing patches of pale blue sky. She turned her Honda into traffic and thought about the jewelry inside her purse. Her lips turned upward as she pondered the value and remembered Anthony’s perpetuity for appearance. This time, she hoped it would work in her favor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Light thinks it travels faster than anything, but it is wrong. No matter how fast light travels, it finds the darkness has always got there first, and is waiting for it.

—Terry Pratchett

SOPHIA WATCHED HER husband pack his suitcase. “Derek, I just got back from Florence. Can’t you stay home?”

“I told you, baby, they want to meet me face-to-face.”

Sophia sighed and smoothed the t-shirts he’d so precisely placed into the bag. It was so different from the way she packed, but then again, they were different. Some of their friends called them *Darma and Greg*. Looking at Derek’s suits, pressed shirts, and cuff links, they definitely had different styles; however, those differences brought them together and kept them united.

Her bare feet allowed her head to fit perfectly under her husband’s chin. Standing to wrap her arms around Derek’s neck, she smiled and spoke lovingly, “I know, just please hurry home.”

His light brown eyes mellowed as he stared into her tender expression. “I’ll come back as soon as the interview process is done.”

“Tell me again, who are these people, and why do they want you?”

Derek tipped his head to Sophia’s and grinned. “I’ve told you. You just don’t listen.”

Her hands wandered down the buttons of his white silk shirt. “Maybe it’s because I get distracted. I keep thinking about wanting you for myself.”

“I think you’re trying to distract me so I’ll miss my flight.”

“Oh, well, so you leave tomorrow, instead of tonight.” She nibbled his neck. “Would that be so bad?”

Punctuality was Derek’s thing, not Sophia’s. She was a free soul—an artist. Perfect for her personality, she could work, sketching and painting,

whenever the impulse hit. Sometimes, that was 3:00 AM. Often times, Derek would wake to find her covered in chalk dust, still wearing the nightgown she'd worn to bed.

Despite their differences, their love was intense, passionate, and real.



JUST SOUTH OF thirty, Sophia had given up on *happily ever after*. She'd had her share of romances, but something always seemed to intervene. Most of the time, it was her art. There were few men willing to take a backseat to a sketch pad.

If she chose to reminisce, there was one man that met her requirements. He did a great job schmoozing with investors, but he honestly preferred spending time alone with her. He understood her art, and he always said everything right; however, as time passed, their goals grew incompatible. It was as if he could see her dream, but it didn't matter. He wanted things she didn't understand. One day, he received an unbelievable job offer, requiring travel. They promised to stay in touch. The final act proved lonely.

Then unexpectedly in December of 2010, her life changed. She met Derek at a mutual friend's Christmas party. It happened so fast. In January of 2011, they married, a whirlwind elopement to Paris. Sophia shared her affection for Europe and memories of Paris while working on her Master's degree. Derek surprised her with a prearranged wedding. They exchanged vows in the park at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. Afterwards, they dined in a small French cafe with their witnesses. Derek secretly flew both of their sets of parents to Paris. It was the dream wedding she'd given up ever having.

Occasionally, her love of art and a desire for self-promotion required her to travel for art exhibitions. Personally, her art was gaining notoriety. Recently, she'd accepted an invitation to exhibit her work at the Florence Academy of Art during a three week exhibition. Although she didn't like leaving Derek, they both knew this was a remarkable offer.

And now that she was home again, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, it was Derek's turn to follow a remarkable offer. Shedis-tics, a software Fortune 500 company in Santa Clara, California, recently contacted him. The parent company, Rawlings Industries, wanted this branch of its empire to be again in the top 100. They believed Derek could help them achieve that goal.

It wasn't that he didn't already have a great job and career. He did, in Boston for a major electronics company. Everything was going so well. He was satisfied with his career, and Sophia was happy in the community she loved. That all changed when he received the phone call from a Shedis-tics representative. The contact person told Derek he came *highly recommended*.

Now he wanted more.

Truly, the offer seemed too good to be true. Unsolicited propositions rarely happen in today's economy. He was rightly cautious; however, after days of research, Derek found everything with Shedis-tics legitimate. He also reasoned the new job would allow him the ability to greater support his wife's passions. Even with notoriety, art didn't pay well. Derek loved her passion and wanted to make her every dream come true.



HIS WARM BREATH bathed her cheeks. "You know I don't like leaving." He kissed her nose. "I'm doing this for you—for us."

Sophia's gauze skirt brushed the tops of her bare feet as she purposely pressed her scooped necked t-shirt against his chest. "I love you for it, but I don't want you working yourself to death to support my art. I want it to support itself."

He encircled her trim waist. "It will, Baby. You're so talented; one day it will." His lips lingered on her pouting lips. "Someday, you can support me. Let me do it now and get you that bigger studio."

She exhaled, melting against his chest. "Please call me before you accept anything."

Derek nodded as his lips found her slender neck, brushing her dark blond waves away, and sending chills down her extremities.

"You know I won't make a decision without talking it over. We're a team, baby."

Sophia looked into his eyes, marveling at his long lashes. "I just wish our team could play on the same court more often."

Derek pulled away and glanced at his watch. "Are you driving me to the airport? Or do you want me to leave the car there?"

Sophia slipped her feet into her flat canvas shoes. "Oh, no, if you're leaving for an undetermined amount of time, you're not getting rid of me until the gate."

"Sorry, sweetie. I've got a commuter from Provincetown to Boston, so no two hour drive in your future."

Sophia pouted again. "So I have to give you up sooner rather than later? Well, you aren't parking there either. I'll see you all the way to the tarmac."

Provincetown had its distinct advantages: first and foremost its reputation in the world of art, also, its small population, close to 3,000—until tourist season. During prime summer months, it's estimated there were as many as 60,000 people in their small town. Each one a potential art buyer. The free-spirited world of the Cape fit Sophia perfectly.

The greatest disadvantage was its proximity to the rest of the world. Out on the tip of Massachusetts, transportation took time. Being late March, the cold wind and ocean spray off the Atlantic could make Highway 6 potentially dangerous.

Derek flew the private commuters daily to his office in Boston. To him, the thirty minute flight was as common as riding the *T* in Boston. He counted it a small price to be with Sophia in the community she loved.



SETTLING BACK INTO the living room of their cottage, Sophia debated a fire in their fireplace. Spring weather on the Cape changed without warning. Yesterday, it was in the sixties; today, with overcast skies and strong ocean winds, it would be fortunate to reach fifty. Sophia settled onto the soft sofa and curled her long legs under her body as her skirt swept the wooded floor.

Sighing, she thought lovingly about their home, a quaint cottage built in 1870. Many amenities had been added since the original structure: a modern eat-in kitchen and two full baths. Sophia loved the clawed tub in the first floor bath. The wooden floors, trim, and built-in bookshelves were original. The second floor held two bedrooms that were perfect for Derek's home office and Sophia's home art studio.

Sipping warm Jasmine tea, she contemplated Derek's job offer. How often does a company like Shedis-tics seek out a potential employee? It was truly a great opportunity, and he always supported her opportunities.

Along with notoriety, her art provided some financial profits. Occasionally, pieces sold, and she enjoyed a cult following of buyers, people who required sporadic pacification with fancy dresses, champagne, and exhibits. She'd even been commissioned for a few specific pieces. A large portrait of a woman in her wedding gown had the greatest payoff. The anonymous buyer required her to sign a letter of confidentiality. She couldn't even sign the painting. Sophia recognized the woman from magazines—the wife of a businessman.

Her work had become bolder since she'd married Derek. His love and support strengthened her to try what she'd previously felt too risky. That same love provided her with stability. Over the years, her parents worked desperately to help and support her, but they were getting older, and she'd been a financial burden too long. Nonetheless, Sophia knew she wouldn't have her small studio on Commercial Street if it weren't for them. She longed to prove she could make it on *her own* with her art, even if *on her own* meant *with her husband*.

Finishing her tea, Sophia reached a decision. If Derek needed to move to

California, she'd move too. Their cottage and her studio would sell. Being together was more important than living her dream.

From her upstairs studio, Sophia looked south, out to the bay. The waves blended into the overcast sky. She pulled out her stool near her drawing table and found the note:

***I love you. If you found this, you're doing what I love seeing you do...
Create me something special. I miss you already, but I'll be home soon!***

Sophia smiled as the East Coast chill evaporated, and she filled with the aura of warmth. Turning on her laptop, Sophia reasoned she couldn't slip a note into his suitcase, but she could send a quick email. He would receive it on his phone when he landed.

As her fingers hit the last exclamation mark, she remembered the publicity photos of her Florence exhibition. Clicking through the different shots, she saw the pictures in their entirety. She didn't scan the crowds, didn't enlarge the masses. If she had, then she would have noticed a recurring face. In most shots, only the gentleman's dark hair was visible; however, his dark eyes were visible in a few. A profiler might notice those black eyes watched Sophia, not her art.

Securing her sketch paper to her table, Sophia closed her eyes and envisioned her subject. The charcoal darkened her fingertips as it brushed the surface of the thick cotton paper. In time, the heel of her hand blackened, rubbing and shading the image. It wasn't a drawing for future exhibits. Never would it glean the walls of a studio. This self-portrait was meant for one man. The shades of charcoal gray transformed the blank page into a dreamlike scene, creating Derek's *something special*.

The hair Sophia drew blew gently in the ocean breeze. Though the windows were shut, she felt the wind on her cheeks and smelled the salty air. The body she drew was presumably better than the one she concealed under her t-shirt and skirt, but not by much. She was slender, yet shapely. Her long legs often spent hours walking the beach or nature walks around Provincetown. Drawing her own breasts, Sophia's thoughts filled with her husband, and her nipples rose under the cotton shirt. Smirking, she drew the same reaction. Sophia reasoned: if I were to walk naked on the beach then it would be cold.

Dinner forgotten, the sound of her cell phone pulled her from her artistic trance. Beaming as her darkened hand reached for the small device, she read

Derek's number and name. "Hello, honey."

"Hi, baby, did I wake you?"

Sophia laughed. "What do you think? I'm working on your *something special*."

Their call lasted only minutes. Shedis-tics had a car waiting to drive him to the hotel.

"They're pulling out all the big guns. I really think they want you," Sophia said.

"We'll see what they say."

"Derek?"

"Yes?"

"I know we haven't talked about it, but I know this may mean moving. I just want you to know that I don't care as long as I'm with you." Sophia heard her husband exhale.

"You don't know how much that means. I won't do anything without calling, I promise. I need to go. I love you, and I can't wait to see my *something special*."

"I love you, too." They hung up.

CHAPTER FIVE

Things do not change. We change.

—Henry David Thoreau

PHILLIP ROACH, PRIVATE Investigator, contemplated his information; by triangulating cell phone towers near a Palo Alto, California street, he narrowed the origination of calls from a disposable cell phone making multiple calls to Emily Vandersol, Claire Nichols' sister. The area contained restaurants, cafés, and residences; Phil didn't know for sure it was Claire Nichols or if she called from one of the businesses or a residence. Nonetheless, his intuition told him that he was close.

Phillip had useful associates possessing resources he didn't. Undoubtedly, he'd be asked to fulfill favors in the future—*Quid pro quo*. It was the way of his profession. With a client like Anthony Rawlings, there was no deal Phil wasn't willing to make. Hell, he'd shake hands with the devil to continue this alliance.

Forwarding the telephone number of the track phone and narrowing Ms. Nichols location to Palo Alto would momentarily pacify Mr. Rawlings. Phil composed his findings into a text message and promised more information in the future. He hit *SEND*.



CLAIRE'S GPS DIRECTED her to the heart of San Francisco's financial district. Although the tall buildings and steep streets created a maze, the computerized voice navigated her to the 200 block of California Street. "You have reached your destination."

Goosebumps incited by the late March wind, rubbed against her smooth

silk blouse as Claire walked from the parking garage toward her goal. Just south of Chinatown, the streets bustled with patrons, yet it wasn't the people which momentarily held her attention; it was the picturesque scene. Down from the hills, a thick white blanket of fog covered the bay, penetrated only by the pillars of the Golden Gate Bridge. Since her release from prison, every view and every scene held wonder and awe. Claire vowed never again to take freedom for granted.

Over the last two weeks, she'd contemplated her presence. Although seemingly unimportant, one question she'd pondered was her clothing style. Her attire before her life with Tony and during were worlds apart. Shopping for herself, her desires, wants, needs, and choices proved more difficult than she'd anticipated. Eventually, she concluded her taste fell somewhere in between. Shopping alone and with her money brought back the elation of finding great deals. Now, she enjoyed *Mrs. Rawlings* quality clothing at reasonable prices. She even perused sales racks. There was no question; intimate apparel was her favorite purchase. Claire now owned more pretty panty and bra combinations than any woman should own. She justified it as overdue, well-deserved, and three years' worth.

Today, personifying the professional, Claire donned wool slacks, a silk blouse, a complementary jacket, and heels with white lace panties and bra that no one would see—but made her happy.

Although the suite number was the only outward sign, Mr. Pulvara's office was easy to find. Claire double-checked Harry's note; yes, this was the right one. Once inside, she entered a small waiting area with a receptionist behind a glassed partition. It reminded her of a doctor's office. She confidently approached the gray-haired woman behind the window.

"Hello, my name is Claire Nichols. I have an 11:00 AM appointment with Mr. Pulvara."

"Yes, Ms. Nichols. May I see your identification?" Claire retrieved her new driver's license and handed it to the woman.

The receptionist took the small card, made a copy of both sides, and returned it to Claire. "Mr. Pulvara will be with you in just a moment. Please have a seat."

The soft leather chairs were neatly arranged in an L-shape in the corner of the room. The incandescent lighting created a soft appearance. To pass the time, Claire removed her iPhone and pulled up the article from earlier that morning. She scanned the article:

...The pardon was legally granted on behalf of Ms. Nichols...Unable to overturn once accepted... Question remains; why was her name concealed by

the governor?...Governor Preston intends to avoid the perception of impropriety...cannot be overturned...complete history of arrest through incarceration expunged...could not reach Ms. Nichols for comment...

“Ms. Nichols.” The voice returned Claire to the present. She hadn’t considered the pardon being overturned. She sighed, relieved that wasn’t a possibility. “Ms. Nichols?”

“Yes,” Claire said, as she followed the woman through a solid door. Once behind the partition, she was amazed at the room before her. There were lights, magnifying glasses, scales, and other instruments designed to inspect small, delicate items. A gentleman on the other side of the counter stood her height with skin the color of lightly creamed coffee. Special glasses with extended magnifiers hung from his neck. His voice contained a Middle Eastern accent and exemplified aptitude. His smile as he extended his hand in greeting, reassuring her. Claire accepted his hand and introduced herself.

Mr. Pulvara wasn’t one for small talk. Time was money, and Claire currently had his time. She pulled a small blue velvet bag from her purse and removed the watch, diamond stud earrings, and journey necklace. Placing his glasses upon his nose, Mr. Pulvara remained expressionless as he inspected her jewelry. His skilled hands rolled each piece between his fingers as he studied the gems and gold. After a few minutes with each piece, he set it upon a black cloth.

“Ms. Nichols, these are fine pieces. Do you have anything else in that bag of yours?”

“I do.” Claire emptied the bag into the palm of her hand. She extended her open hand with her engagement and wedding ring glistening under the lights.

He glanced from her palm to her eyes. First, he picked up the platinum wedding band embedded with diamonds. After a few minutes, he set it down and took the platinum engagement ring. Without speaking, he turned the diamond ring every which way. He then used a few gauges to measure the face of the gem. Finally, he broke the silence. “Ms. Nichols, do you know from what merchant these rings were purchased?”

“I was told Tiffany’s in New York. I wasn’t there, so I’m not sure.”

“I’m assuming you have a receipt or insurance policy, something indicating you are the owner of these pieces?”

“I do not. They were gifts.”

“Perhaps you could contact the giver of these gifts? You understand I must be sure these items truly belong to you.”

“Mr. Pulvara, these items were given to me by my ex-husband. I have no plans to contact him. If you aren’t interested in purchasing them then I will

gladly look elsewhere. Thank you for your time.” Claire began to reach for her jewelry.

The broker gently touched the top of Claire’s hand, stopping her movement. She looked up to his face. He said, “I am very interested. It’s just—I believe this wedding set is of the highest quality and quite valuable. The cut alone is extremely rare. I must be sure—”

She cut him off. “I have no proof of my ownership. I’ll take them—”

“Ms. Nichols, may I ask Mr. Nichols’s first name?”

Claire hesitated. “Mr. Pulvara, am I certain of your confidentiality?”

“Of course, I would not have the customers and reputation I currently enjoy without complete confidentiality.”

“Forgive me, but I would like that in writing. I don’t want to see on tomorrow’s news that I sold my wedding rings.” She recognized such information could make headlines.

“That can certainly be arranged. Now, Mr. Nichols?”

“Nichols is my maiden name. My married name was Rawlings, as in Mrs. Anthony Rawlings.”

The broker stood silently for a few seconds, taking in her words and looking at her anew. Claire watched as the light of recognition filled his eyes. “Ms. Nichols, you’ve changed your hair since your wedding. I saw a picture today...”

“Yes, Mr. Pulvara, many things have changed since my wedding, including my desire to wear these rings. Are you interested in assessing their value and sharing that amount with me?”

“Please, Ms. Nichols, have a seat and allow me some time. May I remove the stones from the settings?”

“If I don’t like your price, will you put them back?”

“Of course.”

Claire saw chairs against the wall. She nodded to the broker, sat, and watched as he weighed, measured, and performed other tests. Then, he consulted his computer and made notes. Claire remembered *Vanity Fair* estimated the value of her engagement ring around 400 thousand dollars. She honestly had no idea if that was accurate or sensationalism. If it were accurate then it would make one bit of information in that article factual.

Almost forty minutes later, Mr. Pulvara finally spoke, “Ms. Nichols, if you would please join me, I’ll explain my appraisal.”



CLAIRE STEPPED FROM the bank onto the sunshine warmed afternoon sidewalk. The multitude of people filled her with exhilaration. She’d just met

with the bank's investment specialist and diversified her new found riches. Employment was still desired; however, the need was no longer dire. Tony's desire for quality and appearance now allowed Claire time. It was the time she would use to complete her research.

Before entering the parking garage, Claire removed her iPhone, checked the time, 4:32 PM, and typed a text:

"IS ANYONE AVAILABLE TO CELEBRATE? DINNER'S ON ME!"

She entered Amber and Harry as recipients and hit: *SEND*.

A few hours later, the three sat chatting at an authentic Brazilian steakhouse in the heart of downtown Palo Alto. Neither Amber nor Harry argued with Claire's declaration to purchase dinner. They ordered wine, read the menu, and debated appetizers and entrees. Although they were surrounded by other patrons, the three talked and laughed about their day's activities. Their goblets touched in a toast to Claire's transaction.

Amber entertained them with multiple stories of SiJo focus groups. Apparently, a recent group had extreme varied opinions on one of their newest games. It amused Claire how Amber could laugh about negative reviews and joke about comments. That wasn't to say the creators didn't consider the opinions of the focus groups. They did.

As their celebration concluded and Claire added cream to her coffee, her disposable cell phone buzzed. Pulling it from her purse, she apologized, "I'm so sorry, but this is probably Emily. She said she's getting a new phone, so I need to answer it." Her chair scooted back as she hit the *CALL* button. She hadn't noticed the number on the screen as she said, "Hi."

Claire intended to move to a hall or outside to speak, but the voice in her ear caused her knees to buckle and her face to blanch. She recognized it immediately.

"Good evening, Claire."

She collapsed into her chair. Both Amber and Harry watched in horror. "Are you all right?" they asked in unison.

Claire managed to shake her head. *No*, she wasn't all right. She still hadn't spoken.

The husky, deep, and baritone voice coming through the ear piece did. "Now Claire, we've been through this before. It is customary for one person to respond to the greeting of another. I said, good evening."

"Hello," she managed, finding her voice. It was difficult to allow her voice to exit while keeping her food down.

"Very good. I thought perhaps we would need to review common pleasantries." Tony's voice was smooth, strong, and domineering. She closed her eyes and saw him, looming near the fireplace in her suite. It wasn't the Tony Rawlings she married. Her vision was of Anthony Rawlings—her captor. The time and place continuum shattered. She was no longer with her

friends in a bustling restaurant; she was three years in the past. Visions played like Tony's surveillance videos behind her closed lids as her body trembled.

Forcing her eyes to open, she searched for her friends. She fought to inhale as she sought desperately through a dense fog. Faceless people spoke. Their voices were a background din to the deep voice in her ear. Her head shook in response to her ex-husband's comment. The movement was so slight that without the movement of her hair, it would have been unperceivable. Conversely, inside she shook vehemently. No, I can talk, review isn't necessary.

Swallowing the overwhelming mixture of emotions and food fighting the natural peristalsis, she summoned a stronger voice. "Goodbye, Tony."

"Claire, you should know that I learned of your release less than twenty-four hours ago. As you can hear, I already have your telephone number. How long do you think it will take for me to learn your location?"

Sitting straight and squaring her shoulders, she found strength. It was a strength she'd always possessed, but in the past, it was used to keep Tony pacified. Today, she used it to declare her thoughts. With each word, her voice gained resilience, "It seems you have lost the ability to perceive meaning. Goodbye means this conversation is over. For the record, that includes future conversations. I'm sure you remember, once a discussion is closed, reopening it is not an option."

The response came in the form of a laugh, a deep, resonating laugh, and then words, "I have always admired your strength. Such a brave speech from someone hiding across the country..." Claire didn't hear any more. She removed the phone from her ear and hit *END*. The fog of isolation lifted; she saw the saucer-sized eyes of her concerned friends.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll be in the restroom." Claire stood. "If you see the waiter, I believe I'm ready to leave." She walked away from the table before her friends could voice questions. Halfway to the bathroom, the trembling resumed and tears escaped her eyes. Nevertheless, not until she was inside the stall did she allow herself to take a ragged breath. Unintentionally, an audible sob seeped from her chest.

Again her purse vibrated. She needed to look; it could be Emily. The screen read *Blocked Call*. It stood to reason, if Emily were getting her own *disposable* phone, a blocked number wouldn't be necessary. Claire hit *IGNORE*. Thirty seconds later the symbol indicating a text message appeared. Hesitantly, she opened it.

"ONLY I CLOSE DISCUSSIONS. THIS ONE IS STILL OPEN. I LOOK FORWARD TO RESUMING IT IN PERSON..."

CHAPTER SIX

I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we'll never know most of them. But even if we don't have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there.

—Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

A

NTON MADE HIS way to the lower level of his family's estate. The scene he just witnessed between his father and grandfather ran in a continual loop through his mind. With each step toward the entertainment center of the mansion, he desperately tried to forget his family and think about life back at Blair Academy. More than anything, he wanted to be back on the campus of his boarding school, away from the charade he called family.

It wasn't like he had many good friends at Blair. It would be easier if he were part of a group, or if he participated in extracurricular activities. Heaven knows his stature benefited him in the area of sports. He continued to grow taller and broader each year. Anton enjoyed intramural lacrosse and basketball. The coaches watched his obvious talent and asked him repeatedly to join one of the Blair sports teams. Though his refusal met animosity from fellow students, little did they realize, it wasn't his choice. The other boys thought he was too *stuck-up* to participate. The truth was that his grandfather forbid participation. Of course, Anton didn't admit that to anyone. If he did then it would show others he wasn't allowed to make his own decisions. That wasn't something Anton was willing to reveal. Go ahead, think Anton Rawls was a jerk; he didn't care. He would make the only man whose opinion mattered proud. Besides, he would show those other boys one day.

His grandfather, Nathaniel, never experienced the benefits of a private education. He wasn't able to offer that luxury to his own son. Now, he expected his only grandson to reap the benefits that only money could buy. Nathaniel expected Anton to succeed. To Nathaniel, academics should be

Anton's only focus. Therefore, it was.

Well, except for Anton's pastime of following his family's company. Anton may only be fifteen, but he could read financial reports, follow the NASDAQ, and follow the Dow Jones. He understood investments, and he could dissect quarterly reports. He never discussed this with anyone. His father treated him like a child and thus would never take Anton's thoughts seriously. His grandfather was too busy to discuss business with a fifteen-year-old. Anton yearned for the day when he was the one on the other side of the desk, discussing profits and losses with his grandfather. Someday, Anton knew that Nathaniel would see him as his greatest asset.

Enduring his fellow students' snide comments was better than listening to his father and grandfather's argument. When Anton was Nathaniel's top advisor, he fantasized they wouldn't argue; they would work together, conspire, and collaborate to make Rawls Corporation the greatest business America ever saw. Exxon, General Motors, and Mobil wouldn't hold a candle to the possibilities of Rawls with Nathaniel and Anton at the helm.

Just before reaching the entertainment center of the house, Anton turned the corner to meet his grandmother. "Anton, where are you headed in such a hurry?"

"Grandmother, I didn't mean to be going so fast. I guess I'm just thinking about other things."

"Of course you are. You're a growing young man, and you probably have a lot of things on your mind; perhaps a young woman?" Anton didn't reply. Sharron continued, "Are you planning on watching television downstairs?"

"Yes, it's the final season of *Hawaii Five-O*. I didn't want to miss the show."

"Oh, I've heard of that show. May I watch it with you?"

Anton feigned a smile; of course he wouldn't tell her *no*, even though he didn't want her there. Not because he didn't love his grandmother, but because she'd talk throughout the entire program. He much preferred quiet. Nonetheless, he responded, "Sure, come on down."

Sharron followed her grandson toward the seldom used television room. Once they reached their destination, Anton turned on the large television, and Sharron settled onto the soft sofa. It was then, she asked, "Nathaniel, what is it we're watching?"

Anton exhaled and turned to his grandmother. "We're watching *Hawaii Five-O*, and I'm Anton."

She smiled lovingly at her grandson, her expression a combination of love and confusion. Slowly, the clouds passed from her gaze, and she stared directly at his deep brown eyes. "Yes, *Hawaii Five-O*, and of course Anton, why would you tell me your name? You're the light of our lives."

He smiled. It wasn't a smile of happiness. It was his way to pacify her and

avoid her long-winded reasoning. He'd heard it before. She could talk her way out of any misstep. Actually, for as long as he could remember, she'd been doing that: saying something totally off-base, or doing something weird and justifying it, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Halfway through the episode, Anton gave up on hearing the actors speak. "Grandmother, I just remembered my mother wants me upstairs. I think I should go up there."

She smiled. "Yes, of course. Please give Margarete my love."

He walked to the television and turned off the set. It wasn't worth the correction or explanation. Margarete was his great-grandmother, Nathaniel's mother. Dying before Anton's birth, she was someone he'd never met. "I will, Grandmother. I'm sure she feels the same."

His grandmother snickered. "We both know that isn't true, but please tell her anyway."

"I will."

Anton wondered if his grandmother was talking about her relationship with her mother-in-law or her daughter-in-law. He didn't wonder enough to question. The answer would take longer than he was willing to commit. Besides, Anton knew from experience; by the end of the conversation, his question could easily remain unanswered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

“I DON’T THINK it’s a good idea.” Courtney’s apprehension came through Claire’s newest disposable cell phone. It was her second *pay-as-you-go* phone. Only Emily and Courtney had this number, and Emily had a new similar phone that she used to communicate. Of course, Courtney would also only call with a *pay-as-you-go* phone, and yes, she had a new one too. None of these numbers could be traced back to the number Tony knew.

“If you won’t give it to me then I’ll get it some other way.” Claire’s voice rang strong and resolute.

After Claire collected herself from her meltdown in the bathroom stall the night before, she decided to meet her problem head-on. Her problem: her ex-husband, Anthony Rawlings.

“Seriously, Courtney, don’t you understand? I’m not going to live my life running. I won’t let him have that control. If I flee every time he’s near then he wins. I’m making a life out here, and I want to live it.”



COURTNEY SAT IN her kitchen and stared into her backyard. The Iowa spring was struggling to break through the gray veil of winter. Patches of ice and snow speckled the pale remnants of lawn. In another month, the grass would begin to green and life would renew. Courtney contemplated her friend; didn’t Claire deserve the same chance? “Claire, how will having his private number

help that?"

"Because he thinks he can call and disrupt my life. The only way to stop him is to turn the tables. I need to have equal opportunity to initiate contact."

"I guess I understand, but don't you think he'll wonder how you got it? I mean—it's blocked. I know you know that."

"I do, but I've seen his contact list; it has lots of people. He isn't as isolated as he thinks. It just takes one of those many people."

Courtney continued to watch the scene outside of her window. Near her elbows on her table sat a list of Saturday afternoon activities. Julia, her future daughter-in-law, would be over soon, and they had many things to accomplish before the quickly approaching wedding. Next to her half-full mug of coffee was her list of proposed guests. She glanced at the list of rehearsal dinner locations and caterers. They had appointments with three of them this afternoon.

Their son, Caleb, recently started his own investment company in a Chicago suburb. It was the only plausible reason he would leave Tony's employment. Luckily, Caleb was convincing when explaining to Tony his desire to—*make it on his own*. Being an entrepreneur himself, Tony actually encouraged Caleb's independent spirit. This scenario also gave credence to the removal of some of Brent and Courtney's Rawlings stock options. They wanted their capital to help finance their son's endeavors. Courtney's thoughts kept her from responding.

Claire's disappointment was audible. "I understand. I really do. If you can't help me then I'll find someone else—"

"No, I will. Let me get my other phone; it's programmed in there."

Claire quickly replied, "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

Courtney was so caught up in her conversation and thoughts she didn't hear the doorbell or her husband's voice, until he and Tony reached the kitchen. Desperately trying to mask her sudden anxiety, Courtney had no doubt that even fifteen hundred miles away, Claire would recognize the voices.

Brent spoke first, "Look who stopped by."

"Hello, Courtney, I apologize for the intrusion. I was on my way home and needed to talk to your husband for a few minutes." His deep voice contained its usual friendly tone he used with Courtney.

She covered the phone with her hand and smiled her brightest smile. "Oh, Tony, it's so nice to see you." Courtney stood to give him a customary hello hug, and she hoped he wouldn't notice her accelerated heartbeat. "I'm just trying to finalize some wedding plans. If you two will excuse me, it'll just take another minute." The two men nodded seeing all the papers on the table. Brent's eyes met hers as he noticed Courtney's small black phone, not her usual BlackBerry.

Casually, he opened the refrigerator, handed Tony a bottle of water, and said, "Come on, Tony, let's go to my office. Believe me, you don't want to be in her way when there are wedding plans to finalize."

Tony laughed. "That's fine. This will only take a few minutes." Turning back to Courtney, he said, "It's nice to see you."

She nodded toward the men as they left the kitchen. Courtney grabbed her BlackBerry and stepped through an archway to the sunroom, increasing the distance from her husband's office. "Shit!" she whispered into the small telephone.

"Oh God, Courtney, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. Let me get you the number. Just please wait until he leaves before you call."

"I will. Honestly, I'm not sure when I'll call. I just want to know I can."

Momentarily, Courtney smiled as she scrolled her contacts. Looking toward the archway and back toward the kitchen, she quietly gave Claire the ten requested digits; then she added, "I hope you know, I truly hate him for what he did to you."

Claire nodded. "Thank you, but you've been his friend for a long time. I appreciate your help, but I understand—"

"No, you don't!"



COURTNEY'S TONE SURPRISED Claire. Anger? Fervor? She wasn't sure she'd ever heard such vehemence in Courtney's voice. "Perhaps I don't." Maybe she'd pushed Courtney's allegiance too far by requesting Tony's number. "I'd better go. Thank you again."

"Claire?" Courtney asked in a hushed tone. "I'd like to see you. I need to be honest with you about what I know and how I feel. It would be better in person."

Emotions swirled. Claire wanted to see her friend, yet part of her wondered, *is she truly my friend?* Hearing Tony's voice so casual in her kitchen, she wondered, *could this request be a trap?* And *know?* What could Courtney possibly *know?* Claire lied to her, just like she'd lied to everyone else. Was the tone Claire heard directed at her or about Tony?

Claire reminded herself Courtney was the only person to go out of her way to communicate with her while she was in prison. She was one of the few people to offer support. Claire replied, "I'd like that too. First, why don't you concentrate on your company? We'll work out details later."

Courtney nodded. "You're right about time. We've known him a long time; however, sometimes you know someone, but you still don't *truly* know

them. Other times, you learn the truth right away.” She paused, but Claire didn’t respond, so Courtney continued, “I hope we can work it out to get together. We’ll talk later.”



CLAIRE REPLIED, AND the line went dead. Courtney placed the small black slender phone in the pocket of her jeans and wiped her eyes. Squaring her shoulders, she walked back to the kitchen with her BlackBerry. Julia would be over soon; they had a busy afternoon ahead.



CLAIRE STARED AT the number on the notepad. There it was. Now, he wouldn’t be the only one able to initiate contact. She added the number to the cell phone Tony called the night before. Claire shook her head. There were three cell phones lined-up before her. All she wanted was *one*; now, she had three!

Courtney wasn’t the only person opposed to the idea of Claire calling Tony. Harry also thought it was a bad idea. Surprisingly, Amber understood Claire’s reasoning. Harry replied with the analogy of poking a beehive with a stick.

Claire finally smiled and explained, “My dad had a friend who raised bees. We used to go and help him extract honey—fun, but scary. The bees would buzz all around his garage as we worked inside, getting the honey out of the combs.”

Harry and Amber listened, probably thinking the bee analogy was meant metaphorically. Claire continued, “When I was little, I was afraid to help. After all, the bees were really mad. You can’t blame them. We’re taking their honey. I remember asking dad’s friend how he got the combs out of the beehives without getting stung. He showed me this funky hat with netting, a thick material suit, gloves, and boots... you know, the whole bee garb?” The other two nodded. “So, don’t you get it?”

Claire watched, waiting to see some realization in her friends’ eyes. When she didn’t see it, she answered her own question. “I promise not to poke the stick in the hive until I’m sure my outfit is foolproof. I don’t intend to be stung—again.” Claire was sure she saw sparks of admiration in her friends’ eyes.

Now that she had Tony’s number, Claire needed to work on her beekeeper’s outfit. Until last night, she wasn’t sure what she’d do. California

was turning out better than she ever imagined. Honestly, she'd hoped maybe she could start a new life and forget the last three years, but then, the whole paradigm changed; Tony called.

Claire knew in the pit of her stomach, depths of her soul, it would never be over. Tony shared in his *box* that he'd been watching her since at least the time of her parent's death. Actually, she wondered *if* it were true that he'd purposely lured Simon away with the job offer, then he'd been watching her since her freshman year of college. The idea sent a cold shiver down her spine.

Yes, Anthony Rawlings was the one who callously threw her away—left her to be incarcerated for a crime that she never committed; however, she'd thought about his offer multiple times. Before she pleaded *no contest* to the charges, he offered her another *out*. He offered her the option to plead *insanity*. He even had an institution ready to take her in as a patient. *If* she'd accepted his offer then he'd still to this day, possibly forever, be in control of her life. Somehow, Claire believed Tony expected her to take his offer.

The realization made her grin. Without trying, she'd defied his plans. Feeling a small amount of pride, Claire grasped the unusual feeling. If she could defy Anthony Rawlings out of instinct, instead of intention and survive, then it seemed if she put her mind to it the possibilities were limitless.

Tony would never allow her to exist away from him. Somehow, she needed to remove his power. Hiding from the sound of his voice only strengthened it. Therefore, the opposite would weaken it.

Last night, after returning to the table at the restaurant, Claire announced to her friends that she was ready to continue the work on their quest. She currently had the time, and thanks to Tony, the money. She would accept help, but without a doubt, Tony's phone call cemented her resolve. Mr. Anthony Rawlings had a lesson to learn, and this time Claire claimed the role as teacher.

Amber and Harry saw her red-blotched face, yet instead of pity or even acknowledgement of her current condition, both friends smiled. Amber got up and hugged Claire. "I hope you know you have my full support and any help I can provide."

"If you two scorned ladies will allow, I would like to be involved in this quest." With that, Harry encircled both women in his arms. Their group hug lasted only seconds, but the common goal and support energized Claire beyond any depletion from the phone call.

This morning, she woke with new purpose. Her phone call with Courtney didn't diminish that purpose; it increased it.

As she dressed for her day, Claire marveled at hearing her ex-husband's voice again. Twice in two days! Hearing him speak to Courtney, sounding casual and friendly, Claire remembered a time when she worked diligently to

keep that tone in his voice. It was refreshing to not concentrate on *his* feelings, but that of her own.

Claire smiled at herself in the mirror. She liked her chestnut brown hair, jeans, and tennis shoes. She liked wearing very little make-up. From now on, *her* concerns were going to be *her* focus!

She'd spent the last fourteen months grasping at straws of self-worth. It was a difficult process, especially while in a federal penitentiary. There were times she wondered if living was worth the effort. Today, she knew it was.

His voice, through her phone, divulged more to her than merely words. Tony had once said she knew him better than anyone. In the pit of her stomach she knew he would seek to find her, and beyond a shadow of a doubt, he'd succeed. Anthony Rawlings rarely, if ever, failed.

This reality fueled her need to suddenly become visible. Her original plan of anonymity was to avoid him. She failed. Being invisible would make her an easy target, no matter his intention. The more visible Claire Nichols was to the world, the harder it'd be to remove her. This, hopefully not too late realization, made her cheeks rise, and a smile radiate beyond her lips to her green eyes.

Honestly, the prospect of seeing him, talking to him, and being near him frightened her. The fear didn't just stem from *his* possible actions—but hers. Claire knew she couldn't predict her own actions, emotions, or responses when the time came to meet him face-to-face. Despite their history, Tony had the ability to manipulate her thoughts and beliefs. Her personal pep talks were all well and good while he remained at large; however, when push came to shove, Claire couldn't honestly predict her own response.

She reminded herself, unlike three years ago, she now knew the rules and boundaries to *his* game. Rule number one, there were no boundaries. Anthony Rawlings was capable of anything, and he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted, yet even Superman couldn't overcome kryptonite. Catherine once told Claire that she had the *rare opportunity* to know Anthony Rawlings as few do. Claire knew his intimate beliefs and knew his kryptonite: appearances!

She also knew without a doubt that he'd be in California. It may be days, weeks, or hell, only hours, but he would step foot on the West Coast. It would happen. Claire needed to be ready, her beekeeper suit intact.

She sat on the tall stool in the kitchen, her laptop open and began to *ego surf*. Before she could change the perception the world possessed of her, she needed to know what that perception held. The results were nauseating.

Entering 'CLAIRE NICHOLS RAWLINGS' into the Google search engine landed her over fifty thousand hits! She began to click and read. Yes, there was factual information: born October 17, 1985, to Jordon and Shirley Nichols. One sister, Emily Nichols Vanderson, married to John Vanderson.

Claire graduated from Hamilton Heights High School in Fishers, Indiana, and obtained a Bachelor's Degree in meteorology from Valparaiso University. She completed a one year internship in Albany, New York, and then worked for WKPZ as a meteorologist assistant in Atlanta, Georgia. After WKPZ was bought, she worked at the Red Wing, a restaurant in Atlanta, until 2010. It's at that point the history of her life becomes mostly conjecture.

One of the few facts: on December 18, 2010, she married Anthony Rawlings. Claire had read the information before about her being a *gold digger*; however, the ferocity of the newly found articles surprised her. It was as if some of these reporters were truly hell-bent on righting the wrongs done to *Anthony Rawlings*.

Claire scrolled numerous articles which made her every sin public knowledge. She read about her changing hair color and shopping habits. There were accurate and inaccurate reports of travels. Thinking that perhaps this was a journey she shouldn't have taken, she clicked and discovered an unlikely ally—a redeemer of her reputation. The article appeared in *Rolling Stone*, February 2012, following her arrest, prior to her plea. It was entitled, *Mrs. Rawlings, No longer a Mystery—But Seriously a Killer?* by Meredith Banks. The article discussed Claire Nichols, the real person, student, sorority sister, daughter: grieving the loss of her parents following their tragic deaths, intern, meteorologist assistant in Atlanta, and bartender. It went on to discuss the impromptu meeting in Chicago, and the unlikelihood of Claire Nichols attempting to murder her husband. Meredith mentioned Claire's hesitation to discuss her future husband.

Hesitation?! I didn't discuss him!

Meredith also discussed the obvious: with as much money as Anthony Rawlings possessed, why would Claire want to kill him? She used the travel, shopping, and pampering spas as evidence. Why would Claire want to kill the handsome, generous husband who showered her with luxuries? She had access to all the money she wanted, and Anthony was making more. Meredith concluded that killing him made no sense.

Claire couldn't help but see the irony, the first and perhaps only, positive and accurate article was written by the same woman who wrote the article eighteen months earlier which almost cost Claire her life!

Claire opened another page on her laptop and Googled 'MEREDITH BANKS', independent correspondent based out of Long Beach, California. The website contained her email and phone number. After a quick check of Google Maps, Claire learned Long Beach was a six and a half hour drive from her current location. She pondered that information. With Tony's current state of mind, perhaps a four hundred mile drive wasn't a bad plan.

Claire considered her new option; she could contact Meredith, and she could promise an exclusive interview, but what was she willing to reveal? If

she couldn't look Amber and Harry in the eye and talk about her life as Mrs. Rawlings, was she ready to do it with Meredith?

Off the dining room were two sets of sliding glass doors leading to a courtyard with a small outdoor sitting area and hot tub. Claire eased her way out into the yard and into a chair. Holding her mug of warm French Vanilla latte, she looked up toward the sky. The clouds had parted, revealing patches of blue. She knew the entire disclosure process needed to be well thought-out. Claire reminded herself not to act impulsively or without forethought. Perhaps, as stunning as it seemed, Meredith may be the answer she'd been seeking, yet before she attempted to make contact, Claire needed to be sure of what she intended to share. Her article years ago with *Vanity Fair* taught her that every question must be thoroughly reviewed and dissected. Each impromptu answer must go through the same scrutiny.

If she planned on informing the world of the *truth*, she needed to be sure it came across the way she intended. The question looming in Claire's mind: could she trust Meredith Banks to write that article? Claire truly didn't know the answer.

White filmy wisps of condensation moved ever so gently across the sky as beams of sunshine continued to win their battle. Tilting her face toward the sun, Claire closed her eyes and inhaled the fresh spring air. The warm rays and warm coffee reminded Claire that no matter her decision, the reality remained, it was *her* decision.

Suddenly, an old question resurfaced: How did he do it? How did he make her disappear, without anyone questioning her sudden departure? This information seemed incredibly important. She needed to be sure that history would not repeat itself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Every journey into the past is complicated by delusions, false memories, false naming of real events.

—Adrienne Rich

C LAIRE GRIPPED THE phone tighter. “What texts and emails are you talking about?”

“It must’ve been in March, if I remember correctly. March of the year you left Atlanta.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, Emily. Tony took me away in March, March 17, 2010, and I was at his house on the 20th. I never sent emails or texts.”

“Yes, you did. You sent out emails about a new job possibility. They said how excited you were about it.” Although Emily couldn’t see, Claire shook her head. “Actually, you also sent out emails via Facebook. I remember thinking that you must really be excited.”

“I never sent those. Did you respond?”

“I did, and you replied; then about a week later, you sent a text saying you’re getting a new phone number and would call. As you know, you didn’t call for months, and your old number no longer worked.”

Claire pondered this new information. “I wonder if messages went out to other people?”

“I know John received the same emails and texts. You know, like you did a mass send? And when we didn’t hear from you again for a while, I called your apartment complex. They said you’d moved out and paid to break the lease. They also said something about a new job opportunity, but they couldn’t remember any details.”

“Why didn’t you ever mention this?”

At first, Emily remained silent. When she spoke, it was with a recent recurring sharpness to her tone, “And when do you suppose I should’ve done

that? Maybe while your every word was scrutinized or perhaps while my every word was monitored?" Those details, about their conversations during Claire's marriage, were just recently revealed by Claire. Obviously, Emily still found them upsetting.

"No, Emily. I'm sorry. I know you couldn't have said anything then, but why wait until now?"

"Well, perhaps I've been busy trying to get to know my sister again and oh yeah my husband. Details of your disappearance three years ago, when I thought you just didn't want me in your life, well, they haven't been high on my priority list."

Claire inhaled deeply and exhaled. Emily's anger was justified. "I want you to know I did not, and would not, just email or text you or John out of my life. If it happens again, please know it isn't me."

Emily's end of the line went silent. She finally responded with distress, not resentment, "Why? Are you seriously afraid it could happen again?"

Claire didn't hesitate. She no longer wanted to delude her sister. "Yes."

"I promise, if I can't get a hold of you, or if I get those kinds of messages, I'll have the police break down Anthony Rawlings' door."

Claire smiled. "Thanks, Sis. Hopefully, that'll never be necessary. Right now, I'm learning what I can about how he did it last time."

The two spoke for a while longer. During Claire's time in Iowa, her calls were not only monitored, but they were also time restricted. The two sisters relished their new lengthy soul revealing conversations. Emily informed Claire that she'd be going to New York during the first week of April to bring John home. With his sentence complete, the condition of his probation required regular interaction with a probationary officer. As long as he did that, he could travel, or live, anywhere within the continental United States.

Due to the charges of fraudulent billing, The New York State Bar Association suspended John's admission to the bar, disabling him from practicing law. For any chance at redemption, an appeal must be made to the governing body's disciplinary committee. Emily wasn't sure what he'd do. She was just happy they'd be together.

Claire wanted to ask to join Emily in New York; however, instinctively she believed her presence was currently unwelcome. She hoped it was only momentary. Besides, Emily and John needed private time.



AMBER ARRIVED HOME to find her dining room table covered in piles of disheveled papers. It was the information Claire saved from Tony's box, along with new information that both Amber and Harry helped accumulate. Harry's

connection to the Bureau of Investigation and Intelligence was definitely advantageous.

From the *box*, Claire saved pictures. Looking through the stack, she placed them in chronological order. The first series was from her parent's funeral. If she hadn't stared at them for hours, in her cell in Iowa, then the subject would be upsetting. Instead, the circumstance of their existence dominated her thoughts. The photo in her hand was of the grave site. She saw the vibrant autumn trees surrounding the double plot and a seemingly appropriate gray sky. The faraway shot showed Emily with John on one side, and Claire on the other. There were many people behind them. The next one caused Claire's stomach to churn. It showed a close-up of her, alone—her name handwritten on the back. She recognized the distinguishable writing. She'd seen that same script on many notes throughout her two years with Tony.

She didn't meet Anthony Rawlings until almost five years *after* these pictures were taken, yet the looming question remained; did he personally shoot these photos? It added to the mystery. She wished for pictures of the crowd; some way she could scan for his familiar face. Thinking back, Claire remembered news coverage. Her father was a policeman, and even though his death wasn't in the line of duty, it was considered newsworthy. Suddenly, she wondered if the footage still existed. Working at a television news station, she knew many videos were disposed of after a certain length of time. Nonetheless, if she could watch even a few seconds of the crowd, Claire would find Tony—tall, dark and handsome—if he were present.

The next stack of photos revealed images from Emily and John's wedding, with the same alarming close-ups of Claire with her name written on the back in Tony's handwriting. The sea foam green dress made Claire smile.

She realized if she took these pictures to the police, they didn't prove Tony's presence. Of course, he could pay someone to take the pictures, yet Claire was certain a handwriting specialist could verify his handwriting.

The other bit of information Claire retained from Tony's box of confessions was the *Top Secret* report. Over the past four months, she'd wondered how he obtained the document. It looked official, containing the Top Secret watermark. Originally, she placed it into the box of information to burn; however, just before leaving her cell, Claire decided to remove it. Looking back, she chastised herself for taking the box to the incinerator at all.

She couldn't really justify her actions, but only that in that moment, she wanted freedom and separation. Watching the contents burn proved temporarily therapeutic. As the flames enveloped the box and its contents, she felt her life with Tony shrivel into parallel nothingness. At the time, it was cathartic.

In the days and weeks that followed, she realized the error of her ways. With time to meditate, muse, and contemplate her life's milestones, it seemed that at many junctures she'd acted impulsively. Whether it was refusing to leave Atlanta after the loss of her job, signing a seemingly benign napkin, getting into a car and fleeing Anthony's estate, or burning a box of confessions, the choices and their consequences continued to return and rear their ugly heads.

The *Top Secret* report told the true identities of two important players in the downfall of Nathaniel Rawls; securities officer, Jonathon Burke, and FBI agent, Sherman Nichols. It was the glue that held Claire to Tony's well played plan of revenge.

After contacting Amber, they worked together to regenerate the information that Claire could recall. If only she hadn't burnt it. Regrets were useless. Their progress thus far was all that mattered.

Claire was lost in her thoughts of the photos when Amber entered the condominium. Claire looked up at her roommate and said, "Hi, I didn't expect you this early."

"The day's too nice to spend cooped up in my office. What're you doing in here?"

Claire explained her less than conventional pile system. First, she had the stack of Rawls information. She was surprised how easy it was to obtain supporting documentation that Nathaniel Rawls not only existed, but was married to a woman named Sharron, and they had one son named Samuel. Samuel married a woman named Amanda, and they had one son, Anton. The information was all available through public records from New Jersey. She'd even been able to access the appropriate websites online while in prison. The birth records confirmed Anton Rawls was born February 12, 1965: not surprisingly, the same day as Anthony Rawlings. His change of name didn't include a change of birth date. Claire wondered why he didn't change that too. It seemed like a serious piece of evidence to overlook. He mustn't have deemed it necessary. Claire doubted he ever considered his identity would be discovered. Truthfully, without his box of secrets, it would have remained hidden.

As Claire and Amber discussed some of the information, Claire picked up a police report from the Santa Monica Police Department. Claire asked, "How did Harry get these reports about Samuel and Amanda's deaths?"

"Since it occurred in California, I think he called in a few favors from some investigators he used to work with."

Claire scanned the report. "I haven't seen this before. It reveals details about the scene and even has statements from neighbors and..." She flipped another page. "Oh, my, here's the statement from their son." Claire pulled out a chair and sat. She imagined a young Tony finding his parents dead in their

Santa Monica bungalow. Being only twenty-four, she shuddered at his endured horror. Imagining wasn't difficult; the report gave a very detailed description of the crime scene. Thankfully, there weren't pictures.

Claire's parents' death at only twenty-one was tragic, but she wasn't the one to find them. Suddenly, thoughts triggered. Could Tony be responsible for the death of her parents? Could he be responsible for the death of his own parents?

In the information she read about Nathaniel Rawls' trial, there were actually three people responsible for Nathaniel's conviction. Besides the security officer and FBI agent, there was Samuel Rawls, Tony's father. Samuel testified for the state. The articles said his testimony played a significant role in the conviction. After all, being the son of the defendant and present during most of the business dealings, he knew details. Samuel testified he was against the avenues his father pursued to increase their income, and although he voiced his objections, his father was very strong-willed. Claire recognized that familiar trait.

As she learned more and more about Nathaniel Rawls, Claire felt as though she knew him. She knew someone who took after him in more ways than just dark eyes.

Claire checked the dates; Samuel and Amanda were found by their son in September of 1989. Nathaniel died while incarcerated May of 1989. She continued to read the police report:

Anton Rawls recalled entering the home via an unlocked door at approximately 8:30 PM. He stated the television was on, and he called for his parents. When they didn't answer, he walked in and found his mother on the floor of the kitchen. He ran to her. She was unresponsive. He noticed blood and yelled for his father. He found his father lying on the bed in the master bedroom. The suspected weapon, a Weston revolver, was found beside Mr. Rawls' body. After discovering his father, Anton left the house and used the neighbor's phone to call the police.

Patrick Chester, neighbor, stated he heard loud voices at the Rawls' home earlier in the day in question. Mr. Chester saw a small blue Honda, but he didn't see the license plate. He believed the car belonged to Samuel's sister whom he'd seen once before. He recalled Mrs. Rawls saying the woman was Samuel's sister. He didn't know her name.

Claire quit reading and went back to her computer. The website she accessed months before was entered into the search engine. She used the web address

from the bottom of the printed pages holding the information regarding Nathaniel and Sharron's records. While she waited for the site to load, she went back to the police report:

Mr. Chester stated the sister left during the afternoon. He remembered, because he was outside working in his yard and saw her leave. He heard voices from within the Rawls' bungalow after she left. He was unable to confirm if the voices were of the Rawls or the television. He didn't see Anton Rawls until he knocked on his door to call the police.

While scanning the computer screen, Claire called to Amber, "Did you read this police report?"

Amber came through the archway from the kitchen. "I did. It didn't mean a lot to me. Why? Do you see something interesting?"

"I didn't remember Nathaniel having two children, yet there's a statement about Samuel's sister." Claire typed the necessary information into the New Jersey public record's website. "I'm trying to see if I can find any record of her under Nathaniel's information."

Amber stood behind Claire as she typed. The information popped up: *Children: 01. Samuel Rawls.* Claire tried another avenue; she typed in Sharron Rawls and waited. The screen read: *Children: 01. Samuel Rawls.* She looked up at Amber and shook her head.

Amber exhaled. "Is there a name listed?"

"No, not on this report." She scanned the pages. "I wonder if they pursued this angle. The article I read before said the crime scene *looked* like murder/suicide. Why would they decide that, if someone else was there?" She hoped Tony wasn't truly responsible for his parents' death. Maybe he included the article because he felt their deaths were *a product* of the work of the securities officer and FBI agent who testified at Nathaniel's trial.

"I don't know. Maybe they decided that person wasn't connected," Amber offered.

Claire shrugged and went back to the report. It contained the dialogue of the 911 call. She read, thinking of Tony calling about his own parents. No doubt, this kind of trauma would have long-lasting effects. His grandfather died as well as his parents shortly after. She knew she shouldn't, but Claire's heart ached for the young dark-eyed man. No wonder he had issues with relationships and control.

Amber went back into the kitchen as Claire settled into the high backed dining room chair. The dialogue on the printed page incited goose bumps on

her arms. She read:

21:02:36: *Caller: I'm at 7208 Mongolia Drive. Please send the police. I just found my parents, and I think they're dead.*

21:02:39: *Operator: I will send the authorities immediately. Please, tell me your name.*

21:03:02: *Caller: My name—my name is Anton Rawls.*

21:03:09: *Operator: Anton, are you in the house?*

21:03:47: *Caller: No. I'm next door.*

21:04:07: *Operator: Good. Don't re-enter the residence until the police arrive. Did you see anyone else?*

21:05:02: *Caller: No. Send someone fast.*

21:05:27: *Operator: The Santa Monica Police are on their way. They'll be there in three minutes. Please stay on the line with me. (silence) Anton? Are you there?*

21:06:18: *Caller: Yes—I'm—I'm—here.*

21:06:49: *Operator: Good. Did you see a weapon?*

21:07:13: *Caller: I don't remember.*

21:07:42: *Operator: Are you sure they're dead?*

21:08:29: *Caller: My mother is. I checked her when I found her on the floor. (Gasp)Oh! There's blood on my hands, I didn't even realize...*

21:09:42: *Operator: Did you say there's blood? (Voices in background) Anton?—Anton?*

21:10:52: *Caller: This is Patrick Chester. Anton is sitting down. The cord doesn't reach that far. Are the police on their way?*

21:11:03: *Operator: Yes, Patrick. Who are you?*

21:11:28: *Caller: I'm the neighbor of the Rawls. Anton called from my phone. Oh, I hear the sirens. Can I hang up now?*

21:12:01: *Operator: Just another minute. Let me please speak to one of the officers when they arrive.*

21:13:12: *Caller: All right, let me go answer the door. (Silence—voices) This is Officer Griffiths—ten four. (Line disconnected: 21:14:03).*

Claire stared at the report and felt moisture coat her cheeks. Yes, she hated her ex-husband for the things he'd done to her, but no one should have to experience what she just read. She placed the pages on the shiny polished table and pushed back the tall upholstered chair with her feet. Dabbing her eyes, she tried to focus on the melting stacks of pages before her. It was too much. They were acquiring evidence to prove Tony's guilt, but at this

moment, Claire didn't feel vengeance. She felt pity for the man she'd loved.

Unconsciously, she used her sleeve to wipe her eyes and massaged her throbbing temples. She couldn't stop the awful images of Tony's parents that floated through her mind. Desperately trying to think of something else, she remembered Amber saying it was a nice day, but she'd spent most of it inside. Claire needed a break from all this information.

As she put the report on a stack of pages, another title caught her attention: *Santa Monica Coroner's Report*. Her stomach lurched. Claire didn't want to read more; she was on overload. Closing her eyes, she contemplated the unread information. Would it indicate the estimated time of death? If it did, would it condemn her ex-husband, or absolve him? Did she want to know the evidence? Or could ignorance allow her peace?

Opening her eyes, she looked at the clutter. The pounding in her head and twisting of her stomach told her to walk away. She placed the coroner's reports in a manila folder, closed the folder, and allowed her hand to linger on the smooth cardstock. The information wouldn't go away. She could read it another time. In more of a dream state, she continued to fight the visualization of Amanda Rawls lying on her kitchen floor, a dark red puddle of thick liquid surrounding her form.

By the time she and Emily were asked to identify the bodies of her parents, they were cleaned, laid on cold silver tables, and covered with clean white sheets. The coroner reported they both died instantly; their deaths were quick and painless.

Claire often hung to that information. Losing people you love is difficult. It wasn't a conscious thought process, but those who remain often contemplate the final moments of their loved ones lives. Claire imagined her parents driving down the dark country road, talking jovially, laughing about some story that her mother was undoubtedly telling about one of her students. Her mother often dominated the conversations. Claire's father didn't mind. Actually, he seemed to enjoy the sound of his wife's voice. The endless chatting created a melody which sang continually throughout Claire's childhood.

The wet roads combined with wet leaves made the road slippery. Physics would prove that their tires lost their grip. The moisture and wet leaves widened the separation. Within an instant, the car slid, and the automobile connected a royal hundred-year-old oak. Due to force and speed, her parents didn't have time to regret their drive or worry about their children. They just transcended from a loving, happy discussion, directly to a heavenly sleep. Many times in the months and years that followed, this story, this fantasy, gave Claire peace. She never shared this account with anyone, even Emily. Truthfully, she'd compartmentalized the entire momentous event away. Nonetheless, it occasionally decompartmentalized.

Groggily, she got up and walked into the warm kitchen. Amber stood near the counter, cutting vegetables. When she looked up from the bright red, yellow, and green peppers, she saw Claire's tears. "What's the matter?"

"I just read the 911 call from Samuel and Amanda's crime scene. I feel bad for Tony."

At first, Amber silently stood scanning Claire's face and expression; then finally, she spoke, "Do you remember saying you thought I might have a halo?"

Claire nodded.

"Well, I think you'd be a better candidate." Amber rinsed the vegetable juices from her hands and dried them on a towel. Empathy no longer evident in her voice, she continued, "I find it very difficult to feel compassion for the man who's caused you so much distress and could—according to your theories—be responsible for my fiancé's death."

Claire walked to the kitchen table and looked out at the street. Long shadows from the trees covered the ground as the setting sun neared the western horizon. Watching the pedestrians four stories below, she saw people wearing only light jackets. It appeared the temperature had indeed risen. Maybe she needed air.

"I think I'm going to go for a walk."

Amber exhaled. "Claire, I wish you'd talk to me. Tell me why I should feel compassion? I don't get it?"

To be honest, Claire didn't *get it* either. Nonetheless, she was mad. Involuntarily, her neck stiffened and shoulders squared. Intellectually, she knew this was ridiculous. Why would she be mad at Amber? Why did she feel the need to suddenly defend Tony? "I think I'll get something to eat at one of the cafés. I'm sorry if you're cooking me dinner." Claire turned to leave the kitchen.

Focused on her light jacket in the hall closet, she stepped into the living room. The swirl of emotions combined with her pounding head and queasy stomach stymied her footsteps. She became mesmerized by the tall floor-to-ceiling windows. Flooding the luxurious room were hues of red and orange; the panoramic expanse radiated colors of the setting sun as it reflected off the purple haze covered mountains. Momentarily, she became awestruck by the beautiful view.

Amber switched on the lights, filling the room with sudden brilliance and taking away the outside. Claire turned from the now dark window back to reality, which now included the glare of her roommate, accompanied by an unfamiliar angry tone, "Don't you get mad?"

Claire stared at Amber's expression. She'd met more intimidating expressions before. She slowly responded, "Yes, I get mad." Nonetheless, her true emotion remained concealed by her calm tone.

"Then show it!" An eternal silence pursued. Eventually, Amber huffed and returned to the kitchen.

The sound of cabinets closing too loudly declared Amber's ability to show her emotion. Claire knew she should talk, but she had no idea what to say. Instead, she reached for her jacket, grabbed her purse, and walked out the front door.

Palo Alto had many small cafés on University Boulevard, which was only a short walk from their condo. Most were open during the early hours, with all kinds of delicious coffee. While many of these establishments closed their doors in the evening, other street fronts brightened with dining choices as the sky darkened and the lights of the city came to life. When she opened the door and walked from the brightly lit foyer of their building, the cool dusk air hit her face. The street lights illuminated the sidewalk, and people hustled along the pathway. Suddenly, Claire realized it was Saturday night.

She didn't want to go to a real restaurant. She didn't want to sit and watch happy patrons chat and eat. No, she wanted time alone, time to sift and consider her thoughts and feelings. Without thinking, she turned toward the northeast, away from the setting sun and toward the water.

During her first week in Palo Alto, Harry showed her a beautiful park along the San Francisco Bay. Perhaps she'd lived too long on private property. Her desire for fresh air and nature overtook concerns for the descending darkness or abandoning side streets. With each step toward her goal, the tension in her head and neck eased.

Could it be possible to hate and love someone too? Claire wondered. The overpowering compassion back at the condo wasn't just for a young man in a tragic situation; it was for the young man who grew up to become the husband she had loved. She blinked her eyes against the breeze and remembered good times. Theirs was a heated passion. She contemplated the man who made her hate her own existence one moment and love it the next.

As her unconsciousness flooded with memories, feelings stirred deep inside. Concurrently, her consciousness screamed for her to remember his atrocities, the cruelties which outnumbered the kindnesses; however, her heart ached and argued—perhaps his positives could overtake his negatives. After all, doesn't everyone have a good and a bad side?

This is why I'm not ready to face him. This is why I can't face anyone right now.

Claire knew her thoughts and feelings were wrong. He'd given her every reason to hate him, seek vengeance, and aid in his destruction. So, why was this so hard? She tried to push Tony back into his assigned compartment.

Her thoughts moved to Amber. Instead of crossing Middlefield Road, Claire should be back at the condo, talking to her friend; however, after spending so much time alone and years hiding her true emotion with Tony,

Claire wasn't comfortable sharing her feelings.

She couldn't control the way she felt. Apparently, her mask wearing skills were rusty.

Hopefully, a walk along the shore will help me sort out my feelings and revive my energy. Then maybe I can face Amber. She deserves that.



PARKED NEAR A four story stucco condominium on Forest Avenue, Phillip Roach compiled his information for Mr. Rawlings. Although Claire Nichols hadn't used the phone with the number he'd determined was hers since she received the calls from Mr. Rawlings, Phil believed this was her place of residence.

In the past twenty-four hours, Phillip learned a lot about Claire Nichols: She'd applied for her birth certificate and social security card—all matters of public record. She opened a bank account with a deposit of 100 thousand dollars from an unknown source—not public record.

He also discovered that just yesterday, her account received a life-giving infusion. Phil wasn't the investing type, but from his scan of the information, Claire Nichols had an impressive investment portfolio. The notable wealth came from a wire transfer. The originator of the transfer was an account in Switzerland. To most people, that would be the end of that transaction. Phillips's sources weren't that easily deterred. The funds came from a high-end gems and jewelry broker named Pulvara who operated in San Francisco. Phil planned to visit his business on Monday.

He gave Ms. Nichols credit. She'd tried to remain under the radar, even using a post office box at the Palo Alto Post Office. It would have worked, except the federal government, as well as the Indiana state government, didn't accept P.O. Box numbers as an acceptable address to send official documents. Ironically, Ms. Nichols adherence to domestic laws led Phillip Roach to the corner of Forest and Gilman.

Phil wasn't willing to relay all of this information to Mr. Rawlings. First, he wanted to visit Mr. Pulvara to learn more before he jumped to conclusions on her recent windfall. Second, he wouldn't divulge the exact address without visual confirmation. After all, she could have deceptively listed a friend's address. Or perhaps she paid someone for the use of their mailbox. Phil glanced between the large, luxurious building and his laptop as he worked to compile a detailed report. He planned to say he was getting closer to pinpointing Ms. Nichols' whereabouts when he saw a petite, brown haired woman suddenly visible through a large window on the fourth floor. He strained to see the woman, stories above. Yes, it looked like Claire Nichols.

Reaching for his camera with the telephoto lens, she walked away from the plates of glass, and he lost sight of her. Momentarily questioning his vision, he debated adding her address to the report. Then like a gift from the surveillance Gods, Claire Nichols stepped through the front doors of the building.

Wearing a jacket to protect her from the spring wind, the brunette turned toward the northeast. Phil watched her bury her hands deep into the pockets of her coat. The breeze blew back her hair, exposing her face and slender neck. Utilizing the long telephoto lens, he zoomed in on her features. Due to the wonders of technology, his camera's illumination element diffused light, creating the illusion of daytime even in dusk.

Despite the brown hair, Phil's intuition told him this was the same woman in the photos he'd studied. Without question, the surveillance Gods had offered him Claire Nichols. Depressing the button on his camera, multiple photos snapped in seconds. Phil pulled his car out of the concealed parking space and slowly eased his way along Forest Street. He drove ahead of where she seemed to be going.

Through his rearview mirror, he watched Claire progress along the sidewalk, only feet from his newly parked car. He snapped her photo. She clearly appeared absorbed in her thoughts. Forcing her into his automobile would be easy, but that wasn't Mr. Rawlings' request. Mr. Rawlings wanted information.

An investigator's job didn't entail questioning his client's instructions. Therefore, he would never do so aloud, yet internally, Phillip Roach wondered, if Mr. Rawlings was concerned about this woman who reportedly tried to kill him, then why did he only want facts? As Phil observed the attractive woman, his instinct told him that he hadn't been hired to keep Mr. Rawlings safe. No, he'd been hired to report the every move of a woman that Mr. Rawlings wasn't willing to emancipate.

As Claire passed, Phil pretended to look down. Once she was a few steps ahead, he eased out of his car and onto the sidewalk, falling into rhythm with her steps.

CHAPTER NINE

*Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many.
The intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden.*

—Phaedrus



HILLIP ROACH REREAD his email:

To: Anthony Rawlings
From: Phillip Roach
Subject: Claire Nichols
Date: March 23, 2013

Mr. Rawlings,

Due to the late hour in Iowa, I'm emailing the information I have acquired thus far:

I had visual confirmation. Claire Nichols has been located. Her address is: 7165 Forest Ave. Unit 4A, Palo Alto, California. She recently obtained a copy of her birth certificate, social security card, and a driver's license. She isn't employed. Her bank account is healthy, opened with the deposit of a 100 thousand dollar Cashier's check. This was traced back to a bank in New York; it was purchased with cash. I have some top notched associates working on

this, but it seems to be a dead end. It was purchased the week before her release.

She spent much of the original money on necessary items: a car (2011 Honda Accord LX), clothes, personal items, telephones, computer, etc.

Her bank account recently received another deposit of 50 thousand dollars, and she created an investment portfolio worth near 750 thousand dollars. The source of this money is still being investigated. I hope to learn more Monday. I have confidence this information will be obtained.

Attached are photos taken Saturday night.

I will await your directives for continued observance and will remain completely devoted to this case until you instruct otherwise.

Phillip Roach

Phil double-checked the attachment: multiple photos of Claire walking along a street, the close-up views were quite detailed. He continued to click. The numerous photos gave the illusion of Claire Nichols literally walking down the street. He slowed his clicks; she now sat on a park bench. Next, she held an iPhone. The conversation changed her expression—relieved, happier. A few more views of her on the bench and then there's someone with her. Click, they're talking—the other person who wore a jacket and baseball cap was a man. Although the hat concealed his features, Claire's expression suggested familiarity. The next shot showed the two of them walking from the bench to a waiting car. No physical contact, however, both of their expressions appeared relaxed and casual. As Phil clicked, Claire opened the passenger door of the blue Mustang while the man opened the driver's. The last photo showed the license plate.

Phil smiled; satisfied with his report and hopeful Mr. Rawlings would feel the same. *SEND*.



THE COOL CLEAR water refreshed Derek Burke as his plane descended toward Boston. Below the clouds and between the buildings, he saw sprouts of green. As April began, so did spring on the East Coast. He'd been gone two weeks, making five weeks since he and Sophia were in the same city. He knew it wasn't either of their preference, but after accepting the Shedis-tics job offer, he worried it'd be their future.

Relishing flying first class with wider seats and increased leg room, Derek closed his eyes and nervously awaited their reunion. The anticipation combined with apprehension obscured the roar of engines. He considered Shedis-tics' final offer; the next time he flew from coast to coast, it would be in a private Shedis-tics plane. They offered him unlimited access and ability to fly from Santa Clara to Provincetown in hours, without the hassle of commercial flights.

The enticement package was incredibly appealing. The salary alone was more than Derek had ever considered requesting, and the signing bonus would alleviate most of their debt. Sophia's larger studio could become a reality sooner, rather than later.

Throughout the negotiations, he'd done what he promised and called Sophia, discussing each offer together. When he explained the financials and necessary living requirements, she was on board; however, her attitude changed when he mentioned the travel component. Not just traveling to and from the West Coast, but weeks and months traveling outside the country. It was inferred, most of his travels would take him to the Orient, the location of the world's major software players. After all, Shedis-tics didn't expect to overcome the competition by watching from afar.

Unfortunately, Shedis-tics required a decision prior to his return home. With a heavy heart, Derek accepted. The pros far outweighed the cons. His new position officially began on the first of May. He prayed his wife would see why he gave them an affirmative answer.

Imagining Sophia's beautiful slate gray eyes, amazing scent, and soft skin, anticipation conquered his apprehension.

"Sir, you may exit the aircraft."

Lost in his own thoughts, he'd completely missed the landing. Derek nodded. The attendant had his bags ready near the door. Yes, this first-class thing was nice, and to think, this would be *slumming* compared to the Shedis-tics private plane.

Derek took his phone out of *airplane mode*, and it immediately vibrated. As he approached the luggage carousel, Derek read Sophia's text message:

"I HAVE A SURPRISE FOR YOU! TAKE A TAXI TO BOSTON"

HARBOR HOTEL. THERE'S A PACKAGE FOR YOU AT THE FRONT DESK—Smiley face.”

It was funny how a colon and half of a parenthesis could bring a smile to Derek's face, but it did.



AT THE FRONT desk of the Boston Harbor Hotel, Derek retrieved his mysterious envelope and tipped the concierge. He surveyed the contents of the envelope: a key to suite 523 and a beautifully scribed note: *Come see your surprise.*

His enthusiasm amplified with each step of this faux clandestine encounter.

Opening the door to suite 523, he beheld his *something special* leaning against the wall, illuminated by candles. Scattered near the sketched self-portrait of his beautiful naked wife and through the suite's sitting room were thousands of rose petals. If the petals didn't indicate his directed path the assortment of lacy under garments at each two step intervals did. Following the erotic GPS, Derek found his beautiful wife, dressed exactly as she was in the sketch, lying upon a large four poster bed. The candles provided a sweet, sexy fragrance combined with the perfect flickering glow.

In mere seconds Derek was dressed to match—or rather undressed.



HOURS LATER, WEARING thick hotel robes, they settled onto the intimate dining table on the balcony of their suite. Boston Harbor's lights glimmered in the cool spring night air. Sophia surveyed the feast before her as she felt her husband's gentle fingers lift her long, disheveled hair, and his lips kiss her exposed neck. Despite the warm terrycloth, goose bumps appeared on her arms and long slender legs. She closed her eyes as a purr escaped her lips.

His warm breath bathed her ear as Derek whispered, “I love my surprise.”

Sophia's smile radiated her entire face. “Good, I'm glad. I've missed you.”

“I've missed you, too.”

“Tell me about your job prospect; I listening, I promise.” Her toe wandered up his warm leg.

“Hmmm, I think you're trying to distract me.”

Sophia beamed, “No, but if I wanted to distract you, I could.”

Derek's cheeks rose, as admiration radiated from his gaze. Without a

doubt, if there was one thing Sophia was good at doing, it was distracting him. Actually, she was good at many things. Beholding her now, hair beautifully tousled and wearing only a white robe, he prayed being understanding was among her list of attributes. “The company is one of the biggest players out there. They have potential to be even bigger.”

“And you want it?”

Derek looked down. This was easier on the phone, not seeing her beautiful trusting eyes before him. “I do.”

“Then tell them yes.”

“But, what about us? What about living arrangements? Traveling?”

Sophia left her food untouched, fell to her knees, and sat back on her heels before her husband. “I love you. Did you say I could stay in Provincetown and that you’d be there every weekend?”

“Yes, unless...”

“Unless you need to be out of the country.”

“Yes.”

“Where will you live during the week?”

“I guess I’ll have an apartment or condo in Santa Clara.” He smoothed her blonde hair. This was going so much better than he’d expected.

Sophia continued, “And didn’t you say they offered you transportation back and forth?”

“Yes, but it will be a lot of time apart.”

She lifted herself to encircle his neck. “If you want this, if it’s your dream, and if we’ll be able to afford both homes, I can travel too. I can spend some of my weeks in Santa Clara and some weekends too. We can both spend time in Provincetown. I can paint, draw, and sketch—anywhere.”

Derek dropped his head to hers, sighing audibly. “I didn’t think you’d take it this well.” She kissed his cheek. He asked, “You’d be willing to travel?”

“I’m willing to do whatever I need to do for us to be together.”

“I anticipate working long hours, during the week.”

“Have you ever known me to shy away from late nights, or early mornings?” Sophia asked with a sultry smirk.

Derek smiled. “Late nights no. Early mornings, not really your thing.”

“So, I guess I’ll just consider early mornings to be later nights. It all blends together. Besides, if you’re some big wig, you need a wife by your side.”

He lifted her body as he stood. “Mrs. Burke, you’re right, as always.” His hands began to roam under her thick robe as his lips found the place where her neck and shoulders met, the spot that sent tingles throughout her body.

“What about dinner?” She murmured, “I ordered your favorites.”

“I think I need some more of my surprise appetizer.”

Sophia didn’t argue, or agree. Her mind was lost in her husband’s touch.



THE NEXT MORNING, THEY awoke to their new reality. They were moving to Santa Clara, and they needed a place to live. Stepping into the spacious glass shower, she thought about their impending adventure. Although Sophia traveled all over Europe, she'd never been to California. Being born and raised in New Jersey, the East Coast was always home.

Her parents lived in the same house where she was raised. They'd lived there for over forty years. Feeling the warm water coat her body and inhaling the fresh clean scent of body wash, Sophia realized home was a feeling, not a place. She liked that feeling. It made her feel safe, loved, and wanted.

Rinsing the floral scented cream rinse from her long hair, she suddenly shivered as cool air penetrated her warm moist haven. Before she could turn or comment, Derek caressed her trim waist and hips. He was her home. He gave her that feeling. It even transcended her art, allowing Sophia to use bolder colors, attempt more abstract drawings, and create beyond previous boundaries. If he could do that for her, moving to the West Coast was a small price to pay.

Wrapped in a thick luxurious towel, Sophia combed her wet hair. Droplets of water rolled down her bare back as she contemplated drying it. She didn't like using a hairdryer. It was bad for her hair, and used a lot of energy, but the cold April wind didn't support wet hair. Smiling, she thought about her parents and heard her mother's voice, "*Don't go outside with wet hair; you'll catch your death of cold.*" At first, her parents may not like the idea of her moving west; however, once she explained the two homes and her ability to visit while Derek travels, Sophia anticipated understanding. After all, that's what they had always provided—understanding.

Derek pulled her from her thoughts as he entered the glass tile bathroom. "I just went down to the front desk to pay the bill, but it was already paid."

"I gave them our credit card."

"No." He shook his head. "Shedis-tics paid it."

Sophia smiled. "That's nice." Then, her expression darkened. "But weird, how'd they know we were even here? I mean, you didn't even find out until last night."

"I don't know." Derek smiled. "But man, this company has perks!"

Sophia tried to push the uneasiness away. Obviously Derek saw this as a positive. She wouldn't be the one to bring him down. "I guess that means more money for breakfast."

Derek encircled her waist, spooned his wife, smiled into the mirror, and mused, "Mrs. Burke, I don't think you can eat that much."



SOPHIA REMOVED HER phone from her purse as Derek slipped their car into Boston traffic. The icon indicated missed calls. She listened to the messages, two were from her mother.

Sophia's expression said it all; something was amiss. Derek waited while she listened. Finally, he spoke, "What is it?"

"It's my pop. He's been in a car accident. Mom thinks he'll be okay, but I need to call."

Derek nodded and reached out to squeeze his wife's hand. As he watched her fumble with the screen of her phone, he changed the direction of the car. No longer were they headed to the Cape. He turned onto Highway I-84 West. Before Sophia realized where they were, they were in Connecticut headed toward New York and on to New Jersey.

"Thank you. I'll feel better seeing him in person."

"What happened?"

"Mom isn't sure. She kept saying, *I was supposed to be with him; I should've been with him.* She'd stayed home with a migraine. She's blaming herself. His car went off the road near Sourland Mountain Reserve. He's driven those roads a million times. The police speculate wet roads caused the accident." She turned to her husband's profile. "You know I'm proud of you and your new job, right? But maybe we shouldn't mention it to them—not yet at least."

Derek nodded. "Your pop will be fine. He has your mom to look after him."

Sophia fought her emotion as tears moistened her cheeks. "You know, I didn't think about others. I got so wrapped up in myself and us." Her chest heaved. "I never considered them when thinking about moving to California. If we were in Santa Clara, we couldn't just jump in a car and be there."

"No, we'd jump on a plane," he reassured and continued, "which, considering this traffic, might be quicker."

Sophia smiled. "Private planes, right... something to get used to!" Sighing, she leaned her head against the seat, watched the world pass by, and settled in for the five hour drive.



THE GRAY CLOUDS settled over Princeton, raining down and draining color from the urban landscape. Sophia considered drawing the scene, thinking about chalk. She'd only need black—void of color, the sketch could come to life in shades of gray.

She liked her hometown of Princeton, New Jersey. After all, it was where she experienced childhood, learned to walk, talk, and color outside the lines, and although her parent's home wasn't in the Borough, it was still Princeton, the home of the acclaimed university.

At times while growing up, she hated the prestigious school. It seemed like the entire world revolved around it. Unlike so many of the locals, she knew in her heart that the world offered more; however, now Sophia was eternally grateful for Princeton, especially its medical center.

Rubbing her eyes, Sophia yawned. She'd been in the hospital room, looking out the window, sitting in the plastic chair, and pacing the linoleum floors for hours. The monitors beeped at appropriate intervals without alarm; everything indicated her father's progress. Sophia just wanted him to open his eyes.

Derek finally convinced Sophia's mother, Silvia, to get some food. It was the first time she'd left Pop's room since he returned from surgery. Sophia's promise to stay near allowed Silvia the reassurance to leave, if only for a little while.

Tears lingered in Sophia's eyes as she watched the man who'd always been her rock. Nearing seventy, with declining stature, he wasn't any taller than Sophia. Of course, he'd never been taller than 5'8" but with age even that lessened, yet when she closed her eyes, Sophia saw the mountain of a man who'd scoop her into his arms and put her on his shoulders.

Throughout the five hour drive, she tried to convince herself she'd arrive to find him sitting up and swearing at the nurses. The image made her smile. Pop was the sweetest man—as long as you played by his rules—and when you didn't, he was more bark than bite. His contagious deep and harmonious laughter shook his too-large stomach with joy. She imagined him arguing about the hospital gown, food, or television stations, yet reality didn't match her memories or dreams. The man before her, attached to wires and tubes, didn't seem like her father. Nevertheless, the small bracelet on his wrist read: *Rossi, Carlo*; confirming he was indeed her pop.

The raindrops continued to pelt the glass pane. Sophia stared at the view. Instead of trees and buildings blurred by sheets of unrelenting spring rain, she saw memories she'd put away, as the saying goes—for a rainy day. She saw the hard-working man who came home from work each day. She saw her mother, wearing an apron in the kitchen, fussing to have dinner ready precisely by 6:00 PM. She saw the couple standing proudly and awkwardly at New York art exhibits and her Paris wedding.

Sophia thought how different she was in comparison to them and how much they'd given her. Instead of fighting her artistic side, they embraced it. They never belittled her dreams. Now, standing by her father's bedside, she wanted to do the same. She wanted to support them any way she could.

Currently, that meant hours of diligent vigil.



SOPHIA MUST HAVE fallen asleep in the hard plastic chair she'd pulled up next to Carlo's bed. She awoke with her head near his feet, her back bent and sore, to the swish of the door across the linoleum floor. She blinked away the sleep from her eyes and watched as a nurse entered the room. The wipe board on the wall read: *Kayla*.

Sophia remained silent as Kayla made her rounds, checking fluids in the hanging bags and making notes, reading monitors and making notes, and lifting Carlo's hand, feeling his pulse and making notes.

When it appeared she was done, Sophia spoke, "Hello, I'm his daughter. Can you please tell me how he's doing?"

Kayla checked her notes. "Can you tell me your name; I need to verify whether you're on the list." Her R sounded like a W. A reassuring inflection to someone raised near the Borough.

"Sophia Rossi Burke."

Kayla double-checked her notes. "Yes, Sophia. Is your mother near?"

"Yes, she's with my husband in the cafeteria."

"Do you expect her to return soon?"

"I do... what time is it?"

Kayla checked her watch. "It's almost 8:30PM. The doctor's doing her final rounds. I'll tell her you're here, and she'll inform you of your father's progress."

His voice sounded groggy, but Sophia would recognize that deep gargle anywhere. "If your talk'n bout me, you might as well talk to me."

Sophia's smile filled her face while the pent-up tears slid over her raised cheeks. Both women turned toward the bed. Carlo continued, "And what in Sam Hill are all these damn tubes. I don't need damn tubes. I want them out!"

Sophia hurried to his side and threw her arms around his neck. "Pop, you're awake?!"

"Damn right I'm awake. Where's your mother? And why aren't you with that husband of yours?"

"Mom's with Derek in the cafeteria. She's been by your side the whole time. We finally convinced her to get something to eat."

Carlo nodded approvingly at his baby girl.

Kayla interrupted long enough to lift Carlo's bed so that he sat up, asked a few questions, and promised to send the doctor. Once they were alone, Sophia held her father's hand and looked him square in the eye. "Pop, what happened? How did you crash your car?"

Carlo returned her gaze. "My car? I don't remember."

She tried to reassure him. "It's fine, just rest."

"It's not fine, Sophie. You're saying I crashed my car? Is Silvia all right?"

"Yes, Pop. She wasn't with you. You were alone... out by Sourland Mountain Reserve."

Sophia watched as Carlo eyes closed. Finally, he spoke, "I-I'm... I just don't remember. Sophie... don't tell your momma. I don't want her thinking I can't remember. Baby, I need you to help me with this. Tell me what happened so that I can get it straight."

"Pop, I don't know. They just found your car. You ran off the road and hit a tree. Your right leg is broke, but your hip isn't. The doctor made a big deal out of that. Momma's been real worried. You also punctured a lung, but the doctor said everything should heal just fine."

"What about the other people, in the other car?"

"Pop, what other car?"

"The one that started to pass; it pushed me off the road."

Sophia stared at her father. "Pop, do you remember another car?"

Carlo looked at his hand. He followed the IV line up to the dangling bag. "What's this shit they're pumping into me? I can't think straight!"

"I think it's pain medicine."

"Sophie, get your momma."

She kissed his forehead. "If you promise not to go anywhere." She smiled, as big as she could, her eyes twinkling.

"Now, tell me how in Sam Hill I'm supposed to do that, with all this bloody crap hooked to me." Beneath the pale complexion and gruff exterior, Sophia saw her father's loving sense of humor.

"Pop, I'll get Momma, but I think you should know I'm not leaving until you're better!"

As Sophia turned toward the door, she once again heard *swoosh* against the linoleum. The large barrier opened and the sound of her mother's voice filled the room.

"Caa—a-ar-lo—oo!" Silva cried, creating a four syllable word where there'd only been two. Within seconds, she was kissing his graying hair and fussing over his blankets.

Sophia looked up to see Derek's tired quizzical expression. She took his hand, and they walked into the hall. The sound of her mother fretting and her father minimizing elated Sophia; however, Derek's sad eyes grounded her emotion.

"Derek, what is it? Did you speak to the doctor? Is there something that I don't know?"

Derek shook his head. "No. It isn't your pop. It's what you just said to him. Are you planning to stay here, in Princeton?"

Sophia collapsed against the wall. “I don’t know. I just can’t leave them.”

“What about finding a place to live in Santa Clara?”

“We have a month. We don’t need to fly out tomorrow.” She watched her husband’s neck and shoulders stiffen. This was a new version of their one main disagreement. He liked plans and details. Sophia lived in the moment. This morning, she would’ve willingly flown across the country; however, things changed. Now, she didn’t know when she’d be ready. “Can I please not make a decision right now? It’s been a very long day.”

He reached for her waist, pulled her closer, and rested his chin on her head. “I have some bad news.”

She didn’t ask. Inhaling his aftershave and listening to the beat of his heart, Sophia braced herself for the bad news.

“I tried to tell your mom that we’d get a hotel.” Sophia snickered into his shirt; she knew where he was headed. He continued, “But she wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Don’t tell me...” Her tired gray eyes twinkled up to his sullen expression.

“Yes, we’re sleeping in your old room tonight.” His lips brushed her forehead and gently kissed her nose. “So, Darling, it’s *also* going to be a long night.”

She molded into his comforting embrace and thought about her cramped bedroom. It was great when she was ten, but now... the standard bed was probably older than both of them put together. “I think staying in my old room is your plan to make me want to leave sooner.”

“Is it working?” Derek asked, his brows elevated.

“If Pop could get up and walk, we’d be home by morning!”

Derek smiled as he held her close. “I can’t take more than two nights in that old bed.”

“Deal.” They re-entered the hospital room, hand in hand.

CHAPTER TEN

When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.

—Helen Keller

MOST MORNINGS, CLAIRE sat at the table, perused the web, and waited for the others to arrive. She enjoyed the quiet time, as much as the morning ritual of coffee and pleasantries. Of course, she was usually the first in the kitchen; after all, Amber and Harry needed to get ready for work. Claire only needed to be dressed to workout.

Her options for connectivity continued to expand. Whether she used her laptop, her tablet, or her phones, she could stay in touch with the world, anytime—anywhere. This also allowed her to see her personal life laid out for everyone whenever she chose. Having technology denied in the past, she now felt compelled to read *everything*, and apparently, since her unusual prison release, Claire Rawlings Nichols was once again deemed newsworthy.

Often, her face would appear on the cover of esteemed magazines, the kind which lined the check-out lanes of the grocery stores. Today, she saw her picture in a thumbnail on her homepage. Still alone, Claire scanned the link and found the corresponding article: *The Rawlings Moving On*. It claimed to enlighten the reader on their lives after marriage, complete with pictures. Tony appeared exquisitely dressed with a pretty woman on his arm. According to the article, she was associated with a large hospital in Iowa where her father was CEO and Administrator. The article alluded to the implications of this affluent union, since Mr. Anthony Rawlings was among the top contributors to the hospital. In the opposing frame, Claire sat with Harry, eating at a café in Palo Alto. According to the article, Claire, left penniless, was unemployed and living with Harrison Baldwin, a security guard at SiJo.

The clicks of Amber's heels upon the hardwood combined with the

opening and closing of the front door brought life to the quiet kitchen. Looking up from her laptop, Claire apologized, “I’m so sorry for bringing the two of you into this media mess.”

Amber snickered, as she finished making her cup of coffee, and said, “I’ve never seen anything so ridiculous. I can’t believe reporters think this is news!”

Leaning against the counter, Harry brushed his disheveled, blonde hair from his eyes and puffed his chest. Claire chuckled, the pictures and article before her forgotten. She found it amusing, no matter the occasion, his golden curls continually fell softly across his face. She wondered if he owned a comb or brush, anything that could possibly tame his unruly mane.

Musingly, she fought a new desire to reach out and brush the curls away, to better see his soft blue eyes. The impulse surprised Claire. She gripped the handle of her mug in an effort to stop her hand. Thankfully, her momentary insanity went completely unnoticed by Harry as he postured in preparation for his speech.

In reality, only a second or two had elapsed; however, the rush of blood to her cheeks made Claire lower her face, in a feigned attempt to inspect the contents of her ceramic mug. Slowly, she raised her eyes as Harry spoke, “Actually, I saw today’s article, and I’m honored. I’ve never been a celebrity before.”

Laughing, Amber brushed her brother’s shoulder and glanced toward Claire with a sly smile. “Guess what, Harry? You aren’t one now!” Amber started to walk back toward her bedroom then turned to Claire. “Don’t worry about it. Life’s much more exciting with you around.”

Avoiding Harry’s gaze, Claire looked toward her computer’s homepage, until Harry’s jovial voice brought her back to reality. “So, what do you think? Just in case I end up in *People* magazine or something, is this shirt all right? Or, do I need something nicer?”

She returned her gaze to the man before her. From behind the soft curls, she saw small lines surrounding his sparkling cobalt eyes, and his cheeks rose in a boyish smirk. Claire looked at his collarless black woven shirt with the SiJo Gaming emblem. The shirt wasn’t tight, but accentuated his muscular abdomen, broad shoulders, and defined arms. Her eyes scrutinized his attire as they descended to the khaki slacks emphasizing his trim firm waist.

Slowly she realized he was teasing her. “Actually, I think you should change.” Her smile radiated emerald shimmers.

“You do?”

“Yes, maybe something like the jeans you wore last night. You know the ones with holes—it highlights my penniless status.”

With his grin in full gear, he reached out and covered Claire’s hand. Never before had this familiarity ignited the tightness she now felt. Claire fought

between the desire to turn her hand over and return the contact and the need to pull away and run to her room. Seemingly unaware of her sudden mixture of feelings, Harry said, “If I ever do live with a penniless woman, I can only hope she has a portfolio like yours.”

“Oh, is that your only requirement?” Her brows rose in question.

“No...” His gaze captivated her, holding her prisoner. “It’s probably the least of my requirements. The first is that she doesn’t tell me what to wear.”

Pulling her stare away, she nonchalantly replied, “Hey, you asked, but I guess that leaves me out. Should I alert the press?”

He winked. “No, let me enjoy my fifteen minutes for a while.”

Claire shook her head. “Okay, our secret living arrangements are safe with me. Oh, and about fifty other people who live in this building who know the truth.”

“They won’t tell.” With that, Harry walked toward the front door, toward his true home.

When the door closed, she exhaled and scolded herself. The easy atmosphere of Amber and Harry’s company was a gift. The last thing she wanted to do was complicate it with feelings which surpassed friendly. In an attempt to dismiss the unfamiliar tightness, she refocused on the article.

Claire knew she should share the nonchalant attitude of Amber and Harry; however, she’d been taught an ingrained fear of *public failure, appearance, and opinion*. Unconsciously, while out at a store, a café, or walking on the street, Claire found herself scanning the crowds for cameras. On some occasions, she would think she’d see one from her peripheral vision, and then upon second glance, the perpetrator would disappear. The photographers had to be there. How else could she grace so many magazines? A new *laissez-faire* perspective would take time.

Claire knew her *star-status* would soon extinguish. After all, California was inhabited by many famous people. That meant if her story was to be newsworthy, she needed to strike while the iron was hot. That was her thought process as she reached for her telephone.

Claire’s heartbeat rapidly increased as she considered the repercussions of her intended actions. For once, she wasn’t being impetuous. She’d thoroughly debated this decision, knew her guidelines, her limits, and even wrote them down. Her stipulations were sitting on the counter in front of her as she dialed the phone.

Justifiably shocked and surprised, Meredith Banks willingly dropped everything to speak with her old sorority sister. Sounding businesslike, yet friendly, Claire explained her desire to get her story out with someone she could trust.

Candidly, Claire asked, “Meredith, is that you?”

Without hesitation, Meredith replied, “Claire, I never doubted your

innocence; yes, I would be honored to help you with this.”

Claire knew Meredith saw dollar signs as well as the potential for fame. She needed to know if she could trust her. To that end, she presented Meredith with a litmus test. “Before any interviews or work on my story, I want you to publish a *very* overdue retraction regarding our 2010 interview. I want you to tell the truth and explain it wasn’t an interview, but an ambush, resulting in an unauthorized article. The retraction must also clarify that during our conversation I never mentioned the name Anthony Rawlings. You made assumptions based solely on conjecture.” Before Meredith could respond, Claire added, “If and when I read your published retraction, the exclusive rights to my story are yours.”

Verbally, Meredith agreed. Claire had heard verbal promises before. She informed Meredith everything would be summarized in a written contract. The breach of said agreement, by either side, would result in a hefty financial penalty.

Claire agreed to one concession. Meredith could promise a real interview with Claire Rawlings Nichols in her printed retraction. Without a doubt, that piece of journalism would reach Tony’s publicist Shelly, and in essence—Tony. Eventually, they would learn of her interview and impending article anyway. This plan put Claire in control of the timing and gave her visibility. She reasoned *visibility* gave the world *cause* if she suddenly disappeared, making Anthony Rawlings the most likely suspect.

Claire was no longer hiding or being played by Tony; for once, she was in control! The two women agreed to meet for a series of interviews and editorial sessions, after the publication of the retraction. They left the specific details in flux.

Smiling, Claire disconnected the call with a sense of satisfaction. She believed it was the right decision at the right time. The public had too many misconceptions. They needed to know the truth. They needed to know the real Anthony Rawlings before he repeated history with her, or heaven forbid with someone else.

Satisfied with her call, Claire sipped her coffee and noticed the blinking icon on her iPad, indicating an email. It was the confirmation of her impending trip. She’d paid for both the airline and hotel reservations with her new Visa. That wasn’t done recklessly. Claire knew her plans were now visible. She even felt a twinge of pride showing her ex-husband her new found independence. Of course, it was all a ruse; instead of flying into Corpus Christi where she’d spend her holiday, Claire was flying to San Antonio, where she’d rent a car, check into a very nice hotel, and then slip away and drive three hours to the coast. The deception was for Courtney. The two friends wanted time together, and their relationship needed to remain clandestine.

Although Claire wasn't sure, she believed her movements were being monitored. After all, Courtney said Tony hired a private detective. In the two weeks since Tony's call, she'd received two lovely floral arrangements. The first came a few days after their short conversation. It contained cherry brandy roses, lilies, dark blue delphinium, hot pink larkspur, silver dollar eucalyptus, and no card. Nevertheless, the meaning was clear... Tony knew exactly where she lived. The second arrangement came a week later with a card simply stating:

I HAVE BUSINESS IN CALIFORNIA SOON: PERHAPS WE COULD DINE?

Although Amber called it a waste of beautiful flowers, Claire threw both arrangements directly into the trash. After her reaction to his call, Claire decided she wasn't ready to face him or talk to him, in person or on the telephone. She could eliminate his voice by disabling her voicemail. Unfortunately, she still received his text messages. They mostly consisted of polite greetings to which she never replied. She hated to admit; even his typed word affected her. At times, she missed the pleasant Tony.

Contradictorily, the voice on the phone that sent chills down her spine and sent her running to the bathroom. That Tony she didn't miss. Besides, Silicon Valley was beautiful in April, with flowers at every turn. They didn't need flowers indoors, too.

Claire spent her favorite part of each day walking outside. Truly, the Palo Alto streets weren't like hiking in the Iowa woods, but it was outside, and as much as she tried, Claire couldn't shake the memories of her incarceration. When the breeze blew her hair and the sun warmed her face, the chains of her imprisonment melted away, and her wounded spirit began to heal. With each step in any directions she chose, her lungs filled with fresh air, and she felt her strength grow beyond that of pre-prison, to a place pre-abduction.



UNBEKNOWNST TO CLAIRE, her outings were diligently photographed and submitted to Mr. Rawlings along with her daily activities. Phillip Roach had never been paid so well for so little. Claire's predictable routine, as well as traceable internet usage, made for detailed reports and photos. He would often sit within the same coffee shop or café while Ms. Nichols lived in her own world. A few times, Phil worried she saw his camera, but with the paparazzi vying for her image, he blended into the crowd.

Mr. Rawlings seemed pleased with his reports, although not always with their content. The disclosure regarding the source of Ms. Nichols' new found fortune—the sale of her jewelry—was met vehemently. Following Mr. Rawlings' directives, Phil returned to Mr. Pulvara's office, and although the price seemed extreme, Phil followed orders to retrieve the rings at *any* cost. Not trusting couriers, Phil personally delivered the rings to Rawlings Industries Corporate Office, in Iowa City.

While he'd seen the tycoon's picture and talked with him on the phone, it was their first face-to-face meeting. Admittedly, within seconds of entering the CEO's regal office, Phil sensed Mr. Rawlings' commanding dominance. The expression Phil witnessed as Mr. Rawlings opened the velvet box was contrary to the millions of photos he'd seen. Obviously, the sale of his ex-wife's rings upset him. Thankfully, the sparkling diamonds satisfied Mr. Rawlings as well as verified Phil's willingness to complete directives.

For a split second, Phil worried about the sweet looking woman who'd become his new dedication. He wondered how she could end up with someone like the man before him. Although he'd read every bit of published information, she seemed no match for Mr. Rawlings' power.

Phillip Roach learned years ago to not include emotions in his line of work. This was emphasized during military training, reinforced in special ops, and ingrained as he covertly monitored person after person. Expectantly, his targets during military and special ops usually ceased to exist following their discovery. Phillip even followed orders; aiding in their demise. This training and dedication earned him the kind of money he currently demanded. On more than one occasion, his work required his own disappearance. With no personal connections, that wasn't a problem. If he relocated or moved for a year or two then it was just part of the game. His alliances could fulfill any necessary relocation, for the right price.

This assignment was different. He'd located his assignment, yet his orders remained reconnaissance. As opposed to setting the sights of a high powered rifle on the enemy of a high rolling gambler or a threatening politician, this was well paid babysitting.



CLAIRE MADE HER way through the crowd and settled at a small round table near the bar of a local Palo Alto restaurant. Although Harry and Amber weren't due for another fifteen minutes, Claire was ready. Tony made it clear early on he had no patience for tardiness. Now, punctuality was her mantra. She really didn't think about it; it just was.

While waiting for her friends, she ordered a martini and thought about her

ensemble: a pair of slacks and blouse from Neiman Marcus and a pair of Dior pumps from Saks. Truly, she was allowing the press to get to her. She wanted to look like Mrs. Rawlings to quiet their attack. Suddenly, she worried she was being photographed from every side.

Last night, when they talked about getting together before Claire left on her trip, Claire suggested eating at home. She even offered to cook. She liked cooking and contributing to the household duties. Her life in Palo Alto was a beautiful meeting of her previous two, not as tedious as her day to day survival in Atlanta, nor as opulent as her life in Iowa. It was real and comfortable: a perfect restart. However, her friends insisted on going out to celebrate her impending vacation. They knew the *press thing* bothered Claire, but they argued she needed to be free to live her life, without worrying about other's perception. After a deep sigh, Claire agreed.

Lost in her thoughts, Claire didn't see Harry until he was right before her with his hand on her shoulder. Looking up to acknowledge him, she noticed how nice he looked, wearing a sports coat and button down shirt. His hair was even gelled and combed back in an attempted style. Before she could speak, he bent down and kissed her cheek. She felt warmth flow from her face to her insides as he took a seat across the small table.

"Well, hello. That was an interesting greeting." She mused.

Harry's blue eyes sparkled, illuminated in the low light of the restaurant. "I noticed how nice you look. Is that a new outfit?" Then he leaned a little closer. "And that you're being watched from a table to your left." He reached for her. "Don't look, it'd be too obvious. I thought I would give them something to write."

"Maybe we should go somewhere else." Claire really wanted to say, *I want to go home.*

"This won't last long. We can leave, if you want, but I think your plan to make yourself visible is working. You shouldn't run from it now." He squeezed her trembling hand.

Claire looked at his serene expression and took comfort in his calmness. She exhaled. "Thank you, for being such a great sport about this."

"Well, like I said, I've never been a celebrity before."

"And, how do you like it?" She couldn't help notice the twinkle in his intensely blue eyes.

"I'm getting used to it. Just this morning, the barista at Starbucks recognized me and gave me free coffee."

Claire giggled. "Are you serious? I'm supposed to be the penniless person. Why don't I get free coffee?"

"Well, I'm not exactly destitute, but..." He mused. "I won't turn down free java."

The waiter came and took Harry's drink order. When he asked if they

were ready to order, Harry turned to Claire. “Do you know what you want? Or, do we need some more time?”

Claire turned to the waiter. “I believe I’d like a little more time, please.” She slowly picked up her martini and took a long sip, suddenly unable to make eye contact.

Seeming able to perceive her sudden change in mood, Harry asked, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s really stupid,” she said as she sat her drink back on the linen tablecloth. Peering above the flickering candle, she saw his concerned expression and gained strength to continue, “I know I don’t talk about my life with Tony very much. Maybe I’m not sure how I feel, but from very early on, actually the first time we ever went out, he ordered my meal, he ordered my drinks—everything.”

“Well, some men do that. Did you like it?”

“Not at first. I mean, he never asked me what I wanted. Even on that first date. How could he possibly know what I liked? Then later, I guess I got used to it. Other than the first time, I never questioned it.” Claire became transfixed by the flame of the candle, flickering in the center of their private haven, moved by some unperceivable breeze.



HARRY DIDN’T KNOW if he should encourage this conversation. It seemed to make Claire sad; however, it was the first time she’d opened up about any personal aspect of her life with Mr. Rawlings. He pushed, “Why?”

Claire looked up from the orange and blue glow. “Why what?”

“Why didn’t you question it? I mean, if you didn’t like it, and if you wanted to order for yourself, why didn’t you tell him?”

Claire exhaled.

Harry watched as her eyes and face which were deep in thought, slowly took on perfect features. He recognized what she was doing. She was becoming the pretend Claire, the one who kept others at arm’s length and said everything perfect.

“It’s very complicated. Let’s just say, no one tells Anthony Rawlings what to do or how to do it.” She picked up her menu. “So, what do you think sounds good?”

“I think it all sounds good. You should order whatever you want.”

The smile Harry spotted behind the large leather bound menu made his chest thump with pleasure. It wasn’t the pretend one.



As THEY DISCUSSED their cuisine options, both of their phones *buzzed*; there was a text message from Amber:

“SORRY. SOMETHING HAPPENED AT WORK—NOTHING SERIOUS. CAN’T MAKE DINNER.”

Claire felt a twinge of guilt. Truthfully, until that moment, she'd forgotten Amber was absent.

By the end of their meal, as they sipped coffee, Claire also forgot about the reporters. She'd been listening to Harry talk about things at SiJo. She didn't know anything about electronics or gaming and even mentioned she hadn't played a video game since college.

Shocked, Harry replied, “Then, it's settled. We're going back to my place, and you're getting a lesson on the advances in gaming.”

Claire smiled and shook her head. “I don't really think I'd be very good; I mean, it's been years. Everything I knew is outdated. Besides, I'm sure you have more important things to do.”

“What? More important than playing video games, are you kidding? Besides, just because you haven't done something in a while, doesn't mean you aren't good at it. With a little encouragement, I bet you'd be very good.”

“Are you that good of a teacher?” she asked. Harry's sly smile suddenly made Claire rethink her question. Perhaps the subject had changed without her realizing.

“I guess that remains to be seen.”

Although she could feel the blood in her cheeks and her increased pulse, she tried diligently to keep the conversation in check. “Well, the most advanced system I ever played was the Nintendo Game Cube, over ten years ago. Has it gotten more complicated? As I recall,” she peered over her cup and continued, “I was pretty awesome at Zelda.”

When they stood to leave, Harry casually placed his hand in the small of Claire's back. She considered moving away, but she consciously decided to continue the contact. Harry joked, “That is an impressive resume. I'm not sure why SiJo hasn't snatched you up as a gaming specialist before a competitor learns of your secret talents.”

Phil's camera caught it all.

“Oh sure, make fun. I bet I can beat you at Zelda, and I might even remember Mario's secret chambers, if I try.”

“You're on!” They stepped into the spring air.



THE NEXT DAY Claire surveyed her new luggage and stacks of clothing. One benefit of Claire's time with Tony was Catherine. She possessed the uncanny ability to think of everything Claire needed. Looking at the items before her, Claire wondered if Catherine would think of something she'd forgotten. There were sundresses, shorts, shirts, beach cover-ups, flip-flops, and sunscreen; it seemed like all the essentials for sun and fun.

Thoughts of Catherine made Claire sad. She truly loved the woman. Catherine was like a mother to her during a very difficult time in Claire's life. The idea to call and talk occurred more than once, yet Claire was afraid. She knew Tony's staff was incredibly devoted. What if Catherine believed Claire tried to kill Tony? The fear of hearing rejection in Catherine's voice stopped Claire from attempting communication. She didn't want anything to change the kind, loving Catherine in her memories.

As Claire's trip approached, her excitement at seeing her old friend grew. Courtney's first choice of destination was Cancun. Claire would have liked that; she'd never been. Unfortunately, Claire hadn't applied for a new passport. That was fine. Corpus Christi was a beautiful destination in mid-April: prime Spring Break time. The hotels and resorts would be bustling with patrons. Two women in a suite, walking the beach, and enjoying the pool would blend in. The last time Claire enjoyed a beach was in Hawaii, eighteen months ago. Allowing her mind to decompartmentalize the months locked away from sunshine only added to her exhilaration as she contemplated white sand, hot rays, and blue waters.

Her items weren't bulky. The smaller suitcase worked well, and it would be easier to negotiate through the busy airport. Claire glanced at her watch. Her flight left San Francisco International at 3:30 PM. With security regulations she planned to arrive by 2:30 PM. Currently, a little after 11:00 AM, she had time for lunch.

On her way to the kitchen, the doorbell changed her direction. Her thoughts were already basking in the Texas sun; they weren't thinking about unwanted telephone calls or reporters with cameras.

Their condominium building was secure. In order to enter, one had to pass a security guard in the garage or one in the lobby. If you weren't a resident, an ID and signature were required for entrance. This could be perceived as inconvenient, but for inhabitants it was reassuring.

Opening the front door, Claire could only see a stack of boxes labeled *Neiman Marcus*. With a sudden overwhelming dread, she realized the boxes obscured the delivery person's face; however, before she could shut the door, she heard a young man's voice and noticed inexpensive scuffed shoes.

“Ms. Nichols?”

She remembered to inhale. “Yes.”

The young sandy haired man moved the boxes to the side and peered around the bounty. “These are for you. Could you please sign the delivery confirmation?”

Relief lowered her defenses. “I’m sorry, there’s been a mistake. I didn’t order any merchandise.”

The young man struggled to balance the boxes and his electronic pad. He surveyed the information and confirmed her name and address. Pity overtook her, she finally responded, “All right. Bring them in and place them in the foyer.”

Claire signed the electronic clipboard and accepted the unknown merchandise. She shut the door and moved the boxes to the dining room table. An envelope was attached to the top box. Claire debated, open the envelope or the boxes? Choosing the envelope she read:

*I'll be in town after you return from Texas. Shall we dine?
Perhaps you would enjoy wearing something more appropriate for our
reservations?*

*Since you seem unable to answer your phone,
I'll send a car to your condominium, Wednesday 7:00 PM.*

I LOOK FORWARD TO OUR REUNION

Her fingers forgot to grip; the card floated to the floor.

A revolt erupted within Claire’s stomach. The contents of the boxes were still undetermined; however, the meaning of his words came through loud and clear. Translation...I know everything about you. I know about your trip. We’re going to dine on Wednesday. It wasn’t a request. His customary mandate.

She contemplated leaving the boxes sealed and throwing away the merchandise; however, curiosity won. Reluctantly, she opened each one. The small top one contained shoes; beautiful, high-heeled, Sergio Rossi black sandals. The next box was larger; tentatively, she opened the lid. The black and white, Christian Dior, off-the-shoulder dress took her breath away. The final box contained a Chado Ralph Rucci trim coat, crepe with sheer chiffon at cuffs and hem. As Claire’s fingers caressed the chiffon, she fought the desire to try it all on with the need to send it all back. Settling for somewhere

in between, she stacked the boxes in her closet and compartmentalized any thoughts related to them away for another day.

It was a lesson learned from Scarlet O'Hara, *Fiddle-dee-de, I'll think about that tomorrow*. Today, she wanted to concentrate on her impending vacation. Her ex-husband's invitation and clothes could wait. She'd deal with those later.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Things do not pass for what they are, but for what they seem. Most things are judged by their jackets.

—Baltasar Gracian

“*Y*es, ANTON, we’ll be at Blair by the time of the ceremony,” Amanda’s voice came through the telephone receiver.

“It starts at 2:00 PM,” he reminded his mother.

“We know that. You know Nathaniel would never be late.”

That went without saying; Anton’s family was punctual. “Mother,” Anton hesitated, “is Grandmother coming?” He debated voicing the question but he needed to know. After all, his relatives portrayed the perfect family. That image was becoming increasingly difficult to depict with Sharron Rawls’ erratic behavior. Besides, he had enough issues with his classmates. He didn’t need a crazy grandmother added to the mix.

“She is, and everything will be fine. I promise.” Anton didn’t answer, so Amanda continued, “Nathaniel hired a private assistant for Sharron. She accompanies your grandmother everywhere. With her assistance, Sharron’s doing much better. It keeps her organized and focused.”

Anton liked the sound of that. “That’s good. I’m glad to hear it.”



TWO DAYS LATER, dressed in his cap and gown, Anton peered out into the auditorium, searching for his family. Bright lights shone directly onto the stage, limiting his ability to see the audience; however, he knew they were there. The Rawls may be many things, but undependable or unreliable were not among their list of inadequacies. If a commitment were made, it was completed.

Following the ceremony, Anton met his family in the grand hall of the Center for the Arts. It was the perfect location for graduation ceremonies hosted by this prestigious private academy. Scanning the crowd, he found his parents and his grandparents, and an unfamiliar face.

Walking toward the group, he waited for accolades that would never come. How could Anton ever imagine he'd receive praises for graduating third in his class? Third, what a disgrace! That his GPA was above the perfect 4.0 and that he'd been accepted by every university to which he'd applied were not important. In his families eyes, he wasn't number one.

Feeling the slap on his shoulder, he turned to see his father's reserved, yet kind eyes. "Congratulations, Son, we'd like to take you out to dinner. This is the end of a very important phase of your life."

Anton nodded in his direction; it was a form of acceptance. He looked toward his grandparents. Nathaniel's expression revealed nothing. Whether he were proud, or whether he were disappointed, Anton wouldn't know until later. Sharron, on the other hand, appeared quite content. The young woman on her arm whispered in her ear as Sharron smiled and nodded.

The only positive aspect of the day, Anton could salvage, was his grandmother's new sense of calmness. His mother gently touched his elbow. "Anton, this is Marie. She's Sharron's personal assistant."

Anton presented his hand. "Hello, Marie, it's nice to meet you."

The young woman smiled bashfully and presented her hand. "Hello, Mr. Rawls."

He noticed Marie's sweet smile and soft eyes, contrasting the dark in the members of his family. He wondered her age and guessed not much older than himself.

What credentials did one need to be a personal assistant? She must have some education beyond high school, mustn't she?



DURING DINNER, MARIE impressively kept Sharron in line. Anton's grandmother didn't yell, complain, or argue. This even affected Nathaniel's demeanor. He was more relaxed than Anton had seen in years. Anton even saw his grandfather occasionally smile at his wife, who smiled lovingly in return. The look in her eyes, as she focused on her husband, was like one peering upon a Roman God. It wasn't that Nathaniel didn't deserve the reverent gazes. Anton presumed he did. After all, his patience with Sharron was more than Anton or anyone else witnessed in any other facet of Nathaniel's life. Nonetheless, Sharon's praises for her husband were lessened by her ability to remember anyone other than him. Her memory seemed to

concentrate on their life, pre-child, before Samuel, before Amanda, and before Anton.

Being Anton's graduation, he thought it would be nice if he were the subject of someone's compliments, but of course, the weather was a more important subject.

On multiple occasions, Marie reminded Sharron of her duties at hand, and the elderly woman immediately refocused. It was obvious, Sharron wanted more than anything to make her husband proud. She could in fact do as she was told, with some assistance. Sharron could follow the rules.



SAMUEL GRIPPED THE edge of the table. His mother was no child. She didn't need a damn nurse, and she sure as hell didn't need to worry about his narcissistic father's concerns. Sharron Rawls should be concerned about herself, not anyone else!

Of course, each time Samuel tried to discuss this with her, she'd smile serenely and ask about Nathaniel. Where was he? When would he be back? And oh, yes, what was your name?

Between his father's business deals and his mother's declining mental health, there were days Samuel thought he should be the one to go completely insane. Thank God he had Amanda to keep him stable and Anton.

It went without saying, they were very proud of their son. Anton graduated third in his class from a prestigious private academy, and he would attend Columbia University in the fall, majoring in business and computer technology. It was no secret his son inherited a prowess for business. Samuel only hoped Nathaniel wouldn't ruin Rawls Corporation before Anton could get his feet wet. There were so many wrong decisions being made.

Seeing his mother's sudden agitation, he started to help; however, Marie immediately assisted. It surprised Samuel to witness his mother's sudden composure. Perhaps having a non-emotionally involved assistant wasn't a bad idea. Although young, the girl seemed to possess a sense of calmness the Rawls admittedly lacked. In some ways, it reminded Samuel of his mother, before this terrible illness took hold.

In the face of the storm, otherwise known as Nathaniel, Sharron calmed the winds, rains, and rough waters. His entire life, Samuel wondered how she did it. Rarely, did he ever witness a disagreement between them. Superficially, she appeared to submit to his every demand, yet there were times when they looked at one another, and Samuel knew, without confrontation, Sharron had made her feelings and desires known.

Samuel failed miserably in that category. He didn't have the ability to

communicate nonverbally with his egotistical father. Their confrontations were predictably loud and boisterous. Perhaps it was a two-way street. Nathaniel needed to want that communication. He accepted the glances and body language from his wife, but not from anyone else, even his only son.

Samuel believed his parent's union had a history of rough patches, yet Sharron never complained, and now, as her mental facilities slowed. Hell, derailed the reality in which she chose to dwell was not that of a mother, or grandmother, or even a wealthy businessman's wife. She saw the world as it had been when she and Nathaniel were first married. She looked at her handsome, yet aging husband and saw the twenty-year-old soldier she loved.

Samuel supposed that, on some level, he resented Anton for looking so much like his father. It wasn't as though Anton could control his genetics, *that* would be Samuel's doing as well. It was only that when Sharron looked at Anton, she smiled so sweetly, and her eyes melted into the liquid affection reserved for her true love. Yes, it was Nathaniel she saw. Nonetheless, she never asked Anton his name; she only called him Nathaniel.

How in the world Samuel found Amanda, and had forged out some semblance of normalcy was beyond him. Talk about nature versus nurture. Shit, he was screwed either way. Peering at his son, Samuel prayed Amanda's influence would overpower the messed up Rawls blood flowing through Anton's veins.

Yes, although the mother he once knew was rarely visible, Samuel knew Sharron's influence was his saving grace. Therefore, if this young girl helped Sharron transition from her world of make-believe to the present, then maybe Samuel could learn to accept her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A friend is someone who understands your past, believes in your future, and accepts you for who you are today.

—Unknown

C LAIRE'S COMMERCIAL FLIGHT to San Antonio took almost four hours. Flying first class, she reasoned was a gradual downgrade from private jets. She also knew some reporter could take her picture, and the penniless thing was getting on her nerves. After landing in San Antonio, she secured a rental car, drove to the Hotel Valencia Riverwalk, and checked into her suite. It was truly beautiful, complete with a balcony overlooking the famous San Antonio Riverwalk. While there, she messed up the bed and threw some towels into the whirlpool tub.

It kind of looks lived in, she thought, as she made her way back to her rental car.

Next, she drove two and a half hours to Corpus Christi. Along the way, she stopped for a healthy McDonald's salad; anything fast to get her to Courtney. Thankfully, the rental car's built-in GPS directed her around an accident on Highway I-37, south around Mathis. The voice knew about the back-up, and although rerouting added about thirty minutes, it was better than sitting in standstill traffic. By the time Claire reached their hotel, it was almost 2:00 AM, local time.

Just like her suite in San Antonio, the floor of their suite was only accessible with a key. Claire's key was waiting for her at the front desk, under the name *Julia*; Courtney's future daughter-in-law.

When Claire opened the door and stepped onto the tiled entry, she heard the familiar scream resonating from one of the two bedrooms. She barely had time to see the lovely white living area and brightly colored furniture before her entire body was encased in Courtney's full embrace. In no time, their joyous reunion became tearful. Perhaps it was sleep deprivation; more than

likely, it was their eighteen month separation and the circumstances surrounding it.

Their reunion was everything that Claire imagined and more. When Claire arrived late Tuesday night—well, it was more like early Wednesday morning—to their rendezvous suite, Courtney was anxiously waiting.

Courtney hadn't changed; her bright blue eyes and brown hair were exactly as Claire remembered. Courtney jokingly said, "Honey, my hair is only the same because my beautician hasn't decided to change colors!"

Leaving her unpacking until morning, the two sat on the sofa, knee to knee, and talked until dawn. Their conversation focused more on the future than that of the past. There would be plenty of time for that as the week progressed.

Courtney told Claire all about the preparations for Caleb and Julia's upcoming nuptials. She desperately wanted to have Claire attend the event; however, as long as their relationship remained secret, they both knew it wouldn't be possible. Courtney also told Claire about Caleb's recent entrepreneur endeavor. "He's doing very well in Chicago. It's an investment firm, and he already has some great clients."

Claire couldn't hide her surprise. "I'm shocked he'd want to leave Rawlings. I mean with Brent and Tony's friendship, I'd think Caleb's future would be set. Tony always liked your children."

"Tony was very supportive. Being an entrepreneur himself, I think he admired Caleb's desire to succeed on his own."

Somewhere deep inside, Claire thought, Yes, I'm glad he can be understanding... I know it's possible, just not usual! "I'm glad it's working out."

Claire told Courtney all about California, Amber, and Harry. Of course, they'd discussed much of this on the phone, but face-to-face was so much nicer. The subject of Claire's financial backing slipped into the conversation as they talked about some of the recent reports of Claire's life. She assured Courtney that she wasn't living with Harry, and she wasn't penniless. She even divulged the information about the mysterious 100 thousand dollars.

"Where do you think it came from?" Courtney asked as she sipped her wine. It was their second bottle of Cabernet, something which likely added to their honesty and freedom of dialogue.

"I really don't know. It's weird. At first, both Jane and I feared it was from Tony."

"Why'd you think that?"

"Well, who else has that kind of money to throw away?"

"Good point, but maybe the donor didn't feel they were *throwing it away?*"

Claire smiled. "I hope not. Whoever it was, I can never thank them

enough. They gave me my life back.” She continued thoughtfully, “Prison wasn’t as bad as it could have been, I guess. I kept to myself a lot.” Claire fell silent as she gazed out the dark balcony doors to the still black sky.

Courtney put her hand on Claire’s knee. “You can talk to me.”

Claire fought the tears. “I know. It’s just—I haven’t spoken to anyone about this. I mean, I like Amber and Harry, I really do. They’ve been wonderful, especially considering we hardly knew one another when Amber went out on a limb and sent a jet to get me. I want to open up to them, but I’m so confused about so many things. I just don’t know.”

“Did you have anyone to talk to in prison?”

“There was a counselor, actually a psychiatrist. Her name was Dr. Warner. She took an interest in me. We met three times a week. At first, I didn’t say much. It’s just hard to know who you can trust, but over time, I said a lot.”

“Were there no other prisoners for you to confide in?”

Claire shook her head. “No. Once people found out who I was married to... well they wouldn’t be... very nice.” Looking down into her lap, she explained, “I never felt like I acted better than anyone else. I mean, I was a prisoner there just like everyone else; however, they thought I did.” Claire inhaled deeply. “It was just easier to stay by myself and not try to make any friends.”

Talking to Courtney was so easy; it had always been.

Courtney scooted closer and squeezed her friend’s hand. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more for you while you were there...” Then in a quieter voice she continued, “...or to keep you out of there.”

“I truly understand.” Claire smiled at Courtney’s sad blue eyes. “But you did do something. When your letters started to arrive, I can’t tell you how much they meant to me!”

“I’m so glad, and I’m sure our entire correspondence went under the radar. Believe me, if Tony knew, Brent would’ve heard.”

Fighting her emotions, Claire said, “I know it was a big risk. Thank you.”

“So, you’re convinced it wasn’t Tony that sent the money?”

“Yes. Well, you helped convince me. You sent me a text saying how upset he was when he learned about my release. I mean, if he’d sent the money and letter to Jane, he’d have already known. I know it wasn’t in the papers, which is just another of the amazing miracles, but I know Tony. If he’d spent 100 thousand dollars, he would’ve followed up to learn if it paid off.”

“I think you’re right.”

“When he called me, he said he’d just learned of my release. No, I don’t think it was him.”

“Any other ideas?” Courtney asked.

“No, not really, but whoever did it took quite a risk. Not just with Tony, but also with Governor Bosley. That isn’t all; Jane could’ve refused to file the

petition. There were a lot of pieces of a puzzle that needed to fall into place.” Claire sipped her wine and settled against the soft sofa cushions. “I don’t know who my angel is or how it all worked; I’m just thankful it did.”

“I can’t believe Jane Allyson gave you the money. Was that *your angel’s request?*”

“I don’t think so. I think it was supposed to be her payment for filing the petition. I tried to refuse the check, but she said it was a ridiculous amount of money for such a small amount of work. Apparently, the petition was complete, except for her signature. All she did was sign and walk it into the governor’s office.” Claire took another drink. “I don’t mean all—obviously that’s a lot, but she told me to consider it seed money to start my new life and pay her an appropriate fee. I could hardly refuse. I really believed I had nothing.”

Courtney’s eyes glistened. “You did have something, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Claire answered slyly. “It was actually Emily’s idea. I hadn’t considered selling my jewelry and had no idea of its value.”

“Do you miss it?”

“No! Oh...” Claire played with the rim of her wine glass. “...I answered that too quickly. As you know, I haven’t worn any of it for over a year. The rings were beautiful, and when I received them, I loved them. Wedding rings are supposed to be a symbol of a feeling. Without the feeling, they’re just metal and stones.” A little more empathically, Claire continued, “I always disliked the journey necklace.”

“Really? It was lovely, and you wore it often.”

“Yes, I did.” Claire allowed the rim of her glass to loiter on her lips, less than a subtle hint she’d said all she was saying on the subject.

“What about the earrings?”

“They were beautiful too. Tony gave them to me for my birthday, right after that party we all attended in Hollywood. Remember, at Eli and MaryAnn’s?”



COURTNEY KNEW, FROM the copy of the preliminary brief that Brent obtained, what happened in California. She knew that Tony abused Claire when they were alone on that trip. Claire didn’t know she knew. Courtney planned to share that during this visit; however, now didn’t feel right. “I remember the party. Afterwards, the two of you went to Yosemite, right?”

“Yes.” Claire’s expression lightened as her lips turned upward, and her eyes began to sparkle. “I’ve considered buying myself some diamond studs. Everyone needs a nice pair, don’t you think?”

Courtney smiled, seeing her friend's pride, discussing *her* ability to do as *she* pleased. "Well, yes! Everyone needs a nice pair of diamond studs!" Courtney agreed.

Courtney also talked about Tim and Sue. Their baby, Sean, just turned one! She showed Claire a picture on her phone from his first birthday party.

"I can't believe their son is actually one. I've missed so much."

"Honey," Courtney began, her voice reflecting her look of concern. She continued, "There are some people who truly believe you tried to kill him."

Claire looked down at her glass. "I assumed as much."

"Just so you know, I'm not one of those people."

"Brent?"

"No. He doesn't believe it either. Let's just say, we have a different perspective than most."

Claire reached out and grabbed Courtney's hand. Her green eyes glistened as tears teetered on the rims. "Thank you, for believing in me. I know I can't prove it, but just knowing there're people who believe me and support me means the world."

Sharing both laughter and heartfelt moments that lead them to tears, they chatted away until dawn. When the sun rose, they were both exhausted. Sleepily, they stood at the railing and watched the dark sky fill with light as a red hue spilled across the Gulf of Mexico. Eventually, the red became orange, brightening the sky until the black became blue. They both agreed; sleep was in order.



SO MANY MEMORIES of their friendship filled Claire's mind as she settled into the queen sized bed. Instantaneously, sleep overtook her.

Unbelievably, she didn't stir until after 1:00 PM. Looking at the clock, she couldn't believe the time. Walking into the empty living room, she found a note:

Hi Claire,

I'm at the pool. There's coffee in the pot. Before you come join me, please look at some papers on the kitchen table. I hoped it would be easier for you to read this without me looking over your shoulder. Brent accidentally received this information via Marcus Evergreen. He never should've had it, read it, or shared it with me. There'd probably be stiff legal ramifications if it were discovered. Of course, Tony doesn't know we have it or read it. Those ramifications don't need to be said. We all know

they'd be stiff.

Please know we love you and believe every word. I hope you'll come down and talk to me when you're finished.

*Love,
Cort*

Although only about seven yards from the living room to the kitchen, Claire's feet suddenly weighed a ton apiece; with each step, her goal seemed farther away. She could see the binder was thick with pages. At one time, before she married Tony, he showed her the article written by Meredith Banks, and another time, he had the news release of Simon's death. Both of those experiences came rushing back. Claire wasn't sure what the binder held. Somehow, she knew it wasn't good.

Sitting her mug of coffee and muffin on the table, she exhaled and opened the binder. Inside she read: *January 31, 2012, Paul Task, Attorney At Law - Preliminary brief - State of Iowa vs. Rawlings, Claire.* Claire thumbed through the pages, catching a word here and a phrase there. She didn't need to read it word for word. She'd spoken it. Hell, she'd lived it. The account of her life with Tony, the truth, was right there in black and white. It wasn't all inclusive, that was even stated, but it was descriptive. From her abduction, to his abuse, his punishments, his controlling nature, her near death accident, his change of behavior, their marriage, his control, his domination...and the reason she drove away from the estate. At 2:30 PM, her cup was empty, and the muffin was cold, stiff, and still wrapped in a shiny tin.

Claire stared at the open binder and wondered what to do, what to say. Other than outsiders, her attorneys and Dr. Warner, she hadn't discussed any of this with anyone. She felt a twinge of panic.

If Tony finds out that they know. Oh God! It's a direct violation of his rules.

Leaving the binder open she went to her bedroom to put on her bathing suit. Claire realized this was the information Courtney wanted to share—in person. She really did know. Claire remembered the cathartic feeling she experienced when divulging all of this to her attorneys; however, it was different with Dr. Warner. Claire felt ashamed, like it was somehow her fault; she allowed all these things to happen. Dr. Warner agreed, well, in so many words, that Claire allowed Tony to dominate her.

How could she face Courtney and look into her eyes, knowing she had allowed herself to be abused and had lied about it?

Claire meant to go to the pool; however, somewhere during the process of getting ready, she collapsed on her bed and released years of suppressed tears.

They didn't stop. Unknowingly, she drifted off to sleep, wearing her new white bikini. Wakefulness came with the sensation of a warm, soft hand rubbing her exposed back. She didn't turn around. Instead, she kept her face buried in the damp, soft pillow and choked out her apology, "I'm so sorry."

Claire expected compassion. Instead, Courtney's voice was stern, "You are sorry?" Heavy emphasis on *you*. "Claire, please turn around." Slowly, she did. Courtney looked at her puffy eyes and tear stained cheeks. "Girl, what in the hell do *you* have to be sorry for? It seems to me that the rest of us are the ones who should be sorry!"

It didn't make sense to Claire. She was the one who allowed Tony to abuse her. She was the one who lied to everyone, especially Courtney. How many times did Courtney ask Claire if everything was all right? And every time, she lied.

The tears resumed. "I lied to you. I lied to you many times. I let things happen."

"Honey, *everyone* lets thing happen around Anthony Rawlings. What were you supposed to do? Do you think if you'd stood up to him more, than he'd have backed down?"

Claire couldn't answer. She didn't want to discuss any of this. It made her head hurt.

Courtney continued, "Let me tell you something, it may not be physical—like you endured—but we're all victims of your ex-husband. Do you think for a minute we would've let you go to jail, much less to prison, if we weren't scared of what Tony might do?"

Claire stared at Courtney in disbelief. Wiping her nose with the back of her hand, Claire asked, "What do you mean, scared?"

"I mean scared, like frightened. We're putting all of our cards on the table, right?" Claire nodded; Courtney continued, "We all know Tony has power, a lot of power. Brent isn't ready to retire, and there's no way he can walk away from Tony. Besides, most of our money is tied up in Rawlings Industries' stock. At least, it was. We never discussed a fear of physical retaliation, but Brent convinced me that our lives and possibly those of our children would suffer unseen consequences if we came clean about this information."

"How long have you known?"

"Since before your divorce. The file was on a pen drive from Evergreen's office. Like my note said, it shouldn't have been there, and Brent shouldn't have read it."

Claire turned her head into the soft pillow and exhaled. Slowly, she sat up and looked into the eyes of her friend. She truly was at a loss for words, and she was completely uncomfortable with the mixture of emotions swirling inside her chest.

"Claire, I understand why you didn't tell me. I wish you would've. I had

this feeling that things were different than they appeared. Truthfully, I had no idea the enormity of the situation. I understand you couldn't say anything."

"If I would've, I wouldn't have been allowed to see you." A sob came from somewhere deep, buried under years of suppression. "I needed you."

The two women hugged like never before. A few moments later, Courtney started to laugh. "Aren't you glad you came all this way, for all this fun?"

Claire looked into her honest blue eyes now reddened like her own and snickered, "At this moment, I'm not too sure."

"I am. I needed you to know what we know. I needed you to know we understand. And, if for some reason you feel responsible, or like you deserved something, anything that happened to you...you're sadly mistaken. I told you once; I loved and hated your husband. That's still probably true. He's capable of wonderful things. We just never knew the extent to which he's capable of terrible things."

Courtney continued, "Claire, you're a saint for loving him despite all of that. Please, *never* think you deserved any of it. No one should endure what that brief says you endured." Courtney shook her head. "The thing I keep thinking is... I really believed he loved you, and I believed you loved him, too. As his friends, we worried about a woman wanting him for his money. I never got that feeling from you."

Claire replied, "I wish I could explain it. Hell, I wish I could explain it to myself. When I met him, I didn't know who he was. Even after he took me to his house, I didn't know who he was. Believe me, I hated him. I told him how much I hated him, multiple times. Maybe it was the isolation; I didn't have contact with anyone but him, yet over time, I did love him. At least, I thought I loved him, and he did get better, a lot better." Claire smiled a sad smile. "I think it's true. Love and hate are very close emotions, both intense and consuming. Even after he left me in jail, and still today, I find myself struggling with those two emotions." Claire shook her head. "I know it doesn't make sense. It's just that when he was good, he could be *so* good. When he wasn't...It was just... here was always so much stress and pressure." Claire thought about Brent and smiled a weary smile. "I think you do understand. I think if anyone would, it would be Brent and you. I've seen that same stress on Brent's face."

Courtney nodded. "I'm glad you believe me. We wanted to help you, but we weren't sure it would pay-off. Honey, it wasn't throwing away our money; it was more than worth it!"

Claire sat straight, her mouth gaped with surprise. Finally, words came from her lips, "Oh my God, it was you?" Courtney nodded again. "Of course, the petition was filled out. An attorney would know how to do that. Brent's an attorney!" Claire's voice sounded shrill with amazement and gratitude. "Let me pay you back. I can now; I sold the jewelry."

“Absolutely not! Consider it guilt money. We were so helpless, wanting to do anything to stop what was happening to you. Like you said, it was a risk—a good risk that paid off.”

Claire hugged her again. “So, it’s true, Brent does believe me.”

“I said he did.”

“Yes, I know you said... but he *really* does. It’s just when he came to the prison—”

Courtney interrupted, “Tony warned him. He said the tapes from those visitors’ rooms were available for a price. He told Brent the visit was strictly business, nothing more.”

“Did Tony ever watch the video?”

Courtney smiled. “I don’t know. Brent hoped he would.”

“Why?”

“Because when Brent came home, he was so impressed by you. He didn’t know what to expect, and he didn’t want to face you.”

“He didn’t have a choice, did he?”

“No, he didn’t, yet he was glad he did afterwards. He talked about your strength, resilience, and determination. I don’t know if you remember, but you told him to tell Tony to bring on the liable case, that you’d be glad to testify to a larger audience.” Claire grinned and nodded; she’d said that. “Of course, Tony wouldn’t tell Brent what warranted such a case, but Brent knew. He also knew there was *no* way Tony would pursue it. It was some stupid mind game. Honestly, we don’t know if it was meant to hurt you or Brent, but I can tell you, it inspired Brent.”

“Inspired?” Claire asked.

“Yes, we knew before then that we wanted to distance ourselves and Caleb from Rawlings Industries. Seeing your strength while away from him—in prison no less—has been a constant reminder to us to stay the course.”

“I’m glad. I remember feeling bad for Brent when he left.” Claire’s eyes were drying. She couldn’t believe she had this support from Tony’s *closest friends*.

The two ladies went to the pool and ate lunch. They lounged on chairs at the beach and sipped drinks. They walked along the shore and talked about everything. Claire even told Courtney about her mixed feelings regarding Tony. She hated what he did. Nevertheless, sometimes she’d remember good times, and at times, she missed him too. Claire knew he wanted to see her. Honestly, the idea terrified her. She wasn’t afraid of a physical threat; she was doing everything she could do to avoid a repeat of that history. It was *her own resolve* she questioned. If the charming, loving, and friendly Tony approached her, then she wasn’t sure she could resist him.

Claire told Courtney about the dinner invitation. Surprisingly, Courtney didn’t try to dissuade her. A few weeks ago, a similar subject caused an

argument with Amber. Claire reasoned; Courtney knows Tony and truly understands.



THE WARM GULF water lapped the shore, as the soft, moist sand enveloped their bare feet, and the sun bathed their tanned skin. Clad in swim suits, Claire and Courtney picked up the occasional shell as they walked along the beach. Although it had been the third morning of their secret getaway, neither friend had run out of things to share.

Claire told Courtney all about Tony's box; his confession of sorts. She hadn't planned to divulge, but sharing felt too liberating. She explained why Tony came for her in the first place, all stemming from *her* grandfather's help convicting *his* grandfather for multiple white-collar crimes. "It's like everyone connected to the scenario thirty years ago, and their family has been made to pay. Even Tony's parents."

"Do you think he hurt his own parents?"

"I did at first. Maybe it's just wishful thinking, but now I'm not sure. I think he had some influence over my parent's death or maybe it was coincidental?"

"I had no idea Rawlings wasn't his birth name. I wonder if Brent knows."

"I think Tony also had some influence with Simon Johnson's death. It's too coincidental, him dying after I saw him in Chicago."

Courtney shook her head. "I knew he was capable of a lot, but I can't believe how deep this all goes. He really sent you pictures showing he's been watching you for years, *before* you ever met him?" Claire nodded. "What about Emily? If he's getting everyone related to your grandfather, wouldn't he do something to her too?"

"I think he did. I mean, not personally, but by hurting me and John, he hurt Emily."

Courtney confirmed, Brent told her Tony was responsible for John's difficulties. "Is it done?" Courtney asked, "Is there anyone else he believes deserves to pay?"

"I don't know. I mean, he seems to be after me again." Claire shrugged. "I don't know if he thinks I didn't suffer enough, or maybe he thinks I did. Perhaps he believes his vendetta is over and that I'll want to resume our relationship. Thankfully, Emily and I are the only descendants left of our grandfather."

"Well, Honey, only you can decide what to do." Smiling with blue eyes shining, Courtney continued, "Just remember that this time it'll be *your* decision." Then as an afterthought she said, "I guess you should be glad you

don't have cousins."

"Yeah, I'd hate to think of anyone else enduring what I did."

"Now, tell me more about this Harry guy. He's kind of cute in the pictures I've seen in magazines."

Claire blushed. "He's just a friend, but you're right, he's kind of cute. I'd say his most endearing quality is that he's nothing like Tony."

"So?"

"So, nothing, we're friends. He's Amber's brother, and he's been very helpful with rebuilding my life and researching Tony's past."

"Sure, I believe you."

Watching the waves flatten the sand, Claire confessed, "And... he might be an excellent kisser, but I can honestly say nothing more has happened."

"Does he make you smile?"

Allowing her grin to surface, Claire nodded.

"Do you live in fear of upsetting him?"

Claire shook her head.

"Honey, if you go to that dinner with Tony... will you do me a favor? Remember those two questions and your answers."

The lump in Claire's throat didn't allow her to verbally answer; she nodded. She'd remember.



THE RENTED CHRYSLER 200 rolled along the hot Texas pavement, driving toward San Antonio. While music filled the car, Claire contemplated Courtney's confession. Never in a million years would Claire have suspected Brent and Courtney were her angels. Tony considered them his closest friends, yet Claire was driving north on Highway 37 toward her hotel. If it were up to him, she'd still be locked away.

The days spent by the pool and on the beach gave Claire's skin a much needed dose of Vitamin D with a golden brown bonus. It had been so long since she'd enjoyed intense sunshine. The getaway strengthened her in so many ways: mentally and physically.

Courtney left Corpus Christi earlier in the morning. As Claire looked at the clock, she thought, she should be back to Iowa by now. Claire wasn't scheduled to fly to San Francisco until tomorrow.

Around 4:30 PM, Claire pulled into the parking garage adjacent to the Hotel Valencia Riverwalk; the suite was still hers for another twenty-four hours. Obviously, the housekeeping staff knew she'd been gone for most of the week, but she wasn't trying to fool the housekeepers.

Searching for the key to her suite, which was really a card, she stepped

into the shiny golden elevator. The doors closed, but the compartment didn't move. She remembered putting the card someplace *safe*—if only she could remember which compartment of her purse that was.

The elevator doors opened again and a tall, middle-aged, white haired gentleman entered. Claire smiled politely as she dug into another zipped compartment within her cavernous Gucci handbag.

He showed a reserved smile and acknowledged Claire with a nod; then he inserted his card and pushed eleven. She exhaled as she found the key. "Here it is." Her voice was barely a whisper, not intended for anyone but herself.

The man stepped to the side, exposing the control panel. "I'm sorry. Am I in your way?"

"No, actually you've already accessed my floor."

He looked at the small suitcase near Claire's feet. "You'll enjoy this hotel; the staff is wonderful."

"Thank you, I've been here for a few days." Realizing the suitcase, she continued, "I just had a few things in my car that I needed to retrieve."

She didn't know why she was lying. Nevertheless, she'd rehearsed her story, and she was glad it sounded slightly plausible.

"Well, enjoy the rest of your stay." The elevator stopped, and the doors opened. He politely held the door, allowing her to exit.

She smiled, "Thank you, you too."

Claire walked toward the right, while the gentleman walked to the left. Unlocking her door, she quickly entered the sunlit suite. As she turned to bolt the lock, she mindlessly peered through the peephole. Directly across the hall from her room, she saw the same gentleman opening a door.

That's odd, why'd he walk the other way if his room was there? she contemplated. He looks familiar. Maybe I saw him when I originally checked in? Or, maybe I'm just paranoid!

Within the bedroom, upon the bedside stand, was the only item she'd left at the hotel, one of her cell phones—her *Tony* phone. She left it *on* and plugged in.

Not hearing from him in four days was refreshing. Allowing the signals from *this* phone to be sent from *this* location was priceless. That bit of deception plus a lengthy GPS erasing procedure were Harry's idea. His past police experience made him suspicious. That same experience gave him invaluable knowledge. Claire couldn't have begun to erase the GPS permanently without his directions. Claire would do anything, no matter how laboring, to protect Courtney.

She opened the French doors to her balcony and inhaled the warm spring air. The beautiful wrought-iron railing added to the French ambiance. Looking down, she watched the people stories below on the famous Riverwalk. It was beautiful, filled with flowing water, flowers, people, and

giant cypress trees. A faint breeze blew the curtains of the open doors as she relaxed upon her king-sized bed and checked the phone. There were seven missed calls and three text messages. Claire closed the phone. The getaway was too fresh in her mind—too many good memories. Her mood was too high; she would read the messages later.

Next, she checked in with Emily: her daily *I'M FINE* text. Today, she added:

"I'M BACK IN SAN ANTONIO. MY FLIGHT IS TOMORROW ABOUT NOON FOR SAN FRAN. CALL IF YOU CAN. LOVE YA!"

With Emily's husband, John, back in Indiana, the two sisters no longer spoke every day; however, they made a point to check in daily. Claire spoke to John a few times since his prison release. At first, it was even more uncomfortable than her first talks with Emily. Thinking about her time with Courtney, Claire decided they needed some face-to-face time. It was much better than phone calls.

She also sent text messages to Amber and Harry, informing them of her location. Knowing there were people who cared and worried about her, added to Claire's euphoria. Closing her eyes, she debated napping. The distinctive *Emily phone*'s ring stopped her descent into the drowsy abyss. With her eyes still closed, she reached for the small black cell phone. "Hi."

"Hi, Claire, I hope you don't mind me calling." The voice caught her off guard, her eyes opened wide. Napping disappeared from her radar. She hadn't heard this voice since last July at Iowa's Woman's Penitentiary.

"Brent?"

"Yes." She held her breath, unsure what to say. Brent continued, "Courtney's home safe."

Claire's mind spun. She wanted to trust him; after all, according to Courtney, he was also responsible for her freedom, and he was also a victim of Tony's. Claire knew that. She'd witnessed their interaction. "I'm glad." She swallowed and continued, "Brent... thank you."

"Please, don't thank me. I've done much more to hurt you than help you."

She heard the anguish in his voice. "Just tell me, of all the things you've done, which ones did you want to do?"

"I wanted to help you. I never wanted to hurt you, even before I read the preliminary brief. It's just that sometimes I had no—"

Claire's words stopped him, "I understand." She inhaled and continued, "You know that though, don't you?"

"I do, and we understand you."

Her entire body filled with warmth. She'd known this man for less than three years. Her ex-husband claimed him as his best friend, and he'd endured much of the same domination as Claire. She couldn't suppress her smile as tears trickled down her cheeks. "I offered to pay Courtney back. I can now."

“She told me, and I agree with her. Please, keep your money. Watching and listening to Tony’s response when he learned of your unorthodox release and seeing him unable to control or influence the situation, more than made it worth every penny.”

“If there’s anything I can do for either of you...”

“Actually, there is...” The two continued their conversation for almost an hour. Brent wanted to know all about Tony’s box. The information fascinated him. He also asked about the information she’d learned from their detective work. Brent vowed to do what he could from his end. He also explained the things he’d done to hurt Claire: the divorce with no financial compensation, his attitude when he visited her in prison, hiring a private detective to find her, and supporting Tony along the way.

Claire reassured Brent that she understood. He didn’t have a choice, and she appreciated his current clandestine support. Fearfully, Claire asked Brent a question she’d contemplated off and on again for a while, “Is Jane Allyson all right? I mean, has Tony done anything to her?” Claire’s heart skipped a beat as her question met silence.

Finally, he answered, “She is, for now.”

“Can you please elaborate?”

“When we left her office, Tony voiced his displeasure.” Claire nodded, although Brent couldn’t possibly see her from Iowa. He went on, “I’ve tried on numerous occasions to remind him that if something would suddenly happen to her up-and-coming career, immediately following your petition for pardon, it would appear suspicious.”

Claire smiled; Brent knew the game. Tony’s kryptonite was indeed appearance. Claire replied, “I don’t want her to pay because she helped me.”

“I put her in that position. I promise I’ll do all I can to protect her.” Brent chuckled. “She knew what she was doing when she did it. That’s why I chose her. She’s one tough lady and a great attorney! You should’ve heard her when we went to her office.”

“I bet. She’s the only one, in a room full of males, who stood up to Tony at the jail in Iowa.”

“Other than you.”

Claire stammered, “I-me? I didn’t stand up to him. I never did.”

“That isn’t true. You never would’ve survived if he didn’t consider you a challenge. He truly thought you’d take the insanity plea.”

“Well, the fact I didn’t, probably confirms that I am insane.”

Brent laughed. “That’s why you and Courtney get along so well.”

He went on to tell her about Phillip Roach, the private detective who’s been watching her for the last month, sending photos and information to Tony. Brent wasn’t privy to all the information, but Tony’s attitude regarding Claire seemed to be changing. Brent assessed that he’s no longer upset; *obsessed*

would be a better word.

Brent assured Claire that she'd successfully lost the private detective during the last week. "If Tony knew you and Cort were together, I would've heard. I even called Mr. Roach once to confirm my theory. He was rather allusive about the past four days and promised more information in the future." Claire heard the smile in Brent's voice. "It's all making Tony a little crazy."

"Have you met this Phillip Roach? What does he look like?" Claire asked.



THE CLOCK READ 7:23 PM. Originally, Claire planned a quiet evening with room service. Her TV had an attached gaming system, and she'd contemplated practicing her skills in anticipation of another gaming session with Harry; however, finishing her make-up, stepping into the Marc Jacobs white silk sundress, and fastening her Prada sandals, she mentally reviewed her new plan.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'Charm' - which means the power to affect work without employing brute force, is indispensable to women. Charm is a woman's strength just as strength is a man's charm.

—Henry Ellis

THE FINAL SLAM of the cottage door muffled Sophia's sigh. On the other side of the wooden barrier were their home, life, and private haven. With a turn of the bolt, and the closing of heavy shutters on creaky hinges, she'd successfully closed it tight: storing everything away for a season.

Sophia's mind swirled with memories of their first home: late nights slipping out of bed and making her way upstairs to her studio, while Derek slept—light brown hair disheveled, mouth slightly open. She relished the security of knowing when sleepiness overtook her creativity; she could crawl back into their bed and be enveloped by his warmth. Leaning against the door, she remembered the first time Derek made a fire in their fireplace but forgot to open the flue. Once the smoke cleared, they laughed until they cried, and the way the golden sunshine streamed into her studio in the late morning. It was her favorite time to paint; the colors looked so real. These recollections made her smile, despite her heavy heart.

Begrudgingly, she allowed herself a window of self-pity. That being said, as soon as she was once again face-to-face with her husband, she vowed to keep her true feelings hidden. After all, this was Derek's big break. Sophia wanted to be the supportive wife. She kept telling herself, if the roles were reversed, he'd support me.

Undoubtedly, the uncertainty added to her unease. They didn't know when they'd be back to Provincetown or who'd be returning. It could be both of them or only Sophia. It all depended on Shedis-tics.

Since graduating high school, Sophia controlled her life. Having the

people of Shedis-tics dictate her living arrangements, travel plans, and everything else made her anxious. Yes, she'd submitted to the occasional investor, agreed to show her work, or attended a private wine-and-dine session; but all at her discretion. She'd always had the option to say *no*.

Sophia knew marriage meant collaboration—a partnership. She'd watched her parents successfully share a similar arrangement her entire life. When she said *I do*, Sophia willingly accepted her role as half of a whole; however, now she questioned her percentage. Was she in fact half? Or was she less? Was Derek still half? Or was he more? Perhaps Shedis-tics was now part of the equation?

Originally, his new job was scheduled to begin May 1st. Nevertheless, they called him out to Santa Clara only two days after her father's accident, over four weeks early.

Little did Sophia realize, when Derek said he couldn't take more than two nights in her childhood bedroom, he'd meant it literally. Truthfully, Derek hadn't known either. As he explained, when the company president calls and invites you to meet with parent company executives, you don't say, No, thank you.

Lingering on the stoop of their cottage, she looked toward the Harbor, inhaled the salt air, and listened to the soft din of the sea. The sound of the surf created a continual soundtrack for life in Provincetown. While something she rarely thought about, she knew she'd miss it terribly.

Yesterday, she closed her studio on Commercial Street. The sign in the window read: *Closed for an Undetermined Amount of Time*. The neighboring businesses promised to keep a watchful eye on everything. Sophia knew nothing would physically happen to her personal slice of cramped heaven. It was the emotional toll that concerned her.

On her way to the airport, Sophia took a detour and found herself at the shore, enjoying the calm water rippling beneath the crystal clear blue sky. Tears streaked her cheeks as she bid adieu to Provincetown Harbor. Through her blurred vision, she saw the Cape across the sea. Sophia absorbed the scene, savoring it—preserving it. If she kept it safely sealed within the recesses of her mind, it would never completely be gone. In times of need, she'd will it forward, out of the depths of her memories, and into her thoughts.

Recognizing the inevitable, she made her way to the small Provincetown airport. From there she'd fly to Boston. In Boston, she had tickets for a first-class flight to San Jose, the closest airport to Santa Clara.

Even with a short layover in Denver, she anticipated feeling Derek's strong arms by 4:00 PM Pacific Time. When she did, she planned to melt into his embrace and show him why they should never be apart again; then, she reasoned, the world would once again be right.



WHEN THE ELEVATOR doors opened, Phillip Roach just about lost it! She entered almost sixty seconds earlier and should have been to her floor, not still within the golden mirrored cubical. Practicing his covert skills, Phil Roach assumed a calm passive persona and spoke casually to his number one assignment, Claire Nichols. This hadn't been his plan. Nevertheless, now that they'd conversed, and she hadn't recognized him; she might be his lifesaver.

Anthony Rawlings was suspicious and becoming increasingly untrusting. Phil did a good job for a few days, giving generic reports and letting Mr. Rawlings assume his ex-wife was vacationing alone in San Antonio; however, the lack of specifics and pictures were beginning to spark too many questions.

The per diem and generous expense account made it difficult for Phillip Roach to confess he'd *lost* his assignment. A few days ago, Claire Nichols flew to San Antonio with Phil on the same flight. He knew of her hotel reservation, and he followed her to the Hotel Valencia. It was late; he assumed she was sleeping safely within her room until the next day; however, when he returned to the Riverwalk later the same night, Ms. Nichols was AWOL. Her car was gone, she was gone, and her cell phone continued to send signals from her suite. Phil panicked, knowing he'd been duped!

He also knew Claire's reservations at the Hotel Valencia extended until Sunday morning. Having no idea where to look, he continued his surveillance of the hotel on the famous Riverwalk. When he saw Ms. Nichols enter the lobby Saturday afternoon, it took all of his self-control to not hug her. Thank God she was alive and safe. If something had happened to her in a place he hadn't reported her being, Phil didn't even want to consider the consequences. It didn't matter. She was all right.

She wasn't just all right. She was relaxed, tan, and happy. He was sure she'd been with a man, but who? He'd confirmed Harrison Baldwin's presence in Palo Alto during the last four days. There was no doubt Mr. Rawlings would want answers. Phil's exuberance at her presence could be blamed for the unplanned meeting in the elevator; however, as he reviewed the encounter, he assured himself no harm no foul!

Currently, she was settled in her room, presumably for the night. Phil had watched her for almost three weeks. She wasn't the wild and crazy kind. Room service was a 99.9% assured outcome. Rarely was Phillip Roach wrong.

The electronic sensor startled him back to reality. It was a non-conspicuous device attached to her suite door. As long as the door remained closed, the device remained silent. When the door opened and separated the connection, an alarm sounded in his room. Immediately, Phil jumped to the

peephole, expecting to see a waiter delivering room service.

Instead, stepping from her suite, dressed to kill was Claire Nichols. No wonder Mr. Rawlings was so interested in this women, she's frig'n hot! Phil thought as he watched the petite frame in the flowing white sundress and high heels. Although his view was somewhat distorted due to the domed glass peephole, the woman he saw looked more like the woman in the pictures. She looked like Mrs. Rawlings.

Phil grabbed his sports coat, combed his hair back, and splashed his face with water. Fifty-seven seconds after Claire left her room, Phil double stepped it down the stairs to the lobby, only eleven floors down.

The firm soles of his shoes hit the marble floor of the main lobby. Phil inhaled and exhaled, regulating his breathing as he walked toward the large glass entry. Being Saturday night, the hotel as well as Riverwalk bustled with people, most paired and appropriately adorned for evening revelries. It was after all, a five-star establishment. The magnitude of private conversations created a dim drone as Phil scanned the open foyer. The ceiling towered many stories above, the enormous fireplace blazed, and the tile floor echoed with the clicks of stiletto heels. An occasional whiff of food cooking in the distance reminded Phil that Citrus, the hotel's finer restaurant, was nearby.

His tenacity was rewarded as Phil passed the glistening, metal, and beaded chain curtain separating the ultra-sleek Vbar from the Hotel Valencia. Just beyond the semi translucent drape, he saw the beautiful outline of Claire Nichols. Her white dress shone like a beacon within the dimly lit tavern.

Phil followed the piano music and entered the posh lounge. The low lights, red carpet, and intimate groupings created a chic romantic atmosphere. He watched from afar as her face, illuminated by a flickering red candle, smiled and spoke to the attentive waiter. Using his phone, he casually snapped a few photos. Walking nonchalantly through the busy lounge, Phil positioned himself on a leather stool at the shiny black bar. Each time he raised his head, Ms. Nichols sat directly in his field of vision. He ordered a *Blue Moon* and waited.

Fifteen minutes passed; no one joined his assignment. She didn't seem worried, and she wasn't fidgeting with her phone, yet her attire screamed date. He waited, but no one joined her, so perhaps no one was coming. Phil contemplated the woman he'd spent the last three weeks getting to know. Many women sitting alone in a bar would be self-conscious. Ms. Nichols looked completely content, composed, and confident. She sipped a glass of red wine and gazed around the room. Suddenly, their eyes met. Phil fought the urge to look away. He reminded himself, they'd met on the elevator. His mind wheeled as she smiled and tipped her glass his direction. *Could this be an invitation? Perhaps if I talk to her, maybe I can learn where she's been?*

Phil smiled and raised his mug in response. The bartender broke their

trance. "Sir, would you like another beer?"

Phil became aware of his near empty mug. Maybe the stress of the last four days had gotten to him. "Yes, and could you please send the lovely lady in the white dress another glass of wine, with my compliments."

"Certainly, sir."

He covertly watched as the waiter gallantly delivered the wine to her table. He couldn't hear their conversation, but he could read her body language: surprised, pleased, and appreciative. When she turned toward him, she lifted the new goblet and mouthed *thank you*. Phil bowed his head. When he looked up, her gaze was no longer his. Had he expected an invitation? Fifteen more minutes passed, and she remained alone. Phil puffed his chest, exhaled, and eased himself from the tall leather stool.

Lost in thoughts, she didn't acknowledge him until he was directly in front of her. "Thank you, for the wine." If he'd startled her, there was no reflection in her voice. He assessed, she is either considerably calm or an ice princess. Her vitality penetrated the calm veneer. Energy sparkled in her emerald eyes. Phil became consumed by the fire he observed in those amazing eyes. An *ice princess* would never be able to conceal that kind of heat: she'd surely melt.

"You're welcome." He remained standing while she lounged gracefully in the soft high backed chair.

"I suppose I should've been the one to buy you a drink."

He smiled. "And why would that be?"

"Well, you're the gentleman who saved me from remaining within the confines of the elevator forever."

"I do believe you would've rescued yourself. After all, didn't you find your key as we began to ascend?"

Claire smiled acknowledging his affability. "Thank you, again."

Phil gestured toward the empty chair in Ms. Nichols' grouping. "Would you mind if I sat and joined you for a while?"

Abashed, Claire replied, "Oh, of course, I'm sorry I didn't offer sooner. Please, help yourself."

Phil lowered himself onto the plush cushion and pursued their conversation. "Hello, I'm Phil." He extended his right hand.

Accepting his hand, Claire responded, "Hello, my name is Claire."

He couldn't help notice how her green eyes glistened in the candlelight. If only he could take her picture now. It would make Mr. Rawlings forget the absence of information during the last four days. "I couldn't help notice your tan. Did you get that here at the pool?"

"Texas sun is quite intense."

"I've been here since Tuesday. I find it hard to believe I've not seen you during the last four days..." He continued to fish for information.

Unfortunately, Ms. Nichols stayed true to her story. She'd been here at the Hotel Valencia for the last four days, enjoying the local sights including the Alamo and a boat ride on the river. It was a well-deserved retreat which included sleeping late, bedding early, and the completion of two novels. They'd been talking and laughing for about thirty minutes when Claire received a text message.

"I apologize, this is rude. It's just that I'm expecting some very important information."

"Please, go ahead and check your phone." Phil wondered if he called the number he'd given to Mr. Rawlings whether the phone in her hand would ring. He doubted it. The glow in her eyes and the obvious smile indicated her satisfaction with the information in the text.

Still holding her phone, Claire took her wine goblet and slowly sipped the red liquid. Setting the glass upon the small table she looked directly into his eyes. "Phil?"

"Yes?"

"I believe given the circumstances, I'd feel more comfortable addressing you as Mr. Roach."

His back straightened. He hadn't told her his last name. "Excuse me?"

"Yes, Mr. Roach." She paused for effect. "I mean, I don't really know you, not as well as you know me: since you've been following me for the last month." She allowed her lips to linger upon the glass's rim teasing the liquid. Her eyes stayed on his.

He contemplated his options: lie, act ignorant, or come clean. "I'm not sure what you're talking—"

"Let's cut to the chase Mr. Roach. You were hired by my ex-husband to keep tabs on me. You've done your job quite well, that is until you lost me last Monday. Now, the way I figure it, you had two choices: be honest with Mr. Rawlings by telling him you don't know where I was, or lie and give him just enough information to keep him pacified?" She sat the glass down. "How am I doing?"

"I assure you, I don't know—"

"Given your inability to be honest with me, I'd assume you chose deception with your employer as well."

"Ms. Nichols, I'm not sure how you've reached your conclusions."

"For starters, I never offered you my last name." She waited; he remained silent. Claire continued, "I decided to confront you tonight—or should I say, to have you confront me—for this discussion. Mr. Roach, I do not wish my whereabouts for the last four days to be known. Let's both say that I've been here in San Antonio alone, and you'll confirm that as the truth."

"Ms. Nichols, tell me why I would possibly agree to this?"

Her broadening smile made her sun-kissed cheeks rise. Without saying a

word, Phil knew she had a plan. “Let me show you the text I just received. Actually, it’s a multi-media attachment.” Claire extended her hand, with her iPhone angled for his maximum viewing pleasure.

Phil looked down onto the small screen and saw a picture of him standing near her table. She brushed the screen and another photo appeared: him sitting across the small table from her. She brushed the screen again: they were leaning toward one another across the small void.

“I don’t understand,” he confessed.

“Come now, Mr. Roach. You infringe upon people’s privacy for a living. That information is often used in less than scrupulous ways. Surely, you recognize the same being done to you.” She waited; he remained silent. “You haven’t divulged the truth to Mr. Rawlings over the last four days. He’s suspicious and asking questions. I’d be glad to forward these pictures to the press. They do seem to enjoy writing about me, or perhaps I could send them directly to my ex-husband with information regarding our secret rendezvous.”

His mind spun. *Shit! This isn’t happening.* “Why would you do that?”

“To get you fired, Mr. Roach. I don’t appreciate having a shadow everywhere I go.”

“I’d deny everything, explain that I was only talking to you for information.”

“That sounds plausible; however, I presume you were instructed to keep me in sight, not to make contact.”

She was right. That was his instruction. He bowed to her manipulation. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to report exactly what I told you. I’ve spent the last four days relaxing in sunny San Antonio and enjoying the sights.”

“Why haven’t I sent photos?”

“You were having problems with your computer, or your SD Card, or your camera. I don’t care. Tomorrow, I’ll gladly don different clothes and allow multiple staged photos. Adjust the date on your camera, and your story will be complete.”

“What’s in this for me?”

Claire stood. “Would you like to join me on the terrace?”

Phil stood. They slowly stepped through the open French doors onto the crowded stone terrace illuminated by large lit torches. The spring air blew warm against their faces, and their attention moved to the magnificent view. San Antonio was before them. Below, the Riverwalk and cypress trees faded into shadows. In front of them, the buildings beamed with artificially induced colorful hues accentuating the wondrous architectural structures. Claire continued their conversation. “It’s a beautiful city. I think it would be nice to spend four days here.”

Her Cheshire grin infuriated Phil; he repeated, “You haven’t answered my

question. Why would I agree to your plan? What's in it for me?"

She responded ever so coyly. Phil thought he heard the faintest evidence of a southern drawl. He'd read she lived in Atlanta for a few years. "That should be *painfully* obvious, Mr. Roach." The word painfully stretched for four or five syllables. "For starters, you get to keep your job."

Phil considered her threat. If she followed through and sent the compromising photos to Mr. Rawlings or the press, he would undoubtedly loose his assignment. "For starters? Are you insinuating there's another benefit, to me?"

"I'll allow you to ponder the possibilities." She lifted the bulbous goblet to her lips, intentionally savoring the rich dry liquid. "My ex-husband is a powerful man. I don't believe he would take kindly to you moving in on me, your assignment. I'm not saying that to imply a mutual affection. Rather your mere presence indicates his sense of proprietorship. Not only will these photos imply a relationship between the two of us, but your recent inability to confess your shortcomings in the area of trailing will support the claim." Claire gazed out over the Riverwalk. "Mr. Roach, let me be the first to warn you. Lying to Mr. Rawlings is not recommended. That said: getting caught lying is even worse. My plan will have mutual support and after tomorrow's photo shoot, substantiating evidence."

"What are you trying to hide?"

Claire finished her wine and sat the glass on a nearby tray. "My plane leaves before 1:00 PM. Of course, you know that, don't you?" Phil smiled, and she continued, "I'd like your decision regarding my proposal. I need to plan my wardrobe for your photos."

Phil stood at least six inches taller than Ms. Nichols. He glanced at her feet. The golden sandals had tall heels. He wasn't sure of how tall she was, but he wondered why women chose to walk in such uncomfortable shoes. As his eyes scanned upward, settling on her intense emerald eyes, he fought the new feelings he had for Claire Nichols. Contempt and respect were currently contending for first place. How could this petite polished woman so easily reduce him to her accomplice? He leaned down to lower his voice. "For such a beautiful woman who appears deceptively meek." She turned toward him, stupid grin still intact. "You really are a bitch."

"Thank you, Mr. Roach." She extended her right hand. After only a moment's hesitation, he accepted. "I've had a marvelous teacher. I believe we have a deal, am I correct?"

"Yes, Ms. Nichols, we have a deal. I certainly hope you've enjoyed your relaxing stay in San Antonio."

"Thank you, I have. Oh, Mr. Roach. If you're considering tampering with the GPS in my rental car, let me save you the trouble. The data's been permanently deleted. Shall we begin tomorrow with breakfast; let's say 7:30

AM?"

Phillip thought how helpful that information would have been earlier this evening, before he spent forty-five minutes trying to extract recent destinations from the built-in Global Positioning System within her Chrysler 200. There was no question in his mind: he'd seriously underestimated this woman. He wondered if he were the only person to make that mistake. He truly doubted it. "I'll be lurking in the shadows at 7:30 AM. Forgive me; I don't want to be included in future photos."

"Then we've never met." Claire turned to leave then glanced back. "Until tomorrow."

He nodded and watched her walk away. Her posture exuded confidence, straight spine and slightly raised chin. The backless dress exposed her feminine, lean body. A faint white line from a slender bathing suit strap was visible across her tanned back. Below the bare skin covered with the soft white material was one of the most perfect round behinds he'd ever seen. Watching it sway with just the perfect amount of sultry yet aristocratic movement, he concluded: she does a fine job walking in those shoes. A clandestine four days with her in this five-star hotel wouldn't be a bad tour. Hell, it might even be worth losing his job.

The body of Mr. Roach's email was short and simple:

Mr. Rawlings,

I apologize for the inconvenience and delay. My laptop decided to reject the SD card from my camera. I'm glad to say the kinks have been resolved. As you will see, I have multiple photos of Ms. Nichols from throughout her four day holiday. I honestly expected to see her with someone; however, it seems this was truly a four day getaway meant only for her personal rest and revitalization.

I have a return ticket on her plane. We should arrive in San Francisco at approximately 5:00 PM PST, 7:00 PM CST. I'll be available by telephone after that, if you need to reach me. Again, I'll remain dedicated to this assignment until I learn otherwise.

Thank you,
Phillip Roach



TONY CLICKED THE attachment. A parade of pictures: Claire eating breakfast, lounging at the pool, at dinner, in a bar...After a fast pass through all fourteen photos, Tony went through them again, slowly digesting the contents. He wondered about San Antonio.

Why? Why would she go there? It didn't make sense, but then again, why not? She'd always enjoyed warm weather and sunshine.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A man growing old becomes a child again.

—Sophocles

M

ARIE COMBED Ms. Sharron's thinning hair and talked endlessly about nothing. Mrs. Sharron Rawls enjoyed hearing her talk. When Marie would momentarily pause, to collect her thoughts or take a breath, Ms. Sharron would gently tap her arm, indicating for her to continue. Marie wondered if the sweet elderly lady understood the words being said, or if she just liked the sound of her voice. Heaven knows, even with the large staff, the enormous house could be incredibly quiet and lonely. There were times Ms. Sharron would allow the sounds to be the radio or the television, but without a doubt, she preferred voices. When Marie spoke, Ms. Sharron's breathing would regulate, and her expression would calm.

It would seem that after a year and a half, Marie would have run out of things to say, but she hadn't. She could ramble at length about nothing. Truthfully, she hadn't planned on staying with the Rawls for this long. She, of course, never saw herself as a nurse maid, yet given her circumstances, this job was a godsend, and now, barely twenty-three-years-old, she feared it would end too soon. After all, Ms. Sharron was barely a shell of who she'd been when Marie began.

In the beginning, it was sad to see the way she struggled for words and their meaning. Nevertheless, as Marie spent day and night by her side, she found humor in the most unlikely places. Surprisingly, Ms. Sharron found humor too. This shared bond and most absurd witty view of an unfortunate reality, bound these women, despite their drastic differences. The rest of the family was too serious, especially Mr. Samuel Rawls, Ms. Sharron's son. Marie shuddered to think how he would react if he knew the way they laughed at some of her mishaps.

Marie never had formal care giving training. Then again, is someone

formally trained to care? Wasn't it as simple as being observant to needs and fulfilling them? If Ms. Sharron looked toward her cup, she needed a drink. If she fidgeted in her bed or seat, she needed to get up and move. It wasn't rocket science, yet other than Mrs. Amanda Rawls, whose presence for some reason agitated Ms. Sharron, the men in this family were hopelessly incapable. Even when they tried, they were often too self-absorbed to notice the slight clues Ms. Sharron put forth.

Marie's duties transformed as Ms. Sharron's disease progressed. In the beginning, Ms. Sharron tried diligently to maintain certain responsibilities. Being that she always oversaw the household staff, she felt it necessary to maintain that assignment and appear competent to her husband. After all, he ran a million dollar business. With tears in her eyes, she explained—over and over—that it was her duty to be sure *his* home ran efficiently. Marie caught on quickly to the roles of the different employees. She helped Ms. Sharron not only monitor job performance, but payroll. Ms. Sharron didn't write checks, but she compiled the information for Mr. Rawls' accounting staff; Marie made sure Ms. Sharron's figures were correct. Eventually, Mrs. Amanda Rawls took over the responsibility. In actuality, it happened before Ms. Sharron became aware. Ms. Sharron believed she and Marie were still in charge, but they weren't. In time, she forgot about the staff and household responsibilities. After all, in her mind, she wasn't the wife of a tycoon, but of a handsome young soldier.

Mr. Nathaniel Rawls spent a lot of time with his wife. It broke Marie's heart to see the look in his eyes as he attempted to make conversation. For the most part, Ms. Sharron was beyond speech; however, if her eyes saw the real world, which rarely occurred, they lit-up when she saw her husband or grandson. Marie learned early on that Anton looked remarkably similar to Nathaniel as a young man.

When she was more lucid, Ms. Sharron enjoyed passing the hours looking through old photo albums. Marie learned a great deal about the Rawls' family history from those albums.

Marie also researched dementia and Alzheimer's disease and learned recalling memories from the ancient past was somehow easier than recent memories. That inability to recall recent events aided Marie's monotonous dialogues. It wasn't like she needed to talk about new things every day or every hour. Ms. Sharron likes the sound; content was unimportant.

There were only so many stories a twenty-three-year-old could tell. At first, she talked about books and movies. For someone so young, her mature interests made good stories. She enjoyed foreign films and biographies. Marie found learning about people and why they did what they did, fascinating. Sometimes, instead of telling stories, Marie would read aloud. The mansion had a large library. Marie could find book after book that filled her interests

and needs. With time, she also talked about her past. It wasn't like it mattered. Ms. Sharron couldn't remember or repeat her sordid story.

The Rawls home was like nothing she'd ever seen, at least not in real life. When she applied for the position, she had no idea of the opulent lifestyle she would enter; however, behind the gated drive, inside the stately walls, and amongst the luxurious furnishings, they were still just people. It took her a while to realize, but once she did, it made everything less awkward.

Even the great intimidating Nathaniel Rawls was in reality a man, as they say: who puts his pants on one leg at a time. Perhaps it's the hours they've spent at Ms. Sharron's side, but Marie actually enjoyed his company, and if she wasn't imagining things, he appeared to enjoy hers. To allow Ms. Sharron the gift of their voices, they discussed unlimited subjects. At first, it was superficial; he didn't seem open to anything else, and Marie was too hurt by her own family to open up with another one; then with time, they'd comment on books, movies, or news. Marie didn't know the protocol for a job such as hers, and without a doubt, she worked too well with Ms. Sharron for Nathaniel to call her out on her shortcomings.

The end result was a twenty-three-year-old woman who'd argue her points and opinions with a sixty-plus-year-old CEO. She didn't realize this was wrong. After all, if he brought up the conversations, why wouldn't she answer honestly?

She spent so much time sequestered with Ms. Sharron that she didn't know she was the only one who spoke to Mr. Nathaniel Rawls with such candor. The realization suddenly became apparent at a family dinner. Anton was home from Columbia University, and the mission was to appear as a family united. Conversely, Marie felt tension bubbling from every pore and rippling through the air, resulting in an undercurrent which swallowed everyone's words and happiness.

Marie knew there were issues at Rawls Corporation. Sometime during their long conversations Nathaniel spoke about decisions and risk taking. Marie increasingly admired Mr. Nathaniel's business sense.

That dinner was a wake-up call. She hadn't noticed the undercurrent in the beginning of her employment; there was too much to take in, but this perfect family suffered from serious dysfunction.

Marie understood Alzheimer's as a sad, degenerative disease. She also wondered if on some level Ms. Sharron wasn't better off in her own world. The toxic quality of the one around her could cause anyone the desire to escape.

She also understood why Ms. Sharron saw the world as it had been, and not as it was. The man who sat by her side, conversed with Marie, and religiously kissed his wife each morning and evening wasn't the same man who presided over the family meal. What Marie didn't understand was why

he wouldn't share his caring side with the rest of his family.

As Ms. Sharron weakened, she no longer made it to the family dining room. Instead, her meals were eaten in her suite. At first, they were served on a small dining table within the large suite. With time, her eating became less regular. Many times, physical feeding was required. For some reason, she'd only accept this action from Marie or Nathaniel.

The other members of the family faithfully visited every day. Well, Samuel and Amanda did; Anton would when he was home. Marie didn't blame the young man for staying away. Actually, she understood the need to distance oneself from certain people, and while Sharron's son and daughter-in-law were kind to her, they both treated Marie with a kind of superior disregard. Perhaps it was because of Ms. Sharron's affinity for her. Marie wasn't sure what she'd done to warrant their acrimony.

Attached to Mrs. Rawls' large suite was a smaller one where Marie resided. The job also included generous pay; however, with no definition of hours, she rarely had time to spend her new found wealth. Besides, she had all her needs met: a place to live and food to eat. With time, Nathaniel offered to purchase clothing, but Marie declined. She had plenty of money in her account, and she didn't want to take advantage.

One evening, following her refusal of his generosity, she entered her closet to a completely new wardrobe. That incident taught Marie the tenacity of Mr. Rawls' resolve. If he wanted to do a kindness, he wouldn't be stopped. Later, she would learn the opposite was also true. If he had a score to even... there would be no holds barred.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Anyone can hide. Facing up to things, working through them, that's what makes you strong.

—Sarah Dessen

THE WATER WASN'T colder or clearer in first class, nonetheless, it was refreshing. Claire thought about Phillip Roach sitting somewhere behind her, in economy. She'd seen him at the airport. The uneasy way he turned away, as she inclined her head in his direction, made her smile. Having Courtney and Brent's support filled Claire with more resolve than she could imagine. The feeling of invincibility wouldn't last forever, but she'd savor it for the time-being.

With her new found strength, Claire forced herself to concentrate on the stack of boxes in her closet. She should have immediately sent them back to Neiman Marcus. She should have called Tony and said, "Thank you, but I'm busy." Unfortunately, Claire didn't do any of those things. Now, she had three days to prepare for a dinner with Anthony Rawlings.

Peering around the first-class cabin, she took in the leather seats and heard the hushed voices barely audible above the drone of the engines. Laying her head against the seat, she wondered how many of the women around her would consider an invitation from the great Anthony Rawlings an honor. Amused by the thought, she reminisced about a time when she didn't know the name Anthony Rawlings. Unfortunately, she couldn't allow the memory to linger. Claire knew his name, both current and birth, and most importantly, she knew she'd allowed too much time to pass to cancel their date. Now, she needed to contrive a plan to control the evening.



UPON ARRIVING HOME, Amber asked Clair to fill her in about her trip. Claire told her about the reunion with her friend. Although she didn't share the discovery of her saviors, she made no attempt to hide her joy at the way the week progressed.

Claire hesitated telling her friends about her impending reunion. She knew they wouldn't be happy. On the plane, she decided to concentrate on the angle of learning more about Tony and getting clarification on his confessions. She couldn't hide from him forever. Actually, she was no longer hidden. This reunion would take place, and Claire needed their support to tilt the odds in her favor.

When Amber retired, prior to Claire's announcement, Harry smiled and asked, "So are you tired from your trip, or would you like to go next door for another video game lesson?"

Throughout her vacation, Claire spent some time thinking about their last gaming lesson. Truthfully, she wasn't looking for a romantic interest. It was even difficult to image herself with anyone but Tony, yet as they sat a week ago, side by side, holding the newfangled controllers, and laughing at her avatar's jerky movements, she sensed a mutual admiration. It showed in his soft blue eyes and his encouragement and support. There was no domination or instruction. After her recent loneliness, Harry's comfort was refreshing and so different than anything with Tony. The light-heartedness, warmth, and mutual appreciation allowed her to lower her guard. When he gently eased his arm around her waist, she was only mildly surprised. Instantly, Claire realized she didn't want to protest. Therefore, when his lips neared hers, she'd intended to submit willingly, but before she could, he stopped.

Claire opened her eyes, unsure of what happened. His honest and even timid expression reflected in his words. "Claire, are you sure you're all right with this?"

His unexpected need for permission flooded her with admiration. Claire didn't answer; she wasn't sure if she could trust her voice. Instead, she nodded and leaned toward him.

Harry pressed forward, and their lips united. She felt his warm chest against her breasts. It had been so long since she shared a passionate moment with a man; however, she unconsciously molded against him.

They didn't take it beyond kissing and caressing. Nevertheless, multiple times throughout her vacation, the memories of that gaming session infiltrated her thoughts. Lying in the sun, she'd suddenly remember his strong arms, unruly hair, or the scent of his aftershave, and uncontrollably, she'd feel a tightening somewhere deep inside. It was an old feeling; however, having it brought about by a new source was surprisingly refreshing.



Now, HE WAS asking if she wanted to play video games. She knew he didn't mean *video games*. With a twinkle in her eyes she answered, "I don't know, do you think I still need lessons?"

Harry glanced toward his sister's room. Turning back to Claire, he whispered, "No, I don't think you need lessons at all. Maybe we could just play?"

"Hmm now that's an offer a girl can't refuse."

He took her hand and led her toward the door.

She'd been in Harry's condominium many times. Though smaller than Amber's, the one bedroom unit was equally lavish in design with quality craftsmanship, wooden floors, handcrafted woodwork, granite counters, and ornamental lighting. Nevertheless, what continued to bring a smile to Claire's face was his amusingly eclectic decor. While obviously equipped by a man, technology was the main focus. Couches, chairs, and tables were secondary to large screens, speakers, and surround sound. All he needed was a pool table in the dining room to have an official bachelor pad. The first time Claire entered his condominium, she half expected to turn the corner and find one, or perhaps foosball, but surprisingly he did indeed have a real dining room table.

"Would you like anything to drink? I have some Cabernet," Harry asked as they passed the threshold, into his abode. Claire noticed the low set, indirect lighting. She smirked, wondering if she were indeed that predictable.

"Sure. Do you want me to get the PS3 out?" Claire asked with a grin to her voice.

"Unless you want to practice your skills on the *Wii*, it does require more hands-on, you know, use of your entire body."

"I've never played that."

He was calling from the kitchen. Claire could hear the pop of the cork. "I bet that, with a little help, you'll catch on fast."

Harry entered the living room and handed her a goblet. Smiling, he leaned in for a kiss.

She absorbed his warm smile and willingly accepted his puckered lips. "Can we talk before we try the *Wii*?"

"We can do whatever you want." Harry sat on the sofa.

Claire eased herself a few feet away and turned toward his handsome gaze. She never expected this to be so difficult. "I didn't have a chance to tell you about a delivery that came just before I left on my trip."

Harry sat his glass on the coffee table and asked, "Delivery? Did you receive more flowers?"

"Not flowers..." Claire went on to tell him about the note and the clothes.

She watched as tension tightened his neck muscles. For someone who was mostly calm, the subject of Anthony Rawlings, in more than an abstract sense, initiated obvious unease.

“And you plan to go on this outing? You plan to get into this car he’s sending?”

“Well, I’ve given that some thought. You see, he still doesn’t know I have his private cell number, so I’ve decided to call him, but not until Wednesday afternoon; then I’ll inform him of a change of plans.”

Harry picked up his glass and listened while Claire explained her ideas. She said she’d tell Tony that since she knows the area, she also made reservations at a nearby restaurant. She’d also inform him that she’d meet him there at 7:00 PM. Honestly, she wasn’t sure how it would go, but she wanted the ability to leave of her own free will.

“If I ask you, will you tell me something about your relationship with him?”

Claire sipped her wine. “I don’t know. It’s difficult for me to discuss.” She looked at the man sitting only a few feet away. She’d entered his condo willing to take their relationship farther. *Did she honestly feel better sharing her body than her memories?* He patiently waited, and finally, she exhaled. “What do you want to know?”

Harry scooted closer, removed the glass of wine from her hand, and placed it on the table. She waited for his question. Instead, he leaned down, his lips brushed her neck, and he gently kissed that spot between her neck and shoulder. The round scooped neckline of her shirt exposed the sensitive site. Shivering at the light touch of his lips to her skin, tingles descended toward her arms, to her fingers, and down her legs, all the way to her toes.

Claire gasped as she inclined her head, granting him greater access. Before she realized, she was sandwiched between him and his leather sofa. His lips were no longer brushing her skin; they were connecting her lips and skin with a new found urgency. Her body arched as his hands roamed over her tight t-shirt and caressed her lacy bra covered breasts. When her mind caught up to their actions—or more accurately her reactions—she whispered, “I thought you wanted to ask me questions.”

He supported his head near her face and looked down into her beautiful gaze. “I needed to know if I could ask.” He gently kissed her lips. “Right now, I’d rather do something else.”

Claire smiled and purred, “Good, there’re better things to do right now.” She arched her back, feeling her nipples rub against the weight of his chest and nuzzled his neck. The aroma of his aftershave combined with the stubble on his neck electrified desires she’d compartmentalized away.

There was no question, those desires weren’t gone. They spilled out with a vengeance.



AS THE AIRLINER taxied to the San Jose gate, Sophia summoned her brightest smile. It wasn't too difficult. After nearly two weeks of separation, she was truly excited to see her husband. Without fail, they'd spoken every day. Unquestionably, that wasn't the same as being together. She longed to feel his embrace and taste his lips.

Sophia consulted the screen of her iPhone and retrieved an email she'd received earlier in the day. It wasn't from Derek, but from Danny, Derek's new personal assistant. Sophia wondered if the term *Personal Assistant* was manufactured so that men wouldn't feel awkward being identified as secretaries. Danny not only handled Derek's business at work, he'd assisted Derek with apartment hunting and learning the area.

The email said Derek would be waiting for her in Terminal B, near baggage claim. She felt her anticipation rise as she stood to exit the plane.

With all of Sophia's experience with international travel, San Jose's small, easy to maneuver airport made locating her desired destination simple. She did, however, have trouble locating her husband.

A gentleman in a chauffeur's uniform stood near the baggage carousel. Subconsciously, Sophia read his sign: *Mrs. Derek Burke*.

After three years of marriage, she should recognize her name; however, it momentarily confused her. First, she expected Derek, and second, her name was Sophia Burke. Other than on guest books at weddings and funerals, she's never referred to herself as Mrs. Derek Burke. The sensation of the shudders came back. The clamor of voices dissipated as she listened to the rusty hinges creak. *What happened to Sophia Rossi Burke?* She wondered.



SOPHIA SAT IN the back seat of a company limousine, while the chauffeur drove her to Shedis-tics. In an effort to remain calm, she peered through the tinted windows at the unfamiliar terrain. Occasionally, she'd see the mountains Derek promised. Admittedly, she enjoyed their blue hue.

Apparently, Derek had an unexpected web conference he couldn't miss. He was very sorry. The apology came through loud and clear—on a text message. He promised a better reunion, once they made their way to their new home.

The limousine pulled into a generous semi-circular drive with a large fountain surrounding the Shedis-tics sign. Tall palm trees intermingled with soft pines created a landscaped barrier to the road. The multi-leveled glass building was more spread out than office buildings on the East Coast. The

building was actually a complex of interconnected glass and mirrored structures.

The car stopped, the driver opened Sophia's door, and she thanked him for the ride. "What about my luggage?" She wasn't sure if she was supposed to take it into Derek's office.

"Mrs. Burke, I believe I am to wait for you. We will leave it in the car until I hear otherwise."

Sophia agreed, all the while questioning her own ability to make decisions. Why would the driver be waiting if she were leaving with Derek? Tentatively, she entered the glass building.

The large impressive lobby glowed with natural light. The white walls, huge windows, plants, and fountains made her feel like she was still outside. Sophia made her way to the information desk.

Three women were behind the tall counter. Two wore blue blouses, *Shedis-tics* embroidered on the front. The other wore attire screaming executive; a black pencil skirt, white blouse, and tall black pumps. While the well-fitting clothes accentuated her feminine gender, they also confirmed she meant business.

Sophia approached a woman in blue. "Hello, perhaps you could help me? I'm looking for Derek Burke."

Before the young lady could reply, the executive woman turned to Sophia. "Hello, you must be Mrs. Burke."

It wasn't a conscious decision for one woman to evaluate the other, but it happens all the time. Sophia took in her features. Immediately, she noticed the woman's petite frame, probably four or five inches shorter than herself, undoubtedly younger, with blonde hair fixed into a low bun, and a beautiful smile. The assessment took only a millisecond. Sophia extended her hand as she responded, "Yes, please call me Sophia."

The young executive eagerly accepted and shook Sophia's hand. Her strong voice was eager and energetic. "It's nice to finally meet you. I'm Danielle, but please call me Danni. I'll be glad to take you to Derek's office. His web conference should be almost done."



CLAIRE'S PLAN PROGRESSED smoother than she'd hoped. She hadn't heard Tony's voice since she answered his call, over three weeks earlier. As she dialed his number, she wondered what big meeting she may be interrupting. While married, after she had a cell phone, she was specifically instructed to only text during business hours. Actual calls were prohibited, except in the case of an emergency. After all, he's a busy man. He didn't want her

interrupting some multimillion dollar deal. The memory of that instruction came rushing back as she listened to the rings on her end. Utilizing the telephone that he called, she knew her number and probably name, would appear when he checked the screen.

Surprisingly, he answered on the second ring. She heard a combination of amusement and surprise in his voice. “Hello, Claire. I hope you’re not calling to cancel our plans.”

Her heart momentarily forgot to beat. Damn, if he wouldn’t have used her name—but he did. Feigning strength, she pressed forward, “I wouldn’t do that, Tony.” She could use his name too. “That would be rude, to cancel something at the last minute.”

“I must admit, I’m surprised to receive your call... on my private cell, no less.”

“I presume you are. I wanted to contact you about tonight.”

“Yes?”

“You see, I’ve been living in this area for a while. There’s a lovely French restaurant that I believe you’ll enjoy.” She didn’t wait for him to respond; she continued, “I realize you made reservations, but so have I. I’d be glad to meet you at Bon Vivant on Bryant, at 7:00 PM.”

“Well, there is a car coming to pick you up—”

She interrupted, “I appreciate that. It’s very kind of you; however, I have my own car and am more than willing to drive.” She heard his soft chuckle.

“If that is what you prefer.”

She exhaled. “I do.”

“Very well, I must return to this table of directors and web conference. Until tonight.”

“Yes, goodbye.”

Her next decision involved attire. The outfit he sent was exquisite. She tried it on, and expectantly, everything fit perfectly; however, the day before their reunion, she returned it to Neiman Marcus, having the money returned to the purchasing credit card. Claire planned on presenting the receipt to Tony during their meal.

She decided to wear the white dress and Dior sandals she’d worn during her discussion with Phillip Roach in San Antonio. When considering hairstyle, she purposely styled it in a way she knew her ex-husband liked. She also figured this outing would make at least one or two publications, and most likely be plastered all over the internet before she settled down for bed. Claire Rawlings Nichols intended to look the part.

Before she walked to the parking garage, Claire exited the elevator on the ground level. It was 6:00 PM, and the restaurant was only minutes away. She was ready to go. Her nerves were stretched to an inflexible tautness which didn’t allow her to linger in the condo any longer. Besides, Amber was out of

town on business, and Claire wasn't ready to face Harry as he returned from SiJo. She'd feel better talking to him after the dinner. Until then, she couldn't stand to see that look in his soft blue eyes. For some reason, the way they looked at her made her feel like she was cheating—which was ridiculous. Especially, since she and Harry didn't have anything official going on which she could cheat. Their mutual admiration hadn't yet progressed to sex. Although, when Claire recalled their encounters, she felt like a school girl, warm and aroused, anticipating the next move.

Exiting the front doors of the condominium, Claire walked boldly to Phillip Roach's inconspicuous grey sedan. She watched him shake his head as she knocked on his window. Suspiciously, he lowered the pane. "Yes, Ms. Nichols? I see you're wearing your trapping clothes."

Claire smiled. "I'm not sure if your employer informed you, but we're meeting for dinner this evening. We'll be dining at Bon Vivant on Bryant." She handed him an envelope; slowly, he accepted. "The restaurant is often crowded, and I didn't want you to miss the fun. There's a small shadowed table reserved in your name, please accept this gift certificate and enjoy your meal on me." With her eyes twinkling, she turned and walked toward her building. Claire felt Phillip's eyes upon her, not an unfamiliar feeling.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What happened in the past that was painful has a great deal to do with what we are today.

—William Glasser

*A*RRIVING THIRTY-FIVE minutes early, Claire noticed the parking wasn't as crowded as normal. She'd only eaten at Bon Vivant once, but she found the service exceptional and the food delicious. It was a popular and highly acclaimed destination in Silicon Valley. Her last visit was on a weekend, and it had been packed with patrons. Claire reassured herself that this was a week night and many people were still at work.

The maître d' politely greeted her as she entered alone, "Good evening, Mademoiselle, do you have reservations?"

Claire looked around the nearly empty restaurant. "*Oui, deux pour Nichols.*" (Yes, two for Nichols.)

"*Oui, Mademoiselle.* Your table is not yet ready. Perhaps you would like to wait for your companion in our lounge. I will personally inform you when your table is ready."

"Thank you, I left specific instructions for a conspicuous table, near the center of the main dining room."

"*Oui,* we will do everything we can to accommodate you and your companion. The lounge is to the right."

"*Merci.*" Thanking the maître d', she followed the piano music, making her way to the posh lounge. Years before, when Claire accompanied Tony to a French restaurant, she was at a complete loss as he spoke to the waitress or waiter. While in France, she began to pick up a few words; however, it was while in prison, she had time to study both French and Italian. She wouldn't be considered fluent in either; however, she could understand what was said around her. Undoubtedly, her speech held a distinguishable American accent.

The lounge was beautifully contemporary, mostly white with colored

lights, creating an awe-inspiring ambience. She noticed a few other couples at nearby tables. Claire checked her watch as the other couples were escorted from the lounge. At two minutes before 7:00 PM, she found herself sitting alone, in the great expanse of the lounge. Maintaining her mask of calm, she watched as the archway filled with the man from her past.

Memories of their last meeting in the Iowa City jail flooded her consciousness. Tony's presence filled the otherwise empty room. The Earth no longer rotated on its own axis, but on him. She had compartmentalized away his utter dominance. As much as she tried to appear aloof, the mixture of emotions raging through her, threatened to propel her from the soft, luxurious seat. Unconsciously, she gripped the arms of the chair, hoping for stability. Claire feared, if not for the anchor, she might possibly become airborne.

Her breathing labored as his gorgeous form advanced. Closer with each step, he narrowed the vast fifteen month divide. He hadn't changed. His perfect appearance was just as she'd remembered, from his dark thick hair masterly styled in place, to his brown eyes sparkling with electricity. His cheeks were raised, revealing a closed lip grin, and of course, his suit was silk, tailored specifically for him, with cuff links shining from the edge of his jacket sleeves. If anyone else had been in the room, they would have disappeared into his all-encompassing aura, but alas, no one else was present, except for the piano player. Momentarily, even the music dissipated.

From the archway to Claire's table could be traveled in a few seconds; however, it seemed as though Tony's casual stride fought an unseen tide. The seconds seemed to last for minutes, hours, or perhaps days. During the elapsed expanse of time and space, Claire remembered every moment of their time together. Three years of memories compressed into a fraction of time. Finally, accomplishing his journey—because Claire knew *Anthony Rawlings* rarely failed at any endeavor—he stood before her table. She diligently fought to remain calm and serene as he politely nodded in her direction.

His voice filled the cavernous room, engulfing the otherwise empty molecules and stirring the cauldron of emotions within her chest. "Good evening, Claire."

She'd fought this fight before. Admittedly, she'd rarely won, but nonetheless, the battle was familiar. Claire pressed on, "Good evening, Tony. Won't you please have a seat?"

"Thank you." He pulled the chair from the table and lowered his tall, lean body into the cushioned seat directly across the table. His dark eyes remained fixed on hers. Perhaps the rest of the world was gone; it was the most plausible answer. Heaven knows she couldn't see or think of anyone else. That must be the answer; they were the only two people left as the Earth spun into a timeless abyss.

Claire once read that time doesn't pass at normal speeds within a black hole. If one were to travel into a black hole for only moments and return again, centuries would have passed. That explained the sensation she felt, once again peering into his dark gaze. She wouldn't look away; she'd trained herself better than that. Then again, she reasoned, it wasn't an option. She couldn't divert her gaze if she wanted. The hold upon her stare was stronger than any ropes or chains made by man. Claire knew from experience that submitting to the hold was her best chance at survival. Fighting was a futile waste of energy.

As she felt herself slipping into her old station, she remembered her cause. Claire remembered her friends and their support. She recalled the advice of a good friend; she needed to ask herself, am I in fear of upsetting him? Does he make me smile? She thought about her cell phones in her purse and her car outside the restaurant.

No, and No! She could fight and survive. She'd done it before! Within the milliseconds that transpired, she clawed her way out of the abyss, and time had not elapsed. She continued their dialogue, "It was nice of you to accommodate my change in plans." Taking a sip of her water, she fought the dryness threatening her mouth and gestured toward a bottle of wine. "I took the liberty of ordering us a bottle of wine."

Tony smiled a devilish grin, and Claire's insides tightened in response. His eyes lightened as he lifted the bottle and assessed the label. "Excellent choice."

Before their conversation could continue, the waiter appeared at their side. "Monsieur and Mademoiselle, your table is not yet ready. May I open your wine?"

Claire spoke before Tony could answer, "*Oui, Merci.*" She noticed Tony's smile broaden. In the past, she learned that amusement wasn't always a good thing. A small voice in the back of her head warned her to proceed with caution.

After the waiter poured the wine, he left them alone—literally. Claire couldn't help notice the absence of others. She diligently tried to keep her increased unease hidden.

"My, Claire, you continue to amaze me. I see you're trying to show me the new, independent Claire Nichols." She didn't speak, so he continued, "You don't need to work so hard. I've been observing you from a far and am already impressed."

"Tony, my goal isn't to impress. My goal is to show that I don't need your observation. I'm doing quite well on my own."

"I believe you have surpassed my expectations, once again."

"And for the record, I was independent before our encounter."

"Yes." Pause. "I can see how you would think that." He sipped his wine.

“Now tell me, what the point was with the change in venue?”

“There was no point to make. I’ve eaten here before, and I thought you’d enjoy the cuisine.”

“I see.” He continued to sip the wine. “That’s good. I was afraid you were trying to manipulate our visibility...”

Before he could continue, the maître d’ approached their table. “*Excusez-moi*, but your table, it is ready.”

“Merci,” Tony replied as he stood. While Claire gathered her handbag, Tony politely helped her with her chair.

As she stood, she continued to fight the old pull. It was as if she were slipping into Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, perhaps not slipping, but pulled by an irresistible force. She needed to remain diligent to be the independent woman she longed to be.

Walking across the empty lounge, Tony placed his hand in the small of her exposed back. She didn’t fight the contact. Actually, she fought the sudden desire to melt toward it. Memories came rushing so fast that she barely had time to blink, the feel of his caress, his ability to elicit emotions and desires, the warmth and security of his embrace. Although her resolve diligently fought, her heartbeat quickened, and fantasies interlaced her recollections. Not only did she remember his large, strong hands; she also remembered his tender mouth, firm, steady chest, and tight abdomen. The slight touch evoked memories of ecstasies they’d shared. Highs, which before him didn’t exist, and elations she feared were forever extinct.

When his tall body inclined, allowing his lips to hover near her ear, her body tingled. Then, without warning, he whispered, and her fantasy evaporated. Reality struck with a slap that only real life can elicit. “I’m glad visibility was not your goal for this evening. I would hate to disappoint you.”

Before Claire could respond, they stepped from the lounge into the dining area. She gasped. Her neck stiffened as she took in the empty restaurant. No longer was her subconscious filled with memories of love and pleasure, but memories of control and manipulation. The harshness deflated her lungs. Claire fought to breathe, battling the sensation of suffocation she’d suffered during the years of his domination.

With new found determination, she turned toward the sly smirk of her ex-husband and asked, “What have you done?”

“I wanted to spend time with you, without the diversion of others.”

“Where are the other people?”

“I believe they accepted an unbelievable offer. In essence, I rented the entire restaurant. After all, you said it was delicious, and I wanted to enjoy the food and your company.”

Claire stared incredulously. “You bought-out the entire place?”

“Yes, Claire. Shall we sit? I believe you requested this central table.”

Her blood boiled. Looking around she wondered about Phil, where was he? She'd become accustom to seeing him periodically throughout her day. Feeling incredibly vulnerable, she sat, allowing Tony to push her chair under the table.

Fighting her instinct to run, Claire straightened her neck and met her ex-husband's smug expression and sparkling, darkening eyes head-on. The waiter delivered their wine, including glasses to their new location. After he left, Tony lifted his glass and proposed a toast, "To you, the only person in this world, who can keep me on my toes."

Claire held her glass. Tony moved the goblet to his lips. Slowly, she raised the rim to her mouth. Just before she took a drink, he laughed. Placing the glass back onto the linen tablecloth, Claire said, "I hope you're amused. I believe I'm getting a headache. We'll need to postpone this dinner for another time." She placed her hands on the table to push back her chair.

Tony reached across the table and covered her hand. The touch ignited her skin. She wanted to hate the man with her entire being, yet his touch, the sound of his voice, smell of his cologne, and sight of his incredibly handsome face turned her insides to jelly. The two contrasting memories of love and domination played simultaneously within her head. Unwillingly, she looked into his soft chocolate eyes and sighed.

In a much gentler tone, he implored, "Claire, I'd like you to stay. Your plans are to be commended. You probably know, but even without the clothes I sent, you are stunning. Now, if we're done with this ridiculous posturing, I'd like to talk with you for a while."

"This wasn't meant as posturing! I assure you, my head does hurt."

"I have missed you terribly."

She stared. What did he just say? It didn't make sense. She was gone from him, from his life by his doing—his alone.

He continued, "I have missed your voice, your strength, your smile, and mostly, your eyes. My God, Claire, you have the most amazing eyes!"

"Stop it."

Abashed, he asked, "Excuse me?"

"I said, stop it!" Her voice was harsh, yet hushed. "The last time we spoke, in person, I begged to go with you back to your home, our home in Iowa City. As I recall, you offered me a psychiatric institution, so why would I be interested in listening to your drivel today?"

"Well, first, because you accepted my invitation."

"I accepted your invitation for one reason, to convince you to leave me alone. We are done!"

"My dear, it isn't that simple."

His expression revived a suppressed fear in the pit of Claire's stomach. She fought to steady herself as the room wobbled off center. It was the finality

with which he spoke, as if his comment were beyond reproach. “It is.” Her voice less convincing than she’d hoped. She inhaled to emphasize her next word, “Anton.”

His back straightened, and his eyes intensified. “My name is Anthony, but you may still address me as Tony.”

“That’s very gentlemanly of you. Do you not think that, as your wife, I deserved to know your true name was Anton Rawls?” Claire watched an internal battle launch and rage within her ex-husband. She knew him and could read his nonverbal clues. Others may not recognize the scene before her, but she did.

Externally, Tony remained stoic as he fought for control. After a few moments had passed, he spoke, his voice deceptively calm, “Where could you possibly come up with such a story?”

“Why, *Anton*, it was in your box of confessions.”

Tony stared in utter shock and disbelief. Claire wasn’t sure if she’d ever seen his facade shatter as quickly. Though he remained still, she imagined him scurrying to pick up the pieces of his usually intact veneer. His voice gained strength with each syllable. “I assure you, I have no idea what you’re saying.”

“The information you sent me in prison.”

Before they could continue, a waiter appeared beside their table with menus. Placing the binders in front of them, he asked if they were interested in hearing about the specials. Concurrently, they answered, “No.” The waiter apologized for the interruption and meekly backed away from the table. Tony reached for the leather folder; his fingertips blanched as he squeezed the helpless menu.

It didn’t make sense. The writing on the note was his, as was the writing on the photos. Although Claire was reasonably certain he’d ended this conversation, she decided to go ahead and ask the question screaming in her head, “Are you saying you didn’t send me a box of information?”

He didn’t need to answer; his expression and body language spoke louder than words. Nonetheless, he managed to articulate, “I can assure you, I did not send you anything while you were in prison.” Continuing to regulate his external calm, he added, “And, speaking of prison, congratulations on your early release.”

Sarcasm dripped from his final statement; however, Claire was still mulling over his first declaration. If he didn’t send me that information, then who did? When his words registered, she decided to dial down the conversation. Yes, her old instincts were guiding her through this minefield. Those instincts saved her life in the past. He’d changed the subject, and experience warned her to take heed. Any discussion of his box or his alternate persona would need to wait. “Thank you, I promise that I was as surprised as

you must have been.”

He *harrumphed* as he took another drink of his wine. The contents disappeared. He poured himself another glass. “That, my dear, is debatable.”

Claire smiled; he may have manipulated her plans. Nonetheless, she’d just acquired invaluable information. He didn’t send the box; he hadn’t known she knew about his past or his vendetta, and she could obviously influence his demeanor. That knowledge seemed more powerful today than it’d ever been. She looked at the menu and discussed the entrees she found appetizing.

Truthfully, neither of them possessed much of an appetite; nevertheless, the dinner progressed. As expected, Tony ordered their meals; however, as he spoke to the waiter, in French, Claire smiled when he ordered the selection she’d suggested.

After the waiter left, Tony turned to Claire and continuing in French and said, “I see that you’ve broadened your language portfolio.”

Also in French, she replied, “Yes, I decided to capitalize on my gift of time.”

He grinned and shook his head ever so slightly. Now in English, “Claire, how is your headache?”

“I believe the wine is helping.”

“That’s good. Tell me about San Antonio.”

Momentarily, she savored the robust thick liquid that contained a hint of sweet floral flavor, contemplating her response. If his obvious knowledge of her whereabouts was supposed to threaten or alarm her, she disappointed him again. Meeting his gaze she smiled. “It was lovely. I’ve always enjoyed sunshine and warmth.”

“Yes, I can see your lovely tan.”

Maybe, he could make her smile. Yes, there was a twinge of concern about upsetting him, but even empty, they were in a public place. She knew he wouldn’t do or say anything harmful while in the sight of others. Truthfully, she felt a new sense of empowerment. If it had been present before, she’d been too close to see it, but now, Claire sensed her ability to affect him. She could upset him, and she could calm him. Few people held that power. Perhaps others did, but they weren’t brave, or stupid enough to try.

Claire chose to use the word *brave*.



WHEN CLAIRE ENTERED her condo later that evening, she heard unexpected noises resonating from the den. Making her way down the hall, she found Harry lounging on the small loveseat, watching a baseball game. The way his

long legs hung off the end of the sofa added to the comedy of the scene, especially considering the large, comfortable couch and five times larger television in his condo. “Is your television broken?”

He turned to speak, but her appearance momentarily muted him. Eventually, he managed to answer, “No, it’s fine. I just thought you might need some moral support.”

“Tell me you aren’t here to be sure I came home alone.”

Harry stood and approached one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen. “Not like you may think. I really wanted to be sure you were all right. I know I haven’t asked directly, and I don’t need to know anything you don’t want to say, but I get the feeling there were times in your past that your ex-husband didn’t treat you well.” He looked into her eyes, and said, “Claire, stop the pretense.”

She backed away from his sudden harsh tone. “Excuse me? I haven’t said a word.”

“No, you haven’t, but you’re doing what you always do. You’re eyes are changing. You’re hiding behind some mask of indifference.”

The night was overwhelming. Her head did hurt. She’d just left dinner with Tony and was suddenly in another confrontation. Claire honestly wasn’t up for more conflict. Plus, his word: *mask*. That’s what she used to tell herself to wear with Tony. Did she really wear one with Harry too?

“My head *is* aching. I’m sorry if you find my expression unappealing. I appreciate your concern. I’m home safe and sound, and I did learn some valuable information. Perhaps I can share it with you tomorrow.”

He stepped closer and placed his hands on her waist. She didn’t back away, yet she filled with guilt as her thoughts centered on the man at the restaurant, not the one before her.

When Harry touched her waist, his fingertips landed on her warm skin. Smiling, he leaned around her shoulder and took in the stunning view. “You look lovely. I’m sure this will be on every magazine in a day or two.”

“No, it won’t.”

Obviously surprised by the finality of her statement, Harry asked, “How can you say that? We go to Starbucks and make the internet. You looking this gorgeous will warrant the cover of every national gossip magazine!” He continued to hold her gently around the waist. Claire shook her head back and forth; then half-jokingly, he whispered, “Apparently, I’ve not warranted such an amazing dress.”

Her neck stiffened. “It isn’t new. I wore it in Texas, and I can assure you that you won’t see my picture in this outfit or any other with Anthony Rawlings. At least, not until *he* is ready to have it out there.”

“What happened to your plan for visibility?”

“I was trumped. I should have seen it coming, but I didn’t.”

“What happened?”

“I promise to tell you all about it tomorrow. Right now, I want out of this dress and these shoes.” Harry moved ever so slightly toward her warmth until her next words changed his plans. “If you’d please lock the door on your way out, I’m going to bed.” She pulled away from his embrace and turned toward her room.

Before she passed the door frame, she heard Harry’s voice. “I’d really like the chance to understand you better—the real you.”

Softly, she said, “Good night, Harry.” Then she proceeded to her room. Truthfully, his comment regarding a *mask* caught her by surprise. She didn’t mean to hide her feelings—well not usually. Nevertheless, tonight she couldn’t possibly look into his soft blue eyes or feel his gentle touch without thinking about the man that challenged her sanity. It wasn’t fair to Harry—being with him and thinking about Tony.

It wasn’t fair to Claire to have to make decisions about her true feelings. She needed time; time to sort out the mayhem that continued to be her life. Luckily, the medicine cabinet in her attached bath contained a big bottle of acetaminophen. Finally, she settled into her welcomingly cool and pleasantly lonely, comfortable bed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ideologies separate us. Dreams and anguish bring us together.

—Eugene Ionesco

C LAIRE'S BODY DRIPPED with perspiration; her breasts pushed toward his solid, muscular chest. She craved the sensation of his tight muscles and soft chest hair against her sensitive nipples. Inhaling deeply, the fragrance of cologne reached the depth of her lungs, filling her senses and intensifying her irrepressible desire. The tips of her fingers gripped the soft Egyptian threaded sheets; her manicured fingernails threatening to gouge the luxurious linens, potentially returning them to fibers, in the heat of passion. Arching her back, Claire's lips sought to taste the stubble neck, which with each exaggerated pulse of his carotid artery, provided the amazing scent. It was so close, yet as much as she tried, and as much as she pushed toward the warmth, she couldn't reach her target. Claire's body ached to feel him, to have him, to take him—or more accurately—to be taken by him. It had been so long, and she could no longer suppress her desires. No one else's opinion mattered. Willingly and without regret, she submitted to the mounting passion. The train she rode couldn't be stopped, even if she wanted, but she didn't want it to stop. Every fiber of her body was in agreement. She wanted what only he could give. She wanted...

Her eyes opened to darkness. It wasn't the darkness in her dream, not the dark eyes, which unpardonably consumed her heart and soul. It was the darkness of night, of her room, of her lonely, empty bed.

Claire looked at the clock on the nearby table. Damn, it was only a little after 2:00 AM. Being the third time she'd awoken since leaving Harry down the hall. She decided it was the night that never ends. *Lamb Chops* sang in her

head, a G-rated childhood memory running in loops, kindly drowning out the echoes of XXX rated passion.

Freeing her bound legs from the tangled mess of sheets and blankets, Claire relished in the cool, fresh breeze from her open window, detecting the slightest scent of the impeding summer. She inhaled the promise of warmth, chlorine, and freshly cut grass.

The night had been a never ending ride upon a carrousel, up and down, around and around, the same scenes replayed over and over. One minute, while feeling cold, she'd ensconce her body with a soft cocoon, drifting off to sleep. What seemed like moments later—she'd awake, violently thrashing to free herself from the sweltering coverings. Thankfully, Amber was out of town as Claire believed that, a few times, she'd actually cried out audibly. She wasn't sure if her screams were from the ecstasy of her dreams or the pain of her reality.

These weren't mysterious nightmares, which left her wondering their meaning. No, these were vivid, lifelike dreams that caused her to gasp with disappointment each time her eyes opened to the cold reality. Although the visions were no more real than her memories of an Iowa summer or her lake shore, she still laid in her bed, panting for breath and clutching the helpless, innocent pillow.

Claire knew her unconscious, carnal yearning had once again forsaken her. It wasn't the first time. Last time, she gave in to its perfidious pleas. Last time, the object of her desire was close—too close to fight. She hadn't had the strength to fight him and her rebellious longings.

Allowing her eyes to adjust to her surroundings, she concentrated on the stucco ceiling illuminated only by the light of the clock. The stupid, red numbers refused to change, giving her more time to do nothing but think. Claire focused on her breathing, willing her pulse to slow and her skin to cool. She argued with her traitorous body. Surely with enough reasoning, she could make it cooperate.

Claire reminded herself that her memory banks held a litany of scenes involving Anthony Rawlings. She had plenty to supersede the erotic episodes she was currently viewing—no, reliving. She knew the other memories existed. It's just she'd worked to compartmentalize them away. So when her eyes closed and she remembered sharing a table with him, only hours before, the lock on the negative part of their past remained secure.

Then again, during that dinner she had plans, and once again, he thwarted her plans, utilizing his unlimited resources and cunning psyche to conquer her desired consequence. Appearing suave and debonair, he'd managed to reduce her well-laid idea to rubble, while maintaining the perfect smile.

That wasn't completely true. His veneer definitely cracked when she referred to him as *Anton*. That bombshell unquestionably permeated his

facade. Claire still couldn't wrap her mind around this new revelation. Of course, she'd assumed the box was from him. She was certain of the writing, although the note wasn't signed. Claire wished she still had the note. Thankfully, she'd kept the pictures, as she was certain the writing behind each photograph had belonged to him.

Again, thankful Amber wasn't home, Claire chose to forgo another all-consuming dream and got out of bed. She wanted to review and work on their research.

With a warm cup of coffee in tow, Claire made her way to one of the spare bedrooms. Turning on the light, she marveled at the magnitude of papers. She was slowly taking over more and more of Amber's space. Although she mentioned finding a place of her own, she admittedly liked the company, and thus far, Amber had been more than accommodating. It was Claire who suggested moving the mountains of findings into the small bedroom. She felt bad, burying the dining room table with her stacks of research.

The queen-sized bed created the perfect palate for Claire's unique filing system. There were piles from one end to the other. In a paperless world, she'd managed to personally decimate a tree or two. The information was also saved on her laptop. Nonetheless, holding the pages in her hands gave Claire a sense of reality. She knew from experience the internet could contain false truths; however, when she held a story, a blurb from an article, dates from public record, and pictures, in her hand—it gave them validity. The small desk contained her laptop while a dresser held the printer.

Claire moved toward the bed and stacks of information. She wondered, could there be something in their accumulated data she'd missed? She wasn't the only one gathering information. Harry pulled strings to get police information containing invaluable reports that were unavailable to the general public. Amber willingly spent hours surfing the net, *back-dooring* company websites. She understood the business side of their research much more than Claire.

That being said, the depth of Claire's business knowledge surprised them all. Apparently, the days she'd spent in Tony's office weren't wasted. She remembered having to sit hour after hour in Tony's office, required to be ready at a moment's notice in case her services were demanded. At the time, she saw it as his display of power and control. Today, she grinned at the new perspective: those wasted days were actually educational.

How many people receive the opportunity to watch and listen to one of the country's most successful entrepreneurs at work? Although she usually spent those days reading, she subconsciously listened. Perhaps he felt she didn't care, or that she couldn't understand. Claire opted for the answer: he didn't even consider eavesdropping. He was busy, displaying his power over her schedule, the rest of the world be damned.

She shuddered at the estimation of hours spent in that office during the nearly two years on his estate. After they were married, most of the time was voluntary. Nevertheless, she'd listened to web conferences, webinars, and unnumbered telephone conversations. Hell, she listened to those in cars and even on his private jet. Her presence never inhibited his words. Actually, she got good at recognizing the subtle changes in body language as his words remained amicable.

When in his office and perturbed, he had a habit of rolling an old key ring in his hand. It was some old trinket that he kept in the upper right-hand drawer of his large desk. If Claire looked up from her book or magazine and saw the stupid ring running laps on his right hand, she knew he was upset, yet the person on the other end of the discussion would never know. His features and voice never wavered. They couldn't see the tarnished silver charm or strangely shaped key being passed from one finger to the next. Claire came to know the speed at which the ring ran a lap in his large hand, was proportional to his state of agitation.

Contemplating those memories, Claire's stomach twisted. His unease was directly proportional to the downturn of her day. Not only did he control her comings and goings, he was the barometer for the tone of her life. If he were happy, the day could be manageable, maybe even good. If he weren't... well, she really hated that stupid key ring.

Her business knowledge was unrealized until she read an article about a company under investigation by the SEC, Securities Exchange Commission. Claire remembered hours of discussion about that same company. Some of the issues that, according to the article, were just brought to light had actually been debated ad nauseam years before.

Amber found her information very intriguing. After Amber pulled up more details on the company, Claire was shocked to realize she actually knew, or at least recognized, the names and faces of many prominent players. They were people Claire had been responsible for entertaining at business dinners. She'd met them, talked with them, and dined with them. Her knowledge base was much broader than she'd previously expected.

Settling into a comfortable chair, feet on an ottoman, and wrapped in her warm robe, Claire began rereading documents. Anthony was obviously surprised by the use of his name—Anton Rawls. He flat out denied it. Well, he called it *a ridiculous story*. She didn't directly ask if he was once Anton Rawls. She only asked him if he sent her the box. That, he categorically denied.

Claire decided to start at the beginning:

Nathaniel Rawls, born 1919. Served in U.S. Army, WWII deployment, returned to USA 1943. Married Sharron Parkinson Rawls in 1943. Began working for BNG Textiles in 1943—1944. Samuel Anton Rawls born 1953. BNG Textiles became Rawls Textiles. The company expanded—1975. Rawls went public, traded on the NYSE. At this point records are easier to obtain. The biggest problem was lack of technology in 1975.

Today, a wealth of information was available on every traded company: assets, liabilities, ownership equity, profit and loss sheets, management analysis, and much more. The same information was presumably available in 1975, but not at a click of a button. Claire debated traveling to New Jersey to access microfiche files. The woman on the telephone told her they *should* have it. However, the state of New Jersey doesn't have the inclination, time, or manpower to track the old information. She invited Claire to come and investigate the bowels of their storage. Although a lovely invitation, Claire hadn't decided if it were necessary.

January 1986, rumors involving Rawls Corp resulted in a drastic drop in stock price. Investors wanted their money returned. 1987, Nathaniel Rawls was convicted and incarcerated at Camp Gabriels, a minimum security state prison, located in northern New York. He was sentenced to thirty-six months, one of the heaviest penalties dispersed for a white collar crime. 1989, twenty-two months after conviction, Nathaniel Rawls died of a heart attack.

Harry found a list of civil cases involving Nathaniel during his incarceration. He said it wasn't uncommon for prisoners to be sued. Many wronged investors want *blood from a turnip*, so to speak. Claire hadn't read the various cases. Harry admitted he'd only scanned them, but believed many stemmed from rumors Mr. Rawls hid money prior to his incarceration. Although he may have had the opportunity while remaining outside of prison, awaiting trial, the allegations were unproven. Judging by the lengthy list of plaintiffs, there were many bidders for a piece of his hidden bounty.

Claire read a blurb suggesting his money was hidden outside of the United States; however, those closest to Mr. Rawls, vehemently denied this, stating Nathaniel was known for his American bravado. They speculated he'd never trusted foreigners with his money.

After hours of reading, not finding anything she hadn't read before, Claire

decided to move on to Samuel. Reaching for his stack of information, she noticed the faint sunlight leaking from around the blinds. Refocusing on the clock at the corner of her laptop, she saw it was almost 7:30 AM.

Claire decided to table—or bed—the Samuel reread and opt for a shower. She wasn’t sure, after the way she left Harry last night, but he usually came over for coffee about eight. She moved stiffly from the soft chair and lifted her empty coffee cup. If she were to survive her incredibly long day, Claire needed more caffeine.

Feeling almost human after another cup of coffee and shower, Claire decided to dress causal, wearing yoga pants, a camisole, and an oversized t-shirt. Not wanting to be busy with the hairdryer when Harry arrived, she combed her wet hair back into a low ponytail and managed a little mascara, lip gloss, blush, and perfume. Claire wasn’t the stunning model from last night, and although she wanted to tell him she was sorry, if he walked in and saw her dressed to the nines for coffee, he’d rightfully be suspicious. She wasn’t sure of her daily plans; however, as her bare feet padded along the wood floor of the cavernous condo, she smiled at the sunshine streaming through the unblocked windows.

Some research, coffee, warm shower, and fog-free blue skies did wonders to put her life in perspective. Claire’s dinner with Tony momentarily sent things off-kilter, but all was neutralizing again. She needed to focus on her mission involving Tony, and that mission wasn’t sex. It was retaliation. He may not have sent that box, but her research continued to validate its contents.

As Claire set her laptop on the kitchen table, she typed in *Newsweek*. Like so many other publications, *Newsweek* required a subscription in order to access previous editions. That’s fine, she thought, Phillip Roach can have fun figuring out why I’m suddenly so interested in news magazines.

Starting the coffee maker for another high octane injection, she typed 1975, the year Rawls went public. She remembered a magazine article with a picture of Nathaniel and his family in front of a house like Tony’s. She wanted to find that picture, to verify—if only to herself—that Tony was indeed Anton Rawls. If it wasn’t in *Newsweek*, she assumed it must be *Time*, which she also had an online subscription.

Two hours later, she found the picture with the house, Nathaniel, Sharron, Samuel, Amanda, and Anton. Claire couldn’t wait to show Harry. She’d tell him about Tony’s denial and then show him the picture to validate her suspicions.

Then Claire realized that another two hours had past, and it was almost 10:00 AM. Surely, Harry’s at SiJo by now. He hadn’t come over for coffee. Claire staggered at the sudden disappointment flowing through her. She hadn’t realized how much she enjoyed their morning chats, until now, when he didn’t show.

There was no question; it was her fault. She'd been rude last night. Would she have ever treated Tony that way? The answer was no, not because she didn't want to, but because he'd never have allowed it. Had she really spent half the night fantasizing about someone who dominated her entire life, including emotions and reactions, when there was a kind understanding man in real life?

Claire went to the bedroom to find her phone. She wanted to send Harry a text, tell him she missed him this morning. Hopefully, he'd respond, and maybe she could meet him for lunch.

The screen indicated four missed calls. Picking up her *Emily* phone, she had texts, one each from Emily and Courtney. They both wanted to be sure she was all right after her dinner.

Darn, she'd meant to call them last night. The whole evening just messed her up. She sent a text telling them she was fine and that she would talk to them, when they had time. Walking toward the kitchen, she added:

"I HAVE SOME NEW RELEVANT INFO TO SHARE!"

Honestly, she hadn't checked her *Tony* phone, but that could wait. She needed more time in the sunshine, without his voice and the darkness that swallowed her into its abyss. Smiling, she checked the iPhone. Two calls were from Amber; she'd forgotten to check in with her too. One call was from Harry, no message. At least he called. She didn't recognize the other number, no message.

When almost to the kitchen, she heard a knock at the door. Wow, Harry must be upset, if he's knocking. Claire didn't care, as long as he was there. Smiling her biggest grin, she opened the door with a light-hearted, "Did you forget your key?"

Her heart stopped beating, and the air dissipated from her lungs. She wasn't staring into Harry's soft blue eyes, or wavy blonde hair. No, it wasn't his chest with the nicely stretched Under Armor across his wide pecs and the SiJo emblem in front of her. The chest before her was covered by an Armani tailored suit. Claire's smile shattered as dark eyes once again sent her world into a spiral. The axis, which had taken her most of the night to correct, was once again wobbling uncontrollably.

Straightening her neck, she suddenly wished for shoes, preferably heels. It was a stupid wish. If a Genie had just given her three, it would be a waste; however, as he loomed, at least six and a half feet high in her doorway and she stood barefooted, Claire felt incredibly small. She didn't like the sense of vulnerability rushing through her nervous system, sending off flares of panic at every synapse.

His voice registered deep as he spoke, "I don't have a key, but I'd be glad to get one. Just tell me where to sign up." After so much time of evaluating his looks, eyes, movements, and voice, she immediately assessed: he sounds

restrained, yet amused.

She wanted to say, “Go to hell, and let me know when it turns cold—because, that’s when you can expect to receive a key!” Instead, she squared her shoulders and tried to display a small amount of decorum, “How did you get up here? You can’t be on this floor without a key.”

He was still standing in the hallway. Claire held the edge of the door, ready to slam it if necessary. “Perhaps you could invite me in, and we can discuss it?”

“Tony, why are you here?”

He smirked. “If we’re playing one hundred questions, I admit defeat. May I come in?”

Momentarily, Claire stared. Her stomach twisted with the realization that he’d asked the same question twice. It was another of his old pet-peevs. As much as she didn’t want to allow him entry, she didn’t want risk him asking her a third time. She stood back and nodded. He walked in and surveyed his surroundings with an air of approval.

“My, Claire, you are living much better than I’d expected. When I first learned of your release, I pictured you destitute.”

“I’m sure you enjoyed that scenario. I’m sorry to disappoint.”

He snickered, “Disappoint? On the contrary, your ingenuity is to be praised.”

Still standing on the marble floored entry, Claire asked her question, again, “Tony, I will repeat myself, at the risk of being redundant.” She could sense the increased intensity in his stare. “Why are you here, and how did you gain access to my floor?”

“I gained access by the security guard on the first floor. He tried to call you, but you didn’t answer.” Claire thought about that unknown number. She needed to program *Security* into her phone. “I explained we’re old friends, I’m leaving town, and since I had recently talked with you, I knew you were home and expecting me.”

As he spoke, her iPhone rang. It was the unknown number again. “This is security. I’ll tell them I don’t want you here, unless you quickly tell me why you’re here.” The phone rang again.

Rarely, if ever, did Anthony Rawlings receive an ultimatum. Now faced with one, he didn’t anger or hesitate, he answered, “I want to know more about your prison delivery.”

She eyed him, more assessment: honesty. Apparently, the conversation wasn’t *closed* the night before, but it had only been tabled until today. After the fourth ring, she brushed the screen and answered. “Hello. Yes, this is Ms. Nichols. Yes, he did. Thank you. Yes. I will. Goodbye.” Tony watched intently as she spoke. She had the sensation of a bird being evaluated by a cat. Should she fly away, had she just thrown away her only chance of ejecting

him from her home, or would she be consumed by a power greater than she could manage?

After her conversation with security ended, she turned back to her *guest*. “I have plans today, so please make this quick.”

His eyes scanned up and down her petite form. “Yes, I see that you’re dressed for business. What do they call that, business casual?” The vulnerability of her light weight pants and top made her uneasy. Refusing to take his snide bait, Claire remained silent. His tone turned sultry. “I’m not complaining. I always found the casual Claire as sexy as the one who rocked designer dresses.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dreaming or awake, we perceive only events that have meaning to us.

—Jane Roberts

C LAIRE LOOKED UP into the sparkling, velvety brown eyes. Damn, she'd been seeing those same eyes and that Cheshire expression all night long. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she exhaled, "Please, I have lunch plans, and I'd like to change. Question what you want and go."

"Do you only entertain in the entry, or may we sit?"

His gentlemanly tone was difficult to resist. "We may sit." She led him to the living room. As they sat, him on the sofa and her in a chair, she added, "I know you enjoy coffee. I'd offer you some, but the last time I got you coffee, it didn't work out so well for me."

Tony smirked. "God, Claire, you're something else. I can't imagine anyone else joking about that."

"Well, see, you misinterpreted. I wasn't joking. I'm actually still pissed as hell." This wasn't something she could have said while they were married, and it definitely wasn't something she would have said in a restaurant, even a restaurant devoid of other patrons. Some details of their life could only be discussed in private. His rules regarding privacy and appearance were as ingrained as punctuality.

"Good for you." He leaned toward her, his eyes devouring her entirely, until she questioned her own presence. "Your ability to admit your displeasure is refreshing. It encourages me to be honest as well."

Claire did her best to glare. "Honesty? That would be a refreshing change."

His expression remained soft, and so were his words, "You should know... I am sorry."

The world as Claire knew it, shifted. Perhaps it was an earthquake, they do happen in California. Why couldn't he be domineering or abrasive? That,

she could resist, but apologetic? In the depths of her soul, she never expected to hear those three words.

“What?” She tried unsuccessfully to subdue the overpowering trembling. The volume of her voice rose exponentially with each phrase, “You’re sorry?” The years of submission, incarceration, and domination bubbled out. No, not bubbled—gushed. This wasn’t his house, and she wasn’t sequestered away from the love and support of others. She’d say whatever she wanted and then tell him to leave. If he didn’t, she’d call security. They were, after all, on her call log. “Well, Tony, I believe I need a little clarification. Please, tell me exactly what you’re sorry about. I’ll gladly give you a few options.”

The fury surging through her veins wouldn’t allow her to remain seated. She stood and paced around the coffee table, in front of the large windows, back to the chair, and again to the coffee table. She felt his eyes on her as she made multiple slow and methodical loops. Her mind was a whirlwind, a tornado, of words. Each syllable vehemently rushed to get out. Instead of opening the flood gate, Claire took a few deep breaths. She wanted to proceed slowly, clearing away the debris cluttering her mind, and choose the right words. Finally, she began, “First, *you’re sorry* for invading my privacy for years, years before I even knew you existed. Second, *you’re sorry* for kidnapping me, isolating, controlling me, and manipulating me. Third, *you’re sorry* for lying to me, pretending you cared and oh yeah, marrying me. Fourth, and listen carefully Tony because this is a big one... *you’re sorry* for framing me for attempted murder, resulting in incarceration in a federal penitentiary.” She sat back down, arms once again crossed over her breasts. It was the most direct she’d ever spoken to him, and it felt liberating. Unfortunately, the resentment coursing through her veins wouldn’t allow her to relish her new found independence.

She expected her words to incite anger; after all, she’d experienced his anger before. Nevertheless, carelessly and unapologetically Claire forged ahead, “I would prefer the words, but you’re welcome to say, one through four, if that’s easier for you.”

As he leaned forward, she cautiously looked up into his eyes. Her body trembled. The cause may have been the fury she’d just released, or perhaps fear of his anticipated reaction, then she took in his expression and without warning the trembling stopped. His eyes were soft, the color of melted chocolate—even sad, overflowing with regret. He reached for her hand and gently tugged. Slowly, Claire released her appendage, allowing it to sit in his large palm. Tenderly, he closed his fingers encasing her petite hand.

“I am deeply sorry for one and four.” He rubbed the top of her hand with his thumb. “I did provide you with an alternative destination for number four.” Claire exhaled audibly, Tony continued, “I’m not proud of two, but three would never have happened without it.” His tone deepened and slowed.

"I am *not*, and *never* will be sorry for three, and for the record, I never *lied about* or *pretended* to love you. I didn't realize it at first, but I have loved you since before you knew my name." He slowly lifted the hand he held and lowered his lips to the firm soft skin. "And, you forgot our divorce. I am sincerely sorry for that as well. Had I known you'd be released so soon, we could still be married." He placed her left hand on her knee and stroked her empty fourth finger. "You could still officially be mine."

Was he implying that unofficially she still was? He waited for her response.

As Claire contemplated Tony's words, she thought about her rings. *Did he know she'd sold them?* Then, she noticed him eying the two cell phones on the table, in front of her. She quickly reached for her *Emily phone* and slid it into her camisole between her breasts. Yoga pants don't have pockets.

Tony closed his eyes and gently shook his head. "If I didn't want to see that phone before, I sure as hell do now."

"It's my work phone." *When had lying become so easy?*

"Oh, I was unaware of your employment."

"Really, I guess I forgot to inform you or your spies." She didn't think it was appropriate to use Phillip's name.

"Claire, I want to show you that I can change. Have as many damn phones as you want. Two seem excessive, but go for it."

"Thank you for your permission, but I don't need it. I can have fifty phones, if I want."

Tony nodded, with a stupid grin and a spark in his eyes. Claire continued, "It's documented that when a person is forbidden something, once it's made available, they tend to overindulge."

Tony met her gaze, his tone a sultry melody, "Before it is made available, a person may dream of it, long for it, and fantasize about it, especially if they once had it and know how amazing it is."

God she both did and didn't hate him at the same time! Her insides tightened as the feelings from last night returned. The inappropriate sensations, deep inside, threatened her irrelevant tone. "I don't recall availability being an issue for you."

"Be careful, Claire. That could be interpreted as an invitation."

"Then once again, you'd be misinterpreting." She stood.

He stood and stepped toward her. She remained strong and defiant, straightening her spine and standing as tall as her 5'4" frame would allow, but at the same time, she wanted to crumble. Their bodies stood resolute, untouched, separated by inches. Those inches might as well have been miles. The space created a deep chasm, filled with a magnitude of baggage and memories. Impassable, the gorge served as an insurmountable barrier, or could the gap be closed?

His voice held more than a hint of sensuality, “I believe you want, what I want, as much as I do.”

Claire feigned strength and ignorance. *What had she told Phillip Roach? She said, she didn't recommend lying to her ex-husband, yet here she was, giving it her all.* “If you’re suggesting I want you to leave, you are absolutely correct. If you’re suggesting anything else, it couldn’t be farther from the truth.” His cologne penetrated her subconscious, the same exhilarating scent that infiltrated her dreams.

His head slightly bowed. Claire feared he would kiss her. She wanted to back away, and at the same time, she wanted to feel his lips on hers. She fought the urge to lift her chin toward him, surrendering her hungry mouth.

The only possible conclusion she could ascertain was that Tony was a giant magnet. His pull affected everything, from the rotation of the earth, to her mind’s ability to reason. Losing her battle, she slowly tilted her face upward.

He gently held her chin as his voice continued with its seductive undertone, “You, my dear, have never been a good liar.”

In a moment of strength, Claire backed away and sat, exasperated. She willingly admitted defeat in this stupid stare-off. His proximity was more than she could bear. She needed air and space. Her arms once again crossed her heaving bosom, igniting friction on her disloyal nipples. Frustrated, she admitted, “You’re right. Your deceitfulness far exceeds my modest attempts at dishonesty. I bow down to your superior duplicity.”

Tony retook his seat on the sofa as his knee touched hers. “I know you have no reason to believe me, but I thought you should know why I came to California.”

She looked up into his genuine gaze. “Please, enlighten me. Why have you come?”

“To take you back to Iowa.”

Claire stared at her ex-husband. A momentary feeling of panic filled her senses. She sat dumbfounded, unable to respond, afraid to trust her own voice. The appealing idea to slap his smug face and scream at him danced through her consciousness. She knew she couldn’t do it. She’d already pushed her luck with her earlier verbal tirade. Nevertheless, the fleeting thought made her smile. Simultaneously, she fought the desires she’d been experiencing all night. That traitorous part of her wanted to forget all reason and take whatever he offered, and more. Eventually, wisdom prevailed; she responded, “Well, since this time I have a choice, I’m going to say *no*.”

“Catherine misses you.”

She searched his face for insincerity, but she found none; however, she’d misjudged that in the past. The sound of the woman’s name made her heart ache. Claire had no reason to lie. “I miss her too.” Hesitantly, she asked,

“Does she believe I tried to kill you?”

His half smile and softened eyes disappeared. Breaking the connection, he looked down at his own hands. Shaking his head slightly, he answered, “I’m not sure. We’ve never discussed it. I know at first she was worried about me, then once I was well, she was upset, but I don’t know for sure if it was at you or at me. The subject’s never come up.”

“Then how do you know she misses me?”

“I just do. When word came of your pardon—”

She interrupted him, “You were angry.”

This time, he stood and paced. Claire watched his jaw clench and unclench. She’d seen it before; his attempt to maintain control. Part of her wanted him to lose it, not a masochistic desire, more clarification. The frightening, domineering man was much easier to resist than the sensual, apologetic one.

Tony stopped at the large windows. With his back toward her, he seemed to be absorbing the view, taking in the mountains and sunlit sky. She silently waited and watched. Eventually, his shoulders squared, and with his back still toward her, she heard his restrained voice, “I was. I admit I was... stunned. Governor Preston informed me of your release *two weeks* after it occurred.” He emphasized the two weeks. “I was angry at everyone, at *you* for being pardoned, at Jane Allyson for presenting the petition, at Governor Bosley for signing it. Hell, I was even mad at the clerk that filed it.” He turned toward her. She knew those black eyes. He may have restrained his voice, but his true emotion shone like beacons through his intense gaze. Refusing to look away, Claire met his stare with her own intensity. He went on, “Finally, as time passed, I figured out that the person I was the most upset with was *me*. For the first time in *years*, yes more than three—you know that now—I’d lost track of you.” His volume increased. “My God, you were gone!”

There were so many things churning in her brain that Claire couldn’t speak. There were statements, accusations, and questions. None would make themselves known. She just watched, knowing she’d done what she’d subconsciously wanted. She’d pushed him to the brink. Tony lingered on the precipice; a slight breeze could push him into a complete meltdown.

Her heart beat rapidly as he walked toward her. There was no violence. His tone and eyes mellowed. He resumed his seat. “Damn it, Claire. Nothing has been the same without you. The house is just a big empty hole.”

She exhaled and asked, “Tell me why?”

He looked puzzled. “Why is it empty? Because *you* aren’t there.”

“No, Tony. Why did you do it to me? Why did you set me up, worse—arrange my entire life to look as though I was after your money, setting you up for the kill? You know that I continually told you that I didn’t care about the money, but everything from the beginning was manipulated to make me

look guilty. Now you say you loved me? You don't do *that* to someone you love. Tell me why you did it."

"It isn't past tense, Claire. I still love you, and I thought you knew why."

"I want to hear it from you."

"What was in the box you said you received? What information did you think I revealed?"

She didn't have time to filter her answers; the words came tumbling out. "There were pictures, articles, and a letter. It all explained that your birth name was Anton Rawls; you changed it after the death of your grandfather and parents." As the words flowed, she realized the thing she'd been missing. She didn't say grandparents and parents. *What happened to Tony's grandmother? Could she still be alive?* She would be very old. Maybe she sent Claire the information? Or maybe, she was behind this vendetta. Would it lessen the sting if Claire learned it wasn't all Tony's doing?

"Was it handwritten? Where is it? I'd like to see it."

"Yes, the note was handwritten, and I thought it looked like your writing. It wasn't signed, but you never signed anything." It was Claire's turn to look down. "You can't see it." She exhaled. "I burned it."

She heard him laugh. "You what?"

Looking up, squaring her shoulders, she repeated, "I burned it, all of it. I took it to the incinerator at the prison and watched it burn."

He stared for a moment and exclaimed, "You're serious! You have no proof of anything you just said? You burned it." His shoulders relaxed. The tension that glued his muscles together, dissipated before her eyes. He continued, "I don't know who sent it to you. I did confirm, today, that you received a box in October of last year. The prison said the return address was Emily's."

Claire nodded. "Yes, I assumed it was books or something."

He exhaled again. "Burned it. Why?"

"I've asked myself that same question a thousand times. I believe it was a cleansing of sorts, my way of removing you from my life."

Tony smirked. "How is that working for you?"

The tension in the room disintegrated, like the ashes of her information. She couldn't help but grin. "Not as well as I'd hoped." Claire glanced at a clock, 11:16 AM. "I really do need to get ready for my lunch *date*." There was no reason to emphasize the last word, but she did. "If we're done, I'd like you to leave." Her voice no longer held the urgency from before. While the ability to direct his movements empowered her, the memory of destroying the evidence subdued her.

"I'd like to ask you one more thing?" She nodded; her strength to fight him was waning. "Who was the expected recipient of that dazzling smile?"

Claire's mind spun. What smile? "What are you talking about?"

"When you first opened the door, your smile was Earth-shaking. Who were you expecting?"

"A good friend."

Tony raised his eyebrows, but Claire didn't respond. She didn't have to; she'd answered his question, the first time he asked, and she didn't owe him anymore. Truthfully, she no longer owed him that.

Claire stood. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to the door."

Tony stood. "I will not give up on my quest." Though his tone was friendly, his words were both a promise and a threat; they both knew it.

The living room and hall continued to stretch, making the walk to the door endless. Finally, they reached her destination.

"Please give Catherine my love." As she reached for the door handle, she continued, "If you have truly changed, as you claim, you will respect my decisions. If that is the case, you're wasting your time."

"I have invested much more." He paused. "One last thing," His words slowed. "Do *not* share your unsupported theories with anyone."

Claire straightened her neck, once again facing off with her ex. "I'm sorry. It's too late for that."

He reached for her hand. Her thoughts were forming too slowly to react with enough speed, to save it from his clutches. He lowered his lips to soft skin as his fingertips brushed her palm beneath. Waves of warmth radiated throughout her body. Before releasing her captured appendage, he warned, "Be careful. You don't want to disappoint me." He dropped her hand as his dark brown eyes peered into the depths of her soul.

She maintained eye contact. "*That* is no longer my concern. Goodbye, Tony."

He nodded, turned, and strode toward the elevator. She watched his tall, elegant body disappear down the hallway.

It took her a minute; finally, she shut the door and collapsed with her back against the hard wooden surface. As she did, her *Emily phone* fell from her camisole. The sound of shattering refocused her thoughts. The small black device lay helpless on the shiny marble floor. Dropping to her knees, she retrieved the phone. Opening its cover, the screen was black. Not registering the implication, she remembered Tony's eyes. When he left, were they black, or had he kept them under control? Could he really change? Could she ever forgive him?

She tried to focus. The phone wouldn't turn on.

Closing her eyes and absorbing the coolness of the marble floor, she fought to think. Each thought was epic, yet minuscule. She needed to get another phone. She also needed to call Harry. It was too late for lunch; she was too drained. Maybe she should nap, and later, she'd face life's decisions.

Dragging herself to the living room, she found her iPhone so heavy. She

managed to complete her unfinished text to Harry. Focusing, she read what she'd started an hour before: it talked about missing him at breakfast and being sorry for her behavior the night before. She just hadn't pushed *SEND* before Tony arrived. She added:

"WOULD YOU JOIN ME FOR DINNER?" And hit *SEND*.

Her bed seemed too far away. Yawning, Claire noticed the soft, inviting sofa. Nestling onto the indulgent, cool leather, she reached for a throw pillow and inhaled his scent. The brief exhilaration morphed to disappointment, questioning her future. Would Tony ever let her go? What exactly did he mean by his comment not giving up his quest?

Waking at 2:00AM wasn't a good idea. Sudden exhaustion engulfed her. Claire was so tired. The large glass windows filled the room with sunshine. She glanced toward the mountains in the distance, appreciating their beauty, as their purple haze filled her vision with color. Dreamily, she observed the sky above. The amazing clarity reminded her of a Midwestern sky, crystal blue with light fluffy wisps of clouds. She wondered when the high pressure system had settled in, very unusual for Palo Alto this time of year. She knew that from meteorology, not experience. After all, she'd only lived on the West Coast over a month. So much had changed in such a short time.

Normally, on a beautiful day like this, she'd go for a walk. Her daily hikes provided fresh air, exercise, and a wonderful view of the city. They took her to places she might not see by car. Surprisingly, there was something reassuring about Phil's surveillance. His omnipresence gave her confidence, like the cameras back in Iowa. She was being monitored. She could choose to focus on the negative, or she could relish the positive. Claire was confident Tony didn't know she and Phil had spoken. Nonetheless, if anything threatened her, she knew that Phillip Roach would be there. Inhaling Tony's cologne, Claire surmised Phil would intercede with any perpetrator—except his employer.

That was apparent with Phil's departure from the restaurant last night. Claire made a mental note to question Phil. Thoughts were becoming too elusive, slipping away. Her attention was once again outside. The blue of the sky melted into the purple of the mountains, bleeding into a swirl of color until her eyes could no longer focus. Finally, succumbing to the tremendous weight of her eyelids, Claire closed out the light and color. The darkness absorbed her thoughts. Everything else could wait; she needed a little nap.



CLAIRE TRIED TO wake, but was that possible from within a dream? The one, from the night before, was back. Again, it felt so tangible. Why couldn't her

subconscious just let her sleep?

It began with Tony's voice coming from a fog, "Put your arms around my neck."

The directive was not demanding, yet she struggled to resist. Undaunted, he controlled her movements, not with words, *that* she could resist. No, he manipulated her thoughts and actions with the most devious means of persuasion, a kiss—his warm, full lips engaged hers. Conscious reasoning evaporated into the fog of her dreamlike state. Tony didn't need to repeat his demand; her arms encircled his neck. Her obedience was rewarded with more of the kissing, more warmth, more bliss. Then the world moved. Claire had the sensation of Tony lifting her, or maybe she was floating. That can happen in dreams, can't it? There's even a line in a song: "*in dreams our feet never touch the ground.*" Claire reassured herself; this wasn't real.

She'd watched him walk away and locked the door. Didn't she?

Convincing herself that this was only fantasy, Claire nuzzled into his chest and allowed the illusion of his powerful, yet tender arms to transport her through the condominium. Familiar sights passed blurrily before her eyes. Was it from the dream, or the speed with which they traveled? Claire closed her eyes and accepted the journey, anticipating the destination.

Somehow, she was on her bed. When she woke at 2:00AM, she didn't straighten the bed clothes. The exposed, soft sheets were cool against her skin. Gently, the clip was freed from her hair, allowing her auburn trusses to fall in waves onto her soft pillow. Piece by piece, her clothing disappeared. She obeyed the simple commands, "Lift your arms over your head." Her oversized t-shirt was eased over her head, then the camisole. Claire moaned as the cool air caused her nipples to harden. Her physical reaction didn't go unnoticed. His now gentle fingers lightly caressed the hard nubs. Closing her eyes, with her arms above her head, she arched her back, surrendering her vulnerable breasts. She ached for more.

Next, her yoga pants were eased past her ankles, exposing her black lacy panties. The barely visible material was but a scant hurdle on the road to their destination. Nevertheless, a streak of panic ran through her, like ice on overheated skin. Goose bumps formed on her arms and legs. The sudden alarm intensified everything, from the sound of their breathing to the touch of his hands. The small lace barrier was another direct violation of *his* rules. She watched his expression as his fingers traced the delicate trim. In the center, inches below her belly button, was a small, black, satin bow. His strong hands encircled her hips as his thumbs teased the tiny adornment. She was a present—a gift, wrapped only for him. He didn't speak, but his chest rose and fell as his breathing deepened. She sighed with relief when the tips of his lips turned upward into his handsome, devilish smile.

In an instant, the panties were gone.

"This isn't real. This is a dream." She wasn't sure if the words were in her head or if she'd spoken them aloud.

They must have been said aloud, because Tony responded. "Do you want it to be a dream?"

She shook her head, *no*.

No, she didn't want it to be a dream? Or no, she didn't want it to be real? She didn't know. "It isn't real." Claire repeated, a little less confident of her words or her ability to speak.

It felt real. The fragrance of his cologne filled her room, as only she filled his sight. It was that all-encompassing gaze, the one that removed everyone and everything from the world, leaving only them. The heat radiating from his amazing body was overwhelming; she wondered if it could burn her, yet she wasn't concerned. This wasn't the man who hurt her. The man in her dream was the one she loved and loved her in return. Her mind searched for reason. He'd proclaimed that love again, in the living room. Now, her subconscious wanted to fulfill its desires. She submitted to the dream. Fighting would take too much energy. Even her unconscious knew her energy would be better utilized in other ways.

His clothes were also gone. When had he taken them off? Time can be so elusive in dreams...

He was talking; asking questions and voicing appreciation of everything before him. Nevertheless, his words didn't register, only the rhythm of his deep sensual tone. That cadence, along with the strong beating of his heart, within his massive, heat-radiating chest, calmed and excited her. Claire listened and nodded, even though she was unsure of what she'd authorized.

Her senses were on high alert. The amazing sight of him, unclothed, his distinctive scent, the warm commanding touch of his hands, the sound of his sexy breathing, so close to her ear, and the taste of his soft lips, produced gasps and moans. The unrelenting provocation generated overwhelming desire. She heard her own voice pleading for more, yet she wasn't conscious of speaking. Everything was in another dimension. Involuntary actions and reactions overtook her mind, words, and body. When had fantasy ever taken her to this height?

His hands felt so real as they caressed her skin. Each touch intensified the electric sensations and passionate desires. She'd been fighting these images all night, but she couldn't do it anymore. The man of her dreams didn't take, as the real one would. He asked, as Harry had done.

That was it, Claire reasoned. Her subconscious created a combination, an amalgamation of sorts. When the husky voice requested permission, her body screamed with need. "Oh God yes, please!" His smile, too, seemed real. Reaching up, she longed to touch his face. Unlike the night before, her fingertips connected their target. She caressed the smooth, freshly shaven skin

of his cheeks and wove her fingers through his thick black hair. Her sensitive nipples pushed toward his chest. Instead of feeling them against his warm skin, Tony bent down and suckled the vulnerable, hard tips. Again and again, her back arched. She wanted everything. It had been so long.



WHAT TRULY WAKES one from the depths of sleep? Was it external, like the sound of a ringing phone and noises from the street below? Or was it internal, like the twisting in your stomach from ravenous hunger? Snuggling into the soft, smooth sheets, she thought about food. When had she last eaten? Slowly, her consciousness took over, and an unreasonable fear filled her being. It was the fear that when she opened her eyes, she'd no longer be in Palo Alto, but in *her* suite—in Iowa.

Trying unsuccessfully to subdue the rising panic, Claire did the only thing she could; she opened her eyes.

Relief escaped in a deep exhale as she viewed the inside of her room, in Amber's condominium. She rolled toward her clock, 5:17. Was it AM or PM? She closed her eyes. No, it wasn't AM... it was PM. She'd slept the entire day away. Pulling back the covers, she revealed her clothed body. The only piece of clothing she no longer wore was the large t-shirt currently lying on the rug near her bed.

Walking toward her bathroom, she remembered her dream. She stopped and took a moment to survey her room. Nothing seemed out of place, yet hadn't she fallen asleep on the couch?

When she was young, her mother told her she would sometimes sleepwalk, so perhaps that's what she'd done. Turning on the warm water of the shower, she decided to freshen up before dinner. Removing her clothes, she inspected herself in the mirror. There were times when she was with Tony, that her body displayed evidence of their intimacy or his domination.

Her skin appeared untouched. Nevertheless, her body felt... she wasn't sure how to describe it... content? The unrelenting tension she'd been experiencing since Harry's first video game session was gone. Satisfied. Yes. That's how she felt: content and satisfied. It was as if she'd been thoroughly taken, filled and pleased, by a memory.

Claire stepped under the soft, hot spray. When the water struck her nipples, she flinched and shielded them from the assault. That's strange, she thought. *Why am I so tender?* As she poured the shampoo into her hand, she briefly inhaled the fragrance of Tony's cologne. Her next breath was filled with the scent of flowers.

Claire shook her head as she massaged the floral cream into her hair. Her

imagination was working overtime. She needed to compartmentalize Tony away. Hopefully, she had dinner plans with Harry. He could help her leave the world of fantasy and concentrate on reality. She wanted to tell him about Tony and about the bombshell of him not being the sender of the box. There was something else too... stepping from the shower, onto the soft mat, she tried to recall.

As she dried her skin, she remembered; it was Tony's grandmother. She wanted to research Sharron Rawls. Something in the mirror caught Claire's attention. It was her pile of dirty clothes. She picked up the camisole and the yoga pants. Hadn't she been wearing underwear?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love, and to be greater than our suffering.

—Ben Okri

MARIE DIDN'T WANT to care this much, not about anyone. Then why was she sitting in her nightgown, at 3:00 AM, watching Ms. Sharron breathe? It wasn't like she was anything to most of this family, other than hired help—and she sure as hell didn't have a family of her own.

The breaths came, inconsistent, with a rattle. If the doctors could just stop the damn rattle.

Marie sat in the high-backed Queen Anne chair and wrapped her arms around her knees. The doctor, who'd been to the estate earlier, said the IV medication would fight the infection. Marie just hoped Ms. Sharron was strong enough to be the battleground. What good was a strong army if the earth crumbled under their siege?

Marie didn't have medical training.

Hadn't that been said, about a hundred times in the past few days? Mr. Samuel and Ms. Amanda made no bones about the fact someone *more qualified* should be at Ms. Sharron's bedside. Not only did they express their dissatisfaction with Marie's medical qualifications, they also didn't want her to be the sole person with Mrs. Sharron when she moved from this life to the next.

As was the case with everything, the decision wasn't theirs to make. Marie would remain as long as Mr. Nathaniel Rawls wanted her there. He didn't argue; he declared, "Sharron is comfortable with Marie. She'll stay." It may not be up for debate, but Samuel and Amanda made no attempt to hide their disapproval.

Even without medical training, Marie knew Ms. Sharron was in pain and

laboring. Everything Marie had read said Alzheimer's disease was unpredictable. She could pass away today or live another five years. As Marie watched and listened, she felt the need to pray for today. This wasn't a life she wanted Ms. Sharron to endure any longer. Then again, if she passed, what did that mean for Marie? It meant she would leave this estate and go on her way. Although it would undoubtedly make Samuel and Amanda happy, Marie wondered about Nathaniel. It surprised Marie to realize she'd actually miss her talks with the stubborn old man.

Marie chuckled softly, *old?* He was in fact old—at least a lot older than she. In the past eighteen months, he looked even older. Nonetheless, for a man with so many concerns weighing him down, he was incredibly attractive, and the power he wielded, outside of this room, was impressive, yet the part of Nathaniel Rawls Marie would miss was the part no one else saw. Not the ostentatious, narcissistic tyrant making deals and barking orders. She would miss the handsome, seasoned gentleman who sat for hours, holding a hand that rarely held back. The man who propped himself on the bed, held his wife's frail body, and watched her sleep upon his chest.

"I thought I told you to go to bed?"

The deep voice startled Marie back to reality. She turned her tear stained cheeks toward the man who'd been in her thoughts. "I tried, but I couldn't sleep."

"So, can you sleep better in that chair?"

Marie smiled. "No, but at least I'm doing something."

Nathaniel pulled another chair beside Marie's, sat, and squeezed Marie's hand. "I can hire someone else to sit with her at night so that you can get more rest."

Marie turned away and tried to breathe; her emotions were overwrought. Her question came through with more dejection than she intended, "Do you also think I'm incapable of doing my job?"

"Marie, are you crying?"

"No." She lied.

His strong hand still covered hers. "I think you're more than capable. I just think you need a break. You can't be by her side twenty-four hours a day."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You sit here half the night and work all day. You need sleep too."

He smirked. "Do I, now?"

"You do. You can't go on burning your candle at both ends. I suggest some time away from work, or more time sleeping." His sly smile made her feel self-conscious; *was he making fun of her?* "All right, now why are you grinning? Are you laughing at me?" she asked.

He tried to hide the smile showing through his dark sad eyes. The smile was a nice change to the solemn expression he often wore while observing his sleeping wife. "I'm not laughing; I'm amused."

"Fine, be amused. Just get some sleep."

"I don't remember the last time someone told *me* what to do." Nathaniel sat back and watched his wife. Marie didn't go to bed; she sat and allowed him to talk. She couldn't take away his pain. Perhaps if he felt comfortable enough to express his thoughts, the ache would lessen, in some way. Nathaniel continued, "I do actually."

They were no longer looking at one another or touching. Both sat with their heads resting on the plush winged sides of the Queen Anne chairs, watching Sharron. Marie encouraged, "You do?"

"Sharron, she was the only person who was ever able to tell me what to do." He chuckled. "And how to do it." He went on describing the love of his life, her incredible beauty and her tenacious will. "When I came home from the war—it wasn't over—but my tour was. She'd written to me, and I her. We still have those letters in a box somewhere. I couldn't wait to see her again, to hear her voice, and hold her." He reached forward and picked up her frail hand. "I should show you pictures. I know what you see isn't what I see. I still see the vibrant, strong-willed girl I rushed home to marry."

Marie didn't comment. The tears she'd shed earlier now had companions. Her heart broke for this man telling a beautiful love story, one which she knew had a cruel, sad ending.

"Did I ever tell you that her family didn't approve of me?"

That was difficult to believe. After all, Nathaniel Rawls was an esteemed businessman. "No, you haven't. Why didn't they?"

"Well, first, her father didn't like me," And with a chuckle, "believe me, the feeling was mutual, but mostly, it was because they had money. Not a lot, but they were comfortable. I barely had two pennies to rub together. He didn't believe I could provide for his daughter, *in the style to which she was accustomed.*"

Marie grinned. "You sure proved him wrong!"

"Indeed, I did." His voice didn't sound triumphant, more melancholy.

"Did he ever admit he was wrong?"

"No, but that's understandable; real men don't apologize. Besides, he died before I made my first million. This..." He gestured with his hands. "...has all been for her, and now, I have to keep going for her. I refuse to back away from any of it. Even if she isn't with me, I'm still doing it all for her."

"She still loves you." It was surprisingly easy to carry on heartfelt conversations while not looking at one another. "Your voice excites her. Her heart beats stronger when you're near."

"Do you think she still knows?"

"Some days, some times. When I first started, she liked to look through old photo albums. I think it was her way to hold on to memories. She'd tell me stories about the two of you, when you were young, and about Mr. Samuel and Mr. Anton. You two had, I mean *have*, something very few other people are ever blessed to experience."

Nathaniel looked at his watch. "Marie, it's after 3:30 AM. You go get some sleep. I'll stay here until morning. You can relieve me in about three hours."

When she didn't move, he stood and took her hand. She noticed the gleam in his eyes. He was thinking about another time and another place. "I mean it. I want you to get some rest."

She allowed herself to stand, her hand still in his. "Good night, Nathaniel." While in the presence of others, she addressed him formally; however, during their private talks, the *Mr. Rawls* was long gone.



IT WASN'T PLANNED. It wasn't right. Nevertheless, as he stood there holding Marie's warm, soft hand and their chests touched, with only her robe covered nightgown and his robe covered t-shirt separating them, something changed. They both knew it, but neither one uttered a word.

Nathaniel Rawls took what he wanted in life. What he wanted, above all else, was his wife. Life was cruel, and he couldn't reach her, no matter how long or how hard he tried. He'd worked his entire life to give her the best of everything; however, he couldn't give her health.

Standing in front of him was everything Sharron had been and had ceased to be. In his hand was energy, vibrant and strong-willed, embodied in a lovely caring young woman. As he looked down into her soft gray eyes, he noticed a sparkle only recently doused with tears.

Although he still held tight to her hand and their hearts beat frantically within their touching chests, Nathaniel watched as Marie turned her twinkling eyes away. He didn't want to lose that vivacity. It was more life than he'd be held in a long time. He gently raised her chin and spoke with a deep throaty voice. In all of their talks, she'd never heard this tone before, "You need to go to your room. May I suggest locking your door?"



HIS TENOR TERRIFIED her. Not that Marie feared Nathaniel; she feared the desires stirring within her. After all, she hadn't been with a man for a long

time, and never consensually. For the first time in her life, she experienced consensual thoughts and feelings. How could she possibly be thinking like this, with Ms. Sharron only two feet away?

Her voice also came from somewhere deep, almost unrecognizable, even to herself, “Does everyone do exactly as you say?” She liked the way he smiled. It was so much better than his grief.

“Everyone, who is *smart*.”

“I’ve never claimed intelligence.”

Nathaniel stood over 6’6”. Marie was about 5’8”. When she was younger, her height made her feel awkward. At this moment, it felt perfect. Her head fit perfectly under his chin, and with her chin tilted, as it was in his hand, and his face inclined their lips were but millimeters apart. The next minutes lasted hours. His lips moved forward, and she made no move to stop them.

It could be argued that she moved toward them, possibly lifting herself onto her toes. Honestly, there was such a small space to cover. The *who* was inconsequential as at the moment was the *why*. What mattered was the *what*. What were they doing?

His lips were full, warm, firm, and right. They’d both been overwhelmed by the sadness at Sharron’s recent decline. Perhaps within a cold, gloomy New Jersey winter where hope seemed lost, a glimmer of joy could exist.

“If you don’t tell me to stop now, I can’t promise I’ll be able to stop in the future.”

Marie remained silent. When he tugged her hand toward her attached suite, she willingly followed. She wasn’t hoping to cure her loneliness as much as his. Could a *wrong* relationship actually be *right*, in the middle of this desolate life?

CHAPTER TWENTY

***Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strength.
When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is
strength.***

—Mahatma Ghandi

C LAIRE LICKED THE spoon, followed by a satisfied, “Yum.” She lifted the pan of creamy cilantro sauce and set it aside to cool. Her empty stomach twisted in anticipation of the appetizing aromas. Amber’s kitchen glowed with warmth and the rich fragrance of baking fish. She pushed the *light* diagram on the screen of the wall-oven and illuminated the small cavern. Inside, she spied fresh tilapia filets sizzling in a warm bath of liquid butter and lemon juice. Claire reread the clock. Harry should be here any minute, she thought.

Walking toward the stove top, she checked the water level in her sauce pan. It would soon serve as the perfect basin for asparagus to soften to *al dente*. The mixed green salad lightly tossed with raspberry vinaigrette dressing that was already on the set table as was an open bottle of cabernet. Claire placed wineglasses next to the tall, filled water goblets.

After her shower, she found her iPhone in the living room and read Harry’s response:

“DINNER SOUNDS GREAT. WE SHOULD TALK.”

Claire wasn’t sure why the word *talk* sounded so ominous, but it did. She immediately responded:

“AMBER’S GONE, HOW ABOUT DINNER HERE? MORE PRIVACY FOR TALKING?”

She finally exhaled when his, “*SURE*” came in reply.

Claire checked the clock again, three more minutes. It seemed as though the world was spinning in slow motion. Claire hit a few buttons on Amber’s whole house sound system and listened as Michael Buble’s rich voice filtered through hidden speakers.

Unlike most evenings where Harry was home by 6:30 PM, tonight he’d sent a text apologizing for unseen delays. Claire didn’t start the tilapia until 7:45 PM, after he messaged he was on his way. With traffic, the short drive could take half an hour. Without traffic it should take less than ten minutes. She looked at the timer, four more minutes.

Clock: 8:17 PM. Where was he?

When the timer sounded, forcing Claire to face the reality of her still lonely condominium, she removed the fish from the oven and placed it in the microwave to stay warm. Her instincts told her to call or text Harry; however, she didn’t listen. Instead, she poured herself a glass of wine and walked aimlessly around the condominium.

In the living room, she peered through the large windows into the night sky. The bottom of the vista twinkled with illuminations from the valley, the glow of the street lights, cars, and buildings. The top half reminded her of velvet with the mountains intensifying the black sky; only the top quarter lessened the darkness with faint flickers of light. Unfortunately, the city lights overpowered the potential glow of the distant stars.

Momentarily, Claire thought about the stars in Iowa. From her balcony at Tony’s secluded estate she could see millions. Instantaneously, Claire remembered Tony’s quest and wrapped her free arm around her torso. Would he succeed? Would she be back on that balcony?

Still wandering, Claire found herself in the spare bedroom containing her unorthodox filing system. She reached for the stack of information she’d put down almost twenty-four hours ago—the information they’d accumulated on Samuel Rawls.

Claire knew she needed to research Sharron Rawls, but it could wait until tomorrow.

She leafed through the documents and found herself staring at the *Santa Monica Coroner’s Report* for Amanda and Samuel Rawls. It was something she’d put off reading, but as they say: there’s no time like the present. She settled herself on the corner of the bed and began to read.

There were a lot of technical terms discussing the injuries, explaining the

trajectory of bullets and the damage that ensued. Claire skimmed the information until she came to the section entitled: *Coroner's Assessment*. She cautiously read the opinion of the elected official:

It is the judgment of this office that Amanda Rawls died of multiple gunshot wounds. While she was struck in the leg, spinal cord, and right shoulder, the lethal shot connected her right ventricle. Death occurred due to rapid loss of blood. A bullet struck the C-5 vertebrae, severing the spinal cord, resulting in immediate paralysis. It is believed the victim was unable to move during the last minutes of life, although she would have remained conscious. Time of Death: based on body temperature believed to be approximately 1600 hours. The trajectory indicates a taller assailant standing at least five feet away.

Claire tried desperately not to internalize the information as she flipped the pages of the report. She found the same section of Samuel's report:

It is the judgment of this office that Samuel Rawls died from multiple gunshot wounds. He exhibited injuries in both legs and his spinal column. The fatal shot occurred with a bullet to the right temple. His right hand tested positive for residue consistent with the placement of the weapon.

The weapon found near Mr. Samuel Rawls has been confirmed to be the weapon used with both Mr. and Mrs. Rawls. Time of Death: estimated at approximately 1600 hours.

Claire sighed. She'd put off reading this report, fearing it would implicate Tony instead of Samuel. Although tragic, she found the information comforting. The times of death exonerated Tony, proving he wasn't responsible for his parents' death.

Then again, the reports raised new questions: Why would Samuel have multiple injuries? Most people committing suicide don't shoot themselves in the legs or back. What about the neighbor's statement? What about the other woman? Samuel's sister? After minutes of scanning, Claire determined the other woman must have been a dead lead. No sister existed or was mentioned in any other reports surrounding the deaths of Samuel and Amanda Rawls.

Finishing off her glass of wine, Claire read the clock, 9:07 PM. *Where is Harry?* The room wobbled slightly. Her head felt light with wine and lack of

food. She left the research on the bed and went toward the kitchen. On the shiny granite countertop, her iPhone sat all alone. Claire reached for the device and pushed buttons. Immediately, the icon for missed calls appeared with the number two. As she changed the screen to see the numbers, she saw a text from Harry:

"I'M SO SORRY. I'M ON HAMILTON AVENUE. ACCIDENT RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME. I'M FINE BUT STAYING WITH VICTIM UNTIL POLICE AND PARAMEDICS ARRIVE."

She immediately called his number; it went to voicemail. Claire hung up and called again. She felt an unwelcome tightening in her chest as she ran for the door. Hamilton was just a block or two away. She could be there in minutes if she walked fast, sooner if she ran. The phone rang as she threw open the door to her condominium. If she hadn't looked up, she would have run right into him.



DEREK QUIETLY ENTERED their dark condominium. Coming home much later than he'd planned, he placed his keys on the small table in the foyer and gazed down the dark hallway. Seeping from around the door to Sophia's new studio, he saw golden beams of light. He slipped off his shoes and walked soundlessly toward the glow. With each step, his anticipation mounted. Would he finally find his wife drawing or painting? She'd been on the West Coast for almost two weeks and hadn't so much as touched a sketch pad. With each step, he realized, more than anything, Derek wanted to see his wife lost in her world of creativity.

Of course, over the past fourteen days, she'd given every excuse for avoiding her new studio; adjusting to the time change, getting to know the neighbors, learning her way around Silicon Valley—all valid, especially his favorite, getting to know people at his work. When Derek worked in Boston and Sophia spent her days and nights on the Cape, she rarely interacted with his fellow workers. He often wondered if it were proximity or personality. It was no secret, they lived in different worlds. Nonetheless, her lack of daily interaction didn't hinder her presence at social functions, where she mingled beautifully, being her gregarious self.

Derek often felt a twinge of pride when coworkers noticed his lovely wife. Some of the Boston associates even commented about Derek's perfect life: a gorgeous wife patiently waiting miles away, leaving his days free to explore what Boston had to offer. Derek didn't agree. He had more woman in Sophia than he'd ever dreamt. Exploring wasn't on his radar.

Truthfully, it wasn't just Sophia's looks, although he approved. It was her

uncensored zest for life. Her ability to see the world in a way he never would. As Derek anticipated her arrival to their new Santa Clara home, he readied himself for a whirlwind of excitement.

It never happened.

From the moment Sophia stepped into his new office, he noticed the difference. Her beauty never wavered, yet her spark and drive did. The spark which drew him to her, like a moth to a flame, was gone. In the past two weeks, she's unpacked their condo, shopped, made regular appearances at his office, attended a few business dinners, and waited patiently for his return home. Derek wondered if he'd unknowingly married a Stepford wife.

He longed for the woman he'd left on the Cape, the woman who would paint all night, crawl into bed before his alarm, nuzzle close, and pout when he finally pulled away from their early morning encounter. She filled his fantasies, yet of all the sudden changes, Sophia's lack of *art* bothered Derek most. She'd made no attempt to organize her new home studio. Even after Derek ordered her a new desk and some of the basics, she'd done nothing to make it hers. Now, as Derek slipped down the bleached wooden planks, toward the light and resonating soft jazz music, his anticipation grew.

He read his watch: 11:27 PM. His meeting turned to dinner, into more discussion and into more drinks. It wasn't the first time since Sophia's arrival that he'd disappointed her by not coming home at a decent hour.

Leaning around the slightly ajar door, Derek peered into the light *at* the end of the dark tunnel. His chest filled with love, seeing Sophia's long, blonde hair secured by a big clip and the deep swoop of her nightgown. She was turned the other direction, sitting cross legged on the floor, with her sketch pad on top of an unpacked box. Her hand moved urgently as the charcoal brushed the surface of the linen tablet. He saw his wife's slender neck all the way down to the middle of her back. Though the room was still in disarray, he noticed a few new bags of art supplies.

Derek fought the desire to break his wife's trance. He realized the woman before him, on the floor with darkened fingertips and bare feet, was the love of his life, and watching her in this state, almost drugged by her own creative muse, was Derek's favorite aphrodisiac. The scent of her perfume mixed with charcoal filled his senses. Gripping the door jamb, Derek stopped his impulse to nuzzle her sexy exposed neck.

They had a beautiful king-size bed, in a large suite with a magnificent view on the other side of the condo; however, as Derek stood watching, he fantasized about taking his wife right there, right now on the wooden floor. Closing his eyes, Derek thought about Sophia's gaze as they made love. He imagined her stunning gray eyes clouded with a blue haze as their passion ignited. Sadly, Derek realized, he hadn't seen those blue clouds since New England.

That realization, combined with the woeful reverberation of saxophone music, prompted him to turn silently toward the hallway. He couldn't disturb her, not for his own desires. Seeing her in her state of euphoria was enough. He eased his way to their room and climbed into their large empty bed. Derek's only solace, as he drifted off to sleep, was that Sophia was once again drawing.



THE LINEN PAGE filled with different shades of black and gray. Sophia bought colored chalk at the supply store, but charcoal seemed more appropriate. She wasn't sure what propelled her to the art supplies store in Palo Alto. Perhaps it was her desire to see the numerous art studios in that area boasting wonderful exhibits. After all, she'd received a postcard inviting her to one of the exhibits. It wasn't really a personal invitation for to her. It was one of those promotional mailings, but it intrigued her. While perusing the displays, she felt the familiar desire to create. It was so overpowering that she couldn't resist any longer.

It wasn't that she'd been resisting. It was more like she'd put it away—somewhere. Since coming to California, there were more important things to do. She needed to be *Mrs. Derek Burke*. No, she *wanted* to be; however, with each passing day, Sophia questioned if she wanted to be Mrs. Derek Burke for her or for him. As an executive in a large and upcoming company, didn't he deserve that? The pretense was draining. Sophia constantly argued with herself... if she wanted to be what Derek wanted, than why did she feel so unhappy?

While in an art studio on Hamilton Avenue in Palo Alto, the curator approached, and they began talking. They discussed the displayed pieces and debated the use of mediums and color. With time, Sophia revealed she too was an artist and mentioned her studio in Provincetown and exhibitions in Europe.

The gentleman asked to see her portfolio. It was at that moment, Sophia realized it was still in Massachusetts. That realization struck her with unseen force. Her portfolio—her life in synopsis—was back on the Cape. She'd left her life to be with Derek.

Some of her better works were accessible through her website. She typed in the address and showed Mr. George her art. He appeared more than impressed.

“Mrs. Burke, I like your work. It has a fresh raw quality.”

“Thank you, Mr. George. Please call me Sophia.”

“I want you to know this is out of character, to offer a position to someone

without checking references, but I've recently found myself in need of a trusted employee." Sophia listened. "I have space in the back where you could create, but mostly I need someone to look after the studio a few hours during the day. It would also require the occasional evening and weekend."

Sophia didn't know what to say. She hadn't been looking for a job. Nonetheless, the past two weeks she'd felt like a fish out of water. The idea of being surrounded by art thrilled her, but at the same time, she knew Derek didn't want her to work. He wanted her to be free to create. She wished she could explain how her new found freedom felt stifling.

"Mr. George, I'm honored. I really should discuss this with my husband, and you should know I plan to make some short trips to Provincetown during the summer. I hate having my studio closed throughout the busy time of year."

"I understand. We can meet again to determine if details can be worked out. Would you consider shipping some of your work here, for display?"

She couldn't help but beam. It would have been impossible to hide the smile. "I'm truly honored. I'll give it all serious consideration. Could I please contact you tomorrow?"

Sophia took his number, and they made all the necessary arrangements. The renewed excitement gave her the strength to purchase new supplies. She couldn't wait to tell Derek; however, he called and told her he wouldn't be home for dinner; then there was the text message explaining his meeting was going longer than expected. She tried to busy herself while she waited.

Sometime during the evening, Sophia found herself in the room he'd planned as her studio. Looking around, she knew it needed to be organized; however, as she began removing the new items from the bags, she gave in to impulse. Although new, the charcoal felt smooth and amazing under her fingertips. Without thought or provocation, she surrendered to the desire, and began to draw.

When the white page was no longer white, she sat back and looked at the whole of what she'd created. It was a beach with rolling clouds and rough seas, no place in particular and yet—East Coast. Looking around the cluttered room, Sophia wondered about the time. Surely, Derek should be home by now. Making her way down the hall, she found his shoes by the door. Sadness swelled in her chest and a muffled sob escaped her lips when she discovered him sleeping alone in their bed. Why didn't he come down to her?

Softly, she shut the door to their bedroom and went back to the other hall. Next to her studio was another room, a spare bedroom, decorated with light colors and natural textures, for visiting friends and family. As she eased herself into the cool sheets and inhaled the fresh newness surrounding her, her thoughts traveled across the country to their cottage on the Cape. No matter how hard she worked to eliminate the scent of age, it lingered below the surface. It probably was a combination of sea, moisture, and mildew. The

ingredients sounded foul, yet it wasn't. Lying on the new bed, in the newly painted room, she longed for that fragrance. Allowing quiet tears to escape her eyes and moisten the soft pillow case, she drifted into a restless sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind.

—Dr. Seuss

*W*HEN CLAIRE LOOKED into Harry's tired, sad eyes, her anxiety melted into relief. She flung her arms around his neck and buried her face into his chest. She'd never expected to be so concerned, but she was. Her muffled words flowed without hesitation, "I just got your text. I was so worried. I was going to find you, to be sure you were okay."

Slowly, his arms encircled her frame, and his chin settled upon her head. "I am."

She led him into the apartment and offered him something to drink. He asked for water then changed his mind to wine. She attentively tended to his needs as he explained what transpired.

"I would've been here sooner. But just as I was about to leave SiJo, we had multiple false alarms. I have no idea what was happening. We had sensors indicating people where there were none, and sensors ignoring people where there had been." He rolled his shoulders in an attempt to release his pent-up stress and continued, "I know it's a computer glitch. I probably could've figured it out, but honestly, I wanted to get here, so I left Jackson to deal with it and headed home." He emptied his glass of wine. Claire refilled it and returned it to his hand. After a few sips, he continued.

"You know, usually Palo Alto is quiet and calm." Claire nodded. She didn't have a clue how Palo Alto was *usually*, but in her short time it fit the description: calm. He went on, "I was almost home, on Hamilton, when this car pulled out of a parking space. It was like some kind of movie; it happened so fast—yet in slow motion." He finished the wine, placed the glass on the nearby table, and took Claire's hands. "I don't mean to sound vain, but if it

wasn't for my quick reactions, I think I would've been the one placed in that ambulance." He squeezed Claire's hands as she remained silent. "Honestly, I wasn't paying attention. I was thinking about you and our talk. When everything happened, I just reacted."

Claire wanted to know about that talk, but he needed to discuss the accident.

"Before I knew it, this car pulled out of a parking space, heading the other direction, and then this taxi came up on my right. There wasn't really a lane. He must have been in a hurry." Harry closed his eyes and watched his private recall. Finally, he spoke, "The car in front of me swerved, I hit the brakes, and the taxi moved into my spot. Suddenly, the car from the parking spot went into the oncoming lane and collided head on with the taxi. The driver of the car from the parking space was a young girl, only sixteen years old. I don't know if she hit the gas instead of the brake." He shook his head solemnly. "We'll never know."

Claire took a drink of her wine: it definitely wasn't a *sip*. She thought about Harry's words, *if it weren't for my quick reaction...* She'd experienced too many questionable situations to believe in coincidence. Finally, she asked, "How's the taxi driver?"

"Distraught and injured, but not life threatening. He was on his way to a fare, so he didn't have a passenger." Claire kissed Harry's cheek and asked if he wanted more wine or if perhaps he was ready for some dinner. When he nodded, she led him by the hand into the kitchen.

He looked around at the set table and pans on the stove top. "I'm sorry that I messed up your dinner. It smells wonderful."

She smiled a wary smile. "I don't think my dinner's as important as you. You're okay; that's what matters." She squeezed his hand. "Why don't you pour us some more wine and start your salad. I'll warm up this food. It'll be fine."

He continued to talk about the accident as Claire warmed the fish in the microwave and heated the sauce on the stove. Next, she refilled the sauce pan for the asparagus. As the faucet gushed water, she heard Harry's voice, but her mind filled with other words: Tony asking, "Who was the expected recipient of that dazzling smile?"

Tears came to her eyes as the realization struck. Her presence wasn't making Amber and Harry's life more exciting; she was putting them in danger.

The memories of her parents and Simon's untimely deaths paralyzed her movements. Water overflowed the pan as she stood motionless, staring at the tiled backsplash. It wasn't the mosaic design holding her trance, it was her new thoughts about Amber. She's flying home tomorrow from meetings in Houston. Simon died in a plane crash. Claire's heart began to beat erratically.

Harry appeared behind her. So deep in her sudden rational or irrational terror, she didn't hear him approach. She jumped as he grasped her shoulders. As if from a tunnel, she heard his voice, echoing against the cavern walls, or maybe he was repeating himself, "Claire, are you all right? Claire, Claire, are you all right?"

Her grip on the handle of the pan failed. The metal pot fell to the depths of the sink as water droplets splashed violently coating the tile, granite, and porcelain. Her body trembled as she tried to speak, "It's me. I have to leave. We need to call Amber."

"What's you? What are you talking about?" Harry tried to calm her; however, she barely heard his words through the commotion within her head.

Finally, in desperation she screamed, "Call Amber, now!"

Still unsure of the reason for Claire's sudden outburst, he turned off the water, reached for his phone, and led Claire's unsteady body to the table. Harry dialed his sister. Once the connection was established, he handed Claire the phone.

Her words ran together as she tried to explain everything to Amber. Claire told her about Harry's accident, about Tony's visit, and about her fear. Harry listened to every word. When she spoke about Tony visiting the condominium, Claire saw his neck stiffen and jaw clench. She pushed on.

Amber listened to what some might consider a mad rant. As Claire finished, her voice slowed, reflecting her utter exhaustion. She listened to Amber's steady voice of reason as tears slipped from her downcast eyes. Her fatigue wasn't physical; she'd slept until after 5:00 PM. It was psychological. All of the research was well and good. She could plan and possibly implement a great demise; however, none of that mattered if her friends were lost in battle.

Only after Amber promised a thorough inspection of the SiJo plane prior to departure, did Claire hand Harry back his phone. Harry spoke to his sister for a few moments, hung up, and reached for Claire.

She wanted his embrace, his comfort, and support. Nevertheless, she knew if she took what he offered, she'd in fact be condemning him. Resolving to keep him safe, she stiffly returned his embrace. With her head safely against his chest the trembling ceased. She started to speak, but Harry spoke first.

"I want to hear more about that visit. Why did he come *here*?"

"I was going to tell you about it as well as the other things I learned..." She pulled from his hold and reached for the water goblet. It shook as she tried to make it reach her lips. "I just haven't had a chance." Her voice sounded stronger than she appeared.

Harry watched as Claire regrouped. He saw a mixture of emotions passing like clouds before her emerald eyes. Once again, he put his arm around her

shoulders. "How about we eat some of this delicious food and then talk?"

Claire stared momentarily into his pale blue eyes. The intensity she'd witnessed as she told Amber about Tony was gone. Now, she saw concern. Claire replied, "I think I need to find a new place to live."

"Let's eat and sleep and then discuss it."

Claire steadied her stance. "We can eat. We can sleep. But it's my decision, and I'm not putting you or Amber in harm's way for my vendetta."

Harry carried the dish of tilapia to the table and walked back to the stove for the sauce. Drizzling the white cream over the rewarmed filets, he said, "It is your decision, but I'm the head of security at SiJo Gaming. I'm pretty sure I can take care of myself, and as for Amber, we'll arrange additional security." He smiled a feigned smile. "For now let's eat. Someone made us a wonderful meal."

Claire obediently picked up her fork. With her hand lingering above the plate he'd dished for her, she considered his words. Finally, she nodded.

Taking his seat across from Claire, Harry added, "And as of tomorrow, you'll also have around the clock security. No more surprise visits."

Her chewing stopped mid-mastication. Swallowing became difficult as her mouth dried. She didn't like his authoritative tone; she'd lived through that once and didn't plan on doing it again, no matter how pure his intentions. After a much needed drink of water, she said, "I don't think that's necessary. Tony won't hurt me. He wants me back in Iowa, besides; I have Phil Roach watching me."

Harry started to speak when Claire interrupted, "What are we going to do, ask Phil and the security detail to share a car? I mean with the occasional paparazzi, a private detective *and* a security guard, I might as well lead a parade."

Ignoring her attempt at humor, Harry asked, "What do you mean he wants you back in Iowa?"

Claire looked back into Harry's eyes. The intense stare from earlier glowed. It surprised her, how the normally soft shade could stay the same, yet appear so different. She answered, "When he was here, he told me the reason he came to California was to take me back to Iowa."

"Did you respond?" During the last two months, Harry witnessed Claire's transition from a quiet guarded woman, into one who spoke more freely. Nonetheless, he wasn't sure she possessed that ability while with Mr. Rawlings. That was part of the reason he'd waited for her after their dinner. He wanted to be sure the stronger Claire still existed. Last night, he wasn't sure.

"Of course I responded. I said *no*."

"And he was fine with that and just left?"

"He left. He isn't still here." Claire looked down at her plate as she

stabbed another leaf from her salad. “He didn’t argue, but...”

“But what?”

“He said he wasn’t giving up his quest.” She ate some more salad and added, “I’ll consider the security.”

Harry nodded, and Claire began to relax. The food provided the much-needed subsistence to her weakened body and mind. Without saying it aloud, they’d agreed to table the Tony, security, and housing discussion until later. Soon, they fell into a benign chat about superficial monumental events. Apparently, the Giants were tied one to one in a three game series with Boston. The next game was tomorrow; Harry wasn’t sure the Giant’s pitcher would be ready...

They fooled themselves, if they thought their conversation could be avoided the entire evening. After dinner, they moved to the living room. It was hard for Claire to fathom that earlier the same day she’d sat in the same room with Tony. Now, instead of sitting one on the sofa and the other on the chair, Claire sat nestled into the crook of Harry’s arm. Somehow, the embrace didn’t feel sexual, only protective.

With her head against his shoulder, she pulled from his strength and thought about his patience. In the last hour, she’d dropped a few bomb shells, and she had more to drop, yet unlike her ex-husband, Harry didn’t demand answers. Instead, he provided space and support. She said she would tell him more; he waited, allowing her the luxury of choosing her time and words.

With a deep inhale followed by an audible exhale, Claire began, “What do you want to know?” The warmth of his embrace on her shoulder and side as they both stared into the Palo Alto night fueled her courage. Before the night was done, she’d share the secrets of her life with Anthony Rawlings. She didn’t know what it would mean for their relationship, or if this was what he’d wanted to *talk* about; however, she couldn’t imagine being with a man who didn’t know her past, to understand her present.

When her history became difficult to articulate, he’d rub her shoulder and remain silent. There were times as she spoke about her *kidnapping, agreement of duties, glitches, or her accident* that she felt his body tense. Never once did he question her choices. It was if he knew she’d questioned herself too many times to count. She’d asked herself: Why did you agree to marry him? Did you really fall in love? Did you think he loved you? Why did you keep up appearances? Asking questions was much easier than answering them.

Harry continued to listen without judgment. Many times he squeezed her shoulder or kissed the top of her head. Each affirmation fortified her resolve.

She didn’t spare any aspect of her life with Tony. She also didn’t dwell on details. No secrets remained. Nearing dawn, she told him about the dinner. She explained how Tony arranged for an empty restaurant. Then, she told Harry about Tony’s reaction to her knowledge regarding his birth name.

For the first time, Harry asked for verification, “Are you saying he didn’t send that box of information to you in prison?”

“That’s what I’m saying.” She turned her weary eyes to his face. “He was really stunned. That’s why he came here, to find out more about what I know.”

“Did you tell him?”

“I told him the package held pictures, articles, and a letter. He wanted to see it.”

Again Harry prompted, “And?”

“And I told him I’d burnt it. He laughed. I could tell he was relieved, but before he left, he told me not to share my information with anyone.” Her eyes widened. “Oh my God!” She jumped from Harry’s embrace to see his eyes. “I told him it was too late.” Her trembling resumed. “That’s why you were almost in that accident. He thinks I’ve shared the information with you and Amber. I need to get a hold of Emily, and...” Claire just remembered. “I dropped the phone I use with her and Courtney. It’s broken. I need to reach them.” Her words came in short increasingly sharp stiletto sentences. “I can’t let anything happen to her or John.”

Harry held Claire’s hands, restraining the explosive panic that surged through her no longer calm body. His voice was now calm and slow. “Do you possibly think you’re giving him too much credit? That accident was caused by a sixteen-year-old girl; how could that conceivably be traced back to Mr. Rawlings?”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t know. What about the sudden computer *glitches* at SiJo?”

“Sometimes, shit happens.”

“I’ll feel better after I talk to Emily, but I need another phone.”

“I understand the need for another untraceable phone to speak with Courtney, but why Emily? He knows where you are. He knows where she is; you’re sisters.”

Claire stared at him momentarily. “You’re right.” She reached for her iPhone.



THE ANGRY SOUND of Derek’s voice brought Sophia out of her restless sleep. She could hear his tone and see his expression; she couldn’t understand the cause. With his hands on her shoulders, he turned her to face him. “Why Sophia? Why in the hell are you sleeping in here?” Disorientation from the sudden wake muted her ability to speak. “I reached for you, but you still weren’t in bed. I thought you might still be drawing. But you’re sleeping,

without me!"

Her mind reeled. "How did you know I was drawing?" Her soft voice didn't mirror his irritation, though it did a poor job of hiding her unhappiness.

"What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

This time a little stronger. "How did you know I was drawing?"

"I watched you." As he spoke, her body convulsed with repressed sobs. "You looked so beautiful with your hair up, that sexy nightgown, and charcoaled fingers."

"Why didn't you say anything? I never knew you were there."

"I didn't want to disturb you. It's the first time you've drawn since you moved here."

She tried to turn her face away. His expression was no longer upset; she saw the man she loved. Even with limited light she could see the concern and relief in his soft brown eyes.

"Please, don't look away. Talk to me."

She couldn't move her arms with his hands on her shoulders, so she lifted her head to reach his lips. His hands left her shoulders and scooped her body into his arms. Between kisses, surrounded by his embrace, she whispered, "I thought you didn't want me because I can't be what you want."

Derek stopped kissing and looked into Sophia's beautiful gray eyes. The sadness made his heart wrench. "What are you talking about? You're everything I want. When did I ever say anything different?"

She pushed herself up to sit. "You didn't, but ever since I got here, I feel like I'm expected to be someone else, you know, *Mrs. Derek Burke*." She wiped her eyes on the clean sheets. "I've been trying..."

"Stop trying. Stop trying to be someone you're not. I love you." His embrace squeezed the air from her lungs. Her body collapsed against his. "I've missed *my* Sophia. Besides, who the hell is *Mrs. Derek Burke*?"

Sophia smiled from behind her tears as the sparkle returned to her eyes. It was the glimmer Derek hadn't seen in what seemed like ages. It was the most beautiful sight he could behold.

The last two weeks of stress melted into a fury of passion. For the next few weeks, every time Sophia walked by their guest room, she'd blush.

Together they reconnected their bodies and minds. Glorious sensations sent both of them to untold heights. When their exhausted bodies finally fell into tender embraces, their words revealed more of their misconceptions.

"I don't want you to be anyone else: not Mrs. Derek Burke. You're Sophia Burke, and I love you!" His heart swelled with the recent vision of blue clouds floating across his wife's beautiful eyes.

Sophia revealed her insecurity around people like Danielle and how she felt inadequate amongst the professionals in his life.

While allowing his lips to roam over her full breasts and tight midsection,

he tried to explain and demonstrate his approval. Yes, she's his wife. Nevertheless, he didn't want her identity to be a reflection of him, only of her. "If you want to work at an art studio, and it'll make you happy..." His smile shimmered in the darkened room. "...go for it. Do what makes you happy." Never once did he want to marry someone like him. Truthfully, he never wanted to marry until he was awestruck by the most amazing, energetic, caring, and possibly crazy, woman he'd ever met.

They both knew they'd just overcome a difficult time in their marriage, learning a valuable lesson: the need to communicate. Neither should assume they know the other's thoughts. They don't. That ignorance keeps life exciting.

Inhaling deeply, Sophia nestled into his warm shoulder, listened to the beat of his steady heart, and drifted into a peaceful sleep. When she awoke, he was gone, presumably off to work. For the last two weeks, she'd tried to get up and make him coffee and breakfast. Smiling into the tear stained pillow, she realized he didn't want or need that. He wanted *her*. Relishing the soft sheets of the guestroom bed, Sophia drifted back to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.
—Confucius



LAIRE REREAD THE email:

To: Claire Nichols
From: Meredith Banks
Subject: Printed Retraction
Date: May 8, 2013

Claire, here is the final copy of the retraction we discussed. It will appear in coming issues of *People*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and various online publications. There's always potential, in this mass media world, for it to be picked up by other sources. I hope you find this final draft acceptable. If I don't hear from you, it will be submitted. Therefore, if you request changes, please contact me immediately. I look forward to furthering this agreement. I appreciate your decision to work with me on this endeavor. I promise to represent your interests to the best of my ability.

Meredith

Claire clicked the attachment:

“Journalist Seeks Redemption”

Meredith Banks, Independent Correspondent

In pursuit of stories, many reporters and journalists close the gap between perceived and truth. We make this jump for the benefit of our readers. In September of 2010, I made such a leap in an article I wrote concerning Claire Nichols and Anthony Rawlings. There were speculations regarding a relationship between this unlikely couple. I used my familiarity with Ms. Nichols to learn more. I spoke to Ms. Nichols in Chicago; it was not an official interview. I purposely made myself available to an old friend and asked to chat. Following that discussion, I wrote a story insinuating a connection between Nichols and Rawlings. While that connection proved in time to be accurate, I am publicly declaring Ms. Claire Nichols did not reveal the relationship to me during our chat.

She has, however, promised me exclusive rights to her story, promising an enlightening view into the world of her true relationship with one of this country's wealthiest men, as well as the truth about her arrest, plea, incarceration and unconventional release. Please stay tuned, the wait will be worth it!

Still dressed in her workout clothes, sipping coffee, Claire approvingly read the attachment. Savoring the warm liquid, she considered the implications and wondered if she'd hear from her ex-husband. No, Claire wondered *when* she'd hear from him. She hadn't heard his voice since he left Amber's condominium nearly two weeks ago, and although Harry continued to declare her paranoid regarding Anthony's influence, she knew in her heart that Tony's power was limitless.

Thankfully, the inspection of the SiJo Gaming air fleet came up clean. There were no signs of tampering with any of the company's aircraft. Emily and John were well, and they would soon be in California for a visit. Amber and Harry remained accident free.

Claire conceded she may have an active imagination. Smiling, she remembered finding her black lace panties inside her yoga pants after a *very* vivid dream. For a moment, she'd actually thought it could have been real, but who in their right mind would agree to hot sex with a man like Tony? Claire's great imagination didn't nullify Tony's influence.

To save her friends, Claire offered again to find her own place to live; however, she honestly didn't want to live alone. Isolation reminded her too much of her cell in the Iowa Penitentiary or her suite at Tony's estate, so as

long as Amber consented to Claire's presence, she'd stay. Claire justified: if I move because of Tony, then I'm giving him power. She refused to relinquish her power; she'd done that before.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Claire realized the attached article wouldn't hit the newsstands for a couple of days. Quickly, she fired back a response, approving the attachment and thanking Meredith for the advanced notice. Claire also sent her cell number and asked Meredith to call to schedule their interviews. The last time they spoke, Meredith suggested the possibility of doing a series of articles. It all depended on the extent of information Claire would reveal.

Claire decided the articles would concentrate on *her* life with Tony, not his hidden past. She didn't believe it was her place to disclose that information. For some reason, someone wanted her to know his secret history. If they didn't, she wouldn't have received the mysterious box. Although Claire struggled to understand the reasoning, she didn't feel sharing it with the world was her place.

The haunting questions that infiltrated her thoughts continued to be... who sent the box? Why did they send it? And what did they hope to accomplish?

Merely moments after she hit send on her email to Meredith, her iPhone rang. The excitement in Meredith's voice reverberated through the cell phone. Meredith made it clear she was more than willing to travel to Palo Alto as soon as possible to begin their interviews. During their conversation, Claire recognized a desire to travel. Since Harry's near miss of an accident, she'd been stressing about everyone and everything. She needed a break. Meredith lived in Long Beach, and she'd be in San Diego during the next three days on business.

"Meredith, I think I'd enjoy a getaway. Could we meet in San Diego?"

"Really? Sure! That would be great. We can get started right away!"

They agreed to meet in Claire's hotel suite, the next night. Claire promised to text Meredith her accommodation information as soon as she booked a room.

Claire assumed text messages were less traceable than emails. It was only an assumption. Phil Roach would probably know the minute she booked the flight and room. She sighed and started her research, purposely checking multiple destinations and dates of travel.

She found three different flights leaving tomorrow, but she purposely decided to wait until first thing in the morning to book one. This would give Phil less time to follow. She also found multiple acceptable places to stay. That too could wait until the morning. She made a list of flights and rooms. Pensively, she wondered, would she ever be able to live without constant surveillance?

During dinner, Amber presented Claire with an interesting proposition, “So, there’s this big fundraiser gala in a couple weeks. It’s a joint endeavor between many of the top gaming companies in Silicon Valley. We all pledge a percentage of certain sales. Individually it’s very minimal, like a quarter of a cent per download, but the cumulative amount is surprising. This money all goes to fund the National Center for Learning Disabilities.”

“That’s nice. I didn’t know you did that.”

“Well, it’s something Simon was passionate about. There are studies showing people with learning disabilities can benefit from some of the electronic games. Hand-eye coordination and sequencing... it’s all very interesting.”

“I think that’s great.” Claire said with a smile. She remembered Tony’s regard for philanthropic funds and thought how nice it was to have people donate, for the right reason.

“Yes, well here’s the thing, I don’t enjoy fundraisers. I mean, I’ll do it, sometimes, but honestly, I don’t do the chatty small talk thing that well.”

Claire sensed a question coming. She smiled and raised her eyebrows.

Amber grinned. “So, I was wondering if you’d be interested in representing SiJo Gaming for me?”

“I’d be happy to do it, but do you really want *me* representing your company?”

“Don’t be silly. Why wouldn’t I want *you* representing SiJo?”

“Well, I don’t know, maybe because I have a dubious past.”

“Seriously, you’ll be talking to the top two percent. Each plate is thirty thousand dollars. Everyone there has a dubious past!” Then in a quieter tone, she continued, “If you’re lucky and someone has too much to drink, you’ll get to hear one or two of those stories. Some people like to be very chatty and the information can be quite entertaining!”

Claire smiled as she looked at Amber’s expectant expression. She was thrilled to be able to do something for Amber after all she’d done for her. “Then yes. I’d be honored to represent SiJo Gaming for you and for Simon. Am I going alone, or will there be someone else with me?”

“SiJo has two tickets. I kind of assumed you’d want Harry to go with you, but if you have someone else in mind...”

Claire’s eyes flitted to her plate to avoid Amber’s direct gaze. “No, I’m relieved to have someone I know. I thought there might be another SiJo representative you wanted there.”

Amber giggled. “Harry’s been avoiding these things for years. After Simon died, I tried numerous times to get him to accompany me to formal events. I like the idea of manipulating him into going.” Her smile indicated possible knowledge of Claire and Harry’s increasingly familiar relationship. Nonetheless, she didn’t verbally acknowledge it, she just said, “I’m sure

Harry will be relieved you don't have another companion in mind, and it's formal so he'll have to wear a tuxedo." Amber's voice flowed with unbridled excitement at the prospect of making her brother dress formally. "Now, if that doesn't deter you, there is one more thing you should know before you totally sign on."

A sudden feeling of foreboding settled over Claire. She hoped it wasn't anything that would make her retract her offer. "And what would that be?"

"One of the companies that are well-represented at this festivity is Sheds-tics, a subsidiary of Rawlings. It was the company where Simon started. He was always fond of his start and stayed close with the local executives. The two companies have shared a table in the past."

Claire's stomach twisted at the prospect of sharing a table with Tony. Her mind went over the numerous formal events she attended with Tony over the years. Her eyes squinted as she processed her memories. "I don't remember this being an event Tony and I attended while we were married."

"I checked. He hasn't attended in three years, since May of 2010, and Shedis-tics hasn't submitted their attendees for this year. They have four tickets."

Claire's mind went to May of 2010. "He went to this in 2010?"

"Yes, that's the information I saw. Why? You weren't married until December, right?"

"Right."

"Well, he was there with someone else, early May. I didn't recognize the name of his companion or remember the exact date, but it was in 2010."

Claire thought about being in *his* house while he attended events with other women. Why had she never thought of that before? It wasn't until late May of 2010 that she went to the Symphony with him. All those lonely evenings and nights when he was *busy*, unconsciously she clenched her teeth. Oh, she didn't want to go there. Claire tried to focus on Amber. "Oh, I guess... I'll still do it. I owe you this and more."

"You don't owe me anything; however, I was thinking if *he* does come, wouldn't this be a great opportunity to be seen near him, in public? You know, since he spoiled your plans for visibility during your dinner."

Claire shrugged. "I suppose it could be." Slowly, a smile spread from her lips to her eyes. She went on, "And if I knew *he* was to be there, but *he* didn't know *I* was... hmm." She pondered. "I think this could be good."

"I won't have Liz send your and Harry's name in until the last minute."

"Thank you." Claire leaned across the tall kitchen table and asked, "Tell me, is this an occasion for a new dress?"

"Oh girl, do you need an occasion? Seriously, you're welcome to borrow one of mine. Check out the closet in the spare bedroom; any one is fine."



By 8:15 AM Friday morning, Claire sat comfortably in the wide, plush leather seat aboard a non-stop *United* flight to San Diego. If she stayed true to her schedule, she'd pickup her rental car and be in her hotel suite before noon. Claire felt devious and clever, booking her flight at 4:30 AM, and not confirming her hotel until she was in the first-class lounge, awaiting her flight. Undoubtedly, Phil Roach would follow, but the momentary slip fortified her ability to manipulate the people who worked tirelessly at monitoring her every move. She relished the brief reprieve from knowing eyes.

Just before take-off, Claire sent a text to Meredith, proposing dinner in her suite while they discussed the impending journalistic exposé. She hadn't received confirmation, and now that the plane was in the air, her iPhone had to be off. With the scrutinizing eyes of the seemingly friendly flight attendant, Claire followed the rules and kept her phone neatly stashed in the pocket of her purse. She'd check for Meredith's response once she landed.



PREOCCUPIED WITH FOLLOWING signs to the luggage carousel and retrieving her larger suitcase, Claire didn't remember to turn on her iPhone until she was standing in line for her rental car. When she turned the telephone on, she saw multiple emails, text messages, two missed calls, and one voicemail message. She opted for the voicemail. After entering the necessary information, she clasped her hand over her ear, trying to shut out the noisy airport clamor and listened to the voice coming from her phone. She needn't worried. The voice was loud and clear.

"I hoped you could answer this phone, since you refuse to answer the number you know I know. I will assume you have a good reason for not answering but will call me back immediately. Shelly just called. I expect you remember she's my publicist. We need to *talk*. If I do not hear from you by noon, my time, I'm boarding a jet and heading to you. The choice is yours."

Claire didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until the voicemail ended. Finally, she exhaled. Looking to the screen, she saw the time, 9:57 AM. She tried to remember the time difference. Shit, three minutes. Why did everyone want to talk? That word no longer held a positive connotation.

Claire stepped from the line and indicated for the next patron to progress toward the counter. She wasn't surprised Tony called her iPhone. She knew once she and Emily started communicating through it, it'd be easy prey. Honestly, at that moment she was happy he had. If he'd left this message on

her other phone, she probably wouldn't have heard it until he was already in California.

Claire dialed Tony's number, while simultaneously sifting her emotions. Fear was among the top contenders; she wasn't stupid. Nonetheless, it held a mild third to determination and revenge. She'd made up her mind. When she thought Harry was the victim of Tony's consequence, Claire knew that he had to be brought down. His power needed to be lessened. She admitted having erotic thoughts about her ex-husband, along with thoughts of lust and perhaps —love. Nonetheless, if he could table his love to fulfill his agenda of revenge, she could do the same.

Regulating her breathing, Claire listened to the ring of his private line.

On the third ring, she heard the same voice, less menacing than the one on the message, yet still irritated, "My, Claire, you do like to cut it close, don't you?"

"I just turned on my cell phone. I hope I caught you before you made an unnecessary trip."

"I don't make unnecessary trips."

"Please enlighten me. What did Shelly tell you that has you so worked up?"

She heard his grin. "Worked up? My dear, you have no idea."

"I would argue, but I'm on a schedule. Could you please tell me why I called, so I can continue with my agenda?"

"Of course, I'm sure your schedule is excessively hectic." He paused, emphasizing his sarcasm. "Meredith Banks? Really Claire, haven't you made that mistake before?" Though his tone was deceptively lighter, his words sent chills down her spine.

She waved the next person to the counter. The retraction wasn't scheduled to be released until tomorrow. Why was Claire even surprised he'd already seen it? "If you'd read the release, it states I actually didn't make that mistake before. Which I believe I told you, and yes, I remember the accident resulting from your misconception."

"Are you trying to push me?"

"No. I'd be more direct if that were my goal. I'm trying to tell the world the truth. I've read numerous false accounts, and I believe it's time to set the record straight."

"Know that my legal team will stop anything, including this retraction, from ever seeing the light of day. You're wasting your time."

"Funny, I remember telling you the same thing—recently."

"I warned you not to disappoint me. I recommend you reconsider your actions."

"I need to go. I'm in the middle of something. As always, it has been a pleasure."

As Claire moved the phone from her ear to hit *end*, she heard him reply, “Not as much as last time.” Touching *end*, she wondered what exactly he meant by that.



As ANTHONY RAWLINGS ended the call with his ex-wife, he noticed the small symbol indicating an email. Despite the fact he had an untold number of people paused on a web conference, he swiped the icon. Within the list of unread emails, he saw one from Phillip Roach, dated today, received 10:23:04 AM. Tony must have overlooked it earlier. He touched the screen, and the document came into view:

To: Mr. Anthony Rawlings
From: Phillip Roach
Subject: Ms. Nichols
Date: May 9, 2013

Mr. Rawlings,

It seems Ms. Nichols booked a flight early this morning for San Diego. She left San Francisco at 08:12:00, PST. Her flight is scheduled to arrive in San Diego at 09:43:00. I have confirmation of her hotel booking at the US Grant on Broadway. I could not manage a seat on Ms. Nichols’ flight; however, I’m scheduled to arrive at 11:17:00. As soon as I learn more, I will forward the information to you.

Smiling, Tony realized Claire did return his call as soon as she could. He immediately replied to Phillip Roach:

To: Phillip Roach
From: Anthony Rawlings
Subject: Ms. Nichols
Date: May 9, 2013

Check to see if a reporter named Meredith Banks is staying at the same hotel, or even in San Diego. I have reason to believe the two are meeting. I want to know if my suspicion can be confirmed. Contact me immediately upon learning this information, or any other. AR

Tony knew Phil Roach wouldn't receive his email until his plane landed in San Diego. He could wait, looking at his watch, another hour and a half.

Suddenly, realizing he had other things to do, Anthony Rawlings resumed his seat and hit the enter button on his computer. He was once again visible to seventy-two finance officers at various Rawlings' subsidiaries. The web conference resumed, and Mr. Rawlings performed perfectly, despite the fact his mind was elsewhere. While discussing profit strategies, he held his iPhone out of camera range and sent a text to his driver, Eric:

"IT SEEMS AS THOUGH I NEED TO TRAVEL TO SAN DIEGO. PREPARE TO PICK ME UP AT 2:30 PM. HAVE THE JET READY FOR FLIGHT."

The next text went to his secretary, Patricia:

"CANCEL MY APPOINTMENTS THIS AFTERNOON AND TOMORROW. I MUST MAKE AN EMERGENCY TRIP TO SAN DIEGO. IF THERE IS A PROBLEM, HAVE TIM OR BRENT HANDLE IT."

All the while, he never missed a question or hesitated with a response. The web conference progressed without a flaw.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.

—Kahlil Gibran

TENSION PERMEATED FROM every corner of Claire's luxurious hotel suite when she allowed Meredith entry; however, like vapors over warm water, the warmth of an old friendship soon rose above the cool, edgy, businesslike atmosphere. Wisp by wisp the strain evaporated, and Claire and Meredith's old relationship prevailed. This first evening was about overcoming their past and becoming reacquainted. Although it was never said, they both knew their future partnership depended upon it.

Boldly, Meredith approached the prime obstacle, "Claire, I know I took advantage of you and of our friendship. I knew it was wrong, and I did it. I wanted the story everyone was trying to get. I'm sorry." She looked sufficiently apologetic. Claire fought the urge to look down at her hands, but instead she kept her gaze upon Meredith as Meredith continued, "After you were arrested, I wrote another article. I meant every word, but I think in retrospect, I wrote it to rectify what I'd written earlier."

Claire inhaled. This wasn't the time for her to inform Meredith of the consequence she suffered for Meredith's coup; it could wait. Looking her old friend in the eye, Claire chose not to see the seasoned reporter. Instead, she saw the young college student, ten years younger—her friend. Claire said, "After I was out of prison, I did some research and found your second article. You're one of the few people to write anything supportive of me." She smiled her biggest smile, relaxed her shoulders and added, "That's why I called you. I'm glad you agreed to help me."

Meredith exhaled on cue. "Thank you. I didn't know if you'd read it."

"I did, and it means the world to me, but there are a few things you should

seriously consider before taking this journey.” Meredith nodded, waiting. Claire went on, “Mr. Rawlings has a lot of connections. I know without a doubt that he’ll make this difficult. You need to know what you’re getting into.”

“I was going to talk to you about some strange things with my retraction. It’s already met unusual editorial scrutiny. *People* and *Rolling Stone* will only agree to print the retraction, not the information regarding future information. *Vanity Fair* completely passed, even after they’d accepted in concept. I just received a generic refusal from them moments ago.”

“His influence is very far reaching. Believe me; I’d understand if you want to pass on doing this article. It’s okay. We can call this a reunion and go on with our lives.”

Claire watched the twenty-year-old peek through Meredith’s thirty-year-old eyes. Claire saw the spark she saw ten years ago when they skipped class to watch the Cubs.

“Hell no! If my simple retraction is generating this kind of reaction, can you imagine what our *series of articles* will do? Besides, the world of publishing is changing by the second. I’ll blog the stuff about the impending information. My blog reaches hundreds of thousands; then with that, *Twitter*, and other social sites, the audience is global.” The excitement in her tone crackled like electricity through the suite. “Sweetie, it takes more than money to stop social media. Once something is viral, it *can’t* be stopped!”

Claire pondered the possibilities. When she first was taken by Tony, social media was in its infancy. While with him, she had no access to media. It was only a little better in prison. Slowly, she was beginning to understand its potential. There’s a world that can take a spark and create an inferno. Looking at Meredith’s large blue eyes, filled with anticipation, Claire believed her old friend knew how to fuel that fire. Nonetheless, Claire owed her one more warning. “There’s something else.”

“Yes?”

“There’s a history of ill fortunes coming to people who cross my ex-husband. I don’t want anything to happen to you. If you want to do this, you need to go into it with your eyes open.”

Meredith exhaled and sat against the sofa cushions. She kept her eyes on Claire, waiting perhaps for the punch line. When none came, she spoke, “I’m a reporter and a journalist. I’ve always dreamt of infiltrating some enemy camp and learning the deep secrets of some foreign dictator. In my dream, I’d tell the world of his atrocities. My life would be threatened, and I may even endure incarceration for my stance, but in this dream, I did it. I believe in the freedom of speech.”

Claire smiled sadly. “That sounds very idealistic and romantic, but this is real life. You have a husband and two children. I’m not saying anything will

happen; I just want you to know, we're talking about upsetting a colossal force. Are you sure you're willing to do it?"

"I'm willing to help you tell your story. I have no idea what it is, but my instinct's telling me, it's bigger than I ever imagined."

Claire nodded.

Conviction grew with each word. Meredith went on, "I'd be honored to tell the world what *you* want them to know."

Ten years earlier, they shared a sorority house at Valparaiso University. With all life dealt Claire, those ten years might as well be a million, yet throughout the evening, that time span shortened. They recalled names from their past, people Meredith stayed in contact with. She knew the latest news on so many people. For a few hours, they were once again two girls, gossiping about sisters and fraternity brothers.

Claire realized she couldn't totally blame Tony for her lack of connectivity with these people. It started years before she became aware of him in her life. She chose to put her energy into her work and career.

After dinner, Claire took their dirty dishes into the hallway. If she'd been more observant, perhaps she would have noticed the small sensors, connected by a thin, hair like wire linking her door with the jam. Each time her door opened, that sensor simultaneously sent a message to Phillip Roach and to a camera hidden in a potted plant across the hallway.

The camera's technology was impressive. It filmed continuously; however, only data received three minutes prior and post signal was recorded and stored. That information was streamed simultaneously to Phil's laptop. An alarm sounded in his suite when the sensor activated.

Approximately every ten minutes, Phillip would text his employer the status of Ms. Nichol's door. Mr. Rawlings was in a car outside the hotel, waiting for Ms. Nichols' guest to leave. Phillip confirmed Ms. Nichols' guest was indeed Meredith Banks, Claire's college classmate and journalist. The confirmation of his suspicions didn't please Mr. Rawlings.



SITTING ON THE sofa and reminiscing, the two women reconnected. This kind of emotional bond wasn't necessary for men, or for many scenarios, but Claire needed it. She needed a safe, intimate environment for her memories. Harry gave her that, an invisible blanket of acceptance, no matter what she revealed. She'd never be able to trust her stories with a stranger. After all, this endeavor was more than disclosing information; she was entrusting it to someone who would then share it with the world. That was why Claire chose Meredith.

Partway through the evening, Claire presented Meredith with a *Confidentiality Agreement*. If Meredith signed the CA, she agreed not to speak to anyone about the information revealed by Claire Rawlings Nichols. Once the information was approved by Ms. Nichols, it could be reviewed for editorial purposes. During the interview process, no one else could know. All the information would be kept secret until the appropriate time.

They hadn't talked money or substance, but as Claire opened her door, and alarms sounded in Phillips's suite, Claire confirmed their goal. "I feel good about this, Meredith; you think about it. We can meet again tomorrow night and let me know your decision."

Meredith hugged her sorority sister. "I know. I'm in! What time tomorrow?"

"Here at 7:00 PM, some dinner then we'll begin."

Meredith smiled sweetly and watched Claire before she asked, "The retraction isn't coming out until tomorrow. Would you mind if I blogged tonight?"

"You may; as long as it stays in our perimeters."

Meredith relaxed. "I'll send you the copy before I post it."

Claire nodded her approval.

"I can't wait to get started on all of this. See you tomorrow." With that, Meredith walked down the hall.

Claire shut the large double door and looked around the luxurious living room. Near the table where they'd eaten dinner, was an antique High boy, complete with various shaped glasses and a bucket of ice. Inhaling the sweet serene quiet of her resolve, Claire moved toward the mini-bar. She hadn't ordered wine with dinner; she wanted to be in complete control of her senses, but now that the evening was done, she sighed, *Yes, I deserve a glass of wine.*

Gazing at the small, one serving bottles, she decided a real bottle was in order and called room service. Claire reasoned, she may not finish an entire bottle, but with the stress of her first face-to-face with Meredith, she deserved it and would give it a good start! Considering a snack, Claire decided wine was sufficient. The server, on the other end of the line, promised prompt service with delivery in five minutes. Claire smiled. Hotels were always so willing to accommodate their nicer suites.

Settling on the plush sofa, Claire kicked off her shoes and mentally reviewed her time with Meredith. As she replayed each interaction, she felt satisfied. It was exactly what she'd hoped for, maybe more. Meredith seemed competent and eager, and Claire had to admit, it was fun to hear about so many people from her past. Her bright disposition clouded with the thought of their articles, how would people react to the information? Did she truly want the world knowing her private misery? After a moment of self-reflection, she reassured herself, this isn't about me. This is to inform the world about Tony.

She was the victim. He's the villain. She needed to get that information out!

Her thoughts turned to Harry. She was eternally grateful for the way he reacted to her private confessions. That, plus the memories of Courtney and Brent, continued to fortify her resolve. Unconsciously, she wrapped her arms around her chest and felt a twinge of loneliness. Harry asked to accompany her to this meeting. Claire just believed she'd be more effective with Meredith one-on-one, and now that the first meeting was complete, she knew she'd been right. The entire evening was better than she could have ever anticipated.

Claire reached for her iPhone to call Harry, when a knock came from the door. Instead, she reached for her purse and pulled out a ten dollar bill; the bottle of wine would go on her hotel tab, but she wanted to tip the waiter. Leaving her phone and her purse on the table, she went to the door.



EVEN THOUGH MR. Rawlings released him for the evening, Phillip Roach remained online with his video surveillance. It was like the night at the French restaurant in Palo Alto. Even though Claire gave him the gift certificate, Mr. Rawlings made it clear Phil didn't need to continue his observation within the restaurant. Actually, Mr. Rawlings specifically told Phil to wait outside until Ms. Nichols left the establishment, follow her, and report when she made it home. On more than one occasion, Phillip felt more like a babysitter than a private detective.

Tonight, he didn't know which title he should accept. He'd informed Mr. Rawlings of Ms. Nichols' early departure from San Francisco. He decided truth about his minor slip, would help him avoid another devious exchange with Ms. Nichols. He then followed her to San Diego. Thankfully, she actually stayed at the hotel where she'd made reservations. It was there Phil wired her door and set up the necessary cameras.

Now, watching the video feed, he saw his employer, dressed in casual khaki slacks and a button down shirt, patiently waiting for Ms. Nichols' door to open. He glanced at his watch, almost 10:30 PM. Although Mr. Rawlings looked calm, Phil knew differently. Throughout the day and their multiple conversations, it was obvious Mr. Rawlings wasn't happy about whatever Claire was doing with Meredith Banks. Phillip Roach, seasoned private detective, knew he should turn off the video feed and stop watching, but he couldn't. Claire Nichols was now his obsession, admittedly, as much as Anthony Rawlings'. Phil didn't understand his fascination, other than the obvious money he earned watching her. It was just that sometimes he worried about her, with Rawlings. It wasn't his place to make assessments. Not to

mention, it's highly out of character; however, Phil reasoned, he was usually in and out of a job in days, but he'd been watching Claire for almost two months.

Glancing from the monitor, he noticed the time, 10:28:07. His eyes returned to the screen, seeing Ms. Nichols open the door to her suite. Phillip saw her immediate change in body language. Her normal carefree presence transformed instantaneously, and she immediately stiffened. The intensity of her stare caught Phillip's attention. The normal sparkle in her eyes morphed to a glare.

This was his job. Phillip Roach watched. Perhaps his correct title was *voyeur*.



CLAIRE STARED IN disbelief; words failed her. The expression glowering down at her was not the same one she'd seen a few weeks ago. This was one she'd seen before—one she preferred to keep compartmentalized away. It contained all the signature features of the man she wanted to avoid; eyes black as night, a tightly clenched jaw, and the visibly strained neck muscles. Angst filled her chest, sending a rush of alarm through her veins. Without thinking, she went into defense mode, straightened her neck, and returned his glare.

Through clenched teeth, Tony said, "Let me in. We need to talk."

"I don't think we have anything to discuss. You made an unnecessary trip. Please go." Her voice sounded small, yet strong.

Tony stepped toward the entry. "We are *not* having this discussion in the hallway. I'm coming in." With that, he pushed past her into the suite. Claire immediately stepped back, avoiding contact. He closed the door behind him. Tension filled the suite as they stared at one another. She contemplated her strategy while evaluating his movements; then, the reality hit her, and her momentary intimidation changed to indignation.

"We're not married, and I'm not your prisoner. You can't just bully your way in here." His glare would stop most people in their tracks. Claire was sure it had. It'd stopped her before, but not today. "I want you to leave." Each phrase grew stronger.

Ignoring her demands, Tony circled the living room of Claire's suite, like a lion sizing up its prey. His presence dwarfed the once large room. Unknowingly, she held her breath as she watched his still clenched jaw and listened as his words came as a low growl, "What are you doing with *her*?"

"I'm having an overdue reunion with an old college friend." Feeling slightly more confident, she continued, "Besides, it's really none of your business. You shouldn't even be here." She observed the dark deepen in his

gaze. Watching from a new perspective, Claire decided the darkness wasn't just his eyes, but it was his entire expression, the way his brow furrowed and his jaw tightened. While her eyes saw only him, his ferocity filled her other senses. She waited for the sound of his reply. So much could be interpreted by the tone, tenor, and speed of his words. The room also filled with his scent. The cologne she'd dreamt about was once again penetrating her senses, yet her thoughts weren't sensual. Seeing him stalk toward her, she remembered fear, reconsidering her boldness.

Without warning, his hands forcibly seized her shoulders. His words came with hot needy breaths upon her face. Her gaze never wavered, and with each syllable, she continued to stare into the darkness. "You think I'm stupid? You're talking to her about me, and I won't have it." Claire chose not to reply. Tony exhaled and growled, "Damn it, Claire, you infuriate me!"

Before she could register his words and actions with enough sensibility to form her thoughts, he released her shoulders and stomped toward the windows. The dark San Diego sky turned the multiple glass panes into a mirror. She watched his eyes close in the reflection and his shoulders sag from behind. The distance gave her needed clarity. The fact, he wasn't wearing a suit suddenly caught her attention. Her heartbeat calmed, and she listened to his words, "I flew across the damn country and have been sitting in a damn car, waiting for your little reunion to conclude."

Claire shivered at the idea of him monitoring her movements so thoroughly. "Tony, you need help. I can't believe you're watching me that closely. Get over it!"

He looked at her with disbelief, his voice no longer harsh. What did she hear? "Don't you understand? I can't. You know from your prison delivery that I've been watching you for a very long time."

"And I think it's beyond creepy. Why? Tell me why. You didn't answer my question before."

Visibly calming, Tony's clenching ceased. He ran his hands over the back of a chair as a mischievous grin slowly formed, shattering his angry expression and mellowing his gaze. "Creepy? I've been called many things, but I think that's the first time someone has called me *creepy*."

Claire tried to hide her smile. "To your face."

After a moment, his amusement reached his eyes, bringing light to darkness. "Touché." He nodded. "That may be true."

"I guarantee it. Now, if you're going to bust into my hotel room, answer my question. I don't owe you answers if you're not going to give them to me."

Tony looked at the sofa and back to Claire. "If you're asking me questions, does that mean you aren't throwing me out?"

Claire folded her arms across her chest and debated. A second ago, she

wanted him out, but his fight toward calm was a step in the right direction. “I don’t recall ever having the ability to throw you out of anywhere. Maybe times do change?”

“People change, too.”

He sat. Before she could join him in the sitting area, another knock came upon the door. Tony looked at her with surprise. “Are you expecting company?”

“I ordered wine from room service,” she said as she walked to the door. This time, she looked through the peephole.

“That must be why you opened the door earlier. You obviously didn’t look the last time.” He smirked.

“You’re right; it’s a habit I need to work on.” She opened the door. A young man dressed in a burgundy uniform entered, pushing a linen covered cart. Upon the cart was a bottle of Merlot and two glasses. He smiled politely at them.

“Ms. Nichols,” he acknowledged. Claire confirmed. She realized the scene looked far different than reality. The young man requested, “Please sign this.” He presented her with a small black folder, a smile, and a slight bow.

Claire took the binder and opened the small folder. To her surprise the paper within wasn’t a receipt; it was a note:

Ms. Nichols, I’m entrusting your silence: Just making sure you are all right. P.

She looked to the waiter, who watched expectantly. Nervously, her gaze went to Tony who too was watching. She took the pen and wrote:

YES—THANKS C

and closed the folder. Finding the ten-dollar bill, she handed both to the waiter.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, ma’am. May I open the bottle?”

Claire nodded. After releasing the cork, he bowed again. Claire thanked him, and he left with his small black folder.

Claire returned her gaze to Tony as she thought, Your creepy stalker, Phil Roach, is concerned. It’s almost comical. She didn’t know if this declaration

was good or bad. The ludicrousness made her giggle. If she'd been alone, it may have bordered on hysteria, but as it was, Tony's voice returned her to present.

"Did you order two glasses?"

She shook her head and tried to focus, her words came through muffled laughter, "No, but since they're here, would you like some Merlot?"

He approached her warily. "You know, you're the only person who can have me pissed off one minute and completely dazzled the next. Why are you laughing?"

Claire shook her head. "I don't know, shock, absurdity? It seems I never know what's coming. As much as I plan, I'm continually blown away."

Tony poured wine into each glass and handed one to Claire. "Do you remember when we had wine at the Red Wing?"

Claire closed her eyes, recalling the scene from a lifetime ago, and nodded. "I do."

"I'd been watching you for years. I was so nervous that night. I thought I was planning your acquisition." He looked into his red liquid.

Her stance straightened. "If you're using business metaphors, may I suggest *hostile takeover*. It's more appropriate."

He took a sip of wine and exhaled. "Yes, Claire." Standing close, he looked solemnly down into her emerald eyes. "And I have apologized for that." He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "What I didn't know, despite all my research, as we sat talking was *you*. I mean, I knew everything about you." He shook his head reflectively, walked back to the sofa and sat down. His long legs stretched out in front of him. Claire noticed for the first time, how tired he looked. It was after all, almost 2:00 AM. "Yet I didn't know you. Truthfully, at first, I had no desire to."

"Oh, really?" She asked with intended sarcasm. "Because I recall some pretty up close and personal contact."

Tony smirked. "Yes, I wanted that. I didn't want to know you—like the real you. I fought it for months, but you were this light that kept sucking me in. It wasn't supposed to be that way. We weren't supposed to happen."

"What was supposed to happen?"

"Well, the *takeover...*" He emphasized the use of her term. "...was supposed to stop you. I never expected anyone to flourish under such circumstances." He looked at Claire with a gaze of admiration as he continued, "You didn't just flourish you conquered." He took another drink of his wine. "I've continually underestimated you or perhaps I should say you've continually exceeded my expectations. You still do. You're the only person who has ever derailed me, and more than anyone, you know me, not Anthony Rawlings—me."

Claire knew she'd had the *rare opportunity*, as Catherine so eloquently

told her once. She pushed forward, “The real you. Would that be Anton?” His expression morphed. Sadness fell like shadows over his face. The despair reached into her chest, physical ache came at seeing his expression.

He exhaled. “I suppose, yes, but not anymore. I had it legally changed. So, you see, I didn’t lie. My legal name is Anthony Rawlings, and it has been for a long time.”

Claire stood. She wouldn’t allow herself to feel pity. Instead, she did what people do when trying to avoid their true emotions; she lashed out, “You share this with me now, but not when we were married. That tells me that you never trusted me, *the only person to really know you.*” The last clause emphasized. “Plus, you threw me away and left me to rot in prison.” She exhaled in exasperation. “You say you love or loved me, past or present. You don’t know what *love* is. You have an obsession, and it really needs to stop. Stop watching me. Stop having me watched. Your fun is done. It’s over.”

He returned his gaze to the red liquid, slowly swirling it within the confines of the crystal globe. His words weren’t rushed, instead a slow release, divulging hidden truths that only recently he’d come to know, “I don’t know how to explain it. It was a loophole. Don’t you understand?”

Claire stood motionless; she didn’t understand.

“I tried to help you.” His eyes stared with need. “Anyone else would have jumped at the insanity plea. I had a hospital all set; your commitment time would’ve been negotiable. But no.” He stood once again, his voice raised. “No! You refused! By doing that, you took your sentence away from me and gave it to the state of Iowa. I no longer had influence over your release.” He turned to face her, and his volume increased, “Why did you have to be so damn obstinate?”

“Me? You’re accusing me of being obstinate? I didn’t want you in control of my life any longer. I was willing to let the state of Iowa decide, rather than you.”

Tony looked perplexed. “It was the only way to save you.”

Claire tried to comprehend his words. “I have no idea what you’re saying. Save me, from what?”

Tony looked down, his tired eyes suddenly dark and gloomy, and his voice flat with restrained emotion, “Me.”

The temperature of the room suddenly dropped. Claire felt the goose bumps materialize on her arms and legs as she instinctively wrapped her arms around herself. Slowly, she sunk into the chair to Tony’s left. The silence stretched between them, little by little, filling each available molecule in the suite. The intensity of the silence made the air difficult to breathe. Claire diligently tried to fill her lungs with oxygen. She wasn’t sure what he meant, but somehow, the confession seemed monumental.

The sound of her vibrating telephone shattered the silence. She jumped as

the small device danced in vibration across the table before them. The screen flashed: “*HARRY CELL.*” She saw Tony’s eyes read the name before he turned away.

His question sounded strangely distant, “Are the news stories accurate?”

“You should know the accuracy of news reports.” She replied as the phone continued to vibrate.

“Perhaps I should answer it?” Tony offered. His voice now clipped. The spell that encased the suite and isolated them from the rest of the world was broken. She wouldn’t learn anymore about his attempt to *save* her this evening.

“No, thank you. I’ll be just a minute.” Claire reached for the iPhone, stood, walked into the bedroom, and accepted the call. “Hi.” Although she was trying for light and carefree, she feared she failed miserably. Her mind was still reeling from Tony’s declaration.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When we were children, we used to think that when we grew up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability; to be alive is to be vulnerable.

—Madeleine L'Engle

HARRY'S TONE BROUGHT light back to Claire's dark suite. "How did your meeting with Meredith go?"

The insinuation of dread no longer lurked in corners and unknown hiding places; radiance flowed with the promise of better things. She absorbed the positive energy, closed the door between the bedroom and living room, and answered, "I think it went well. Mostly, we just reconnected."

"That's probably a good first step." He paused. "I miss you. I still think I should be there."

Claire exhaled, knowing he deserved honesty. Her voice was hushed, "I have a surprise visitor."

She heard the change in his countenance. His voice suddenly tensed as his words came too fast, "Is he still there? Are you all right?"

"Yes and yes."

"I'll get a SiJo jet and be there in an hour and a half."

"That isn't necessary." She continued to keep her voice low. "Although, I would love to see you, but seriously, you need to work tomorrow. I'm fine. I'll call when he leaves."

"He isn't the only one who can jump on a plane to see you."

Claire shook her head. "You know, I never wanted to be someone people jump on planes to see."

"I'll be waiting for your call. If you change your mind and want me there sooner call, text, or send smoke signals." His attempt at levity made her smile; he continued, "I'll be there."

The grin traveled through the phone. "Thanks, I will, I promise."

"I like hearing that smile. Just remember, it's for me."

"How can I forget?" she asked. "I'll call soon."

"I hope so. I'll be waiting. Bye."

"Soon, I promise. Bye." She disconnected the line.

Claire saw her phone, now solely used for Courtney, flashing on the dresser. She checked the screen, one text message, and hit the button:

"BRENT JUST CALLED. TONY'S MAKING AN UNSCHEDULED TRIP TO SAN DIEGO. YOU AREN'T THERE, ARE YOU? JUST WONDERING... THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW!"

Claire smiled, fortified by the support of others.

Hesitantly, she approached the door to the living room. Her hand seized the handle; the cool metal calmed her nerves. She took a deep breath and pulled it open.

She half-expected to find Tony standing directly on the other side of the closed barrier. Opening the door and stepping through the threshold, she saw him standing again at the windows, holding his wine, and looking at the nocturnal vista. Claire wondered if he'd heard her open the door. If he did, he didn't turn around. Slowly, she approached and joined him at the window.

"I apologize for the interruption," she said, looking at the lights below.

He turned toward her, looking down from above. "Do you now, Ms. Nichols?"

Claire noted the change in his tone, more businesslike. "I do." Perceiving the meaning of her last name, she confirmed, "You're correct, I *am* Ms. Nichols, not Mrs. Rawlings." She considered adding, "your doing, not mine." However, she didn't. She'd baited him enough.

Momentarily, Tony stood, facing her, close enough to touch, yet a million miles apart. Making no attempt to lessen the expanse, he replied, "I'm sure you're busy. If I were *him*, I'd be on a jet right now. According to my calculations, that gives us about ninety minutes to discuss what I came to discuss."

Claire considered enlightening Tony on the difference between the two of them, explaining Harry wouldn't be arriving because she asked him not to. She could talk about trust and communication. Instead, she walked toward the sitting area, refilled her glass, sat down compliantly, and asked, "What do you want to discuss?"

"You will discontinue your discussions with Meredith Banks and any further plans you've entertained regarding speaking with the media." It was a very poorly worded plea, sounding more like a mandate.

She sat back against the chair and smiled. "Will I now?"

There was no hint of humor in his reply, "Don't push me. I'm tired and suddenly not in the mood."

Inwardly, she smirked, knowing that Harry's call upset him. With each such instance, her sense of empowerment grew. "Well, I'd like to discuss something else."

"I would like to stay on topic."

"Then it seems we're at an impasse. Perhaps you should go. We can continue this, another day, or not."

"You're not changing the subject. The nondisclosure of our relationship is non-negotiable."

"I don't recall signing anything. Well, other than a blank napkin. We didn't even have a prenuptial agreement, so I have no legal restraints on what I can and cannot disclose."

Tony stepped closer. "Legal, no, but what about ethical or moral?"

"Did those concerns come into play during your acquisition or our relationship?"

"I have tried to explain, not at first, but they did."

"Tony, I'm tired, too. I don't have the energy to figure out your puzzles. I don't plan on disclosing anything about your true identity to the media, if that's part of your concern. I have, however, learned of many misconceptions regarding *me* during our relationship. I do plan on correcting those errors."

"Why?"

She sat straighter and used the words he'd said to her, "Because I can." His micro-expression revealed his displeasure. "The world wants to know, and I'm willing to disclose."

"It won't happen." He sat his glass on the table and leaned forward. "I came here to emphasize *this* is a waste of your time. Currently, my legal team is working diligently to stop any information regarding our marriage or relationship from public media. If anything appears on the internet or anywhere else, a civil suit will immediately follow, against you, Meredith, and the offending sites."

Claire allowed the glass to linger on her lip and watched as Tony laid the gauntlet at her feet. Finally, she spoke, "Well, at least this time you have the nerve to deliver the ultimatum in person, instead of sending Brent."

The reference to Claire's prison visit caused Tony to straighten his stance. "I was angry about the plea."

"You've made your point, but now it's my turn."

Tony smirked. "Yes, I recall, you did like your turn."

She ignored his implication and went on with her request, "I want a promise from you."

"What promise do you want from me?"

"I want a guarantee the people in my life, the associates, and friends I've acquired aren't in harm's way."

"My Claire, you give me too much credit. I'm a businessman. I don't have

the ability to cause harm to anyone, much less those associated with you.”

This time Claire straightened. “Simon, John... do these names mean anything to you? How about my parents, your parents? Are there more? I can’t seem to process right now.”

“I don’t take responsibility for that entire list, and explain exactly what you’re requesting.”

“Actually, I don’t believe I’m requesting anything. I’m saying, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if anything happens to me, my friends, or associates, my story and the truth behind our relationship will be public. I will continue to work on the articles and stop production before everything is public; however, if anything happens to me or my friends, everything will be public knowledge. You’re welcome to do damage control, but that’ll only be after the initial public response has been made and broadcast globally. As you know, once a perception is set, it’s difficult to change.”

Tony’s grip on the stem of the wine glass intensified as he changed the subject, “I don’t want you with anyone else. You’re mine and have been for a very long time.”

Although his words sent a shiver down her spine, Claire managed to respond incredulously, “That isn’t your choice. You sent me away!”

“No. You left. You drove out of our garage.” His words were stifled by his clenched jaws.

Claire stood. “Tony, I’m done with this conversation. I’m tired; however, I have a few other demands.” She didn’t wait for him to acknowledge, but continued, “John’s out of jail. I want his law license reinstated. You took it away, don’t deny it. Now, bring it back. I will consider that proof of your commitment to this agreement.”

“I never liked him.”

“I’m pretty sure the feeling is, and always has been, mutual. Nonetheless, he never deserved what you did to him. By the way, do you know who sent me the box?”

Tony stood, walking toward the door, but stopped and faced her. “Yes,” his voice confident. “My dear, that information wasn’t known by many. My list of candidates was quite limited. It didn’t take long to confirm my theory.”

She followed him toward the door. Looking up at his face she asked, “Who?”

“Goodbye Claire, for now. May I have your hand?”

She spied him suspiciously. “Why?”

He didn’t answer; instead he held out his hand and waited. Reluctantly, she placed her right hand in his upturned palm. Tony bowed and touched his lips to her knuckles. While the warmth radiated up her arm, he turned her hand over. “Close your eyes.”

Weakened by his strong, yet benign command, she obeyed.

"Keep them shut," he whispered. She nodded as he reached into the pocket of his slacks, brought out a white gold chain with a pearl upon a white gold cross, and placed it in her upward palm. Next, he closed her fingers around the delicate necklace and squeezed her hand. "My sign of commitment. End this stupidity with Meredith." He kissed her closed fingers and opened the door.

By the time she saw her grandmother's necklace lying innocently in her hand, the scene blurred. Tears overflowed her lids and cascaded down her cheeks. She turned to Tony, but he was gone.

Claire's trembling fingers fumbled with the small clasp. With intense concentration she managed to put the delicate chain around her neck and secured the fastening. Hastily, she ran to the mirror and watched the small, white gold cross with the large pearl, move up and down upon her chest, accelerated by her now rapid heartbeat.

With time, her eyes moved from the necklace to her own face. The concentration and determination from before were gone. Her cheeks were now blotchy and smeared with mascara.

The stress of her reunion with Meredith, the unexpected meeting with Tony, complete with multiple confrontations, and now the reality of her grandmother's necklace sucked any remaining strength from her core. Claire collapsed onto the bed, stared up at the ceiling, and fought the urge to cry. She couldn't stop the tears streaming from the corners of her eyes, but the sobs that screamed for release from the confines of her chest—those she worked to contain.

Cradling the large, soft pillow, now damp with tears, Claire curled into the fetal position and closed her eyes. The combination of stress and emotion brought back her once familiar aching head. In time, slumber surrounded her, isolated her, and comforted her, creating a safe haven from the storms continually confronting her life.



THE SOUND OF pounding interrupted her peaceful bliss. She fought the disorientation associated with waking suddenly in an unfamiliar place. Groggily, she saw the clock: 3:17 AM. and forged toward the door of the suite, toward the source of the pounding. Nearing the large double doors, she heard a key in the lock and *his* panicked voice, "Claire, Claire, are you in there?"

O, shit, I didn't call Harry.

Claire ran toward the doors. She'd used the chain lock; their key couldn't open the door completely. Just before her destination, she glanced at the large

mirror near the entry, seeing her clothes from yesterday. The silk blouse, now untucked, hung wrinkled above her rumpled linen slacks. Dark black circles of melted mascara graced the underside of her swollen, red eyes. She mindlessly tried to smooth her messed hair, as if that would help her sad appearance. Quickly, she called to the man on the other side of the door and fumbled with the chain. "Please, wait just a minute." Sliding the chain and pulling the freed door inward, Claire gasped at Harry, two men dressed in the hotel's signature burgundy, and a woman in a San Diego police uniform.

She stood in shock at the crowd before her.

Any anger she'd heard in Harry's voice through the door evaporated as he took in her appearance. "Are you all right?"

Before she could respond, he hugged her shoulders and pulled her into his embrace. She didn't resist, melting against his chest. Unconsciously, she inhaled his masculine scent as her cheek felt the rhythmic beat of his rapidly pumping heart.

"Are you alone?"

Claire nodded.

"Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head.

Harry turned to the others. "You may go." Speaking to the woman in uniform he said, "We'll let you know tomorrow if there're any charges."

Harry's unwavering embrace impeded her view, yet Claire struggled to free herself and turn toward the police officer. "There are no charges." Looking up Harry's soft blue eyes, she continued, "I'm sorry. I just fell asleep." Looking back to the woman in blue, she said, "Thank you for your time. I'm sorry for any misunderstanding, but there are no charges." Harry pulled her back into his embrace. She felt his heart slowing to a steady rhythm. "I'm sorry, I worried you." She mumbled as they walked into her suite.

The comforting tone of his voice dwindled and agitation prevailed, "You said you'd call. You promised."

She stepped back from his touch, suddenly defensive. "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say. I was upset when Tony left. I didn't mean to fall asleep. I just did."

Harry reached out to Claire's cheek and wiped smeared mascara with his thumb. "You've been crying?"

She nodded.

"What happened?"

She exhaled and recalled the evening in a synopsis of the finer points. "We argued. He told me not to speak to the media about our relationship. I told him to leave the people I care about alone. Then, when he left, he gave me this." Claire pointed to her necklace.

“He gave you a necklace?”

“It was my grandmother’s. It’s the only thing he saved from my Atlanta apartment, my only connection to my life before him.” She fought the sobs bubbling in her chest and whispered, “It means more to me than anyone will ever know.” Claire tried to compartmentalize the realization that lurked in the back of her mind; *Tony knows how much it means to me, he’s the only one who knows all about me.*

Harry’s voice helped clear her thoughts, “If it’s something you want, I’m glad he returned it. But why now?”

“He said it was a sign of commitment. In that box of information, there was a picture of it at an auction of my things. I thought it was gone forever.”

Harry took Claire’s hand and led her toward the sofa. On the table, in the middle of the small grouping, sat the almost empty bottle of wine and two glasses.

When Harry’s grip tightened, Claire felt the need to explain, “I ordered a bottle of wine before he showed up. It came with two glasses, and I offered some to him.”

“That’s very hospitable of you.”

Claire wrenched her hand free at the crispness of his tone and turn toward the bedroom. This time, she didn’t get the chance to dismiss him. He followed, seized her shoulders, and turned her around. Peering down with the softest blue eyes, Harry spoke, “I don’t care about the wine. I only care that you’re safe. I called and called, but you didn’t answer. His jet left the private airstrip about 12:30 AM. I panicked. After what you told me about last time, I was scared to death you were on that jet, involuntarily.”

“I really am sorry. I don’t know why I didn’t hear my phone.” She picked it up, from the table near the wine. The screen’s message said eight missed calls as well as text messages and emails. She checked the ringer; it was silenced. “I guess I never turned on the ringer after my meeting with Meredith.” She looked up into his caring expression. “Thank you for your concern. What are you going to do about work tomorrow?”

Harry smiled his first smile since arriving, giving Claire the sensation of sunshine breaking through a cloudy day. “I know the boss. I’d better text her and let her know you’re all right, but she gave me the day off.”

Claire grinned, enjoying the sensation of raised cheeks instead of ones dampened with tears. “I’ve always heard it helps to have connections.”

Harry leaned down and kissed her nose. “I like your smile much better than the sad face.”

“Me too.” She tipped her face up and allowed her lips to linger on his. “I know I look like hell. I’m gonna go clean up. Why don’t you text Amber?”

“I think you’re beautiful. You couldn’t possibly look like hell even if you tried, but go do whatever you want. You need some more sleep, and so do I.

I'll text Amber."



WRESTLING BUTTERFLIES AND insecurities, Claire opened the door from the bedroom to the living room as her hand slightly trembled on the cool door knob. Scanning the suite, she immediately noticed Harry's bed. He had a sheet, blanket, and pillow on the sofa. Continuing to search, she found the man she sought. Irony struck when she realized he stood exactly where Tony stood hours before, at the large window, staring out at the dark San Diego skyline. This time, her mind was on the man with her.

Worried that he'd reject what she had to offer, she tried to push the doubts from her mind and press forward—barefooted across the light carpet. As she neared him, she saw the glass in Harry's hand; it wasn't one of the stemmed wine goblets from the table, but a small tumbler from the bar. He swallowed the last of the wine.

Quietly, she moved next to him and touched his elbow. Lost in thought and startled by the contact, he turned his gaze to her. She watched as his blue eyes devoured and his expression morphed. She was only inches away, her face clean of make-up and tears, her hair brushed, and wearing a silk, floor length, light green nightgown.

She remained motionless, nervously awaiting his response. When he didn't speak, she tried for levity, "You're awfully tall to sleep on that sofa."

Keeping his eyes fixed to hers, he replied, "I was thinking the same thing as I put the blanket there." His hand gently went to Claire's shoulder, teasing the delicate spaghetti strap. She closed her eyes and exhaled, causing her breasts to move as her lungs deflated.

In unison, they stepped forward. Her nipples hardened as they brushed the silk nightgown and pushed against his hard chest. They'd been close to this numerous times, always stopping before making the ultimate leap.

Claire knew the consequence of her clothing choice. She had shorts and t-shirts for her morning workouts. If she'd chosen that for her sleeping attire, she'd have sent an entirely different message. But she didn't. Her decision wasn't made hastily; she'd been debating it for weeks.

Harry's voice resonated deeper than usual, "You've had a long night. Don't you want some sleep?"

Her body shivered with anticipation, and her response came breathily, "Eventually."

He pulled her petite frame to him. Within his embrace, her body became liquid, molding against his. "Are you sure? I didn't come here for this."

She nodded, smiling a shy tight lipped smile and wrapping her arms

around his muscular torso. “I know. You came because you were worried about me.”

It was Harry’s turn to nod.

She strained her tip toes to kiss his cheek. “And I appreciate your concern.”

He lifted his brows. “So this is your way of saying thank you?”

Claire gazed through her lashes. “No. I said thank you, I think. *This* is what I want.”

With only a moment’s hesitation, he took her hand and led her toward the bedroom. Her insecurities faded with each step. When they reached the threshold, Harry stopped and asked, “Are you letting me in, or pushing him out?”

Claire’s smile faded as she contemplated the question she wished he’d never asked. Feeling the warmth of the hand that encased hers, she replied honestly, “At the risk of losing you to the sofa, I don’t know.”

He reached down and scooped Claire into his arms. She giggled in surprise as her feet left the ground. “At the risk of sounding like a man, at this moment, I don’t give a damn. I just want to be sure you know what you’re doing.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and spoke with purposeful breaths into his ear, “I promise I know exactly what I’m doing. It’s you and your actions I’m uncertain about...” She nuzzled his neck. “...and the anticipation is driving me crazy.”

His blue eyes twinkled. “Ms. Nichols, crazy is just the way I like you.” When he laid Claire upon the king-sized bed, her long chestnut hair fanned behind her lovely face, highlighting the intense shimmer of her emerald eyes. After kissing her sweet lips, he expressed his appreciation of his observation, “You are so beautiful!”

Claire felt her cheeks blush as she lifted her head to watch Harry pull his shirt over his head. She’d seen his bare chest before, usually when they’d worked out together. Tonight she stared, thinking it looked wider than she’d remembered. The sight of it heaving with each breath took her breath away. Happily, she replied, “I must say, I like my view too.” Her smile flowed from her lips, to her cheeks, and settled in her glittering green eyes.

When he started to unbuckle his belt, Claire sat up and asked, “May I?” Harry nodded and watched as Claire reached for the buckle.

She was a divorced twenty-nine-year-old woman, not a teenager. There was no need to portray false purity. Harry knew her past. As she unzipped his slacks and his boxer shorts tented in expectation, it was obvious he wasn’t deterred by her boldness.

Standing in only his boxers, Harry reached for Claire’s hands and helped her stand. With their chests once again touching, he whispered, “My turn.”

First uncertain, she then nodded, understanding his meaning. Slowly, he bent down and secured the hem of her silk gown. With painstaking patience he eased the soft fabric over her hips, torso, and breasts. Only the gasp that escaped his lips, as he uncovered her supple firm body, could be heard until he spoke with the raspy tenor of desire, "Lift your arms." She acquiesced, and he eased the gown over her head, dropping it to the floor in a puddle of silk.

Harry's smile made her feel sexy as she stood before him wearing only a small white pair of lacy panties. His eyes never left hers as he stepped toward her. Though his words directed her movements, his tone spoke with desire, "Lie down."

She stepped back, their eyes locked with need and gratification. Feeling the bed against her legs, she did as he bid. He gracefully followed her onto the soft mattress. His soft blue eyes danced with yearning. The emerald—blue contact ended as Claire's eyes closed in response to Harry's caresses. Next, his lips contacted her soft exposed skin, eliciting moans from deep inside of her. His kisses began at her cheeks, moved to her neck, shoulder, and down to her breasts.

Claire's breathing labored at the feel of his fingers massaging the small white lace triangle and his tongue tantalizing her hard nipples. Her back arched toward his touch, and her fingers twisted his blonde hair. She pushed his shadowed stubbly chin against her throbbing breasts. The sensation overwhelmed her deprived senses. She craved more.

She kissed his head, tasted his shampoo, and inhaled his after shave. It'd been so long. Claire knew what she wanted, and the sexual assaults upon her electrified nerves made her patience dissolve. She wanted him—now.

Harry didn't show the same urgency, patiently caressing, feeling and kneading her most sensitive areas. Though she pleaded for more, he continued his reverent worship. Between kisses he showered her with adoration and compliments, "You're amazing." "Your skin is so soft." "I want you so much." The longer he denied her, the more intense her desire. Never had a first time been so intense. Never had Claire been made to feel so adored.

Her body tensed when Harry asked if she was on the pill. It hadn't occurred to her. The birth control insert that she had implanted long ago had passed its expiration. Thankfully, Harry was prepared. She didn't question why he carried a condom. At the moment, her only reaction was relief. When they finally united, they were both hot with carnal longing.

Her dreams seemed real and exciting, but reality was magic. The undercurrent pulled her into Harry's rhythm as her body moved in sync with his. In time, the current became a wave. Starting at her toes and moving north until it titillated the hairs of her scalp. She reached for his shoulders, arched her back, and unknowingly uttered a deep primal moan. The tidal wave took them all the way to a deserted exotic shore where he spoke the same primitive

language.

Once the aftershocks calmed, she collapsed against Harry's chest. It seemed almost incomprehensible to Claire, that after such a stressful evening she could feel so relaxed and content. Her eyes closed as the sound of his heart lulled her tranquil body toward sleep. Encircling her shoulder, he squeezed, momentarily waking her. She buried her face into his soft chest hairs and murmured, "I don't know what this means for the future." Enjoying his embrace, she added, "I really don't know what I want this to mean. I'm not looking for forever, but thank you for tonight."

He wrapped both arms around her, securing her gently to his chest. His voice made his chest vibrate against her cheek. "I don't know about the future either." He kissed her hair. "However, I don't think I can look at you the same way in Amber's kitchen, wearing those shorts you wear." Claire lifted her eyes, sighing at his shy smile as he continued, "I mean, now that I know exactly what's under the shorts and t-shirt."

Claire shook her head. "Oh my, I hadn't thought of that." She let her hand trail over his pectoral muscles and down toward his waist. "I might just need to blush myself, knowing what's hidden by those delicious ripped jeans you like to wear."

"Delicious?"

"Hmm—mm," she murmured, hearing his laugh.

Stroking her hair, his voice became more serious. "Honestly, I'm not looking for forever, either. But if we're giving out thank yous, *you* should be on the receiving end."

"I think I was."

He chuckled, and went on, "I confess, I've been thinking about this since you bought your first cell phone."

Claire lifted her head. This new position gave her visual access to his soft blue eyes. "What? My cell phone, why?"

Harry grinned, remembering the scene. "I didn't know your story or even much about you. It just struck me as odd: you were so excited about a phone. I mean everyone has phones, yet you were almost giddy. I remember you looked like a kid at Christmas. At that moment, I fell head over heels for your excitement, enthusiasm, and innocence."

Claire lowered her head to his chest. "Harry, don't be deluded. I'm hardly innocent."

He lifted her chin and kissed her lips. "I'm not deluding myself. Innocence refers to lack of guilt and pretense. While often reserved, you fit that description. You're also very honest and naively trusting." He rubbed his thumb over her chin and stared into her clouding eyes. "Those, too, are admirable qualities. Besides, I think you've given me a pretty complete bio. You deserve the same." Claire tried to subdue a yawn, it was almost dawn.

“And I’ll give it, another time. Right now, let me enjoy the moment.”

Claire nodded as she nestled her head once again upon his chest. “I’m rather enjoying it myself.” His arm tightened around her soft bare shoulder. For the first time in weeks, she fell into a sound dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Of all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel. He is the only one that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it.

—Mark Twain

DESPITE THE RISING outdoor temperature and humidity, the mansion remained cool—too cool. Marie longed for a momentary reprieve.

Emotions were running too high. Sighing, she settled onto one of the comfortable lounge chairs Nathaniel had ordered to Sharron's balcony and accepted the sun's warmth on her upturned face. A slight breeze tempered the June rays as Marie inhaled the fresh country air. Sitting barefooted in a pair of shorts, she stretched her long legs out before her and attempted to read. Despite the lovely afternoon, concentration was difficult. After all, the doctor was completing his most recent examination of Sharron on one of his now daily trips to the estate. Since he usually had one or two nurses for assistance, Marie found it better to allow them their space. When he was done, he'd sit down with Marie and Ms. Amanda and give his daily report. Of course, if Nathaniel or Mr. Samuel were home, they too would be included in the conference. Although Marie knew Samuel and Amanda didn't approve of her presence, she appreciated they'd momentarily quelled their objections.

Ms. Sharron continually outlived every prediction made by the physician, but as Marie listened to the monitors and witnessed her expressions, she knew Ms. Sharron was ready to go. The beautiful, elderly, and frail woman believed in a higher being, a merciful God, and a heavenly paradise. After spending over two years at the woman's side, Marie believed Sharron refused passage due to an unseen binding, bound to this earth by the chains of love. The afterworld, full of beauty and peace, was waiting. She just needed to let herself go.

Some would call it cruel, but after careful consideration, Marie and Nathaniel decided to be honest with her. Although her eyes hadn't registered

any recollection in months and her mouth no longer spoke, there were times when holding her hand she'd momentarily squeeze theirs, in return. The physician explained this as mere muscle contractions. He reasoned emotional humans try to read meaning into scientific phenomenons, where in fact, there was none. Marie didn't care about his explanation. She believed there were times that Sharron could hear, understand, and communicate any way possible.

They'd discussed their speech many times. These discussions occurred alone in Marie's suite—usually in her bed. If Sharron wouldn't leave this world because of her bond to Nathaniel, he needed to tell her to go. Not as he would dismiss a servant or an employee, but with love and understanding. He needed to explain, he wanted her suffering to stop, and he would survive. He would live again, and this was the part they debated—he *was* living again. Not only living; he was loving.

They both hoped the knowledge of Nathaniel's new life and new love would allow Sharron the peace to cross over. She could go where her body once again worked, where she could smile, sing, and most importantly, where pain, physical and emotional, ceased to exist.



THE OPPORTUNITY CAME only two nights ago, sometime after midnight. They'd been sitting in the plush high backed chairs, talking about something from Nathaniel's work when Marie noticed Sharron's eyes flutter and her hands open and close. Silently, Marie approached the far side of Ms. Sharron's bed; Nathaniel did the same on the near side. Without speaking, they created a circle. Marie remembered the warmth and strength coming from Nathaniel. It was such a stark contrast to the cool fragility of Sharron.

It was one of those instances in your life where time ceases to exist. When Marie's gaze went from Sharron's uncharacteristically clear and knowing eyes, to the dark intense stare of Nathaniel, she felt her heart break and swell. Was that how it happened? Similar to a turtle's shell, it shatters before it can grow. The pain that no medicine could treat produced tears which unapologetically streamed from Marie's eyes; however, it wasn't until she saw the same moisture escape from the dark eyes of the man she loved, that she felt the impending sobs within her chest, threatening the loving silence which filled the room.

Marie knew it wasn't her place to speak. Oh, she didn't have a problem directing Nathaniel while alone, but this was his speech, and he needed to proceed at his own pace. It may be the only time she ever heard his voice crack, but she did. It was a gift few others receive, a forbidden view into his

heart and soul.

"Sharron, it's all right. I want you to let me go." He continually exhaled at a seemingly disproportionate rate to the breaths he took in. Finally, he continued, "I love you. I will always love you, and I know you love me, but you need to move on, for you, for all of us. Samuel and Amanda will be all right. Anton will be fine." More exhaling and inhaling. "And we will miss you, but we will survive."

Sharron squeezed both of the hands that held hers. Her eyes appeared to flit from one face to the other. Did she know? Was she giving her blessing? They'd never know for sure, but they could believe. Nathaniel's voice gained strength, "I will never forget you, but I've found solace. Marie came into my life for you, but she's helped me, too." More breathing. "We've found comfort in one another."

When he fell silent, Marie spoke, "Ms. Sharron, I promise to take care of Nathaniel, as much as he will allow. He will not be alone."

Nathaniel's eyes moved from his wife, to his companion, to her midsection. Marie looked away. Did he really want to reveal their secret? She couldn't do it; again, it was his decision. "Sharron, this may shock you." He grinned through the grief; Marie believed she heard a low laugh. "I know it did me, but dear, there'll be another Rawls in the house. Our name will continue. We have a baby due the beginning of next year."

Did she understand? She squeezed both hands again. Her eyes seemed to register every word, and she blinked two times. The next breath she took was one of the deepest she'd taken in a while. One more squeeze of their hands, and she fell asleep—Sharron hasn't awoken since.



THE SOUND OF the French door opening behind her brought Marie back to the present. She moved her focus from the vast green landscape to the person now looming beside her chair. Expecting the nurse, Samuel's presence caught her off guard.

Marie spun around, her feet feverishly pushing into her sandals. "Mr. Rawls, I didn't know you were home."

His stare was intense as he lowered himself onto the adjacent lounge chair. Instead of speaking, he looked out at the blue sky. The growing silence magnified Marie's unease. Only the rustle of the trees in the breeze was audible. Finally, she asked, "Did you want something? Or are you waiting for the physician to finish his exam?"

"You like this lifestyle, don't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"I had you investigated. Did you seriously think I would allow someone to live in my house, care for my mother, and seduce my father without knowing her past?"

Marie stood abruptly. She moved toward the rail, debating her response. If this were Nathaniel and they were alone, she would meet him head-on. This wasn't Nathaniel, and she'd always addressed Samuel with respect, a kindness obviously not reciprocated.

"Mr. Rawls, your tone is making me uneasy."

He stood. "Really, my tone? My words aren't bothering you? The fact I just accused you of seducing my father, calling you what you are—a whore."

"I believe you're overwrought by your mother's illness. I'm sure you don't mean everything you're saying."

"You're wrong. I mean every damn word. I will admit, the investigation was tricky, seeing as though you don't use your first name." She turned and glared, her gray eyes speaking the retort she wouldn't allow her lips to say. He continued, "My investigator told me you were disowned by your family. They don't want anything to do with you after you disgraced them, after you gave birth to a bastard!"

Her blood boiled; she couldn't contain her words. "Your investigator doesn't have the whole story."

"When my father hears this, once my mother is gone, you'll be out on your ass!"

"Good luck with that." Marie's chin rose in defiance. "Your father knows the truth. I've told him everything. The truth is..." Marie straightened her stance and contemplated. After a protracted silence, she continued with more control and less emotion, "The truth is you don't deserve to know what happened. It's none of your damn business."

Samuel took a step toward her, infuriated by her insolent words and tone. This conversation could go so many different directions. Fortunately, the destination would remain unknown as a petite blonde nurse offered a welcome interruption, politely knocking on the glass paned door, purposely making as much noise as possible, as she entered the stone balcony. "Excuse me, Mr. Rawls, Ms. Marie, the doctor would like to speak with you both."

Samuel's look would stop most people in their tracks. His brown eyes glowed with frightening intensity. Many people would be intimidated by the darkness; Marie was not. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt she had Nathaniel's support. That knowledge propelled her forward. She'd seen those eyes before, in the man she loved; however, they hadn't been directed at her, but at the man before her. Perhaps that was Samuel's true source of animosity. She possessed the love and support he'd never received. Pity threatened her indignation until fear took over. What would Samuel do if he knew she were pregnant?



THE REPORT WAS the same: Ms. Sharron's vitals continue to diminish. The IV kept her hydrated, but without nutrients, she'd be gone within days or hours. This time, the doctor did not expect a reprieve. Samuel, Amanda, and Marie listened as the doctor explained the probable sequence of internal events, ultimately releasing Sharron from her earthly prison and stopping her respirations altogether.

The three sat in silence as the doctor and his staff gathered their belongings. "Mr. Rawls, I will once again offer my nurses to stay with Mrs. Rawls during these last few days. This is a difficult time for those emotionally bound to her. We can have a rotation here twenty-four hours."

Nathaniel wasn't present, granting Samuel the supreme position as decision maker. Marie sat straight and looked to Mr. Samuel. She wanted compassion, understanding, perhaps even respect for her years of service. She wanted to be the one monitoring the sweet lady. Instead, what Marie saw was contempt. Samuel's sinister expression displayed his sudden ability to thwart her plans. His voice was smug and restrained, "Thank you, Doctor. I believe that would be best. Please have your nurses begin immediately."

Amanda looked from her husband to Marie, back and forth. Finally, with a pompous smirk she spoke, "Then I guess it's settled. Marie, you may pack your things. It seems everything is covered."

"Thank you, Mrs. Rawls." Despite their cruelty, Marie conducted herself with poise and dignity. They were after all, in Ms. Sharron's room. It wasn't the place for an argument. "I believe I'll wait for Mr. Rawls' return before I begin that endeavor."

Amanda smirked. "Marie, perhaps you've forgotten, I'm in charge of household staff. Nathaniel has more important issues than dealing with the help. Your services are no longer required."

Ignoring Amanda's directive, Marie walked toward the bed and squeezed Ms. Sharron's hand. With tears in her eyes, Marie nodded respectfully to the nurses, gathered her composure, and walked toward the door of the suite. She needed air. The day was beautiful. Her goal was the pool or perhaps gardens, anywhere away from Samuel and Amanda.

Marie's mind spun as she approached the grand staircase, taking in the gorgeous entry. The space below shone brightly and full of light, the high ceiling sparkled with reflective gold flakes glistening above the large glowing chandelier. One story below, sunlight seeped through beveled glass, creating prisms of color. Momentarily, Marie paused at the railing, mesmerized by the rainbows dancing on the reflective sheen of the marble floor. It was as if the beautiful foyer was unaware that death lurked in the shadows.

After descending a few steps, Samuel's gruff voice stalled her movement. Gripping the rail she remained facing forward, refusing to turn toward him. His words reached her loud and clear, "I would appreciate you to remember, staff uses the back stairs." When Marie chose not to respond, Samuel moved closer, descending a few steps. "I'm speaking to you."

Her gray eyes shot shards of hate through the moisture she shed for the woman upstairs. "I can assure you, I heard you. Would you like me ascend so that I may descend again?"

"I would like you to ascend so you may fulfill the task my wife instructed."

Marie turned away, exhaled audibly, and continued her descent. This time he stopped her progress with a tight grip to her right arm as he propelled himself in her path. "My father has a lot of important things happening with his work; he doesn't need to be concerned with the employment of servants." His heavy emphasis on the last word did not go unnoticed.

Marie's chin rose in defiance. She stared directly into Samuel's eyes. "I'm aware of his concerns."

"Oh, really?"

She didn't owe Samuel anything. Nonetheless, she hoped her knowledge would stop his barrage, if only momentarily. "Yes, your father is currently in a meeting with Mr. Clawson and Mr. Mathews. That's why he wasn't able to be here for the doctor's examination; however, he plans to be home as soon as he can. Your son is coming too."

Samuel chuckled. "Well, I guess it's true. If you want to know everything about someone..." He paused. "...share a pillow."

Marie freed her arm and attempted to step around the detour Samuel created. The prisms of light and color continued to dance across the floor, far below.

"We want you gone by the time he gets home." It wasn't a request.

Marie spun again. "I will *not* leave this home until your father asks me to do so."

"So you actually think you will stay, after my mother is gone?"

"I think you disrespect your mother by speaking as if she's already in heaven."

His rage was fueled by multiple sources. His mother's illness and impending death was unjust. She deserved so much more than she'd experienced. She deserved love and kindness, something Samuel couldn't imagine she'd ever received from his tyrannical father. As he stared at Marie's vain expression, he wanted to remove it forcibly from her smug face. He had never struck a woman, yet he questioned this woman's true status. Believing her to be nothing more than a gold digging whore, Samuel questioned how Nathaniel could be deceived by this slut. Samuel reasoned it was due to his

father's increased stress with Rawls Corporation and Sharron's worsening health. Fighting to contain his instincts, he reached once again for her arm. "I'm dis-respecting her, when you're fucking my—"



THE FRONT DOOR opened as the prisms disappeared in a shower of light. Samuel and Marie's loud, angry voices carried throughout the vast foyer and beyond. Nathaniel and Anton's attention immediately went to the two people half way up the grand stairs.

Nathaniel's booming voice superseded the two coming from above. He saw the tear stained face of his love and the menacing expression of his son. "What in the hell?" He watched as Marie's expression turned toward him with obvious relief.

The next instant would replay over and over in his mind. Samuel's hand was on Marie's arm. She spun toward Nathaniel. Anton rushed forward as if sensing the future. Amanda appeared at the rail above, seemingly to witness the commotion, but alas, she had her own agenda. His daughter-in-law's voice transcended the foyer, "The doctor said we all should be in Sharron's room; it's almost time."

Samuel moved upward toward his wife. Did he push Marie? No, she simultaneously pulled away from his grip. Physics were non-negotiable. The law of conservation of energy states energy can neither be created nor destroyed. It can only change form or be transferred from one object to another. As the two angry individuals exploded from their point of origin, they each used the contained momentum to propel themselves in their own desired direction.

The stair on which Marie stood was maybe ten or eleven inches wide. In her haste to reach Nathaniel, her sandaled foot misjudged the step. In slow motion, Nathaniel watched helplessly as his new love and the life of his unborn child tumbled downward. Her form rolled vulnerably, hitting each step with increased speed and power as she neared the marble landing.

Anton's agility and quickness allowed him to reach her before she connected with the rock hard floor. Nonetheless, Nathaniel, Amanda, Samuel, and various curious staff, gasped in horror and stared powerlessly as Anton held Marie's limp body.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The most precious possession that ever comes to a man in this world is a woman's heart.

—Josiah G. Holland

C LAIRE WOKE SLOWLY, enjoying the soft, luxurious hotel sheets against her bare skin. Before her mind registered her location, she snuggled happily into the blankets. Suddenly, her knee contacted a warm leg. Claire gasped and stilled. Only inches away, she heard the unfamiliar sound of rhythmic breathing and felt radiating heat. Opening her eyes, she saw Harry's tussled blonde hair. Momentarily, her mind replayed scenes from the night before as her knee mindlessly moved against Harry's leg. It'd been so long since she'd awakened with anyone. She smiled and relished the softness of his leg hairs against her smooth skin.

Turning slightly toward the clock, Claire adjusted her eyes and read the numbers, 10:27 AM. At first, she wondered where the morning had gone. Then, she remembered dawn breaking through the dark sky when they finally submitted to exhaustion and yielded to sleep. Dismissing the idea of leaving their secure haven, Claire peacefully closed her eyes, curled her body close to Harry, and savored the closeness.

In the recesses of her mind, she recalled Harry's confession; he'd anticipated them together since she purchased her first cell phone. Smiling, she contemplated her first thoughts of a union: when Harry first asked her to play video games. Although she told Courtney his anti-Tonyisms drew her in she acknowledged to herself that it was his unwavering kindness, concern, and support which now held her captive.

Grinning into her pillow, she recalled Harry's prowess between the sheets. Prior to Tony, she'd been in a sexual slump. Simon was many years earlier, and they were just children. Between the two, there were a few nameless, meaningless men. Unquestionably, Tony's sexual abilities were boundless.

Nonetheless, the daunting reminder of his nonconventional introduction into her life and bed darkened every positive memory.

Gratified with Harry's skills, Claire snuggled into the soft sheets, enjoyed his warmth and floated in and out of consciousness. Nearing 11:00 AM, Claire stirred as Harry eased his way out of bed. Her damaged self-esteem waited patiently for him to return. When he didn't, she freed herself from the warm cocoon, shyly wrapped herself in her robe and wandered into the sitting area.

Tentatively stepping into the bright room, Claire found Harry standing in the sunshine, peering through the large window. A glistening vista filled with buildings and shimmering sea filled the large pane beyond his silhouette. Despite the beautiful view, Claire's gaze focused on Harry's firm bare torso, trim waist, and perfectly faded jeans. They were the same jeans from last night and hung perfectly around his hips with the top button undone. As she admired the vision, she noted the absence of visible boxer shorts. Suddenly contemplating their location, her insides tightened. If they were still in the bedroom—it meant under his jeans...

Smirking, Claire shook her head and listened as Harry spoke on his BlackBerry.

"That's fine, send the email to me, and I'll review it. No, that can wait until Monday. Be sure Lee knows. Yesterday? No, I wasn't aware. Have Lee call me as soon as he's off the call. Thank you, Rachel. I'll check in later today." He turned around and saw Claire.

Momentarily, she feared her eavesdropping would upset him; however, Claire's anxiety dissipated as Harry's eyes lightened, and a smile filled his handsome face. Slowly, he walked closer, keeping his glimmering eyes locked on hers.

Though he spoke into his BlackBerry, his expression revived Claire's feelings from last night. "Yes," he said. "Forward everything to my personal email. I can get it from my phone." His eyebrows rose as he neared and discontinued his conversation, "Goodbye, Rachel. You know how to reach me."

He hit the disconnect button and flung his phone onto the couch.

Harry's change in countenance eased Claire's uncertainties about the night before. Suddenly, her facial expression was beyond control. No longer did she wear a mask, her cheeks rose involuntarily, and the tips of her lips moved upward. She remembered Courtney's question: *does he make you smile?* She knew the answer and momentarily considered calling her friend and screaming—YES, he does! However, her desire to remain within Harry's grasp prevailed.

"Hey, beautiful lady, I called room service and ordered coffee." His arms wrapped his arms around her waist. "It should be here soon." He moved so

close that Claire needed to look up to see his blue eyes.

"That sounds wonderful. It's way too late for my first cup."

Lowering his lips to her forehead, Harry asked, "Did you sleep well?"

Her arms encircled the torso she'd been admiring, and she murmured, "Hmmm, I did. You?"

"Much better than I would have on that couch."

Claire grinned into his chest, thinking so many questions. What did this mean for their friendship? Truthfully, she wasn't looking for anything long term and she didn't want to hurt him, but selfishly, the closeness felt wonderful. Every inch of her craved more of what they'd shared.

"Harry," she began shyly. "Maybe we should talk about—" His hand gently lifted her chin, slowing her words. When their lips connected, her words ceased.

"How about we talk later?"

Claire didn't reason or think. Instead, she nodded, and her body responded carnally without modesty. His hands untied the belt of her robe and slowly eased the fabric from her shoulders. As it fell to her feet, she pushed toward his warmth and security. From within the confines of his jeans, Claire felt his straining erection against her hip.

Moving his gaze down her body and back up to her emerald green eyes, Harry asked, "Do you know how gorgeous you are?"

She fought the urge to look down modestly and replied, "You make me feel that way."

"You should always feel that way." His hands cupped her behind as he pulled her nude body against him. The rough denim fabric burnished her suddenly sensitive skin. Their mouths united as Claire welcomed Harry's tongue through her parted lips.

This time she remembered the condom. "Do you have any more protection?"

Harry released his embrace, grasped her hand, and led her to the bedroom. Going to the bedside stand, he opened his wallet, and with a triumphant look produced a small silver square packet.

Claire's smile and lifted eyebrows begged the question, did you expect this?

"What can I say? Once a Boy Scout—always prepared." His infectious levity made her giggle. Harry crawled on the bed and patted the mattress. She willingly followed, unable to restrain the large ridiculous smile overtaking her face.

Gently easing her onto the pillows, Harry moved to the foot of the bed. With his own devilish snicker, he allowed his lips to brush the skin of her ankle, calf, knee, thigh, hips, and stomach. By the time he reached her breasts, Claire's expression morphed into a pleasure clouded gaze, and her back

arched as he teasingly suckled each nipple.

Weaving her fingers through his unruly hair, she asked the question burning in her mind, “How many of those packets do you have?”

Harry lifted his eyes to hers. “This is my last one.” She exhaled. “I suppose we’d better make it count.”

The thought alone electrified her skin, taking her beyond words. She gasped as her head foolishly bobbed in response.

She heard him say, “I know a few other ways to utilize our resources,” as his kisses moved back toward her stomach and south.

Acquiescing to his suggestion, Claire fell against the soft pillows, allowing her body to enjoy the excursion.



PHILLIP ROACH REVIEWED the video: 23:42:34: Mr. Rawlings leaves Claire’s suite. Phillip notes she appears unharmed, perhaps slightly stunned, as she closes the door. Phil rubbed his temples and ridiculed himself for sending the note. Thankfully, since he hadn’t heard from Mr. Rawlings, he assumed Claire managed to hide its existence from his employer. There was something in Mr. Rawlings’ voice as he waited in that car, something which alarmed Phil. Now, shaking his head at the stilled image of Ms. Nichols closing the door while simultaneously looking into her closed hand, Phil acknowledged Claire’s talent. This petite woman could influence Mr. Rawlings, in ways few others could.

The video restarted, 03:17:25: Ms. Nichols had a crowd at her door. Listening to the dialogue prior to the door opening, Phil determined Harrison Baldwin to be the one to gather the group. Baldwin looked and sounded tense while he banged on her door. As Claire appeared, she looked recently awakened, having slept in her clothes. Though her face was barely visible through the crowd and Baldwin’s embrace, she looked uncharacteristically disheveled.

The others went away while Baldwin entered the suite. Phil rewound the feed and listened again. Though difficult to hear everything, it sounded as though they said something about *charges*. Claire specifically said *no charges* to the police woman.

The camera didn’t activate again until 11:13:48, when Mr. Baldwin opened the door to allow room service to enter with a cart, the exchange polite and short. Baldwin wore the same clothes from the night before.

At 13:37:16, Mr. Baldwin pushed the cart into the hall and left the suite. At 14:16:32, Ms. Nichols exits her suite wearing a beach cover-up, hat, sunglasses, and flip-flops and carrying a beach bag.

Phil decided to get a closer look at Claire's suite. He stopped on his way to the pool. When he reached her door, he found it ajar with a housekeeping cart parked before her entrance. Casually, Phillip Roach stepped around the cart and waved to the housekeeper, in the bedroom changing the sheets. Noticing the blanket and sheet upon the couch, Phil grinned and clicked a picture. Although it was none of his business, he suspected Mr. Rawlings would be as happy about this discovery as he.

Phil clicked a picture of the coffee table with an empty bottle of wine and three glasses. Next, he nodded politely to the housekeeper, left the suite, and walked toward the pool.

Easing into a lounge chair shadowed by a large umbrella, Phil's eyes settled upon his new obsession. Despite her eventful night with multitudes of visitors, Claire looked rested and relaxed, casually lounging under a deep burgundy umbrella, her bare legs stretched out before her, wearing a black bikini. On the table to her left, Phil saw her iPhone, a plate with part of a sandwich, and a tall glass with amber liquid. The lemon upon the rim and the small bowl of various colored sweetener packets indicated the glass contained iced tea. Her sunglasses were on top of her head as she read from the iPad.

He leaned back, snapped a photo and began his email to Mr. Rawlings.



CLAIRE ADJUSTED HER eyes to her iPad. As long as she kept it out of the sunshine and her sunglasses off, she could read the screen. Sighing, she reread Meredith's blog for the third time. The content wouldn't change. She wasn't seeking new information—only assessing. The procedure felt strangely familiar, evaluating each new situation for possible fallout. She'd lived two years of her life that way, taking in everything around her, and gauging if, no not *if*—how Tony would react. Claire no longer feared physical retaliation; yet part of her felt the need to placate Meredith's blog, hoping to mellow his response. Claire reread:

Freedom of Speech:

While Freedom of Speech is protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, it is not apparently immune to money and influence. I wrote a retraction scheduled to appear today in Rolling Stone and People Magazine. It was a retraction to an article I wrote over three years ago. (Hyperlink to 2010 article)

As an independent correspondent, I have experienced the highs and lows of our ever changing world of media. In the past, I've proposed ideas which

have been accepted or rejected in principal. Never, until now, have I had a publication refuse to print my finished product, after first accepting the concept.

(Hyperlink to Rolling Stone article) and (Hyperlink to People Magazine article); for the record, my retraction was to include additional information which these esteemed publications have since refused to print. A third nationally recognized magazine refused to print any of my retraction.

In an effort to inform the public, as is your right to know, my blog will serve as the sounding board designed to reach the masses. Here, as is my right, I will write what no magazine was willing to print:

Ms. Claire (Rawlings) Nichols has agreed to sit down with me and openly discuss her relationship, marriage, and divorce with Anthony Rawlings. Mr. Rawlings is one of this country's leading entrepreneurs and listed as one of the top ten wealthiest people in the United States. His influence in the world of business is without bounds. That same influence has been working overtime to stop Ms. Nichols' right to free speech.

As of yet, I do not know any details of their relationship. It is, however, my opinion that since Mr. Rawlings' legal team is working diligently to contain her voice; the final product will be worth writing... and reading!

Continue to follow this blog to learn more about the TRUTH only Ms. Nichols can share!

Looking to her phone on the table beside of her, Claire wondered if she should call Tony. After all, she didn't want Tony's fine legal staff presenting Meredith with a restraining order. Claire tried earlier to reach her old friend, but she was busy in another interview.

Claire closed her eyes and debated the effectiveness of her case, she would tell Tony: *I was upset after you left last night. You should know that. I fell asleep before I could call Meredith. The blog was already up and viral by the time I woke up.*

There were over 300,000 hits. Her planned words were all true. Claire just wasn't sure if she could talk to Tony, after what happened last night with Harry.

Thinking about last night, and this morning, caused a smile to sneak onto her face, momentarily forgetting the blog. She lowered her sunglasses over her eyes, placed the iPad face down on the small table, and relaxed against the soft lounge chair.

Absorbing the sunshine, she recalled her night and morning.



WHEN SHE AND Harry finally talked about what they'd done, Claire was reassured by their like mindedness. Neither wanted to jeopardize their friendship, and both thought they were comfortable with the additional benefits. After all, they're both consenting adults.

Harry previously accused Claire of being distant regarding her past. If that were true, he was in another state. Until this morning, he'd kept his personal past hidden. Even Amber hadn't mentioned anything.

After their morning's use of Harry's last condom, he wheeled the cart with coffee into the bedroom. Sitting on the bed, sipping coffee, and wrapped only in a sheet, with Harry once again dressed, felt absolutely licentious. Despite all they'd done, the decadence was stimulating. She remembered peering at him over the rim of her coffee mug, secretly wishing he had more silver packets, and knowing their daily coffee chats would never be the same. She listened as Harry offered a small glimpse into his history:

He'd only had two serious relationships. He acknowledged other sexual encounters, but there were only two he considered girlfriends. One started in college and lasted three years. Claire listened, thinking that was longer than her time with Tony. The most recent lasted about a year and a half and that had ended a few months before Claire arrived in Palo Alto.

At first, it surprised Claire she didn't know any of this. Then she realized how little she knew about Harry's past. He'd been very forthcoming regarding his work at SiJo and previous police work, but that was all in relation to his investigating skills with Tony.

This morning, he told her about regular medical care and his belief that he was healthy and free of all communicable diseases. He even offered to have a routine check if it would ease Claire's mind. He winked and his blue eyes twinkled when he mentioned with a clean bill of health and her on the pill, they could avoid the bothersome condoms. While Claire appreciated his candor, she wondered if this was what dating had become, the exchange of medical records. It wasn't like she ever had a chance to consider that with Tony, and she had seen a doctor in prison, without a doubt, her medical record was clear. The pill—that was something worth considering.

As he volunteered a larger glimpse of his personal history, Claire wondered why she'd felt the pressing need to share her past despite knowing so little of his. She reasoned it was due to his help researching Tony's past. After all, Harry hadn't asked Claire to investigate his ex-girlfriend.

It was the name of Harry's most recent girlfriend which caused Claire to twinge. She wasn't sure what it meant. Could it be jealousy? She didn't think so. However, not only had she met his ex, she'd talked with her. Now the

more recent coolness she'd noticed from Amber's personal assistant made sense: only months before, Harry and Liz had cohabitated.

"Do you find it weird working with her every day?" Claire asked.

"No. It's over. We both know it. Besides she's great at what she does."

Wow, that was an open ended statement, Claire thought.

"And Amber doesn't want to lose her, just because we had a thing."

"That's incredibly mature. Does she feel the same?"

"Well, I think so." He shrugged. "We haven't talked about it." Looking closely over the rim of his mug with a look of disgust, he added, "Not everyone hires private detectives to follow their ex's every move."

That reminded Claire of Phil's secret message from the night before. With everything else, she'd actually forgotten. Harry's eyes widened with curiosity when she told him about the wine delivery and the note.

Taking her empty cup, Harry kissed her nose and said, "My, your list of admirers continues to grow. How did I end up being the one to stay the night?"

The idea of Tony or Phil staying made Claire uncomfortable. Mostly because she'd fantasized about one and hardly knew the other, but Harry's tone made the blood rush again to her cheeks. She couldn't believe she was blushing like a school girl. "Lucky, I guess, Mr. Baldwin."

"I would have to agree." His smile warmed her.

They also talked about her last night in San Diego. Despite Mr. Rawlings' *request*—more of a mandate Claire thought—to stop her discussions with Meredith, she had a scheduled meeting and planned to keep it. She planned to do what she'd told Tony: go on with the interviews but halt production. Recounting the sickening feeling of fear for Harry, Amber, John, and Emily, she believed this might just be the ticket to keep them safe. However, she did worry about Meredith's reaction. Undoubtedly, she would want her article or articles published, preferably sooner than later.

Harry asked, "So, would you mind company for the rest of your stay? I'll make myself scarce while you and Meredith are working." Claire smiled and remained silent. She liked his requests. They were so much nicer than decrees. Harry continued, "I think with all of your visitors, I should stay... for your safety, of course."

"Didn't you say Tony's plane went back to Iowa?"

"Yes." He hesitated and then asked, "Does that mean your answer's no?"

"It means you need a better reason." Her eyes twinkled.

"How about, I want to?"

"That works for me, but, maybe you could..." She raised her eyebrows.

This time his cheeks reddened. "Yes, I was thinking a stop at the drug store was in order." Claire didn't respond verbally. She just nodded.

The vibration of her iPhone, against the glass surface of the small table,

pulled Claire from her memories. She read the screen: “*TONY CELL.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Turn your face to the sun and the shadows fall behind you.

—Charlotte Whitton

C LAIRE READ THE words “TONY CELL” from her iPhone. She wanted to be the one to call him, but her memories faded into dreams as she lay on the sunlit lounge chair. Mindlessly, she realized her plate was gone and her tea was full. The vibration and ringing confirmed her earlier concern; Tony or Shelly must’ve seen Meredith’s blog. Claire knew she needed to meet his confrontation head-on. If she didn’t, she risked him flying back to San Diego, and seeing as how her sleeping situation had recently changed, that wouldn’t be good. After the fifth ring, she squared her shoulders and swiped the screen.

“Hello, Tony.”

“Claire.”

She couldn’t determine his mood by his one word response. “To what do I owe this honor? First, a visit—now a call.” Claire tried in vain to sound nonchalant.

“It seems that your *friend* blogged about your impending disclosure.”

“Yes, I read that.”

“We discussed this yesterday. I was under the impression we’d reached an agreement.”

Claire reached up and touched the pearl dangling daintily from her neck. “As I recall, our agreement states the articles won’t be printed, unless something happens to me or someone associated with me.” She attempted to maintain her businesslike tone. “I said I would go on with the interviews.”

Sarcastically he asked, “Tell me Claire, do you expect bodyguards for everyone? I’ll need a list of names.”

She shook her head, “I expect distance and respect.”

“And I expect my directives to be followed.” Claire recognized the

change in Tony's tone. It was harder with increased volume. "Her blog no longer exists."

"That's unreasonable," she replied. "She didn't know anything about your directive. I hadn't had the chance to speak with her."

"That's your undoing, not mine."

"Actually, I beg to differ. I was upset by your visit last night—more accurately by your gift. Instead of calling, I fell asleep. By the time I woke, she wasn't available, and the blog was viral." As Claire spoke, she powered-up her iPad and searched for Meredith's blog. The web address she'd used earlier was met with the Error Response: "*Server not found.*"

"Shit, Tony, what have you done?"

"I believe I presented you with a sign of commitment, and now, I have presented you with a warning. Following my rules isn't optional. I expect you to remember that, if you want your requests to be considered."

Claire's blood boiled. She remembered his rules and his redundant lectures regarding those rules; however, as much as she wanted to argue and fight, she wanted her loved ones safe, and John's law license reinstated. With great effort, Claire's voice strained with projected compliance, "I will speak with Meredith this evening. Nothing more will appear in print or online as long as people stay safe and John gets his license."

"Your second request will take some time."

"Tony, it wasn't a request."

"Your bravado is appreciated, but I won't be swindled. I don't make mistakes or unsubstantiated threats. It would do you well to keep that in mind."

"From business metaphors to chess, the thing is, for a swindle to have occurred I would need to be losing. On the contrary, I'm in California, and you're in Iowa. I would say I have the initiative."

"Well, I see your weakness, your *hole*, and I'm confident that you'll blunder. The queen will be mine."

"Yes, I know the term. Now, didn't you tell me last night that I continually exceed your expectations?" She didn't wait for a response. "I think you've forgotten, to win at the game of chess it isn't the queen you seek, but the king."

"You may consider Meredith's blog to be a gambit, but I doubt she shares your point of view. I look forward to the end game."

Claire sighed. "I will talk with her tonight."

"By the way, I like the black bathing suit, but I'd prefer it here at the estate where it wouldn't be seen by as many people."

Her head darted from side to side. Behind the trunk of a palm tree, under the shade of an umbrella, she saw Phillip. "Goodbye, Tony." Before he could comment, she disconnected the line, stood, and made her way toward Phil's

umbrella; they needed to *talk*.

The late afternoon temperature was perfect. The low humidity combined with a light breeze made the pool oasis a haven for relaxation; however, as Claire approached Phillip Roach, his expression looked anything but relaxed.

She didn't ask permission to sit in the chair next to his; she just did.



HIS VOICE WAS curt, “Ms. Nichols, I thought we weren’t to know one another. Can I assume we’re being photographed?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing.” Holding up her phone, Claire continued, “It seems my ex-husband is receiving up-to-the-minute updates. He even knows what I’m wearing.”

“What can I say? I have a job. I do it well.”

“Then tell me what last night’s note was all about.”

Phil looked away. Apparently, the enticement to see Claire sitting next to him, in nothing but her black bikini, was too strong. He returned her gaze. Mindlessly, he wished she weren’t wearing the large sunglasses. He so rarely was able to look at her this close. He wanted to see her eyes. Finally, he responded to her question, “It was a display of unwise judgment.”

“Unwise?” Her voice softened. “I thought it was kind.”

“Well, Ms. Nichols, I’m not paid to be kind. I suppose I momentarily forgot my place in this equation.”

Her anger regarding Tony’s knowledge of her attire faded. She gently touched Phil’s outstretched leg and said, “Thank you. He was upset when he arrived.” She smirked. “He’s not too happy right now, but he calmed last night; he’ll calm again.”

“You seem to have an uncanny ability. My concerns were unfounded.”

“No, Phillip, your concerns were admirable. Thank you.”

He nodded.

Claire went on, trying to give Phillip some sense of understanding. “This is nothing but a game to Mr. Rawlings. Unfortunately for me, he has the ability and resources to keep the game going into untold overtime, and you are a piece of that game.”

“Game? That wasn’t the impression I’ve received.”

“It’s like chess. I make a move, he makes a move. Eventually, one of us will declare checkmate.”

“From my short experience, I believe you’re a worthy opponent.”

“You see, that’s where I’m confused. Sometimes, I think I’m an opponent, but other times I think he believes I’m the prize. Thing is, I’m not interested in being either.”

“Perhaps instead of chess, it’s archery, and you, Ms. Nichols, are the target.”

She appeared to be pondering his observation. She asked, “By the way, what happened to you at that French restaurant?”

“I had an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

Claire nodded. “Thank you again for your concern. I’m in hope of you being dismissed soon, but I doubt that will happen, and at this time I don’t want to break in another bodyguard, so I’ll leave you to your work.”

As Phil watched Claire walked back to her chair, he considered her words: *Bodyguard*—that does sound better than paid voyeur.



AFTER HER TIME by the pool, Claire went back to her suite and made some calls. A lot had happened with Tony since she’d last spoken with Courtney. Claire told her all about Meredith and the agreement she hoped to secure with her tonight. She also told Courtney about Tony’s surprise appearance the night before.

Courtney filled Claire in on the progress of Caleb and Julia’s wedding. With it, less than a month away, Courtney was trying to be as helpful as possible. Claire smiled, listening to her friend go on and on about dresses, rehearsal dinner, and tuxedos. Claire told her how much she’d like to help. They both knew that wouldn’t happen. Nevertheless, Courtney promised lots and lots of pictures.

Just before they hung up, Claire mentioned her other late night visitor. Claire couldn’t tell Amber about what they did. It was refreshing to have a friend with whom she could talk to about Harry. Courtney didn’t judge; she listened. When Claire said Harry *did* make her smile, Courtney said she couldn’t wait to meet him. Her last comment on the subject caught Claire off-guard, Courtney remarked, “Can you imagine if Tony realized his visit was the push to advance your relationship with Harry?” Claire hadn’t thought of it like that. She remembered Harry’s question. If Courtney’s observation was right, was she pushing Tony out, instead of letting Harry in?



HARRY RETURNED TO the suite later in the afternoon, looking delicious in new jeans and a new black t-shirt. Since he hadn’t planned on staying in San Diego, he was forced to do some shopping. With a boyish smirk, he handed Claire a plastic bag containing a box. She looked into the bag and returned his

smile from under her mascaraed lashes. It seemed silly to feel shy about the box of condoms; however, when she noticed the number on the side of the box, she exhaled. She didn't know they were sold by the dozen.

Her thoughts went back to Palo Alto. Did his bulk purchase mean he intended this arrangement to continue back at the condominium? She wasn't opposed. It would just be different. This getaway was more like a holiday. Another issue requiring more thought.

Just before seven o'clock, Harry asked Claire, "I was thinking, instead of flying back to Palo Alto tomorrow, maybe you'd be interested in driving?"

"Driving? How long of a drive is it?"

"About eight hours."

Claire stared in disbelief. "Eight hours?! Why do you want to do that?"

"Because Santa Monica is about two and a half hours from here, and a friend of mine, known for his amazing research, tracked down Patrick Chester."

Claire contemplated for a moment. "Chester? The neighbor of the Rawls? The man whose house Tony went over to and made the 911 call?"

"Yes, one and the same. If you want to visit, I'll call him this evening and see if we can arrange a meeting."

Her mind spun. That wasn't something she'd even considered. Claire thought, *if Tony was upset about me visiting with Meredith, this would throw him over the edge.* But then again, she did have a reservation to fly back to Palo Alto at 9:00 AM. If she didn't cancel, Phillip would once again lose track of her, at least temporarily.

A knock came on the door of Claire's suite interrupting, their conversation. Looking through the peephole, she saw Meredith. Just before opening the door, she turned to Harry and replied, "If he's willing to meet, let's do it."

Harry leaned down and kissed her. His voice sounded huskier than before. "I'll be back after your meeting. Have a nice dinner."

His smile made her pulse increase, and her stomach clench. She replied, "You, too. Sorry, that you're eating alone."

"I'll survive."

With that, Claire opened the door letting Meredith enter and made quick introductions, "Meredith, this is Harrison Baldwin. Harry, this is Meredith Banks." The two shook hands and made quick pleasantries. Harry excused himself and left.

When the door shut, Meredith's eyebrows shot up. "Is he the man I've seen you with in the magazines."

"Are we off the record?"

Meredith smiled. "Yes."

Claire returned her smile, and said little more shyly, "Yes."

"My, Claire, you certainly know how to attract the good-looking men. If I weren't married, I'd ask for your secret."

Their easy banter quickly disappeared as Claire explained the loss of Meredith's blog.

Meredith stared in disbelief. "I thought there was a problem with the server due to the excessive number of hits. I never dreamt it could be due to Mr. Rawlings." She sat in silence for a moment and added, "So, is this an example of what he can do?"

Claire nodded. "It is. Are you sure you want to do this. He was here last night, and I can promise he isn't supportive."

"He was here? So you two are still talking, after everything... the prison thing and all?"

Claire nodded. "Honestly, I don't know if I'd call it conversation. I'm speaking, he's speaking... well you get the picture."

Meredith nodded affirmatively.

"He set some boundaries." Claire explained briefly, "At this time, I'm inclined to respect them. It's a quid pro quo thing."

Meredith laid her purse on the table, pulled a small laptop from her bag and turned it on. "All right then; lay it on me. What are the rules?"

Claire snickered. "Oh, you have no idea."

She and Meredith discussed the new rules: They would continue to meet, Claire would tell her story, it could be written, but it would only be published *if* Tony failed to keep Claire and her close friends safe. During the conversation, Claire realized Meredith needed compensation for lack of publication. Claire could help with some of that, but decided if Tony wanted to keep this quiet, he could help float the bill.

After dinner, Claire gave Meredith a small sample of what she could expect. It began with the story of a twenty-five-year-old woman working at a local news affiliate in Atlanta, Georgia. After 10:00 PM, Claire decided she was done talking for the night. Their story ended with that same woman waking in an unknown room. Claire didn't begin to describe the woman's physical condition, just the terror of a lost day and the unknown.

Meredith typed feverishly and conceded, "I want this story. I'm willing to do anything and follow any rules to be the one to write it."

They agreed to meet again in a week. Next time, Meredith would travel to Palo Alto.



CLAIRE'S AIRLINE RESERVATION required her to leave the hotel early. Even though she wouldn't board the flight, Harry and Claire chose to stay on

schedule. It would help their illusion with Phillip Roach. Their night hadn't been as late as the night before. Nonetheless, Harry's trip to the drug store wasn't for naught.

When Harry and Claire arrived at the airport, they traded Claire's Mazda 3 for a Mustang convertible. As Harry lowered the roof on the bright blue muscle car, Claire secured her hair in a ponytail. She smiled and chose not to respond to Harry's comments as he put Claire's luggage in the car. He mumbled something under his breath about how happy he was that he didn't have luggage. Claire's suitcases seemed to fill the trunk. Shaking his head, he repeated, "It was only a three day trip."

The ocean breeze helped disperse the clouds and create bright blue patches high above, matching the paint of the Mustang. Harry eased the rental car into the light Sunday traffic of Highway I-5N. Claire laid her head against the seat and enjoyed the sun and wind on her face.

She didn't often allow herself to think about prison. It was easier to keep it compartmentalized away. Nevertheless, sometimes the isolation and incarceration came rushing back. The memories of days, weeks, and months with limited interaction, fresh air or sunshine would infiltrate an otherwise happy day. It happened as she listened to Led Zeppelin sing about a stairway to heaven. Closing her eyes behind the Oliver Peoples sunglasses, she relished the warmth and tingling on her cheeks. It was all such a contrast to those dark months. Claire didn't even realize she was lingering on her own sad memories until she felt the tears slip from her eyes. Harry reached for her hand and squeezed, offering comfort.

He turned down the music and leaned toward her. "Are you all right? If you don't want to do this, I understand. Amber told me the police reports upset you."

Claire took a tissue from her purse. "It isn't that. I really haven't given this whole meeting a lot of thought."

"What is it?"

She exhaled. "I just love the sun and wind."

Harry smiled and squeezed her hand again. "Well, if it makes you cry, maybe we should avoid things you love."

Claire grinned through her tears. "How about I try not to cry, and we enjoy lots of sun and wind."

"You don't need to *try* anything."

A few minutes later, Claire volunteered softly, "Sometimes, I remember what it was like to only see the sun for an hour a day."

Harry exhaled. His grip intensified upon the steering wheel. "I forget about your time in prison. You never talk about it." She shook her head. His eyes offered compassion as his blonde unruly hair blew in the wind. "You can cry, laugh, or scream, anything that helps. Go for it."

She squeezed his hand, laid her head against the head rest, closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and screamed! It was like nothing she'd ever done before. She didn't look at Harry; her eyes stayed closed tight. They were traveling at approximately seventy miles per hour, with the wind blowing wisps of her tied back hair, and the sun bathing her cheeks.

Although her first attempt was weak, Claire didn't quit. She pictured her prison cell, the cement block walls, and sparse furnishings. She tried again. This time, she felt the sound begin in her diaphragm, travel up her throat, and explode through her lips.

Without thinking she felt the smile creep onto her face. Despite the memories, the outlet filled her with hope. When had she last screamed? Really screamed? There were plenty of opportunities, but she'd never done it.

Feeling the release, from her toes to her eyebrows, Claire scrunched her eyes tighter and gave the scream one more try. This one lasted longer, going on and on. Her eventual silence came only due to the deflation of her lungs. Nevertheless, once they inflated again, the sound morphed to a giggle, starting as a lonely chuckle and propagating. By the time she opened her eyes, tears leaked from her lids, not from sadness, but from the rush of release.



HARRY TRIED TO maintain his focus on the highway. There were other cars as well as big trucks. The lack of roof made the rush of wind and sound so much louder than it'd be normally; however, the woman beside him filled him with awe. When he'd said to scream, he never expected her to take him up on it, but there she was, head back, emerald eyes hidden behind lids and sunglasses, with her mouth open wide.

His peripheral vision refused to release her image, even for one second. The second scream was louder. The third was beyond belief. For a moment, he thought about Claire in a prison cell. In that instant, his chest filled with angst for her plight, yet that thought was but a flash. Claire started to laugh. Yes, Harry couldn't believe his ears. Her chuckle grew becoming infectious. His expression of disbelief changed as if his lips started at below zero and within seconds became zero and soon forty-five degrees. When she finally opened her eyes, he couldn't contain his own laughter.

Never could he remember feeling the admiration for someone he currently felt for Claire Nichols. How could anyone let her go?

At that second, Harry realized, no one could. Anthony Rawlings would never let her go. If Claire were to be part of his life, so would Anthony Rawlings. He forced a smile and glanced toward her hidden eyes.

Claire's voice transcended the rush of air. "Thank you. I really do like the

car and the drive.”

“You’re very welcome, anytime.”

With her cheeks still raised and her lips turned upward, she moved her glance to the right. He thought about the woman who arrived at Amber’s apartment. Would that woman have screamed at the top of her lungs, on Highway 5-N? Would she have joined him in their activities over the last two days? Harry wasn’t sure. He knew the petite brunette at his side was a mass of contrary emotions and actions. Beyond anything, he longed to explore every one of them.

Claire glanced back at Harry as he suggested. “I know this great place in Oceanside, for a Sunday brunch. Are you up for stopping on our way to Santa Monica?”

“Yes, it sounds great.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

All secrets are deep. All secrets become dark. That's in the nature of secrets.

—Cory Doctorow

*W*ITH THE WIND in her hair, Claire's thoughts disappeared into the ribbon of white sand and rolling waves. She watched as a few lone souls, in wetsuits, walked the shore, carrying surfboards in search of the perfect wave. The table she shared with Harry at the Beach Break Cafe was covered by a blue umbrella. Under that same table, Claire's sandaled feet rested upon a carpet of sand. Inhaling the salty surf, she relished the perfect atmosphere for a Sunday brunch and sipped her coffee.

Harry remained uncharacteristically quiet as Claire enjoyed the glowing vista. The glistening sun reflected off the waves, creating silver caps rolling upon the turquoise blue ocean. Wistfully, she remembered other sandy beaches. She loved the soft, gritty sensation as she wiggled her sand covered toes under her chair.

After the waitress refilled their cups of coffee, Harry's soft voice penetrated the sounds of the sea. "If this is too difficult for you, I can go to Patrick Chester's house alone. I'll just call and reschedule."

Claire looked up. Despite his concerned expression, it was his long, unruly blonde hair moving in the ocean breeze that made her smile. Only once had she seen it controlled, the night they'd met at the restaurant and he'd used gel. She remembered he'd also worn a jacket, a sexy look, but not as sexy as his jeans and well-fitting t-shirts.

"No, I can do this. Honestly, I haven't allowed myself to think much about it. I guess I'm torn." Harry lifted his brows, and Claire clarified, "I'm curious, but apprehensive. The police reports were upsetting. I'm not sure I want to hear more gory details."

"That's not why we're going to see him."

Claire listened.

“I asked a friend, who works at SiJo, to help me with research—”

Claire interrupted, “Harry, please don’t do that. I feel bad enough with all Amber’s done for me. She doesn’t need to be paying people to research my vendetta.”

“Well, Lee’s my friend; we went to academy together. After Simon made me head of SiJo security, I called him and offered him a job. There were openings, and he was more than qualified. He’s got a wife and two kids. The increase in pay was too hard for him to turn down. Most of all, he’s been a tremendous asset to SiJo. Amber isn’t wasting money on him, no matter what he does.

Anyway, he’s always been a master at digging for information, So, I might have mentioned that there were some inconsistencies in the Samuel and Amanda Rawls case.”

Claire sat her coffee cup upon its saucer. “Because... you often bring up old homicide or suicide cases during lunch break?”

“I might have also mentioned you and your ex, but I promise, Lee’s professional. I told him about the ballistics and the reported COD. He agreed, it seemed—well, fishy.”

“Is that supposed to explain why we’re going to Santa Monica?”

Harry remained silent as the waitress interrupted their conversation, delivering food. The smell of sand and salt disappeared into a cloud of decadent aromas. Claire noticed the attentiveness of the cute voluptuous blonde, all directed in Harry’s direction, of course.

She watched as Harry returned the server’s adoration with restrained politeness. Momentarily, Claire remembered being at restaurants with Tony. There were times when waitresses or hostesses blatantly flirted; however, as *red hot sexy* as *People Magazine* said he was, Anthony Rawlings was also intimidating. More often than not, Claire witnessed shy smiles and platitudes from servers, “*Thank you, sir.*” “*If there is anything else I can do...*”

Harry, on the other hand, screamed sexy, with his tight V-neck, relaxed *7 For All Mankind* jeans, and tussled blonde hair. She thought about his *free* coffee that he received after their article appeared in popular publications. Grinning into her quiche, Claire inadvertently shook her head.

Harry looked up from his eggs Benedict to see Claire’s actions. “What?”

She looked up with big bright emerald eyes, trying for her most innocent, *I have no idea what you’re talking about* look.

After a bite of his eggs, complete with Hollandaise sauce, Harry continued their conversation, “Well, Lee is thorough. He, on his own, decided to do a better investigation of the neighbor, Patrick Chester.”

Claire nodded, interested in Harry’s information; almost as much as her fresh fruit.

“It seems Chester was awarded a settlement in November of 1989.”

"That's not long after Samuel and Amanda's death. What kind of settlement?" she managed between bites of succulent pineapple.

Harry went on to explain the origin was fuzzy. At first glance, it appeared as though Chester was a litigant in a class action suit, however, upon further investigation, the beneficiary seemed to be an independent international company, based in the Cayman Islands. The actual funds were siphoned through a law firm in Los Angles. Of course, this law firm refused to answer questions or divulge any information."

"What kind of settlement are we talking? How much money?"

"The first installment was only 20K."

Claire had to ask, "The first?"

"Well, his bank account has received infusions every year. I want us to go to him with the pretense of justifying his story."

Claire looked puzzled.

Harry explained, "You're newly involved in the distribution of wealth. You're just checking your beneficiaries, making sure they deserve *your* annual supplement."

"I have no idea what you're saying, so if I'm supposed to be clueless then I've got this!"

"Follow my lead. I used to be very good at this kind of thing. Patrick Chester still lives in Santa Monica, but not on Mongolia Drive like twenty-five years ago."

While heading east on Highway 10 toward Santa Monica, Harry asked Claire if she wanted to drive by the bungalows owned by the Chesters and Rawls. She declined. What benefit would she gain from seeing the home where Samuel and Amanda Rawls died? She wasn't a pathologist, and what clues would be available twenty-five years later?

Exiting Highway 10 onto Lincoln Avenue, they wove around side streets on their way to Riviera Estates. It was a posh neighborhood with an amazing view of Riviera Country Club. Claire revisited their plan, "Did you actually speak with Mr. Chester?"

"Yes."

"And he's willing to talk to us?"

Harry turned toward Claire. "Yes. Well, kind of."

"What do you mean, *kind of?*"

"He was hesitant until I told him you're a Rawls, and you needed to talk to him."

"I wasn't a—"

"Theoretically you were." He interrupted. "Just let me do most of the talking"

Claire looked at him pensively.

"Do you think you can do this?"

Claire exhaled. "I guess."

Harry squeezed her hand again. "It'll be fine, I promise, and, if my gut is right, this could be enlightening."

Claire laid her head back, closed her eyes, and fought the onset of a headache. "All right, are we almost there?"

"A few more minutes."

Claire watched as the houses grew and the yards became expertly landscaped. Slowly, Harry pulled the Mustang up to large iron gates and stopped at a guardhouse.

"May I help you, sir?" the uniformed man asked.

Harry removed his Ray-Bans and responded, "Yes, Harrison Baldwin here to see Patrick Chester."

The man in the small building referenced an electronic tablet and nodded. "Yes, sir, 100023 Fairway Drive. You'll just need to continue left, then right at the roundabout."

Harry thanked the man and eased the car forward.

Claire leaned toward Harry. "This is a very nice neighborhood. What does Patrick Chester do?"

Harry hadn't replaced his sunglasses. Claire saw the twinkle in his eye as he answered, "He's retired, but before that, he was in retail."

"Retail? Like he owned some amazing chain or overpriced boutique."

"He didn't own anything. He was middle management at a mid-priced chain."

They pulled onto a wide stone and slate drive. A sprawling, stone and stucco house created an "L", with a four car garage perpendicular to the street. One bay of the garage was open. Harry put the car in park, in front of the open door, behind a sleek silver Audi S5.

Claire continued in a low whisper, "Then how did he end up with *this* house with *that* car?"

"That's what we're here to find out." Harry's light blue eye disappeared momentarily as he winked in Claire's direction. "I'm thinking it has to do with that mysterious settlement. Let's give my theory a run?"

She smiled. "Okay, but if I forget my name is Rawls, elbow me in the side."

"If you say so," Harry teased as they both stepped from the Mustang and moved toward the front door.

Before Harry and Claire could reach the stoop of 100023 Fairway Drive, the wide front door opened. A balding gentleman wearing a black Burberry Brit Zip Hoodie, gray t-shirt, and sweat shorts, stepped outside. If he'd been wearing running shoes instead of flip-flops, he might look as if he was about to jog around the neighborhood. Harry and Claire stopped. The man hastily closed the large front door and rushed toward them.

As the distance narrowed between them, Harry spoke, “Mr. Chester?”

Glancing right and then left, the man answered, “Yes, yes. You must be Mr. Baldwin and Miss Rawls?”

Claire extended her hand. “My name is now Nichols.”

Patrick Chester took her hand and assessed the woman before him. “So are you Anton’s daughter or his cousin?”

Claire’s back straightened. She saw the smile sneak from the corner of Harry’s lips. Yes, she could chronologically be Tony’s daughter, but no one had ever said that to her before. While she fought with her answer, Harry spoke, “Mr. Patrick, Ms. Nichols has been given the responsibility of overseeing certain funds. She’s here today to confirm the need to maintain one of those funds.”

Patrick glanced back toward his house. “Let’s go around to the pool, my family’s in the house. They don’t know anything about my settlement. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Harry replied, “Of course. We’ll follow you.”

He briefly reached for Claire’s hand and squeezed. She chose not to reciprocate, deciding instead to press her lips together and exhale. If he’d known her better, he would’ve understood the displeasure screaming from her eyes. Instead, he goaded, “How’s Daddy?”

She leaned closer. “So far, I’m not enlightened!”

They followed Patrick Chester through a large wooden gate situated within the tall stone wall. Entering the rear yard, Claire’s step stuttered at the majesty. A kidney shaped swimming pool surrounded by lavish furniture served as the feature of the lower level. It was a three tiered yard. A few steps up, the next level contained an outdoor living room, complete with fireplace, sofa, chairs, and encased technology center. Currently, country music lofted from the speakers. Claire looked even higher and saw an orange grove on the upper level.

“Your yard is beautiful, Mr. Chester,” Claire said as she sat at an umbrella covered table near the shallow end of the pool.

“Thank you, Ms. Nichols. I don’t mean to be impolite, but let’s get this over with. This is very unusual, and quite frankly, it makes me uncomfortable.”

Claire went on, “I was in the area and decided today would be as good as any. Thank you for seeing us.”

Patrick nodded.

Harry said, “We’re here to confirm you’re the true recipient of the ongoing settlement.”

“Is this some kind of joke? I’ve kept my end of this bargain.” He turned toward Claire. “Your family better keep theirs.”

Without missing a beat, she replied, “Let’s not get hasty. We just have a

few questions.” She looked toward Harry.

Harry asked, “Are you certain your original testimony involving the presence of Samuel’s sister has been contained.”

Patrick looked skeptically toward them, and finally answered, “I think I need to see some identification. How do I know you’re who you say you are?”

Claire reached for her purse and grabbed her wallet. Before she could open it, Harry took it from her hand and spoke, “Mr. Chester, how do we know you deserve to see identification?”

“*You contacted me.*”

“True, but give me something. How do I know you’re the Patrick Chester who Ms. Nichols needs to contact?”

“What do you want?”

“Tell us exactly why you deserve your annual settlement.”

With sarcasm dripping from his voice, Patrick answered, “I don’t remember.”

Harry pushed, “What don’t you remember?”

“You see, that’s the problem. If I remember—your mom...” He looked toward Claire. “...or your aunt? Well, there’s no statute of limitations on murder in California.”

Claire remained silent while Harry opened her wallet and handed Patrick her American Express credit card with *Claire R. Nichols* embossed on the front. Patrick took the card, read it, and handed it back to Harry. Claire watched as each man’s eyes glared back and forth.

She reached for her credit card and placed it back in her wallet. Breaking the silence, Claire said, “Thank you, Mr. Chester, I’ll relay your information, but I can’t make you any promises regarding future installments.”

His glare turned toward Claire. “I think you can, and you will. Tell Anton my memory’s not so bad for an old man.”

She sat taller. “I will.”

Harry interjected, “Do you really want to threaten the man who’s provided you with all of this?”

Patrick sat back against the chair. “I agreed to meet with you because I wanted to see you.” He tipped his head toward Claire. “I haven’t been able to find or contact Anton in twenty-five years. I wanted confirmation he still exists.”

Harry replied, “Your yearly payments weren’t enough?”

“No trace of their origin. Glad to know he’s still kick’n. He was a good kid.”

Claire asked, “So, what message do you want me to give that *good kid*?”

Patrick stood and the others followed. “Tell him to contact me only through the suits in L.A., I don’t want any more surprise visits.”

Claire nodded, and Harry extended his hand as he spoke, “Goodbye, Mr. Chester. I believe Ms. Nichols has enough information.”

Going in the direction they came, Claire and Harry silently made their way back to the blue Mustang. It wasn’t until they were outside the iron gated community that Claire finally spoke, “Why did you show him a credit card?”

“I didn’t want him to know your address.”

His words added to the unease she’d been feeling at the end of their interview. “Oh, thanks, I didn’t think of that.”

Making their way back to Highway I-5 North, they settled in for the almost six hour drive. Claire inclined her seat, listened to the music from the speakers, and absorbed the sun’s rays.

Her mind wandered from Patrick Chester to Tony. Claire still didn’t know who this mystery woman was, but now, they’d confirmed she exists, or existed. Who would Tony be willing to protect with annual payments? He never mentioned another woman. Actually, he said he never wanted to be with anyone else, but could she believe anything he ever said? Maybe the woman really was his aunt; however, she never heard of any family members. Even the Vanity Fair article said he had no other relatives. Could that woman be the one who sent Claire the box? Why would she willingly upset the man who’d financed her freedom from prison for murder? Or did she or someone else have another motive for sending Claire that information? Maybe the person wanted the box to affect Claire differently? It seemed the new information did nothing but create more questions.

Claire closed her eyes under the sunglasses and fought the ache threatening her temples.

As she was about to drift away, she heard Harry say, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have exposed you to that creep.”

She shrugged. “I’ve met a creep or two before. No harm, no foul. I’m just not sure what we gained.”

“We now know for sure there was a woman; someone that Patrick believes is Samuel’s sister. I’d put money on the fact she killed Samuel and Amanda.”

Claire added, “And Tony is willing to pay yearly to keep that knowledge hidden.”

“Who’s the woman?”

“That seems to be the million dollar question!” she said as she watched the beautiful scenery.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Compromise - better bend than break

—Scottish Proverb

*L*EANING AGAINST THE countertop in the kitchen of their new condominium, Sophia traced the edge of the cool granite as her mind wheeled in disbelief. She desperately tried to make sense of the voicemail she heard for the second time. Mr. George, from the Civic Center Art Studio in Palo Alto, received a call from a buyer, representing an anonymous customer. This mysterious person wanted to purchase *three* of Sophia's pieces, the entire collection Mr. George commissioned from her Provincetown studio. During their earlier discussions, she agreed to three of her older works, after painstakingly debating the pieces on her website. The paintings were still in Massachusetts and had only been on Mr. George's website for twenty-four hours. Now, they were sold.

Mr. George wanted Sophia's entire portfolio—yesterday. Apparently, the buyer was enthralled. Yes, Sophia couldn't believe it. That was the word Mr. George used—*enthralled* with her art. The mysterious buyer may even be interested in additional works. Mr. George wanted to know how soon Sophia could fly to Provincetown and ship her *entire studio* to Palo Alto. He promised to make it worth the expense.

Although Sophia and Derek had recently reached an understanding—well, more than an understanding: a coming together of monumental proportions—she wasn't picking up and flying east without discussing it with him. Looking at her calendar, she realized the only conflict, if she suddenly flew to P-town, would be some fundraiser dinner they were supposed to attend. Some top executive wanted Derek to attend this dinner as a representative of Shedistics. Apparently, this was an annual big deal.

Sophia wondered if she could possibly do both. Considering the probability, she realized she would either need to tell Mr. George to wait, or

tell Derek she couldn't do the dinner. The timing was just too unfortunate for both. Packing the art work would take days, possibly a week, and the event was in five days. This was one of those compromises they'd discussed. The concept was much easier in the figurative sense.

Like a child, she crossed her fingers, unconsciously bit her lower lip, and dialed the phone.

Danni's voice on Derek's private line no longer surprised Sophia. Sophia even shamefully felt a twinge of superiority with Derek's recent confession. He swore total ignorance regarding Danni's hidden agenda. Perhaps part of Sophia even felt a bit sorry for the pretty young blonde. No, given the circumstances, she didn't.

"Hello, Danni, it's Sophia."

"Yes, Mrs. Burke, Derek is in a meeting right now. May I take a message?"

Sophia noticed, despite many attempts to change Danni's salutation, she was still addressed as *Mrs. Burke* and Mr. Burke was still *Derek*. "Yes, please let him know I need to speak to him as soon as possible. As a matter of fact, I'll be going out later and can come by his office this afternoon."

"Yes, well, his schedule is quite full. Perhaps I can have him call when he's available?"

A week ago that would have stopped Sophia, but not today. As soon as she hung up with Danni, Sophia would text Derek's cell phone. When Sophia explained her insecurities during their reconnection, Derek promised only he would answer his text messages.

Sophia smiled into the phone and replied, "You can let him know I'll be in the area from one to three. Please call me with the best time to stop by."

"Yes, Mrs. Burke."

"Bye, Danni."

She hung up and sent the text. Seconds later her telephone buzzed. She swiped the screen:

"I ALWAYS HAVE TIME FOR YOU! CAN'T WAIT. GOT A WEB CONFERENCE AT 11:00 AM. BE DONE BY 12:30 PM, ANY TIME AFTER AND I'M ALL YOURS.—NOT TRUE, ALWAYS YOURS! LOVE YA BABY."

She grinned. Technology was wonderful! She wouldn't let Danni, or anyone else, make her feel insecure about her husband. After swallowing the final drops of Jasmine Tea, she stowed her tea cup in the dishwasher, wiped down the breakfast bar, and began contemplating the extent of art in the Provincetown studio. Her mind spun with displayed and stored artwork. Suddenly, the ring of her cell phone brought Sophia's thoughts back to Santa Clara. Looking at the illuminated screen she saw: *Derek's office*.

"Hello?"

“Hello, Mrs. Burke. This is Danni.”

“Yes?”

“It seems that a meeting has been rescheduled; Derek is available after 12:30 PM.”

Sophia’s smug expression couldn’t be contained. “Thank you, Danni. I look forward to seeing you and Derek then.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The line disconnected.

Glancing at the clock, Sophia realized she had three hours before she needed to be in Derek’s office. She decided to go to Palo Alto and talk to Mr. George in person. Maybe he called the wrong person. After all, who would buy three pieces of art without seeing them in person?



THE CIVIC CENTER in Palo Alto was in the heart of a cafe haven. Easing her car into an available space, she contemplated stopping at one of the many shops she passed. As in Santa Clara, parts of the city gave Sophia the wonderful *small town* feel.

The fog that so often encased the Silicon Valley was gone, dissipated into the shining blue sky. The buildings, trees, and mountains all glowed with the spring sun. As Sophia walked along the crowded sidewalk, inhaling the fragrant aromas emanating from the coffee shops and cafes and listening to the murmurs of pedestrians, she found herself bemused by the recent turn of events. This new life wasn’t as bad as she’d made it out to be. Derek *did* want her here.

The revelation or epiphany came in the knowledge that he wanted *her*—not some perfect wife. That support strengthened her, rejuvenating her confidence as she approached Mr. George.

Entering the small studio, she noticed the contrast in noise. The sounds from the busy street silenced as the glass doors closed to faint music, impeded only by a soft chime indicating a prospective customer. Sophia took in the white walls, indirect lighting, and lovely pieces of displayed art on canvas as well as three-dimensional pieces on podiums. At the beck and call of the protective bell, Mr. George appeared from the depths of the back rooms.

Since their initial meeting, they’d only spoken on the phone. Sophia wanted more information before she shipped her entire collection to this man.

“Oh, Mrs. Burke!” Mr. George exclaimed with perhaps too much glee.

“Mr. George, please call me Sophia.”

“Yes, Sophia. I’m so glad you came in today.” His bright smile threatened to rupture his ruddy cheeks as he positively swelled with excitement. “Did you receive my voicemail?”

So it was meant for me, she thought as she answered, “Yes, that’s why I’m here. Can we discuss this transaction?”

“Most certainly. I agree it’s unusual, but I want you to know, I’ve verified the funds, although I’m unable to confirm the identity of the buyer. It’s real. Someone offered 2.3 million dollars for all three works.”

Sophia’s bravado dissolved. She struggled for air. Her lungs collapsed, and her legs wobbled. “I’m sorry; did you just say 2.3 *million*? ”

“Oh, didn’t I mention the amount on the message? Yes, initially the buyer asked me the price. I told him I’d need to discuss it with the artist. He didn’t want to haggle, so he offered what he believed would be the top bid.” Mr. George’s grin enlarged even more, showing his too white, too perfect teeth, and the pink gums above. “I think he succeeded; however, I still told him I’d need to discuss it with you. Of course, the studio collects fifteen percent. The rest is yours.”

Before her legs gave out entirely, Sophia found an empty chair. Her mind subconsciously computed the math while her lips fought diligently to speak, “Mr. George, I’m going to talk to my husband, soon. I’ll be getting those works for you as soon as I can.” *One million, nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars!* “I just don’t know about my *entire* collection. I don’t want to close my Provincetown studio.”

The two of them discussed the possibilities and opportunities. They decided upon a sampling of her works on display in Palo Alto, with the entire collection available online. If this buyer or another wanted one of the works still in Provincetown and were willing to pay appropriately, Sophia would return to Massachusetts.

An hour later, Sophia entered Derek’s office. As her long gauze skirt brushed the tops of her feet and her high heeled sandals clicked the marble floor of his private reception area, Sophia chose to ignore Danni’s looks and innuendos. Her mood was too high to worry about the immaculately dressed PA or the plush surroundings. She casually walked past the pretty blonde without speaking and stepped into Derek’s regal office. Brazenly, she wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck and kissed his parted lips. Before she could introduce her tongue teasingly into his willing mouth, Sophia realized Danni followed her into Derek’s office.

They both turned to see her standing in the doorway. Before Derek had the chance to recover from his wife’s licentious greeting, Sophia took the liberty of dismissing his assistant, “That’ll be all, Danni. Please close the door on your way out.”

Danni looked questionably at Derek, who smiled uncontrollably, barely able to take his eyes away from the spirit filled woman who’d just fallen into his lap. Finally, he glanced toward his PA and confirmed Sophia’s wishes, “Yes, Danni, and please hold my calls.”

Danni's incredulous expression as she backed out of the office and closed the door added to Sophia's euphoria.

"My, my, Mrs. Burke." Derek managed between kisses. "To what do I owe this lascivious reception?"

She explained the unbelievable procurement of *three* of her oil paintings. Derek stared, open-mouthed when she disclosed the bid. Eventually, he found his voice, "Wow, Baby! I love your work, but I'm shocked at that amount of money."

Sophia pouted, more in jest than reality. "What? Don't you think they're worth it?"

He immediately pulled her against his chest and spun her around in his large leather chair. Sophia curled her legs into his lap and threw her head back, allowing her long hair to fan out and fall over his shoulder as his office became a blur. Leaning his mouth to her exposed neck he breathily whispered, "I think they're worth ten times that! But, if you're willing to part with them for a measly 2.3 million then I guess that's your prerogative." His lips connected her warm, sensitive neck, immediately instigating purrs from the depth of her throat.

When his lips slowed, Sophia pulled away and made eye contact. Looking suddenly serious, she went on, "There's a slight problem though. The buyer wants them yesterday. I need to fly to Provincetown and ship them back here. Mr. George also wants me to ship some other works to put on display and photograph the rest of my collection. It'll take me days to get them all packaged for mailing."

"That dinner for Shedis-tics is Friday. Will you be back by then?"

"I'm sorry. I don't think so." She looked passively into his soft brown eyes. "If you want me to wait, I can ask Mr. George to contact the buyer, have him contact the mystery person, and see if it can wait." Sophia watched through seductive lashes as Derek's expression changed before her eyes. She saw pride, disappointment, indecision, and resolution.

Eventually, his light brown eyes glimmered as his cheeks rose in conjunction with the tips of his lips. "You know, when Shedis-tics asked me to come out here early, they promised me some time off. How about, I travel with you? If we work together, we can package your art much faster. We might even make it back for this big dinner thing. I'm not sure why, but *they* really want me there."

Sophia stared at her husband in disbelief. "You'd really be willing to go with me?"

"Sure." He kissed her lips. "We can consider it a romantic getaway." Then, with a predatory grin, he added, "And maybe we can use one of those private jets they promised in my interview?"

"You know, Mr. Burke, I've always wanted to belong to an exclusive

club.”

“Really, Mrs. Burke, what club would that be?”

“I believe it’s called *The Mile High Club*.”

Derek closed his eyes and shook his head at the woman who’d swept him off his feet three years ago. Regaining his focus, he replied, “I’ll be sure to find the criteria regarding entry into that exclusive club. I’ve heard initiation can be strenuous. Perhaps you’re not up to the challenge?”

“Mr. Burke, you check out the specifications, and I’ll concentrate on my aptitude.”

He tried, unsuccessfully, to keep his grin concealed. “Aptitude isn’t an issue, Mrs. Burke. I believe the component in question is altitude.”

Sophia buried her lips into the crook of his neck. “You provide the altitude, I’ll provide the aptitude.”

“We can do a test run at sea level, just to be sure.”

Sophia amusingly shook her head. This was a battle of wits she didn’t want to win.

“Perhaps when I get home?” Derek didn’t wait for an answer from his wife as he picked up the phone, his voice no longer playful, “Danni, make the necessary arrangements. My wife and I need a Shedis-tics jet to fly to Provincetown, Massachusetts, leaving tomorrow and returning Thursday.” Sophia listened to his side of the conversation.

“That can be rescheduled. That, I can do from anywhere. Do you have any other concerns?” Sophia heard the agitation in his voice. She wondered if Danni recognized it too. Derek continued, “That is fine. Let me know the final arrangements. Thanks, Danni.” He hung up. Smirking ear-to-ear, he proposed, “The next order of business it to research the requirements for that club.”

Sophia squeezed his neck. “Thank you! We can work day and night to get back for that dinner.”

Derek caressed her waist as his eyes muted ever so slightly. “I think I know a better way to spend our nights.”

Sophia giggled. “Really? We can debate the pros and cons of each proposal.”

“No. I think I’m evoking the *helpful husband* card; you’ll have to agree to my proposal. No debating allowed.”

She didn’t argue. “I see your point; however, I’ll need at least an abstract of your ideas presented tonight at home.” Her eyes twinkled as she stood and smoothed her skirt.

“You drive a hard bargain,” Derek replied. “See you tonight.”

They kissed, and Sophia opened the door of his private office. Walking past Danni’s desk, her mind filled with Derek’s affection and playful banter. As she turned toward the impassive gaze of his private assistant, Sophia

summoned her sweetest voice and said, “Thanks, Danni. Bye.”
From gritted teeth, Danni replied, “You’re welcome.”



WALKING ALONG THE still crowded sidewalk, Sophia felt the sensation of floating. Had someone really offered 2.3 million, for her art work? It didn’t seem possible, and her conversation with Derek went in such an unexpected direction. She’d expected him to be supportive, yet reserved about missing the dinner. After all, how important could attendance at a fundraiser really be for a Fortune 500 company?

Despite his executive pretense, he was just a man, Sophia told herself; she needed to remember that. After all, she was just a woman. That makes the two of them compatible in a remarkable way.

Wanting to speak to Mr. George in person, Sophia drove back to Palo Alto. She wanted to let him know she and her husband would be packaging her work and getting it out west as soon as possible. Before facing *Mr. White Teeth*, Sophia decided to stop for a cup of tea and some lunch. Working her way into a bustling café on the same street as the Art Studio, Sophia scanned the crowd, looking for an empty seat.

The café hummed with the drone of conversations at almost every table. The aroma of freshly baked bread, rich coffee, and tangy spices made her empty stomach twist with anticipation. She stepped toward the counter to read the menu above, when a woman near the window with an electronic tablet, cup of coffee, and salad caught her attention. She looked vaguely familiar. Sophia didn’t want to stare. It just seemed strange that she’d know anyone eating in Palo Alto.



THE CHATTER OF the busy café surrounded Claire, soothing her aching temples. She mindlessly picked at her half-eaten salad while simultaneously skimming the latest news on her iPad. Relishing the temporary reprieve, she enjoyed one of her first free moments in the last week. She realized the irony of solitude in a crowd.

Last Saturday, her sister, Emily, and brother-in-law, John, arrived in San Francisco. Since then, she’s hardly had a minute alone. Wistfully, she thought about Harry; *they* hadn’t had a minute alone either. Actually, since San Diego, a week and a half ago, they’d only had one opportunity to utilize his procurement of resources from that drugstore.

Multitasking, Claire read each headline on her news feed; however, her thoughts were of her sister and brother-in-law. They'd asked to borrow her car and take a day trip into San Francisco. She was thankful for them to get some time to themselves.

The face-to-face reunion between the three of them washed away all doubt and hard feelings from their past. When Emily walked through the archway at San Francisco International Airport last Saturday and their matching green eyes met, they melted in a sobbing embrace. It was minutes before John was able to separate the two of them, before he got his own chance to hug Claire.

Being the ever accommodating hostess, Amber offered the Vandersols the use of her third bedroom. It meant refiling all of Claire's research, but it was worth it. For five days, Claire's sister and brother-in-law would be only a door away.

It also thrilled Claire that Emily and John got along so well with Amber and Harry. The ease of conversation and similar interests created a comfortable atmosphere, very dissimilar to the one while she'd been married to Tony.

After a few days, Amber began to talk business with John. The two shared similar philosophies and work ethics. What started as discussion over a few interesting Rawlings Industries dealings soon turned to SiJo Gaming strategies. While the two talked shop, Claire and Emily enjoyed one another's company. The sharing and camaraderie was wonderful.

Nevertheless, Claire couldn't understand why she continued to fight her aching head. She was being more open and honest with her family than she'd been in years, yet she had the strange feeling of teetering on the edge of a looming argument. Her emotions felt stretched. Truthfully, she had no idea what the impending argument entailed or why it was stressing her out.

Looking up from her iPad, Claire scanned the café. People moved about in every direction within the café and outside on the street. Sitting by the window, she watched people pass the glass. Occasionally, she'd have the sensation of being watched. It was both annoying and familiar. In a moment of self-reflection, Claire asked herself, *when in the past three years haven't I been watched? Or did it date back further than that?*

Later tonight, Claire, Emily, John, Harry, and Amber had reservations at a local restaurant. They were going to meet Amber's new friend. She met him a few weeks ago, at an out of town conference. He works for Google. Amber claimed it wasn't serious, but the gleam in her eyes as she mentions Keaton made Claire smile.

It also made the idea of telling Amber about her and Harry easier. Claire reasoned if Amber were also involved with someone, she'd take the news much better. Claire assumed Amber and her family had suspicions, but no one

asked, and Claire and Harry hadn't volunteered. For the most part, the two of them kept their new familiarity private.

Claire looked up again and saw Phil Roach standing in line behind a pretty blonde woman. Her nervousness quelled. That nagging feeling of being watched was easier to deal with when you know the voyeur, or as Claire liked to refer to Phil, her bodyguard.

She wondered how he handled losing her at the airport back in San Diego. Smiling to herself, Claire realized she sometimes too thought of parts of her life as a game, and unquestionably, she enjoyed controlling the metaphorical chess board.

Refocusing her attention to the electronic tablet, she read a headline on MSNBC about Megatone, a subsidiary of Sony. She read about concerned investors. There was a recent selling frenzy of stock, resulting in a plummet of share prices. Just since this morning, they'd fallen from \$77.12 to \$48.13. Claire glanced at her watch. It was almost 1:30 PM, 4:30PM on the East Coast. The stock market would close soon. It didn't sound good for Megatone.

The Associated Press article discussed personal wrongdoing on the part of the CEO. Concerned shareholders questioned ethics in the boardroom. The underlying insinuation was if an individual in a place of power made poor personal choices and investors rightfully or wrongly transferred that to business choices. Megatone and its board of directors maintained the company's position of strong integrity and principal. Currently, no evidence of corporate wrongdoing was evident, yet with up-to-the-minute news, the stock continued to dive.

Claire searched her stock market app; Rawlings Industries stock currently sat at \$168.78 per share. That was up \$2.04 since the same time yesterday. The company had been experiencing an upward spiral, despite the economy, for the last five years.



SOPHIA SEARCHED HER mind as she stood in line. Each time she snuck a glance at the brown haired woman, she analyzed her features. Finding a small table, Sophia sat sipping her tea and waiting for her salad. Suddenly, she realized it was the hair that was wrong. The woman that this woman resembled had lighter hair. Nonetheless, as an artist she dissected the woman's features. Sophia knew without a doubt, in every other way, the woman at the window was the same woman Sophia had stared at for days and weeks. Not only had Sophia stared at her, she'd painted her, wearing a beautiful Vera Wang wedding gown.

Suddenly, Sophia wondered if she should approach her. After all, she'd signed a confidentiality statement regarding that painting. While Sophia debated, the woman seemed lost in her tablet.

With her salad now secured, Sophia resolved to approach the woman at the window. Without warning, an attractive blonde haired man sat down opposite the woman. Sophia watched as the concern and concentration the woman had been devoting to the tablet dissolved. The blonde haired man appeared to take all of her attention. Sophia wondered, *could that be the man who hired me to paint the picture?* If it were, she should remain silent. Any breach of contract would require payment. Since she didn't have the 1.95 million from the sale of her paintings, yet talking to the woman she believed she'd once painted was no longer an option.

Without a doubt, the possibility of an encounter with this mystery woman seemed odd.

Sophia sat back, enjoyed her lunch, and watched the man and woman converse with a heartwarming sense of familiarity. She hoped they liked her work.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The strength of a family, like the strength of an army, is in its loyalty to each other.

—Mario Puzo

HIS SPARKLING BLUE eyes were right in front of Claire before she noticed Harry's presence. His rich voice rose above the clatter, "Your color looks much better. How are you feeling?"

Claire beamed toward the handsome face and turned her cheek, making it available for his friendly kiss. "I'm feeling much better, thank you. I'm not sure what my problem was this morning."

Harry took the seat opposite Claire.

She continued, "I love having Emily and John here. I don't know why I'm so on edge."

Harry leaned over and covered Claire's hand. "Your sister's thrilled to be here with you. Just enjoy the time. They're leaving Thursday."

Claire looked down toward her half-eaten salad. "I know." She looked up and her emerald eyes twinkled. "And on Friday, I get to see you in a tuxedo!"

Harry shook his head from side to side. "It's not too late. We can get someone else to go to that gala. It's nothing more than stuffed shirts acting all self-righteous about their donation."

Claire smiled smugly. "I know what to expect. Been there, done that. But I haven't seen you in a tux, and I want to do that. Besides, I promised Amber."

Harry picked a strawberry from Claire's uneaten salad and plopped it in his mouth. Immediately, she thought about his lips as they closed around the small red fruit. She tried to compartmentalize the thought smoldering deep within her. To aid in her diversion, Claire chose to speak, "I thought Amber said you hadn't been to any of these things with her. How do you know what to expect?"

"I haven't been, as a guest. I've worked security at events like this, as a

cop and for SiJo.” He reached for a sleek slice of orange.

Claire giggled. “Do you want the rest of my salad? I’m really not hungry.”

Bashfully, he replied, “No, you should eat it. I don’t think you had much breakfast. Besides...” His voice slowed. “...I was wondering...”

Looking up, Claire saw his expression change subtly, with a gleam to his eyes and a crease on his forehead. She couldn’t pin point the exact difference, but whatever it was, it caused that fire she’d felt moments ago to reignite. Trying to sound more seductive than shy, Claire leaned toward Harry, “Yes?” She allowed the word to be drawn out, asking a question, not answering one. “What were you wondering?”

“Well, you see I was at work, minding my own business, when I received this text.”

Claire raised her eyebrows. Yes, she’d sent a text. It wasn’t intended as a request.

He went on, “It said something like: *hope your day’s going well. Heading to Clancy’s on Hamilton for some lunch. Emily and John took my car for a road trip to San Francisco for the day.*”

“Yes, I believe I know about that text. I sent it, and I received one in return. It said something like: *have a good lunch.* Oh, there may have been a smiley face.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, yes, but then I started to think about you... all alone.”

“I’m a big girl.”

His eyes now held the same smoldering fire she’d been trying to conceal. “Yes, you are.” His fingers rubbed the top of her knuckles. “You see, I wasn’t sure how you would handle being all alone back at the condo. It seems like with your company, you haven’t been alone in a while.”

Claire’s grin caused her eyes to twinkle; the fire now glowed behind the green. “You’re very kind to leave work just to assist me. Maybe I do need some help.”

He seized her hand as she started to push her chair away from the table. “I’m here to assist, anyway I can.”

She leaned closer to his ear and whispered, “What would your boss say about you playing hooky?”

“My job definition is open to outside security.”

“Oh, so you’re providing me with security?” She smiled, looking back at Phil sitting with a sandwich and tea. “Should we tell Phil to take the afternoon off?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t think it’d do any good. Now, Ms. Nichols, what assistance do you need?”

Claire felt her cheeks flush. “Well, maybe from here to the condo, we can think of something?”



THE BRAZILIAN RESTAURANT offered amazing cuisine with impeccable service. Keaton, Amber's friend, held his own in their small crowd. He jumped right in as the conversation moved from person to person. Claire enjoyed hearing her brother-in-law banter jokingly with the others. Her shoulders relaxed, realizing the stress she used to feel whenever John and Tony were together was now gone. Maybe that old feeling was what had been bothering her.

Harry laughed as Emily questioned Claire's diet. "Why are you so hungry?"

Claire smiled... perhaps her afternoon activity had helped return her appetite. "I guess I really like this restaurant."

Emily couldn't see Harry's hand squeezing Claire's dress covered knee.

After the waiter cleared the dishes from their main course, Claire noticed glances, bemused smiles, and nods between Amber, John, and Emily. Her curiosity got the better of her. "What's going on?"

Amber raised her glass of wine, and said, "I'd like to propose a toast."

Claire obediently lifted her Chianti filled goblet and listened. "To Claire." The temperature of the room rose as Claire felt self-conscious at the sudden attention. Amber went on, "The past three months, well almost three, have changed mine and Harry's lives. We've not only found a good friend, but learned about life in the spotlight." Everyone giggled. She continued, "You've done more than that. You've brought others to our life. Thank you." Everyone sipped their wine. Amber continued, "Now, to John and Emily. When Claire spoke to me about your visit, I was thrilled to have you stay with us, for her. But as the two of you know, it's become more than that. Here is to a long relationship between us, and more importantly, between you, John, and SiJo Gaming." Again glasses went to lips.

Claire's glass didn't move. Her stomach lurched; she had to ask, "What does that mean?"

Emily leaned toward her sister; their shoulders touched. "It means we're moving to Palo Alto."

Claire glanced around the table still in disbelief. Amber continued, "John and I spoke about the possibility of him working for SiJo. I called an emergency meeting of the board yesterday, and they agreed. SiJo needs someone to spearhead our investment division. Diversifying is essential, and we're lacking. Claire, your brother-in-law is very intelligent, and I'll be forever grateful that we've met."

Stammering, Claire looked at the wide eyes around her. Turning to Harry, "You're on the board, y-you knew about this?" He nodded. Looking to Emily,

she asked, “Did you go to San Francisco today?”

Emily shook her head. “No, we spent the day at SiJo. John had paperwork to complete and people to meet.”

Claire placed her glass on the linen covered table and exhaled. “So, why’d everyone know about this but me?”

Staying quiet during this personal conversation, Keaton interjected, “I didn’t know.”

Claire smiled a weary smile. “Wow, I’m shocked.” Tears filled her eyes as she turned to Emily. “I never dreamt we’d be together again.”

Emily embraced Claire’s shoulders. “Honey, we’re thrilled. Are you all right with this?”

She nodded into Emily’s shoulder. The entire table laughed as Harry patted Claire’s back.

Emily whispered, “You’re so emotional. Are you sure you’re on board with this?”

Claire sat up and wiped her eyes with the napkin from her lap. “Shocked, that’s all.” Then as she beamed at everyone, she added, “It’s a very good shock! Thank you, Amber, and welcome, Emily and John. When are you moving?”

John answered, “We have some things to do in Indiana. A few legal hoops to jump through, but we’re hoping to be here by the first of July.”

Claire leaned back, rested her head against Harry’s shoulder, and settled into his comforting embrace. When she refocused on the table, she saw everyone’s questioning looks. *Oh, that’s right, they don’t know about us.* She thought as she glanced up at Harry and grinned. He shrugged and remained quiet. Claire followed his lead and allowed conversations to resume.



BACK AT THE condo Amber, John, Emily, Harry, and Claire relaxed in the kitchen before retiring for the night. Claire was coming to terms with her family living near. “Nearby. Not in the same condominium.” John smirked.

“I’ll be glad to start the search for your new place, if you’d like,” Claire offered.

Changing the subject, Amber announced, “Liz submitted your names to the National Center for Learning Disabilities Gala today.”

Claire didn’t know if the statement made her bristle due to the mention of Liz’s name or the apprehension regarding SiJo’s and Shedis-tics’ shared table. “I still don’t have a dress.”

“Oh, I’ll help you with that tomorrow, if you’d like,” Emily offered. Claire nodded enthusiastically. Yes, she’d like having her sister near.

Amber continued, “And Liz also gave me the names of everyone at your table.”

Both Claire and Harry stiffened.

Amber smiled and said, “I didn’t recognize any of them.”

Claire and Harry exhaled together.

Emily looked at the two of them. “You two are scaring me. You’re breathing in unison.”

Claire realized the cause of her recent headaches. She hadn’t really talked to Emily about Tony since she’d had dinner with him. That was the argument Claire had been anticipating. Emily knew she and Tony had a few discussions, but even on the phone, the subject caused tension. The only time Emily or John were open to discuss Tony was in the context of revenge.

The only person who knew Claire’s mixed emotions, the way she hated Tony and still loved him, the way she pitied him for the tragic loss of his parents at a young age and became exasperated by him every time he foiled her plans, was Courtney.

Harry knew about Claire’s *requests*, no *demands* of Tony, regarding her friends, and specifically John’s law license. Nevertheless, Claire found it difficult to discuss any amicable or enlightening interactions with Tony with the people around her. To them, Anthony Rawlings was a monster. Claire realized she *could* also see him that way. However, she knew it wasn’t the entire person, only one side of the multidimensional man.

With Claire lost in thought, Amber responded to Emily’s statement, “SiJo shares a table at the gala with a local company, Shedis-tics; it’s a subsidiary of Rawlings. In the past, Claire’s ex has attended this event. We were waiting to submit SiJo’s attendees until we knew if he were attending.”

Emily obviously stiffened. “So if he *were...*” She paused and looked at Claire. “...you wouldn’t go, would you?”

The familiar throbbing erupted behind Claire’s temples. She stood straighter, looked to Harry for reinforcement and responded to her sister, “We promised to attend, no matter what.”

Emily’s tone hardened. “Claire that’s ridiculous. Why would you willingly put yourself near *him*? ”

Harry squeezed Claire’s shoulder and spoke, “Your sister is a very tough lady. She can handle any confrontation.” He added with a sense of pride, “She has many times.”

Shit! Claire thought. *Emily doesn’t know how many times I’ve seen him.*

Emily stared directly at her sister. “What does he mean *many* times? I thought you just had dinner that one time.”

Claire didn’t like Emily’s tone. It was the I’m the older sister and you need to listen to me tone. Maybe their move to California wasn’t such a good idea. Claire answered, “Don’t worry about it. I’m good. *If* he were at the gala,

Harry and I'd still be there. Things change, I can handle myself. Besides, I wouldn't be alone. Harry' will be with me."

"When else have you seen him? Besides the dinner, I mean."

Amber and John remained silent, hanging on each word. Emily and Claire's stares intensified as each woman's emerald eyes bore into the other. While Claire contemplated her answer, Harry spoke. The soft tenor of his voice eased Claire's head, "Claire is quite capable—"

Emily interrupted, "I'm sorry, Harry. That's very nice of you to support my sister, but I doubt you know the complete history."

Claire found her voice, "Actually, Emily, he does."

Harry's calm voice released the tension from the room, like the air from a gently deflating balloon. Everyone relaxed as he spoke, "I'm sorry if I mentioned something that has overshadowed our wonderful evening." Refocusing the conversation, he added, "It's great that the two of you are moving here. John, Amber has high hopes for your assistance with SiJo, and the rest of us on the board are anxiously waiting to see if her hopes payoff."

John nodded. "It's a new job description for me, but I'm excited to jump in with both feet."

Amber smiled to her brother. She appreciated his ability to defuse the situation. Addressing John, Amber said, "You won't be alone. You'll have a staff to help with your research, and I don't expect miracles overnight." Looking to Harry, Amber added, "Neither does the board. Don't let Harry stress you too much."

As the conversation within the kitchen went to SiJo, Claire mouthed, "Thank you" to Harry.

He embraced her shoulder and whispered, "Sorry, I didn't know she didn't know."

Claire whispered, "It's okay. I'm not used to the protective, motherly attitude."

"Really?" He whispered with a grin. "I'd think *protective* would be old hat to you by now. After all, you've got me, and don't forget your bodyguard."

Stifling a yawn, Claire smiled and nodded into his shoulder.

"I think you'd better call it a night."

The others were talking about something; Claire had lost track of their conversation. She turned to Harry and raised her eyebrows. "Maybe I should have napped today?"

She watched his cheeks rise and his eyes do that half-open, half-closed thing. "Perhaps the next time you nap, you'd rather sleep."

Blushing, Claire whispered, "That's not what I said; maybe I should have slept, too."

Harry addressed the group, his voice once again loud enough to be heard

by all, "Good night everyone. I'm headed home."

"Good night," came from the crowd.

After the front door closed, Claire turned to a room of questioning eyes. She feigned her most innocent expression and asked, "What?" Without waiting for them to answer she added, "I'm tired too. See you all in the morning." Claire turned to walk to her room before anyone could propose the unspoken questions. Besides, she didn't want to revisit her conversation with Emily.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.

—Ambrose Redmoon

SOPHIA SETTLED INTO the plush, white leather seat and fastened her seat belt. The tranquility of the plane's luxurious cabin enveloped them. Just as Sophia's tired eyes began to close, she felt the warm reassuring presence of Derek's hand covering hers. Lifting her heavy lids, she glanced at her husband through her lashes. Despite the haze of sleepiness, Sophia saw his soft brown eyes intently watching her every move. The tender look filled her with affection. Smiling, she whispered, "Thank you so much, for all your help. I'd have never gotten so much done without you."

His chocolate eyes sparkled. His hand squeezed hers as he replied, "It was a fun break from routine."

Jokingly, she asked, "Oh, now I'm a break?"

"Mrs. Burke, you're the fun part. Coming back to Provincetown was the break. In such a short time, I've forgotten how quaint and beautiful the East Coast is so different from the West."

"They both have their charm," Sophia confessed, while rotating her hand so that their palms united. Instantly, their fingers intertwined. "The most important thing is being together."

A gentleman in pressed navy slacks and a starched white shirt appeared through the door of the airplane. "I apologize for the delay, Mr. and Mrs. Burke; we will be taking off in another five minutes."

Derek responded, "That sounds wonderful. Do you have all of Mrs. Burke's art stowed below?"

"Yes, the last crate was just secured."

"Thank you."

Once the gentleman was in the cockpit, Sophia whispered, "This is so

cool.”

Derek’s eyebrows rose. “I think it’s pretty neat, too.”

“I’m glad you thought of bringing the art back with us. I feel much better having those three pieces on board then handing them over to Fed Ex.”

“I don’t blame you. They’re kind of valuable.”

Sophia shook her head and closed her eyes. “I still can’t believe it, and the twenty other pieces should be in Palo Alto by next week.”

A second gentleman entered the plane; they heard the stairs move away and the outside door close. “Mr. and Mrs. Burke, we should arrive in Palo Alto in precisely six and a half hours. Once we reach altitude, there will be refreshments available.”

“Thank you,” Sophia and Derek said in unison as the second man in uniform nodded and joined the other in the cockpit.

Derek leaned toward his wife and whispered in her ear, “Alone again.” Pulling away and facing her, his eyes glistened.

“Why, Mr. Burke, whatever do you have in mind?”



AS DEREK AND SOPHIA drove toward Palo Alto behind the logistics van containing her art work, Derek asked, “Do you have a dress for tomorrow night?”

Sophia’s expression fell. “Oh no, I’ve been so excited about this sale and everything we had to do that I haven’t had a chance.” She glanced toward her husband. “I don’t expect this is an occasion for a dress I already own.”

“Well, apparently not. The other day, I learned we’re attending with my boss, Roger Cunningham, and his wife, but the big news is the CEO of our parent company is one of the featured speakers. His name is Rawlings—Anthony Rawlings. I haven’t met him, but I’ve listened to him on web conferences. Since we are one of his companies and he’ll be there, everyone is supposed to do it up right.”

“All right.” She said apprehensively. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m glad you didn’t get a dress yet.”

“You’re glad?” she asked surprised.

“Yes, if you’d gotten one before then it would’ve been on my meager salary, but now you’ll have your money from the sales, and you can get whatever your heart desires.”

Sophia pressed her lips together. “Your salary is hardly meager, and I have no idea how to shop with that kind of money. My heart’s desire is cotton gauze.”

“Would you like some help?”

She giggled. "Now you're a professional shopper?"

Laughing, he replied, "No, but I do know what I like to see you wear." He glanced toward his beautiful wife. "And what I enjoy you *not* wearing."

"Well, although easier to shop for, it sounds hardly appropriate for this gala. I do have a hair appointment tomorrow afternoon. Do you have your tuxedo?"

"I do, and I was serious about that help. I'm sure Danni—"

"No, thank you," Sophia interrupted.

"I was going to say, I'm sure Danni knows where you could go."

"And I'm sure that she'd be glad to tell me."

"I think you read too much into things. Do you want me to ask?"

"Well, since I'm in a pinch, fine, but don't call her now; it can wait until tomorrow."

Their car pulled into a parking space near the paneled van as Mr. George eagerly emerged from the front of his studio. Before they could enter, he spoke rapidly on the street, "Ms. Sophia, I'm so surprised you were able to get all your art work settled so quickly. Of course, it is wonderful. I heard from the buyer today. The mystery investor will be in town tomorrow night, and he wants the paintings delivered to his hotel."

Sophia nodded. "Well, can that be done?"

"Oh, yes!"

Listening to Mr. George's words, Sophia looked to Derek and her heart filled with pride as she saw his delighted expression. Finally, her manners returned. "Mr. George, this is my husband, Derek Burke."



THE NEXT DAY, sitting in the stylist's chair, Sophia mentally went through her wardrobe for the evening. The day had started early with her visiting numerous boutiques in Santa Clara, all at the recommendation of Derek's PA. When the visits yielded no bounty, Sophia debated more boutiques in Palo Alto versus big department stores in San Francisco. The department stores won. Time wasn't her friend; Sophia needed an evening gown, and she needed it yesterday, so while remembering Derek's comments, she tried to shop without looking at prices. It worked until she needed to pay.

Nevertheless, Sophia pushed on, determined to make Derek proud at this important gala. As the young man, with way too many piercings, pulled and pinned her long, blonde hair, she hoped that the Cameron Marc Valvo silk chiffon gown would fit the bill. It was the third dress she tried on at Saks and about the tenth for the day, yet from the moment she saw herself in the full length mirror, Sophia knew it was the one she liked.

The bright indigo color made her gray eyes shimmer with a blue hue. The plunging V neckline, together with the gathered bust and bodice accentuated her assets. In a nut shell, her breasts looked bigger and her waist looked smaller. The flowing silk chiffon outer layer reminded her of the gauzy skirts she liked to wear. Based on pure esthetics, it was the gown she wanted; she continued to avoid the dreaded price tag.

The sales associate was very helpful, obviously working on commission. She emphatically expressed Sophia's need for new shoes for this exquisite dress. A mirrored metallic leather sandal completed the ensemble. The heels were a little over four inches, but Sophia had experience in heels while wining and dining art investors.

She shivered at the memory of paying for her outfit. Her sensible self screamed—*it's an outfit, for one night!* However, her rarely-touched shopping side purred—but you look gorgeous in it, and Derek will be pleased with the result. Sophia quieted the internal debate by reasoning—I just made a ton of money on three paintings. I deserve this.

It was that voice that sang triumphantly as she signed the receipt for sixteen hundred dollars, give or take a few dollars. The hairstyle, facial, and professionally applied make-up added to the total of her day.

The man with the piercings slowly spun her. Peering into the large mirror, Sophia viewed his masterpiece from all angles. Completely outside of her comfort zone, Sophia eyed the woman in the mirror. Courageously, she nodded in approval. The make-up was next. Yes, Sophia told herself, *I can do this, for Derek.*



AMBER CLAPPED HER hands like a school girl when Harry entered her condominium. “You look so handsome all cleaned up; you should try it more often.”

His expression warned his sister to not get too excited about this. “Since you’re dating Keaton, you two should be attending this.”

“I really don’t like these kinds of things. I mean, the charity is worthy and all, but the hob-knobbing isn’t my thing.”

Harry eyed her suspiciously. “And what makes you think it’s mine?”

She grunted a stifled laugh. “I know it’s not, but it’s Claire’s. She’s good at this kind of thing. She’ll be good for SiJo.”

Harry walked around nervously, not sure if he should sit or stand. The tuxedo felt like a suit of armor.

“Will you relax? You look very handsome, and just wait until you see Claire’s—” The ringing of Amber’s cell phone interrupted her thought.

“Sorry, it’s Liz. It might be about your car. I have a SiJo driver coming to get you two in about twenty-five minutes.”

Harry could only hear Amber’s side of the conversation, “Yes, Liz, is everything all right? Really? When did you find this out? All right, well thank you for letting me know, however, I find it hard to believe this information wasn’t available sooner. No, no, it’s all right. Oh. What about the car? Okay then, twenty more minutes. Bye”.

He could tell by the change in his sister’s tone that something was amiss. “What’s that all about?”

Amber sighed. “Remember the confrontation in the kitchen between Claire and Emily?”

“How could I forget?”

“Well, do you think she meant what she said?”

“Who, Emily or Claire?”

“Either, but I’m more concerned about Claire.”

Harry thought for a moment and then replied, “Do I think she’d still go to this if Rawlings were present? Yes, but why are you asking?”

“It seems he isn’t sitting at your table *because* he’s one of the speakers. He’ll be sitting at the head table.”

Forgetting his tailored tuxedo, Harry sank onto the sofa. Subconsciously, he blew his blonde hair from his eyes; however, this evening, his normally unruly hair was gelled back. The only movement from his deep exhale was a subtle repositioning of his long lashes.

His tone was one not often heard, and Amber recognized her brother’s pinned up animosity. “You know damn well Liz knew about this, before now.”

“No, I don’t. She’s a good assistant. I can’t fire her because you two have history.”

“Then fire her because of shit like this. She’s trying to derail this evening, and it has nothing to do with SiJo; she’s doing it because it’s me with Claire.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Like hell I don’t!”



CLAIRE TOOK ONE last, long look at herself in the mirror. She did a slow spin, trying to see the whole package. The dress she’d chosen with Emily’s help was a Donna Karan emerald green gown. It created an hourglass figure, better, in Claire’s opinion, than the one hidden underneath. Its sweetheart neckline was perfect to showcase her grandmother’s necklace. The cap sleeves and crossover design on both the front and back fit perfectly. Of

course, she'd had it shortened. Now with the Jimmy Choo, sling back, peep-toed pumps complete with four and a half inch heels, the hem brushed the top of her toes, making her closer to Harry's six plus foot height. Turning ever so slowly, her gaze lingered on the cut-out back. It didn't go as low as her white sundress, but nonetheless, it exposed a large portion of skin. Smiling, Claire knew Harry would like that.

Peering closer at the woman in the mirror, she analyzed her hair. Claire decided to do it herself; she enjoyed the primping. It had been a long time since she'd dressed up this much. Yes, she agreed to do it for Amber, yet truth be told, she enjoyed the occasional formal occasion. It was part of her life with Tony she sometimes missed. When he first started taking her out, she thought of it like playing Dress-up—make-believe; then over time, it was a fun getaway from the confines of the estate. It never seemed to matter what was happening in their private lives as once the door of the limousine opened and they stepped in front of the cameras, they were the perfect couple. Those memories didn't feel jaded or feigned; instead, they felt warm and exciting.

After the first time they went to the symphony, Claire never feared the events. She quickly learned how to behave and very much enjoyed the *social Anthony*.

Pushing the memories of her and Tony away, she looked again at her hair. Piled high on the back of her head, there were ringlets falling down her exposed neck. She knew it was a style Tony liked, but hopefully, so would Harry, and thankfully, Tony wouldn't be there.

As she touched up her lipstick, she heard Harry and Amber's voices from down the hall. Frowning, Claire realized they didn't sound happy. She did one last scan, grabbed her purse, her light wrap, and headed for the living room. She wanted to know what was happening.

The sound of her heels upon the polished wood floor caused both Amber and Harry's heads to turn in her direction. Immediately, their quarrel ceased and smiles radiated from each face. Amber found her voice first, "Claire, you look beautiful! Thank you so much for doing this; Simon would be so proud."

Simon's name brought a wave of sadness. Claire had been in her room, thinking about Tony, about to go to this function with Harry, and now Amber mentioned Simon. Despite the melancholy sentiment, Claire feigned her brightest smile. Perhaps all formal attire came complete with a lovely mask. "Thank you, that's very sweet."

Before Amber could reply, Harry made his way to Claire's side and smiled lovingly down into her painted face. "I wish I were better at words; all I can think is Wow!"

Claire felt her cheeks blush. "That says a lot."

"Maybe this thing won't be so bad; after all, I'm going to have the most beautiful woman on my arm," Harry said as he lifted his elbow. Claire

obediently slid her petite hand into the crook of his arm.

"You look pretty amazing in that tuxedo, too," Claire purred, enjoying the adoration radiating from Harry's intensely blue eyes.

Amber beamed. "Seriously, thank you, both of you."

Claire's expression became more serious as she glanced between both Harry and Amber. "What were all the loud voices about?"

Harry straightened his stance; his shoulders filled the confines of his jacket. "Amber just received some news."

Defensively, Claire straightened her posture, too. "What's wrong? What kind of news?"

Amber spoke quickly. As if saying the words in rapid succession would lessen their sting. "Liz just called. While it's true Mr. Rawlings won't be at your table, she just learned he'll be there. He's one of the speakers."

Claire's mind once again went into reverse. She remembered many events, sitting at the head table, and listening to her husband speak. "So he'll be at the head table," she said matter-of-factly.

Amber and Harry both released their breaths.

Claire looked surprisingly at each face, trying to read their expressions. "Did you think I'd be upset? Did you think I'd say forget it?"

Amber moved forward and clutched Claire's hands. "I'd understand if you did. I mean it's one thing to plan for this, but it's another to have it thrown on you at the last minute."

Claire shrugged. "When it comes to Tony, I've learned the best way to be prepared is to expect everything and nothing. Do I wish he wasn't there? Sure, but I've sat at those head tables. You honestly can't see many faces in the crowd. At least I never did." She reached again for Harry's arm and looked up and into his eyes, filled with concern. "Are you still fine with this?"

He shrugged. "Why not? I'm the one with you on my arm."

Claire's face launched into its biggest grin. "Yes, *you* are."

Her subconscious brewed below the surface. Could she really do this? Could she be next to Harry with Tony in the same room? She said you don't see faces, but in the pit of her stomach she knew, at any moment during the evening, she would turn and see, even feel his dark penetrating stare.

Seeing the relieved expressions of her friends, Claire's resolve strengthened. Apparently, her mask skills were still very much intact.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

—William Shakespeare

“*J*” T’s GOOD TO SEE YOU SMILE.” HIS DEEP THROATY VOICE LIFTED HER SPIRITS, AS MUCH AS HIS FULLY MASCULINE BODY FILLED HER.

MARIE GRINNED AT THE FACE INCHES AWAY, FINDING HERSELF LOST IN THE SPARKLING INTENSITY OF HIS DARK MAHOGANY IRISES.



WATCHING THE BEAUTIFUL woman beneath him, Nathaniel enjoyed her soft, blissful expression as their bodies moved in rhythm. He could lose himself in the gray eyes that muted beneath her long lashes. Her soft moans of pleasure were like music to his ears as he escorted her through their own private world.

Her eyes parted as he felt her body relax under his weight. He wanted the warmth and closeness to go on forever. Her lips brushed his cheek as she spoke, “It feels good to smile. For the longest time, I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.”



NATHANIEL DIDN’T WANT Marie to go there. She’d spent too much time in darkness and despair. When she finally awoke from her fall, the realization that she’d missed Sharron’s passing was exacerbated by the knowledge that their baby did not survive.

He’d provided around the clock medical treatment. Her body healed, but her mind refused to mend. She slept most of the time, and when she ate, it

was only enough to pacify his pleas. On the rare occasion he could engage her in conversation, the hollow look in her eyes and continuous tears broke his heart. It was almost too much. They'd just buried the love of his life, and suddenly, he saw the same vacancy in the eyes of his one source of vitality.

Nathaniel spent his days at work, it was the only place he had control. He could read reports, purchase companies, sell them off like a fire sale, and rake in millions. His CFO, Jared Clawson, kept deals in motion, even when Nathaniel's mind was sidetracked by thoughts of the women, Sharron and Marie, who he wanted to please but continually failed.

There were deals, stocks and securities, which Samuel didn't understand. He didn't understand how each victory, each dollar, justified Nathaniel's existence. Sometimes, Nathaniel wondered why he was put on this earth if everything he touched and loved—died, and then he'd see profits as Clawson and Mathews reported another conquest. It filled him with the same resolve he felt as he provided Sharron with the life her father thought she'd never obtain. The satisfaction was superficial compared to the love he'd seen in her eyes or Marie's, but it was enough to sustain him, to propel him to the next deal.

From where Nathaniel sat, Samuel had a different perspective. He didn't know the desolate emptiness that comes with poverty and dejection. He'd always enjoyed his mother's coddling and his wife's health. How could he know what it felt like to have someone disapprove of you, as Sharron's father had him? At least Nathaniel ended the ridiculous notion of sending Marie away.

Oh, the look on his son's face when he learned Marie was pregnant. Samuel's overpowering animosity was respectfully quelled by the sadness of another loss. While Samuel may not have shared the sympathy, Amanda did. On the day Sharron went to heaven, accompanied by Nathaniel and Marie's unborn son, Amanda appreciated the great loss and wisely guided her husband through appropriate conduct.

Thank God, Anton was home. After witnessing the scene on the stairs, his condolences were the only ones Nathaniel would accept. After all, Anton was the one to save *her*. Nathaniel didn't know what he'd have done if he'd lost Marie too.

After months, Nathaniel eventually resorted to psychiatric therapy. Marie didn't realize she was being treated; she never would have permitted it. Her stubbornness, despite her despair, gave Nathaniel reason to smile. He hired a therapist to be her *nurse*. She encouraged—no pushed, Marie to perform daily activities: rise, shower, eat, walk, etc. During those activities, the *nurse* engaged Marie in conversation. In time, and with encouragement, Marie re-entered the world of the living.

She hadn't just endured the loss of their child and Sharron; Marie finally

spoke about her first child, a daughter, who she was forbidden to hold or touch. She only saw the baby girl for a few seconds.

When she learned she was pregnant at eighteen, she understandably detested the child. It was after all the result of non-consensual incest. Marie's uncle came to live with her family in an effort to recover from a drug problem. He was a dreamer of sorts, seeing life through music and art. He claimed that drugs intensified his creativity.

When his advances first began, Marie told her mother. Of course, her uncle denied the allegations. After questioning her brother, Marie's mother warned Marie to stop lying. A few months later, when Marie became pregnant, her uncle accused *her* of coming on to *him*. He had been incapacitated with cocaine and was helpless to resist her advances.

Marie's parents didn't entertain her stories to the contrary or debate her options. She was shipped away for the end of her senior year. The following summer, her baby was placed in a *good* home, with a competent caring mother.

Marie never returned home and hasn't spoken to any of her family in years. She needed a complete escape. After a few years of odd jobs, she contacted the attorney who handled the adoption. He knew of a possible position. Marie answered a request for *a personal assistant*.

Nathaniel heard her story before; however, when Marie shared it with her nurse, it helped her move through her continued grief. Nathaniel reveled in Marie's daily progress as she shed layers of dark veils. He couldn't be sure, but he hoped that the therapy, combined with his support, helped his new love learn to live again.

He was unable to help Sharron, and he couldn't bring her back, so in order to resurrect Marie, no holds were barred. Of course, Nathaniel Rawls had a tendency to show support in unusual ways. He wanted Marie to know there was nothing he wouldn't do to aid her recovery. At the same time, he had investigators working to find her daughter. The source of her past anguish was easily located.

Marie's father owned a small business in upstate New York, a car dealership. Nathaniel wondered if an unwed daughter were truly such a great disgrace in 1981 or if it were the allegations of incest that her family feared. As he devised the demise of the family-owned business, Nathaniel brought the greatest fear of Marie's father's to reality. The day Nathaniel showed Marie the paperwork, in fact giving her rights to the now defunct car dealership, he wasn't sure how she would react.



MARIE COULDN'T BELIEVE Nathaniel's gift. Strolling the paved stones through the estate's gardens, she listened to his deep, rich voice and inhaled the spicy scent of autumn. The summer flowers were sleeping, replaced with orange and yellow mums. The various shades of green in the distance were transforming to vibrant shades of red and brown. It seemed as though the nearby hillsides were ablaze with flames, leaving waste in their wake.

Although the world was settling in for the slumber of winter, Marie felt herself coming back to life, enjoying springtime rejuvenation in the middle of autumn. The journey was draining, yet with each accomplishment, she regained strength. Knowing it was the isolating depression that drained her energy, she worked daily to distance herself from the darkness, filling herself with increased vitality.

Marie never thought of herself as vengeful, but every evening as she was forced to eat at the same table as Samuel Rawls, her skin crawled and thoughts of revenge surfaced from recesses unknown. It was the one injustice she willed herself to endure—for Nathaniel. He wanted his *family* together.

In time, she came to realize the unease she felt during the strained performances of cohesiveness made Samuel more uncomfortable, especially each time she addressed him or his wife by their first name. At times, Marie would do it repeatedly, just to watch the muscles in Samuel's neck tighten. His unease soothed her. It seemed as though she did have a bitter, revengeful side she'd never explored. Surprisingly, each opportunity to inflict discomfort on Samuel or Amanda fueled her rejuvenation as much as Nathaniel's love and support.

Now, as she held the ownership papers to a closed, bankrupted car dealership, Marie stood dumbfounded. "I don't know what to say. Why did you do this?"

His eyes intensified, the blackness overtook the already dark brown. "Because, they hurt you, and I want them to share in your pain." He pulled her closer. "I would make them take all of it, if I could."

There'd been a time she would have argued his reasoning. No longer. She'd experienced pain and loss. She'd been hurt, and amazingly this feeling of revenge somehow filled places within her soul she'd assumed destined for emptiness. Her smile unknowingly appeared sinister. It was a new sensation; Marie couldn't control the unfamiliar feeling or its outward manifestation. She could, however, thank the man who obviously welded unknown resources to present this unexpected treasure.

Marie gripped the papers and flung her arms around Nathaniel's neck. She stretched out her toes and lifted her face higher. As he always did, he leaned down to accommodate. "Thank you! No one has ever done anything like this for me." She kissed his lips as her body pressed against his.

Gently, he pushed her away, wanting to see her face as he delivered his

final gift. "That took care of your parents. Are you not curious about your uncle?" The mention of the man brought a shadow of sadness across her gray eyes. "Marie, I don't intend to upset you. I thought you should know, he had a relapse with cocaine."

"Is he... dead?"

Nathaniel grinned. His expression wasn't joyful, it was more sinister—like nothing she'd ever seen. If it had been directed at her, instead of a reflection of others, she might be afraid, but his expressions couldn't scare her. She trusted him with her whole life. "I considered that," he said, "but decided death was too easy. He's serving a sentence for robbery and attempted murder. The police report suggests he performed those acts in an attempt to score more money for drugs."

Marie considered the implications and searched Nathaniel's eyes for clues.

With a smirk, he added, "Unfortunately, he drew the short straw of penitentiaries. His facility is under federal investigation for a highly unusual number of inmate murders. I believe his imprisonment will be difficult. It's doubtful he'll reach the end of his sentence."

She absorbed his words. The last she'd heard of her uncle, he was clean. "But I thought I heard..."

"Your parent's recent financial woes must have contributed to his downward slide."

She once again molded into his warm embrace. The autumn breeze held a hint of the impending winter, and the coolness brought clarity to everything. She'd just received the gift of revenge—of vengeance—as redemption for the wrongs done unto her. Nathaniel had done all he could to restore her world to its proper place. "Thank you, Nathaniel, I love you."

"I love you, too. I'm still looking for your daughter, but so far, I'm hitting dead ends."

Marie placed her head against his sturdy chest. Her words were strong and filled with conviction, "I'd like you to stop looking."

He didn't pull her away. Instead, he held her tight, sensing the strength in her voice wouldn't be reflected on her face. "Are you sure? Money can open closed files. It just takes time."

She looked up at him, her strong-willed stance now moistened with tears. "I'm sure."

He didn't ask for further explanation. If she wanted to offer, he'd listen. Although he wanted Marie to see her daughter, Nathaniel Rawls decided *this* wasn't his call. He would continue the investigation, but he wouldn't supply her with the information until she was ready.

Marie wanted to ask about one last perpetrator. She wanted to ask what punishment Samuel would receive, but she didn't. Perhaps that was her battle

to fight. Each dinner, each time she asked him to pass the salt, or stepped on the grand staircase, she shot a shell into his camp. As long as she had Nathaniel's protection, her defenses were impenetrable.

Nathaniel returned to his home office, whereas Marie remained in his suite. She hadn't stayed upstairs since recovering from her accident. He expected it to feel wrong, having her in the suite he'd shared with Sharron, but it didn't. Sharron hadn't been there for years. During her absence, his grand master bedroom suite became nothing more than a showroom for opulence, an empty space occupied by the best of everything, yet void of anything.

Now, when he entered the suite and found signs of cohabitation, he felt it was once again a *home*, a *refuge*. Sometimes, he'd find Marie resting on the sofa in front of the large fireplace. With warmer weather she might be enjoying a rest on the adjacent terrace. The scent of vanilla and flowers lofted from his attached bathroom as lotions, gels, and perfumes filled his countertops and Sharron's dressing table. His closet glowed with colors, dresses, and filmy blouses, where for so long he'd only seen suits in shades of gray and black. He smiled with each welcomed intrusion.

Nathaniel eventually planned to make their comfortable arrangement something more permanent and legal. He knew Samuel would protest, but *wasn't that always the case?* Nathaniel hoped he could count on Anton's support. His grandson provided it on numerous occasions since the *accident* on the stairs. What he truly didn't know and what terrified Nathaniel was Marie's response to his request. It was no secret she wanted children, but he wasn't exactly a spring chicken. Yes, everything worked. Her recent pregnancy proved his swimmers still swam, but would she want to intentionally plan a family with a man three times her age?

He wanted to prove she was more than a caring woman, nursing a sad old man back to life. She deserved to know how special she was to him. He wanted to wine and dine her and bestow the proper title of Mrs. Rawls upon her; however, as close as they'd become, they rarely went out into public. Sharron hadn't been gone that long, yet. They had time.

Nathaniel had a trip scheduled to Europe, more specifically Geneva, soon, and he planned to ask Marie to accompany him. Maybe he'd even share his Switzerland investments with her. He hadn't shared those with anyone. There was something about starting with nothing that made a man want a reserve, a card in the hole, so to speak.

Focusing back on his desk, Nathaniel read Clawson's latest report. There were two struggling companies in Ohio that looked ripe for the picking. There were also multiple possibilities in Illinois, but that was a trickier battle ground. Sometimes, greasing hands cost more than actual purchases.

As he shuffled the reports, a manila folder caught his attention. It was the

information Samuel presented to him while Marie struggled to survive the *accident*. Nathaniel thought his son's timing couldn't have been worse. Even if he had learned anything from Samuel's investigation, even if it changed his feelings, Nathaniel wouldn't have done as Samuel wanted. There was no way he would have kicked Marie out of his home while she was recovering from internal injuries.

Nathaniel shook his head. Although, he continued to hope for Samuel's business prowess—hope couldn't continue to dawn eternal. His poor judgment proved his inability. Perhaps there was hope for Anton—or children yet to come.

Nathaniel stuffed Samuel's report in his side private file drawer, under C for *Catherine Marie*. After all, with any hope her last name would soon change to Rawls.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men.

—Robert Burns

*T*HE TRAFFIC SLOWED as the SiJo limousine moved in short bursts. Claire recognized the sensation, and after an almost hour long ride, she was finally nearing her destination. Even though it had been a long time since she'd rode in the back of a limousine, her opinion hadn't changed, she liked driving better. It gave her more of a sense of location and direction.

Through the tinted windows, she saw multitudes of people gathered behind velvet ropes. Looking around the vast cabin of the car, she wished desperately for Harry. *How had their evening changed so dramatically, so fast?* Claire tried to convince herself it was all coincidence, but a voice in the back of her head warned otherwise.

Just before the SiJo car arrived to take them to the gala, Amber and Harry's phones rang. The urgent message to both of them was the same: the computer systems at SiJo Gaming had been hacked. It wasn't just their current operations, but also prospective projects and technology. One of their designers recently created a unique application, which theoretically threatened cell phone gaming forever—the next Angry Birds. That new creation was in jeopardy. To make it worse, clients' billing information had been assessed: a potentially huge public relations problem for SiJo. If they couldn't keep billing information secure, then no one would ever buy their games.

Fortunately, the breach was discovered virtually minutes after it occurred. Unfortunately, it doesn't take long in *computer terms* to steal millions of gigs of information. Everyone was needed back at SiJo immediately to work on the problem; every creator, forensic specialist, computer specialist—everyone.

As the car inched forward, Claire thought dreamily about Harry in his

tuxedo with his hair gelled into place. Despite his unease in such an outfit, he looked wonderful, sexy, and handsome. Mostly he looked different. A very good different.

It was painful to watch his expression. Claire could immediately tell he was torn. He wanted to go to SiJo; his skill set was needed. It's his sister's company, and he'd do anything to protect it. That being said, Claire knew he also wanted to be with her.

After Amber hung up, she looked at both of them and said, "I can't believe this! Harry, if you want to make an appearance at the gala and then come to SiJo, I'd understand. Lee's at SiJo, but we need you sooner rather than later."

It would have been easier for Claire to assure Amber and Harry of her ability to attend the gala alone if they hadn't just learned of Tony's attendance. Truly, Claire didn't mind going alone, although she hated the idea of being unescorted and seeing some gorgeous model on Tony's arm. The idea rekindled ideas about him attending this gala in 2010, while she was held captive in his house.

Thoughts start out as single idea: *attend the gala alone*, and soon stream together: Tony with gorgeous companion, and become a river flowing uncontrollably: he went out with other women while I was there; what did he do with those women? Claire knew what he did with her, many late nights when he'd return home. If she hadn't had the medical examination in prison, these thoughts surely would've propelled her straight to the doctor checking for every possible disease known to man.

Before the figurative damn broke and her thoughts became too difficult to contain, Claire secured her formal mask and spoke earnestly to her friends, "I'll be fine. You two do whatever needs to be done. SiJo has enough problems right now without wasting two dinners at this gala."

Amber responded, "The tickets are part of the donation. If you don't want to go alone, I'd understand."

Claire kissed Harry's cheek and spoke sincerely, "You two go do what you need to do. I'll do the one thing I'm good at doing. I'll hob-knob for SiJo, and I'll do my best to make you two and Simon proud. Now go!"

Harry's angst quickly turned to relief. He kissed Claire. Not on the cheek, as she'd done, but a kiss full of emotion. His lips took hers as his arms embraced her. She sensed thankfulness at her understanding and concern for her evening alone. Thankfully, Amber turned away and pretended not to notice. His voice was strong, "You're amazing. If you need me, call and I'll get there as soon as possible."

"I'm a big girl. I'll see you here later tonight."

Amber looked at her phone. Her words were staccato, "Claire, the car is here."

Harry volunteered, “I’ll walk her to the car and meet you in the basement garage.”



Now, ALONE IN the limousine, through the windows, Claire watched the people in the car before hers; they were waving to the people behind the velvet ropes. Claire remembered Harry’s penetrating blue eyes as he helped her into the SiJo car. His voice was slow and steady, “I know you’re a big girl, but if you have any problems with Mr. Rawlings, call me immediately. I hate not being with you. You should know every man there will want to be your escort. You’re undoubtedly the most beautiful, brave, and intelligent woman I know.”

His words warmed her soul. She smiled bashfully as he closed the door to the SiJo car.

That same car now stopped. While Claire waited for the driver, or an attendant, to open her door, she secured her mask. As the door opened, the voices from behind the rope came into range.

“Ms. Nichols, why are you representing SiJo Gaming?”

“Ms. Nichols, how does it feel to be out of prison?”

She followed Tony’s instructions, from so long ago at the Symphony, *Do not act surprised or shocked. Just flash a beautiful smile and radiate confidence.* Claire smiled, nodded politely to the crowd, and gracefully made her way into the Saint Regis Hotel.

Once through the front door, a woman with an ear piece and an electronic tablet approached. Claire noticed multiple people fitting that description, all directing attendants through a set of double doors.

“Welcome to The Saint Regis! May I have your name and the name of the company you’re representing?”

“Claire Nichols, SiJo Gaming.”

“Yes, Ms. Nichols, I see your name. There is also a Mr. Harrison Baldwin registered. Is he with you this evening?”

“No, he was unfortunately detained. I’ll be representing SiJo Gaming alone.”

“I see. If you could please follow the others through the double doors ahead and to your left, you will receive further instructions. Thank you for joining us this evening.”

Claire answered affirmatively and followed the others through the double doors. Once inside, she found herself in a large room. Men in black tuxedos and women in beautiful gowns stood in groupings, while waiters and waitresses mingled about with trays. Some of the trays contained flutes of

champagne, while others held hors d'oeuvres. Claire's stomach twisted as whiffs of caviar, smoked salmon, and pâtés lofted through the air. She'd meant to eat something before she left the condo; however, the glitches at SiJo changed her plans.

Before Claire could think more about food, a young man explained, "In about twenty minutes, you'll need to step to those doors. At that time, you'll be announced as you enter the gala. Do you have any questions?"

Claire said she didn't. Once again, she was standing alone in a sea of people. Gathering her inner socialness, Claire scanned the room. As she looked from couple to couple, a nice older man and woman approached, "Hello, Ms. Nichols?"

"Yes."

"My name is Roger Cunningham, and this is my wife, Hilary."

Claire extended her hand as Mr. Cunningham continued, "We're from Shedis-tics. I believe we'll be sharing a table."

Claire filled with immediate relief. It was so nice to talk to someone whom she would be seeing throughout the night. "Yes, I believe we are. It's nice to meet you."

The three spoke for a few minutes when another woman with an earpiece politely interrupted, "Excuse me, Ms. Nichols?"

Claire responded, "Yes, I'm Ms. Nichols."

"If you would please follow me, your presence is requested in another room."

Claire nodded to the Cunninghams and followed the woman leading her away from the doors she'd been told to exit. When they were on the fringe of the reception room, Claire asked, "Excuse me, everyone else is going another direction. What did you mean, my presence is requested?"

The young woman answered, "If you'll follow me, I'm sure you'll understand."

The voice Claire heard earlier, the one warning her about the coincidence of SiJo's recent problems, began speaking with an alarming tone.



AFTER ALMOST THIRTY minutes in the *waiting room*, Sophia wasn't sure what else to call it, she and Derek were escorted to the main ballroom. The large double doors opened to a great beautiful vista. The outside was suddenly in, highlighted by a flowing fountain under a glass atrium ceiling. It reminded Sophia of fountains she'd seen in Italy, complete with glittering sculptures, a continual shower, and an enormous pool.

Everywhere she looked, Sophia saw finely-dressed people in tuxedos and

gowns moving gracefully from place to place. The hum of polite chatter and soft music filtered through the air as their names were announced: Mr. and Mrs. Derek Burke of Shedis-tics Incorporated. Holding tight to her husband's elbow, they made their way to the floor. Immediately, a gentleman approached and introduced himself and his wife.

"Derek, this is my wife Hilary."

Derek shook her hand and introduced Sophia. "I'm pleased to meet you, Hilary. This is my wife Sophia. Sophia, this is my boss Roger Cunningham and his wife Hilary."

As the men began to discuss the economy and expectations for the future, Hilary Cunningham pulled Sophia under her wing. Her motherly voice offered more advice than Sophia wanted, "My dear, you look beautiful. I'm so glad to meet you. Roger speaks very highly of Derek. They're all so happy he agreed to come to Shedis-tics. How do you like Santa Clara? How do you like San Francisco? How about the beach, do you like the beach? Have you two had a chance to drive into the mountains? They are simply beautiful this time of year..."

Although she was trying with all her might, Sophia couldn't keep up with Hilary's questions. *It was as if the woman never paused to breathe. How was she expected to answer?*

Finally, Mrs. Cunningham moved them away from their husbands. "Let me introduce you to some of the other wives. Listening to the men talk shop all night is a bit tiresome."

Sophia looked to Derek who appeared completely engrossed in Mr. Cunningham's words. Unwittingly, Sophia allowed herself to be directed around the room. Hilary knew many of the people. After introductions and polite chats, they would move away and Hilary would whisper sordid tidbits of information about their private lives. Sophia wondered how she possibly knew so much information.

Making their way back toward their husbands, Hilary whispered, "I'm surprised Mr. Rawlings isn't here yet. I don't think I've ever made it to a function before him. He has a real thing for punctuality, or so Roger says."

"Do you know him?" Sophia asked, suddenly interested in some of Mrs. Cunningham's gossip.

"Not really. We've been introduced a few times. He doesn't usually make it to our area. I think Shedis-tics is pretty small on his food chain. That's why Roger is so excited he'll be here tonight."

"Is he married?" Sophia asked.

Hilary's expression was both surprised and amused. "Oh come on, surely you know his story."

Embarrassed by her lack of knowledge, Sophia apologized, "I'm sorry, I really don't follow things like that. Why, should I?"

At that moment, a waitress passed by with a tray filled with glasses of champagne. Hilary reached for two glasses, handed one to Sophia and said, “Well, let me fill you in!”



WITH INCREASED CONCERN and anxiety, Claire followed the woman away from the crowds to an elevator. When the doors opened and the woman entered, Claire decided she'd followed long enough.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to get into this elevator without knowing where I’m going.”

It was at that moment she heard determined footsteps approaching from the direction they’d just traveled. Claire turned toward the source and saw a face from her past. The man approached at a steady pace, dressed in a very nice suit.

Claire’s mind wheeled with memories. This man had never shown her anything but kindness, except perhaps at their last meeting. *Had he purposely left the key cabinet to the cars at Tony’s estate open? Was he part of Tony’s plan? Did his actions lead to her eventual incarceration?* Although these questions and many more formed in her head, her lips pressed together in a straight line. This wasn’t the time or place to speak her distress. The only outward signs were the sparks blazing from her eyes toward Tony’s driver.

“Ms. Claire, Mr. Rawlings is upstairs and would like to see you.”

“Eric.” She managed through clenched jaws.

“Yes, now, if you’ll please enter the elevator, I’ll gladly escort you to him.” He looked at the woman from the gala. “Thank you, I’ll take Ms. Nichols from here.”

The woman didn’t bother to look back toward Claire for confirmation. She nodded and walked away toward the gala.

While hushed, Claire’s voice sounded strong and resilient, “Eric, please tell Mr. Rawlings I no longer make command performances. If he wants to see me then he can come to me.”

Seizing her elbow, Eric directed her toward the still open elevator. His voice was low, yet determined, “Ms. Claire, there are many people about. Perhaps this time you could make an exception?”

Surprised by his assertiveness and stunned by his touch, her feet moved obediently into the elevator. When the doors closed, she pulled her elbow free from his grasp and felt the floor move upward.

This wasn’t an elevator used by guests, but an industrial lift, presumably used by the staff of the St. Regis. The stainless steel walls marred with fingerprints and the floor covered by a large black mat resembled the service

elevator at Claire's condominium.

As the doors opened, Eric gallantly turned and asked, "Ms. Nichols, may I assist you?"

She wondered if that meant: Do you want me to forcibly remove you from this elevator?

Her stoic expression remained while her words were clipped, "Thank you, I believe I'm capable of walking on my own." She wasn't happy with this man, yet she knew Eric was only doing what everyone did around Anthony Rawlings—following orders. Exiting the elevator, they stepped into a brightly lit, empty hallway. The sound of her heels upon the concrete floor echoed through the passage. "I'll follow you as you seem to know where we're going."

Eric nodded. "Yes, ma'am, this way please."

What choice did she have? The elevator was now closed, and the sensor near the doors indicated a key was required to regain entry. The hallway had few options for escape. The few doors they passed held name plates indicating the contents beyond: heating/AC, cleaning supplies, and personal supplies. The destination at the end of the passage was not labeled. Eric opened the door and held it for Claire to pass. She did, each step becoming more difficult to endure. More than anything, she wanted to call Harry, but he was busy with problems at SiJo. She squared her shoulders and entered an elegant posh foyer. Claire knew who she'd find at the end of this journey. Before her were two options, an elevator and a set of double doors. This elevator was adorned with golden mirrored doors.

Eric placed a card below an electronic reader near the double doors, and she heard tumblers shift. Anthony Rawlings' driver, and right hand man, opened one of the grand doors. Claire obediently entered the threshold of the luxurious penthouse atop the San Francisco St. Regis Hotel. Although every fiber within her body told her to run for the gold elevator, Claire's Jimmy Choo four and a half inch heeled Jimmy Choos moved forward. She heard the click of each step as she followed Eric through the foyer, complete with a winding staircase, toward a beautiful sitting area. Beyond the elaborately furnished room, with multiple sofas, tables and entries to other rooms were windows covering the wall from the polished floor to the ceiling, at least fifteen feet above.

Claire saw the back of *his* head, hair gelled perfectly in place and his customary Armani tuxedo slacks and perfectly pressed white silk shirt. She couldn't remember how many he owned; however, she knew it was many. Tony's large form appeared dwarfed against the height of the glass pane. Beyond him, the sky filled with color, creating a magnificent vista as an amazing sunset glistened in the western sky, with the Golden Gate Bridge in the foreground.

The anger growing within her chest stilled as she heard his voice. Uncharacteristic anger emanated. He was yelling at some poor soul on the phone he held tightly in his right hand. With his left hand, he twisted a cord. It was the tie holding back the drapes at the edge of the amazing view.

“She’s not to be there, and only he is to remain.” “No, that isn’t acceptable. This has been the plan forever. If you aren’t capable, I’ll find someone who is.” He turned, hearing Eric and Claire enter. His eyes smoldered. Despite the dark blackness of his irises, fire flashed from a deep untouchable abyss. Claire searched his expression for a sign of assurance, finding none; she shivered knowing the depths of this man’s temper.

The words of protest she’d silently practiced since entering the elevator faded into Tony’s cloud of rage. With all her soul, Claire prayed she wasn’t the one meant to disappear or the reason for his fury.

“Twenty minutes—I’ll be waiting.” He disconnected his phone and slid it into the pocket of his Armani slacks. “Thank you, Eric. Ms. Claire will remain with me. Please take care of our other issue. I’m late for the benefit, and that’s very upsetting to me.”

“Yes, Mr. Rawlings. Twenty minutes?”

“Not a second more.”

Eric nodded as he backed toward the door. “Yes, Sir.” Before Claire could blink, Eric disappeared down the hall, and she heard the grand double doors close.

Claire gripped her purse and nervously ran her fingers over the silk of the wrap, now lying over her arm. Eric was a source of uneasiness, yet his departure was more unnerving. She stood anxiously before her ex-husband. Straightening her neck, she tried for a formidable, yet respectful voice. “Tony, please explain to—”

He didn’t allow her to finish her sentence. Instantly, his chest touched hers, and her chin rose with the direction of his forceful grasp. His warm breath hit her face as his harsh words flowed, “I have no intention of being at a social gathering, or anywhere else, with you and another man. You’re a fool to consider such a thing.”

The bile bubbling from her stomach caused her knees to tremble, yet her voice remained resilient. “I agreed to attend this gala, weeks ago, and I didn’t learn of your attendance until this evening.”

His grip increased as he held her emerald eyes toward his pits of darkness. “Then your informant is as incompetent as the firewall at SiJo.”

Though her stance remained still, her eyes ignited, “What did you do?”

“Nothing—and as long as your friends don’t have an overwhelming sense of conscious requiring them to inform the public of their near breach, no harm will come.”

Claire remained motionless. Her well trained protocol wouldn’t allow her

to pull away from his hold. Nevertheless, her eyes screamed at his manipulation. “Why?”

As his hand released her face, Claire flexed her neck and shoulders. Taking a step back, Claire assessed the man before her. He was still very agitated; however, she needed to know his reasoning. “Why did you do this?”

“I told you Claire. I know your weakness; it’s your concern for others. God only knows why, but for some reason, Amber McCoy has been kind to you. Her company won’t be harmed.” He paused and walked to the window. The sky of orange and red was now darkening, and the land beyond the bridge was speckled with lights as the bridge glowed with artificial illumination. Turning on his heels, Tony’s gaze devoured her, as his commanding voice filled the tall room, “If you follow my rules.”

Claire’s heart sunk, her knees wobbled, and her stomach twisted. This was her nightmare, her greatest fear. She’d convinced herself she was able to maintain the upper hand. Her inner voice tried to warn her, but Claire hadn’t listened, and now it was too late. Suddenly, his expression changed.

“Are you not feeling well? You’re pale.” Was there concern in the voice that only seconds ago was harsh and authoritative?

“I need to sit down.”

Tony wrapped his arm around Claire’s waist and directed her toward a soft leather loveseat. Her knees buckled, and a sudden wave of perspiration covered her skin as she settled against the cool plush hide. Claire lowered her head to her knees and tried to inhale. She saw Tony’s shiny loafers move away and return, then his voice reassuringly offered assistance, “Here’s some water, drink.”

Claire shook her head against the green material of her Donna Karen gown. The feeling of queasiness wouldn’t fade, and she feared if she drank the water she’d be ill.

“Dinner will be starting downstairs in about an hour. Have you eaten recently?”

Feeling the chill that comes after the rush of heat, Claire looked up into the softening eyes. “No. I haven’t,” her voice quivered, revealing the trembling within her body. She wasn’t sure if the cause of her trembling was the recent onset of nausea or Tony. “I don’t want to go down there with you.” She sat straighter, trying desperately for strength. “I’m here for SiJo, for Amber and Simon.”

Tony’s gaze lingered, taking in her still, unusually pale complexion. Nonetheless, his voice hardened as his posture straightened, “Then you’ll do as I say.”

Her resolve was spent. She once again lowered her head to her lap and asked the question she’d proposed so many times, “What do you want me to do?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Entrepreneurs are simply those who understand that there is little difference between obstacle and opportunity and are able to turn both to their advantage.

—Niccolo Machiavelli

SOPHIA LISTENED AS Hilary described Anthony Rawlings' marriage to Claire Nichols. Hilary's excitement continued to build as she spoke about both of them being present at this function. Sophia didn't need to feign interest; this was better than a TV show. She couldn't believe this kind of intrigue existed in real life. She anxiously awaited Claire Nichols' presence at their table. According to Mrs. Cunningham, Ms. Nichols was a surprisingly attractive and friendly woman.

Occupied with sipping her champagne, tuning out the crowd, and listening to Hilary's words, Sophia almost missed the vibrating sensation coming from her handbag. Excusing herself from the conversation, Sophia looked at her phone and read the screen: Mr. George 3 missed calls. Walking tentatively from the ballroom into the quiet hall, she returned his call, receiving an answer on the first ring.

“Mrs. Burke, I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“I’m rather busy this evening, Mr. George. What can I do for you?”

“The mystery buyer wants to meet with both of us *tonight*.”

Sophia collapsed against the wall, allowing her shoulders the relief of a sturdy anchor. “Tonight? I’m with my husband at a very important event. I can’t leave.”

Mr. George continued undeterred, “He’s at the Saint Regis Hotel in San Francisco and wants both of us there in fifteen minutes. Perhaps I can pacify him until you arrive?”

Sophia looked toward a group of waiters with wheeled carts and stacks of covered plates. “Mr. George, I’m at the Saint Regis. Where are we supposed

to meet?"

"At the Consigner's desk, before 8:00 PM."

She looked at her delicate watch, 7:46 PM, and asked, "Will you be here in time?"

"Yes, I'm in a cab as we speak. I've been trying to reach you for over a half an hour."

"I'll be there." Sophia disconnected her call and gathered her nerve. She needed to explain the situation to Derek and emphasize that she'd only be gone from the festivities for a very short time. Seriously, what luck the buyer wanted to meet at this hotel?



THOUGH THE LARGE hand, which held hers radiated warmth, the unyielding grip was not intended to be misconstrued as comfort. It was undeniably a warning. Tony made it clear: Claire would again follow his rules. Magnanimous as ever, he kindly reminded her of the most important ones: do as I say, public failure is not an option, and be the perfect companion.

Tonight's duties required obeying all three. In order to assure SiJo Gaming's complete recovery from its current troubles, Claire must attend the National Center for Learning Disabilities Gala as Anthony Rawlings' companion. The silk wrap covering her shoulders failed to keep the trembling at bay. Claire stared at their perfect reflections upon the mirrored door of the private golden Penthouse elevator. With each floor of their descent, her mind reeled with this new reality.

Perhaps someday she'd learn to expect the unexpected, and his actions wouldn't shock her, yet as was their history, whenever Anthony Rawlings was in Claire's life, so was the potential for abrupt change. Remembering the past hour, she bowed to the reality of her new paradigm.

In their figurative game of chess, Anthony Rawlings had Claire in *check*. Every move she made, he countered. When she wanted their dinner to be public, he made it private. When she wanted to surprise him at a public event, he chose to make it the stage for their renewed allegiance.



AFTER CLAIRE REGAINED her composure in the St. Regis Penthouse, Tony ordered crackers and cheese to the suite. While Claire ate and sipped a soda, Tony asked for her purse. Although, she didn't want to relinquish it, the recent change of events and his familiar domineering demeanor left her momentarily

unable to resist. In a matter of minutes, her world had returned to his control.

Taking her elegant black clutch, Tony removed her iPhone, turned it off, and placed it in the breast pocket of his silk shirt; then he methodically unzipped and searched each compartment of the bag.

Finally, Claire asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Your work phone."

"It isn't here; I left it in my condo." That statement was true in all aspects, except that it wasn't a work phone, but Claire's only communication with Courtney.

"As you may remember, while at a function such as this, your attention should be on me and your duties at hand. I believe tonight you're representing SiJo Gaming." Despite the recent snack, hearing Tony say Simon's company made Claire's stomach twist. His tone and expression hardened, "As well as representing it to the masses downstairs, your behavior will go a long way in solving their current situation, or..." He paused. "...making it public."

Claire nodded, then remembering his propensity for verbal responses, she replied, "I understand."

"I'm glad you do. You'll get your phone back when this evening is done. I believe you'll have enough on your plate, and you don't need another distraction."

Next, he handed her a printed page. Compartmentalized memories of previous news articles flooded her consciousness. Never had a similar situation been favorable. There was the Meredith Bank's article and the information regarding Simon's death. Tonight's information wasn't as dramatic, but the aftershocks could be. Claire's hands trembled as she took the page from his hand.

"What is this?" she asked.

"It's a news release. My press secretary released it moments before you arrived to the penthouse." Smiling, he added, "I just saw a text from Shelly; it's already viral."

Her stomach twisted, hearing the same word Meredith used regarding him. Move, countermove, the game continued. Claire focused on the page before her.

Associated Press – May 24, 2013

Mr. Anthony Rawlings, CEO of Rawlings Industries, asks the public for patience at this difficult time. He believes two years ago he and the world were deceived. Despite circumstances and appearances, he is now convinced his ex-wife, Claire Nichols (Rawlings), is innocent regarding her unfortunate accusation of attempted murder.

This realization came to Mr. Rawlings through a series of personal and private encounters with Ms. Nichols. Listening to instinct and following his heart, a combination of resources, which have successfully helped to create his global empire, Mr. Rawlings is now certain of Ms. Nichols' innocence.

In an effort to correct the wrongful prosecution by the state of Iowa, Mr. Rawlings attempted to reverse the ruling of the judge, to no avail. In a moment of inspiration, Mr. Rawlings personally contacted Governor Bosley and requested Ms. Nichols' pardon. With the assistance of Jane Allyson, Esquire, and the signature of the late Governor Richard Bosley, the innocent Claire Nichols was pardoned and released from prison on March 9, 2013.

Mr. Rawlings regrets initially denying connection to her pardon. He also refuses to answer who he believes was responsible for the poisoning, which resulted in his near death and lead to the false accusations. He will only respond, "It is a personal issue."

It has been reported that multiple long-time employees of Mr. Rawlings have been released of their duties.

At the current time, Mr. Rawlings is concentrating on renewing his relationship with Ms. Nichols. He confirms that theirs is a complicated and passionate bond and asks for privacy at this important time of healing.

As she processed the words, Claire's stomach reeled with thoughts of Harry. Did Tony say this news was already viral? Had Harry seen it? Or was he too preoccupied trying to defuse the problems Tony set into motion at SiJo? With all her heart, Claire wanted to call Harry and explain, but that wasn't an option. Obviously, that's why Tony took her phone before he handed her the press release.

"Why are you doing this?" Tears threatened to overflow her painted eyes. She couldn't even pretend to be strong as she placed the page on a nearby table.

"I've tried express you my feelings for you. I've even apologized to you for past behaviors, and attempted to explain." Claire heard his attempted restraint as his tone once again hardened. "Yet you blatantly flaunt another man at a shared function."

Perhaps it was the food, but her strength was returning, if only enough to respond, "I was *not* flaunting. We—you and I—are divorced. This..." She picked up the news release. "...is false. You didn't secure my pardon. You had *nothing* to do with it."

"And who's going to refute my claim? Governor Bosley? No, he's dead. Jane Allyson? I think not."

"Why, Tony? What have you done to Jane?"

Grinning triumphantly, Tony stood and looked down at Claire. “Again, so much credit. I should be honored.”

Claire stood to meet his stance, her words slowed, “Tell me what you’ve done.”

“While I may be able to assume some responsibility, it’s quite the opposite of what you suspect. Miss Allyson is currently enjoying the honor of an invitation to one of the most prestigious law firms in Des Moines.” Checking his phone, Tony read a text message. His shoulders relaxed, and he continued, “As informative as this conversation has been, we can continue it later. It’s almost 8:00 PM, as you know this gala started at 7:00 PM. You may remember, I do *not* like to be late.”

For the first time since she entered the penthouse, Tony evaluated the woman before him. “My, Claire, you do look lovely. I admit I doubted your financial ability to dress as would warrant my companion for the evening. There’s a complete ensemble in the master suite for you, but I like your choice.” Scanning her from head to toe, he stepped toward her and lifted the pearl of her grandmother’s necklace. His eyes shone in triumph as he said, “Yes, after you touch up your make-up, I believe we’ll be ready to attend our reunion gala.” Gently dropping the cream-colored pearl, he softly brushed the back of his hand against her cheek. His voice dripped with bogus compassion. “Don’t look so strained, my dear, this is a happy occasion. You wanted our dinner public, so your wish is my command. Besides, you came here to represent SiJo Gaming. I promise this will bring that small company more publicity and positive public relations than would have originally happened.” Taking her small hands in his, he squeezed and said, “This is a win—win.”

Claire squared her shoulders. Her eyes found the fight she’d momentarily lost. Although the emerald green flashed and her voice seemed stronger, she submissively asked, “Where can I get ready?”

As he directed her upstairs, she noticed his demeanor calming. He had her over the proverbial barrel. If she chose to argue or disobey, then SiJo would suffer. He’d given her no alternative. That, plus the content of a text message he’d just received, seemed to mellow him. Claire wondered why he could divide his attention between telephones, text messages, and those around him, but she couldn’t. Feeling the prickling sensation of the hairs on the back of her neck, she chose not to voice that question.

The ostentatiously large bath of the master bedroom suite contained rows of buttons capable of illuminating the room from every angle. The glass, chrome, mirrors, and tile sparkled as she depressed each switch. Claire beheld her reflection. In many ways, she resembled the woman back at Amber’s condominium, yet the aching behind her temples, paler complexion, and strain behind her eyes reminded her of a woman she used to be: Mrs. Anthony Rawlings.

Some powder, blush, and lipstick helped the complexion, and a few acetaminophens from her purse would eventually aid her head. Claire believed only the conclusion of this nightmare would relieve the stress. Nevertheless, when she emerged from the bath and found Tony waiting, in his custom Armani jacket and tie, she secured her mask and appeared the perfect companion. Old habits die hard.



MINUTES EARLIER, SOPHIA walked briskly through the crowded lobby of the Saint Regis Hotel. She glanced again at her watch, 7:56 PM. Across the sea of people, she saw Mr. George with a tall man in a nice suit. She watched as Mr. George acknowledged her to the other man. Both of their postures relaxed. She wondered if they'd been concerned she wouldn't come.

"I'm sorry, I'm late. The walk from the grand ballroom was farther than I realized."

Mr. George smiled nervously. "Sophia, let me introduce Eric Hensley. Mr. Hensley, this is our very talented artist, Mrs. Sophia Burke."

Eric extended his hand. "Mrs. Burke, so nice to finally meet you. I apologize for disrupting your evening. I certainly hope this meeting hasn't caused you too much inconvenience."

Sophia smiled. "Well, as you see, I'm dressed for the gala down the hall; however, after your generous allocation of my paintings, I felt unable to deny this request."

"Mrs. Burke, I apologize. I'm not the one who purchased your art, although I have seen it and think very highly of it. I'm here, representing someone else. He would like to meet with the two of you privately."

"Privately, Mr. Hensley?" Sophia asked. "I was told this wouldn't take long. My husband is waiting for me; dinner is being served soon."

"I understand, Mrs. Burke. I will let my employer know that you aren't able—"

The shocked expression on Mr. George's face said more than the words from Mr. Hensley. Sophia interrupted, "No, I apologize. Of course, I'd like to meet with your employer. I do hope we will meet here."

Eric continued, "Yes, upstairs in one of the Presidential suites."

Sophia nodded at both gentlemen. "All right, let's go."

With that, the three of them walked toward a bay of elevators. Once inside, Eric slid a plastic card in the reader and pushed the button for the twenty-seventh floor. The presidential suites were located on the floor below the penthouse. As the compartment ascended, Eric removed his cell phone. "I must text my employer. He'll be very happy to know you're on your way to

the suite.”



ANTHONY AND CLAIRE did *not* pass GO... they didn't pass through the waiting room as she'd done earlier. When the golden elevator opened, a well-dressed gentleman met and greeted them, “Mr. Rawlings, we are so happy to have you with us tonight.”

Tony shook the man's hand. “Yes, Mr. Wilkins, I apologize for our tardiness. My companion was not feeling well, but all is better now.” Tony inclined his head toward Claire and added, “Perhaps you remember my companion, Claire.” He paused momentarily. “Nichols.”

Claire extended her hand. “Mr. Wilkins, it's so nice to see you, again.”

Though visibly shocked, Mr. Wilkins accepted Claire's hand and smiled weakly. “Ms. Nichols, yes. It is a surprise to see the two of you...” He regrouped. “It is always a pleasure.” Turning back to Tony, he said, “Now, Mr. Rawlings and Ms. Nichols, if you'll follow me, we'll make your introductions.

Tony replied, “Although I'm here to speak, I'm also representing Sheditics, and Ms. Nichols is representing SiJo Gaming.”

Mr. Wilkins nodded affirmatively and promised proper introductions. Tony once again seized Claire's hand and slowed their pace, allowing Mr. Wilkins to lead the way to the ballroom. He whispered, “Well, if that's any indication, reactions alone should keep this night entertaining.”

She smiled and replied, “*Entertaining* isn't the word I'd use.”



HER QUICKNESS DELIGHTED him. Though his soft voice divulged his amusement, his grip, and words revealed his warning. “Be careful, Ms. Nichols; don't let your recently discovered independence get you into trouble.”

Utilizing her previous southern charm, she replied, “Why, Mr. Rawlings, I believe I'm already in more trouble than I can handle.”

They both quieted as the doors opened and an emcee announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are proud to introduce, Mr. Anthony Rawlings and his companion Ms. Claire Nichols.” A hush followed by applause echoed through the large ballroom. Except for a few waiters and waitresses, the room of people stilled and looked their direction. The emcee continued, “We are honored to have Mr. Rawlings, of Rawlings Industries, with us this evening as

one of tonight's prestigious speakers and as a representative of Shedis-tics. Ms. Nichols is also present as a representative of SiJo Gaming." There was more applause. As Tony placed his hand in the small of Claire's back, they stepped into the sea of people. Immediately, they were surrounded by people wanting to meet and speak to tonight's honored guests.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

A thing long expected takes the form of the unexpected when at last it comes.

—Mark Twain

*I*NTERMITTENTLY SIPPING ICE water, Claire sat at the head table, two seats to the left of the podium, and listened intently to Tony's speech. As the evening progressed, each scene she performed became easier, almost comfortable. After all, it was the role she'd created; she was the original costar in their perfect couple show. The only constraint to her seamless performance was the daunting concern lingering in the back of her mind. Each time her thoughts turned to Harry or Amber, Claire immediately compartmentalized them away. She couldn't continue this charade if she allowed herself to worry about what was happening at SiJo or imagined the hurt in Harry's soft blue eyes when he learned about her evening.

Tony's speech concentrated on the National Center for Learning Disabilities and its many accomplishments. Claire noted how Tony rarely referred to the electronic tablet before him, yet he cited statistics and philosophies perfectly. She had to wonder how someone who just came from a confrontation, like the one they'd just had upstairs, could perform so flawlessly.

It wasn't just his speech, but everything about him; the way he conversed with others, his attentive looks, and even his light, chatty dinner conversation. His social presence always had, and still did, fascinate Claire. No wonder he was so successful; this Anthony Rawlings was truly captivating. With time, she forgot the circumstance of her situation and fell into her own role as his companion.

That was what he wanted, and Claire Nichols knew Anthony Rawlings always got what he wanted. Listening as he concluded his speech, she found herself applauding appropriately and smiling approvingly at the handsome,

professional man before her.

When he turned from the podium and their eyes met, there was a moment when she was once again—Mrs. Anthony Rawlings. His velvety brown eyes filled with appreciation were directed at her. It was a look only shared with someone who knows you and truly understands the real person. *How many people did Tony have like that in his life?*

In the few months since her pardon, Claire had rekindled relationships with friends and family, as well as forged new ones. *Who did Tony have?*

As he took his seat, he reached for Claire's hand and gently lifted it from its resting place on her lap. This time, his grasp wasn't a warning. Instead, he lowered his head, keeping his eyes fixed on hers, and brushed her knuckles with a soft sweep of his lips. The warm, light touch made her smile. It was then she remembered the room of onlookers. Her cheeks reddened and she whispered, "Very nice speech, Mr. Rawlings."

His smile lit up the room. "Thank you, Mrs.—Ms. Nichols, you're mighty remarkable yourself."

Someone else was speaking from the podium; their voices were a faint whisper against the sound from the nearby speaker. Claire raised her eyebrows and asked, "Mighty?" It was a strangely common word to hear from Tony.

He gently squeezed her soft hand. "Mighty." They both smiled and turned to listen to the next orator, a woman from the Center for Learning Disabilities thanking the audience for their support.



THEIR MOST INTERESTING exchange occurred before the meal was served. Truthfully, they weren't able to make much progress moving about the room. Person after person and couple after couple made their way to them. When Claire saw Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham from Shedis-tics waiting for their attention, she decided to warn Tony she'd spoken with them earlier. Her social instinct served her well in the past; she knew it was best to listen. Therefore, before the Cunninghams made their way to Tony and her, Claire excused the two of them from the public conversation and whispered in his ear, "The Cunninghams from Shedis-tics are making their way to us. You should know I spoke with them a few minutes in the waiting room prior to being asked to your penthouse." Claire practiced her statement. The *asked* could have been *summoned*, or perhaps *dragged*, but she decided *asked* sounded best. Her temples throbbed at the pressure of again weighing each word. She watched displeasure cloud his eyes and braced for his response.

"You were supposed to be brought up immediately, before you had time to

speak with anyone.”

“Well, that’s someone else’s concern. I was out of the loop on your plan. I just thought you’d want to know.” Maybe she was caving to his plan, but her verbose response was pointedly more abrupt than it would have been years before.

Tony assessed Claire’s expression for a moment and responded, “Thank you, I appreciate knowing. Did you discuss...” he hesitated.

She knew he wanted to ask about Harry. “I said I was alone because of an issue at SiJo. Who I was supposed to be with was never mentioned.”

Tony nodded, and replied loud enough for others to hear, “Most certainly, I’ll gladly get you something to drink.”

Before he could move, a waiter appeared with a tray of crystal fluted glasses, the contents bubbled from the stem to the rim. Tony took two flutes and handed one to Claire with a nod. She returned his nod. Claire understood the conversation was done; he was happy with her honesty. Each such behavior helped her figurative chess king live one more day.

When the couple from Shedis-tics finally arrived, Tony gallantly proceeded, “Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham, it is always a pleasure.”

Roger Cunningham replied, “Mr. Rawlings.”

Tony continued, “Ms. Nichols tells me you met?”

Claire wasn’t sure, but the Cunninghams appeared embarrassed or apprehensive about their earlier meeting. She joined the conversation, extending her hand. “Yes.” She smiled pleasantly at both of them. “I was so lost in that large room. I appreciated your friendly greeting.”

The Cunninghams visibly relaxed with her comment. Mrs. Cunningham spoke, “Ms. Nichols, it was a pleasure to meet you. I’m sure this collaboration between Shedis-tics and SiJo will be beneficial.”

With her mask intact, Claire continued, “I’m sure you’re aware, it goes way back. Mr. Rawlings gave Simon his first opportunity in Silicon Valley with his dream job at Shedis-tics. Simon Johnson never forgot where he started and enjoyed the allegiance between the two companies.”

Mr. Cunningham replied, “It’s easy to forget the origins of our companies. Thank you for reminding us. I’m sure Mr. Johnson would be happy that the allegiance has remained.” Claire radiated confidence. Her never wavering smile successfully hid the contained emotions she compartmentalized away. Mr. Cunningham indicated the man to his left. “Mr. Rawlings, Ms. Nichols, this is our promising new associate Derek Burke.”

Everyone shook hands. Claire evaluated Derek Burke: tall, polished, and polite. He approached Tony with an honest reverence, yet with enough self-confidence to indicate he deserved the praise bestowed upon him. There were so many people who blabbered incoherently in Tony’s presence. Claire assessed Tony must also be impressed by Derek’s poise because they

conversed longer than Tony usually did with one person. Unfortunately, his attention toward this new associate left Claire, once again, at the disposal of Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham. Their friendly greeting earlier in the waiting room turned to gushing compliments about Claire's attire and the gala. *More incoherent babbling*, Claire thought.

Eventually, the next set of attendees made their way to Claire and Tony. When dinner was announced, Claire was relieved beyond words. She'd played her role well—very well. Even Tony complimented her regarding the Shedis-tics couple. Nevertheless, her body ached from standing in high heels and the stress. The act of sitting was a welcome relief.

At one point, before the speeches, Claire excused herself to visit the ladies room. She expected a warning glance or gesture, but surprisingly, she received neither. All the way to the restroom, she considered borrowing someone's cell phone and calling Harry. The problem was she didn't know his number. She called it multiple times a day, but the number was programmed into her phone. After racking her memory, she gave up and made her way back to her new assigned seat.

On her way to Tony, she passed the round table where she should have been sitting. Claire noticed three empty seats. It was the only table within the large room with so many vacancies. The Cunninghams, Derek Burke, and another couple were politely chatting. Claire moved quickly, to avoid another conversation with Hilary Cunningham.



SOPHIA BELIEVED SHE'D suffocate if she spent another minute in the beautiful sitting room of the Saint Regis' Presidential Suite, waiting for the mystery buyer. Walking through French doors onto a balcony, she observed the lights of the Golden Gate Bridge. Although almost the end of May, the evening air was brisk against her exposed skin. Mindlessly, she wrapped her arms around her chest and dissected the view, as only an artist can do. *The towers glowed more orange than gold*, she thought as she viewed the illumination from Highway Route One.

She stood motionless at the rail and inhaled the salty air. It wasn't the same as Provincetown. There was something about Provincetown Harbor, which was unique from San Francisco Bay. Nevertheless, closing her eyes and listening to the distant rush of waves, the similarities made her homesick. She glanced at her watch, almost 9:30 PM.

She and Mr. George had been in this suite, for an hour and a half. Though she'd communicated with Derek regularly, she knew he was upset. He should be, she reasoned. This was ridiculous and rude.

Sophia even felt sorry for Mr. Hensley. The poor man was doing his job. It truly wasn't his fault his employer was delayed. The first excuse was about traffic on Highway 280. When 8:30 PM came and went, Mr. Hensley kindly ordered them dinner. At 8:45 PM they fired up Mr. Hensley's laptop and virtually viewed Sophia's art. At 9:15 PM, Mr. Hensley received a text message and excused himself from the suite.

Now, Sophia and Mr. George continued to wait. The night air helped relieve Sophia's distress. Although she hadn't been looking forward to Derek's big gala, she knew how much it meant to him. He'd been anxiously anticipating spending this time with his boss and Mr. Cunningham's wife. He was also very excited to meet the CEO of Shedis-tics' parent company. He'd told Sophia his name, and Hilary had gone on about a woman named Nichols, but currently, the CEO's name escaped Sophia. More than anything, she wanted to be back in that crowded, pretentious ballroom.

"Mrs. Burke, I apologize for this inconvenience." Mr. George was now on the balcony too.

"I don't blame you. It's just that my husband is so close, and I should be with him."

"Mrs. Burke, if this weren't important, then I wouldn't have asked you to be here."

"Do we even know the name of this mysterious buyer?"

Mr. George rubbed his temple. "No, Mr. Hensley is the one I've been dealing with."

They both turned upon hearing the door to the suite open. Mr. Hensley entered. When it was clear he was alone, they both exhaled and moved to join him within the suite. His voice was more assured, "I cannot adequately express my sincere apologies regarding this horrid meeting. Circumstances beyond anyone's control have delayed my employer. He would, however, like to offer an olive branch."

Sophia and Mr. George didn't reply. It had been a long evening.

Mr. Hensley continued, "If you two could please have a seat. My employer would like to fund an exhibition of your work, Mrs. Burke. He was thinking of an exhibition, which would run in multiple cities, in succession."

Mr. George and Sophia sat. Her tired mind spun with this new offer. First, this mysterious man paid 2.3 million dollars for three of her paintings, and now, he wanted to fund a moving exhibit. She momentarily forgot about Derek and the gala. Her thoughts now centered upon Mr. Hensley and the papers before him.

Eric went on, "Mr. George, commission of all sales at all locations would be directed through you. Mrs. Burke, if we could take a few minutes to discuss possible locations?"

Sophia nodded. She wasn't sure her voice could sound composed.



WHEN THE FINAL speaker concluded, the emcee from earlier came to the podium and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, the orchestra will be in place soon. If everyone could please make their way back out to the atrium, dancing will commence in less than a half an hour.”

Claire looked down at her watch; it was only 9:40 PM, but she was exhausted. If this were Harry, she’d let him know, but it wasn’t. She was back to weighing each word, “Are we staying for dancing?”

Tony leaned closer, his eyebrows raised. “Do you want to dance?”

“No, I really don’t; I’m tired, and I’d like to go home. If I could have my phone, I’ll call for the SiJo car.”

Tony leaned back against his chair. His lack of response caused Claire’s skin to crawl. The contrary emotions his actions elicited made her feel as though she were with two different men. One minute he was courteous and social, the next he was his old domineering, controlling self. She tried to remain obedient. With each passing minute, her insolence increased. Finally, she leaned toward him, smile glistening. From afar, they appeared to be having a friendly chat. Claire’s voice betrayed her current emotions; she could only restrain them visually—audibly was too much. Her voice cracked as she questioned, “Have I done everything you asked?”

His external facade remained intact. “Yes, but I want more.”

Her heart sank. “Please, I’m tired.”

“Then perhaps you should go to bed.”

She saw the twinkle in his eye. Her mask momentarily shattered, she leaned closer as panic filled each syllable, “I’m *not* agreeing to sleep with you.”

His perfect smile remained unwavering; however, his eyes registered darker than she’d seen since the penthouse. “Sleeping, my dear, was *not* what I had in mind.”

She closed her eyes and waited for the distress to pass. When it merely subsided, she turned to her ex-husband, and said, “I will go upstairs with you; I will complete this scenario; however, I will *not* have sex with you.”

“Why do you fight it?”

People mingled close. There were waitresses and waiters clearing tables. Other couples milled near. Claire inhaled and exhaled. The urge to cry was almost beyond her control. “May we please go upstairs? This conversation is upsetting me. If you want to maintain this charade, we’d better leave while I can maintain a smile.”

Tony stood and chivalrously offered Claire his hand. Exhaling, she placed her hand in his, allowing her fingers to be swallowed by his. “Ms. Nichols,

shall we bid our ado's to the appropriate people?"

"Yes, Mr. Rawlings. I'm so ready to close the curtain on this performance."

Tony leaned toward her ear. "The press release is viral. This, my love, was only the first act."

An older couple from the National Center for Learning Disabilities approached. With her stomach in knots, Claire bravely continued her duties. When they finally reached the golden elevator, Tony removed his phone from his jacket and sent a text. Claire remained silent until the doors opened to the Penthouse entry. "May I have my phone?"

Tony looked at his watch, 10:17 PM. "My dear, the night is still young."



SOPHIA LOOKED AT the list of cities: San Francisco, Seattle, Phoenix, Dallas, Chicago, Louisville, Atlanta, Miami, Charlotte, New York, Boston, and Bangor. The tour consisted of two weeks in each city. Exhibition halls rented, advertised, and paid. Lodging and food stipends, as well as travel expenses. Mr. George would receive his customary fifteen percent, the mysterious buyer would receive five percent, and the remaining eighty percent of all sales would go to Sophia. With two weeks in each city and the occasional time off, the tour would last approximately thirty weeks.

"I have some overseas commitments," Sophia said as Mr. Hensley discussed the exhibitions.

"I'm sure that can be worked out."

"I really need to discuss this with my husband."

"Of course," Eric replied as he glanced at his phone. "Let me give you this written information." Looking to Mr. George, he added, "You have my number. Please call when Mrs. Burke has made her decision."

Mr. George responded, "Yes, we'll talk."

Eric Hensley turned to Sophia. "Mrs. Burke, again, I apologize for the inconvenience. I hope my employer's olive branch will help to make amends for the missed gala. I'm sure you would like to join your husband. I look forward to talking to you again soon."

Sophia stood with the realization she'd been released. "Thank you, Mr. Hensley. Mr. George and I will get back to you soon. Please tell your employer that I truly do appreciate his offer."

Eric walked Sophia to the door of the suite and replied, "I will. Do you need an escort back to the ballroom?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine."

Eric Hensley nodded as Sophia walked from the suite. As she waited for

the elevator, Sophia sent a text to Derek:

“I'M FINALLY RELEASED. DO YOU STILL WANT ME?”

Her phone vibrated within seconds.

“DINNER IS DONE. DANCING IS ABOUT TO START, AND I'D LOOK FUNNY DANCING ALONE. I ALWAYS WANT YOU!”

Sophia smiled as the mirrored cubical descended to the main level. When the doors opened, she hurried toward the ballroom.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

—George Bernard Shaw

PERHAPS IT WAS her look of desperation or the tears that lingered on her perfectly painted lids. The reason was not yet revealed. Nonetheless, once the golden elevator closed and Tony and Claire were alone in the entry of the Saint Regis Penthouse, he opened his Armani jacket and handed Claire her cell phone. She contemplated taking it to an isolated area and calling Harry. Instead, she bravely stood before Tony, waited for it to turn on, ignored the icons indicating missed calls and messages, and scrolled for the number of the SiJo driver.

Although Tony stood resolute before her, Claire refused to turn away. Maybe it was a replay of a scene from their past, or maybe it was a move, counter move. Nevertheless, she waited while the phone rang. When the driver answered, she heard, “Ms. Nichols, this is Marcus, are you ready to be picked up?”

Looking Tony in the eyes, she replied, “Hello, Marcus, yes, this is Claire Nichols—”

She didn’t complete her sentence. Unexpectedly, Tony took the iPhone from her hand and spoke, “Hello, Marcus. Ms. Nichols will not need your assistance this evening.” Claire could no longer hear Marcus’s response, only Tony’s: “This is Anthony Rawlings. That is correct. Yes, you are relieved of your assignment. Thank you, good night.” He turned off the phone and placed it back in his pocket. His dark chocolate eyes glowed in the dim light of the penthouse.

Claire wanted to fight, she wanted her iPhone back, and she wanted to be back in Palo Alto with Harry and Amber; however, after Tony disconnected the call, she dejectedly walked to the sofa and collapsed. The tight rein she’d

had on her emotions all night severed. How could it not? The tension was too much. With tears cascading down her cheeks, Claire closed her eyes and waited. She'd been here before. Not this hotel or this scenario, but one with enough similarity she knew the drill. Her only option was conceding—until her side regained strength.

Momentarily, Claire remembered Courtney, Brent, Jane, Amber, Harry, John, and Emily. She wasn't a lone chess piece isolated, without support. The realization fortified her. Claire didn't stand and declare victory. Nonetheless, she silently accepted their support and sat taller. Drying her tears, she stared compellingly into the depths of her ex-husband's dark abyss. If those people could stand for her, then she could sit straighter for them. Deeply inhaling and exhaling, Claire asked, "What do I need to do, to leave?"

Tony sat next to his ex-wife, his gaze mellowed. "Eric will take you home whenever you want. You may leave at any time."

She didn't hesitate. "Then I want to leave now."

Tony nodded and removed his phone from his jacket. It was at that moment she remembered *why* she was there, why she'd done as he asked, "Tony?" her voice quivered with concern. "Is SiJo secure? Did they get their problem fixed?"

He placed his cell phone back in his pocket and replied, "Do you want to know what I have been thinking about all night?"

Claire struggled to stay on track, "What you've been thinking about? All right, tell me."

"Many things, the first, how amazing you've been. I've endured many companions since our divorce, but I haven't enjoyed any of those evenings as much as I have tonight being with you."

Claire stared; she wondered what part of that statement was supposed to warrant her response, his many companions or her exemplary performance.

Tony continued, "Shelly wasn't happy with my desired press release, but I decided it was the only answer. Now the world knows of our reconciliation. It's official."

"You say that as if it's beyond debate."

He peered unquestionably into her emerald eyes. "Beyond challenge. It's public." The *failure is not an option* went without saying.

"SiJo?"

"The breach has been resolved. It has been since about 8:00 PM this evening."

Claire breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

Tony accepted her gratitude and answered, "Actually, I'll have Eric take you to your condominium. It's probably better if you don't know what else I've been pondering."

Claire sat straighter. "Thank you, again. I'm ready to leave." She watched

as he nodded. The familiar attraction sucked her into his gravitational pull, and without thinking, she took his hand in hers. Propelled by curiosity as well as concern, Claire asked, "What else have you been thinking?"

"Those black lacy panties."

Claire released his hand and stood abruptly. "What did you say?"

"I've been thinking about your black laced underwear; there was a small bow." His smile turned sensual. "I've been wondering what color you're wearing tonight."

Her voice came out an octave higher. "How do you know about black lace panties?"

Tony stood, his hands grasped her shoulders. Their chests touched and his breath quickened. "Why can't you believe I still love you?"

"Really? You want me to believe you still love me! After an entire night of blackmailing me into being your companion, threatening my friend's company with disaster, and; now, learning that you... that you..." Her body trembled, tears once again flowed, and her voice broke becoming a mere whisper. "...raped me."

His tone was more of a plea, "No, Claire. Don't even suggest that." He lifted her chin and their eyes met. "You agreed to everything. You more than consented; you wanted it as much as I did." He released her chin, allowing her face to fall against his chest.

She remembered the day he came to the condominium. She'd been up half the night, dreaming about *him*—about *them*. She remembered telling him goodbye; she remembered wanting him. She'd convinced herself it didn't happen. After all, who in their right mind would consent? Maybe that was it, when it came to Tony, when had she been in her right mind?

Her knees weakened as his arms engulfed her. The sound of his heart echoed in her ear, and the familiar aroma of his cologne filled her subconscious. Claire melted into his embrace; she had no strength left from which to draw. He was right. She wanted him that day. Truthfully, even at this moment, she enjoyed the familiar touch. There was something about the continual challenge that kept her senses electrified. The range of emotions he elicited and the depth of understanding they shared, created a bond. She'd fought it all night. Closing her eyes, she conceded the current battle. There was no fight left within her.

Tony kissed the top of her head and scooped her up into his arms.

Her voice was soft, but determined, "No, Tony. Not tonight."

"I'm putting you on the sofa. You're about to fall."

She nodded against the silk of his shirt. The softness against her cheek and the steady drum of his heart calmed the aching in her temples. Together, they sat on a large white sofa, facing the tall windows. With Tony's long legs stretched out onto a matching ottoman and his arm still tenderly around her

shoulders, Claire removed her high heels and curled her legs onto the plush cushions. Molding to his side, she accepted the comfort of his embrace. For the longest time, they stayed like that, silent, watching the vista before them.

The towers of the Golden Gate Bridge glowed from the street level illumination. That same light reflected picturesquely onto the water below. The night was clear and the sky appeared a deep blue-black. There were no visible stars, yet the moon shone low over the darkened land on the other side of the suspension bridge.

Claire felt his chest rise and fall with the inhale and exhale of a deep breath. His rich voice resonated through the silence, “Are you ready for me to call Eric?”

When he spoke, the vibration tickled her cheek. She didn’t lift her head.

She bravely answered, “What I really want are answers.”

“What kind of answers.”

“Truthful.” It was the thing he’d asked of her in the past. Some of their deepest heart-to-heart discussions occurred in a similar pose, intimate times when they couldn’t see one another’s expressions. When Tony didn’t respond, Claire pushed on, “You say you still love me. You’re a very intelligent man. Surely, you understand actions speak louder than words.”

“You said, no.”

“I don’t mean sex. I mean actions, like tricking me tonight and setting me up for your attempted murder.” His chest rose and fell again. She felt his warm breath blowing across her hair. “Tell me why.”

“I told you. It was a loophole.”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t understand your puzzles.”

“You, too, are very intelligent. I don’t believe you’ve spent the past year and a half without suspicions.”

“I truly didn’t understand, until I received that box of information.”

“And what did you conclude from that?”

She contemplated her answer as her fingers mindlessly played with the small buttons down the center of his silk shirt. Finally, she spoke, “Well, it’s hard to answer. You see, at first I thought *you’d* sent it, so I thought you were adding insult to injury, you know, rubbing salt in my wounds.”

His embrace tightened. “You thought I’d do that?”

“What else could I think? You set me up and left me.” Her emotion-laden voice trailed into silence. Closing her eyes, she remembered him at the jail in Iowa and saw visions of her prison cell. Her body trembled as she fought to contain the sobs within her chest.

“There are few people in this world whom I’ve cared about.” Tony’s voice had a faraway quality. “Few people whose opinion of me I value.” He lifted her chin and looked into her moist glistening emerald eyes. “I know you have reason to doubt me. Hell, *reasons*. But, Claire, you are one of those people.”

She closed her eyes, and he continued speaking, “I need you to understand that I made promises, and I keep my word.”

She didn’t know where the words came from. It wasn’t something she’d been consciously thinking, yet they came anyway. “You made *me* a promise, on December eighteenth—”

He interrupted, each word coming slower than the one before, “Two thousand and ten, in our estate, to love you forever. I keep my word.”

His lips found hers, and passion glued them together. It wasn’t fevered, like a wildfire roaring through the California Mountains. It was deep and painful; the kind of bond that yanks at your heart until your only desire is to remove the pumping organ with your bare hands.

Abruptly, Claire stood, and from her quick movement the room spun.

Tony reached up and steadied her. She heard the honest concern in his voice. “Are you all right? What happened?”

Claire picked up her shoes and smoothed her dress. “I’m fine. I want to go now.”

He didn’t argue, though his gaze never left hers. He reached inside his pocket and removed his phone. She waited while he spoke to Eric.

“Eric will have the car ready in the private garage in a few minutes.” Her expression must have asked her unspoken question about the location of the car. In the past, cars were always outside. Tony replied, “If we enter the car in the garage, then we can avoid paparazzi.”

“Oh, good idea, I need to use the restroom, and I’ll be ready to leave.” Claire turned to walk away and then turned back. “We? Tony, I don’t need you to ride with me.” She paused. “I’d prefer you didn’t.”

“Then I’ll escort you to the car. If that’s acceptable?”

Claire nodded and walked away; her dress swept the cool floor while her shoes dangled from her fingertips.



THOUGH CONSIDERABLY LESS tense than the earlier descent, the ride down the golden elevator was awkwardly quiet. Their reflections in the gold mirrored doors were much less polished than before. Claire’s eyes displayed signs of her multiple emotional breaks. Her lids were no longer painted to perfection, and her mascara was gone. While freshening up in the restroom, she cleaned the dark circles from under her eyes. If they’d planned on exiting through the lobby, then she would have needed to redo a great deal of her make-up.

Tony’s jacket was gone, and his tie hung loosely through his unbuttoned collar. His shirt contained clues to the location of her missing mascara. Multiple dark smudges stained the now wrinkled white silk.

When the elevator opened to the private parking area, Eric immediately opened the door to the back seat. Claire nodded to Tony's driver and sat down. She heard Tony's voice, "Ms. Claire would prefer to ride back to Palo Alto alone. Please call me when she's safely to her door."

"Yes, Mr. Rawlings."

Claire heard Tony say, "I can get this." She then saw Eric move around the front of the car to the driver's seat. Next, Tony's face appeared in the opening of the door. She looked into his dark, tired eyes. In his outstretched hand was her cell phone. She took it and placed it upon her lap.

"Thank you, Tony. Goodbye."

"Don't forget the news release." His sturdy voice once again held his authoritative CEO tone, the one that gave orders and expected unquestioning obedience. She'd heard that tone for years, directed both at her and at others. Instinctively, the tone heightened her defenses, causing her neck to straighten and eyes to blaze. She never liked that tone.

"How could I?"

"We'll need to discuss it further."

"I'm discussed out." Later, Claire would reflect on their candor in Eric's presence. Sometime ago, Tony's intimate staff became part of the woodwork. Claire didn't mean to say they weren't people, but on most occasions, she'd forget they were even present.

"I can tell you're tired. Go get some sleep. We can continue our discussion tomorrow, before I leave for Iowa."

Claire closed her eyes. The last thing she wanted was Tony in Palo Alto with Harry. "I have plans tomorrow. Call me after you're back in Iowa."

"This would be better discussed in person."

She exhaled. "Let me meet you somewhere."

His eyes returned her blaze. "10:00 AM. Text me the location; Palo Alto is fine."

Claire nodded. She didn't want to meet, but the concession was better than having him at Amber's condominium. "Tomorrow," she replied.

"Tomorrow, Claire." He closed the door.

Eric eased the Mercedes C-Class out of the underground garage and around the front of the Saint Regis Hotel. Along the sidewalk, under the bright lights of the canopy, were multitudes of people. Some had cameras, while others only wanted to see the attendees of the gala, as they made their way to the line of waiting cars. Claire reclined against the soft leather seat, thankful for Tony's discretion, and the tinted windows. No one seemed to notice the dark grey sedan as it made its way onto Highway US 101.

Once on the road, Claire turned on her iPhone. The time appeared, 12:13 AM. Where had the night gone? The screen filled with messages: 16 missed calls, 3 voicemails, and 11 text messages. She debated. Should she listen and

read, or should she just call?

Sweeping the screen with her finger, she sought her call log and tapped Harry's name. Her heart beat rapidly as the sound of ringing filled her ears. Glancing forward, she saw Eric's eyes in the rearview mirror. She knew anything she said would be repeated to Tony as soon as she exited the car.

Harry's voice sounded strained, "Claire."

She took a deep breath. "I'm finally on my way home. I should be there in about an hour."

Silence—finally, he asked, "Can you talk right now?"

Her heart broke hearing the emotion in his voice. "Not really."

"Is *he* with you?"

She imagined his clenched jaws and strained blue eyes. "No, I'm being driven by his driver."

"And he can hear you?" There seemed to be relief in the knowledge Tony wasn't present.

"Yes."

"I'll tell Amber you're on your way. Will you please come here first?"

Although she was exhausted beyond belief and didn't want any more confrontations, Claire knew she owed this to Harry. "Yes, as soon as I can."

"Can we work this out?"

She thought about the news release. Had he seen it? Were there pictures of her and Tony on the internet? What did he think happened? A tear fell from her eye as she replied, "I hope so."

"I'll be waiting."

She nodded into the phone as the connection ended. He didn't say goodbye. She couldn't remember a time in the past when he hadn't said goodbye. Claire leaned her head against the seat and watched the lights of the highway. She thought about checking the messages and missed calls. Instead, she watched the lights.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Power resides only where men believe it resides.

—George R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings*

SOPHIA GRIPPED TIGHTLY to Derek's elbow as they walked past the crowd of onlookers. The bright lights of the hotel's canopy illuminated the night. A gentleman wearing a black uniform opened the door of the Shedis-tics' limousine. Gracefully, Sophia lowered herself into the spacious compartment and settled into the plush leather seat. Once Derek was beside her, the door closed and the car eased forward. It was the same car which brought them to the gala. Sophia whispered in Derek's ear, "I like some of the perks with your new job!"

Momentarily, closing her eyes, Sophia enjoyed the silence of the limousine. It was heaven compared to the mayhem of the gala. With the multitudes of people talking, music, people dancing, and paparazzi outside the hotel, for the past three hours noise had been constant. Suddenly, she remembered the presidential suite. Sophia struggled with her mixed emotions. She was angry she'd missed part of the gala, sad at disappointing her husband, and excited about the mystery buyer's newest offer.

Derek's familiar touch warmed her hand and brought her thoughts back to the man beside her. She leaned against his sturdy shoulder. Her cheek brushed the sleeve of his new tuxedo while her fingers played with the satin lapels.

"Are you tired?" Derek asked.

"I am, but I enjoyed the dancing very much."

"Me too." He kissed the top of her head.

Sophia exhaled; she'd already apologized a hundred times for missing the meal and speeches. Nevertheless, she felt the need to do it again, "Derek, I'm so sorry I missed part of the gala."

"You don't need to keep apologizing. I understand; it's your job."

Sophia nodded. She rarely thought of herself as employed, yet Derek was

right; art was her *job*. She reasoned that he understood job responsibilities and equating her temporary absence in that way made it easier for him to justify.

Derek continued, “I just wish you could have met Mr. Rawlings. Roger said he doesn’t visit often.”

“How was his speech?”

“Excellent. I was the most surprised by our private talk. He knew all about my current projects. He even asked very specific questions. I had this strange feeling I was being quizzed.”

Sophia grinned. “Well if you were, then I’d guess you responded appropriately and received an A+.”

“I don’t know; I hope you’re right.”

“Hilary sure likes to gossip,” Sophia said, stifling a yawn.

“Yes, I noticed. She was in seventh heaven with Mr. Rawlings’ ex-wife.”

“I think Hillary was disappointed the ex-Mrs. Rawlings didn’t sit at our table; however, I think that poor woman is lucky. Hilary would’ve eaten her alive with her relentless questions.”

Derek replied, “Well, I only said hello to Ms. Nichols, but she seemed nice enough.”

Sophia sighed, leaning into her husband’s arm. “I missed so much. According to Hilary, the whole thing will be all over the gossip pages, probably before we’re home. I’m usually not into that kind of thing, but I may make an exception.”

Derek lifted his arm and placed it around his wife’s shoulders. Sophia again lowered her head to soft material of his tuxedo. His words rang clear and true, “I think people deserve privacy, no matter who they are...”

Nodding in agreement, his voice faded away as she closed her eyes. Her mind filled with thoughts of the moving art exhibit, which she hadn’t had the chance to mention it to Derek. As the gentle vibration of the car soothed her, Sophia decided she didn’t have the energy to discuss it now. It could wait until morning.

The next thing Sophia knew, Derek was gently shaking her. His soft voice slowly infiltrated her dreams, “Hey, sleepy head, we’re home.” Her eyes fluttered; she saw her husband’s sweet smile.

The Shedis-tics’ driver opened the door, and the cool night air filled the limousine’s cabin. Derek thanked the kind man, and they made their way to their condominium.

At such an early hour, the street was quiet, and a velvety dark sky concealed the stars above. With her hair pinned back, Derek had easy access to Sophia’s ear and inclined his lips to it. In a deep, sexual voice, he whispered, “Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?”

Her gray eyes sparkled as she looked up at his loving expression. “Yes, but I like hearing it.”

Stepping into the foyer of their new home, Derek turned from the closed door and traced his finger from Sophia's ear to the apex of her plunging neckline. The light touch sent chills throughout her body. Suddenly, sleep didn't seem important, and she was very glad she'd napped. With his hands caressing the gathered waist of her evening gown, his lips once again lingered near her ear, and her breath quickened.

"I was wondering..." His words contacted her skin in hot bursts of air.
"...if perhaps. you need. help. getting out. of this. amazing dress?"

Sophia nodded as the silk chiffon gown molded against his black tuxedo. Despite the layers of material, she could feel his intention against her hip. "I do," she purred.

Once within the confines of their new bedroom, the day's disappointments and satisfactions melted away. Derek no longer remembered the frustration of sitting alone as everyone else sat in pairs, and Sophia forgot the stress of waiting for a mystery buyer who never arrived. Derek's excitement at speaking to Mr. Rawlings faded, and Sophia's exhilaration at the new amazing offer waned. Their joy came in each other, the ecstasy of pleasing and being pleased.

When they finally settled into the soft satin sheets and gave into sleep, calm contentment relaxed them. They both glowed with the serenity associated with complete trust in the person by their side.



TEXT MESSAGE SENT: May 25: 01:17 AM – To: Anthony Rawlings

"MS NICHOLS JUST EXITED GRAY MERCEDES. SHE SAFELY ENTERED HER BUILDING."



CLAIRE DIDN'T NEED to knock on Harry's door. When she turned the corner in the hall, she saw him leaning against the jam in his open doorway. She sighed in relief at the sight of him; his casual appearance made her cheeks rise. She saw that his customary faded jeans and black t-shirt had replaced the tailored tuxedo he'd worn earlier. His blonde hair now lay in waves, unrestrained by gel.

Prior to entering the building, Claire gave Harry the opportunity to avoid this meeting. She sent him a text message. After all, it was almost 1:30 AM. It said:

"MINUTES AWAY. DO YOU STILL WANT ME TO COME BY?"

His short reply appeared almost immediately:

"YES."

It wasn't possible to read emotion or attitude in a text message. Nevertheless, as Claire neared and her eyes met Harry's, his unhappiness loomed omnipresent, surrounding them in a cloud of despondency. His hardened expression cooled her progress, almost stopping Claire in her tracks. Instead of summer skies, Claire saw ice in his light blue eyes. She searched for minuscule signs of acceptance. Instead, she found frost with his lips pressed together tightly in a straight line.

As her glistening high heels propelled toward him, the scent of whisky filled her lungs.

"Well, if it isn't the belle of the ball?" he asked cynically. He gestured for Claire to enter.

Initially, she planned on kissing him *hello*. Even with his bare feet and her shoes, he stood several inches taller than she. In order to contact his lips or cheek, she'd need to stand on the tips of her toes, or he'd need to bend down. The furrowing of his brow, as she neared, weakened her resolve. Claire looked pleadingly into his cold eyes, as she passed, entering his foyer.

Throughout the entire car ride, Claire divided her time between reliving the evening's confrontations with Tony and imagining her reunion with Harry. It was at least thirty minutes into the trip before she realized she and Eric had been driving in complete silence. It wasn't as if they'd ever chatted, but in the past, their relationship was cordial. Nevertheless, when Claire recalled his *persuasive* behavior from earlier, she felt no desire for familiarity. Besides, her mind was too full of thoughts and memories; the outside world seemed temporarily irrelevant. It was when those thoughts incited tears that Claire asked Eric to turn on some music. Truly, it was an attempt to conceal her crying from Tony's informant.

Interestingly, Claire noted Eric never asked her where she lived. Perhaps more thought provokingly, she never questioned his knowledge. Music was their only topic of conversation. Eric's only words during their entire drive were those in his reply, "Yes, ma'am, do you have a preference?"

She shook her head to the eyes in the rearview mirror and turned again to the side window. The interior of the Mercedes filled with the sounds of Doc Severinsen and Louis Armstrong. Claire doubted the moisture on her cheeks and occasional ragged breath escaped Eric's observation. Nevertheless, she took comfort in believing the jazz music muffled her involuntary sobs.

In Claire's likely scenarios for their reunion, she imagined Harry sad, hurt, or more optimistically, relieved that she'd made it back. She imagined his supportive embrace as she explained the events of the night. Not once during her hour long journey did she foresee anger. Why would she? In the three months she's known Harry, she'd never witnessed him upset.

Stepping into his entry, Claire saw and felt the aura of his fury. After dealing with Tony's anger, she was now face-to-face with an obviously irate Harrison Baldwin. Her imagined scenarios paled in comparison. This was worse than she'd predicted.

On the table near the sofa, Harry displayed the source of his discontentment. Laid out for her viewing pleasure were pages of information, multiple internet stories complete with photos featuring her and Anthony Rawlings.

Shit, she thought, this stupid gala only happened five hours ago. How did all of this get out already?

Claire walked silently to the table and scanned the headlines: *Rawlings' Reunited, Anthony Rawlings Asks for Privacy, Innocent? Anthony Rawlings' New Claim*. There were more, but she just couldn't stomach to read each one. Each article contained pictures—one of them during the introductions, with Tony's arm behind Claire's back and them both smiling another photo was during the meal. He appeared to be smiling at something she was saying—a friendly conversation—there was another picture of them standing together, talking to another couple. The other couple was not identified. Claire read the caption:

EVERYONE IS TALKING! *The big news at this year's National Center for Learning Disabilities Fundraising Gala, in San Francisco, is not the millions of dollars raised for a worthy charity. It is the reunification of Anthony Rawlings and Claire Nichols. Their unexpected inseparability during the festivities begs the question: is this merger only personal or will it include Shedis-tics and SiJo Gaming?*

As she put down the page, another photo caught her eye. It was one of them at the head table; Tony was kissing her hand. The look on her own face made Claire uneasy. The woman in the picture was staring into Tony's eyes with a blushed radiance. Claire remembered; it was right after his speech.

"Yeah, that one caught my attention too." Harry's emotionally-laden voice returned Claire to present. "I've never seen that look in your eyes. May I commend you! You're acting skills are amazing!"

Tentatively, she looked up to Harry. His blue eyes cried out with unspoken angst. She laid the papers back on the table and struggled with her own emotions. Claire needed to feel understood. Instead, she felt challenged and fought the urge to launch her defenses. When she spoke, her voice sounded flat, "Do you want to hear what happened? Or, have you already made your

own conclusions?"

He stared in silence. Finally, shrugging his shoulders, Harry walked to the kitchen and returned with a partial bottle of Blue Label and an empty tumbler. Pouring himself two fingers of whiskey, he sat down in his recliner, gestured to the sofa, and replied, "By all means, make yourself comfortable and fill me in. I can't wait to hear how this isn't how it looks." She sat. He took a drink of the amber liquor and added, "It never is, is it?"

"I've never seen you drink—like this."

"I've had a shitty day. Would you like a glass? Or has your day been all parties and private drivers?"

She saw herself in the mirror at Tony's penthouse. How could he not see that she'd been crying? Claire could feel her swollen eyelids. Did he think she looked like someone who'd had a great day?

"No, thank you." She answered dryly. "Harry..." Claire began, then she stopped. Her head pounded with her internal debate. Was she mad, sad, defensive, or wounded? Abruptly, she stood and walked toward the door. "I can't do this." The tears resumed. Claire honestly wondered how she had any tears left. "I can't do more confrontations."

Suddenly, Harry was out of the chair and standing before her. She looked up at his expression. Behind the anger, she saw hurt.

She had been wrong. Hurt was worse than anger. The smell of whiskey burned her nostrils as his breath blew warmly toward her face. Her stomach clenched, but undeterred she strived to maintain the eye contact.

Claire attempted to explain, "You deserve to hear everything, but know that I didn't do anything without thinking of you and of Amber. I did it for you! But I can't talk to you about it when you're like this."

She reached for the door handle as his words cut into her heart, "Did you sleep with him?"

Claire wanted to be angry, but then she remembered her dream—that wasn't a dream and settled for offended. "I can't believe you just asked me that. No! We didn't sleep together tonight."

He seized her shoulders and stared down into her red, swollen eyes. "Why?"

"Because, he blackmailed me! With you and with Amber and SiJo. He was responsible for the problems you had tonight at SiJo."

Harry interjected, "No, he wasn't! We found the problem; it was internal. I tried to call you. Hell, I was on my way to San Francisco when Amber called me. She saw the news release, and after witnessing our moment in her living room, she thought I should know."

Claire's stomach twisted. She desperately wanted to make Harry understand. "But he *did* know about it! He threatened to make your problems worse if I didn't concede. He had that press release issued before I even spoke

to him.”

Harry released her shoulders and stared incredulously. “I can’t fathom how you can continually believe he has that much power. Our computer engineers are top notch. Your ex-husband...” Harry struggled with his words, walked to his glass, took another drink, and continued. “...or should I say the man you’re working to reconcile with can’t just snap his fingers and bring down our firewall.”

“Firewall! That was the word he used. He said it was incompetent, and I didn’t answer your calls because he took my phone.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Our firewall is secure. Our people had everything cleared and secure by 8:00 PM. I could have been there with you by 9:00 PM.” He took another drink and chuckled. “Now, that sure as hell would’ve been fun!”

“You had it cleared by 8:00 PM?” she repeated dejectedly.

“Yes, why?”

Claire closed her eyes. She remembered Tony’s words: “The breach has been resolved. It *has been* since about 8:00 PM this evening.” It was clear, Harry wouldn’t believe her. She made her way to his sofa and collapsed. *The night would never end.*

“I know I sound ridiculous, but don’t you see? Now, I’m trapped. He took my plans for public revelation and used them against me.”

“How are you trapped?”

The words flowed with welcomed release as she tried to explain. She told him about being summoned to the penthouse, the revelation of their supposed reconciliation, the gala, and their confrontations back in the penthouse. Admittedly, her recollection contained a few omissions. Specifically, she excluded the kiss and the disclosure about her dream. She explained to Harry that the news release was a public disclosure. According to public knowledge, she and Tony were now working on their relationship and that public failure wasn’t an option.

His shocked expression renewed her stream of tears. After waiting for him to comment, she finally whispered, “You and I aren’t official. We haven’t even told Amber about us.”

“So you’re ending this...” He waved his arm around. “...us... because of a news release?”

“No! I don’t want *us* to end. For the time being, we’ll just keep it the way it was, under wraps.” She tried to smile. “You know, like they say: *friends with benefits*.”

Harry contemplated her words. “So, *I’m* friends with benefits, whereas you’re going to be out in public with *him*? ”

“I have to talk to him about it. I’m supposed to meet with him tomorrow before he leaves for Iowa, but that’s my current concession, public only—no

private.”

“Well, obviously when it comes to Rawlings your negotiating skills are stellar! After your little meeting tomorrow, you’ll probably move back to Iowa. Hell, you won’t even need to pack your things. I’m sure he’ll gladly buy everything new,” Harry’s sarcasm-saturated words stung. Claire believed the pain from a physical slap would pass faster than the hurt she felt growing in her chest.

Claire stood and turned toward the door; her dry tone resumed. “I’m going home.” She paused, still facing the door and asked, “Unless Amber no longer wants me?”

“She didn’t say that. It’s your home. No one’s kicking you out.”

Claire exhaled in relief. After a few steps, she turned back. “What about us?”

His blue eyes paled as his broad shoulders sagged. “What *us*? We aren’t official. You see, I didn’t realize I needed to inform the Associated Press. Maybe you could devise a handbook?”

She squared her shoulders and stared at him through swollen lids. “*You* are letting him win.” After a prolonged silence, she lowered her eyes and turned toward the door.

As she stepped into the hall, she heard him say, “No, you forfeited...”

Walking toward Amber’s condominium, Claire grasped the magnitude of Tony’s current victory. In one critical move, he completed a double attack. He exposed a weakness at SiJo Gaming. Even if Harry didn’t believe her, Claire knew Tony was responsible for their problems. If she hadn’t done as Tony asked, those problems would have become worse. It also proved he could do it again.

Next, in a bold and critical move, he exposed their bogus relationship. While risking negative public opinion, he took control of the situation. He effectively removed any power Claire previously believed she possessed. As a bonus for forcing her moves, Tony damaged her relationship with Harry.

While opening the door to her dark, quiet condominium, Claire wondered about Amber. How would she behave toward Claire tomorrow? Was Tony systematically removing her external support, in essence whittling away her chess pieces?

Lying in her cool bed, Claire’s tired mind tried to regroup. Did she still have any power? Could she fight him? The questions and answers processed slower and slower as she tried to debate her options. Sleep overtook her consciousness. There was no doubt—to paraphrase a book her mother used to read to her as a child: *it had been a terrible, horrible, very bad, and very long day*. She couldn’t even rise triumphant over sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

You cannot make the same mistake twice. Because the second time you make it, it is not a mistake, it is a choice.

—Unknown

THE INCESSANT RINGING of her alarm jolted Claire from her blissfully sound sleep. Her mind reeled with *why* she'd set an alarm. Rarely did she need to wake at a definite time. Besides, she didn't get to bed until almost 3:00 AM the night before. As she sat up to turn off the noise, her stomach twisted, and she fell against the pillows. Closing her eyes, she willed the rapid onset of nausea to pass.

The alarm continued to assault the silence of her normally peaceful room; nevertheless, Claire feared moving to stop the ringing. Perspiration beaded her entire body. Suddenly, her light silk nightgown moistened and plastered against her clammy skin. Slowly, she tried to remove the covers from her sweat drenched legs. Her focus increased with each movement. Claire prayed if she earnestly concentrated, then she could keep the contents of her stomach in check.

Exhaling repeatedly, she stared at the bright ceiling. Mindlessly, she realized she'd forgotten to close the blinds the night before. Through the wrenching intestinal pain, her eyes squinted against the added assault of the unrestrained morning sunlight flooding her bedroom.

Suddenly, Claire remembered the reason for an alarm. She was supposed to meet Tony at 10:00 AM. Could her impending meeting be the origin of her current illness? Perhaps even her body didn't want to see him again.

The knock at her door caused Claire to jump. The jolt intensified the nausea, propelling more beads of perspiration to adorn her skin. "Come in," she managed as her face contorted in pain, and she concentrated once again on breathing.

Claire didn't turn her head to see her roommate enter. Nevertheless, she

heard the door open and Amber's footsteps approaching the alarm.

"What the heck? It's Saturday morning. Why do you have a damn alarm —?" As Amber turned from the now silenced clock, she beheld her roommate's ashened, perspiration drenched complexion. Her tone mellowed, "Claire, what's the matter?"

Claire didn't speak, but she gently shook her head from side to side. The movement was too much. Gathering strength, Claire reached for her blankets, threw them back, jumped from the bed, and ran to her bathroom.

It had been a long time since Claire Nichols had been physically sick. The last time she remembered vomiting was when she learned of Simon's death, which seemed ironic now that she was living in Amber's home. The heaves came in waves.

Amber stood, holding Claire's long auburn hair away from her face as Claire rested her heavy head on trembling arms and waited for the next upsurge. When it came, Amber remained quiet while Claire's body wracked with convulsions. Even after the contents of Claire's stomach were gone, the heaving continued.

In time, the lull between occurrences lengthened. Finally, her body stilled, leaving only a weakened and shivering Claire.

Amber helped her roommate sit on the closed lavatory lid, wetted a washcloth with cool water, and handed it to Claire. Next, she directed her to wipe her face; then Amber helped Claire to the sink where she repeatedly rinsed her mouth with water. After Amber helped Claire back to bed, Claire closed her eyes and prayed that, whatever this was, it was over.

"It could be food poisoning," Amber offered after Claire's color returned and her breathing normalized. "Maybe you ate something bad at the gala last night. I wonder if anyone else is having problems."

Feeling her strength returning, Claire nodded her head. "You're probably right. With as bad as last night was, food poisoning would be a highlight." She grasped the hand of the woman now sitting on the side of her bed. "Amber, we need to talk about last night."

Amber visibly bristled and regrouped. "We do." Her tone was comforting not harsh, as it had been when she entered the room about the alarm. "But not right now. Can I get you something? Maybe some toast? It could help settle your stomach."

"What time is it?" Claire asked, panic threatening to disrupt her current non-vomiting state.

"It's a 7:45 AM. Why did you have that alarm set anyway?" Amber asked as she replaced the cloth on Claire's forehead with a fresh cool compress.

"I have to meet someone at 10:00 AM."

"Well, I think you're rescheduling."

Closing her eyes, Claire assessed her current state, and she said, "I can't."

She was truly feeling better. Hopefully, the offending food was gone. She wondered, *could Tony possibly be sick too?* A weak smile floated across her face. She responded, “I’ll take that toast, if you don’t mind.”

Amber stood. “Sure thing. Do you need anything else?”

“A glass of water, please.”

Amber squeezed Claire’s hand and replied, “Coming right up.”

Once she was gone, Claire reached for her phone. When she completed the task requiring movement successfully, Claire reassured herself that she was definitely feeling better and if the toast stayed down—she was good to go.

Claire needed to text Tony a meeting location. She wondered where she wanted to meet him. Her first thought was nowhere, but she knew that was unacceptable; then she remembered a cute café in Redwood Shores. It wasn’t far, and it wasn’t Palo Alto. She Googled the café and forwarded the information to Tony, with a text:

“I MIGHT BE LATE. HAD AN ISSUE THIS MORNING, BUT THINGS ARE IMPROVING.”

Claire knew he wouldn’t be happy about her possible tardiness. Nonetheless, remembering the overwhelming sickness, she decided Tony’s darkening gaze ranked below projectile vomiting and keeping Amber’s toast down on her current list of concerns.

Covering her now cold body with blankets, Claire felt her stomach growl. How could she possibly be hungry after what she’d just experienced?



AT 9:51 AM Claire eased her Honda Accord into the parking lot of the *Patio Café* in Redwood Shores. She wasn’t late. Her reflection in the rearview mirror frowned back through the glass. Even the blush and lipstick didn’t disguise her pallor. On the bright side, she’d kept Amber’s toast down, plus a banana, and despite the paleness, she truly felt better.

During her drive to Redwood Shores, Claire fought the urge to turn around and miss this mandatory meeting. Once again, it was fear that propelled her. This time, it wasn’t the fear of physical punishment. It was the fear of Tony showing up at Amber’s. He was right; Claire’s concern for others was her weakness. Although she dreaded seeing him, she wrestled with fleeting positive thoughts regarding her ex-husband.

Claire reasoned it was because of their charade last night. During the evening, as much as she hated to admit it, she actually relaxed and enjoyed Tony’s company. Guiltily, she thought of the picture Harry printed—the one of Tony kissing her hand after his speech. The look on her face exposed her

momentary ease and affability. No wonder Harry was upset.

Upset or not, Harry's words still hurt. They may have been brought on by a combination of jealousy and liquor, but that didn't make them any less painful. How could Harry honestly feel her affections could change so dramatically in six hours?

The thoughts of Harry turned into thoughts of Emily, John, and Courtney. Her magnitude of missed calls and messages on her iPhone were mostly from Harry, Amber, and Emily. There was also one from Meredith. Claire decided that she should wait until after she spoke with Tony. Her work phone held missed calls and text messages from Courtney. Since she and Harry spoke last night and Amber wanted to wait, Claire spent a good part of her morning talking to Emily, John, and Courtney.

Apparently, Tony's press release hit the airways last night at approximately 7:30 PM, PST. Emily and John saw it around 10:30 PM in Indiana. Courtney said Brent read it on his news feed about 9:30 PM in Iowa. Needless to say, they were all relieved to hear from her this morning. That being said, once the relief passed, indignation reigned.

Courtney remained the most supportive. She understood Tony's persuasive nature and promised continued support. Claire appreciated Courtney's constant concern, despite her stress regarding her son's upcoming wedding. Understandably, she and Brent weren't happy about Tony's claims of ensuring Claire's pardon. Claire assured Courtney that she didn't believe him, and she'd never tell him, or anyone else, who her actual saviors were. Even Jane Allyson didn't know.

Claire repeated her honest account of the entire evening with everyone. There were a few omissions. Courtney was the only one to hear about the kiss, and no one learned about her dream—that wasn't. She wasn't ready to admit that reality to herself.

After everything she'd been through, Claire believed honesty, no matter how difficult to face, was her greatest ally. Remembering the isolation of Iowa and being Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, she vowed that despite the forced charade, she wouldn't allow Tony to distance her closest supporters. She would do whatever was necessary to keep her loved ones safe, as well as their businesses. Privately, she promised never again to deceive the people around her.

Despite, or possibly because of, Claire's truthfulness, Emily was livid. A few times during their tense conversation, Claire considered hanging-up on her sister. After all, Claire wasn't feeling top-notch after the whole food poisoning thing, and having her sister's condescending, accusatory tone loudly ringing through her phone didn't aid her recovery.

Walking along the sidewalk toward the café, Claire lifted her face to the breeze. Wisps of loose hair blew around her face as she inhaled. The fresh air

coming off a small inlet from San Francisco Bay was cool. Her blue jeans and blouse were perfect for the late spring air. Yes, if she were in Indiana or Iowa this late in May then it would be much warmer. Nonetheless, she was slowly acclimating to West Coast weather.

Parked three cars down, Claire saw a gray sedan with a man inside reading a paper. She hadn't spoken to Phil since San Diego. With Tony near, she decided this wasn't a good time to chat.

Phil Roach was another of Tony's intrusions that somehow, over the past three months, she'd come to accept. *Was she being too compliant, as Emily said?* Claire didn't believe so. She truthfully felt she was resisting Tony's control much better than she ever had. Not staying with him last night and not allowing him to visit the condominium this morning were two examples of her non-compliance. Claire contemplated her strength, or lack of, as she stepped into the busy restaurant.

The large glass doors led directly to a counter. The Saturday morning crowd filled the bustling café with people waiting to order food. The hum of voices filled her ears as the various aromas filled her lungs. She tried desperately to ignore the returning nausea as she made her way to a tall two person table near the window. A ceiling fan above the table provided a continual cool breeze, calming her queasiness. Moments later, she glanced toward the doors and saw Tony walking casually toward her.

Involuntarily, she smiled. He looked so laid-back and informal in jeans and a button down shirt. She noticed how his crisp shirt was pressed and untucked. His hair was perfect, and his face freshly shaven. Her eyes went back to the jeans. Claire always liked Tony's long legs in blue jeans. When his dark eyes met hers, her breathing stopped. She immediately judged his expression. His cheeks rose and a small smile came to his lips. Claire exhaled with a sigh of relief. She didn't want more confrontations. If this charade needed to proceed then she wanted to learn the specifics and go on with her life.

Unexpectedly, he bent down and kissed her cheek before taking the seat across from her. Claire's eyebrows rose suspiciously as she eyed the man across the table. He responded with a mischievous grin and crooned. "Good morning, Claire. It's nice to see you aren't late."

His pleasant greeting eased her tightly strung nerves; she chuckled. "Yes, you see there was this man I used to know. He was a real stickler for punctuality."

"Really? It seems as though he must have been a good influence. His persistence appears to have paid off." Tony's brown eyes glittered, reflecting the sunlight through the windows.

"I'm not sure about his influence, but *insistence* would better describe it; however, since you mentioned it, persistence was something he'd definitely

mastered.”

“Hmm, sounds like my kind of man. I’d like to meet him.”

Claire shook her head good-naturedly. “No, I don’t think you’d like him.”

Tony’s eyes opened wider. “You don’t?”

“No, he has real control issues. You two would probably clash.”

“Because... you think *I* have control issues?” This time, Tony’s eyebrows rose.

Claire leaned forward—as if telling a secret. Her eyes sparkled with the lightheartedness of their conversation. “I hate to be the one to break it to you... but yes, you do.”

Tony’s laughter filled her ears. Finally, he asked, “Don’t you want something to eat?”

“No, not really, I ate earlier.”

“I’ll get us some coffee then.”

Although she usually loved coffee, the idea didn’t sound good on her recently emptied stomach. “Could you get me an iced tea instead?”

Tony eyed her skeptically. “Sure, unsweetened, correct?”

Claire nodded.

When Tony returned with their drinks, they began to discuss this public reconciliation. Although the café bustled with patrons, their voices remained low and private. “Claire, I’m pleasantly surprised by your accepting attitude this morning.”

She sipped her tea. “Don’t mistake it for pleasure. I don’t like being bullied into this situation; however, I see signs of compromise. It gives me hope.”

“Compromise?”

“In your own way, you’re trying to be accommodating. If you weren’t then you would’ve tried to stop me from leaving last night, or you would’ve insisted on riding with me. I see that.”

Tony nodded, considering her words; then he asked, “*Hope*, what do you hope for?”

“That this won’t last long. That we can remain friends and be honest with the world.”

As she spoke, clouds darkened his gaze. “I see.” He took a drink of his coffee. “I hope... you change your mind.”

“See what I mean? That’s progress. I honestly don’t intend to change my mind; however, I’ll admit, when you aren’t being a controlling ass who’s threatening my friends or my friends’ company...” She smiled coyly. “...you can be charming.”

“Thank you, my dear.” He snorted, obviously shocked by her candor, and replied, “When you’re being bold and cheeky, that spark in your gorgeous green eyes makes my initial irritation fade. At that point, I see you for what

you truly are.”

“Oh really, what am I?”

“Sexy as hell.” He leaned closer, his words slowing to a sultry tenor, “And when you’re being reticent and genteel, I find you irresistible.”

She felt her insides quicken and her cheeks blush—just like in the picture. “Well, then I guess I can behave in any manner without fear of consequences.”

“As long as you are doing it with me, my affection will prevail.”

Claire shivered at the possible implications of his words. Playfulness left her tone. “Tony, I don’t intend to be with you all the time. I’m not moving back to Iowa.”

“I’m a busy man, Claire; I can’t be flying to California every other day.”

“Then we won’t be seeing each other every other day. By the way, when do you need to be back?”

Dryly, he said, “I have a private jet. I don’t have a schedule to maintain.”

“I’m aware of your jet, but I thought you might have meetings or a date or something.”

The clouds returned. “I won’t be having any *dates* with anyone except you. That was the point of the news release.” His voice lowered as his tone hardened, “And neither will you.”

She sat straighter. “This is what we need to discuss; define *date*.”

His hesitant expression glared. His gaze loomed shades darker than moments before. “A date is the going out in public of a man and a woman.” He scanned the café. “I suppose it could be a man and a man or a woman and a woman; we are in California.”

“Well, that happens in Iowa, also, but my point is, two people can go out in public and be friends, not dating.”

“I would prefer you didn’t.” Before she could choose the words to her reply, he rephrased, “It would not be publicly acceptable. So the answer is no.”

Trying to keep her voice low, Claire said, “I’m telling you; I’m not asking your permission.”

“This is not debatable.”

“Then what is?” She leaned across the table as indignation infiltrated her words. “Why are we even here, discussing anything at all? If it’s all predetermined, just lay out the ground rules.” She tried to keep her voice low and restrain her emotions. “That’s the way you operate. Things don’t change!” Moisture stung her eyes as tears threatened her facade of strength. She stared and waited for the explosion, but Claire knew it wouldn’t be overt. Their location was too public, perhaps a whispered clandestine threat.

Although his eyes remained dark, the tips of Tony’s lips moved upward. He reached out and held the hands that lay on the table in front of him. “Yes,

sexy as hell.”

Claire removed her hands, sat back against the chair, and pressed her lips together.

His tone lightened with a change of subject, “You know, I don’t think the cooler weather is good for you. You look pale. You need sun.”

“Thanks, I quite like the West Coast.”

Tony watched, presumably waiting for more outbursts. After a few moments, he said, “I concede. Some things are debatable. I would make you move to Iowa if I could. Don’t get me wrong. It isn’t that I’m incapable. It’s that I want you there of your own free will, so that move is debatable.”

“Not debatable. I’m not going.”

“Now you see. We each have issues where we don’t want to budge. Let’s discuss public events.”

Claire settled back and listened. Tony talked about the different public events and business trips he had scheduled in the near future. He offered transportation, private accommodations, and money to purchase appropriate attire. He also discussed acceptable behaviors while separated. In many ways, it reminded Claire of sitting in his office, listening to the ground rules of living in his house. The memories made her feel uneasy. With time, she felt her pulse increase and the temperature of the room increase. The breeze from the fan remained but no longer felt refreshing.

It was then she noticed the food behind her. The man must have had an entire side of pork. His plate overflowed with bacon, and the aroma filled the space around their table.

Although Tony was still talking and Claire had been attentively nodding, she abruptly stood. “Tony, I can’t do this. I need to leave.”

His shock quickly morphed to irritation. “What?”

“No, not this *us*. This *here*. I need to go outside.” With that, she grabbed her purse and walked briskly toward the door—away from the mound of pork. Each step eased her discomfort. Nonetheless, it wasn’t until she stepped into the sunshine and felt the wind once again on her face that she could truly inhale.

Only steps behind her, Tony reached for her arm and spun her toward him. His expression changed immediately. The rage disappeared into a mixture of displeasure and concern. “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know. I think I must have gotten food poisoning last night. How have you been feeling?”

“I feel fine. Is that what this just was, you not feeling well?”

“Yes, it was that bacon. It smelled horrid!”

Tony laughed. “I thought you liked bacon. Catherine used to have it for you all the time.”

Feeling better, Claire smiled. “I did. I do, I think. But, I was ill this

morning. That's why I thought I might be late."

Concern won the race on Tony's roller coaster of emotions. "You were ill? I could have come to you."

Her eyes narrowed. "No. I don't want you at Amber's. It just isn't right."

"I've taken you to my *friends*. If that is truly your definition of Amber and her brother, then what's the problem?"

There were so many things wrong. First, *his friends* reminded Claire of Brent and Courtney, people whom, just this morning, she'd spent over a half hour talking with on the phone. Next, she thought of Tony with Simon's fiancée, and lastly—Harry. At this moment, she wasn't sure how to define him, but having Harry and Tony together wouldn't be good—no matter his definition.

"Are we done?" Claire asked.

"There are a few more things to discuss. How do you feel?"

"Better, the fresh air helps."

"I saw a park not far away. Would you like to walk?"

Claire nodded. Truthfully, she wanted to go home, but walking was better than staying in that café. Tony gently grasped her hand. Conceding the loss of her appendage, their fingers intertwined. The casual contact radiated familiar warmth through her body. They began walking toward Bridge Parkway. Across the small inlet, they entered a haven of nature. Trees surrounded a large grassy plane with picnic tables and benches overlooking a lagoon. Scattered about were signs indicating a summer concert season. Everything pointed to warmer weather and blue skies for the future.

While they talked about their agreement, they also chatted—not about anything in particular, just things. Surprisingly, it felt good and easy. As long as the conversation avoided Harry, Amber, and her incarceration, Claire found herself speaking without weighing each word. They laughed at children on the playground equipment and watched a man set up a camp to fish in the lagoon.

Claire tried to remember the last time she'd spent such a normal day with her ex-husband. It had been a long time. When Tony looked at his watch and saw that it was after 2:00 PM, he asked Claire if she were up to eating lunch.

"I think I can handle it, as long as there's no bacon," she said with a smile.

They walked back to Tony's car and drove to a small diner with outside seating. When the waiter brought the menus, Claire perfunctorily left hers lying on the table. She couldn't contain her surprise when Tony glanced her way and said, "Since you haven't been feeling well, you'd better look and see what sounds appetizing." It was the first time she'd ever ordered her own meal while with him. Maybe things do change?

By the time Tony took her back to her car, they'd made some compromises and found some common ground. In two weeks, she would join

him in Chicago for meetings and dinners with investors.

Standing next to Claire's car, Tony asked, "May I kiss you goodbye?"

"Is it a requirement of the news release and mandatory to keep my friends safe?"

"No." He leaned nearer. "It's because I would really like to kiss you."

She found herself on the precipice of a very slippery slope, her figurative footing was difficult to maintain. While her mind debated, her body leaned into his chest, and her face tipped upward. His strong arms encased her, his hands found their way to the nape of her neck, and his fingers entangled her hair. They may have been in a parking lot, or perhaps the moon, but at that moment, neither one knew. The rest of the world disappeared.



DRIVING TOWARD PALO Alto, Claire couldn't remember who finally pulled away from the embrace. Whoever it was, the other conceded. She did remember the sensual allure emanating from his eyes. Even in the car, the image reddened her cheeks.

Oh shit! What have I done? Claire asked herself as she contemplated her next assignment.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after another.

—Walter Elliott



EXT MESSAGE SENT: May 25: 4:41PM – To: Anthony Rawlings

“MS NICHOLS RETURNED SAFELY TO HER PARKING GARAGE. MS MCCOY NOT HOME. NO SIGN OF ANYONE ELSE”

Phil waited for a response. Either he would spend the evening monitoring Claire Nichols, watching the front door and parking garage, or he'd be done for the night. After the late night, last night, watching Harrison Baldwin drive the Highway 101 toward San Francisco and turn around and go back to Palo Alto, he hoped this night was done. After so much time on Mr. Rawlings' payroll, could he be getting soft?



AFTER HER AFTERNOON with Tony, Claire returned to a quiet condominium. She wandered from room to room, looking for Amber; instead, she found a note on the kitchen counter:

I'm running errands—will be back soon. I'm having dinner with Keaton. Maybe we can talk tomorrow? Hope you're feeling better. There's a

message on the house voicemail for you.

Amber

The note gave Claire hope. Optimistically, they would all work this out. She still didn't know what to think about Harry. While out with Tony, Claire checked her phone a couple of times: not one call or text message from Harry. Of course, he knew where she was and who she was with.

Thinking about Amber on a date with Keaton made Claire happy. Amber may argue the term *date*, but Claire recently heard from the *Rawlings Dictionary*. According to that very reliable source, *a date* was the term used to define the act of two people going out into public together. She shook her head and rolled her eyes. It was so ridiculous. Somehow, she would need to modify his definition.

Claire picked up the telephone receiver in the kitchen. With cell phones, they rarely used this telephone, yet Amber maintained SiJo needed a way to reach her if something happened to her cell phone. Pushing the appropriate buttons Claire waited for the message. *Who would call me on this number?*

The voice came through the receiver: "You have one saved message—saved message. Claire Nichols. Do I have the right number? I remembered something else. Call me back: 4X2-555-7732."

Claire listened to the message a second time. The man's voice sounded vaguely familiar, but she wasn't sure who or why? It was probably a reporter. Heaven knows she'd been making the news lately. Whoever it was would call back, if whatever he remembered was truly that important.

It was only a little after 5:00 PM, but with her stomach full of what she ordered. Claire smiled while adding that last part to her thought. She was tired. These past two days had worn her out and down. The idea of a warm bath and an early night sounded heavenly. Honestly, she thought about calling, texting, or going over to Harry's, but she didn't have the strength for another confrontation.

Walking toward her room, Claire thought about her afternoon with Tony. She was incredibly thankful it didn't include overt arguing. Her emotions have been working overtime, and despite their blackmailing topic of conversation, the calm afternoon was surprisingly therapeutic.

As she opened the door and tapped the switch illuminating her bedroom, Claire stared in shock. The sweet aroma permeated her senses. On her dresser, desk, and bedside stand were large bouquets of long stemmed red roses. Tears fill her eyes as she made her way to a card propped against one of the glittering vases with *Claire* penned on the outside of the small envelope.

Gingerly opening the flap, Claire removed the small rectangle piece of card stock. Relief filled her consciousness, and her tired muscles relaxed as she read the words:

*If you're reading this, you haven't moved away... and I'm a jerk.
Now you know why I don't drink—much.
It makes me an ass! I hope we can talk again—soon...
I promise to be more open. Can you forgive me? Harry*

She immediately reached for her iPhone and sent the text:

“THANK YOU FOR THE BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS! EXCESSIVE, BUT I LOVE THEM. YES, I CAN FORGIVE... IF YOU CAN? WE CAN TALK TOMORROW? I'M TIRED AND GOING TO BED AFTER A BATH. SO TOMORROW?”

Claire inhaled the jasmine from the dissolved bath salts as her shoulders submerged under the warm water. Laying her head against the incline of the tub, she closed her eyes and let her mind wander. There was too much to process, too many things to think about. From the distance of her room, she heard the sound indicating a received text message. The warmth enveloped her as the salts moisturized her skin. Claire slipped away to the serenity of sleep.

She recognized the room. With each breath, the familiar stagnant air filled her lungs. As her eyes adjusted to the pale light, she saw the dimples on the painted cinderblock walls. Claire wrapped the thin blanket tighter, trying to fend off the chill permeating deep into her soul. It wasn't from the controlled temperature of the small cell, but from the solitude. When she stared up she saw all four corners of the small room without turning her head. Only the grid of an air vent disturbed the monotony of the dirty white ceiling. Each wall looked the same—same color, same height, and same length. Pulling her from the intolerable seclusion, the buzzer sounded. Tentatively, she moved

toward the door with the small window. People could only be seen through the small glass opening if they stood directly on the other side. Her heartbeat quickened. Could it be a package or a visitor... someone to talk to? Lifting herself to her tip-toes, she peered through the pane... Her vision filled with eyes, his dark penetrating eyes...

Claire woke with a startled jump. Her heart beat rapidly as her quick movement caused tepid water to splash about the tub onto the tile floor. She must have fallen asleep. Her eyes scanned the luxurious tile, plush towels, and dimmed sconces framing the mirror. The view blurred as tears filled her eyes. Did the tears come from her dream or her relief? She momentarily submerged her face under the now cooler water. Lifting her face above the water, the aroma of jasmine lingered, reinforcing her current location. She inhaled deeply as her muscles relaxed. She wasn't in prison; she wasn't alone. It was only a nightmare.



THE FOG DISSIPATED both from the Palo Alto sky and from the sleeping recesses of her mind. Sunshine facilitated the process as Claire's eyes adjusted to the morning light. She remembered the food poisoning of the day before and evaluated her current condition. The only possible ailment she could identify was hunger. Rolling tentatively toward the clock, her eyes widened at the number before her: 9:53 AM.

When Claire checked her phones, she found the response from Harry:

"I'M GLAD YOU'RE HOME. GET SOME REST. WE'LL TALK TOMORROW."

It made her both happy and sad. She wanted them to work it out, but she dreaded telling him about her public arrangement with Tony.

On her other phone, she had a text from Courtney. It was received at 9:17 AM and said:

"FYI-TONY IS HERE. HE WANTS TO TALK TO US ABOUT YOU! I

SLIPPED AWAY TO TELL YOU. I WILL TEXT WHEN HE'S GONE.

Claire closed her eyes and shook her head, poor Courtney and Brent. Caleb's wedding is in less than a week away, and they have Tony on their doorstep. Narcissistic as ever, Claire was sure Tony believed his issues were more important than anything else in their lives. Curiosity grew as Claire contemplated the conversation occurring 2,000 miles away.



AMBER ENTERED THE kitchen as Claire finished the final stages of preparing her breakfast feast. She had two fried eggs, two pieces of toast, a banana, and a cup of yogurt. Amber's voice sounded light as she asked, "Did you forget how to make coffee?"

Claire grinned. It wasn't that long ago that she didn't know how to work the strange little machine. "No, I'm in more of an orange juice mood."

"Harry told me about your talk the other night."

"Well, it wasn't much of a talk."

"Do you really think Tony's responsible for our problems?"

Claire nodded, her mouth full of banana. Once she'd swallowed, she replied, "I do. I honestly don't think it can be proven, unless there is someone working for him and you can torture a confession out of them."

Having Claire's ravenous hunger appeased and Amber's attitude composed, created the perfect environment for them to calmly discuss the gala and recent events. Claire told Amber about her agreement with Tony. How she needed to appear with him in public, and how she was worried about telling Harry. Amber agreed; Harry wouldn't be pleased.

Although upsetting, the thought didn't deter Claire's appetite. Amber laughed as Claire used her toast to sweep the remnants of egg from her plate.

"I only ate lunch yesterday. I'm trying to catch up." Claire responded with a shrug.

Before they finished, the front door opened, and they heard Harry's footsteps approaching the kitchen.

"That's my cue to sneak back to my room. You two need some privacy," Amber whispered.

By the time Harry entered the kitchen, his sister was gone. Claire looked up from her empty plate and sheepishly said, "Hi, thanks for the flowers."



SOPHIA WATCHED DEREK as he read the newspaper and sipped his coffee. Things were perfect after the gala, but she wasn't ready to mention the possible tour. Then yesterday, the time never seemed right. Could it be because she didn't want to do it? It was a fantastic offer, but why wouldn't she want to tour the country, all expenses paid. As Sophia watched her husband, she knew the answer: she wanted to be with him!

The ringing of her cell phone brought Sophia back to reality. The screen said: *MOM*. Sophia frowned. Derek looked up from the paper. "Who is it? Why do you look worried?"

"My Mom, I just talked to her yesterday." With that, Sophia swiped the screen. "Hi Mom, what's up?"

When Sophia disconnected the line, she turned to Derek's furrowed brows and concerned expression. He'd heard Sophia's end of the conversation, and now he wanted to know more.

"Is it your dad again?"

Sophia nodded. "Yes. Mom's really worried. She said yesterday he went to the store, someplace he'd been a million times. He didn't come home for three hours. She kept trying to reach him on his cell phone. Finally, when he came home, he didn't have the groceries and couldn't remember why he'd been out or where he'd been."

"She needs to get him some help."

"He's stubborn," Sophia said with a sigh. "I'm worried. I think part of it is financial. Dad doesn't want to spend any money on himself."

"Then help them. They sure helped you."

"He won't accept it, but Mom might. Maybe I should go for a visit?"

Derek kissed Sophia's forehead. "I need to leave for that ten day China trip next week. Maybe you could go then?"

She took a drink of coffee. "I've also been thinking about the studio in Provincetown. You know, since I have the money from those paintings, I was thinking about hiring someone to keep that studio open, while we're out here. I hate for it to sit closed during peak tourist season."

Derek agreed. The money changed so many things, giving Sophia the ability to do things she'd always wanted.

"I've been meaning to tell you about an offer I received the other night," Sophia said.

Derek looked up again from the newspaper. "What kind of offer?"

"Well, that mysterious buyer, the one who never showed up..."

Derek listened patiently as Sophia described the tour, the cities, the exposure, and the time apart. He feigned enthusiasm. "That sounds amazing. What do you plan to do about it?"

"I agree, it's amazing, but I'm going to tell Mr. George no."

Derek's relief was visible. "Why?"

Sophia put her arms around her husband's neck. Their eyes met soft brown to light gray. She kissed his tender lips. "Do you think I should do it?"

"I want you to do whatever is best for you."

"I want to be with you, and it's not just me—it's *us*. I'm thrilled I've sold these paintings. I love the idea of having studios on each coast, but my mom needs help, and I want to be with you. There are too many things going on for me to travel around the country for two years."

He pulled her close. "Good, I don't want to ever stop your dreams."

"You and me, we are my dreams. The rest is just frosting on the cake."

Derek snickered. "You like frosting."

"I do, but too much makes me sick."

"Then by all means, Mrs. Burke, we don't want you feeling ill."



HARRY LISTENED AGAIN as Claire explained the gala. This time, he didn't judge. He didn't interrupt or doubt Claire's theories. They talked about her agreement. Finally, Harry asked, "How long is this supposed to go on?"

"I don't know for sure. He gave me dates reaching into July."

His lips started to move, but then he pressed them together.

"The first one is in two weeks, in Chicago. I'll have my own accommodations."

"Really, Claire, what's the point?"

"Appearances. It's all about appearance and manipulation."

"Do you think it will ever end?"

"I don't know. Maybe if we learn something about his past. I need something to hold over him. I'm going to keep talking with Meredith. She's been in contact with some publisher. They no longer want to do a series of articles, but a book."

"Why are you still meeting if this book will never get published?"

"I still have the agreement. If anything happens to me or someone I care about then the book will be published."

"So, you're both threatening each other?"

Claire nodded and shrugged. "Yes, it's a great basis for a relationship, don't you think?"

Harry placed his hand over Claire's. "No, it seems pretty messed up to me. I just want a simple honest relationship."

Claire sighed. "That would be wonderful."

He bent down, their noses nearly touched. "I'll accept friends with benefits, for now, but not forever." His lips brushed hers.

Claire's body relaxed, and her arms found their way around his neck. "I'll

find a way out of this. I promise.”

Amber joined them as they talked about SiJo. “I felt the tension ease; do you mind if I join you two?”

“Well, I don’t know. It is your place,” Claire said with a grin. She felt triumphant. Tony tried to take this camaraderie away from her. He failed. It was a small victory, the saving of a pawn, but each victorious battle—no matter how small—helped win the war.

“Oh, did you listen to that message?” Amber asked Claire.

“Yes, twice. I have no idea who it is. Probably a reporter or something.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked.

Claire told him about the message on the house phone. He asked if it had been erased. When Claire told him no; he listened to the voicemail. Claire noticed his expression cloud as he replayed the message and wrote down the number.

“Let me do some checking. I don’t like people calling this number. It’s unlisted.”

After Harry left, Amber mentioned Claire’s flowers, “You were quite the popular lady yesterday.”

“It was very nice of your brother.”

“He brought one of the vases. The other two came in separate deliveries. Neither had a card, but I did find it strange; the delivery guy said one of the bouquets was for Claire Rawls.”

Claire felt the blood drain from her face. “Why didn’t you say anything about that before?”

Amber stared at Claire. “I figured it was some code between you and your ex. I didn’t want to upset Harry, more.”

“I don’t think it is a code. Tony doesn’t like that I even know about his past. He isn’t going to flaunt it in a delivery. I’ll ask. Honestly, I’d feel better if they were from him. Otherwise, it creeps me out.”

Her iPhone had two missed calls from Tony, and her work phone had a text message from Courtney, received an hour earlier:

“HE JUST LEFT. SAID HE WANTS YOU TO BE HIS PLUS 1 AT THE WEDDING! CALL ME!”

CHAPTER FORTY

If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.

—Anne Bradstreet

NATHANIEL HELD MARIE's hands and looked at his beautiful young wife. Her resolve was stronger than that of a woman two or three times her age. At twenty-six, she'd experienced more heartbreak and disappointment than most endure in a lifetime.

"I'm doing fine. Nathaniel, please don't worry about me. You're going to be out of this place in only nine more months. Please use your energy taking care of yourself."

"You shouldn't be tied to an old man in a prison cell. You should be enjoying everything life has to offer."

Marie's smile took his breath away. Her gray eyes lit up the dull visitor's room. Concentrating on her, he could forget their surroundings. Her vitality sustained him. Nathaniel didn't know if he could make it without her weekly visits. Mentally, he'd replay them word for word in his head for days. The way her hair glistened under the florescent lights, the scent of her perfume, and the feel of her skin ran a continual loop through his memory. Then on about Wednesday, two days before her return, his memories would give way to anticipation. Sometimes, he tried to guess what color she'd wear or how she'd fix her hair. He liked her dark blonde hair loose and long, hanging down her slender back, but then again, he liked it up exposing her neck and collar bone.

In so many ways, Marie reminded him of Sharron, when they were young. Sharron's energy and wit continually enthralled him. Nathaniel knew he was the luckiest man alive to experience two such wonderful women. He wished Marie knew Sharron when she was healthier. He believed they would have been friends. His late wife had a knack for calming him when the world

triggered fury. At this moment, Marie was doing the same thing. Her steel eyes danced with life while her steady voice reassured.

"You, sir, are *not* getting rid of me that easily." She gently removed one of her hands from his hold and placed it on top of his. "I love you, and I plan on spending much more time with you. If the next nine months are in this room at an hour a week, then so be it. But after that, Mr. Rawls, I get you all to myself."

"But, Marie, you deserve—"

She interrupted, "I think you've made me realize I deserve to be loved, and you're the man to do it."

Nathaniel grinned in spite of himself. Marie's radiating beauty left him speechless. It wasn't just the external attributes of Catherine Marie Rawls, but her spirit and kindness. The only time he saw that spirit change was with the mention of his son. Nevertheless, the subject needed to be breached. She was his only source of information. Anton only visited occasionally; now in graduate school and working, understandably Anton's time was limited.

The idea of Anton supporting himself through graduate school infuriated Nathaniel. This entire mess was ridiculous. The damn FBI should have better things to do, real criminals to find, instead of attacking a man for living the American dream. Truthfully, Nathaniel still had money, a good amount of money; however, accessing it and bringing it back to the United States was too risky.

Since the court seized his home, company, and other assets, he was thankful he'd provided Marie with a comfortable investment portfolio. If they'd been married when he was convicted then she would've lost that too, but because they weren't, it remained hers.

When he got out of this hellhole, Nathaniel intended to give Marie a real wedding, maybe somewhere on a beach. The justice of the peace, in this visitor's room with Anton as witness, was legal and memorable; however, it wasn't the kind of memory Nathaniel wanted Marie to have of her wedding. If she'd said yes the first twenty-five times he asked, they would have had a much nicer wedding. Then again, she wouldn't have the financial resolve. It wasn't like she had a fortune, but she could live comfortably.

Neither Samuel nor Amanda visited Nathaniel, ever. After Anton informed Nathaniel of Samuel's testimony, Nathaniel honestly didn't care if he ever laid eyes on his son again. What upset Nathaniel was his son and daughter-in-law's constant intrusion into Marie's life. Since Samuel was part owner and a top executive at Rawls Corporation, his assets too were seized. Despite Samuel's cooperation, he and Amanda were left with nothing. Somehow, in Samuel's mind, he felt he deserved what Marie now claimed as hers.

Nathaniel wondered what Samuel would do if he knew about the

Switzerland investments. That information was only shared by Nathaniel, his wife, and his grandson. The funds needed to be routinely moved. The relocation of his investments kept curious individuals from discovering the actual administrator. He didn't physically move the money, but at least twice a year, he took a trip to Geneva and reallocated the funds. Throughout the years, his nest egg grew. With his inability to travel, Anton was now his proxy.

Nathaniel encouraged Anton's communication with his parents. Family had always been important. Just because he couldn't stand the sight of his son, didn't mean Anton should lose everyone. When Nathaniel spoke to his grandson, he could tell Anton's respect for his father had lessened, and despite his current location, Nathaniel felt Anton's growing respect for him. Nathaniel believed his investments were in safe hands with his grandson. Anton would never tell his father and disappoint his grandfather.

Nathaniel dreamt night and day of leaving the minimum security prison. That being said, Nathaniel Rawls wasn't a dreamer. He fought in WWII, clawed his way up the textile business, and worked day and night to provide excessively for his family. He understood the possibility he may not walk out of this facility.

There were threats. There were people who wanted what was rumored to be Nathaniel's. Others believed by hurting Nathaniel Rawls, they'd learn the truth about his supposed hidden millions.

Therefore, not only did he trust Anton with the knowledge regarding his investments, Nathaniel also trusted Anton with watching over Marie and her daughter. Anton's resources were limited, yet if something happened to Nathaniel, then his resources would grow exponentially. The money in Switzerland would be jointly owned by both Marie and Anton.

When Anton brought Nathaniel the information on Sherman Nichols, AKA Cole Mathews, and Jonathon Burke, Nathaniel knew he could trust his grandson with the name and location of Marie's child. Her daughter was safe and living with a loving set of parents. Nathaniel hoped one day Marie would want to know more. From what he'd learned, Marie should be proud of the young girl. Though only eight, she appeared the perfect mixture of obedience and precociousness. Looking at her biological mother, *why wouldn't she be?* They even had the same eyes.

"Have you had any recent problems with Samuel or Amanda?"

Marie lowered her lids momentarily and exhaled. Although obviously not her favorite subject, Marie answered, "I haven't heard from them this week. I did speak to Anton about Samuel's appeal to have our marriage voided."

"That is ridiculous. He can't do that. Our marriage is legal."

"Samuel has appealed to the State of New York to find our marriage void, based on your mental capacity."

Their hands disconnected as Nathaniel abruptly stood, and his metal chair groaned with the sudden movement, screeching across the linoleum floor. “My mental capacity?!” His face reddened with exasperation. “My mental capacity? He’s saying I’m crazy?”



MARIE’S LIPS TIGHTENED. She didn’t like seeing Nathaniel this upset. He had other concerns. Nevertheless, she relished his like-mindedness regarding Samuel. She’d endured too many *c congenial* family gatherings. When Nathaniel got out of this prison, they’d be able to live without the daily intrusion of her *son-in-law*. “He claims your business actions confirm previous mental instability, and the stress from the trial and now your incarceration have worked together to diminish your ability to make sound decisions.”

“Then get a God-damned doctor in here. I’ll do their tests. I’ll prove to the fucking world I’m sane.”

Marie stood. Resolutely, she walked toward her husband. His eyes burned with intense darkness; yet she showed no fear. “He hasn’t been granted the right to sue—yet. Hopefully, it will never get that far, and the courts won’t allow him to challenge our marriage at all.”

Her words pacified him. His eyes softened and the creases between his eyebrows mellowed. She reached again for his hands. What she wanted more than anything was to feel his arms around her and to be swallowed by his strong embrace. The prison had rules regarding contact. If they didn’t abide by the rules Nathaniel’s visiting privileges would be denied.

Marie longed to have the man before her resume his control of the world. That power combined with his private tenderness attracted her. The man she loved was unquestionably an enigma. Under no condition was he *insane*.

Nathaniel stroked Marie’s cheek. “Mrs. Rawls, I will not let that happen. You are a mighty and remarkable woman. No one will take your name away.”

“Mighty?”

“Yes, mighty. Defined as having superior power. Your strength in the face of adversity continues to amaze me. I’m awed by your constitution.” He kissed the top of her hand. “You are *mighty* remarkable, Mrs. Rawls.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

—Vaclav Havel

C LAIRE LISTENED AS Courtney eagerly relayed the conversation. She couldn't wait to tell Claire everything Tony said. His excuse for visiting was to personally discuss the press release. Courtney promised she and Brent did their best to appear astonished and shocked by his change in attitude.

Brent reminded Tony about his threatened civil suit. Courtney even cried, remembering her visit to the jail and inability to help. She said Tony claimed his outlook changed after seeing and speaking with Claire in person and that his earlier anger was a form of self-preservation. He didn't want to admit having feelings for the woman he'd been led to believe attempted to kill him. He told his friends he wasn't sure where this reconnection was headed, but he hoped for full reunification.

Then according to Courtney, he apologized for his previous behavior and announced he wanted to bring Claire to Caleb's wedding. Courtney said she almost lost it. She'd wanted to get Claire to the wedding for so long, and now with the possibility before her, she told Tony it wasn't up to him, it was up to Julia and Caleb. Courtney didn't want her son's wedding to be a media circus, like the gala.

Graciously, Tony offered assistance with security and promised discreet behavior. They called Caleb and Julia. Courtney said Julia always liked Claire and was respectfully supportive of Tony's choice of guest.

Claire listened in total shock and disbelief. The wedding was in less than a week, but she wasn't supposed to see Tony again for two weeks. Nonetheless, she truly wanted to attend the wedding. As they spoke, Claire thought about

the trip she took with Courtney to Texas. For some reason, she remembered her period was right before that trip. At the time, she was relieved it occurred before frolicking in the sun and surf.

At that second, while Courtney rambled on enthusiastically about the wedding, Claire realized she hadn't had her menstrual cycle since then.

When Courtney paused, Claire asked, "How long ago did we go to Texas?"

"I'm not sure. Things have been so busy. I just know I can't wait to see you again." Perhaps hearing Claire's recent change in tone, Courtney added, "But you do what you feel is right. If you don't want to be here with him, then don't do it. We can get together again after the wedding."

Claire's mind tried to process: they went to Texas in the middle of April, and now it's almost June. She and Harry first got together in San Diego. When was that? How effective are condoms? How soon does morning sickness start?

Those questions and more bombarded her mind as she tried to maintain her conversation, "I want to see you too." Claire managed weakly, "It'll be hard to act like we haven't been in contact."

"Well, don't worry about that. Just decide what you're going to do."

Before Claire could answer, her iPhone rang. It was the third call from Tony. "I need to go; he's calling again. I can't avoid his calls all day."

"Love you, Honey. Tell me what you decide, or maybe Tony should. That way, I'll react honestly."

"Got to go, bye." Claire disconnected her work phone and answered the iPhone.

Tony's call added to Claire's already fried emotions. Besides working things out with Harry and Amber, she'd just learned Tony was going to ask her to the Simmons' wedding, and she'd realized at the very least, her period was three weeks late. Needless to say, she didn't need to feign anxiety. It was real. "Tony, this is the third time you've called this morning. We aren't making any public appearances for two weeks. Please give me some space."

"Hello, Claire, so nice to hear your pleasant tone."

"I've got a lot going on. What do you want?"

"Let me say, I would call less frequently if you would answer your phone." She didn't respond, so he continued, "I made plans for us, for this coming weekend."

Despite the upheaval in her life, she attempted to conceal the smile from her voice, not wanting the emerging expression to reveal her eagerness to attend the wedding. The mixture of emotions caused her voice to crack; hopefully, it sounded like irritation. "I agreed to go to Chicago, in two weeks. I'm not going anywhere with you next weekend."

"I believe I might be able to persuade you otherwise."

“Is that a threat? What are you going to do this time, arrange a walk-out of SiJo’s employees?”

“No, Claire. No threats. I believe you’ll *want* to attend this function.”

Exasperation evident, she replied, “Why? What function would I possibly want to attend with you?”

“Caleb and Julia’s wedding.”

Claire gasped. It was unbelievable. Even after Courtney’s call, Claire never truly believed she’d have this opportunity. “But... but... all of your friends think I tried to kill you.”

“The news release says different.”

“That doesn’t mean they’ve changed their opinion of me. They probably don’t want me there.” As they continued to speak, Tony convinced Claire her presence was welcomed. She agreed to fly commercial to Iowa City, arriving Thursday afternoon. He wanted the chance for her to meet with his friends before the wedding, which was Saturday.

Claire’s agreement contained a few stipulations: She wanted a pre-purchased return ticket for Sunday. Tony agreed.

The next confrontation came when discussing accommodations. Tony wanted her to stay at the estate. Claire’s initial response was *no*. Reinforcing her stance, she exclaimed, “This idea is not debatable.”

Then Claire thought about Catherine. “The news release said you let some longtime members of your staff go. I know you still have Eric. Is Catherine still at the estate?”

“She is, and she’s hoping you’ll stay here.”

Claire sighed. “My room will need a lock.”

“That isn’t a problem.”

His answer made her bristle. “It needs to be a lock that operates from the inside.” She clarified. “Also, I will keep my phone at all times and have access to your Wi-Fi.”

He chuckled. “You drive a hard bargain. I told you before you should go into business. You’re a master negotiator.”

Claire remembered Harry’s words: *When it comes to Mr. Rawlings, your negotiating skills are stellar! My guess is that you’ll leave your little meeting and move back to Iowa.* She wasn’t moving. This was just a visit.

As soon as she hung up with Tony, Claire went to the store and bought a home pregnancy kit. Sitting at her dressing table and waiting for the results, the memories of her phone calls infiltrated her thoughts. She wanted to go to Caleb’s wedding; however, the results of this test could make everything different.

Claire stared at the white plastic stick and waited for the timer to sound on her cell phone. Did she really need this little piece of plastic to tell her what she already knew? She was experiencing all the symptoms: nausea—more

intense in the morning, hunger—all the time, tiredness—even after napping, and thirst—unquenchable at times. Looking at the two small openings within the stick, Claire saw lines begin to form. The directions said: *results in three minutes*. It had been less than one, and the vertical blue line in the control window appeared before her eyes, indicating the test was working.

Her head pounded with questions. What symbol would appear in the other window? Would she see a lone horizontal stripe meaning not pregnant, or a horizontal and a vertical stripe indicating pregnant. Essentially, the directions said a plus sign would form in the case of pregnancy. *Plus* was often synonymous for positive; thinking about that possibility—*positive* wasn't the word Claire believed she'd use to describe her current mental state.

She closed her eyes and debated her distress. Was it from the nausea twisting her stomach or the fear of the unknown quickening her heart rate? The buzz of the timer triggered her iPhone to vibrate across the dressing table. Claire's eyes opened. Before her, on the table was her answer: the indicator window revealed a blue *plus*.

The bottom fell out of Claire's world. She eased herself from the stool and sank to the bathroom floor. The ceramic tile cooled her legs, while the solid wall supported her head. Mentally, she assessed the timeline: mid-early April period. Two weeks later—dream. Three weeks later—San Diego. And now here she was: seven weeks since her last menstruation. How had this not occurred to her before?

Reaching for her phone, she scrolled her contacts for Amber's doctor, one of the most sought after gynecologists in the Silicon Valley. After San Diego, Claire called and made an appointment, hoping to get a prescription for birth control pills. The usual waiting period for new patients was up to six months, but Amber's referral shortened the wait considerably. Claire's appointment was in another three weeks; however, now things were different, waiting wasn't an option. She then realized the day—Sunday. She would have to wait another day to call.

Tears moistened her cheeks as she placed her head on her knees and gave in to the overwhelming emotion. Before she could make any decisions, or talk to *anyone*, Claire needed answers. First and foremost, how pregnant was she? Seven weeks or four weeks?

Finally, she made her way back into her bedroom and into the overpowering aroma of roses; thankfully, the flowery aroma was pleasurable. The three bouquets saturated every molecule of the room. She'd meant to ask Tony if he'd sent the other two bouquets; however, with the talk of the wedding and thoughts of the pregnancy, she forgot.

Claire went to her laptop and Googled answers. *How effective are condoms?* The search engine spun; answers appeared: *if used correctly, condoms are 98% effective. With common usage the failure rate grows to*

between 14 and 15%.

What do they mean if used correctly? How many ways are there to use a condom?



ON MONDAY MORNING, Claire called the doctor's office and was relieved to learn of a Wednesday afternoon opening. If it weren't for her *dream*, Claire would consider asking Harry to join her; however, despite their reconciliation Sunday morning, there was a change in their relationship. It was her news of the impending wedding that pushed his limits. Although it hadn't been declared that their relationship was different, instinctively, Claire knew it was. The stolen glances and casual touches were gone.

Everything probably happened too fast, yet thinking about the possibility they'd used the condoms *commonly* and not *correctly*, Claire was thankful they were still comfortable and friendly with one another. Harry said he appreciated Claire's bond with Courtney and her desire to attend the ceremony, but he couldn't comprehend the necessity of being in Iowa Thursday through Sunday, and most importantly, why had she agreed to stay at Mr. Rawlings' estate. Claire told him and Amber the truth. She was staying at the estate for one reason—to see Catherine.

In many ways, the woman had become Claire's mother. She was the steady force during a very difficult time in Claire's life. Catherine's support and encouragement sustained her. Looking back, there were times Claire wondered if she would've survived without Catherine's care. Amber and Harry still had their mother; they couldn't understand.



WHEN WEDNESDAY ARRIVED, Claire tried with all of her might to retain the wealth of information. In the beginning, the doctor's staff asked a lot of questions, and even though she'd done a home pregnancy test, they instructed her to urinate in a cup to confirm the pregnancy.

The eerie stillness of the examination room pulled at Claire's already stretched nerves. She longed for a hand to hold or a voice for comfort. Instead, she waited alone on her roller coaster of emotions for the doctor to confirm the blue plus. Since that moment, three days ago—every minute, every second—she thought about the pregnancy. While shopping for a dress for Caleb's wedding, Claire stood motionless for an eternity, looking at her flat stomach in the dressing room mirror and wondering, How long until it

begins to grow?

The last two nights, during the night, she woke to use the bathroom. Last night, she heard her own voice saying, “Hey little one, I know you don’t mean anything by this, but just remember I like my sleep. Maybe we can work on some compromises.” She always was the master negotiator. It wasn’t until the words were out of her mouth that she contemplated her discussion. Was she actually talking aloud to the cause of her nausea and increased urination?

As she sat alone, in the silence of the examination room, Claire realized she wanted the doctor’s test to confirm the one she took at Amber’s condo. She wouldn’t have believed it three days ago, but if they came in the room and told her that she wasn’t pregnant, Claire knew she’d be devastated.

That realization strengthened her. She wanted this baby! Thinking about the paternity, she recognized it didn’t matter. It did, but it wouldn’t affect her feelings for this child. He or she was hers. The rest would work itself out—or it wouldn’t. Keeping this baby safe and healthy was now her number one concern.

Dr. Sizemore entered the small room with her laptop in her hand. “Ms. Nichols, congratulations! You are going to be a mother.”

Claire’s smile radiated to her emerald eyes. It wasn’t planned. Potentially, she was in the middle of a dangerous minefield. Her entire world could explode with one single misstep. None of it mattered. Her world and the treacherous terrain she navigated were suddenly and forever inconsequential. In her figurative game of chess, attacking her opponent was no longer as important as reinforcing and protecting her pieces, especially her one new piece. Claire would forever have someone else to consider.

After some discussion, Dr. Sizemore directed an ultrasound wand and spoke reassuringly, “The external ultrasound works well later in pregnancy. This early, we need to use what is called trans-vaginal.”

Claire forgot the uncomfortable sensation as she watched the screen before her go in and out of focus. When the doctor finally stilled the picture, all Claire could see was white static, with a dark oval and something white, shaped like a peanut. Dr. Sizemore explained, “This is your baby.”

A grid appeared, superimposed on the *peanut* as Dr. Sizemore took measurements.

“Is everything all right?” Claire asked nervously.

“Yes, everything looks perfect. Do you see this small movement?” A white arrow appeared on the screen and pointed to a dark pulsating spot within the peanut. The sound of *swishing* filled the small room. The sound reminded Claire of the calming swoosh of waves on the shore of her lake in Iowa.

Claire nodded.

“That’s your baby’s heart beating.” Dr. Sizemore continued, “The

heartbeat isn't detectable until six weeks Estimated Gestational Age. According to my measurements, Ms. Nichols, you are seven weeks pregnant, give or take a day."

Claire laid her head on the soft pillow of the exam table. Her eyes filled with tears as she closed out the world and considered her feelings. If the baby were Harry's it would be so much easier. Or would it? Is easy what Claire desired? Tony claimed to still love her. Harry never said he loved her. But then again, could she trust Tony after all he'd done? She needed answers. She needed to know more about the man she'd once married—the man whose baby she now carried.

The doctor pushed a button and printed copies of the ultrasound screen. Instinctively, Claire knew who she wanted to see these pictures. With a new determination, Claire realized she couldn't wait to be in Iowa and talk with the woman who'd supported her and could hopefully answer her questions. Claire couldn't wait to talk with Catherine.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

There is sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness but of power. They are messengers of overwhelming grief and of unspeakable love.

—Washington Irving

HE BMW STOPPED momentarily at the front entrance as the large iron gates opened. It had been seventeen months since Claire had been on Tony's property. The last time she watched these gates open was that fateful day in January of 2012, the day she drove away. Her heartbeat quickened as the car navigated the winding drive. Being early June, the lush vegetation allowed only the occasional ray of sunshine to break through the canopy of leaves, creating a strobe effect as they neared their destination. When the trees cleared and the vista opened, the house before her took Claire's breath away. She remembered its grandeur; however, with time, memories fade. The stately reality flourished in its full glory. Had this mansion really been her home? The combination of brick, river stone, and limestone stood a paragon of Tony's affluence. Or perhaps, Claire wondered, was it a monument to Nathaniel Rawls, Tony's grandfather? After all, it did resemble the picture of Tony's childhood home.

Claire struggled to contain her increasing anxiety while Eric pulled the car onto the brickyard in front of the steps. He had met her at the airport and chauffeured her to the mansion. Although she was still unhappy with Eric's physical persuasion last week in San Francisco, his presence was comforting. After all, he too was a steady presence in her past. Nonetheless, his words as he opened the rear door increased her growing fretfulness. Bowing slightly he said, "Welcome home, ma'am."

Her expression revealed her surprise. "Eric, I'm visiting."

"Yes, Ms. Claire. I'll make sure your bags are in your room as soon as possible."

"Thank you."

Veiled in the shadow of the house, her heels stalled upon the brickyard. Turning a circle, she took in the countryside. The bright blue sky and various shades of green created a palate of color contrasting the landscape of Palo Alto. She inhaled the warm clear air as she stalled, facing the towering front doors and insurmountable steps. Did she really want to willingly re-enter this house? Moments passed as she stood frozen in time. Though she willed her body to move forward, her feet remained steadfast. Rising emotions paralyzed her. Suddenly, the massive door opened and her heart melted. Standing within the frame of the threshold was the woman Claire longed to see.

Catherine's smile prompted tears to trickle from Claire's green eyes. Claire wanted to go up the steps, but her feet refused to move. Lowering her head, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the sobs within her chest. Her shoulders shook with intense anguish.

Unexpectedly, a comforting embrace surrounded Claire. Her head settled onto Catherine's shoulder as Catherine's arms encircled her petite frame. Stroking Claire's hair, Catherine murmured, "Ms. Claire, it's all right. I'm here."

At first, Claire could only nod into Catherine's blouse. Finally, Claire reached into her purse, retrieved a tissue and wiped her eyes and nose. "I'm sorry, Catherine. I've just missed you so much."

The two women embraced. "Oh, Ms. Claire, I have missed you too. Please come in the house and let us get you settled."

Claire willingly followed. How many times had she confidently followed this woman despite lurking apprehension?

Claire paused as she stepped onto the marble entryway floor. The grand staircase wound upward toward the railed second floor. Her eyes continued to move skyward, taking in the elaborate chandelier and the shimmering ceiling beyond. Inhaling deeply, she peered around the foyer. Even though it had been almost a year and a half, she knew every inch of this massive mansion. She took in the archway leading to the sitting room and the sun porch beyond. She saw the hall leading to Tony's office and the French doors to the formal dining room.

Her body trembled as she mentally moved from room to room. Catherine reached for her hand. "Ms. Claire, may I get you something? Perhaps you'd like to rest after your trip?"

Finding her voice, Claire asked, "Is Mr. Rawlings here? Eric said he was still at work."

"He is; Eric is on his way to Iowa City to bring him home as soon as he's able." She patted Claire's hand. "He wanted to meet you at the airport; however, there were pressing matters. He should be here in another hour or so."

Claire nodded. With increased concern she asked, “Where am I staying? What room?”

“Mr. Rawlings instructed to have *all* rooms ready. It’s your choice.”

“My choice?”

“Yes. He said to tell you that *all* of the suites have locks that operate from the inside.”

Claire smiled. “Is my old suite available?”

“Oh yes, it is! And it’s ready for you. It’s even been redecorated. Would you like to see?”

The nausea hit fast. Claire felt her face flush. “I think I need to sit down first. May we go to the porch?”

Together, they stepped down into the open sun porch. Instantaneously, a breeze blew Claire’s hair and settled her nerves. Beyond the windows and screens, she saw Tony’s lush backyard bursting with color. Besides the intense green of the lawn, reds, pinks, whites, and yellows shimmered from the flower beds, pots, and gardens in the distance. Instinctively, Claire turned toward the pool. The blueness of the water rivaled the clear Iowa sky as the fountains sprayed high into the air. The lounge chairs and umbrella tables sat ready for occupancy. At one time, it had been Claire’s private resort. She closed her eyes and settled onto the rattan loveseat.

“May I get you something, perhaps a drink or something to eat?” Catherine asked with obvious concern.

Claire looked at her watch. Although it said after 2:00 PM, Claire knew it was after 4:00 PM in Iowa. She had an airline lunch in flight, but it wasn’t much. “I know we’re supposed to dine later, but I could use something now.”

Catherine smiled tenderly. “Of course. Would you like me to bring it to you here or in your suite?”

Tears threatened Claire’s resolve. She couldn’t think of it as *her* suite. She wasn’t even sure she could sleep there, but then again, could she sleep anywhere else? “I would like to stay here right now and enjoy this beautiful afternoon.”

Catherine quickly left.

When Catherine returned, she had a tray with a bowl of chicken salad, a sleeve of crackers, some grapes, and a tall glass of iced tea. Claire sighed and asked Catherine to join her as she ate. Catherine did. The food was perfect. It warmed Claire’s soul to be near this woman. Somehow, no matter the circumstance, Catherine always knew what was best.

While Claire ate, they chatted about nothing—very superficial. Once Claire’s food was gone and she felt the color returned to her cheeks, Claire breached the subject looming omnipresent. “Catherine, do you believe I tried to hurt Tony?”

Catherine took Claire’s hand and watched their entwined fingers for a

long time. The sounds of nature from the other side of the screens filled their ears until Catherine looked to Claire and said, "Ms. Claire, I've known Mr. Rawlings for a long time. I was very concerned for his well-being." She squeezed Claire's soft hand. "I know there were times when you weren't happy. I know there were times when being with him was difficult. I also know you're the best thing to ever happen to him, and in his own way, he loves you more than he has ever loved anyone." She paused. "No. I never believed you could hurt him, not like that."

Claire allowed the tears to flow, not from sadness, but from relief. "Thank you Catherine. I wouldn't do that."

"No, Miss, I know you wouldn't; however, you have in you, the ability to hurt him deeper than any poison could. Your absence has been very difficult for him. If you chose to abandon him again then I don't know what will happen."

Indignantly, Claire replied, "I did not abandon him. He left me at that jail in Iowa City."

Catherine's gray eyes pleaded with Claire in a way words would never articulate, "Ms. Claire, I wish I could help you understand the man beneath the facade. One doesn't become who he is without cause. Your presence and absence has affected him beyond the same from anyone else."

Claire stared and her hands trembled. Finally, she managed to voice her new realization. "You sent it to me, didn't you?"

"Ms. Claire, we should get you to your suite. Mr. Rawlings will be here soon, and the two of you have dinner plans with the Millers, Bronsons, and Simmons. I also believe Mr. Summer and Ms. Combs will be there."

At this moment, Claire didn't care about her impending dinner plans. "Please tell me. Did you send the box of information to me in prison?"

Catherine stood. "Eric took your bags to your suite. Do you need me to escort you upstairs?"

Claire closed her eyes and lowered her face. Her emotions were too intense to contain. "I so hoped..." Her voice trailed away as she swallowed her words.

Catherine knelt before Claire and placed her hand upon Claire's knee. She spoke in a whisper, "Ms. Claire, I'm pleased you're here. There are many things for us to discuss, but we must proceed with care. May I suggest you ready yourself for your evening, and tomorrow, while Mr. Rawlings is working, we can walk, perhaps beyond the gardens?"

Suddenly, Claire remembered the cameras and recordings. Her eyes opened wide. With the excitement of seeing Catherine, she'd forgotten about them. Claire wiped her eyes on her napkin. "Yes, I'd like that. I think I need to freshen up. Do you know how long it'll be until Mr. Rawlings arrives?"

"Eric sent a text message; they're about to leave Iowa City. He should be

here in thirty minutes. Do you need an escort to your suite?"

Claire stood and deeply inhaled the fresh air. "No, I'll be fine." She embraced Catherine, "Thank you, I really have missed you. You're the closest person I've had to a mother since my mother passed away."

Catherine's expression of love and shock surprised Claire.

Claire quickly added, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

With her expression mellowing, Catherine said, "No, Claire, it didn't. I never thought anyone would ever think of me that way."

Internally smiling at finally being addressed by her first name, Claire hugged the woman before her. "I do. I don't think I would've survived without you. I feel so much better just being with you."

Catherine's gray eyes filled with moisture as she turned her gaze out into the yard. Never in Claire's memory could she remember seeing Catherine cry, even after Claire's *accident*. Catherine was always strong and steady. The crack in this woman's armor made Claire uneasy; she lifted her purse and walked toward the grand staircase. Her suite was at the top of the steps in the southeast wing. She knew the way well.



TONY GRIPPED THE telephone as he looked once again at the clock on the dashboard of the BMW: 5:22 PM. The voice on the other end of his conversation was understandably uneasy. Tony had listened to the murmuring as long as his nerves would allow. Finally, Tony interrupted, "So she turned down the tour. Did she tell you why?"

"She said there are too many things happening right now. She doesn't want to be gone from her husband for that long."

"Then tell her that she can choose a shorter tour. I thought thirty weeks was excessive. You were the one who advised bigger and grander. Make it twelve; sixteen cities in twelve weeks. I want an answer tomorrow."

"Mr. Rawlings, she's gone. She went to visit her father in New Jersey."

"She left town, and you didn't inform me?"

"She just left today."

"Mr. George, you're on the verge of losing the best investment you've ever secured. I want her signed to a contract—yesterday."

"Sir, do you want me to follow her to New Jersey?" He said *New Jersey* like it was purgatory.

"Is her husband with her?"

"I don't know, sir. She didn't mention him regarding her trip."

"Get me a verbal answer by tomorrow." Tony disconnected the call; then he quickly dialed another number.

“Hello, Mr. Rawlings.”

“Danielle, I was just informed Sophia Burke is visiting New Jersey. Is Derek with her?”

“No, sir, Derek left yesterday for a ten day factory visit in Beijing.”

“And where are you?”

“Santa Clara.”

“Why are you not with him in China? You’re supposed to be his *personal assistant*. I’m sure we could find someone who is better for your job.”

“Sir, Derek is a nice man, and he’s not interested in cheating on his wife.”

Tony’s sneer lingered, as his eyes remained cool. “People get lonely in other countries. You’ll leave immediately. Keep me apprised of your success.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony disconnected his call and placed his phone on the seat to his right. Looking up to the rearview mirror, Tony asked, “Eric, tell me again about Ms. Claire. How is she?”

“She was strong until she reached your home.”

“What happened?”

“She broke down, crying on the brickyard...” Eric explained everything up until Catherine took Claire gingerly in to the house.

Tony listened. Not once in seventeen months had he felt the anticipation of reaching his home as he did today. He couldn’t believe Claire was really back. Drumming his fingers silently on the leather seat, he watched the road pass before him. If he were driving, he’d have this car doing one hundred and ten!



HER SHOES CLICKED along the marble second floor landing until the carpet of the southeast corridor enveloped her heels and muted her steps. Each door she passed along the corridor made Claire wonder if she’d chosen the right room. The door to *her* suite stood ajar as she tentatively stood at the threshold. It had been a long time since she’d spent thirteen days trapped within the confines of this suite, yet despite the happy memories associated with this room, that incarceration was what tumbled out her hidden compartment.

By entering, was she exposing her queen or worse her king? Everyone knows if her king were captured the game would be done.

Bravely, she reached into her purse and looked at her iPhone. Yes, she had a signal. Her queen had protection. Most of her support was miles away; however, a bishop or a rook could move across the entire board in an undeterred motion.

The suite was as luxurious as she remembered. Some of the colors and

textures had changed, but the opulence remained. The woodwork was still white, and now, the walls were copper. Claire walked to the tall open balcony doors as a gentle breeze blew the now burgundy and gold draperies. The new valances were classic brocade contrasting elegantly with the copper colored walls. Taking the curtains between her fingers, Claire assessed the fabric; it was lighter than the ones before. She watched as the satin moved freely in the gentle wind.

Mindlessly, she stepped onto the concrete balcony and stared out into the vista. She'd viewed this scene in every season. Today, greens filled the landscape. So many trees and so many shades.

"Welcome back, Ms. Claire."

Claire spun toward the sound of Cindy's voice as she took in her genuine smile. "Cindy, it's good to see you."

"And you too, ma'am. I took the liberty of placing your luggage in the dressing room and hung your dresses so that they wouldn't wrinkle."

"Thank you. How have you been?"

"Very good, ma'am, and how... It's so nice to have you back with us."

Claire knew Cindy was about to ask how she'd been, but stopped. They all knew she'd been in prison, not exactly a great conversation starter. "Cindy, lately, I've been very good, and I'm just here for a visit, to attend a wedding, but it's good to see you. Thank you again for putting my things away."

"Can I get you anything else, ma'am?"

"Not right now. I believe I'm going to rest and then get ready for dinner."

Cindy nodded as she left the suite, closing the door behind her. Claire gazed about the room. The sofa and chair were now a silvery taupe plush material. It looked very soft. The fireplace held wonderful memories of warmth and serenity. Her heart quickened as she saw the now closed door.

Claire steadily walked to the lever handle and pulled. The door easily opened to the empty hallway. She saw the button upon the lever, on the suite side of the door. Above the lever was a new addition. Claire smiled at the dead bolt. No key could enter if she secured the new lock.

Walking into the dressing room, Claire saw new clothes hanging from the racks. There weren't as many as there had been when she arrived the first time. Nevertheless, there were dresses, blouses, slacks, skirts, jeans, and tops, and the shoe rack contained multiple pairs in various styles. Of course, they were all very expensive. Claire wondered if things really had changed. With curiosity, she began opening drawers. The second drawer she opened contained bras in many colors and textures. The third drawer contained panties, various colors and styles. These clothes should have upset her, but instead, the new lingerie filled her with promise.

On the small dining table was a crystal vase filled with an array of wild flowers. Next to the vase she found the note:

I'm very pleased you chose this room. As you may have noticed, your lock is only operational from within. Below is the username and password to the Wi-Fi. I am a man of my word.

Were there similar notes in other rooms? What if she would have requested the first room on the left in the southeast corridor? Claire didn't allow her thoughts to linger. Was she predictable, or was he overly prepared?

Claire sat at the table. The flight, her reunion with Catherine, seeing Tony's estate, and being back in this suite, left her drained but surprisingly content. Using the information on Tony's note, she connected her iPad and iPhone to the internet. She then sent a text message to her various chess pieces:

"I ARRIVED SAFELY. I HAVE MY PHONE AND A LOCK ON THE INSIDE OF MY DOOR. ALL IS WELL. I WILL TEXT AGAIN LATER."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Courage isn't having the strength to go on —it is going on when you don't have strength.
—Napoleon Bonaparte

SOMEWHERE, CLAIRE HEARD knocking; *was it real, or was it in her dream?* She tried to analyze whether she'd heard it or not, but she couldn't. She couldn't distance herself from the warmth and pleasure cocooning her body. She floated on the softest sheets, upon a bed of perfect firmness. Somewhere, between sleep and awake, the knocking stopped, replaced by her name.



“CLAIRe—CLAIRe, YOU need to wake. We’re supposed to be at Tim and Sue’s in an hour,” Tony spoke from the moment he entered the suite. He didn’t want to give her the wrong impression, although *that* impression was paramount in his mind. She looked so peaceful, sleeping on *this* bed, in *this* suite. With all his might, Tony wanted to reconnect the electronic lock and keep Claire there forever.

He couldn’t succumb to his thoughts. If Claire were ever to be his then she needed to *want* to be here. If he were to stop her stupid articles from appearing, then he needed to tread lightly. The fact she was here was, in itself, a miracle. Approaching the bed, her serene expression transfixed him. Hoping not to startle her, he spoke louder, “Claire? Claire?” Partially out of necessity, but more out of desire, Tony touched her exposed skin. “Claire?”

She began to stir. His fingers caressed the light blue satin bra strap, visible above the blankets on her exposed shoulder. The allure of moving the covers

and discovering the remainder of her attire was almost irresistible. Tony wondered if she could possibly be wearing matching light blue panties.



AS HER BLISSFUL nap slipped away, she slowly opened her eyes to his voice. Suddenly, they opened wide. Claire abruptly sat, pulling the blankets around her body. "Tony!" Claire pulled the covers higher. "What are you doing in here? You promised!"

He chuckled at her modesty. "I promised a lock, and the door wasn't locked. I knocked, multiple times. You must have been very tired."

Her panic diminished at the sound of his casual tone. "I think I was. I have that jittery just awakened feeling." She laid her head back onto the pillow, and her long chestnut hair fell in waves around her face. The late afternoon sunlight shimmered off of her emerald eyes. "What time is it?"

"6:30 PM, and we need to be at Tim and Sue's in an hour." Tony remained motionless, grinning at Claire.

"Well, if you're going to stand there, then go find me a robe so that I can get ready."

He didn't speak as he moved away from the bed and walked slowly into the dressing room. Claire's eyebrows rose, and her lips pursed into a straight line when he emerged, holding a black silk transparent negligee cover. The smirk on his face revealed his attempt at humor. Her only response was a slow shake of her head. With a feigned pout, he re-entered the dressing room and returned again with a long pink cashmere robe.

"That's better. Now, if you don't mind?"

Tony gallantly turned away as Claire covered herself with the robe. "Don't you think this is a bit ridiculous?" he asked. "We were married."

"No, I don't," she answered. After securing the robe, Claire said, "You may turn around now." When he did, she couldn't help but notice the twinkle in his soft suede eyes.

"I thought we could talk about tonight."

She looked up at his still amused expression, and replied, "Not now. I need to get ready. We can talk in the car. If you leave me alone, then I'll be ready in thirty minutes."

Mockingly, he bowed, blew her a kiss, and left the room. Instinctively, she listened to the door close. Upon hearing the normal sounds associated with the mechanisms of a latching door knob, Claire walked into the attached bathroom. It was exactly the same: white tile, chrome fixtures, and glass shower. The only change was the color of the towels, now copper, matching the walls in the bedroom.

Thirty minutes later, Claire descended the main staircase to see Tony casually leaning against one of the grand doors, with his hands in the pockets of his navy slacks. She noticed his white V-neck shirt and unbuttoned sports coat. Her choice of slacks and blouse blended perfectly.

Claire tried to ignore his non-wavering gaze as she made her way to the foyer. Once her heeled sandals touched the marble floor, he straightened and said, “You look amazing—as usual. Is that an outfit you brought or one from the closet?”

“One I brought. The closet seems silly. I’m leaving in three days.”

“You refused to take a credit card to shop, so I hired someone to shop for you. You may decide to wear some of those clothes to our public functions.”

Claire shook her head as she stopped before him. “Tony, I’m not falling into that same trap. I don’t want the media accusing me of *reconciling* with you for your money.”

“Tonight, there won’t be media—just friends.”

Claire exhaled, and her shoulders slumped.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Are you sure they want me there? I would rather face the media than *your friends* considering what they think I did.” That was another of Claire’s prepared speeches. She’d thought about saying *after what you made it look like I did* or *after what you did*, but she believed she’d found the best wording.

Tony grasped her hand. “I promise. I’ve spoken to everyone, most in person. I spoke to Mary Ann and Eli on the phone.”

“And...?”

“And they understand. I was distraught, but we’re reconciling.”

Claire closed her eyes. Why was she forced to face these people as the villain? Wasn’t she the victim—the heroine? Exhaling, she allowed Tony to lead her through the grand doors, down the steps, to the bricks below. Waiting for them on the circular drive was a Lexus LFA. The silver car reminded Claire of the *Batmobile*. Tony opened the passenger door, and she eased herself into the low seat. The red and black interior included a very impressive dashboard. As Tony settled himself into the driver’s seat, his broad smile and shimmering eyes held her gaze. Without a doubt, Tony loved his cars. She got the distinct impression this vehicle could go very fast.

“This is a very nice car. Would you mind not going too fast?”

“It can do zero to sixty in three point six seconds.”

“I believe you, but do you remember my reaction to the bacon the other day?”

Tony frowned. “Yes, are you still not well?”

“I’m not back to myself.”

He scowled. “Maybe you should see a doctor.”

Claire looked through the windshield as Tony put the *Batmobile* in drive

and eased down the driveway. She replied, “I have an appointment in a few weeks.” That was true. She did; it would be her four week obstetrical visit. According to Dr. Sizemore, she would be seen every four weeks until week twenty-eight. Then the appointments would be every two weeks, and eventually every week. Of course, she didn’t say any of that to Tony. Instead, she prayed her stomach wouldn’t revolt against the low riding *Batmobile*.

As they passed the impressive double gates, thoughts of that fateful day and her drive away from this place infiltrated her mind. She stared at the blue skies as the road before them wound and twisted through fields and forests. Claire closed her eyes and laid her head against the headrest. They would be there soon. *Please let me keep Catherine’s snack down*, she silently prayed.

Tony turned down the radio. As the volume decreased, so did his smile. It was barely visible when he said, “We need to discuss your behavior for tonight.”

Claire opened her eyes and peered to her left. She wasn’t alone, she told herself. Maybe her greatest ally came in a pawn or bishop, but nonetheless, she had allies! “Tony, I wouldn’t be here—of my own free will—if I didn’t completely comprehend my behavior. Don’t patronize me. I’ve done this dance before.”

Tony’s eyes darkened. “Are you implying that when you were with my friends in the past, it was a performance?”

“No.” Claire sat taller; the car glided onward. Tony continued to make marked looks to his right. “I’m saying that there were times I wasn’t happy with you, but no one knew.”

“You aren’t happy with me?”

Reaching for the large hand holding the steering wheel, she explained, “Tony, we’re doing what you want; it’s a performance.” She considered their child. “I can’t say I don’t want it to be real, but for now it isn’t. Let’s not add unnecessary layers to this charade.”

He finally asked, “So there is a part of you... I will settle for a small part that wants what we are about to do to be real?”

She exhaled. “Yes, Tony, a small part of me...” *And of you*, she thought. “that wants us to be real.”

The scenes passed, and a comfortable banter ensued, until they neared Tim and Sue’s home. Tony slowed the car and his tone. “Perhaps we should review the rules?”

Claire closed her eyes and replied, “Maybe I could save us some time and summarize? Do as you say, no public failure, and don’t divulge private information.”

Tony exhaled. “Are you summarizing or mocking?”

“For the sake of argument, I’ll call it summarizing. As I said earlier, I’ve done this before. Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but I’m perfectly capable of doing

as you wish.”

“No, Claire, I haven’t forgotten your abilities. I just need confirmation that we’re on the same page as we enter the Bronson’s home.”

Her patience was waning. “Tell me the number, and I’ll turn right to it.”

The car was now stopped along the side of the country road. Tony grasped Claire’s chin and turned her glaring green eyes toward him. “I believe I’m tiring of the sexy, bold, and cheeky.”

Her strong tone didn’t vacillate, “Then stop this charade.”

He maintained his hold, peering intently into the fire of her emerald eyes. Finally, with obvious restraint, he asked, “May I please have reticent and genteel while in the presence of others?”

Her lashes fluttered, the fire ebbed, and her faux southern belle emerged. “Why, Mr. Rawlings, your wish is my command.”

The darkness before her grew; she found herself lost in the abyss of his stare. Time stilled as her chin remained captive between his thumb and finger increasing her heart rate. With each second, their distance decreased as his lips neared hers. “Kiss me.” It was his wish, his command. Powerless, her eyes closed, lips parted, and their mouths united. His hand released her chin and reached for her shoulders. The restraint of the seat belts held their bodies in place, yet their hands and lips sought one another’s contact.

When they parted, Tony breathlessly replied, “If we weren’t expected at the Bronson’s any minute, I’d like to put more effort into exploring the wish and command possibilities.”

Claire leaned her head against the seat and laughed. With each mile, the tension within the sleek sports car had been mounting, but the kiss released the pressure valve on their boiler. The sudden relief allowed Claire a moment of honesty. “I’m nervous to see all of them again.”

Once again, he reached for her chin, but this time, he gently pulled her eyes toward his. What was once black, was now faded into soft brown velvet. “There may be questions—personal questions. This isn’t the press. They’re people who know me—know us—and they’re going to want to know what happened.”

Claire nodded, accepting Tony’s advice. He continued to create a believable scenario: a story which they’d each know, and could refer to, with consistency. The blending of their stories was essential to making the world believe their reunion. Dutifully, she listened to every word, knowing her performance affected the lives of many.

This dinner was another of his forced moves. Claire needed to evaluate the chess board and strategize her next appropriate move. She couldn’t afford to lose any more pieces as she considered their baby. Too much was at stake.



THE CARS PARKED in the driveway indicated they were the last to arrive. Claire tried not to imagine the conversation occurring within. Of course, she'd probably learn the truth from Courtney later. For fear of being discovered, Claire left her *work* phone in California. Talking intimately with her dearest friend would wait until Claire was back in Palo Alto.

Claire compliantly stayed within the grip of the sleek bucket seat, struggling to quell her growing anxiety, until Tony parked the LFA and chivalrously came around to open her door. Upon seeing her expression, Tony whispered, "I'm not leading you into the den of lions."

"No, you've already done that."

His polished expression wavered. "This time, I won't leave you. I'll stay by your side, and you won't be alone."

His valiant tone strengthened her. Nodding, Claire grasped his extended hand. Being alone was always her greatest fear. As their fingers intertwined, she realized she wanted his support and presence. Walking toward the house, Tony leaned down. "I'd hoped seeing everyone here first would be easier than seeing them for the first time in a crowd."

"It probably will be; nevertheless, I think I'm going to be ill."

He stopped their forward movement and assessed the woman before him. "Your color looks good. You look amazing. I promise." He squeezed her hand. "I'm right here." His grin broadened. "A man of my word."

She reached up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Before they could push the doorbell, Tim opened the wooden barrier. With Sue by his side, he politely offered a greeting, "Welcome to our home, Tony, Claire." He nodded with a smile.

"Please come in," Sue added. She motioned toward the large sitting room full of familiar faces. Feeling the cool insincerity, Claire secured her mask and clung tighter to Tony.

Silence prevailed as Tom, Bev, Brent, Courtney, Mary Ann, and Eli turned and watched Tony and Claire enter with Tim and Sue. Courtney was the first to move. Without speaking, she sat her wine glass on the large square table before the sofa. Ignoring Tony, Courtney approached Claire, her blue eyes glistening with tears. It wasn't as dramatic as their reunion in Texas, but Courtney's embrace squeezed the air from Claire's lungs. Helpless, Tony released Claire's hand as the two women clung to one another, weeping. Courtney whispered in Claire's ear, "I'm so sorry; I'm so sorry."

Claire nodded, swallowing her sobs. This wasn't an act; it was the reunion of two friends. The ice was broken, another release. Eventually, the rest of the room began to talk. Sue, Bev, and Mary Ann led the women to the kitchen.

Dabbing their eyes, all the women gave Claire the support she'd feared Tony's friends would withhold. Everyone claimed to have doubted Claire's guilt, and they all apologized for not being more supportive. Claire knew the man in the other room was the reason for their disobliging behavior. Nonetheless, she bashfully accepted their belated validation.

When they returned to the living room, Claire devotedly sat beside her ex-husband. His expression displayed genuine pleasure with the ladies' response. When he reached for Claire's hand and gently brushed her knuckles with his thumb, their faces bowed toward one another and their noses touched. The light contact provoked an approving smile from her lips.

Their Oscar worthy performance was outstanding, possibly under serious consideration for nomination. Throughout the entire evening, Tony was Claire's anchor. By the time dinner was complete, even Claire believed the words coming from her mouth.

With Tony engrossed in conversation in the living room, Claire made her way to the kitchen. She'd spent the evening nursing a glass of wine, for appearances; however, water seemed to be the only liquid capable of quenching her ever present thirst. Leaving the others behind, Claire wondered, *is thirst another symptom of pregnancy?* She stood at the sink, filling her goblet when Brent approached and nonchalantly whispered, "Did you get my message?"

Claire looked nervously toward the other room. "No, I left *that* phone in California."

He continued, "I saw some paperwork on a recent Rawlings hire. The man's name caught my attention." Claire looked questionably at him. Brent whispered, "Burke."

Her mind twirled; there were so many things going through it. She tried to make a connection. "I'm sorry, should I know that name?"

Brent glanced to the other room to see everyone still talking. "Jonathon Burke worked with your grandfather—"

Claire's eyes opened wide. "Yes. The securities officer."

Brent nodded and whispered, "I understand why you're doing what you're doing, but please remember who you're dealing with *and* be careful."

Ignoring his warning, Claire asked, "Is there a connection between the Rawlings employee and Jonathon?"

"I haven't had the chance to follow through, but I will."

"Oh, there you are—" Courtney came loudly into the kitchen with Tony close behind. Claire finished putting ice in her water glass, grinned, and walked toward Tony.

"What are you two in here talking about?" Tony asked. Claire heard his question, but at the same time, her mind tried to process the new information. Are other people suffering because of Nathaniel and Tony's vendetta?

"Monterey," Brent said. Claire pushed her new concern away and turned toward Brent with a grin. Brent continued, "Yes, Courtney and I've been there a few times and really enjoyed it. I wondered, with Claire living in Palo Alto, if she'd been."

Claire interjected, as she smiled toward Tony. "I was telling him the only time I'd been there was with you."

Tony placed his arm around her back. "We did go there, didn't we?"

Courtney said, "I hate to leave this get-together, but we have a lot to do before the rehearsal and dessert celebration." She addressed Tony and Claire, "You two will be there, won't you?"

Unsure of their plans, Claire looked to Tony. He replied, "Of course, we will. That's why we met tonight. I hoped Claire's reintroductions would be easier if she could meet first with friends. Hopefully, this will allow her additional support with increased people." His arm gently squeezed his ex-wife to his side. She smiled appropriately to *his* friends.

"Well, you have ours. Oh, Claire!" Courtney asked, "Could I have your cell phone number? I'd love to talk more after the wedding."

A flashback of a similar situation years earlier entered Claire's thoughts. Before she could answer, Tony responded, "Courtney, I'll give her your number tonight. She can call or text, and then you'll have each other's number."

The women nodded. "We'll do that," Claire said with a smile. Maybe things do change, she pondered.

"Now, if you'll excuse us, we need to say our goodbyes," Brent offered as they turned to leave.

Tony stopped them. "Wait, we should probably go, as well. Claire's had a pretty emotionally packed day. Besides, I believe the four of us need to speak privately. Perhaps out by the cars?"

Claire's insides suddenly twisted, and she refused to look toward the Simmons; what could he want to discuss privately? Did he know about their clandestine relationship and support?

"All right," Courtney managed. "But we do have a lot to do." Her tone sounded as if she were agitated by the delay; however, Claire knew the same concerned inflections would be present if she spoke, so she didn't.

Tony thanked Tim and Sue for hosting the dinner, and the four of them said goodbye to the others. Before they could leave, Sue asked, "Could you please wait just a minute?" Without waiting for an answer, she hurried away toward the stairs.

Courtney seized Claire's hand. "I think she's going to get Sean. He's upstairs with the nanny."

A lump developed in Claire's throat, recognizing Sue's ultimate gesture of acceptance. Through pleading eyes, she looked to Tony, silently conveying

her desire to stay and see Tim and Sue's son. He shrugged. Claire turned back to Courtney. "Can you stay for a few more minutes? I know you have a lot to do, and Tony wants to talk—"

"Oh, honey, I always have time for babies. Wait until you see him!" Turning to Brent she asked expectantly, "How long do you think it'll be until Caleb and Julia make us grandparents?"

"I'm not old enough to be a grandparent."

Courtney laughed. "You are, and so am I, but I don't look like it!"

"No you don't." They all light-heartedly agreed.

Moments later, Sue appeared with a pajama clad, very blonde, little boy in her arms. He alternated nestling into his mother's shoulder and peering at the people around him while keeping his little arms wrapped tightly around Sue's neck.

"Claire, I wanted you to meet Sean. I'm sorry. This is past his bedtime, and the poor little guy is getting tired."

Claire's heart melted. "Hello, Little Guy, it is nice to meet you." She looked at his small frame, calculated Sean's age and asked, "He's what? About fifteen months?"

"Almost." Sue smiled. "He's so much fun, getting into everything and learning new words every day."

Tim approached the group; Sean held out his arms. Tim lovingly swung his son into his embrace and added, "Believe me; it makes you think about every word when little ears are listening."

The attention made Sean awaken. He smiled mischievously at the Simmons, Tony, and Claire, while intermittently hiding his face in Tim's shoulder.

"Thank you." Tears teetered on Claire's lids as she reached out, tussling Sean's soft curly hair. "I think you might have some difficulty getting him back to sleep."

Everyone scoffed jokingly and said goodbye.

Tony and Claire followed the Simmons out to the cars. Stepping away from the brightly lit home, Claire noticed the black velvet sky sprinkled with millions of stars, exactly as she'd remembered. Pulling her attentions away from the beautiful sky, Claire braced herself as Tony began to speak, addressing all three of them.

"I'm doing my best to be honest with Claire, and I expect the same from her." Swallowing, she attempted an innocent expression as he looked down at her and continued, "That's why I thought we should get this out in the open."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

There are two mistakes one can make along the road to truth... not going all the way, and not starting.

—Buddha

“*T*ONY, I THINK the Simmons need to—” Tony interrupted Claire’s attempt to avoid this discussion, “This won’t take long.” He turned to Brent. “I’ve trusted Brent with many things through the years.” Claire watched Brent’s stance stiffen. Were they all about to be reprimanded? Tony went on, “That’s why I wanted him to be the one to tell you about his progress regarding your brother-in-law.”

Brent visibly relaxed. Apparently, Claire hadn’t been the only one holding her breath. “Yes,” Brent said, looking at Claire as relief shone from his tired eyes. “Well, it seems some new information has come to the attention of the New York State Bar Association. This hasn’t been released to anyone, not even John. If my informant is correct, then this new information will cause his case to come up for review soon. We’re hoping the review will result in the reinstatement of his license to practice law.”

Claire sprung skyward and clasped her hands with the news. “Oh, thank you!” The tears teetering in the house now spilled onto her cheeks. “Thank you, Brent. Thank you, Tony. I won’t say a word. When will you know if it will be up for review?”

Brent answered, “It’ll take a few months, and I should be kept apprised of updates.”

Tony offered his hand to Brent. “Thank you.” He shook Brent’s hand. “I apologize for delaying your departure, but I wanted Claire to hear it from you.”

Courtney’s relief made her giddy. “That’s all right; however, now we really need to go. I’m so glad this was good news.” Reaching out for Claire’s

hand, she continued, "Now you need some rest. Tony's right, you've had too many things thrown at you. Look how emotional you are."

Claire nodded and managed, "We'll see you tomorrow night, and before then, I'll call you." The words spoken out loud felt liberating.

Tony grasped Claire's hand, and they walked back to the silver *Batmobile*. As he opened her door, he bent down and whispered, "A man of my word."

She smiled all the way to her emerald eyes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, I really mean that."

The country roads wound like a ribbon before them. Claire closed her eyes and tried to comprehend the evening. There were so many things to think about, yet the only vision which managed to find its way to her consciousness was Sean, the way his pudgy little arms encircled Sue's neck, his giggle as Tim propelled him in the air, and his security at landing on Tim's strong stable shoulder. Would their child ever have that? Would Claire's baby have a father willing to embrace him unconditionally?

Tony's squeeze of Claire's knee brought her back to the present. She focused on his words, part of a statement already in progress. "...it takes longer than you would expect, but Brent thinks it can be resolved before the end of the year."

Claire turned. "That's a long time away. How long did it take to set him up?"

Tony turned. His expression suddenly darkened. "I'd rather not talk about that."

With her preoccupation of Sean, she'd forgotten to weigh her words. "Why? I know you did it. You told Brent and Courtney you wanted to be honest. So, be honest."

Tony's neck stiffened as he peered forward through the windshield. Finally, he spoke, "From the time he turned down my job offer."

Claire sat straighter and looked out the side window. She tried to keep her mind on the passing scenes. Subtle interruptions in the nocturnal darkness were visible with the occasional house or opening in the trees. The light from the quarter moon illuminated each field or a yard they passed. Although the familiar terrain gave Claire comfort, she wrestled with Tony's confession.

"You asked. Now, you won't comment?" Tony asked.

"I don't know what to say. Do you want my bold and cheeky response or the reticent and genteel one?"

Claire watched his knuckles blanch upon the steering wheel. She waited. Instinctively, she knew she'd baited him enough. He'd been honest, and she should give him credit for that.

"This is why I haven't answered all of your questions. You may think you're ready for answers, but you're not. Bits and pieces may help you understand, but the blatant truth is too much."

Claire watched the passing scenes without comment. It wasn't that words didn't form in her thoughts. They did. She chose to keep them to herself. In the past her silence may have been the result of fear regarding Tony's reaction. Exhaustion was her current motivator. Without a doubt, Claire was tired of confrontation.

When Tony pulled the car onto the brick circular drive in front of his house, Claire turned to him. Sincerely and serenely, she placed her hand on top of his and spoke softly with confidence, "Thank you." He turned, showering her with the intensity of his dark glare. Every fiber of his expression displayed his unspoken resentment regarding at her recent silence. Undeterred, she continued, "Thank you for supporting me tonight with your friends. I was very nervous. It turned out much better than I could have possibly hoped, and thank you for helping John. I know you don't like him, and that you created his problems, but helping him now—it means a lot to me." She leaned in and lightly kissed his lips.

The touch ignited feelings deep within her. The change in Tony's breathing revealed a similar response. She searched his eyes in the dark stillness of the car.

"Claire, I'm trying to give you space, but I'm on the edge."

She leaned back and undid her seat belt. "I know you're trying, and I appreciate it." She opened her door and started toward the house. She heard his door slam as he made his way to her; grasping her arm, he stopped her progress. They stood in the night upon the brick drive. His chest pressed against her hypersensitive breasts.

"I'm very glad you're here."

Claire smiled and looked up at the mansion before her. "I'm surprised at how much I like being here. I was afraid the bad memories would overpower the good."

Tension escaped his lips in an audible sigh as a grin emerged. "Does that mean... the good overpower the bad?"

Claire shrugged. "I don't know. I wish I could say yes. You said you want honesty, and honestly, I don't know. They're both there. It's just that the familiarity of *here* is heartwarming."

He kissed the top of her head, and with lightened eyes, he offered, "I need to go into the office tomorrow morning. I hope to be done and be home by noon. The dessert celebration isn't until 8:00 PM. Would you like to go for a walk tomorrow?"

"A walk?"

His encouraging smile peeked her curiosity. "Yes, Claire, to *your* lake?"

She smiled and nodded. "I-I'd like that very much."

He kissed the hand he'd secured. "Please allow me to escort you to your suite. I'll give you Courtney's number, and you may use the lock you

requested. Actually..." His eyes narrowed. "...I suggest you do."

Claire pressed against his chest. "You know, we never did this."

"This—what?"

"We never *dated*. I guess we did on two occasions, in Atlanta." Her smile didn't falter at the reference. "I like it."

He gently squeezed her hand, and they ascended the front steps. "We better get you behind a locked door, so I don't do anything to ruin this *date*," he emphasized the word.

Claire smiled slyly. "Actually, according to a definition I recently heard, we need to be in public for this to be a date."

Tony's only response was another small squeeze of her hand; however, as they entered the well-lit foyer, her emerald eyes sparkled at his upturned lips.



ONCE BEHIND HER secured door, Claire hit *call* on the contact Tony had just added to her phone. After three rings, she heard Courtney's voice. "Hi Courtney, I was just checking the number Tony gave me..." They didn't talk long. Courtney asked if Claire was okay. Claire assured her that she was alone, behind a locked door, and fine. When she hung up, she sent a text message to Emily, Amber, and Harry. It said the same thing:

"I VISITED WITH TONY'S CLOSE FRIENDS. ALL WENT WELL. NOW SAFELY ALONE AND GOING TO SLEEP. WILL TEXT TOMORROW."

On the table, Claire found a note:

Mr. Rawlings turned off the cameras in your suite. Please call the number below when you wake so that your breakfast will be brought to you. Sleep well.

Good night,: Catherine

Claire thought about the changes she'd seen in Tony. Was her opinion swayed because of their child? Did she see positives where she should be seeing

warnings? Claire recalled Brent's advice: *Remember who you're dealing with.*

Wasn't that a two-edged sword? She had many memories of Tony, and many were good. Of course, there was a flip side. Perhaps she should think about them; however, she didn't want her baby overwrought with negativity.

Inhaling the cool night air, the country noises and moonlit vista enveloped Claire as she stepped onto the balcony. Despite the change in decor, the familiarity of the suite, balcony, and nocturnal murmurings comforted her. She felt her body relax and exhaustion prevail. Moments later, she snuggled into the soft sheets as sounds of crickets and cicadas through the open French doors serenaded her to sleep.



THE NEXT MORNING, Claire woke after 10:00 AM. She blamed the time difference. Nonetheless, she lay motionless for moments, assessing her physical state. When she'd determined she wasn't going to be ill, she made her way to the bathroom. Next, she called the number from Catherine's note. Claire didn't leave her breakfast to chance. When Cindy answered, Claire was very specific, "Hello, Cindy, I'm finally awake. Could someone please bring me...?"

Cindy brought dry scrambled eggs, toast, and fruit and served it on the balcony. Claire ate her breakfast and drank tea and orange juice while a soft breeze blew her unbound hair around her face. Taking in the beautiful, green, and peaceful scene, it was difficult not to enjoy her surroundings. Everything was perfect.

When Claire finally descended the grand stairs, it was almost noon. She'd wanted to speak with Catherine, and although Tony was due home any minute, Catherine was waiting for her near the sun porch.

"Do you think we have time for a walk?" Claire asked.

"Yes, not too long; however, I believe it would be good for you to walk."

The two women strode in step out of the sun porch and down into the backyard. Even though the midday sun heated the June day, a warm breeze kept the air moving and comfortable. Together, they made their way to the gardens. Flowers of all colors adorned the paths. Following the flagstone stepping stones they made their way to a stone bench at the edge of Tony's yard.

"This is visible, not audible," Catherine said. Claire nodded. "Ms. Claire _____"

"Just Claire, please?" Claire asked with a smile.

Catherine smiled. "Claire, thank you for what you said yesterday. You'll never know how much it means to me. Mr. Rawlings asked me about a box of

information sent to you in prison. Why do you believe it was sent?"

Claire's insides fluttered. She didn't know if it was their baby finally waking or anxiety produced by the possibility of answers to her many questions. "I think it depends on who sent it. At first I thought it was sent by Tony. If that were the case, I thought he sent it maliciously—bragging about the things he's done." She paused. When Catherine didn't respond, Claire continued, "Now I'm not sure, and I don't understand all of the contents."

"What don't you understand?"

"How long have you known Tony?"

"A long time." Catherine's expression revealed someone reminiscing. "I met him the day he graduated high school."

Claire gasped. She had no idea they went back that far. "So, you knew him when he was Anton?" Catherine nodded. Claire asked, "Did you know his family—his parents and his grandparents?"

"Yes, I did."

There were so many questions going through Claire's mind. She didn't know which ones to vocalize. "He never talks about his family. Well, he's mentioned his grandfather a few times. Please tell me about them."

Catherine focused on Claire. "Someday, perhaps. Today is about Anton. He needs you more than he's willing to admit, even now. I hope you can see the strides he's accomplished and the concessions he's made."

Claire fought the emotions within her, and she steadied her shoulders. "I do. I also have memories. Not just the ones of here. You mentioned sometimes being with him was difficult. You and I both know that's an understatement." Claire inhaled deeply and continued, "I also have memories of prison. Tell me why he did that to me."

"Mr. Rawlings is a man of his word. The problem was, he made two different promises, and he felt honored to keep them both. He hoped that by fulfilling one, in a different than expected way, he may have the chance to rectify the other." Catherine squeezed Claire's hand. "That's up to you. Please give him the chance."

"Why are you so loyal to him?"

"He's like my family. I've seen what life has done to him and how he's triumphed on so many levels. He's also been loyal to me."

"But, if I'm to interpret the box correctly, he's done some terrible things."

"Ms.—I mean, Claire, we've all done some terrible things. That doesn't mean we aren't capable of good. You've shown me that too."

As Claire was about to respond, they both heard the approaching footsteps. Coming from the house, Tony advanced, carrying a large satchel. His concerned expression mellowed when his dark eyes met Claire's. Abruptly, Catherine stood.

"Catherine." His one word greeting could easily be interpreted as a

reprimand.

“Tony,” Claire reached for him. “What do you have?”

Slowly, his piercing gaze left Catherine and turned toward Claire. She watched the light overtake the dark as a smile emerged. “I see you’re wearing the hiking boots.”

“Well, yes, you promised a walk,” Claire responded.

“I have our lunch. Shall we picnic at your lake?”

Catherine said, “I’ll leave you two to your afternoon.” Her eyes pleaded at Claire before she nodded and turned away.

“I hope I remember the way,” Claire said as they began walking toward the trees.

“Did I interrupt something?” he asked.

“Girl talk. I’ve missed Catherine terribly.” With a tightening in her stomach brought on by concern for the woman she held dear, Claire hoped Tony’s lack of response meant this conversation was done.



WITH EACH STEP, the directions to one of her favorite places—in the entire world—came back to her. When the trees opened to her meadow, Claire sighed with relief. Everything was just as she’d remembered. The shadowed fringes contained remnants of morning glories the color of the Iowa sky. Daisies and mustard plants added yellow and golden highlights to the otherwise green clearing. Although Tony and Claire talked during their hike, they also enjoyed the quiet serenity of nature.

The buzz of the occasional insect and the rustle of the leaves above, brought on by the gentle wind, filled their ears. As they neared the lake, Claire noticed the fresh aroma of the water penetrating her lungs with each breath.

The new boots she’d found in the well-stocked closet stood upon the pebbles of the lake’s edge while the waves lapped the shore. Out over the water, the sun shone in sparkling prisms like colored flashes above the rippled lake. Tony squeezed her hand and whispered, “It’s as beautiful as I remember.”

“Have you been here recently?”

“No, I’d be lost without you.” Claire wondered if he meant he’d be lost in the woods or if the statement held deeper meaning.

They laid the blanket upon the shore and unpacked the lunch. She made no attempt to hide her ravenous hunger. Claire blamed her appetite on the exercise.

Later in the afternoon, as the warmth continued to build, Claire took off

her shoes and socks and ventured into the water. The soft underwater terrain squished beneath her toes. The warm sun on her skin and the cool water on her feet created the perfect balance.

“We could swim?” Tony offered.

“I didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

“Me either,” he managed with a sultry grin.

Claire laughed and declined his offer. Instead, they lounged on the blanket in their shorts.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

No man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks.

—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

*A*NTON EASED HIS rental car in the parking space at the Royal Hotel on Century Boulevard. Thankfully, the low watt overhead lights did little to brighten the shabby cracked asphalt lot. Even if he tried, he couldn't ignore the beat-up old automobiles filling many of the available spaces. With the demise of his family's fortune, Anton had fallen, but he was extremely thankful he hadn't fallen this far. Under normal circumstances, he'd never step into the likes of this flea infested hotel.

It was a place where whores and junkies rented rooms by the hour. For some, it was a living, for others—their death. It was the last place in Santa Monica anyone would expect a Rawls to stay. For that reason and that reason alone, it is where Anton safely stowed his step-grandmother.

Technically, Marie wasn't his step-grandmother any longer. Nathaniel suffered a massive heart attack four months ago. His death came two months before the completion of his reduced sentence, and the news sent shock waves through Anton's family like a magnitude seven earthquake.

Prior to Nathaniel's passing, Samuel Rawls sought legal declaration voiding his father's marriage to Catherine Marie London. While few states allowed third-party challenges to marriage, New York had a unique rule allowing the ability to annul a marriage and defeat the property consequences of said marriage. Both Nathaniel and Marie fought Samuel's efforts. Despite Nathaniel's incarceration, his power managed to keep Samuel's allegations out of court.

Although Samuel never visited his father in the minimum security prison, the moment he learned of Nathaniel's passing, his attorney successfully filed the necessary paperwork. Because Samuel had begun the annulment prior to

his father's death, the legal action survived.

In order to *void* a marriage, one of the following situations must be proven: fraud, duress, mental incompetence—either permanent or temporary, undue influence, sham, jest, and underage—voidable in a majority of jurisdictions. Samuel's suit claimed mental incompetence and undue influence.

It wasn't property from the marriage that Samuel sought. Most of the family assets were gone, seized by the federal government. Rawls Corporation was sold, and it no longer existed as a whole, but had been parted out to many different procurers. The contents of the large home in upstate New Jersey were auctioned to the highest bidders, and the estate now belonged to a prominent sports star. The resulting proceeds sat in trusts, waiting to be funneled to those wronged investors. Of course, the attorneys would take their share first. What was left would eventually make its way to the people taking part in the claims and various class action suits.

Thankfully, Samuel wasn't aware of Nathaniel's overseas money. Samuel's main objective was Marie's name. His case was only to strip *Rawls* from her title. Vindictive, yes, but Samuel Rawls learned from the best. In one bold move, he punished Marie for replacing his mother and Nathaniel for wronging their family.

Anton tried to act as mediator, but his father was not receptive. It didn't matter to Samuel that Marie loved his father. He didn't care that she'd sat through every minute of his trial, and that she visited Nathaniel every week for twenty-two months.

Nathaniel had always been gruff and commanding, but there were times where a softer side emerged. In Anton's memory, those instances usually involved his grandmother or Marie. Anton remembered one of his last visits with his grandfather. They were in the dingy, pale green visitor's room, and Nathaniel was giving Anton business advice.

"Boy, when I'm out of here, we're going to start new."

"Yes, Sir, I told you about the project I'm working on with a friend."

Nathaniel answered, "Yes, something about computers and getting information fast."

"Yes, it's called a search engine. We have some great ideas..."

"I don't know about that, but I do know you need money to make money. I know you can begin this start-up computer search thing, and when it hits—move on. Buy, invest, sell, and just remember, it's the bottom line. Your father always worried about people." Nathaniel stood and paced behind the table. A habit he had when he was thinking, especially when the subject agitated him.

It reminded Anton of watching a caged lion. “Where are those damn people now?” Nathaniel asked. Not waiting for a response, he continued, “They’re gone! They don’t give a damn about me, Marie, you, or even your damn parents. Do you think any of them give a shit if you have the money to grow this idea of yours?”

“No, sir, but that doesn’t matter. I’ll make this work.”

“Damn right, but it’s money that will help you. I’ve spoken with Marie about this. Regarding the money we’ve discussed, you can use as much as you need to get your project working. When I’m out of here, I’ll help with the growing, investing, and selling. Be smart, boy. If you have too much, the damn feds will be on you before you know it.”

“Thank you, sir, but I can’t take Marie’s money.”

“I know your father thinks very little of her, but that woman is one mighty remarkable woman. She doesn’t care about the money. Just don’t let your father get to her. I’m an old man. It helps me to know she has you on the outside to take care of her, if things get too rough.”

“I will do that, sir.”

As Anton walked in the shadows toward room 12 A, he thought about how rough things had become. He never expected this family feud to end this way, but he wasn’t completely surprised.

When he came to Santa Monica to visit his parents, Anton wanted to discuss the recent ruling successfully voiding Marie’s marriage. He wasn’t relishing the idea of listening to his parents’ victory speech.

Anton wanted to stop the lawsuit; he tried. By tolerating the ruling to pass, he felt he’d disappointed his grandfather. He’d hoped this visit could bring about a compromise. Samuel had made his point. Now that Marie was planning on appealing the decision, perhaps Samuel could allow her to proceed.

Anton never had the chance to talk to his father or his mother. When he entered their bungalow three days ago, he found them dead. Immediately, Anton knew Marie had made it there first.

Her rendition of events was not too farfetched, if you knew the history. According to Marie, she went to their home to *talk*. It was Samuel who exploded first. He ordered her off his property. When she refused and asked to explain, Amanda entered the conversation. Supporting her husband, she told Marie to leave. It was Marie’s second time to attempt this discussion. More than anything, she wanted to make them understand.

Marie was determined to talk until they listened. Amanda was the one to surprise Marie with a gun. Marie’s memories were fuzzy after that. There was

a struggle. She didn't intend to kill them, but once Samuel was shot, Marie knew that she'd be arrested if either of them lived. She couldn't endure what Nathaniel had endured in prison—she just couldn't. The combination of pent-up rage, years of degradation, fear, and self-preservation all fueled Marie's ability to stage the final scene. She knew the exuberance of the gun shots nullified the murder/suicide theory, yet Marie hoped the scene she staged would aid in that notion.

Next, Marie turned up their television and cleaned away evidence of their scuffle. Her finger prints were wiped away. By all accounts, she was still in New York. There were no records of her traveling to California. No one knew she was there. No one—except Anton. She'd driven the 3,000 miles in her own old Honda, using cash along the way.

Opening the door of 12 A, Anton entered the small, stale hotel room. The stench of old tobacco and bodily fluids filled Anton's senses. It was enough to quench any desire he'd previously had of food. Nonetheless, he brought food from a local drive-thru. Placing the bag and cups on the small table, he said, "I brought this for you." "Anton, I want to get out of this dump. When will it be safe for me to leave?"

He paced the only space large enough to take more than three steps, near the end of the bed. He considered sitting; however, the filth and stains on the furniture quickly changed his mind. "It will just be for a few more days. I've been talking to the police and making all the necessary arrangements. So far, the neighbor, Chester, is cooperating. He made one statement that first night to some cop. After that, he conveniently forgot about my *father's sister's* visit."

"It's going to cost money to keep him quiet, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I've negotiated. It won't all be up front, more of a yearly settlement."

"Did he agree?" Marie asked.

"I'm a very good negotiator. He understands sudden wealth brings questions. This will be mutually beneficial. Over time, his payments will increase, and it assures us of his future cooperation."

Marie stood before Anton. He looked at the woman that his grandfather loved. She looked so much older. Her tired gray eyes cried out in anguish over the events of the past few months. She'd lost her husband, her name, and now her money. Anton knew he could turn her in to the police and go on with his life. Marie knew that too.

"I'll repay you for this," she said with her eyes lowered toward the grime on the worn carpeting. Marie continued, "I know you're doing this for Nathaniel, not for me, but I thank you."

Anton lifted her chin; she was his grandfather's wife, and she needed to act as such. "You're right, and you're a Rawls; don't ever look down like that.

I'm the one who failed him by not stopping my father's lawsuit. I will *not* fail him again."

"I came to your family as hired help. I'm not above doing that again. I can work for you."

Anton stared. His mind filled with memories of his family. He remembered the dinners in the grand dining room with his grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, Marie, and him. How had it come down to just the two of them? "I'm not sure how this arrangement will work. I don't exactly have need for household staff at this point."

"You will." In the midst of total chaos, Marie's tone rang with confidence. "You are Nathaniel's grandson. You will succeed. Of that, I have no doubt."

Anton remembered Nathaniel's evaluation: *She is mighty remarkable.* He replied, "I won't abandon you. In a few more days, we should be able to move you. Once we get you back to New York, we'll create a timeline, an iron clad alibi for your whereabouts during my parent's death. The future will work itself out."

"It will, Anton. I have confidence in you." She reached for his shoulders; although they were only three years apart in age, there was no sexual attraction. They were family. Marie felt as if she were looking into Nathaniel's eyes each time she stared into Anton's deep dark irises. The touch was merely a point of contact. They were together in this mess and bound forever by Nathaniel. "You know, your grandfather had plans for after his release. I've had a lot of time to think about those during these past few days."

"He told me." Her determination impressed Anton.

"I can help. I *want* to help. Truly, I didn't intend to kill your parents, but I'm not sorry they're gone. I could lie and tell you I am, but I won't." Anton nodded. "There are others who assisted in putting Nathaniel in prison; your father was but one."

"I have names; however, this will take time and money."

Marie smiled. "I have time. You make us more money."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

—Oscar Wilde

SOPHIA EXHALED AND spoke determinedly, “Mr. George, I’ll consider the most recent offer, but I’m afraid I cannot give you an answer today or tomorrow.” She didn’t wait for his response. “I will call you when I make my decision. Goodbye.”

Silvia looked questionably at her daughter. “You’re too busy to be babysitting your old parents.”

“I’m hardly babysitting. You and Pop are helping me get this studio ready to open.”

“I think getting away from home for a while has been good for your father, a change of scenery and all.”

Sophia smiled. The thought came to her as she was flying to Princeton. She wanted to spend time with her parents and get the studio open. At first, her parents balked at the idea. It wasn’t until she told them how much work she needed to do that they willingly consented. Sophia knew if they felt needed, then they’d be willing to go.

It was a good change of scenery for Sophia too. With Derek overseas, she didn’t want to be stuck in California. Besides, Mr. George was beginning to annoy her with his persistence. Although smaller than the studio in Palo Alto, her studio in Provincetown was home.

She and Derek had worked so quickly to secure some of her art for shipping that they’d left this studio in disarray. Sophia still had many paintings as well as chalk and charcoal drawings stored here. Now, she and her parents needed to work to choose the best ones to display. Once the choices were made, the pieces needed to be framed, or stretched and framed, depending upon the medium.

Sophia’s parents never claimed personal artistic skills. Nevertheless, when

it came to displaying art, they were professionals. Silvia laughed, saying they'd been doing it since Sophia was barely two years old—displaying her creations on the refrigerator door. Carlo's memory may have difficulties, but when it came to constructing an appropriate frame for his daughter's masterpieces, he was still on the top of his game.

Derek wouldn't be back to Santa Clara for another week, so it was the perfect time for Sophia to enjoy her family, her cottage by the shore, prepare her studio, and hire someone to manage it while she's away. The income from her recent sales truly gave her more freedom than ever before.



TONY AND CLAIRE returned to the house before 5:30 PM. Claire hoped for a nap, before readying for the dessert celebration at Brent and Courtney's house. Catherine promised dinner on the patio at 7:00 PM, saying they shouldn't go to a dessert and wine celebration on empty stomachs. Considering her condition, Claire agreed.

Back in her suite, Claire checked her phone. Of course, she had multiple text messages from her sister. The main request was for a call, but Claire didn't want to call. She would willingly text, but she didn't want to hear Emily's voice or lectures; however, Claire worried, if she only sent a text then Emily would suspect Tony's manipulation.

Dreading the conversation, Claire hit *call*. Emily answered on the first ring. "Claire, are you all right?" Claire assured her sister she was fine. She still had her ticket to return to California on Sunday and those plans haven't changed. Claire promised to be careful and politely hung up before Emily's words became too annoying.

After sending text messages to Amber and Harry, Claire climbed into the beautiful four poster bed, settled into the soft sheets, and slipped away. The memories of their afternoon at her lake floated through her subconscious. Being alone, she didn't try to subdue the smile that continually crept onto her face.

Her dream didn't make sense... when she drifted to sleep, she was in the copper colored suite—

As she looked around, the walls were once again a rich beige and heavy golden draperies covered the windows. Claire reached for her cell phone, but it was missing. Easing herself from the warm covers, she searched for her iPad, but it was no longer on the table. She saw the television, but instinctively knew the channels were limited. Her breathing quickened as she

paced the confines of the luxurious room. No matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn't fill her lungs with adequate oxygen. The beautiful walls were closing in around her. She needed air, fresh air. Quickly, she moved to the heavy golden drapes and exposed the tall French doors of her balcony. When the lever refused to budge, her heart rate quickened. Why wouldn't the doors open? The condensation on the small panes indicated coldness on the other side. She peered through the small windows and registered the scene outside. The green leaves and vibrant colors were gone. In their place, she saw skeletons of bare trees and visions of black and white. Inches of snow sat undisturbed on the rail of the balcony.

Claire's knees became weak. If it were winter, where was her baby? Claire's hand moved to her midsection, finding her flat stomach. She wasn't visibly pregnant, so their child must be born. Claire scanned the suite for a crib—nothing. She ran to the hallway door. The lever wouldn't move. No! She was locked in! Where was her baby? Tears of panic rushed from her eyes as she beat upon the door. Panic filled her voice as she screamed at the top of her lungs. This was no longer her nightmare; it was her child's too.

"Ms. Claire—Ms. Claire, you're having a dream." Catherine's words quieted the screams which summoned Catherine to Claire's suite. She'd heard Claire's panicked screams from down the hall.

Claire opened her eyes to Catherine's concerned gaze. "Oh, Catherine. I was dreaming. It wasn't real, was it?"

"Yes, you were dreaming. Thankfully, your door wasn't locked. I'm here for you. Everything is all right. Whatever it was, it was just a dream."

Claire allowed Catherine to embrace her before lying back upon the soft pillow. Trembling slightly, she scanned the suite. The copper walls were back. Her stomach twisted as tears escaped her eyes. "Catherine, did you ever want to be a mother?"

The older woman straightened her back. "Why are you asking?"

Claire struggled to sit up. Her heartbeat beginning to calm, "I got the feeling yesterday, when I told you that I've thought of you in that way, that it made you uncomfortable. I'm sorry."

Catherine's expression mellowed. "Don't be sorry. I believed it to be a compliment."

Claire smiled. "Good, that's how it was intended."

"Yes. Is the answer to your question; however, I've come to realize some people aren't meant to be parents. There are better people to raise children."

"Why do you say that?"

"Some people have made too many poor choices to subject a child to their

views.”

Claire asked earnestly, “So you think a person’s past would influence their ability to parent?”

“Of course, how could it not? Some people don’t deserve to influence a child. Take Mr. Rawlings for example. He’s the way he is in part due to the environment in which he was raised.”

“What were his parents like?”

“You need to ask him that question, but I believe he could have done much better.”

Claire pondered Catherine’s words and asked, “What about his grandparents?”

Catherine’s expression softened. “In that category, Mr. Rawlings did do much better.” Catherine pulled herself from her memories. “Ms.” She smiled. “Claire, dinner will be ready soon. Are you better? From your dream? You need to get ready for the Simmons’ celebration.”

Truthfully, Claire could scarcely concentrate on Catherine’s words. She had too many thoughts going through her mind. Tony’s parents weren’t good examples. Would that make him a bad father? If Catherine believed a person’s past could make them undeserving of children, what about Tony’s past sins? Claire thought about the transgressions she knew to be true: his stalking obsession of her, removing Simon from her life early on—although that turned out well for Simon’s career—and then Simon’s death. Somehow Claire still believed Tony was involved. Also her kidnapping, his treatment of her when she first arrived, his controlling domineering side, how he set her up for attempted murder, and the demise of John’s career; did it matter that he was now attempting redemption? What about the reason she was with him now? What about his recent blackmailing?

She tried to concentrate on the woman before her. “Thank you, Catherine, for giving me some answers.”

Catherine nodded.

Claire continued, her voice distant as her mind wrestled with these new thoughts. “I’ll get ready and be down for dinner.”

This evening was more formal than the last, but not as formal as the wedding. As she readied for the festivities, Claire’s nausea returned. Sitting on the edge of the large whirlpool tub, wrapped in the pink cashmere robe, she fought the onset as perspiration drenched her recently painted face. She heard the knock on the door of the suite. She couldn’t form the words to bid entrance. Claire knew she should be ready and downstairs, but her body wouldn’t let her move.

His voice came from the other side of the bathroom door. Slowly, she heard the turning of the knob. Whatever his expression and tone had been before, distress now prevailed. Tony fell to his knees before a shivering,

ashened Claire. “What’s the matter with you? Are you sick? I’ll get you the best doctors...”

She heard his voice, but their long ago lunch was no longer content to remain within her stomach. The problem was they’d eaten hours before. Claire ran to the lavatory enclosed within a small attached room and submitted mostly to dry heaves as her petite body convulsed. This wasn’t how she had wanted to tell him, *if* she was to tell him at all.

When her body finally calmed, Claire stood, attempted poise, and re-entered the main part of the bathroom. She walked to the sink, rinsed her mouth, and turned toward Tony. She hadn’t noticed before how handsomely he was dressed, quite the contrast to her current condition. Her hair was still done, but her cosmetics needed repair, and although quite expensive, her robe was hardly celebration attire. Looking at his worried face, she finally found her voice, “Tony, I’m not sick.”

He gently reached for her shoulders. “What do you mean? You’re obviously ill. I’ll call Brent. They’ll understand.”

“No, I want to go. I’ll be better soon. It doesn’t usually hit this hard in the afternoon. I think I’m just stressed.”

“What doesn’t hit...?” For an extremely intelligent man, he was slow at fitting the pieces of this puzzle together. His eyes widened, and he released her shoulders. Suddenly, his concerned tone morphed, now more slow and harsh. “*What* doesn’t hit?”

“The nausea.” Claire wasn’t feeling the positive aura one would hope in such a conversation.

“Brought on by what?”

Hell, her make-up needed touch up anyway. She felt the tears pool and blinked, allowing them to descend her cheeks. “I’m seven weeks pregnant, almost eight.” Claire could see the wheels turning in his head. “Yes, Tony, we are going to have a baby.”

His expression momentarily appeared blank. There was no manipulation, no hidden agenda—only shock. Did she ever remember seeing Tony speechless? If she did, she couldn’t recall. Finally, she saw his emotions swirl through his ever darkening eyes as he asked, “How did this happen?”

She looked at him incredulously. “That’s a great question, since I have no recollection of letting you back into my condominium, but nonetheless, the timing works perfectly.”

He slowly turned circles, pacing as he could within the confines of the bathroom. “What are we going to do about...” He motioned toward her midsection. “...this?”

Indignantly, she stood straighter. “I don’t know what we are going to do. *I’m* going to have a baby, with or without you.”

“But you’re twenty-nine years old. I’m forty-eight!”

"Yes, and when we married, our age difference was the same."

"We never discussed children."

"It's a little late for discussion." Claire felt her strength returning with the fury now surging through her veins. Damn him for not responding the way she wanted him to! "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be downstairs in ten minutes for dinner, and we can continue your charade."

Tony shook his head and stepped toward his ex-wife. "I'm sorry. You surprised me. Let me think about this for a while."

"Fine, Tony, you *think* all you want. Your thoughts and decisions don't matter. I'm having this baby."

"Of course you are. I never suggested otherwise. I'll be downstairs on the patio." He kissed her cheek and left. She collapsed again on the edge of the tub. *Well that went well!* She thought sarcastically. Then she remembered the little life inside of her and audibly comforted. "It'll be all right. No matter what—we will be fine. Don't worry about your father. I'm not." Was it good to lie to your child, even if you were doing it for their own good?

When Claire stepped onto the patio, Tony attentively stood and pulled out her chair. Her hair was perfect; make-up repaired, and dress lovely. Her growing breasts filled the bodice more than they would have before. Even her color was back to normal, with a glow of sun on her cheeks from their day on the lake shore.

Sincerely, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

Genteel and reticent, she responded, "I'm feeling better, thank you for asking." And then Claire did what Tony had done to her over and over. She conversed about anything and everything except the pregnancy. On his few attempts to discuss it, she changed the subject. Her change of subject wasn't as direct as saying, "The subject is closed" but subtly, she'd mention something else: for instance her dress. It was one from the closet. She told Tony how much she liked it and thanked him for having it bought.

The dessert celebration proceeded with equal poise. Claire stayed dutifully by his side and said and did everything to continue their charade. After all, this gathering contained people they didn't know. It was Claire's experience that information can be leaked at any moment by any source. To everyone, they appeared the happy couple trying for reconciliation.

When the waiter offered glasses of champagne, Claire smirked as Tony asked for non-alcoholic. Even he drank the disgustingly sweet bubbly grape juice. It didn't make up for his initial reaction, but it did incite a genuine smile to Claire's lips.

On their way back to the estate, Tony detoured to a secluded back road. The June night was warmer than the one before, and the stars were bright. Although she didn't know where they were going, Claire didn't ask. She remained reserved, answering questions, and continuing courteous

conversation. Finally, after a bumpy dirt road, Tony stopped the Mercedes. His headlights faded into the darkness illuminating a meadow as he asked, “Do you know where we are?”

Claire looked from side to side. Beyond the meadow were trees, but they were no more distinctive than any other trees. “No, I don’t.”

He got out of the car and walked to her door. After opening it, he extended his hand and asked, “Will you please walk with me a moment?”

Claire looked down at her shoes. They too were from his closet of clothes, Casadsi platform pumps with a very thin four inch heel. She wasn’t sure of their cost, but from experience, she was certain they weren’t intended for hiking. “I don’t think my shoes are meant for—”

“I don’t give a damn about the shoes.” His polite invitation gave way to the emotions he’d been suppressing all evening.

Claire shrugged and accepted his outstretched hand. Her facade once again in place, she replied, “Of course, Mr. Rawlings, I’d be delighted.”

They took a few steps when Claire stumbled, falling into Tony’s strong embrace. She straightened and secured herself. “Have you figured out where we are?” he asked.

“I really don’t know.”

“This is where I brought you the day I apologized for your accident.” Claire’s back straightened, and her chin rose indignantly. He added, “I meant every word that day.”

“Tony, I don’t want to talk about—”

“I’ve done some things in my life that I’m not proud of. I never in all of my life considered having a child.”

Claire turned to look at his face. The faint glow of the moon saved them from total blackness and shadowed his features. He continued, “I can run businesses, I can make deals, and I can multi-task better than most.” His volume increased. “Nothing frightens me. I can take on an entire board of directors and know that tomorrow they’ll all be jobless. I have eliminated adversaries and obstacles.” He turned toward his ex-wife. “This is totally new territory.”

Her facade melted. “I know, and it scares me too.”

“Do I?”

His question surprised her. Claire considered her answer before she spoke. Finally, she said, “I’m afraid of what you’re capable of doing. You made a point of showing me your control over my friends’ futures.” She reached for his hand. “But of you *personally*? Not anymore, there was a time, but I’ve changed and you’ve changed. No, I’m not.”

“I don’t want you and this baby living in California.”

“I know, but Tony, I can’t go back to the past.”

“To here?”

"No, I love *here*. I won't go back to your supreme control over my every move. I can't, and I won't allow that kind of life for our child."

"*Our child*," he repeated as he gently touched her midsection.

Claire nodded. "I went to the doctor on Wednesday. She did an ultrasound. I saw the image of our baby and his heart beating. The sound of his heart reminded me of my lake, here. From that moment on, everything felt right."

"You keep saying *him*?"

She mused, "I have no idea of the baby's gender. *Him* sounds better than *it*, don't you think?"

Tony appeared to be contemplating her words. Finally, he said, "You know you're very good at pretending. I knew it before, but tonight, you were perfect at every turn. I felt your anger, yet you appeared perfect. How do I really know how you feel?"

"How do I know how *you* feel? Or that you won't do something to me like you did before, with the attempted murder thing?"

Tony lowered his lips to the top of her head. "I guess we need to trust one another."

"Can we do that?" Claire asked.

"I don't know," he answered as he took her hand and helped her back to the car.

On the ride home, Tony asked questions and Claire answered. No one else knows about the pregnancy. She wanted to see him and decide what she'd do, which from the moment she saw the ultrasound, Claire knew that *not having* this baby wasn't an option. She told him about the sickness, what she'd thought was food poisoning, and the bacon. He asked when she knew. It was Sunday, less than a week ago, when she did a home pregnancy test, and on Wednesday she saw the doctor, and on Thursday she flew here.



AT THE BOTTOM of the stairs, Claire said good night to Tony.

Before releasing her hand, Tony said, "I would like to join you, just to talk."

"Not tonight. I've got a lot to think about."

He didn't argue.

When she reached her suite, she closed the door and collapsed on the soft sofa. The vibration in her purse caught her attention—three missed calls from Harry. If it were one, then she could wait until morning, but three needed attention. There were no voicemails, but she did have a text message, simply saying:

“CALL AS SOON AS YOU CAN.”

Harry answered on the first ring. “Claire?”

“Yes, what’s the matter?”

“Amber’s condo was broken into tonight.”

Claire’s heart stopped. “Is she all right?”

“Yes, she was out with Keaton.”

“How did it happen? I thought security had been tightened?”

“It has, and now it’s been stepped up another notch.”

“Did they catch the person?” she asked.

“No, whoever it was got away. Security noticed the breach. Do you think Mr. Rawlings is responsible for this too?”

Claire sat straighter and indignantly she replied, “No.” Her mind whirled; *he* wouldn’t do that, would he? “Besides, he’s here.” She hastily added, “In Iowa, not here in this room.”

“Well, the thing is... whomever it was tore *your* room apart. Drawers dumped, closet torn apart. We won’t know until you come home and do inventory, but so far, we’ve determined the only thing missing is your laptop. Or do you have it?”

As the blood left her face, she felt violated. “No, I have my tablet, but my laptop should be on the desk.” Her once strong voice now quivered, “Did they only disturbed my room?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Love comes when manipulation stops; when you think more about the other person than about his or her reactions to you. When you dare to reveal yourself fully. When you dare to be vulnerable.

—Dr. Joyce Brothers

REALITY BEGAN TO focus as Claire's blissful dreams gave way to the intermittent beeping of her iPhone. She tried to push the sound of her unanswered text messages away and stay in her warm, safe cocoon. Undaunted, the beeping continued. Blindly, Claire reached next to her on the large ornately carved four poster bed for her iPhone. It was where she'd left it after falling asleep talking to Amber until very late, Iowa time. Claire concentrated on the time: 7:35 AM.

She assessed her body. How did she feel about waking this early? After a few moments, she determined neither her body nor her baby were protesting. Claire focused, reading the text messages. The first from Amber:

“IM GLAD WE TALKED. SEE YOU SUNDAY.”

The next from Tony:

“IF YOU ARE FEELING UP TO BREAKFAST, MEET ME ON THE PATIO AT 8:00 AM.”

Claire wondered if that was an invitation or a mandate. Either way, her presence was requested in less than a half an hour.

Making her way to the bathroom and washing her face, Claire decided, *if Tony wants to see me this early, then this is what he gets.* She wrapped herself in the pink robe and made her way to the patio. The morning summer sun rose

in the southeast, beginning its ascent considerably earlier than Claire. Therefore, by the time she arrived to the patio, it was making its way over the trees and illuminating the brick terrace with its morning brilliance. As soon as Tony saw Claire through the French doors, he moved his coffee cup away and stood.

“Good morning, I wasn’t sure you would wake for my text.”

“Good morning.” She smiled. “I did.” She sat at the seat complete with a place setting—obviously for her. Immediately, Cindy was by her side.

“Ms. Claire, would you like some coffee or some tea?”

“Tea, please. Thank you, Cindy.”

Cindy scurried away toward the kitchen, leaving Tony and Claire alone in the warming fresh country air.

“How are you feeling this morning?” he asked, with concern evident in his tone.

“I’m feeling well, which is surprising, thinking how early this is in California.”

Tony smirked. “I think you’re getting used to being in Iowa. It probably isn’t a great idea to keep changing time zones; maybe you should stay here.”

Claire smiled half-heartedly. “I don’t think that would resolve any of my current issues.”

“Oh, but you’re mistaken. It would be ever so helpful.” Tony reached for the bowl of fresh fruit. “Would you like some fruit?”

After Claire spooned some fresh melon and grapes into her bowl, she asked, “Why did you summon me here so early?”

He reached for her hand. “Claire, why do you think everything has double meaning?”

She swallowed a mouthful of juicy fruit and replied, “Because, I know you.”

Tony laughed. “Better than most.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I wanted to discuss the day. I plan to work from home this morning and was hoping we could spend time together before the wedding.”

“I told Sue that I might be available to meet her and Sean this morning in Iowa City. I think I’d like that.”

Tony sat back and contemplated. Finally, he said, “Eric can drive you.”

She tried her best to keep her defenses at bay. “I was thinking; perhaps you have a car, which isn’t worth half a million, that you’d let me borrow for a quick drive into town?”

Claire watched Tony’s mental and physical wheels turn. She knew she’d sent his controlling impulses into overdrive. The muscles in his neck intermittently protruded as his jaw clenched and unclenched. She drank some orange juice and enjoyed the show.

After a few moments, he asked with a smirk, “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Claire grinned. “Immensely, thanks for asking.”

Clouds darkened his expression. “The last time you drove away—”

“This time I’m talking to you about it.” She interrupted. “I want to meet Sue for coffee. I’ll return; then you and I will go to the wedding, together.”

“I thought coffee made you ill?”

Claire smirked. “Coffee is an expression for getting together. I can guarantee I will *not* be having coffee.”

“Getting together? About what?”

Claire sat straighter. “This is what I don’t want.”

“Concern, Claire. That’s what I have. After all, someone broke into your condominium last night. Don’t you think you should be concerned?”

Cindy brought eggs and toast to Claire and sat them in front of her. After Claire thanked her, she left. Her attention returned to Tony. “How do you know about that?”

“So, you aren’t surprised?”

“No. I spoke to others about it last night, and I suppose I’m not surprised you know.”

“Others?”

“Yes, Tony. Friends. Harry called. I spoke to him and then to Amber. They’re both well, thank you for asking.”

“Why aren’t you more upset?”

“I was initially, but now, I think you’re responsible.”

His spine straightened. “Claire, why would I have someone break into *your* condo?”

“I don’t know, but whoever it was took my laptop. The only secret information on there is about you.” Claire continued to eat.

Tony sat his cup of coffee on the table. “Me?”

“Yes, I’ve been trying to reconstruct the information from the box I received. I’ve spent a lot of time looking up information about your grandfather and father. It’s on my laptop.” Claire watched as his jaws once again clenched and unclenched.

“I have nothing to do with this break in,” Tony said. “I do, however, think you should consider staying here. It is significantly safer.”

“Well, Tony, I’m being honest with you. That laptop contains information regarding Nathaniel and Samuel Rawls. If you aren’t the person responsible for its disappearance, then perhaps you’d like to learn who has it.”

“I’ll do my best. This is getting out of hand.”

“Well, back to my original question, do you have a car I can take into town for coffee with Sue? I need to call her.”

Tony leaned forward. “Claire, are you asking? I’m having difficulty with

your wording.”

“Are we in the presence of others?” She looked to her right and saw the empty pool deck. She looked to her left and saw the southeast wing of the mansion; she knew the woods and gardens were behind her. “No, I’m not asking permission to go into town, only permission to use one of your cars. I would hate to be accused of stealing.”



WITH HER GET-TOGETHER complete, Claire maneuvered the BMW toward Tony’s estate and contemplated the long winding drive. She tried, unsuccessfully, to diminish the beauty of it. She’d driven off his estate twice; this was her first solo drive back onto it. Looking at the dashboard clock, it was nearly 11:00 AM, and the wedding wasn’t until 5:30 PM.

Coffee with Sue was nice. Sue obviously felt guilty for not supporting Claire in her troubles. In many ways, Claire felt bad lying to Sue now about her and Tony’s reconciliation. Or was she? Claire’s emotions were so jumbled. Sometimes, she didn’t know what was real and what was pretend. To Claire, the best part of their meeting was seeing Sean again. While the ladies chatted, he busied himself with toys. Claire smiled, remembering how Sue picked the bright colored rattles off the floor at least fifty times.

Claire pulled the car to the front door, not worrying about taking it around to the garage. Eric would do that. As she walked up the steps toward the house, Claire realized how easy it was to slip into that place where others did things for her. Was this part of Tony’s plan? Did he want her to remember the perks of being here?

She opened the door to the massive sparkling entry. While she decided if she wanted to go upstairs to her suite or down the hall to Tony’s office, Catherine came hurriedly down the hall to greet her. “Claire, you’re back!”

“Yes, I just went to town.” Claire looked questionably at Catherine. “Did you think I wouldn’t return?”

“I was only concerned when Mr. Rawlings told me you’d taken one of the cars.”

“Where is he?” Claire asked.

“He’s in his office. Would you like me to let him know you’re back?”

Claire remembered his rules: she was only allowed in his office by invitation or summons. Claire decided this was another opportunity to push the envelope. “No, thank you. I will.” She saw Catherine’s surprised expression as Claire turned toward the corridor and walked to office. Should she knock?

As she contemplated, she heard his voice from behind the large doors. “...

that was two days ago. I wanted an answer yesterday. Your incompetence is..." His speech stalled, hearing the simultaneous knock and opening of his door. Claire watched his expression morph through a series of emotions. Wasn't there a time when she couldn't read his thoughts? Seeing him go from anger—at the person on the telephone, to shock at the intrusion, and finally, to amusement by Claire's forwardness, she wondered how anyone couldn't read his every thought. With a mischievous smile, he continued speaking. Although his heart was no longer in his tirade, he attempted to conceal that from the poor soul on the other end of the line. "It seems as though another pressing matter has come to my attention. We will postpone this conversation. Mr. George, I expect to hear from you Monday morning. Do *not* disappoint me." He disconnected the line. His eyes remained fixed on Claire's from the moment she opened the door.

She smiled as he gracefully walked around the large mahogany desk. As he neared her, his powerful movements reminded her of a lion stalking its game. With the light behind his intense dark chocolate eyes and a sultry look she'd seen before, Claire's insides tingled in anticipation. She recognized her potential role—she was his prey. Why did that make her smile? She'd come to his office to let him know she was back, and suddenly, the temperature of the regal room was rising exponentially.

She thought about his words on the phone, a closing statement she'd heard a hundred times. "That should be your tag line."

"Oh, but you are so right." He was now only inches away, looking down into her confident expression. His cologne penetrated her nostrils and filled her lungs. "I don't like being disappointed."

"I remember that about you." She hesitated. If she just leaned forward, they'd be touching. She stood straight, fighting the urge for contact. "Your car has been returned in one piece, scarcely a scratch."

The tips of his lips twitched, and his eyebrow cocked. "A scratch?"

Claire's grin broadened. "Wasn't that your concern, that I might scratch it?"

He took the initiative and leaned forward. Their subtle touch increased the beating of her heart. Almost instantaneously, her tender breasts responded to the sensation of his massive chest. "I don't recall being concerned with a scratch," he said. "The whole damn car can be replaced. I believe my concern was with your safe return." Since Claire hadn't resisted their contact, Tony made another move, wrapping his arms around the small of her back. With their proximity, her face tipped upward.

Her mind told her to back away; however, she could barely hear those instructions over the intense pulsation of blood in her ears. Her words slowed with breathy expectation. "I have returned."

With one hand still behind her, Tony gently brought her chin skyward. His

touch combined with a new husky tone caused Claire's emerald eyes to flutter. She felt the vibration of his speech against her chest. "You, my dear, are continually teaching me new things?"

"What, pray-tell, have I taught you?"

His lips tenderly brushed hers. "I believe I mentioned before that I liked the black panties. The other night, the light blue satin bra strap monopolized my thoughts. Every time I looked at you, I wondered if it was part of a matching set." Claire nodded, their noses touching with the movement of her head. "And just now, I realized how much more satisfying it is to have you bring yourself home, freely—willingly, than to know you have been driven—perhaps reluctantly."

"It seems-s..." Claire giggled. "You *can* teach an old dog new tricks." The breath of his laugh bathed her face in warmth. She went on, "And as I recall, you've taught me quite a few things too." Her mind screamed to stop! Did she really want to go here? Yet her mouth seemed to be attached to another part of her anatomy: a part that knew exactly where it wanted to go.

"I had been thinking about the pool, but I'm up for review, if you're willing?"

She smiled at the reference. He was definitely *up* for review. She could feel him *up* against her hip. This wasn't her plan either, but for some reason, it felt right. Maybe she needed to know. Lifting her hands to his dark hair, Claire allowed her fingers to weave their way through his thick black mane as her green eyes opened wide, searching his softening brown irises.

He pulled her closer, pressing himself against her. She lowered her lids and willingly consented. Parting their lips, their tongues engaged. The passion ignited Claire in ways she'd forgotten. In ways she'd safely compartmentalized away, even with Harry.

None of it made sense. Claire wanted Tony to pay for his sins. She wanted to bring him down, and-and... she wanted what they had. But more... better. She wanted what seemed to be staring her in the face.

Tony. His magnetism, his control, his dominance was erotic. Claire also wanted freedom and liberty. She wanted a non-monitored telephone, the ability to come and go, and freedom—and him.

Didn't their child deserve to know his or her father? Could Tony ever be a man to swing his small child into his arms with a laugh? Claire told herself, she was consenting for their child, but currently, *her* needs wholly dominated her thoughts.

As Claire's arms encircled his neck, her breasts tingled against his solid muscular chest. Everything she did or said was brought on by deep suppressed carnal desire. She'd spent too much time during the past three years thinking. Today, she wanted to respond and react. She wanted her screaming consciousness to take a much-needed break. Claire wanted Tony.

When he bent down with his nose touching hers and asked, “Are you sure?”

Claire didn’t hesitate. “Yes. I’m sure.”

Tony didn’t ask again. Instead, he bent slightly and scooped Claire into his arms. They didn’t stay in the regal office; Tony carried her away from the grand staircase, down the corridor to his room, and laid Claire on the large regal bed.

Today, she wore pink underwear, matching the color of her top. Once again, his skilled fingers played with the bow directly below her belly button. After removing the lace bra, he caressed her growing breasts. Their tenderness intensified his manipulation, rousing stimulation and bringing Claire unknown ecstasy. His prowess within the defined skill set was unequaled. Multiple times, Claire gripped Tony’s shoulders or the satin sheets desperately trying to remain earth bound as her body surged toward heaven.

When they were both satisfied, she laid within the crook of his arm, enjoying the feel of her head on his shoulder and his intoxicating scent. Claire thought about what she’d done. Unashamedly, she didn’t regret her decisions. His steady breathing was an aphrodisiac, electrifying her already taut body. Was this insatiable need too, a result of the pregnancy? The more he gave, the more she wanted.

The draperies of his large windows were open. The midday sunshine illuminated his suite. Seeing past the glass, the crystal blue sky reminded her of the pool. “Do you think we could have lunch at the pool and enjoy some of this day outside?”

He turned to her with a grin that matched his sultry stare. “I’d like to stay here forever, but I like the idea of getting you more sun.”

Her lips found his neck and began to roam, and between suckles, she said, “At this second, I wouldn’t argue, with staying here.” The low growl elicited by her actions was enough to split her body wide open. “But I’m hungry, and that sky looks beautiful.”

He rolled her onto her back as her long, brown hair fanned the pillow behind her glowing face. “Not as beautiful as you look this moment.”

Claire felt her cheeks blush. Her eyes went to the grand ceiling above as she felt his lips nuzzle her collar bone and move south. “Mr. Rawlings, I believe we were discussing lunch?”

His smile filled her as much as his actions. Claire didn’t want to enjoy it or him, but she did. When she sat to get out of his bed, her vision turned toward his grand fireplace. There were so many good memories associated with that hearth, and the warmth radiating from it. What caught her attention causing the air to leave her lungs was *above* the fireplace.

“T-Tony...” She stammered. “H-how long have you had that there?”

His expression changed. Had he forgotten her wedding portrait was

hanging above his fireplace? “Ever since you left.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Perhaps it is impossible to wear an identity without becoming what you pretend to be.

—Orson Scott Card

PICTURES OF TONY and Claire flooded the internet. Someone at Brent and Courtney's house made good use of their cell phone.

There were even pictures of Claire with Sue in Iowa City. Claire wondered, *isn't there any real news happening in the world right now?*

As she viewed each picture, Claire questioned her expressions. How long could she continue to argue her facade? Was she truly that accomplished at lying, or had Tony's bold move and forced togetherness induced his desired outcome? Could Claire possibly be enjoying herself with him?

As she completed the final touches of her wedding attire, Claire thought about their afternoon. From his office, to his suite, and the pool deck with the warm sultry water, his expressions and touches that kept her body on high alert. Even while napping under the shade of a large umbrella, Claire remembered the feel of his large, strong hands caressing her skin with sunscreen. It wasn't the first time her body rebelled against her better judgment. Claire reasoned, tomorrow I'll fight. Today, I want to enjoy.



RADIANT WAS THE word in Tony's mind as he watched Claire descend the grand staircase. With the blush of afternoon sun on her cheeks, her hair and make-up done to perfection, and the light green Herve Leger dress she'd found in the closet, Claire looked radiant.



As THE GUCCI, strappy five inch heeled sandals clicked across the marble floor, the adoration she saw in his eyes made her cheeks redden.

“I think it’s true what they say,” Tony whispered.

She raised an eyebrow. “What do they say?”

“You’re glowing—absolutely radiant!”

“Thank you, Mr. Rawlings.” She took in his toned, muscular body, covered exquisitely with his customary Armani silk suit. “You’re rather handsome yourself.”

They made their way to Tony’s waiting Mercedes and drove to Davenport. On the way, Claire asked about Eric. Other than picking her up from the airport, she hadn’t seen him her entire stay.

“Well, if you recall, I offered his services this morning for your trip into town.”

Claire blushed at the memory of her return. “Perhaps I should have taken you up on that offer?”

His hand caressed her knee. “I believe I’m very happy with your choices; bold and cheeky is proving to be another pleasurable lesson.”

“Why, Anthony.” Her faux southern belle accent purposefully elongated the yyy. “Who would have guessed that you could be open to new things?”

Thankfully, she was sitting and seat-belted into the soft leather seat, because Tony’s expression made her knees weak, and the sound of his deep, sensual voice caused her insides to melt. “I’m always open to new things. Especially so, if they involve you.”

Once again, she felt the blood rush to her cheeks as they rose into a genuine smile, causing her emerald eyes to glisten. Claire turned and watched the passing scenes beyond the passenger side window. Was she flirting? Was he?

Entering the cathedral, Claire and Tony blended into the groom’s guests. Claire couldn’t believe she was actually attending Caleb Simmons’ wedding. It had been a dream of hers since learning the date in a letter from Courtney while in prison. Glancing down at her hand resting comfortably in Tony’s, she thought about how long ago prison seemed. Never in a million years could she have predicted her current location, watching Courtney and Brent escorted down the aisle. Courtney looked beautiful in a mother-of-the-groom sunburst gown. Claire had heard all about it when Courtney first purchased it. Again, neither woman ever foresaw Claire seeing it in person.

As the ceremony progressed, Caleb appeared handsome and confident, and Julia’s smile lit the entire cathedral. Her gown’s train flowed behind her as her father escorted her to the front of the church. Claire couldn’t help think about her own wedding. As the memories came, so did the tears. She dabbed her eyes while Tony gently squeezed her hand. Without thinking, she leaned against his strong shoulder and accepted his unspoken support.

They sat with Tony's friends during the reception. Claire was thankful Tony insisted on getting together prior to the wedding festivities. It made the reception much more comfortable. After the meal and cake, the music began. While the new Mr. and Mrs. Simmons danced, Tony and Claire watched from their seats. Again, he held her hand. She wondered if he was thinking about their first dance as husband and wife. She remembered feeling like a princess in his arms. After the couple danced with Julia's parents, Claire watched Caleb dance with Courtney and Julia with Brent. Claire couldn't imagine being anywhere else. Next, the dance floor opened to the guests. When the music slowed, Claire accepted Tony's invitation and joined him under the soft lights. Perhaps it was their afternoon activities, but Claire's body molded unconsciously to his. He directed their every step, gracefully guiding her across the floor.

"I know I fought you about all of this," she whispered. "But I'm so happy to be here right now."

His embrace of her slender waist tightened. "I couldn't be happier myself." He leaned away to see her face. "I hope you realize that *this* isn't a charade."

Claire pressed her lips together in a straight line. With all of her might, she wanted to argue, but she couldn't lie. Shaking her head from side to side, she admitted, "Right now, I know that."

Tony pulled her close as the rest of the guests disappeared. Claire closed her eyes, felt the warmth of his embrace, and allowed her body to go wherever he led.



IT WASN'T DIFFICULT to access her laptop. A few different tries, and her password was easily discovered. The information within was more than he could ever have imagined. Just recently, he'd formed his own ideas about Anthony Rawlings being Anton Rawls, but now, he had it in black and white. She had so much information about the Rawls family. Years ago, he'd tried to do similar research, but everything came up a dead end. Why wouldn't it? By 1990, the Rawls family ceased to exist.

According to Ms. Nichols' fine research, Sharron died first of natural causes. There was very little information about her, especially during the last three years of her life. She didn't even appear in any family photos. Nathaniel passed away in May of 1989, while incarcerated in a minimum security prison in New York. Next, yes, he liked this part: Samuel and Amanda died in a *murder/suicide* in Santa Monica, California. Why did Ms. Nichols have a question mark next to the *murder/suicide*? Obviously, she questioned the

accuracy of the assessment.

He often wondered how Anton got the police investigators to go along with that conclusion. Perhaps he made the same bargain with them that he had with him. Ms. Nichols even had copies of police, ballistic, and autopsy reports. The scanned copy of the 911 call caught his attention. Apparently, Anton hadn't been as thorough as he thought. This must have been how she and Harrison Baldwin found him. His name appeared on the report.

Smirking, Patrick Chester thought it funny; he'd actually thought Ms. Nichols was Anton's daughter. Seeing her recently all over the internet, she wasn't Anton's—aka Anthony Rawlings—daughter. She was his ex-wife. According to the gossip people, they were working on reconciling. Patrick wondered if Mr. Anthony Rawlings had any idea of the wealth of information his ex-wife had accumulated against him.

Patrick Chester considered the possibility of blackmailing Claire Nichols too, but she wasn't exactly living in the lap of luxury. Oh, her condominium was nice, in a very high priced part of Palo Alto. She even kept affluent company. Amber McCoy, CEO of SiJo Gaming, was valued at quite a bit. Her brother, Harrison Baldwin, wasn't hurting for cash either. Nevertheless, in comparison to Anthony Rawlings, they were paupers.

Why had Patrick accepted such measly annual supplements when Anthony Rawlings could so easily afford more? Of course, it was because up until Ms. Nichols made an appearance at his home, he never suspected Anton Rawls of being the great Anthony Rawlings. The way Patrick saw it; he was due twenty plus years of back payments.

The missing information on Ms. Nichols' laptop was about Samuel Rawls' sister. Patrick didn't even know her name; he never did. He just remembered Amanda Rawls referring to the woman as Samuel's sister. Funny, as he scanned Ms. Nichols' research, it didn't even look like Samuel had a sister. That didn't matter. For all the time, Anton/Anthony had paid to keep the information about that woman hidden; she must be someone important. Patrick wondered if Mr. Rawlings would pay a bonus for keeping this information away from Claire Nichols. Seriously, what man wants his wife or ex-wife to learn he's been paying to keep a secret about another woman?

Another picture just hit the internet. Wasn't today's technology wonderful? The photo was taken only minutes ago, via someone's cell phone. Amazing quality for a phone. The picture was of Anthony Rawlings and Claire Nichols dancing. They seemed very dressed up. The caption mentioned a wedding reception. Patrick Chester smiled. The sinister grin was truly too large for his face. He knew without a doubt, the real money was right there, in Mr. Rawlings' arms. The mega-billionaire would gladly pay big—no, huge, for the safe return of that woman. And to think he'd had her right on his property. If he'd only known what a goldmine she was the day she and Mr.

Baldwin visited. That didn't matter. Patrick knew now.

Searching the laptop, he found her travel itinerary. Ms. Nichols' flight was due back to San Francisco at 17:40:00, tomorrow. She had a first-class ticket. *That figures, Patrick thought. Well, her accommodations won't be as luxurious once I get a hold of her.*



TONY READ THE following message from his phone:

To: Anthony Rawlings
From: Phillip Roach
Subject: Ms. Nichols
Date: June 8, 2013

I've confirmed with security at Ms. Nichols' condominium; her unit was indeed breached. It wasn't until the perpetrator was leaving her unit that security devices indicated a violation. Until Ms. Nichols can confirm that the only item taken was her laptop, it is safe to assume, since her room was the only one manhandled, she was indeed the target.

According to the records of my indicators, the front door to her condo was opened Friday, June 7, at 20:15 the violation was noted when the door once again opened at 20:27. Security cameras do not show a clear picture of the person in question. It appears to be a man who's bald or balding. I will increase my surveillance and report any suspicious activity.

Please confirm the time and place of Ms. Nichol's arrival. I know her reservations have been changed. I will look for the new times and places.

Thank you.



As THE GUESTS began to thin, Tony suggested they head back to the estate. Claire hated leaving Courtney, Brent, and her other friends. She didn't know when she would see them again. Of course, since she and Tony were in the midst of *reconciliation*, she couldn't voice her concerns. Instead, she smiled politely and warmly offered her farewells.

Once they were alone in the seclusion of Tony's car, Claire settled against the soft seat and thought fondly about her day. Her mind went from the breakfast on the patio, to driving Tony's car, coffee with Sean and Sue, her return to the estate, and their mutual physical admiration, poolside, the wedding, and finally, the reception. Each scene filled her with hope, with promise of what could be.

These thoughts kept her from talking and overpowered her consciousness. She was mindlessly lost when Tony asked, "Have you spoken to anyone from Palo Alto lately?"

Her insides clenched with apprehension. She didn't like discussing Harry and Amber with Tony. "I haven't even looked at my phone since we left for the wedding. Why? Has something else happened?"

"Not to my knowledge; however, my source tells me the intruder to your unit was not interrupted. His only intention was to access *your* room and take *your* laptop."

Her world of happiness and hope evaporated. "Why would anyone want *my* laptop?"

"What was on it?"

Claire considered the contents of her hard drive. "I don't know... my bank accounts, my travel itinerary, information about your past, and a rough draft from Meredith about her boo—articles."

Tony's knuckles blanched as he gripped the stirring wheel. "I thought this stupid Meredith Banks thing was over?"

"It is. With the money you gave me, to give her, she'll keep it quiet, unless, as you and I agreed, something happens to me or someone I care about."

After taking a deep breath, Tony asked, "What do you have regarding my past?"

Claire sat straighter. "Seriously, I've spent so much time on this; it's hard to condense it into an elevator pitch."

With the eerie green of the dashboard, his black eyes transcended the darkness. "Give it a try. I'm sure you can do it."

Claire inhaled. "Fine. I confirmed Nathaniel and Sharron Rawls had a son named Samuel. He married a woman named Amanda; they had a son name Anton, born February 12, 1965: the same day as you. That, plus a picture in Newsweek showing your grandfather's home confirmed to me that you are indeed Anton."

“Well, you know that’s true. Why are you continuing this research?”

“I really don’t want to discuss this... please?”

“Despite your suspicions, I had nothing to do with the break in. I need to know what the perpetrator now knows.”

“My computer is password protected. No one besides me can access it.”

Tony’s ambivalent expression spoke volumes regarding her *secure* laptop.

Eventually, she said, “Obviously you disagree. If someone is able to access my information, there are documents and reports from your parents’ death that they’d get a hold of.”

For a moment, Claire feared their future. Tony seemed unable to peer forward although the Mercedes cruised that direction at unknown speeds. His eyes bore into her soul. “What possible business of yours is my parents’ death?”

Claire straightened defiantly. “I suppose that before it was morbid curiosity. I wanted to know if you were truly capable of hurting your own parents. Now, however...” She hesitated and sat straighter, defiantly. “...Now it is very much my business. I need to know about *my* child’s family history.”

The tenseness in Tony’s strong shoulders eased. “I suppose that’s correct.” In a moonlit glow, the countryside continued to pass outside the windows. Tony confessed, “I didn’t harm my parents.”

Claire reached for him, covering his hand with the warmth of hers. “I know that now. I’ve known for a while. It wasn’t you. It was the woman in a blue Honda.” Claire felt the atmosphere within the car tighten. She went on, “Whoever that woman is, you’ve been protecting her for years.”

“Protecting her?”

“Yes, whoever she is, you’ve kept her secret secure.”

It felt as if Tony were wrestling with himself, wanting to ask more questions, yet not wanting to divulge more information. After a moment, he asked, “So all of this is on your laptop?”

Claire nodded. “Yes.”

They drove in silence until Tony said, “I want you to seriously reconsider your return flight. The estate is much safer and more secure than a condominium, which has already been broken into.”

Claire squeezed his knee. “I’ve had a wonderful time. Please don’t ruin it. Let’s just take all of this one day at a time? I’d like to think about tonight now and tomorrow later.”

His grip loosened upon the innocent wheel as he contemplated her words.

When they reached Tony’s estate, he left the Mercedes sitting in front of the steps, gallantly opened Claire’s door, and kissed her hand. Earlier, in the dashboard light, she’d watched the man she’d once thought she loved fight his emotions. The intensity in his black eyes and grip upon the soft leather steering wheel no longer frightened her. Hadn’t Catherine asked her to see

how hard he is trying? Claire did, and now, that same gorgeous man had her hand at his lips with an equal, but different intensity in his gaze. The aura surrounding them wasn't about laptops or airplane tickets, but about pure and simple desire. She could over analyze; however, the way his lips electrified her skin and melted her insides nullified any arguments she could form.

They walked hand in hand into the house. At the base of the grand staircase, Tony hesitantly whispered, "I suppose this is good night?"

She stretched her toes allowing her lips to linger on his. When she pulled away, she suckled his neck, just above his perfectly starched collar. Tony's grasp of her small waist tightened as a low groan escaped his clenched teeth. "That's up to you," Claire purred. "I don't plan on using that lock."

With their fingers entwined, they made their way toward her suite. At the door, Tony stopped to kiss the woman before him. "There's more for us to discuss—"

Claire's finger touched his lips. She watched as the pressed straight line below her touch slowly formed a sensual grin. With her face tilted upward, she whispered, "Tonight is about us, non-charade, non-performance. If you want something different, go downstairs."

The copper walls and satin drapes were different, but the suite was the same. It held so many memories. Their history was made within these walls, yet as they came together, it didn't feel like the past. It felt new, rejuvenated, consensual, and real.

Their bodies united like they'd never been apart; however, their roles were different.

Prison and being away hardened Claire. No longer could she trust without question or believe without confirmation. That didn't mean she couldn't trust or believe. It meant she needed the ability to question without fear and confirm on her own terms. As she surrendered to his erotic caresses, Claire pushed the questions away. Right now, their carnal needs demanded attention. She craved what only he could give.



WITH ALL HIS entrepreneurial success, Tony's private life had been anything but. He never wanted love. Why would he? He wasn't even sure it existed, until her—the woman now willingly beneath him. Her beautiful eyes saw into his soul. Her petite body dominated his mind. Somehow, despite all of his mistakes and manipulation, Tony was once again where he longed to be. He wanted to control Claire and limit her access to his past and his heart; however, he knew it was too late. She'd managed to open places he didn't know existed, and now they had a child coming. Although he felt his power

slipping through his fingers, when her eyes opened and Tony watched the shimmering emerald irises glow and her lips form a smile, he no longer cared.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Hope is the dream of a waking man.

—Aristotle

C LAIRE DIDN'T KNOCK, and she didn't enter reverently. The sudden rush of his office door made Tony turn toward the commotion. His emails could wait. Her displeasure radiated throughout the room before she uttered a word.

"Tony, what the hell have you done?"

"What are you talking about?"

"After I got dressed, I checked my emails. One is a confirmation of my airline reservation *cancellation*." She stood defiantly before him. "I did *not* cancel my reservation. I called the airline, and they informed me my seat was sold. They have no open seats for my original flight or any others until tomorrow. I told you I was going back to California today. You promised me!"

He smirked, taking her tirade too well and fueling Claire's anger. "I promised you..." He said with a smooth, calm voice. "...a return ticket. I'm a man of my word; you have a ticket."

"A voided ticket. Semantics! I want to be on that flight!"

"Claire, listen to reason." He gestured toward the chairs. "Have a seat."

She looked at the straight backed chairs near his desk. How many times had she sat in those seats while he rattled off rules or perimeters for her behavior?

"No." As the word left her lips, she watched the muscles in his neck tighten and his eyebrow rise.

"Very well, stand if you prefer. How are you feeling today?"

Claire glared. "You're not changing the subject. I'm going home."

"I hoped you would consider yourself home."

Claire exhaled, paced the length of the desk and back, and collapsed into

one of the chairs she'd just refused. "Tony, why do you have to push and push?" Exasperation came through her tone. "I truly have had a wonderful weekend, and I've surprisingly enjoyed being on your estate, but I have a life. I have plans. Amber is leaving for a conference, and I want to see her before she leaves. John and Emily will be in Palo Alto Monday. They're spending four days looking for housing. I need to be there."

"Amber is leaving? You'll be alone?"

She misinterpreted his question. "I won't be with anyone in public, if that's what you're asking."

His voice hardened. "That goes without saying. I'm asking will you be alone?" His volume rose. "Christ, Claire! Your condominium was broken into. It isn't safe!"

"You're trying to scare me into staying. I'm not falling for it. My building has top notch security. Harry is utilizing more SiJo resources, and then there are always your people watching me. I lead a damn parade!"

"Your laptop was stolen."

"Stuff happens. It isn't cause to stop living."

He tried to reason. "We have plans beginning Friday in Chicago. *In your condition*, you shouldn't be flying all over the country." She pressed her lips tightly together. The words forming in her head were not appropriate and wouldn't add positively to their conversation. He exhaled and added, "In a commercial plane. Do you know how many people get ill after breathing that recycled air?"

"You're really stretching here. Tell me, how I'm getting back to California today?"

He sighed, "I want to take you back upstairs and lock that door..." His eyes glared as he added with excessive emphasis. "...from the outside."

Claire stood and walked toward him. Her closed lips formed a soft smile as she peered deep into his dark eyes. There was a time the expression before her would have frightened her but that was no longer the case. Framing his freshly shaven face between her petite hands, she bent toward him. Their noses touched, and she brushed her lips to his. "Tony, I believe you. I know that's what you want. I drove to town yesterday, and I came back." She kissed him again. "I will go to California today, and I'll be back to Chicago on Friday. Remember what we said the other night?" She didn't wait for his answer. "We said we needed to trust each other."

He closed his eyes and nodded; his face still in her hands.

She continued in her soft and steady voice. "I trust you not to lock my suite from the outside. You need to trust me to return."

He reached out and encircled her waist, caressing the small of her back, above her slacks and beneath her blouse. She allowed herself to be pulled onto his lap. In response, she embraced his neck and listened to his gentler

tone. "You don't need to believe me. I know I need to earn that right, but I *did not* have anything to do with the break in. It wasn't a plan to scare you into staying here. I'm concerned." He kissed her lips and moved his hands to her stomach. "And not just for you."

Claire lowered her face to his broad shoulder as tears formed. "Thank you. From the moment I saw the little blue plus, I've been concerned too. You have to know, I'll do anything necessary to keep me and our baby safe. I just need to be in California, especially this week. I have a lot going on."

"What if I told you, you shouldn't have a lot going on? You deserve to rest and allow others to do for you. If Catherine knew about the baby, then you'd never lift another finger."

Claire suddenly remembered the two computerized pictures she had in the pocket of her slacks. "I have something to show you."

He raised his brow. "Oh?"

She ignored his reference and removed the ultrasound picture from the pocket of her slacks. Tony's eyes widened with wonder. "Is this what I think it is?"

Claire nodded, barely able to contain her emotion. "Yes, it's our little one's first picture."

"I want her to have your eyes," he declared.

Claire smiled. "I know you are used to getting your way, but sex and eye color are non-negotiable."

"I don't know... sex sounds great, and I love your eyes." His twinkled. "Would you like to negotiate?"

Claire shook her head, feeling the blush on her cheeks. "How am I getting..." She almost said *home*, but rephrased. "...back to California?"

"The same way you're getting to Chicago, in a private plane. It's a safer mode of transportation, with no public record of your itinerary."

She exhaled with relief and thanked him. Tony explained the time of departure was negotiable, but asked that she stay in Iowa until after they share an early dinner. Claire chose not to argue. She was leaving; time was inconsequential.

Claire went back to her suite, finished packing, and called Amber and Harry, telling them her change in plans. Unfortunately, she would miss Amber. Her roommate promised to return on Thursday, before Claire needed to leave again. Another problem created by her new itinerary was her car. It was parked at San Francisco International Airport. She would now be flying into the private commuter airport in Palo Alto.

"I can take a SiJo car into San Francisco and bring your car back," Harry offered, as they spoke on the phone.

"Thank you, but I'll just take a taxi home and get my car tomorrow when I pick John and Emily up from the airport."

"No, Claire, I'll be glad to get you. Just text me with the time of your departure."

She inhaled. Claire knew she and Harry needed to talk. Nevertheless, she didn't want to face him, yet. "I don't want to put you out."

He hesitated; Claire heard his heavy sigh. After a moment, he asked, "Will you text?"

"Yes, thank you." After customary and polite goodbyes, they both disconnected. Her recently settled stomach tied in knots in anticipation of their discussion.

Claire walked onto her balcony and leaned against the concrete and stone ledge. She had a few hours before their afternoon dinner and the air was warming nicely. Her clothes were packed, but she knew there were bathing suits in the dressing room. Watching the gentle rustling of the leaves in the vast sea of green, she lifted her face to the sun and felt the warm breeze against her skin. While she debated a swim, she heard a knock on the door.

Claire called into her suite. "Come in."

Catherine entered. "You're leaving?"

Catherine's sad grey eyes tugged at Claire's heart. She reached for the kind woman's hands. "Yes, and I'll be back. Thank you, for all you've done to make my visit special."

Claire saw a spark of hope as Catherine asked, "You'll be back?"

"I will... I believe you. He is trying."

Catherine smiled a satisfied smile until they both turned toward the opening of Claire's door. Tony performed a perfunctory knock as he pushed the door further open. "Oh, am I interrupting?"

Claire walked to Tony and took his hand. "No." Her emerald eyes gleamed toward him. "But since you're here...?"

He looked at her, questioning, "Yes?"

"I think I'd like to share something with Catherine, but not without you."

His features softened as a glow overtook his face.

"Catherine, I suggest you sit," Tony recommended.

She did, and although her expression revealed alarm or suspense, she didn't speak.

Claire reached into her pocket, removed their baby's picture, and handed it to Catherine. The woman took the ultrasound picture and stared. Finally, her eyes widened, and for the second time, Claire saw tears form on her lids. "You're pregnant?" she asked Claire, who nodded in response. Then turning to Tony and seeing his proud expression, Catherine continued, "The two of you?" She sprang from the sofa and embraced Claire. "Oh my, a Rawls—Nichols baby. I can't believe it."

Claire allowed herself to be swallowed by Catherine's embrace. Looking to Tony, she was instantly surprised by his expression. The smile that was

present only seconds ago was gone. *Why is he glaring?* Claire wondered. *She's happy. What's his problem?*



CLAIRE AND TONY decided to spend a few hours at the pool while they waited for dinner. With the rising humidity, the tepid water felt wonderfully refreshing. When Claire wasn't submerged, she sat with her feet dangling in the cool blue liquid and enjoyed the view of Tony swimming the length of the pool and back. His strong arms fanned outward as he pushed against the water. The muscles in his back, shoulders, and arms defined with each stroke.

In the light of the sun, Claire noticed a few renegade gray hairs in Tony's black mane. She thought it made him look distinguished; however, with his recent *age* comment, she chose not to mention them. When he surfaced at her feet, she giggled as he pretended to pull her into the water. Just when she thought she was safe, he stood and scooped her into his arms. All of her squealing was to no avail.

After a few playful moments of feigned fighting, she relaxed and floated in his arms. The sun bathed her exposed skin as he supported her shoulders and legs. His words were a statement, intended as a question. "I want to show you something."

"I'm curious." She asked with a seductive smile, "Is it something I've seen before?"

He returned her sparkling gaze. "Yes, but not what you're thinking."

It was her turn to raise an eyebrow. He led her up the steps and out of the pool. The afternoon heat made for a smooth transition from water to air. The breeze only dried their skin as they walked to one of the umbrella tables. Sitting knee to knee, Tony reached into the pocket of his bathing suit. Claire gasped as her eyes adjusted to the umbrella's shadow. In Tony's outstretched palm, sparkling in the reflection of the June brilliance was Claire's engagement ring, the one she sold.

Only her eyes moved as she looked from his hand to his face. Was he mad? What was he going to say? How did he get it? So many thoughts assaulted her mind. His true intent was not even on her radar.

Despite her concerns, his expression seemed soft—almost fearful.

"Tony, how did you...?"

"I bought them back."

Her stomach twisted. "I'm sorry. I needed money—"

He interrupted, "If I gave them back, will you promise not to sell them?"

"Why would you give them back?" she asked in all sincerity.

"Do I need to get on one knee? I suppose I didn't do that the first time."

She suddenly stood and backed away, almost tripping over the heavy iron chair. If she'd made him speechless with her pregnancy announcement, then he'd certainly returned the favor with his proposal. Finally, as her eyes remained large, she said, "No, I'm not ready for anything like that."

His eyes dropped. "No, never. Or no, not yet."

She saw his pain and instinctively moved forward. Kneeling before him, she pleaded, "Tony, slow down. I told you, I like the dating thing... we never did that. Please don't push too hard. In the last week, we've survived a major game changer. I think we need to proceed with caution." Everyone knew the game of chess required planning and strategizing. Making moves too quickly often proves lethal for the offending piece.

He reached for her left hand and slipped the diamond ring onto her fourth finger. Prisms of color and light radiated from the large center stone as the smaller diamonds sparkled around its perimeter and from the embedded band. Of course it fit. It was hers. With a mischievous smile, Tony said, "I just wanted to make sure it still fit."

Removing the platinum engagement ring, she handed it back to him. "I appreciate the offer. Don't make me give you a definite answer. If I do, you won't be happy. Let's be content with what we have for now."

Reluctantly, he accepted the ring. Holding her hand, he bent his head and kissed her fingers, one by one. The warm sensation began where his lips contacted her skin and immediately radiated throughout her body. As he suckled each finger, he confessed, "I have made some bad decisions... and done some things I regret in my life... but without a doubt... what I regret the most... is divorcing you." His penetrating gaze held her emerald eyes captive. "If you tell me there's hope, that one day you'll be Mrs. Rawlings again, I'll wait."

She didn't reply. She was busy enjoying the sensation of his lips. It started with her fingers, moved to her hand, arm, shoulder, and by the time he reached the nape of her neck, Claire was moaning and lost to the world around her.

"May I get you out of this wet suit, *Ms. Nichols?*" he emphasized her name.

She answered heatedly, "Yes... and Mr. Rawlings, there's always hope."



Text message, from Claire's iPhone to Harry's number:

"THE PLANE IS ABOUT TO TAKE OFF FROM IOWA CITY. IT'S A LITTLE AFTER 4:00 PM. SHOULD BE IN PALO ALTO AROUND 6:15 PM OR 6:30 PM PST" She hit SEND.

Then, thinking about it more, she wrote a second message:

“THANK YOU FOR PICKING ME UP.”

She settled into the plush, white leather of the reclining chair and fastened her seat belt. Closing her eyes, she tried to think about Harry; however, her thoughts continually returned to Tony.

The copilot, a woman Claire didn't know, spoke. The competent voice returned Claire from her daydreams. “Ms. Nichols, we are about to take off. If you'd like to make any calls or send any messages, please complete them in the next few minutes. Once we are at cruising altitude, I'll be happy to get you anything you need.”

“Thank you.” Claire read her name badge. “Grace, I think I'm going to try to sleep.”

“Yes, ma'am.” The woman disappeared behind the door to the cockpit.

Claire removed her phone one more time. With an uncontained smile she wrote:

“THANK YOU FOR A LOVELY WEEKEND. I'M SO THANKFUL I WAS ABLE TO ATTEND THE WEDDING.” SEND.

She saw the icon for an incoming message:

“I WILL BE THERE.”

Claire frowned. It was from Harry. His normal pleasantries were gone. She knew without a doubt, tonight's conversation wouldn't be pleasant. A beep and another message:

“I HOPE THAT WAS NOT THE ONLY PART OF THE WEEKEND YOU ENJOYED?”

Her grin returned; the plane was starting to move. She replied:

“I BELIEVE THERE WERE OTHER PARTS TOO. BUT SINCE YOUR PLANE IS MOVING, I NEED TO TURN OFF MY PHONE—CAN'T ELABORATE.”

She hit SEND and turned her phone to Airplane Mode.

With the seat reclined and a soft light blanket, Claire drifted off to sleep. It had been a long eventful four days. Just before sleep, she realized Tony was right about something else: this was a nicer way to fly.



SIMULTANEOUSLY, ANOTHER TEXT message conversation occurred. Interestingly, this one too was volleying between Iowa City and Palo Alto:

IC (Iowa City): **“WHAT NEW INFORMATION DO YOU HAVE RE: BREAK IN?”**

PA (Palo Alto): "**BUILDING SECURITY TO SEND ME ENLARGED IMAGE OF PERP—WILL FORWARD AS SOON AS I RECEIVE. NOT CLEAR ENOUGH TO BE USED WITH RECOGNITION SOFTWARE.**"

IC: "**SEND VIA E-MAIL, EASIER TO ENLARGE ON MY END.**"

IC: "**MS NICHOLS WILL ARRIVE PALO ALTO AFTER 6:00 PM, PST. KEEP HER IN YOUR VIEW UNTIL SAFELY RETURNED TO HER CONDO. ARE YOUR SENSORS IN PLACE?**"

PA: "**YES SIR. MS MCCOY JUST EXITED UNIT.**"

IC: "**SHE IS GOING OUT OF TOWN**".

PA: "**HER FLIGHT PLAN IS FOR LOS ANGLES WITH RETURN FLIGHT THURSDAY.**"

Phil wanted to show Mr. Rawlings he knew what was happening.

IC: "**KEEP ME CONSTANTLY APPRISED**"

PA: "**YES SIR.**"



PATRICK WAITED BY the exit to her terminal. He didn't know if she had checked luggage or not, but he could follow from a distance. It took some patience, but he had the panel van parked right next to her Honda Accord. The element of surprise was always the best. It wasn't like he'd ever kidnapped anyone before, but he'd watched enough episodes of crime shows to know the necessary tools and form a well thought out plan.

He double-checked the monitor. Yes, this was her flight; nevertheless, as passenger after passenger passed, she was AWOL. Didn't first class usually deplane first?

After the stream of people waned, Patrick walked confidently to the American Airlines counter. "Excuse me," he said politely. "I'm waiting for a friend. She was supposed to be on Flight 1103 from Iowa. Can you tell me if she made her flight?"

Once Patrick gave the attendant Claire's information, the man checked his computer. "I'm sorry, sir. We don't have anyone by that name scheduled on this flight. Perhaps she changed her reservations."

"Can you check?"

"No, sorry." The attendant looked disgusted. "Privacy issues, you know? I can't look in her account. I *can* see if she's on another flight scheduled to

arrive later today.”

Patrick’s heart raced; damn this was going to be perfect. Maybe there was still a chance. “Yes, please.”

After prolonged scanning, the attendant confessed, “I’m sorry, sir. I don’t see a Claire Nichols on any of our flights. United has two coming in this evening from Iowa City. Perhaps she switched carriers.”

“Thank you.” Patrick huffed as he walked away. Now what?



DEREK’S FACE FILLED the screen of Sophia’s laptop. It amazed Sophia how even half a world apart, his voice sounded like they were in the same room. “I called corporate. She’s on her way back to California, and she’s being reassigned.”

Sophia couldn’t believe her ears. “So, what are you going to do about an assistant?”

“They’ll assign me a temporary replacement, and when I get back, I guess I get to start interviewing potential candidates.”

“I’m really sorry I was right about Danni’s intentions.” She smiled into the camera. “However, I’m very glad you stopped her in her tracks.”

“Yea, Baby, I need to get some work done here. I just wanted to be honest with you.”

Sophia’s smile transcended the oceans. “Thank you. When will you be home?”

“I’m scheduled to fly back Friday. I hope this doesn’t postpone things.”

“Me either. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Derek said as he disconnected their Skype call.

For a few moments, Sophia stared at the blank screen. She couldn’t believe Danni flew all the way to China to seduce her husband. Of course, that wasn’t the reason she listed on her travel request. It had something to do with negotiation assistance.

“Sophie, did I hear that husband of yours in here?” Carlos asked as he walked into Sophia’s kitchen.

“No, Pop. Remember, he’s in China. I was just talking to him on the computer.”

“China? He’s in China? Why would he be there? He should be here with you. He could help me make some more frames. I think we can get a few more sketches stretched today.”

“That sounds great. I want to be back to California by Friday.”

“You and that man of yours need to move back here. New Jersey is where you belong.”

“Yes, Pop.”

She decided not to remind him that *here* was Provincetown not Princeton. It wouldn’t matter in another ten minutes anyway. She and her mom told him a hundred times about Derek’s trip to China.

Sophia smiled as she thought about her father’s agenda for stretching sketches. Why could he remember some things and not others?

If she hadn’t spent the past week with him, she wouldn’t have believed how far he had deteriorated. Sophia wanted to talk to her mom about hired help. She worried her mom was doing too much. Sometimes, you just need help.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Anger is not the opposite of love, for the opposite of love is indifference. To be angry is to care tremendously.

—Doris Moreland Jones

TONY WOKE WITH a start; his wife—for just over a month—rolled from his shoulder to her side. In the silence, he heard Claire's soft rhythmic breathing. She was sleeping peacefully.

A far cry from earlier. Closing his eyes, he remembered their night, their words, and her tears. When they went to bed, everything was fine. Then out of nowhere, she told him she was bored and wanted to join him on business trips. Normally, he'd like that, but lately nothing was normal; he had too many fires to count. Fires Claire never would or could understand.

Truthfully, he'd been holding so much in lately, so many issues: Rawlings Industries, Sophia Rossi—no, Burke, and John Vandersol.

Lifting his head to his elbow, he watched her. Tony couldn't fathom how someone so seemingly compliant could so easily incite his emotions. He could keep his cool in the middle of chaos, yet a few simple words from her and his reactions were uncontrollable. *No*, Tony thought, *not uncontrollable*. He'd gone there once. He wouldn't go there again.

Then why did she need to remind him? Her insolent question... when he told her she had invitations, but he had chosen not to share them, explaining he wanted her safe from more *accidents*... she had the audacity to ask... *from whom*? Tony's body trembled with pent-up anger—*from whom*? He knew what she was implying. Of course, she said, *from whom* were the invitations... but Tony knew what she meant—from *whom* would an accidents occur. It wasn't like he didn't think about that every damn day! He'd never regretted his actions more, but you can't turn back time.

There was something about Claire, something about her veiled assertiveness, something which provoked Tony like no one else. She could

bring out the best in him. No question, as he watched her petite body curl into a ball and snuggle into the soft pillow, he wanted to please her. Not just please, love, indulge, spoil, and pamper her beyond her greatest dreams; however, she could also elicit the worst in him. Tonight was no exception.

Damn, if he didn't want to wake her and tell her he was sorry—explain that she was experiencing his frustration with so many other things. He thought about her words: *Thank you, I'd really like to see Courtney and Sue.* She had the uncanny ability to say the right thing. Nevertheless, he questioned her sincerity... could she be playing him? Had he fallen victim to her persuasion? Is that why he offered Phoenix?

Tony slid out of bed, stood silently, and watched as Claire remained sleeping. He wouldn't be as cautious upstairs, but he wanted to leave the room. Ironically, it was her desire to *leave*, which escalated tonight's emotion. Nonetheless, if she were awake, then he wouldn't be able to leave her in *his* suite—alone. Her rhythmic breathing continued. Tony eased himself into a pair of nylon shorts and a t-shirt and quietly entered the corridor.

His bare feet padded the marble hall into the foyer, past the grand stairs, and toward his office. The path was dark, yet he knew every step. Quietly, he eased himself into the confines of his grand office, pushed the switch, and illuminated the room.

Bored! She said she was bored. Tony tried to push Claire from his thoughts. He hit the mouse and watched his desktop come to life. Searching his private inbox, he found the email he'd been anticipating:

To: Anthony Rawlings
From: Cameron Andrews
Subject: Ms. Burke
Date: January 26, 2011

Although Ms. Burke is now living in Boston in her husband's apartment, I've just confirmed they made an offer on a small cottage in Provincetown, Mass. I'll notify you immediately if their offer is accepted.

Derek Burkes' employment record is straight forward. I've attached his dossier. I will continue to monitor. Please inform me if you would like my activities to change in any way. CA

Tony fired off a response:

To: Cameron Andrews
From: Anthony Rawlings
Subject: Ms. Rossi-Burke
Date: January 27, 2011

Let me know the value of the cottage and their offer.

He hit *SEND*.

Tony rubbed his temples and silently berated himself. He'd looked away for a couple of weeks. A couple of weeks to marry and honeymoon and everything changed—Sophia married! She wasn't even seeing anyone when he went to her art show in New England, the beginning of December—just two weeks before his own wedding.

Closing his eyes, he remembered seeing her across the room. She was stunning, wearing a long red gown with sparkling, dangling earrings which hung to her shoulders. It wasn't a style he'd like on Claire, but they looked beautiful on Sophia. Her people skills were constantly improving; her gray eyes looked confident and steadfast.

Then a month later, she not only married. She married *Derek Burke*.

Derek Burke wasn't a *large* blip on Tony's radar screen, but Tony knew of him. When Sherman Nichols, aka Cole Mathews, worked to bring Nathaniel Rawls and all of Rawls Corporation down, he was assisted by Jonathon Burke, a securities officer. Their testimony, along with Anton's father's, hammered the final nails in Nathaniel's coffin, literally, as far as Tony was concerned.

Nathaniel's quest was to return the favor: to bring down these men and their families. Sherman had one son, Jordon, who had two daughters, Emily and Claire. Jonathon had one daughter, Allison. Though married, she had no children. Well, at first they thought she had a daughter, Cindy. It later turned out Cindy wasn't her biological child, but rather the child of her husband's sister. All very complicated. The first miscue on their road to fulfilling Nathaniel's quest; after Allison and her husband tragically perished in a hiking accident, Cindy was left alone. Marie reached out, posing as one of

Allison's old friends. Since that time, Cindy has worked on the estate. All of her needs were met: college tuition—she was currently taking online courses, clothes, and housing. She has also accumulated a nice nest egg. Never would Cindy suspect her saviors were anything but.

The direct line of Jonathon Burke was gone.

Nevertheless, the reason Derek Burke was on Tony's radar was in reality Cindy was his cousin; Derek's grandfather was Jonathon's brother. In the past month, Tony had spent a great deal of time learning more about Derek Burke. A few of Tony's recent trips weren't *business* at all. He couldn't very well take Claire to watch the new Mr. and Mrs. Burke in person.

Tony's observation: Derek was nothing like Sophia. Their relationship wouldn't last.

Past suitors were tested, induced with great temptations. All failed. Sophia may have interpreted it as personal failure; however, Tony believed he was only accelerating the future, in essence, saving her from greater heartache. He needed to decide how to do the same with Derek; test him, before it was too late. This would take time.

After all, just because Tony allowed his defenses to wane, he couldn't allow Sophia's rash decision to change his ultimate plans. Her art career was finally receiving warranted attention. She truly had talent. He even owned many of her pieces. They were displayed in New York, Phoenix, and Dallas... if he remembered correctly. It didn't seem right to have her work displayed at the estate. Damn, if he hadn't been so preoccupied with Claire...

Leaning back in his luxurious leather chair, Tony's mind slipped back to his wife. He didn't regret marrying her; it surprised him how much he usually enjoyed being with her. In the past, beautiful women had their purpose, like anything else: a nice car, a priceless antique... It took Tony awhile to realize Claire was different, not someone to use when he wanted and forget until the desire returned. No, she wasn't like one of his many expensive cars, and she wasn't just a beautiful ornament to have on his arm at functions, although she played that role to perfection.

Tony's realization hit months ago when he realized it didn't matter if she were dressed in designer gowns with perfect hair and perfect make-up or newly awake with no make-up and tussled hair. He no longer saw the difference. For a man who valued outward appearance as much as Anthony Rawlings, that insight was shocking.

When he first brought her to the estate, he never intended to enjoy her, much less love her. Truthfully, it was initially determined she and her sister would have *accidents*, much sooner—years sooner, like their parents; however, as he began following Claire and her life, there was an undeniable attraction; then at her parent's funeral, for no particular reason, Tony fought the urge to comfort her. At that moment, he knew he wanted her for himself.

Truthfully, Emily's survival has been a byproduct.

As a man who makes money—lots of money, buying and selling, rarely does Anthony Rawlings become emotionally vested in projects or people. Initially, he saw Claire the same way; however, after his acquisition, as weeks and months passed, despite her situation, she worked her way into his being—into every fiber. Her strength to meet him with eyes on fire while her words and body appeased, fascinated Tony. Never had anyone done that.

Smiling, he recalled their amazing honeymoon. The isolation of the island paradise kept he and Claire within the confines of a private bubble, yet as always, life intervenes. Back to Iowa meant disruptions. Being a multibillion dollar company, there were always issues with Rawlings Industry. The stock price was up, but there were always fires in need of dousing. A recent acquisition in Missouri was currently raging.

On top of Rawlings Industries and Sophia, Tony had to deal with John Vandersol. The man absolutely infuriated Tony. Never had he met a more arrogant, self-righteous prick. Tony did his research. He knew John was accomplished. Every account Tony uncovered was flattering, some to the point of nausea. It was hard to believe anyone could be as perfect as everyone's account of John Vandersol.

During their first meeting, Tony was determined to play nice, for Claire. It was after all, his olive branch to his fiancée. Thanksgiving went well. The ladies didn't seem to recognize the subtle feather ruffling and posturing, which occurred on multiple occasions.

He tried to endure John because of Emily, Claire's sister. Tony knew Claire wanted to see her family, and he also knew Claire obeyed his rules while alone with her sister. After all, he listened intently to the recordings of each private conversation; from their after dinner catch-up in New York, to their giggling girls' sleep over prior to the wedding. Never once did Claire allude to her and Tony's less than conventional beginning. He was extremely proud of his wife's obedience.

Allowing his mind to change directions, perhaps Claire had earned the right to spend some time away from the estate. He would reconsider that possibility.

Rubbing his temples, Tony contemplated John Vandersol's future as he remembered the man's past. Their first open disagreement occurred the night following Thanksgiving, regarding the prenuptial agreement. Tony was both amused and shocked by John's impudence. The man actually thought he could persuade Claire to defy Tony's authority. Smiling to himself, Tony knew he'd trained Claire too well. Public defiance from his wife wasn't a concern. Nonetheless, John's audacity agitated Tony beyond words.

Then there was the wedding rehearsal, where John *didn't* give Claire away. It was at that moment, as Tony stared into Claire's anxious eyes, Tony

determined *John Vandersol will pay*. This insolent man not only upset him, but his words caused Tony's future wife distress. Her connection with John was his only saving grace. By causing *her* discomfort, at *her* own wedding rehearsal, John secured his own demise.

Tony's first plan was brilliant: offer John a job. It *appeared* as though Tony was taking the high road, recognizing John's superior legal abilities, offering him an exorbitant amount of money and pleasing Claire. It was win-win. Rawlings Industries could always use another competent attorney, but he'd be under Tony's thumb.

Nonetheless, in the ultimate act of defiance, John Vandersol refused Tony's offer. It was an act, which has infuriated Tony ever since he learned of it. That was two weeks ago, although he hadn't told Claire until a few hours ago.

Claire was smart, and Tony was certain she understood the unspoken implications: her ability to see her sister now, or in the future, was in serious jeopardy. Her ability to interpret boded well. The thought of his wife's family caused Tony's blood to boil—discussing them infuriated him. It was truly better for Claire, if he didn't experience those feelings while in her presence.

Tony poured himself a drink; *perhaps it would help him sleep*. Pacing the confines of his regal office, he contemplated his wife further. He thought about Catherine's words. She claimed Claire's strength in the face of Tony's adversity was proof of Claire's true competence. Truly, Catherine's encouragement regarding their relationship helped propel it beyond the original plan. Catherine claimed she saw Nathaniel's positive qualities in Tony when he was with Claire. Comparing him to Nathaniel was no small compliment. Catherine's approval of Claire continued to mean a great deal to Tony.

That was why Tony wanted Claire at the estate, safe, with Catherine to watch over her. With Rawlings Industries, Sophia, and John Vandersol, Tony didn't need to be concerned about Claire. Her role as Mrs. Rawlings had just begun, and admittedly, in most situations she'd done well; however, there were a few occasions she'd forgotten the significance of her new title. He didn't want to spend his days worrying how her actions reflected upon him.

Claire said she wasn't a spouse or a partner. That wasn't true. He wanted her as both; however, Anthony Rawlings never shared control. His percentage always held more weight; therefore, it didn't matter if she were bored. If he wanted her at the estate, that was where she would be.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.

—Anatole France

“*M*s. NICHOLS, WE’RE almost to Palo Alto.” Grace’s voice penetrated Claire’s dream, resounding through the hum of engines. “Ms. Nichols, please return your seat to its upright position.”

Claire opened her eyes, seeing the luxurious interior of Tony’s private plane and the nice copilot standing before her. Recognizing she’d slept the entire flight, Claire slowly obeyed. She nodded at Grace as she pushed the appropriate buttons and returned her lounge to its chair position. It was true; no commercial seat, even in first class, could provide the comfort and serenity Claire had just enjoyed for over four hours.

As wakefulness came, so did hunger. Earlier in the afternoon, she enjoyed one of her favorite meals: grilled salmon, asparagus, salad, and red potatoes, and since Tony claimed not to have requested the delicious menu, they both suspected Catherine. Nevertheless, as Claire adjusted her watch to Pacific Time, she realized dinner was over five hours ago. Contemplating her future, she wondered if the twisting in her stomach was hunger or the thought of her impending discussion with Harry and her future travel plans next Friday morning.

Claire wanted to talk with Harry, be honest, and explain her thoughts. The problem with her plan—Claire didn’t know her own thoughts. Harry deserved honesty, but she wasn’t completely sure what that entailed. She truly never meant to lead him on. She liked him. Perhaps no one would believe her, but up until recently, she never expected to even consider allowing Tony back into her life. Even now she didn’t know if their charade was an act or if real

feelings were emerging.

From the moment Tony left her in jail in Iowa, she thought *they* were ancient history. If she didn't, would she have spent hours upon hours sitting with Meredith Banks, recounting some of the most horrific times of her life? Would she have spent day after day researching Tony's family history? No. No, she wouldn't.

And when he blackmailed her at the gala, she had no intentions to truly reconcile. It was all a sham, but Claire had to admit, there were moments... flashes of feelings. She tried to ignore them. Unfortunately, the press didn't. Harry was right about some of the pictures; Claire wasn't that good of an actress. The look in her eyes couldn't be feigned. Nonetheless, that didn't mean she wanted reconciliation. Well, not until... the little blue plus and pulsating black dot appeared.

If Claire allowed herself to somehow look past Tony's faults and peer into the man who claimed never-ending love, she could see his good. She could see what Catherine wanted her to see: Tony was trying.

As the plane descended, Claire struggled with her wedding portrait. Tony walked away from her, left her to sit day and night in a lonely prison cell, while every night he stared at her portrait above his fireplace. It didn't make sense, and when she noticed it, he seemed surprised, obviously accustomed to its presence.

Claire attempted to understand what he and Catherine tried to explain. Tony said he did what he did to save *her—from him*. Catherine explained that Tony made two promises; he tried to keep one in a way as to also keep the other. Was that the loophole he mentioned? In San Francisco, after the gala, Tony reminded Claire of his promise to love her forever, the promise he'd made in front of family and friends. Claire needed to know the specifics of his *other* promise and confirm to whom it was made. Was it his grandfather, as she'd suspected, or the woman in the blue Honda?

Claire closed her eyes and contemplated Brent's recent information: Burke, the same name as the securities officer. Could Tony possibly be doing the same thing to someone else, like he did to her? Claire knew one thing for sure: no one else was in her suite.

Didn't she owe it to herself and to their child to give this reconciliation a try? How could she possibly explain all of that to Harry? He knew the truth about Tony's past behaviors. The night of the gala, Harry was upset and said hurtful things. Nevertheless, Claire doubted he could ever treat someone the way he treated her in the beginning. How could she make anyone understand she would willingly choose Tony over Harry?

As the plane came to a stop on the tarmac, Claire stood. Her stomach knotted in anticipation of their conversation. Suddenly, she remembered the second part of her week: John and Emily's arrival tomorrow. If her impending

conversation with Harry would be difficult, then talking to her family would be impossible. Feeling light-headed, Claire sat down against the plush seat and closed her eyes.

“Ms. Nichols, are you well? You’re very pale.”

Claire peered toward Grace’s concerned expression. “I think I just stood too fast.”

“Yes, ma’am. We’ll have your luggage out to you in a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” Claire said as the door began to open. Remaining seated, she inhaled the fresh air and returned her iPhone to normal. Almost immediately, her phone chimed with notifications; there were three text messages. The first one was from Tony, sent just as she left Iowa:

“OH, BUT HOW I WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO ELABORATE!” The color quickly returned to her cheeks.

The second was received only a few minutes ago:

“I’M HERE.” It was from Harry.

The third came immediately after Harry’s:

“YOU SHOULD BE LANDING, PLEASE LET ME KNOW YOU HAVE ARRIVED SAFELY” From Tony.

With the fresh air filling the cabin, Claire quickly replied to the third text:

“JUST LANDED. THANK YOU AGAIN FOR EVERYTHING. I SLEPT THE ENTIRE FLIGHT... VERY COMFORTABLE WITHOUT ALL THAT RECYCLED AIR!”

Smiling, she hit *SEND*.

The comfortable California breeze refreshed Claire as she stood at the door atop the steps. Looking around, she saw Harry standing casually near one of the hangars. Immediately, she recognized his blonde hair moving slightly in the breeze. Her eyes moved from there to his well-fitted black t-shirt tucked casually into the slim waist of his faded jeans. Claire remembered telling Courtney about Harry, describing him as the anti-Tony. That was so true, yet it wasn’t. Both were incredibly accomplished, strong men. Tonight’s conversation would be much easier if Claire could in some way blame Harry; however, she knew none of this was Harry’s fault.

She smiled his direction, and he nodded, stepping toward her as she descended the stairs.



SITTING BEHIND HIS large mahogany desk, Tony tried, in vain, to read the documents on his computer. The words entered his mind and disappeared before he could digest their meaning. He watched the clock in the corner of his monitor. Finally, the iPhone to his right sounded and vibrated upon the

smooth glossy surface. Hastily, he swiped the screen—1 Text Message:

“JUST LANDED. THANK YOU AGAIN FOR EVERYTHING. I SLEPT THE ENTIRE FLIGHT... VERY COMFORTABLE WITHOUT ALL THAT RECYCLED AIR!”

He smiled at her cheekiness. Maybe the recycled air was a stretch, but he would undoubtedly prefer her in Iowa to California. Nevertheless, they made progress this weekend. They both knew it. His phone sounded and vibrated again—1 Text Message:

“MS. NICHOLS PLANE JUST LANDED. MR. BALDWIN WAITING AND LUGGAGE BEING PUT INTO HIS CAR. I WILL FOLLOW.”

The muscles in Tony’s neck tightened. *Does picking her up at the airport constitute a date?* Tony tried to tell himself it didn’t. *Besides, would he rather have her in a taxi with some stranger?* They’d spent four days together, made love on three different occasions, and have a baby on the way. While reasoning words went through his thoughts, the clenched jaws and tightened shoulders revealed the jealousy coursing through his veins.

Tony replied to Phillip Roach:

“KEEP HER IN SIGHT. LET ME KNOW IF THERE ARE ANY STOPS ON THE WAY TO THE CONDO. WHERE IS THAT PICTURE?”

He hit *SEND*. Text message number two, to Claire:

“OUR AGREEMENT FORBIDS PUBLIC EXPOSURE WITH ANYONE ELSE! I THOUGHT I'D MADE THAT CLEAR! WE HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING!”

Exclamation marks were so often overused in text messages. Tony hesitated. He repeatedly hit the backspace and typed once again:

“I'M GLAD THE AIR WAS TO YOUR LIKING. REMEMBER OUR AGREEMENT. CALL WHEN YOU'RE SETTLED.”

The restraint was difficult, but he knew he wasn’t going to win her back without effort. The damn press would have a field day if they saw her with Mr. Baldwin, but Tony reminded himself to do what he’d told her to do: trust. Exhaling, he tried. It was especially difficult, especially if you’d never done it before.

The sound and vibration announced another arriving text message:

“THE PICTURE WAS SENT TO YOUR EMAIL. LET ME KNOW IF YOU DON'T HAVE IT.”

Shit, Tony had been trying to read the acquisition documents and forgot to check his email. He switched screens. There was the email from Phillip Roach with an attachment. Opening the attachment, Tony saw that the photo quality was poor—obviously enlarged too many times, creating a very grainy image. Tony pushed the plush carpet with his feet as his leather chair moved away from the screen, hoping for a clearer picture. He saw a man with little to no hair. Was he older and balding or younger with his head shaved? Looking

closer, Tony guessed the man was older. Normally, Tony was excellent with names and faces. He saw a hint of familiarity, but Tony couldn't remember why. Perhaps it had been a long time since he'd seen him, or maybe he'd been on television or in the news. Regardless, the twinge of recognition made Tony uncomfortable. Why would someone he recognized steal Claire's laptop?

Two more text messages came through his iPhone. The first one, from Claire:

"I DO. I WILL LATER."

Tony exhaled. It took every fiber of self-restraint to not get on another plane and go get her.

Second message, from Phillip Roach:

"DID YOU GET THE EMAIL? I CAN RESEND."



ON A SUNDAY night, the light traffic around Palo Alto flowed well. Nevertheless, within Harry's Mustang, their polite conversation was strained through the dense unspoken tension. Harry asked, "How was the wedding?"

Claire told him about Caleb, Julia, Courtney, and Brent and how nice it was to talk openly. She rambled about one thing and another, avoiding their impending discussion.

As the tension began to wane, Harry asked, "Would you like to get something to eat?"

Claire thought about it. She was hungry. Yet Tony's reminder about their *agreement* came to mind. Even more deterring was the thought of her and Harry's future talk. "I think I'd like to order something to the condo," she said as they neared the four story building. "It'll be more private, and we need to talk."

Harry eyed her suspiciously. "Talk?"

Claire exhaled. "Oh, come on. You have more questions than you're politely asking. I think we need to be honest about what's going on."

"I thought we were."

Claire exhaled. "Please, I need to tell you a few things."

"Maybe I don't want to hear them." Harry waved at the security guard as he pulled the Mustang into the underground parking garage. "Hey, there's a van in your spot." Harry noticed as they wove around to his assigned parking spot. "I don't remember seeing that before. I could call..." He hesitated. "...or maybe you should call security and have it moved."

Claire didn't care about the stupid van. She wouldn't have her car back from the airport until tomorrow. "If it's here in the morning, I will. It's probably someone's guest who doesn't know about the assigned spaces." She

looked at his light blue eyes. "Please, can we order some delivery and talk?"

"Yeah, fine." He got out of the car and began removing her bags from his trunk. "My place or yours?"

Claire pulled the smaller bag, while Harry pulled the larger. Stepping into the elevator, she replied, "How about yours?" It would be easier for her to leave if things got too uncomfortable. "I'll take my bags in and freshen up, and then I'll be over."

"Don't forget, your room's a mess."

She had forgotten. There were too many things competing for space in her head. "Oh yeah, I'll do a quick inventory and let you know if I think anything else is missing."

Harry walked Claire to her door and let go of her large suitcase. "Are you sure you're okay seeing your room by yourself?"

Claire shrugged. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why don't you call for some food?" She thought for a moment as she unlocked her door. "Just no sushi, all right?"

Harry's blue eyes squinted, allowing his amazingly long lashes to linger near his cheeks, and his head tilted to the side. "But you like sushi." She wrinkled her nose, and he asked, "How about Chinese?"

She nodded. "Chinese sounds great. Extra rice," she added with a smile.



PARKED ACROSS THE street from Claire's condo on Forest Avenue, in his nondescript grey Camry, Phil watched the lights turn on in the large windows on the fourth floor. He typed the text message while engaging his laptop:

"MS NICHOLS ARRIVED TO CONDO. NO STOPS ON WAY."

He checked his laptop. The sensors would indicate if only her apartment opened or if both hers and Mr. Baldwin's opened. The sensors were new, but with the recent break-in and an unlimited budget no piece of technology was beyond his scope.

There must be something wrong with his sensors. Yes, Claire's door just opened; then moments later Mr. Baldwin's door opened; however, the data indicated Claire's door had also opened twenty minutes ago. Phil's heart raced as he looked up toward the windows. He pulled out his phone; Mr. Rawlings answered on the first ring. Common pleasantries disappeared. "I just read my sensors..." Phil's voice came with deep breaths as he raced across the street. "...She's in her unit and it was opened twenty minutes ago."

Ignoring Mr. Rawlings' bellowing voice, Phil hastily entered Claire's building and approached the security desk. "Has anyone been to unit 4A recently?" The security guard looked at Phil questionably. Phil repeated himself louder. "The unit that was broken into last week, has anyone been up

there?" Phil could still hear Mr. Rawlings yelling through the phone.

"Yes, there was a delivery. The man had the appropriate documents."

Phil revealed the picture he'd sent Mr. Rawlings. "Is this the man?"

The security guard looked at the picture. "I don't know. He had documents. Yeah, maybe. He was bald."

Raising his voice above the one screaming through his phone, Phil shouted, "Call 911 and get me up there right away!"



TONY COULD HEAR everything and do nothing. How long would it take to get up four flights? He disconnected from Phillip Roach and scrolled his contacts, finding Harrison Baldwin. He hit *CALL*.



CLAIRE PULLED HER luggage into the foyer. She'd forgotten about her room being a mess. Maybe Tony didn't have anything to do with it. If that were the case, she was glad she'd been out of town when it happened. Suddenly, she wished Amber were home.

Turning on lights, she headed toward the kitchen. Even though Harry was calling for dinner, she thought a little snack might help her nerves before she faced her wrecked room and their conversation. She watched as the overhead lights flooded the living room and darkened the outside world beyond the large windows.

Which occurred first—the sound of his footsteps or sensing his presence? Claire's heart raced as she spun around. She recognized the man immediately: Patrick Chester, the neighbor from Santa Monica. In an attempt to hide her panic, she feigned indignation, "What are you doing in my house?"

He walked toward her, his beady eyes narrowing while his smile widened.

She repeated her question. "What are you doing in my house? Get out!"

He continued forward. She backed toward the windows and assessed an escape. If she ran through the kitchen, could she get back to the door and out before him?

"You made me think you're Anton's daughter." Patrick laughed. The menacing sound made the hairs on the back of Claire's neck prickle. "You're not his daughter..." His volume rose with each word. "...unless that's what they call whores who seduce Sugar Daddies!" His.

The distance between them lessened as her back pressed against the cool glass. "I never told you I was—"

Without warning, his hand forcefully contacted her left cheek, causing her to stumble sideways. She caught herself against the glass before falling to the floor. He grabbed her hair and pulled her back to her feet. Tears filled her eyes as her scalp screamed in pain.

“Shut up!” he shouted. His foul breath made her stomach lurch.

She thought about her baby. “Please, you can have whatever you want. Just don’t hurt me.”

“I said shut up!” He slapped her again, releasing her hair and allowing her to fall. Her head bounced off the sill and onto the wooden floor. Claire pulled her knees into her chest as she tried to shield herself and her baby. Patrick’s foot connected her ribs, pushing the air from her lungs.

As she struggled for air, she heard his voice, “You’re coming with me. I’m going to get everything I deserve...” His fist now entwined her hair, pulling her body upward. She scrambled, trying to move, to stop the pain. He dragged her body across the floor. The room grew steadily darker while in the distance she heard Harry’s voice yelling. Pain intensified in her head and her chest. Then hearing a loud noise, everything faded away...

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

***I hope you aren't too ugly. What a collection of scars you have. Be grateful.
Our scars have the ability to give us the reality that our past is real.***

—Red Dragon

C CONSCIOUSNESS CAME SLOWLY; she felt the throbbing in her head and the intense pain in her side. As the feelings intensified, so did her nausea. Claire couldn't remember where she was... it felt wrong. Wanting to see her surroundings, she tried to open her eyes. Why did she hurt so much? Why wouldn't her eyes open? Panic intensified her nausea. Instinctively, she knew getting sick would increase her pain; she tried to breathe and distance herself from the agony. Beyond the darkness, she heard sounds. Her mind scrambled; beeps. She heard beeps... what were the beeps?

As the fog cleared, the beeps steadily became louder, allowing her to register their origin—She was hearing monitors. She also felt a strange sensation in her arm. Claire tried to touch it, but her hand wouldn't move. Why wasn't her body responding to her thoughts?

Voces... she strained to hear the voices. Was it Tony? Oh, she wanted Tony. What about their baby? No, it wasn't Tony's voice. It was Harry's. Her body didn't move; yet, she felt tears escape from her closed eyes.

That feeling in her arm—she remembered it. She'd felt it before, but when? The pain in her head made it impossible to concentrate.

“How long will she be unconscious?” Harry’s concerned tone disengaged Claire from her thoughts, filling her with conflicting feelings.

“That’s up to her. She’s fighting her injuries the only way the body knows. Her energy is needed to repair the trauma. She’ll wake when she can. In the meantime, we’ll keep her monitored.”

“You said she was pregnant.”

Claire’s heart ached. Did Harry say *was*?

“Mr. Baldwin, Ms. Nichols *is* pregnant. The baby is strong and healthy.

Ms. Nichols is fighting for two right now.”

Claire wasn’t sure what else they said. The only thing that mattered was that her baby was healthy. She drifted back to the place where her body didn’t hurt.



THE BEEPING CONTINUED even in her dreams. Rolling slightly to her side, the tightness in her arm intensified. Claire suddenly remembered when she’d had that feeling. It was after her *accident*!

She concentrated on lifting her lids. Slowly, they obeyed. The fluorescent beams lit the room as they flowed from under the cabinets. The tubes in the crook of her elbow came into view. She was right; it was the same sensation she had after her accident. As her eyes continued to focus, she saw his golden hair resting near the foot of her bed. Although sleeping in a chair, Harry had his head resting on the bed with his hand over her leg. She remembered him picking her up at the airport; they were going to talk. She went into her condominium, and then... there was fog. Claire closed her eyes: Patrick Chester. She couldn’t remember anything else.

Claire tried to talk. “Harry?”

He didn’t move.

“Harry?”

The blonde head bobbed as Harry raised his head and his light blue, tired eyes peered toward Claire’s face. “Oh, Claire, you’re awake.”

He climbed toward her as he grasped her hand. “I need to let everyone else know.”

With a raspy voice, Claire asked, “Everyone else?”

“Amber, Emily, John, and Keaton are out there somewhere.”

Her heart sank. Where was Tony? Maybe he didn’t know she was hurt. Of course he knew! Where was he?

“H-Harry.” The words were difficult to form with her mouth too dry. “What happened?”

He held her hand and brushed her knuckles with his lips. “Claire, I’m so sorry.”

She was reeling from everything. “Why are you apologizing? Can I please have some water?”

He reached for the Styrofoam cup sitting nearby. Sipping the water from the offered straw, she relished the coolness as it moisturized her throat. Experience told her not to drink too much. She tried her question again. “What happened?”

“Let’s talk about that after we tell everyone you’re awake.” Claire nodded.

There was no need for urgency, somewhere in her memory, she'd heard her baby was all right.

Harry hit the nurse button. When the woman in light green scrubs came into the room, she took Claire's vitals and promised more information after the doctor's examination. Claire wanted to ask about the baby; however, Harry's presence caused her to hesitate.

When Dr. Sizemore entered the room, she asked Harry to leave. He kissed Claire's forehead and walked into the hall. She heard Amber, Emily, and John's hushed voices as they questioned Harry beyond the closing door.

"Dr. Sizemore, I don't know what happened, but please tell me, is my baby all right?"

"Yes, Ms. Nichols. I've already shared with Mr. Baldwin that your baby's vitals are strong."

"Mr. Baldwin?" Claire asked, puzzled.

"Yes, he said that the two of you..." The doctor's face blanched. "I know that I shouldn't have, but I guess... I assumed. Ms. Nichols, I'm sorry."

Claire couldn't stop the tears. *Oh my God! Harry knows I'm pregnant; and he thinks it's his!* Her thoughts came with such velocity her head spun.

"My head hurts, Doctor."

"Ms. Nichols, you hit your head very hard. You don't show signs of a concussion; however, the MRI indicated you've had one before."

Claire nodded. That's what Dr. Leonard said after her *accident*. "Yes, I did. That was a while ago. Does that matter now?"

"Well, yes. Any damage to your brain after a previous injury is significant. You also have bruised ribs. You're quite lucky they aren't broken. Again, I saw evidence of past broken ribs. Ms. Nichols, were you in an automobile accident in the past?"

Claire inhaled; the action caused her side to hurt. "I had an accident in 2010. Will any of that affect my baby?"

"No, we have pain medicine that won't hurt your baby. I want you to get some rest. If you do, we can probably release you tomorrow or Thursday."

Claire's mind reeled. "Thursday? What day is it?"

"It's Tuesday. You've been unconscious for about thirty hours."

Thirty hours, why wasn't Tony here? As happy as Claire was about her baby being healthy, Tony's absence caused equal sadness. "Please send Mr. Baldwin back in."

"I will, but you have an entire waiting room of people. Would you like me to let them all come see you?"

"Harry told me they were here." She failed to sound happy.

Dr. Sizemore squeezed Claire's hand. "You have a great support system. I apologize for sharing your secret, but everyone is thrilled."

Although the aching in her heart made it difficult, Claire tried to smile.

"Thank you, Doctor. Just Mr. Baldwin, please."

Dr. Sizemore left Claire's room. Moments later, Harry peered his light blue eyes around the tall, imitation wood door. "May I come back in?" he asked bashfully.

Claire nodded through her tears. "Harry, I remember your voice when Chester was hurting me. Please tell me what happened."

Harry sat on the edge of Claire's bed, took her hand inhaled, and exhaled. Chronologically, he recounted the events of Sunday night. "I left you at your door. Oh, Claire, I'm so sorry I didn't go in with you."

She touched his arm. "I remember you weren't too happy with me. It's okay."

"I went to my place and began looking for the number for Chinese take-out, then my phone started ringing. It was a blocked number. The first time, I'm sorry to say, I ignored it. After the second set of rings, I gave in..."

"Yes?"

"It was your ex-husband, and I wasn't in a friendly mood. He was talking so fast, I had a hard time following. Basically, he knew someone was in your condo and wanted me to get to you as soon as possible. Honestly, I thought it was some kind of set up. I mean, I was right there, and he's across the country. How could he know what's happening in your condo?" Harry paused. "I must agree..." He said with a grin. "...Anthony Rawlings can be very persuasive. Truly, as I used my key and entered, I expected to find you doing inventory in your room." He shook his head.

"Thank you, Harry. I think you saved my life. Mr. Chester said something about taking me..."

"It was his van we saw in your space. Do you remember that?"

Claire nodded. The action made the room lose focus. She closed her eyes, laid her head back, and tried to keep the world still.

"He had a note ready and supplies in the van. Claire, he planned on kidnapping you and ransoming you to Mr. Rawlings. He wanted more money."

Claire felt the world slip away. She was supposed to be kidnapped!

"Claire?" Harry's questioning voice kept her earthbound. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She looked to the soft blue eyes staring down at her.

Harry continued, "I'm so sorry. You tried to tell me we needed to talk. I was an ass. I keep saying the same thing, but I want you to know that I'm really sorry!"

"What happened to Patrick Chester?"

"When I started to open the door, I heard the commotion in the living room. You were on the ground and he was..."

Claire saw the anguish in Harry's expression. She turned her hand and

squeezed his.

He continued, “He was pulling you by your hair.” Harry took another breath, in and out. “I screamed at him, and at the same time, building security and Phil, you know—the guy you call your bodyguard? They came rushing in. Chester freaked. He started to reach for something. I think we all assumed it was a gun. The security guard shot first.”

Claire listened in horror. Putting her hand to her lips, she asked, “Is he dead?”

Harry nodded. “By that time you were unconscious. This is entirely my fault. I never should have taken you to his house. I never suspected he would see you as a—”

Harry’s voice trailed away as voices in the hall became loud and angry. Claire heard John’s rising above the fray. “*You are not welcome here. I can’t believe you would have the nerve to show your face after all you’ve done.*”

“I want to see her.”

Claire’s heart leapt. Tony! “Oh, it’s Tony!” She couldn’t hide the happiness from her voice or expression while simultaneously seeing the pain in Harry’s. “Didn’t you say his call is what got you to me in time?”

Harry nodded.

“Then don’t you think he should be able to see that I’m all right?”

“I don’t think, in your condition, you need to be upset by him.”

Claire closed her eyes, and tears slid down her cheeks. “Please, Harry, before he and John exchange blows.”

Begrudgingly, Harry rose from the side of her bed and walked toward the voices. When he opened the door, the harsh words came even clearer to Claire, but she heard Harry above the others. “John, stop! Claire wants to see Mr. Rawlings.”

Emily’s voice prevailed. “I haven’t even seen her yet. She’s my sister.”

“*Claire* wants to see him now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Baldwin.”

Although Claire heard restraint in Tony’s words, the deep baritone voice filled her with relief. Tears trickled from her eyes as she turned toward the door frame and saw her two men. She remained silent as Tony offered his hand to Harry, and the two men shook. It was then she noticed Tony’s wrinkled shirt and slacks, his unkempt hair and evidence of a three day beard. Harry looked as equally unkempt. It just wasn’t as unusual to see him in that condition. They both walked into the room. Though she tried, she couldn’t read Tony’s expression. She watched as he took in her appearance and slowly approached her bed. She wasn’t sure how she looked, but suspected by his darkening eyes and protruding neck muscles, it wasn’t good.

The silence turned deafening as Tony’s presence overtook the small hospital room. Claire turned to see Harry watching Tony suspiciously. She

suddenly feared he would try to stop Tony's progress. Breaking the tension, Claire spoke to Harry. "Please give us a moment alone." She saw his indecision. "Harry, I promise I'll be fine." Her words broke Tony's trance.

"Mr. Baldwin, I will only stay as long as Claire allows."

Claire exhaled at Tony's manners. She knew he was speaking as the social Anthony, not from his soul. Nevertheless, his charisma prevailed, and Harry approached Claire. When he bent to kiss her, she pleaded with her eyes. Instead of continuing his descent, he squeezed her hand. The sad realization in his eyes broke her heart. He said, "I'm right on the other side of that door."

"Thank you." She feigned a smile. "For everything."

After a prolonged stare at Claire, and again at Tony, Harry exited the room. As he did, Claire heard the protests of her family, but she didn't care.

She looked up to the man looming above her: gloom emanating from every pore. His expression should terrify her. It was probably the reason Harry didn't want to leave, but she wasn't afraid. Tears of relief flowed as she reached for him and said, "I'm so glad you're here."

He took her hand. "The last time I saw you like this..."

"I'm all right."

"If that son-of-a-bitch weren't dead, I'd kill him myself."

By the sound of Tony's voice, Claire didn't doubt the accuracy. "Tony, we are both okay."

His eyes opened wide, and his shoulders relaxed. "I haven't been able to get any specific information. I just assumed—"

"The doctor was just here. She said *our* baby is fine."

Moisture filled his eyes as he pulled away and paced near the end of her bed. Finally, he spoke, "Claire, just like your accident, this is my fault too." She shook her head, but he continued, "I don't know how Chester found you or knew of our connection. I don't even know how he knew me. I knew him when I was Anton." He moved closer and started to reach for her chin, but stopped. "And now, look at what he's done."

Claire squeezed his large hand and lifted it to her face. "Thank you for coming. I feel so much better having you here."

As her face inclined to his touch, Tony's forehead fell to her chest, and he sighed with relief. "I knew my presence wouldn't be welcome. I've been waiting on another floor for word of your waking."

That's why he wasn't here. Claire thought as her lips turned upward and said, "Yes, I heard your welcoming committee."

He looked into her eyes, and his voice hardened as he spoke, "When you're well enough to travel, you're coming home where you'll be safe and where Catherine can take care of you."

She narrowed her eyes. "That didn't sound like a question."

His eyes narrowed in response. "It shouldn't. I would hate to mislead you."

It wasn't."

Claire exhaled. "Chester is dead. No more danger."

He leaned toward her. "Are you seriously going to argue about this, covered in bruises and carrying my baby?"

He was close. She raised her chin and kissed his pursed lips. "Not right now." She smiled. "Let me get some rest and get a little stronger. Then I will." She watched his eyes soften as a smile caused his cheeks to rise.

"Good." He kissed her again. "I look forward to it." He squeezed her hand. "We don't know if Patrick Chester was working alone. Until we find out and find your laptop, this isn't negotiable."

Claire debated protesting. While Tony's expression warned otherwise, that wasn't what stopped her. She wasn't sure she wanted to argue. What if there was someone else? "I need some sleep for this headache to go away, and then I'll respond with the appropriate cheekiness for you."

His eyes continued to lighten. "Even looking like you do, I think you're sexy as hell." He gently kissed her forehead. "Do you think now is a good time to tell your entourage our news?"

Claire looked down. "No, they know." Tony's eyebrows went up. "The doctor told Harry before I woke. He told everyone else."

Dark clouds returned to his gaze. "Why would the doctor tell *him*?"

"She assumed he was the father."

His words slowed as his posture straightened. "And does he assume that as well?"

Claire thought she might be ill. She was single. She and Tony weren't married, engaged, or anything else. At least they weren't when she and Harry... So why did she feel so guilty? Shyly, she replied, "Yes."

If she'd slapped him, he couldn't have stood faster. For a split second, Claire feared he was heading for the door. She worried more for Harry than for herself; however, Tony stopped his progress and paced around the small hospital room, keeping his eyes fixed on his shoes moving rapidly upon the glossy linoleum. Claire didn't speak; Tony needed to work this out himself. Instead, she laid her head upon the pillow and closed her eyes.

His voice brought her back, "You're sure I'm the father?"

Claire opened her eyes, her voice steady, "Yes, you were at the condominium two weeks before Harry and me... Well, at the ultrasound, the doctor said the heartbeat isn't detectable until six weeks. If he were the father, I would have barely been five weeks along. At that time, I was seven." She reached for his hand. After a moment of hesitation, he stepped to her. She continued, "Tony, I didn't know we were together until you confirmed it at the gala. I remembered it, but I'd convinced myself it was a dream."

He sighed and sat again on her bedside. "You were very tired, but you were talking. You mentioned something about a dream. I may be guilty of

taking advantage of a tired woman, but nothing else.”

“How did you get back in the condo? I remember closing and locking the door.”

“You closed it, but you didn’t lock it, or it didn’t lock. I came back to say something, and I heard something fall. It sounded like it broke. I listened, but I didn’t hear anything else. So I decided to check on you. The door opened.” He confessed, “I didn’t knock. You were asleep on the couch when I walked in. So I carried you to your bedroom. I can say with honorable intentions, but that wouldn’t be entirely true. Claire, I asked you multiple times. You never said no.”

She sighed. “I remember wanting you. I’d spent half the night dreaming about you until I gave up and stayed awake. That’s why I was so tired.”

His smile lit her world. “You dreamt about me?”

“Yes, it was after our dinner. I hadn’t seen you since... the jail in Iowa.”

He softly kissed her lips, and his eyes sparkled. “You dreamt about me?”

She smirked. “Yes. You egotistical narcissist, I did.”

“I’ve dreamt about you too. I think it may have something to do with seeing your beautiful face above my fireplace every night before I fall asleep.”

The door opened, and they turned to see the nurse return. “I’m sorry, sir, Ms. Nichols needs her rest. I’m closing her door to visitors for a while.”

Tony stood with Claire’s hand still in his. “What about...?” he asked.

“I’ll tell them. I was about to tell Harry when you showed up.”

Tony turned to the nurse. “How long is *a while*?”

She looked to Claire. Suddenly, Claire realized the nurse was probably sent to save her. Claire replied, “I want Mr. Rawlings here whenever possible.”

The nurse spoke to Tony, “Let her sleep through the night.”

Tony nodded. “I can do that.” He bent down and kissed Claire. “I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Good. I think you look like you could use some sleep, too.” Although her head hurt, her emerald eyes glistened through her bruised face.

As she turned to watch him leave, she saw four sets of eyes watching their goodbye and focusing on Tony as he politely passed their human wall. The door closed.

“Nurse, I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“Terri.”

“Terri?” Claire asked softly. “Could you please tell my other visitors I need rest? I really don’t have the energy to talk with *any* of them.”

Terri nodded. “I can do that. This medicine should help your pain and help you sleep.”

“It won’t hurt the baby?”

“No, it’s completely safe.”

Claire watched as Terri injected something into her IV, and then she closed her eyes and allowed the medicine to take effect as Terri walked to the hall and addressed Claire’s entourage.

Blissfully, sleep took her away.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

A woman must not depend on the protection of man, but must be taught to protect herself.
—Susan B. Anthony

C LAIRE WOKE TO a piercing pain in her head and a throbbing ache in her side. She tried to keep herself still and evaluate the nausea building within. She remembered eating with Tony on Sunday afternoon, *but had she eaten since?* There couldn't be anything in her empty stomach to revolt, yet it was. She hit the nurse *CALL* button and peered out the window, attempting to divert her attentions. Her window looked over the roofs of the sprawling hospital and beyond to Stanford's Medical Campus. Past the campus in the distance, she saw the mountains. The lightening sky and lingering fog told her morning had finally arrived. It was Wednesday, and her family and friends had been waiting all night, for multiple nights.

She needed to talk to them. She knew Harry deserved a private discussion; hopefully, the others would agree to a group session. Claire didn't relish the idea of repeating her story over and over. She turned to the sound of the opening door.

"Hello, Ms. Nichols, I'm Abbey, your day nurse."

"Please, call me Claire."

"Claire, what can I do for you?"

Claire asked about getting up and out of the bed. After Abbey checked the chart, she assisted Claire to the bathroom. On the way, Claire worried about her reflection. She hadn't seen herself yet. She knew from Tony's reaction she looked as bruised as she felt. Steeling herself for the worse, she bravely faced the woman in the mirror.

Walking to and from the bathroom required help. By the time they were done, her tubes were disconnected, she was sponged clean, her teeth brushed, and thankfully, her bladder emptied. Claire would have loved to wash her hair

and add make-up to cover the various shades of bruises on her checks and temples, as well as the deep purple under her left eye. Nevertheless, she felt better.

This was, in many ways, easier than her *accident*. Although she tried not to make comparisons, they were staring her in the face: injury to head and ribs. Ironically, the injuries ensued by a crazy greedy monster were less than those obtained by the man who claimed to love her. Claire continued to remind herself that Harry stopped Patrick. What would have happened if he hadn't, if Tony hadn't called Harry, if Phil and security hadn't come? With her accident, no one stopped Tony, but he had stopped himself—eventually. The most monumental difference was internally. Following her *accident*, Claire lost all desire to continue forward. She remembered a black hole of apathy. She didn't feel that way now. Despite her battered appearance, Claire's desire to live was stronger than it had ever been. She saw hope for better tomorrows with every new day.

As Abbey helped Claire back to bed, she handed Claire a folded note. "This is for you. I was supposed to deliver it once you woke."

Claire took the paper and opened it:

*I hope you and our baby are feeling better. Perhaps you'll feel up to
arguing your destination following your release.
(I'm definitely ready)*

Claire couldn't help but smile. Tony was actually welcoming her cheekiness, and she couldn't wait for the light-hearted debate. She continued reading:

*I want to see you, however, I realize you need to speak to the others and I
don't want you to overdo yourself. I'm staying nearby. Call me at the
number below when you're ready for my visit. I'll be there in minutes.*

Fighting tears, she closed the note. She had never known Tony to give her the space she needed to deal with her family and friends. Although she wanted to feel his reassuring embrace, at this moment, his absence meant more and filled her heart with reassurance.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” Abbey asked.

“I would love some food. Can I eat?”

“Yes, I’ll get you an order card. You have many people who’ve been patiently waiting. Are you ready for visitors?”

“If Mr. Baldwin is here, would you please ask him to come in?”



CLAIRE’S PULSE INCREASED, and her stomach twisted. As Harry entered, she saw his clean shirt and freshly-shaven face. “You went home?”

He held her hand; the spark she’d seen in his eyes yesterday was gone, and the resulting dullness infiltrated his voice. “According to the nurse, you didn’t want visitors. She said you were going to sleep. I knew you and the baby were healthy, so I went home.”

“Good, I’m glad you got a good night’s sleep.”

“I went home. I didn’t say I got a good night’s sleep.”

Claire raised her eyebrows.

“Tell me, Claire, what you wanted to tell me Sunday night. It wasn’t that we were having a baby, was it?”

She squeezed his hand. “No. It wasn’t.”

His face lowered to his chest. “I knew that last night, as soon as I saw *his* face and your expression when he arrived.”

“Thank you for saving him from John.”

“I don’t think your ex needs saving from anyone. Although, you have to admit John has legitimate reasons for his feelings.”

Claire knew Harry was right, and she didn’t want to rehash any of that. “Still, thanks.”

“He saved you. I don’t want to even think about the injuries you endured because I didn’t answer his first call.”

“Harry, there are plenty of medals to go around; one is definitely yours!”

“Tell me, when?” His voice was now distant as he added, “Was it the night of the gala?”

“No!” She fought the urge to be defensive. “I told you, nothing happened that night.” She took a deep breath and continued, “It was the day he came to the condominium. I don’t want to discuss it, but the ultrasound confirmed the baby is two weeks older than it could be if you were the father.”

Harry nodded. Finally, he asked, “He already knew, didn’t he?”

“Yes, I told him this past weekend. I wasn’t sure I would, but I did.”

“What else happened this past weekend?”

Claire looked down. “Harry, I can’t tell you how much your friendship has meant to me; you’ve been so supportive. I understand if you hate me.” She

looked up into his sad expression. His blue eyes looked distant. Her heart ached knowing she was the cause. “But I hope you won’t.”

He stood and walked toward the door. “Are you ready to tell everyone? They want to see you.”

To Harry’s credit, he didn’t let on to the others that there were issues, or that he wasn’t the father of Claire’s baby. Immediately, Emily embraced her sister and began crying. Next, it was Amber’s turn. Besides telling Claire how happy they were she was all right, they both told her how delighted they were about the baby. Both couldn’t wait to be aunts. After enduring everyone’s good wishes, Claire braced herself for comments about Tony’s visit.

She decided it was better to allow everyone their say. The comments started slow and continued with increased velocity. Ironically, it was Harry who stopped the barrage. “Are any of you interested to hear Claire’s point of view?”

Although she was grateful for his support, in a way, it made her feel worse. “I let him in. I wanted him here, because things have changed.” How could Claire make her chess pieces understand? “I’m not denying any of his past sins; however, some of what we’ve assumed were his—weren’t. Nevertheless, I’m very much aware of all he’s done. With that said, the baby I’m carrying isn’t Harry’s.” She waited while realization came to those around her. Amber went to Harry’s side and put her arm around him.

“I’ve known since last night,” Harry told his sister. “But I thought Claire should be the one to tell everyone. I’m disappointed, but listen, she’s still having a baby. That’s a miracle.”

“Anthony’s baby?!?” Emily exclaimed. “How could you?!?”

“Yes.” Claire replied defensively. “Your niece or nephew.”

John didn’t speak. His eyes sent daggers toward anyone willing to look his way. Finally, he walked from the room. When the door shut, Claire exhaled.

Emily used the moment to attack. “I don’t know why you’re relieved John left. I’ll have you know, your attack, injuries, and probably your pregnancy would be all over the internet and television if it weren’t for John. He immediately set about with a *do not disclose order* against the hospital. Your newly found friend, lover/ex-captor, I don’t even know what to call *him*, took away John’s life and law license, but your brother-in-law still managed to be here for you.”

“Please, tell him thank you. What does the press know?” Suddenly, she thought of Meredith. Claire didn’t want production on her book started.

Harry sounded as though he were describing an unknown news story. “The police and ambulance were called to your condominium. You went to the hospital in an ambulance. An intruder was taken from your condominium after suffering deadly gunshot wounds.”

"Could someone bring me my phone? I need to call someone."

"It's at the condo," Amber replied. "You're probably coming home today, Can it wait?"

Claire didn't know. She didn't want Meredith publishing anything prematurely.

Their conversation was interrupted by the delivery of Claire's breakfast. She opened each plate with reserved anticipation: eggs, orange juice, toast, and tea. As she inspected the food, Abbey re-entered.

"Ladies and gentleman, I understand how happy you are to have Claire and baby Nichols doing well, but they *both* need their rest. I'm restricting her to two visitors at a time."

Harry spoke first. "I need to get to work. Claire, I wish you well, and I'm trying. We both need some time."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Thank you."

Amber came forward and hugged Claire. "I'm disappointed and confused, but more than anything, I'm happy you and your baby are safe." Her smile sparkled. "I guess it wasn't food poisoning, was it?"

Claire shook her head and smiled. "No, it wasn't."

"I don't know your plans, but you can stay with me as long as you want."

Claire remembered her impending debate with Tony. "I really don't know what I'm going to do, but thanks for the offer."

Once Amber left the room and Emily and Claire were alone, Emily spoke first, "What do you mean you don't know what you're going to do? Are you seriously considering moving back to that prison?"

Claire closed her eyes. "I don't know. Tony wants me to move back to Iowa. I was resisting, but after Patrick Chester, I just don't know. At least, on his estate, I'm safe and so is my baby."

"Safe? Is that what they're calling imprisonment these days?"

Claire regretted telling Emily the truth of her and Tony's past. She thought of Tony's recent words: *You may think you're ready for answers, but you're not. Bits and pieces may help you understand, but the blatant truth is too much.* Claire tried to explain, "I know I can't make you understand, but when I was there last week, things were different."

"Right! Once you decide to stay, I'm sure it will stay that way."

"I'm going to call him. He'll be here soon. The nurse said I can have two visitors. Emily, the choice is yours. When he arrives, you can stay or go, but he's coming. I want him here."



THE NEXT TIME the door opened, an orderly entered, carrying two large

bouquets of flowers. The first one had a card which simply read: *Tony*. The second bouquet was from Courtney and Brent, with wishes for fast healing. Claire wondered if Tony told them about the baby.

Emily stayed until Tony arrived. When he did, she kissed Claire on her cheek and said, “We have more places to see today. I’ll check on you later.” She turned, made eye contact with Tony, and left.

He immediately went to Claire’s bedside. “Well, I seem to have that effect on all of your family.”

Claire’s eyebrows rose. “All? Did you see John again?”

“Briefly, he’s in the lounge down the hall.”

Wrinkling her nose in anticipation, she asked, “Did you two speak?”

“No.” Tony grinned. “I’m pretty sure if you ever decide to accept the ring I offered, he won’t give you away—*again*.”

Claire sat taller. “I’m not anyone’s to give away, and I don’t care any longer what others think.”

“Does that mean...?” His brown eyes twinkled as he lifted her hand. When she smiled in response, she winced at the pain near her swollen eye, and Tony’s voice hardened, “I wish that asshole were still alive, so I could kill him.”

She rested her head against the pillows and closed her eyes to the pain. “It means... we’re dating.”

Looking around the small room, Tony whispered jokingly, “This hardly seems public.”

Claire’s eyes sprang open. “I need to contact Meredith. I don’t want her to misconstrue this and think it means she can publish her book, but my phone is at the condo.”

Tony removed his iPhone from his pocket. “I have her number.”

Claire eyed him suspiciously. “How do you have her number? And now that I’m thinking about it, how did you have Harry’s?”

He looked down. “Before I answer, you must admit the information was useful.”

“Yes, I admit that. How?”

He handed her his phone. *Meredith Banks* was on the screen. “You just need to hit *CALL*.”

“I know how to use a phone. Thank you.” She waited. She remembered how Tony didn’t like asking the same question more than once; understanding the sentiment, she continued to stare.

“The night of the gala, I copied your contacts.”

Claire shook her head and hit *CALL*. While she spoke to Meredith another orderly entered her room with another bouquet of flowers. Tony accepted the arrangement and sat it on the large window ledge. He reached for the card and began to carry it to Claire. Suddenly, he stopped. Claire watched as he opened

the envelope, and the color drained from his face. She wondered if it were from Harry.

"Thank you, Meredith, our agreement is still intact. Yes, I'm fine. This had nothing to do with Tony. I need to go. Thank you, goodbye." She disconnected the call. "Tony what is it?"

He hesitated. "I'll be back in a minute." He started to leave her room with the card.

"No, you don't." Her voice rose. "Show me that card."

When he turned toward her, his expression was scarier than she'd seen in years. "Claire, you and our baby do not need to be concerned. I'll find out who is responsible for this, and by the way, we are talking to your doctor about a referral for Iowa City. You're moving home as soon as you're released."

She didn't want to argue. It wasn't just his expression, the darkness of his eyes, or the determined tone. She saw fear masked under his sudden fury. "Tony." She spoke softly. "Please let me see the card. I'm not arguing. I need to know what I need to do to protect our baby."

Slowly, he walked toward her. His furrowed brow and intense glare revealed his conflicting emotions.

Claire pleaded, "I know you want to protect me, but you have to let *me* protect me."

He handed her the card, and she read the envelope: *Claire Nichols Rawls*. The air left her lungs. She opened the envelope and read the note:

I've learnt that you are well... But now, there's another body to add to the count...

"What does that mean?" she asked, as the fear she felt Sunday night returned.

"I don't know, but you're coming home with me."

Claire nodded.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Trouble is part of your life. If you don't share it, you don't give the person who loves you a chance to love you enough.

—Dinah Shore

LATE WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, Dr. Sizemore released Claire from the hospital and gave her a referral to Iowa City. Tony wanted to drive her directly to the airport; however, Claire convinced him to take her back to her condominium and pack some of her things. She didn't know if her trip to Iowa was for a week, a month, or forever.

Entering her bedroom, the sight of her things strewn across the room and drawers emptied all over the floor, paralyzed her movement. Her knees weakened as Tony's strong embrace steadied her. Together, they worked to right the mess.

When they finally had her room almost in order, building security called. There was a package waiting downstairs for Claire. They wanted to confirm her presence before bringing it to her unit. Leaving Tony in her room, she went to the door and greeted the security guard with the potted plant. It wasn't the same man who saved her, but everyone within the Forest Avenue Condominium knew what had transpired.

"Ms. Nichols, we're all so glad you're safe."

"Thank you."

"Here's your delivery. Obviously, lots of people are worried about you." The young man handed her the plastic wrapped arrangement and scanned the envelope. "This is you, right?"

Claire read the card: *Claire Nichols Rawls*.

Feeling suddenly faint, she called for Tony. He immediately appeared by her side, took the card, saw the name, and rudely ordered, "Take this away!"

Claire didn't have the presence of mind or words to mend Tony's negativity. Instead, she merely nodded. The guard apologized and left with

the plant.



TONY OPENED THE envelope—nothing... not even a card within. “I’ll find out who’s doing this, I promise.”

Tony meant every word as he waited for Claire’s response. After a moment, she stood straighter and nodded. Although he admired her strength, watching her hold back tears was all most too much. As she began to walk past him toward her room, Tony seized her arm and stopped her movement. Claire looked up at him indignantly. His voice echoed against the long hallway and wooden floors, “You are *not* staying here another night.”

Despite the sound to the contrary, Tony was executing all the self-restraint he possibly could. Claire’s bruise-covered face and pained expression had him on the edge of sanity. His proclamation wasn’t a debatable statement. Thankfully, Claire understood.

She nodded, and replied, “I know. I want to pack.”

He released her arm. “While you do, I’ll make some calls. May I go into the living room?”

“Yes, Amber knows we’re here. She’s giving us space.”

“She doesn’t want to see me.” His statement wasn’t judgmental—just a statement.



EITHER WAY, HE was right. Both about Amber purposely avoiding the condominium and about Claire leaving California. Amber wasn’t the only one opposed to Claire’s decisions. Emily repeatedly chided her, John avoided her at all costs, and Claire hadn’t spoken to Harry since the hospital room.

Nevertheless, with the recent turn of events, Tony’s estate seemed much safer than California, even if temporarily. Claire packed while Tony made calls. His efforts were rewarded as he learned: the flowers and plant came from two separate florists. One was ordered over the telephone, the other over the internet. The caller ordering the flowers claimed to be *Mrs. Rawls* and used a purchased credit card, the kind available at any retailer across the country. The internet order appeared to be made by Claire herself; all the information entered into the order form was hers. It was also purchased with the same type of credit card, but from a different retailer. Tony also had people working to track the origin of the credit cards and someone checking the fingerprint of the computer placing the internet order.

Claire didn't understand it all, but if it led Tony to the person sending the threatening gifts, she was all for it.

Although Tony repeatedly told Claire she didn't need any of her clothes or anything that wasn't of emotional value, she packed as much as her luggage would hold. Her belongings were the things she'd accumulated on her own; everything from her plethora of lingerie to the flip-flops she wore on the beach with Courtney. It all meant something. Securing her jewelry in a small velvet bag, she fingered her new diamond stud earrings. Admittedly, they weren't as large as the ones she sold, but they were hers, bought by her. She didn't want to part with anything.

Claire struggled with her research. Even though her laptop was still missing, she had hard copies of everything. Did she want to take all of that to Tony's? Claire decided she should. She didn't know who to believe or who to trust. What if someone used her information to hurt Tony? It was safer with her.

By the time Claire finished packing, it was late, and she was tired.

Tony conceded, "We can spend the night in Palo Alto at my hotel. Tomorrow, we'll come back for your things and leave for Iowa." Claire agreed. There was no need for debate. Every time she walked into the living room, in her mind, she saw Patrick Chester.

As she settled into the passenger seat of his rental car, exhaustion hit. By the time they arrived at the Marriott where he'd rented the Presidential Suite, Claire was sound asleep. Tony's words woke her gently as he opened the door and kissed her cheek, "I'd gladly carry you to my suite, but I'm afraid we'd attract more attention than either of us wants."

Despite the stress of the day and of the past few days, his sensitive smile and tender tone made her anxious expression morph into a smile. "I'm pretty sure I can walk." Sorely, she stood and melted against his chest. "I could do this alone, but I'm so thankful I don't have to." She brushed her lips against his. "Thank you."

When they reached the suite, Claire looked around at the modern furnishings and beautiful view. The living room had lovely glass doors leading to a balcony, an archway leading to a dining room, and a doorway she assumed lead to a bedroom.

Tony offered, "Perhaps we should order some food?"

"I just want a shower and some sleep," Claire said as she walked toward the bedroom.

The warm water assaulted her bruised skin , yet felt refreshing at the same time. She towel dried and combed her hair and brushed her teeth. *If they could share a bed and a baby—why not a toothbrush?* She turned off the lights and settled into the large king-sized bed, wearing one of Tony's t-shirts.

Claire had seen her reflection in the bathroom mirror and didn't want

Tony to see the large bruises on her ribs. Although sleep loomed, she yearned to feel his embrace. The last few days had left her anxious, and surprisingly, Tony's presence reassured her. Closing her eyes, she realized how safe she felt near him. Thinking about the stories she'd recently recounted to Meredith, Claire knew that hadn't always been the case, but now, she longed for his presence.

As she was about to drift away, she heard a knock at the door. Claire assumed Tony must have ordered dinner. She rolled over, wincing from her sore ribs, cradled a pillow, and drifted away.



SOMETIME LATER, CLAIRE woke with a start. She'd been dreaming, no, not dreaming—it was a nightmare: darkness, Chester, gun shots... She reached for Tony, but his side of the bed was cool.

His t-shirt fell to her thighs as she quietly walked toward the living room. Her bare feet silently made their way down the hall. In the near darkness, she saw the back of Tony's head, bobbing in silence. The sofa where he sat was made up like a bed, complete with sheets, blankets, and pillows.

Claire walked around the sofa and met his gaze. "Tony? Are you all right?"

She saw the amber liquid in his glass, his vacant expression, and smelled the bourbon in the air. After his dark eyes looked her up and down, he finally replied, "No."

"What's this?" She motioned toward the sofa. "Why aren't you in bed with me?"

"I don't trust myself."

Claire tilted her head sideways. "I trust you..."

His stare looked through her. "I went in there and kissed you. You were sound asleep." Claire smiled, then he continued, "I watched you, saw your expression and your bruises." Claire flinched; she didn't like her appearance. He grasped her dangling hand. "Stop that."

"What?"

"You're beautiful!"

She pulled her hand away. "I've seen myself in the mirror. Beautiful isn't the word I'd use."

Tony leaned back and rubbed his face. With a new focus, he demanded, "Take off my t-shirt."

Claire stood taller. Her chin rose indignantly. "Excuse me?"

He stood. His body towered over her as his voice hardened, "Take off my shirt."

"Tony, I didn't bring any night clothes. I didn't think you'd—"

"I don't give a damn about the shirt. I want to see you."

Claire stammered. It had been a while since she'd experienced this domineering personality. "S-See me?"

"I can see your face and your legs. I want to see what that bastard did to you."

She reached for his hand and kept her voice steady, "I'm fine, but I want you to come to bed with me."

His stoic expression remained. "I planned to call for dinner. Instead, I found the bar. It's been a rather stressful few days." Claire inched closer. His sudden grasp on her shoulders stopped her progress. "I should never have let you return to California." Shaking his head, he released her and stepped backward. In a tone she remembered, he commanded, "I believe I've said this more than once. Take off the damn t-shirt."

Her innate training prevailed; disobeying wasn't an option. She reached for the hem. Trembling, she lifted the cotton above her head and exposed her battered body, covered only by a pair of flesh-colored lace panties.

His hardened expression continued in silence. Her trembling continued. Suddenly, he fell to his knees and gently clutched her hips. His lips gently brushed her stomach and tenderly caressed her battered mid-section. The domineering voice disappeared; his actions spoke of love and possession. Holding his head for support, her fingers wove through his hair. Claire whispered, "Please, Tony, please, can we go to bed?"

His lips continued to caress her bruised body. Each kiss stilled the trembling, electrified her skin, and melted her insides until her legs turned to jelly. When her knees buckled, she knelt before him, meeting his eyes.

"You're mine." His words weren't debatable. He wasn't asking.

"Tony, bed... please?"

"I'm trying so hard. You have no idea the restraint I'm enlisting, yet all I can think about are *his* hands on you."

"Tony, I'm fine. I'm all right. I'm with you."

"But you weren't. You were with him."

"He just wanted your money—"

Tony clutched her frame. His dark eyes burned with desire and despair. "I'm not talking about Chester."

Claire froze with her heart pounding frantically in her chest. Somewhere deep, she knew the scene at the hospital went too well. She framed Tony's face and watched as he searched her emerald eyes. With all her might, she tried to keep them subdued. "I wasn't with you," she whispered. "We weren't together."

His loud visceral response was unreadable.

"But now..." Her lips touched his. "Now, I want to be. Please, Tony."

One of the hands, which held her waist now roughly seized her loose, damp hair, pulling her head back, and exposing her slender neck. His lips met the soft skin with equal force. A shocked moan escaped her lips. Tony's unbridled passion ignited her, creating a sudden rush of heat overpowering any impulses of pain crying out from her tender scalp. His rough stubble scratched her collar bone, and his voice resonated throughout the suite like a low growl, "Are you sure?"

The fervent lust tightened her insides. Momentarily, speech was lost. Finally, she whimpered, "I am."

He continued his unrelenting assault, holding her tighter, wildly claiming everything before him. His fire consumed everything in its path, a passion which held no bounds. Claire never felt so desired; her whole body ached for his touch. When he paused, she saw the flames in his dark eyes. The inferno wasn't frightening; it fueled her desire. His low growl became more demanding, "You are *mine*."

She kissed his stubbly neck, hearing, as well as feeling, a rumble from the back of his throat. Once again, he pulled her hair, tipped her head, and bathed her in the aroma of whiskey. His glaring abyss penetrated as he demanded, "Say it!"

Her emerald eyes begged for understanding, uncertain of what he wanted.

"Say you are mine and nobody else's."

Despite his command and her powerful yearning, Claire's eyes shone. Her voice resonated above his growl, "Yes, Tony, *you* are mine and nobody else's."

She watched. A spark penetrated his dark gaze. A flash of light where only moments before darkness prevailed. Through the crack in his facade of domination, he responded. It began as a whisper and rose in volume. "Yes. Mighty fine and sexy as hell." Claiming her lips, he added, "And mine!"

Suddenly, he stood, seized her wrist, and pulled her up toward the bedroom. Before she could comment, the world shifted, and she was upon the king-sized bed. His hungry mouth on hers made protesting impossible. Truly, it wasn't her plan.

Once her breathing became labored, he moved to the end of the bed. Beginning at her ankles, he worked his way toward her injuries. Each touch released energy, freed aggression, and exposed affection. If she winced, he caressed. If she moaned, he encouraged. With each kiss, each touch, Tony reminded Claire of her desires. The outside world was lost... gone beyond comprehension. He elicited thoughts and desires she'd compartmentalized away. His lips found places she'd abandoned. His teeth nipped at nubs, which yearned for attention. His long, talented fingers and skillful tongue probed and tantalized. Within no time, Claire found herself begging for mercy, pleading for more at the same time.

It was different than the day in the condo or from her visit to Iowa. It was different than ever before. This was deep, raw, and primal—unbridled carnal passion. While it started with possession, its culmination was unification and reconciliation. Tony began this ecstasy, but Claire met him move for move. Truthfully, she didn't like the reports of him with other women either. The handsome, possessive, domineering, and loving man before her was *hers*, and although she wasn't ready to commit, she wanted everything he offered.

When they finally submitted to sleep, no desire was left unfulfilled.



THE NEXT MORNING, at Amber's condo, they were met by a crew of men to carry her belongings from the fourth floor to a waiting van and from the van to his private jet. While the men moved her things, Claire's mail arrived.

If she hadn't already been frightened into moving to Iowa, the package she received would have pushed her over the edge. It was a large, light, thick, and soft manila envelope addressed in handwriting Claire didn't recognize, with no return address. She didn't want to seem paranoid; after all, it was addressed to: *Claire Nichols*. Nevertheless, when she opened the envelope and a small yellow layette fell to the floor with a note which simply read:

Congratulations

Claire feared she'd faint. Tony assessed the package.

They both knew it was a threat, not only aimed at Claire, but at their baby, yet the benign nature gave them nothing they could take to the police.

Tony grabbed Claire's purse and phone and immediately walked her from the condominium to his rental car. "We're going to the airport. Whatever you want that doesn't make this move can be sent later. I don't want you here another minute."

Claire broke down in the passenger's seat, no longer able to contain her tears. She didn't know what the future held, only that she needed to get away from California.



ONCE THEY WERE safely in the air and flying east, Claire's anxiety began to lessen. Lying on the long white leather sofa with her head on Tony's lap, she

closed her eyes. The hum of the engines pacified as he smoothed her long hair away from her wounded face. His words surprised her.

“Claire, this whole mess is my fault. I’m so sorry.”

She sat up. He looked older, less confident, perhaps even frightened. “What do you mean it’s your fault?”

“That man, Patrick Chester. He attacked you because of me.”

“That’s not your fault. It’s because of your money. That’s not your fault.” She touched his cheek. “I know you were overbearingly controlling before, but I get it. I think about our baby. If I could, I’d never let him or her leave the estate. There are too many crazy people out there.”

“I’ll hire you security. For the time being, I don’t want you going anywhere without them.”

Claire nodded. “I don’t like it, but I’ll do it. Also...” She looked him in the eye. “*I will* come and go as I please, or I’m leaving.”

His back straightened, and he reached for her chin. “Remember what you just said about our child?”

“I’m not a child, and I will *not* risk my life or our child’s.” She exhaled. “I can see why informing you of my activities is important, but I’m not asking permission.”

He closed his eyes and exhaled. “You will have someone with you.”

She noticed it wasn’t a question. “Yes, Tony. I will take whomever you hire as a bodyguard with me, but does this person have to be with me on the estate?”

He released her chin. “I don’t know. This is all new to me.” He gently squeezed her hand. “We can feel it out together.”

Claire nodded and laid her head back on his lap.

Tony asked, “Can I tell you a story?”

She looked up at his face. He wasn’t looking down at her, but staring away to another time and another place. Claire replied, “Yes.”

“There was this man—young man, actually. He didn’t have the greatest role models growing up. The positive traits he saw in people and what he learned to respect were power, unbridled control over those around him, veracity, and ambition, the belief that nothing was beyond his reach. Nothing, meaning the acquiring of a company, money, or even people, and reliability. Once a promise was made, no matter what it was, it was kept.”

Claire listened as Tony spoke about this young man who emulated his grandfather. In his own way, he’d made his grandfather into the person everyone would want to be. Few people truly knew the grandfather. Of those that did, most disliked him; however, they respected him and his abilities. That was until some decisions he made and people he trusted turned on him. The young man’s father helped in the family demise. The only support this young man believed he had was from his grandfather and his grandfather’s

new wife.

Claire followed along until this point. Nathaniel had a new wife? She remembered reading where Sharron Rawls died years before his arrest. Why hadn't she seen anything about another wife? She wanted to ask, but never before had Tony shared. She remained silent, hoping he'd reveal more.

Tony went on explaining, "Emotions were high, threats and promises were made. The new wife and this young man's parents didn't get along. One night, there was an incident." Tony looked down into Claire's eyes; he rephrased, "There was *an accident*. It wasn't intentional, but things got out of control. The young man wasn't there. He'd arrived too late to help his parents. Since they were beyond help, he chose to help the woman that his grandfather loved. The only person who could refute the premise of murder-suicide was a neighbor. That neighbor, like everyone else, had a price. For over twenty years, the young man worked to shield the woman he promised his grandfather he would protect."

Tony's eyes once again met Claire's. "When I changed my name, I hoped to distance myself from the Rawls' sins. I'm not sure how or why Patrick Chester made the connection from Anton Rawls to Anthony Rawlings, but I'm so sorry he did."

Claire sat up. "It's my fault."

His eyes refocused. "What? How?"

"We found his name on a police report. Your parents' injuries weren't consistent with murder-suicide. Patrick Chester lived in a very nice neighborhood with very nice cars. His lifestyle didn't match his profession or income. He had an annual installment that continued to grow. We suspected the annual payments were payoffs for silence. In the original report, he mentioned a woman in a blue Honda. The woman was never mentioned again. A month or more ago, I went to his house."

Tony's regret changed to hostility before her eyes. "You did what?"

Claire couldn't justify her behavior. She melted against the soft cushions. "I know. It was stupid."

His hands were on her shoulders. "Why would you even think...?"

She allowed the tears to fall. "It wasn't *your* fault. It was mine. I'm the one who put our baby at risk." His arms surrounded her. With her face pressed against his chest, she asked, "The woman, she wasn't your aunt, was she?" Claire felt Tony shaking his head. "She was your grandmother?"

He shrugged. "I guess. I've never really thought of her that way. My parents successfully petitioned her and Nathaniel's marriage to be voided. She wasn't legally able to maintain the name Rawls."

"You've been paying for her freedom for all these years. Do you ever see her?"

"I do, but she doesn't want to be identified."

Claire nodded. She didn't blame the lady. There was no statute of limitations on murder in California; the less people that knew, the better. "Thank you for telling me the truth."

He pushed her away and looked into her eyes. "No more detective work." This again wasn't a question. Claire agreed and settled against his chest. Inhaling his cologne and listening to the beat of his heart, Claire closed her eyes. She didn't want to ponder the new information. She wanted it all to go away.

Claire awoke as the plane touched down in Iowa.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Your memory is a monster; you forget - it doesn't. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you, or hides things from you—and summons them to your recall with a will of its own. You think you have a memory; but it has you!

—John Irving

OVER THE NEXT few weeks, Claire settled into an old, yet unfamiliar, pattern on Tony's estate. Things were different, yet the same. She had her iPhone and iPad. Tony even bought her a new laptop. Her old one was still missing. Apparently, the police found Patrick Chester's van and hotel room. Unfortunately, the laptop was in neither place. His house in Santa Monica was also thoroughly searched. Nothing was there either. His wife and daughter were shocked. They had no idea why a loving husband and father would decide to kidnap someone. Repeatedly, they told the police and press, "This wasn't like him at all. We don't understand what drove him to such behavior."

The missing laptop led everyone to assume there might be an undetected accomplice. For that reason, Claire was more than content to stay behind the large iron gates. She rarely left the estate. When she did, it was usually to attend functions with Tony. The first few dates on their prearranged schedule were missed due to her appearance. Claire didn't want the press taking pictures of her with the remnants of Patrick Chester's handiwork around her eye or on her cheeks. During those first few weeks, she called friends and family. Courtney and Sue made multiple visits. She even told them about the baby.

One afternoon, Claire led Courtney out to the gardens. They settled onto the same bench that Catherine had told Claire was visibly accessible to the cameras, but not audibly. Claire explained her change of heart to her dear friend. Courtney told Claire about Brent's research. Derek Burke was related

to Jonathon Burke, but not directly, and Brent couldn't find anything remotely negative regarding him or his wife. The news fortified Claire. With all of her heart she wanted to believe Tony's vendetta was done.

The two women embraced. Courtney promised to always be there for Claire, if Claire promised to be honest. With tears in her eyes, Claire said, "I refuse to be anything else, and Tony knows that."

Courtney smiled and hugged her again. "If this is really what you want, I'm happy for you. I want you to be happy."

"I'm not sure about forever, but right now, Tony is what I want."

Courtney smiled. "You know I love babies?"

"Good, I think ours is in need of an aunt. Emily isn't very happy with me."



TONY HIRED A bodyguard, Clay, an ex-secret service agent. As long as Claire stayed on the estate, he stayed behind the scenes; however, if she and Tony left the grounds, he rode shotgun with Eric. If Claire left by herself, he drove. If Tony chose to drive somewhere with Claire, Clay followed closely behind. He was much more intrusive than Phil had ever been. She almost asked for Phil; at least he'd be familiar. Sometimes, Claire wondered what happened to him.

Claire never moved back to the second floor suite. The first night she arrived at the estate, she stayed in Tony's room. After that, all of her new and old things were moved there. The technology, which once barred her from his suite, was no longer an issue. Besides, once their baby was born, neither one wanted to maintain separate rooms. The underutilized room beside Tony's suite was in the midst of renovation. It would be a lovely nursery, accessible from their suite and the corridor.



BY EARLY AUGUST, Claire's baby bump was visible, especially when wearing a bathing suit. Although it made her self-conscious, Tony complimented her changing anatomy. Her midsection wasn't the only part of her growing. Her new doctor in Iowa City maintained everything was progressing well. Somehow, they'd managed to keep the pregnancy from the press. This was amazing since the media seemed to know almost everything else including Claire's change of address. Thankfully, nothing was ever printed about the threatening packages she'd received. The name *Rawls* never appeared in print

or on the internet.

Living within their secure bubble, Claire began to relax and enjoy her life again. She would spend days sunbathing at the pool or hiking to her lake and listening to the waves lap the shore. When she closed her eyes, the sound of the water upon the pebbles continued to remind her of the sound of their baby's heartbeat at that first ultrasound. As their little one grew, the heart rate increased. It was too early to learn the baby's sex, but the doctor said the faster the heart rate the better the chance of a girl. When he said that, Tony squeezed Claire's hand and whispered, "I bet she has your eyes too."

Claire smiled and shook her head. It never ceased to amaze her how Tony managed to get his way.

Memories of Patrick Chester's attack kept Claire content within the safety of Tony's estate. Catherine's presence helped Claire fight the feeling of isolation. Catherine's ongoing support was therapeutic as their relationship moved beyond anything it had ever been. Nonetheless, when Claire asked, Catherine wouldn't reveal any more about Tony's past. Claire believed Catherine wanted her and Tony back together. She'd achieved her goal.

On a warm and breezy day in late August, Claire's bubble burst. She might never have realized it, if she hadn't decided to come in early from the pool. From the sun porch, she heard loud voices coming from Tony's office. Claire quietly walked down the marble corridor to investigate. She heard Tony, but she couldn't tell who he was talking to—*yelling at* would be a more accurate description.

Nearing the closed grand doors, Claire recognized the significant change in their relationship. Never in the past would she have willingly walked toward his voice holding the threatening brash tones she currently heard. Most significantly, she no longer feared opening the doors and learning the reason for his tirade.

Not wanting to interrupt, she gently opened the door and slid inside the office. Immediately, she realized she was standing in a bathing suit, flip flops, and a cover-up while Tony wore a suit. Obviously, he'd come straight from the office. His eyes flickered toward her. She saw the darkness she'd heard in his voice. The office was full. Facing Tony, she recognized the backs of Eric, Catherine, and Clay. When she entered, Clay was speaking. She heard the end of his statement: "...no, sir. We've intercepted the others. This is the first one to make it onto the estate."

Claire panned the room. Sitting on Tony's desk was an open package. She wanted to know what was in the package, and most importantly, if it were addressed to her. Tony's eyes were now solely on her, and soon everyone turned her direction.

"You're all very loud. Is this about me?" Claire asked.

"Claire, please don't worry about this. I'm taking care of it." Tony's voice

strained in an attempt to modulate his tone from the one he'd been using on everyone else.

She stepped toward him. His eyes went to Catherine. "Catherine, if you could please help Ms. Claire, she may need some assistance."

Claire stopped. Yes, there were others in the room, but if this were about her and her baby, she had the right to know. "Clay, what *others* have you intercepted?"

"Ma'am, nothing that concerns you."

"I don't believe you."

Catherine approached Claire with her arm out. "Claire, let's get you something to drink. It's very hot outside." Claire heard Catherine's voice from the hall; she'd been loud too. Something was happening.

"I'm not leaving."

"Claire." The finality in Tony's tone, the way he said her name, the one syllable, could easily be translated: *Not now Claire. I'm handling this. Leave now.*

Claire shot Catherine a *don't you dare touch me* look and walked to the other side of the desk. She didn't intend to make a scene in front of everyone, but she wasn't leaving without answers. Standing beside Tony, she said, "Catherine, Eric, and Clay, could you please excuse us for a minute. Mr. Rawlings and I need to speak privately. I would assume he's not done with you, so please stay close. This won't take long."

Everyone in the room turned to Tony. The tension was palpable. Finally, through clenched teeth, Tony proclaimed, "Do not go far. I'm not done. Clay, make some calls. After Ms. Claire and I have finished, I want answers."

Everyone hurried from Tony's office as Claire turned toward her ex-husband. She'd seen the intensity of his eyes before; however, she knew the blackness was meant for someone else. She wanted to know who. "What's happening?"

"How did you hear? You were at the pool."

"How could I not hear? Everyone in a three mile radius could hear you. Tell me, what's so important to bring you home early from work? The sooner I know, the sooner you can continue your meeting."

"Damn it, Claire! I don't want you worrying." He paced to the window and back. "Besides, who in their right mind would come in here while I'm teetering on the edge of sanity? Did you see how fast they all left?"

Claire smiled as she placed her hands on lapels of his dark suit. "No one. Just ask my family, I'm definitely not in my right mind, and if I'm correct, the only thing that can get you this worked up is something about me." She turned and picked up the package. It was addressed to *Claire Nichols Rawls* with the estate's street address. "So, I don't get to open my own mail anymore?"

"Seriously, some asshole found you here, knows our address, and you want to complain about opening mail?"

She turned and faced him. With her spine straight and chin up, she kept her voice calm. "No, it scares the hell out of me, but anyone can learn this address; it's public record. The stupid press has told anyone who wants to listen that I'm living here." She lifted the box. "What was in it? And how many packages or letters have come that I don't know about?"

"It was a silver baby rattle—engraved."

"Where is it?"

"Clay bagged it. He's having it processed for finger prints. Hopefully the asshole touched it."

"Engraved... what did it say?"

He seized her shoulders and pulled her close. "Claire, let me handle this. Show me you have faith in me."

Her face tilted upward. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't." She kissed him. "What did it say?"

"Baby Nichols-Rawls."

"That isn't so bad, considering the way it was addressed. Why didn't you want me to know that?"

He directed her to his large leather chair. She obediently bent her knees, and he said, "That wasn't all. Under the name it read: *R.I.P.*"

She couldn't hide the shock or fear suddenly flowing through her. Protectively, her hand covered her midsection as her body began to tremble. "Oh my God, Tony..."

He knelt before her, his voice now soft, "I told you once before, too much information isn't good for you. Will you please learn to trust me and enjoy the bliss I'm trying so hard to provide?"

"But... that has to be considered a threat. Can't you take it to the police?"

"We are, but what will they do that we aren't already doing?"

When his arms encircled her, she lost her fight with tears and took comfort in his lingering embrace. When a semblance of calm prevailed, she said, "I'm going to lie down. Will you please come to our room when you're done with the others? Or are you going back to work?"

"No, I'm staying here. I'll be there as soon as we're done."

Later, he explained the new cards and packages began arriving to the estate mid-July. The first was a congratulations card about a baby. Sometimes, they were flowers, and other times they were presents. The notes were always addressed to *Claire Nichols Rawls*, and the sources of origin would range from the West to East Coast. Even the font changed on the cards. The benign contents made it difficult to involve the authorities, but the recent change in text now had the police's attention.



DURING THE FIRST week of September, Tony needed to take a ten day trip to Europe. Time and time again he asked Claire to join him. Her growing anxiety caused by the spontaneous deliveries made Claire question every decision. She didn't know if it was safer to stay within the gates without Tony or to be with him overseas. She chose the familiarity of the estate.

The first attempt to unlawfully enter the estate occurred three days after Tony left. Though initially concealed from Claire, when she finally learned the details, she learned Clay thwarted the failed attempt. No perpetrator was caught, but thankfully, a possible threat was averted, and a previously unknown kink in their security was identified.

The next incident occurred as Clay drove Claire back to the estate one warm afternoon. Keeping her gaze toward the tinted window, the changing leaves of the vast countryside went unnoticed as Claire's mind reviewed her busy day. They'd traveled early to Iowa City where Clay escorted her to her doctor's appointment. She thought wistfully about the doctor's words. If she and Tony chose, with the assistance of an ultrasound at her next appointment, they could learn the gender of their baby. Claire smiled, wondering if they wanted to know. Yes, they occasionally joked about their green-eyed daughter, but did she want to know? One thing was for sure, if the answer was yes, she didn't want to attend that appointment without him.

As often happened, especially with the increased fluttering she felt, Claire realized her hand was protectively shielding her growing baby. She thought about the maternity clothes she'd purchased before meeting Courtney for a delicious lunch. The press would be all over that, but hiding her pregnancy was becoming impossible. Without even considering a desire to drive, Claire's eyes closed to her favorite pregnancy side-effect: her afternoon nap.

Feeling the change in acceleration, Claire was jarred awake. By the time she focused, she saw the car to their left. Like the car in which she rode, the windows were too dark to see through. Clay held fast as the other car bumped and pushed against the side panels of Tony's prized Mercedes. If the roads had been wet or snowy, the outcome may have been different. Thankfully, the roads were clear. By the time Clay pulled over, the other car disappeared over a hill. Claire's breathing was shallow, and her heart rate accelerated. The other car didn't have a license plate.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Clay asked as he removed the cell phone from his pocket.

"Yes, please get me home."

He spoke softly into his phone as he eased the car back onto the road. When she entered the mansion, she went quietly to their suite and collapsed

on the large bed. Would this ever end? Would her baby ever be safe? She'd tried to call Tony. Her mind spun with what-ifs as his phone went straight to voicemail. What time was it in Europe? She couldn't think.

Claire was almost asleep when the knock came on the suite door. With puffy eyes and an aching head, she managed to say, "Come in."

Catherine entered. "I just heard what happened. Are you all right? Should we call your doctor?"

"I'm fine," though the anguish in her voice revealed otherwise.

Catherine approached the bed. "Can I help?"

"I don't think anyone can help. I've tried to reach Tony, but I keep getting his voicemail." Claire shook her head. "It feels the same. Although, I know it's different."

"I don't understand."

Claire sat up. "I know I have my phone and access to friends and internet, but I feel trapped."

Catherine held her hand. "You aren't. You see the difference from before, don't you?"

Claire nodded. "I do. This time, it isn't Tony. It's this person. Who would want to hurt me or our child? I don't understand. I'm afraid it will never end." When Catherine failed to offer Claire the reassurance she sought, Claire's tears resumed. She buried her face in the soft plush pillows. Catherine gently rubbed her back until Claire's tears subsided and sleep overtook her.



LATER THAT EVENING, Catherine personally delivered Claire's meal to her suite. When Claire saw Catherine's return, she couldn't hide her surprise, "Catherine, I hadn't planned on eating in here tonight. Outside would be nice." The cooler late summer evenings combined with the red and golden leaves made the back patio very enjoyable. Although she was nestled on the leather sofa with her reader, the tepid breeze from the open French doors beckoned Claire outside.

Without acknowledging Claire's words, Catherine pushed the cart to the side of the small dining table and silently began placing dishes upon the surface. When she'd finished, there were two place settings. She turned solemnly toward Claire and said, "I think it's time we talk. As you probably know, there are no cameras in here, so this is the best place."

Immediately noticing the change in Catherine's demeanor, Claire nodded. Curiosity overpowered her thoughts. Claire needed to know what Catherine wanted to say. Their discussion took them late into the night.

How long had she sought the truth about Tony's promise to Nathaniel?

Now with all her might she wished for ignorance.

Tony's hesitation and Catherine's reluctance at disclosing the full truth was easily understood. As the evening progressed, Claire wondered how Catherine knew so much. Of course, she'd been within the walls of the Rawlings and Rawls' homes for a very long time, and there wasn't much which occurred within those walls that Catherine didn't know.

With all of Claire's heart she wanted to call Tony and verify the story she'd just heard, but as Catherine explained, if she called Tony and opted for the escape Catherine offered, she risked too much. The New York Bar Association recently agreed to revisit John's case. John still wasn't speaking to Claire, but Emily was, a little, and then there were Amber and Harry. After what happened to Simon years ago, a part of Claire feared for Harry ever since she confessed their brief relationship. Tony had stayed true to his word. Her friends and family were safe; however, if he thought she left him of her own accord, he would no longer be bound by his promise.

Catherine was right. It had to look like this unknown perpetrator took her. It was the only way to keep everyone she loved safe.

Although her heart told her to stop and trust the man she knew she loved, her mind replayed the words Catherine shared, "Anton promised to keep Nathaniel's vow: Everyone associated with Nathaniel's downfall will pay... their children, their children's children, and children's children's children..."

How could she stay? Even if she'd already paid her due, Claire couldn't allow her child to pay.

The temperature of their suite dropped as Catherine presented her final and most persuasive argument. Catherine stood from the table, disappeared into the closet, and returned with Claire's missing laptop. When Claire saw it, she thought she'd be ill. "I thought my laptop was missing?" Claire asked as dread filled her chest.

"I believe the final word was..." Catherine set the laptop on the table in front of Claire. "...the police weren't able to locate your laptop."

Semantics, Claire thought. "When was it found?"

"From what I understand, it was before you regained consciousness after Patrick Chester's attack."

"I don't understand." Claire looked into Catherine's gray eyes hoping for an answer capable of quelling the dread growing within her. "That missing laptop was why I moved back here."

Catherine closed her eyes and nodded. "Anton knew if you felt threatened you'd be more likely to move."

Claire tried desperately to comprehend Catherine's words while her new world crashed around her. "What about the packages?"

"Those are real." Claire heard the emotion in Catherine's voice, "At least I think they are."



BY THE TIME Catherine left the suite, the tepid air had become cold. Walking to the French doors, Claire stepped onto the private patio and looked up at the velvety sky laden with millions of stars. Struggling with her decision, the cool autumn air cleared Claire's mind and her thoughts moved to her future. In and out, inhale and exhale. Her future was her baby's future. Claire knew she needed to make her child's safety her first priority. Feeling the calming effects of Iowa's tranquility, she contemplated her decision. Tony wasn't due back to Iowa for four more days. If she followed through on Catherine's plan, by the time he returned, she'd be long gone, and no one would suspect him.

The stars blurred as she thought about the dark chocolate eyes she'd never see again. Her heart ached. Nevertheless, her child's safety was paramount in her mind. Suddenly, Claire prayed, not for the green-eyed daughter Tony sought, but for a dark-eyed son...



SOPHIA FELT SHE was getting better and better at timing her personal events around Derek's travel. While he was on his second trip to the orient, she executed a very successful art exhibit at her Provincetown studio. Although she often exhibited at the Palo Alto studio, since Mr. George was called away and the new curator was in place, she wasn't as comfortable there. It was all right while she was in Santa Clara, but more than anything, she relished her time on the East Coast.

Her recently found success and artificially high sales prices out West increased her notoriety throughout the East Coast art community. This translated into more guests and investors interested in her three day gallery exhibit.

As she settled into their cottage on the cape, Sophia poured herself a glass of wine and waited for the familiar ringing of her laptop. Derek's Skype call was due any minute. Although the time difference made communication difficult, they'd worked out a manageable schedule. Derek's new assistant was both efficient and experienced with business travel. His suggestions aided in making their separation easier. Sophia never heard what happened to Danni. The last thing Derek said was that she was transferred to another office under the Rawlings Industries umbrella. Personally, Sophia could care less. She was just glad the woman wasn't around her husband anymore.

The ringing of her laptop brought Sophia's focus to the screen. After a moment or two of circles turning, she saw her husband's soft brown eyes shining from the other side of the world. "Hey, Beautiful, how did day three

of your exhibit go?"

"It went very well."

"Do you ever wish you'd taken that offer for the traveling exhibit?"

"Are you kidding?" Sophia lifted her glass of wine and toasted her husband's image. "This is too much work. I'd rather spend my time painting and enjoying time with you."

Derek's smile filled the monitor. "I like that, too!"

"Hey, I sold three pieces to Jackson Wilson."

"Are you sure he isn't your secret mystery buyer?"

"No, I'm not sure, but that would be silly. I've never seen the mystery guy and Jackson is at every showing I have east of the Mississippi."

"Three pieces—impressive. Did you get the same price as the ones last spring in Palo Alto?"

"No, but thanks to those, my prices have definitely gone up."

"Babe, I think I'm going to tell Shedis-tics to forget future travel, I'm going to be a kept man."

Sophia giggled. "I'm not sure I'd go that far, but I could come up with a few things to keep you busy."

"Have I ever told you how much I love to hear your laugh, even when your smile has that nice red wine glow?"

Sophia quickly ran her tongue over her teeth. "You're awful. Maybe the wine is adding to my humor—plus exhaustion. It's been three long days!"

"Yeah, I'm sorry I couldn't be there with you."

"Me too, but I like staying busy while you're gone."

When they finally disconnected their call, Sophia climbed into bed and allowed her thoughts to center on the man on the other side of the world. Her silly red wine smile stayed on her lips until dreams took her to another place.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

We gain strength, and courage, and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face... we must do that which we think we cannot.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

PREDAWN MURKINESS WEIGHED heavily on Claire's tired eyelids. Blinking back the threatening gloom, she gazed into the rearview mirror. Behind her the eastern sky filled with reds and oranges from the rising sun. She feigned optimism and promised herself: *it is a new day.*

The text message on the disposable phone, one resembling her old work phone, instructed her to pull over on Highway I-80, at mile marker 145. With each mile she drove toward Des Moines, the mile markers decreased while her anxiety proportionately increased.

The phone in her hand and the folder of information on the passenger's seat were the extent of preparation she'd received for her escape. Everything happened so fast Claire hadn't even had a chance to look through the material. After she re-entered the house from the patio, her new phone and the folder of information were waiting on the small dining table within the suite. Part of her wondered how Catherine had been able to supply her with so much support with such a short timeframe. After all, Claire's decision to leave the estate was only minutes old. While light overtook the sky and she neared her designated mile marker, multiple questions swirled through Claire's mind. She tried desperately to push away the uneasiness.

She cranked the radio and air conditioning, plummeting the car's internal temperature while simultaneously increasing the interior volume. Curiosity was powerful but not as powerful as sleepiness. She needed her eyes to remain open.

In the distance, waiting at her designated mile marker, Claire saw a dark

gray SUV. Suddenly, her need for rest evaporated. The SUV grew as she approached. Of all the questions swirling through her mind, the one that came pressing to the forefront—the one that screamed in her head and echoed throughout her consciousness was... *How can I put my life and my child's life in the hands of this unknown person?*

As if on cue, the darkness gave way and rays of sunshine infiltrated the windshield. Prisms of color and points of radiance flickered throughout the interior of the freezing cold BMW as beams hit the large diamond on Claire's trembling left hand. She'd only recently agreed to wear the ring, and now she was leaving her fiancé. It was more than Claire could fathom.

If she turned around and talked to Tony, could she explain Catherine's stories, and would Tony understand her fright? Could things be all right?

Berating her indecisiveness and battling a combination of sleepiness and fright, Claire felt as if wavering would prevail. It wasn't until she slowed, passed the SUV, and saw the sole occupant of the gray utility vehicle that she was able to see freedom from the unknown terror and promised vendetta which threatened her and her child's life. Claire recognized the white hair immediately. She swiftly pulled the BMW over to the shoulder of the highway, feeling the vibration of the uneven surface. Slowly, she backed along the gravel until the trunk of her sedan rested only a few feet from Phillip Roach's bumper.

Catherine had connected her with the perfect person to help her escape. This realization reinforced Claire's steely determination. Stiffening her spine, she placed the car in park, grabbed the folder of information, the disposable cell phone, turned off the BMW, laid the key on the driver's seat, locked and shut the car's door.

A line of semi-trucks passed, blowing Claire's hair and exposing her determined expression. She made her way toward Phil's SUV. Over the rush of traffic, she heard the click of the unlocking doors. Claire opened the passenger door and climbed into the seat beside her old bodyguard.

She was the first to speak, "I thought you worked for Tony."

"I did. How do you think Ms. London found my name?"

Claire raised her eyebrows.

"He hasn't needed me since you moved to Iowa."

"How do I know you won't tell him where I am?"

"Because I work for money. According to Ms. London, once I get you to Geneva, you'll pay me more to keep quiet. Secrets are my specialty."

"And you can do this?" Claire asked as she felt the SUV ease back onto Highway I-80.

"Oh, Ms. Nichols, my talents were wasted as your babysitter. I'm very capable."

Claire looked at the man to her left. "Don't you think you should call me

Claire?"

He smiled. "Actually, no, you have new documents. Claire Nichols is gone."

He handed her a stack of passports. Each folder contained the international document and a corresponding state issued driver's license, each from different states. The documents and licenses held digitally enhanced pictures. They were all her, but not; in some she was blonde, some red-headed, and others her hair was darker than normal—almost black. Upon further scrutinization, she read her eye color also varied. "I understand how my hair can change, but how can my eyes change?"

Phil pointed to the back seat. Claire picked up a small cosmetic case. Inside were multiple pairs of colored contact lenses. He took the next exit and turned around, heading the SUV east toward the rising sun. Claire reached into her purse for her sunglasses.

"We'll need to get rid of your purse and the clothes you're wearing." He noticed the large stone on her left hand. "And that. Isn't that the same ring you sold?"

She fought the tears that suddenly filled her eyes and nodded.

"Can you do this?" Phil asked.

She swallowed. "I don't have a choice. Where are we going? Are you taking me back to Iowa City?" There was a hint of optimism in her voice.

"Cincinnati. You're flying from Cincinnati to Florence later this afternoon." He turned toward her, and although her gaze was out the side window, Phil could see her trembling shoulders. "We have to stop on the way so you can change your clothes and your hair." He waited until the silence grew uncomfortable; then continued, "Unless you want to go back to Iowa City?"

Claire felt the movement of her baby inside of her. Her voice quivered, "N-No. This is something I need to do." She reclined the seat and refused to turn toward Phil. "I think I'd like to rest while we drive to this hotel." She knew he'd watched her for months. She remembered the note he sent the night Tony came to her hotel in San Diego. She couldn't let him see the tears which refused to stay behind the Cartier sunglasses. He'd know immediately: Iowa City was her destination of choice.



THERE WERE SO many things Sophia needed to do at her studio. An exhibit throws everything off kilter. Cassie, the assistant she hired to keep the Cape studio open while she was in California, was supposed to meet her at 9:00 AM. Waking and sleeping at appropriate hours had never been Sophia's gift.

She was better of late, but the exhibit wore her out. When she rolled over and saw the bright Cape Cod sun streaming through her windows, she jumped from bed, knowing she'd overslept.

It was a 9:15 AM before she made her way out the door. Luckily, it wasn't a long walk to the studio. Derek kept talking about her buying a bigger studio, but honestly, she was happy with the one her parents helped her start. As she closed her front door and breathed in the wonderful salt air, her purse began to vibrate. Immediately, she assumed it was Cassie wondering if she would make their meeting. Glancing at the screen of her phone, Sophia saw an unknown number with the Princeton, New Jersey, prefix. She hit: ANSWER.

"Mrs. Sophia Burke?"

"Yes, this is she." The bright sunshine faded.

"Ms. Burke, I'm sorry to be making this call, but a blue Camry was discovered this morning. We don't know the cause of the accident, but we believe both of your parents were discovered within the car. It may have been due to wet leaves. We had a hard rain here last night, or with the year of your parent's car, it could be an acceleration issue. Their car hit a tree, and the coroner believes they both died instantly. We need you to travel to New Jersey to identify the bodies."

Sophia collapsed onto the steps of her cottage as the tears grew and sobs formed in her chest. Her mind tried to process. She managed to speak, "Okay, I can do that."

"Visible identification will be difficult. We were hoping for familiar DNA."

"I'm sorry. That won't work. I'm adopted."

"Are there any other siblings?"

"No, I'm an only child."

"Perhaps you will be able to identify their belongings."

"I will be there as soon as I can." Her mind tried to process everything.
"Can you tell me who was driving?"

"It was your father, Mrs. Burke. May I ask why you're asking?"

"Curiosity, Officer, perhaps shock."

"I understand. Please ask for me, Officer McPherson, when you arrive."

"I will. Thank you." Sophia disconnected the call and called Derek's international phone.

Although she knew it would be best to claim *an acceleration problem* or possibly *wet leaves* as the officer suggested, Sophia knew that wasn't the cause. Officer McPherson said Pop was driving. Why hadn't her mom listened? Sophia pleaded with her to take away Pop's keys. It wasn't his fault. Not really, yet Sophia knew in her heart, it was. What would she do without them?



THE MID-MORNING sun moved higher as Tony's private plane touched down in Iowa. After the call from Clay, he cut his European trip short and immediately headed home. If someone tried to push Claire off the road, he needed to be there. Tony tried Claire's phone again—no answer. He hadn't been able to reach her since the near accident, even her voicemail wouldn't activate.

Getting into the car, he tried Catherine's phone. When the line connected, Tony couldn't comprehend Catherine's words. "What do you mean she left yesterday and hasn't come back? How could she leave without Clay?"

"She said she was tired of the constant surveillance and needed a break."

"When? Why haven't you called me or the police?"

Catherine tried to justify her reasoning. "Yesterday evening... I assumed she'd be back. It wasn't until this morning we realized she never returned. You were in the air; I couldn't reach you. I haven't called the police; what was I supposed to say? A twenty-nine-year-old woman drove away on her own, and now I can't reach her? Once Clay learned she'd disappeared, he followed the GPS. Your car was just located outside Des Moines... Anton, I'm so sorry. I truly thought she would return after she got her break. You know how the hormones are making her emotional. I'm very worried."

Eric couldn't drive the car fast enough for Tony. "Eric! Hit the damn gas! I need to be home!" His mind scrambled as he spoke to Catherine through the phone. "Des Moines? Jane Allyson is there. I'll contact her."

"Claire left her phone and iPad here. I can tell you, she's missed many calls from people, especially her sister."

"Shit. Someone will need to contact Emily." The jet lag was nothing compared to the chaos in his mind. "What if Chester's accomplice has her? We need to get the police involved. Have I received any ransom requests?"

"No, nothing here."

"So, a car tries to run Clay off the road, and later, that same day, Claire decides to leave. Doesn't anyone else think this is suspicious?" His question was rhetorical; he'd disconnected their call.

A few minutes later, the front door of the estate burst open. Tony entered barking orders into his phone and around the room. He wanted everyone in his office *yesterday*. He wanted the security detail, Tom and Brent, the local police chief, and he even contacted the FBI. His call to Jane Allyson went to her secretary. Ms. Allyson was in court and wouldn't be available for another few hours; however, the secretary knew nothing about Ms. Nichols.

Tony even called Emily and Harry. Surprisingly, the call with Harry went better than the one with Emily. He ended up hanging up on her. Harry promised to call with any news and assured Tony they'd not seen or heard

from Claire, but they would contact him if they did.

Tony contacted his office; there'd been no ransom requests or other messages. Patricia would check the satellite offices and get back to him immediately.

Although she'd only been missing a short time, with Tony's influence, APB's went out to all airports and every flight's manifest and passenger list was scrutinized for *Claire Nichols*. Her name didn't appear as anyone who'd flown in the past forty-eight hours or who had reservations.

While Tony assembled the greater part of his posse, Chief Newburg of the Iowa City Police Department, excused himself to take a call. When he returned, he reluctantly approached Tony. "Mr. Rawlings, I need to speak to you privately."

Tony looked around the room. His legal consultants were present as well as Catherine and his security detail. "Does this have to do with Ms. Nichols?"

"Yes, sir, it does."

"Then I don't see any reason you can't speak in front of these people. We all want to find her."

"I think this would be better alone."

Tony's heart sank. He looked around. "Everyone but Catherine and Brent step out of my office for a minute."

Chief Newburg waited until the grand doors closed, leaving the four of them alone. "Mr. Rawlings, a Mr. and Mrs. John Vandersol have contacted the Palo Alto, California Police Department. Their department has formally contacted our department. You are being accused of culpability in the disappearance of Ms. Claire Nichols. If she is not found, they want you charged with her disappearance and possible death—same for her child."

Tony collapsed into his leather chair. "Chief, that is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I called you here."

"If they'd contacted our office personally, I could agree with you and talk them down. Unfortunately, since they've involved another agency, and we have to follow through. Mr. Rawlings, may we search your house?"

"Yes. Of course, do anything you need to do to find her, but please don't waste too much time here. Find out where she went, and if she's with some maniac. You know she was attacked in California. We've brought the threatening mailings to you. She could be with some crazy person right now." His dark eyes fumed as he fought the desire to argue his innocence.

"I understand, Mr. Rawlings. We will get to the bottom of this."

Chief Newburg called for additional officers and began taking statements from Anthony Rawlings and his household employees. The process lasted deep into the night, and most of the staff remained blissfully ignorant. Chief Newburg wondered how so many people could reside under the same roof and have no idea what was happening with one another.

By the time they finished, Tony figured Claire had possibly been in the hands of some zealot for an additional five hours. It took all of Brent's persuasive power to keep Tony from calling Emily and John and telling them exactly what he thought of their charges. After all, Claire's baby was his baby. He'd never cause Claire or their baby harm. He reasoned: *All right, maybe I did with Claire, but now, I wouldn't.*

During the questioning, another team of investigators descended upon the house. They went from room to room and searched everything. One investigator searching their private suite found Claire's box of research. He deemed the information worthy to be designated as evidence and took it back to the station for processing. They also asked about the estate's security system. The police wanted to know about video footage and if they could access saved files.

The press was already hot on the hunt. Someone leaked to the media that the ICPD was investigating Anthony Rawlings and his estate in conjunction with the reported disappearance of his ex-wife and current live-in relationship, Claire *Rawlings* Nichols.

As soon as everyone left, Tony returned numerous calls from his publicist who was working feverishly to restrain the outgoing information. Shelly was doing her best, but stalling or limiting was all she could promise. It was coming too fast and too furious; curtailing it was impossible.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Any emotion, if it is sincere, is involuntary.

—Mark Twain

A T A ROADSIDE motel, somewhere in Illinois, Claire dried her newly temporarily-died red hair while Phillip explained the first part of her escape. “You’ll stay in Florence for a few days before you make your way across Italy toward Switzerland.” His voice came through the thin bathroom door as she changed into the clothes he’d brought. “The secret of staying hidden is moving, but not too erratically.”

She slid the squeaky pocket door, creating an opening large enough for her to exit the ugly pink and black tiled bathroom. The smell of stale smoke overtook her senses as her eyes scanned the shabby motel room. Thread bare carpet highlighted the traffic areas. Despite the surroundings, Claire’s voice sounded stronger than before, “Eventually, I want to settle. I have a child to raise.”

From the corner of her eye, in the cloudy mirror above the low dresser, she saw her unfamiliar reflection. She noticed the looseness of the new clothes. They hid her pregnancy much better than her previous outfit.

“You will, after you acquire the money from the account in Geneva.”

Claire nodded. Catherine’s documents had specific instructions for accessing Nathaniel Rawls’ hidden fortune. It seemed appropriate that if *his* decree could send her into hiding—then *his* money could finance her future. Claire even justified it as her baby’s grandfather’s support. It was amazing how the mind can twist things, making them legitimate, especially under duress.

Phil went on, “You’ll have a week to travel from Florence to Geneva. I’ll meet you there next Thursday. Your hotel reservation is set in Geneva. I need to know where to meet you. It’s too dangerous for you to have contact with anyone in the United States, even me. While leaving the U.S. you’re *Lauren*

Michaels. In Geneva, minus the time you're in the bank, you're *Isabelle Alexander.* Hopefully, once I'm there, we'll discuss your eventual destination."

"Hopefully?" Claire asked.

"Your transaction must be complete. Temporary identities are one thing; securing a permanent identity with a new residence is expensive."

Claire nodded. She wondered how much money the Switzerland account held.



PHIL LEFT CLAIRE at a café in Burlington, a suburb of Cincinnati. From there she called a taxi which took her to the Cincinnati International Airport. She had to admit, he was smart. The curbs at the airport had video surveillance. With this plan, if she were to be identified, he wasn't connected.

Claire realized she was flying international with nothing more than a carry-on; Phil supplied her with the basics. She would need to purchase everything else new in Italy. His plan provided her with enough starter cash to sustain her until she completed her financial transaction in Geneva.

The first security check was unnerving. Claire summoned every mask she'd ever worn. Once she passed to the other side of the checkpoint and nodded to the last TSA agent, she sighed with relief. From that point on, *Ms. Lauren Michaels* confidently met each agent and scan head-on.

Lauren was thirty thousand feet in the air, crossing the Atlantic Ocean, by the time the police finished searching Anthony Rawlings' estate. The striking green-eyed woman with deep amber hair rode economy-class, wedged between a mother with a sleeping child and a man in a cheap suit. The man to her left was not only a barrier to the aisle, but after he consumed too many seven dollar beers, his attempts at flirting made her debate the pros and cons of committing assault and battery.

It took all her self-restraint to not pull the large diamond from her purse and wiggle it under his nose. In her daydream, she curtly said, "Leave me alone, jerk; I'm engaged." But sadly, she realized that was no longer true.

The diamond was the only instruction from Phil, Claire didn't follow. She could leave her Prada purse, her overpriced clothes, and her Cartier sunglasses—just not the ring. Claire closed her eyes and remembered the afternoon she'd finally accepted it...

It was a Saturday, and Tony was working from home. She'd spent most of the morning out in the gardens. Before, when they were married, Claire longed to

work in the gardens, planting and tending his beautiful plants. Back then, she worried it wasn't appropriate. Now she didn't care and didn't ask. One day, she started talking with James, the gardener. He helped her find the tools. Tony never complained. On the contrary, he delighted in her hobbies, often asking questions about her plants and supporting her desire to get her hands dirty and tend the small living things.

On that particular Saturday, after digging, dividing, replanting, and weeding, Claire decided to cool off in the pool. Tony must have seen her swimming. She'd only been in the cool water for a few minutes when he joined her. While they talked and swam in liquid bliss, he reached for her hand. Seeing the dirt still under her nails he mentioned, "I think you need a manicure after all this manual labor."

Claire giggled and pulled her hand away. "I wasn't planning on having anyone look that closely. Besides, I haven't had a chance to shower yet."

"Now that sounds intriguing!" His eyes twinkled as his lips formed a mischievous grin. "In the meantime, I know a way to deflect people's attention from your nails."

She was holding his shoulders, and for no particular reason, the moment felt right. Later, Claire decided it was the ordinary calmness she liked; nothing special, just realness that comes with every day. Her answer surprised him, "Well, that shower I'm about to take..." Her emerald eyes returned his sparkle. "Perhaps if you can figure a way to bring the ring in there, I'd slip it on. I mean..." She cooed into his ear, "I wouldn't want it to go down the drain."

Grasping her growing waist, he gently pushed her away and stared deeply into her eyes. Claire remembered feeling the familiar tug as his gaze lingered. "Are you finally saying yes, you will be Mrs. Rawlings again?"

She nodded and kissed his neck. Her insides tightened at the sound of his responding growl. When her lips finally released his neck, she replied, "I'm willing to go from dating to engaged—can we not rush the married part?"

His dazzling smile melted her completely. Claire wanted the shower, the ring, and whatever would come next; however, his gaze turned serious as did his tone, "There is one condition."

After trying so long for her to accept his proposal, the addition of a stipulation surprised Claire. "Yes?" she asked tentatively.

"I don't want to have to track it down again. Do not sell it, give it away, or leave it any place but on your beautiful finger." It was one of those non-debatable statements.

Nodding with a seductive smile, Claire whispered, "I promise." She sealed the deal with a lingering kiss.

She couldn't leave the ring behind.

-Three days later-

TONY STARED AT the monitors in his office. The large screen was subdivided into many smaller screens. At the top was a live feed from outside his office door. He didn't want intruders. Below were multiple smaller screens changing constantly with various locations on the estate. The bulk of the screen held two videos. He controlled the speed and sound of each one. On the left, he saw Claire in his garages, rushing to the key cabinet and removing the key to a Mercedes Benz. In the lower right corner the date read: 01/17/12. On the right was the video of Claire walking casually to the key cabinet which no longer held a lock. He watched as she removed the keys to a BMW and calmly walked toward the car. The date in the lower right corner read: 09/04/13. Repeatedly, he paused the action and scrutinized the scenes. With all his might, he tried to read Claire's facial expressions.

In 2012, he saw fear as Claire looked nervously all about her. On the video recorded only days earlier, Tony wondered what he saw. No, he knew her look; it was a mask of steely determination. What he didn't know was the emotion hidden underneath.

The police also saw the 2013 video. They believed it proved she left of her own free will—if that were true, wouldn't she have taken more belongings? Wouldn't she have taken more money? She had access. She had credit cards and an ATM card, yet they were all found in an Illinois hotel.

At nearly 2:00 AM, Tony was all alone. The various screens displaying the estate were devoid of people. Everyone was fast asleep. Even the crickets outside his open windows knew to leave him in silence, yet with no one to hear, he spoke the question he'd been wrestling with for days, "Why, Claire? Why?" In one gulp, he downed the amber liquid from the crystal tumbler. Though the rich Glen Garioch Whiskey went down smoothly, it didn't ease the ache in his head or the pain in his chest.

His facade of the last few days successfully drained his strength. Tony knew he needed sleep, but *how could he sleep in their bed?* He couldn't even stand to enter their room or see the unfinished nursery. It was the *not knowing* that hurt the most. If he knew she was safe... If he knew she did this of her own free will... but he didn't know. Last time, in 2012, he knew, and without a doubt, the pain he'd put her through back then added to his current torment.

In the past few days, he'd spent untold amounts of money, had private and public agencies search every inch of Iowa, the surrounding states, country—damn, the world. There were plenty of tips. A large reward will bring those, yet nothing had paid off.

How could Claire evaporate into thin air?

The BMW she'd driven, was thoroughly searched by Iowa's top CSI. Only her finger prints, Clay's, Eric's, and his were discovered... but no unknown clues.

During the last three days, Tony had hardly left the confines of his home office. Entering the attached bath, he barely recognized his own reflection. Never had his facial hair been so long. Rubbing his hands through the now soft stubble, he stared into his own eyes. For the first time in his life, he'd dared to believe in happily ever after. He learned at a young age that it was unattainable; therefore, he'd never even tried... until Claire. Somehow, for a few short months, it was at his fingertips. The wealth, homes, and appearance of stability and sanity... all meant nothing when he saw the pictures of Claire with Harry. Tony couldn't be at that damn gala and know she was there with *him*. Hell, Tony didn't even know about their baby. He just knew, for the first time in his life, Anthony Rawlings was willing to risk public scrutiny to have what he wanted most. What mattered to him above anything else... the problem was making *her* realize it.

Tony turned off the screens of his computer and lay on the soft leather sofa. His mind went back to 2011. On this very couch... on this luxurious carpet... he smiled... on his desk... there was hardly a place they hadn't been together. Damn, they'd been great. Despite the happy memories, the twisting in his heart tightened. The things he'd done to her. The regret was almost paralyzing.

Then somehow in this totally screwed up world, when all was said and done, she'd taken him back.

The pounding in his head brought moisture to his eyes. His words were barely audible. That was all right; they weren't intended for anyone except the woman who wasn't there. "I'm so sorry... for everything. Why? Why did you leave me?"

As the tears coated his cheeks, he told himself, *Anthony Rawlings doesn't cry. He doesn't apologize, and he doesn't cry...*



ONCE SETTLED IN Florence, *Isabelle* utilized an Internet Café to surf the web and learn the latest news happening back in Iowa. The face of Claire Nichols appeared in multiple thumbnails. She scrolled over the pictures, which looked nothing like the blue-eyed woman with short dark hair staring at the monitor.

Different titles appeared:

***Missing—Day Three, Reward Offered, Ex-Husband “Person of Interest”,
and Vanished—Memoirs left behind.***

Claire read each article, scrutinizing every detail. The first article spoke analytically about Claire's disappearance. It described the incident where her car was attacked by another car, how that evening she went for a drive and never returned. The article highlighted photos of her and Tony at recent events. It even showed a recent photo of them out to eat. Claire tried to see the restaurant. She was pretty sure it was in Chicago, and on her left hand, she could see her engagement ring.

The next article said:

Anthony Rawlings believes his ex-wife was coerced off his estate and kidnapped. He states the incident in California as evidence of a probable attack. To this end, he is currently offering a reward of 100 thousand dollars for information leading to the safe return of his ex-wife. The Iowa City Police Department hired additional personnel to help with the onslaught of calls and emails. Mr. Rawlings offered to reimburse ICPD for the extra expense.

The “Person of Interest” story claimed:

John and Emily Vandersol, Claire Nichols only family, made allegations suggesting Anthony Rawlings look no farther than the mirror. They allege the wealthy tycoon is responsible for the disappearance of Claire Nichols, claiming he's done it before (see story related to memoirs). The office of Mr. Marcus Evergreen, Johnson County Prosecutor, Iowa City, Iowa stated formal charges against Mr. Rawlings are under consideration.

Mr. Rawlings' attorneys are working overtime. While defending his innocence, they are also battling Parrott Press. The publishing company is seeking to publish Ms. Nichols memoirs immediately. A written agreement between the author, Ms. Nichols, and Mr. Rawlings states said manuscript may only be published in the event of possible harm to Ms. Nichols. Parrott Press believes her disappearance fits this description. Advanced orders of: My Life as It Didn't Appear—Unofficial biography of Claire Rawlings Nichols have exceeded one million.

Isabelle read in disbelief. If Tony were in Europe when she left, how could anyone suspect him? She never meant to implicate him. That's why Catherine recommended Claire leave immediately so that she would disappear while he was out of town, and what about Meredith's book? Catherine said Tony's lawyers would stop it. What if they didn't? Claire hated herself for going through with those interviews. She didn't want their history published. Someday their child would see it! Lastly, John and Emily's actions infuriated Claire. If only she could call them, but she knew it wasn't an option.

For the last two days, *Isabelle* reviewed Catherine's specific instructions regarding the hidden fortune. She also practiced her Italian and used it whenever possible. According to Catherine, Nathaniel's money was hidden at an institution in Geneva, Switzerland. She said Tony had accessed the money for different things throughout the years. Nevertheless, Catherine believed it had accrued nicely since Nathaniel's death. According to the documents, there was a safety deposit box within the institution, which could only be accessed by two people: Anton or Marie Rawls. Catherine provided Claire with Marie's information, and Phil supplied her with identification under the same alias. Sometime during their fateful late night talk, Claire asked Catherine, "Were you still with the Rawls when Nathaniel remarried."

"I was."

So many questions came to Claire's mind: Nathaniel's second wife was the woman Tony protected, the woman Patrick Chester thought was Samuel's sister. She was the woman who killed Samuel and Amanda, but that was a long time ago. And Tony said the woman was still alive. Claire asked, "Was she younger than Nathaniel?"

"Yes," Catherine answered and then asked, "You are younger than Anton. Do you think that's wrong?"

"No, I'm just trying to figure things out." Claire wanted to ask more; however, she needed to concentrate first and foremost on her escape. Besides, Claire had the feeling her questions made Catherine uncomfortable.

As Catherine described the financial institution in Geneva, Claire remembered the place. Near the end of her European journey, so long ago with Tony, she'd met him at the same institution before they went for lunch. Claire remembered being early and waiting patiently for him to emerge from behind the gated area. This time, she'd be the one behind the gates.

Catherine provided Claire with the number of the safety deposit box, as well as a copy of the required key. Both were necessary to access the safety deposit box. The moment Claire saw the key Catherine placed in a small envelope, she recognized it. It was the odd shaped key Tony used to roll from finger to finger when agitated. Years ago, Claire hated that key. Its presence

meant her day had just taken a turn for the worse. Now, its replica would unlock her and her baby's future.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

*Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many.
The intelligence of a few, perceives what has been carefully hidden.*

—Roman poet Phaedrus

DEREK HELD HIS wife's hand, admiring her strength. Bravely, she faced mourner after mourner, as each offered their condolences.

No one mentioned Carlo's recent mental state. It wasn't as if everyone didn't know. The unsaid tragedy was that he'd taken Silvia with him. They all pitied Sophia, losing both parents at once.

When Derek arrived in New Jersey from Taiwan, Sophia had already faced too many things alone. She'd visited the morgue. Fortunately, the coroner hadn't allowed her to view her parents' remains. After striking the tree, their Camry burst into flames. She did identify some of their possessions. Her parent's wedding rings, though charred, survived the inferno. Sophia recognized them immediately.

Although she grieved their loss, Sophia reasoned it was better for them to be together. She couldn't imagine consoling her mother if her father died alone. Derek embraced his wife as she rationalized the tragedy. It was late one night, while holding her trembling body, she uttered the words he never expected to hear. Though muffled by tears, her resolve was steadfast, "I've lost my only parents... I never want to go through this again."

He understood what she was saying. She didn't want to find her birth parents. He whispered, "Anyone can give birth... a parent is the person who loves you every day without condition."

Sophia nodded into his chest. "Mine were the best. Please don't let me forget that... if I ever change my mind... please remind me."

He hugged her tight and promised.



OTHER THAN THE meal she'd shared with Tony at the French restaurant in Palo Alto, Claire hadn't had the opportunity to practice her newly acquired languages. Nonetheless, as she traveled through Italy and Switzerland, her Italian came back with a little more than a hint of an American accent. That didn't seem to matter. She spoke well enough to gain access to the locked vault in Geneva.

Appearing with short, dark hair and gray eyes to match the ID with the name *C. Marie Rawls*, *Marie* entered the vault with a bank official. Her hands trembled as they approached the safety deposit box once opened by Nathaniel. According to the ledgers, it was regularly accessed by Anton Rawls, usually twice a year. Claire signed the same ledger: *Marie Rawls* and presented her identification. The officer never flinched. He asked, "*Seniora Rawls, la sua chiave?*" (Ms. Rawls, do you have the key?)

"*Si, signore, grazie.*" (Yes, sir, thank you.) She prayed the financial executive couldn't hear the pounding of her heart or sense her wet palms. She placed the small replicated key in his outstretched palm. *Marie* smiled when he gently closed his fingers around her petite hand. The man was less concerned with her identity and more interested in her proximity. She responded boldly, "*Signore, ti ringrazio per il vostro aiuto.*" (Sir, I appreciate your assistance here.)

"*Forse più tardi?*" (Maybe later?)

"*Prima la mia missione.*" (First, my mission.)

He released her hand with a friendly, "*Si, naturalmente.*" (Yes, naturally.)

With his invitation momentarily dismissed, the officer inserted a key from his large ring. Next, he took *Marie's* key. When he fumbled momentarily, her breathing stopped, and her heart forgot to beat. Then, all at once, the metal key breached the archaic lock. The tumblers turned; he slid the long box from its home. Remembering to exhale, *Marie* worked diligently to maintain her stoic expression as she followed him to a private room.

Once alone, Claire opened the lid and gasped. She'd come this far, she'd given up her life, listened to Catherine's advice... all for a virtually empty box; however, virtually was not entirely. Slowly, Claire removed the documents. In the next forty-five minutes, she read all the information.

Nathaniel planned everything to a *T*. His original intention was for *Marie* or Anton to tend to his fortune. He left specific instructions about maintaining an overseas cache. The money was to be constantly rotated, moved, and secured. All pertinent information regarding the accounts was to stay locked in this box. Only the person in possession of these documents could access the monies. Being as he didn't know for sure which heir would maintain his

secret, everything was accessible with a numeric code. No names were associated with the financial accounts. This layer of security also aided in concealing the true ownership. Tracing the money to a Rawls, or anyone in the United States, was virtually impossible. The Switzerland financial system specialized in maintaining hidden fortunes. Only in the case of broken laws would they share information with the United States government.

In the 1970's, when Nathaniel created his hidden treasure, it probably seemed very *James Bond*. Claire wondered if Tony changed the rules or had gotten more high tech. She would need to find out. She'd gone too far to turn back.

Currently, there were seven different accounts. The last time funds were transferred was six months ago. It really was time for a transfer. She wondered why he hadn't done it while recently overseas.

Claire wished for Phil's assistance. He'd be joining her in another day; however, this was something she needed to do on her own. Feigning confidence, *Marie Rawls* took the documentation to the front of the institution and requested a representative.

Over the next ninety minutes, *Marie* watched and scrutinized computer screens. Her months of required attendance in Tony's office paid off. She frowned at unsuccessful investments and discussed better reserves for better returns. If there ever was a time to wear a mask, this was it. As the afternoon progressed, she systematically moved and invested over 200 million dollars. The monies were once again dispersed throughout the world market with a portion liquid and accessible. The only difference was that now *she* was the only one holding a means to their access.

By the time she feigned reinserting the documentation into the box, a presumed action based upon prior transactions, she was ready to faint. Tony's personal reserve was now hers. It wasn't stolen out of spite. Her desire for vengeance was gone. Claire willingly admitted her feelings of hate were only a close cousin to the love she now felt, and she knew Tony loved her, but thankfully, Catherine helped her see the truth. No matter how much he loved her and their child, his need to fulfill his promise to Nathaniel would always prevail.

Claire couldn't live with that. Besides, their child deserved to live like a Rawls. With a heavy heart, Claire justified she didn't steal Tony's money. She only reappropriated it, to his child.

With the papers in her purse, *Marie Rawls*, disappeared and *Isabelle Alexander* stepped onto the bustling Geneva sidewalk a multimillionaire. Faces didn't register. While in the heart of Geneva's financial district, *Isabelle* didn't notice the magnificent blue waters ahead or the grand snow covered Alps around. As she walked from the bank to her hotel, not even the phenomenal shopping within the sleek cosmopolitan buildings beckoned her.

While the slender heels of her Luciano Padovan sling-back platform pumps clicked along the sidewalk toward Lake Geneva, Claire's self-absorbed thoughts filled every fiber of her being.

How many times had she told Tony his money didn't matter? How many times had she shunned the idea of wealth?

Nevertheless, she'd just done the unthinkable. If it weren't for the uncomfortable gray contacts, she'd surrender to the tears threatening to flow. She fought the impulse. *Isabelle Alexander* needed to be strong, just as *Marie Rawls* had been moments earlier.

The documents inside her purse were the key to over 200 Million dollars. More than anything, she longed to throw them in the nearest gutter. The only thing stopping the growing compulsion was the child moving inside of her. Never in Claire's entire life had she hated herself as much as she did at this moment. Thankfully, her love for her baby overpowered her self-loathing.

Claire's common sense demanded she go directly to her hotel and secure the documents inside a locked safe. Nevertheless, she was tired of listening to her mind. She needed to know what was happening in the USA, in Iowa, and at Tony's estate. She had so many questions, and over the past week, she'd formed many more:

First and foremost... who was the real Marie Rawls? Tony admitted to seeing her since she killed his parents. Catherine admitted to being with the Rawls family when Nathaniel married Marie. This woman existed. Why hadn't she turned up in any of their research?

The vibrant sky and tall limestone buildings disappeared beyond the sea of sidewalk tables and happy tourists. *Isabelle* politely intermingled and scanned the landscape. Slipping into an internet café, she ordered a tall tea. No question, her Italian improved with each passing day. She settled into an available swivel chair next to a computer, logged onto the Wi-Fi, and transcended the ocean in search of information.

Information began to materialize:

Parrott Press Wins Battle Against Rawlings Industries - Representative Promises Claire Nichols' Rawlings Memoirs Published By October First.

Claire's heart sank... was there any way to stop this mess? Next story:

Palo Alto Police Question Iowa City Police Regarding Lack of Cooperation with Anthony Rawlings. As of yet, no charges had been filed or restrictions placed on Mr. Rawlings' travel. Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol have requested his passport be seized. Marcus Evergreen, Iowa City Prosecutor, was quoted as saying, "Mr. Rawlings is an upstanding law abiding citizen. Until we are convinced otherwise, he is free to live his life. He has a home and multibillion dollar business empire. We have no reason to assume he is a flight risk."

Claire exited the current stories and began searching New Jersey records—nothing on Marie Rawls. She remembered Nathaniel was incarcerated in 1987. Claire wasn't sure when he married Marie; however, if he married her while in prison, that would have been in New York. Claire entered *Marie Rawls* into the data base of *Marriage Licenses—New York State*. She narrowed the search to 1986–1989.

Claire held her breath as the small sentence surfaced:

February 25, 1988, Nathaniel Rawls and Catherine Marie London—license of marriage.

Claire stared at the screen... *Catherine Marie London*.

She wasn't sure how long she stared; a minute, an hour, a day, maybe ten? Claire's world once again swayed from its axis. Catherine is Marie! Marie is Catherine! What does that mean?

She closed her eyes and reviewed. The nausea from her early pregnancy returned. The stress at the bank was nothing compared to the mayhem in her mind. It meant *Catherine* killed Samuel and Amanda Rawls. It meant Tony paid Patrick Chester yearly for *Catherine*'s freedom. It meant *Catherine* loved Nathaniel. According to Tony, Nathaniel loved her too.

Despite the damn gray contacts, Claire's tears of fear, rage, and sadness swelled behind the pigmented disks. She didn't want to believe the thoughts and theories flooding her mind. She loved Catherine. The woman sustained her during the time of Tony's domination. Claire reassured herself: *Catherine is protecting me again*.

However, she had to wonder, was this truly protection?

Catherine knew Claire's greatest fear, her biggest terror, was isolation. Catherine provided money—lots of money; however, suddenly Claire

questioned: how was this kinder than thirteen days sequestered in her suite? She and her baby would have every need met, yet when all was said and done, Claire's need for love and companionship would remain unfulfilled for the rest of her life.

She laid ten Swiss Francs on the counter and stepped out into the bustling cosmopolitan city. Her hotel was only blocks away.

Claire, no *Isabelle*, entered the Hotel d'Angleterre in a mental fog. Her mind whirled with new and old information. The concierge's greeting caught her off guard. "*Buon pomeriggio, Senora Alexander. Senior Alexander è qui, ti aspetta.*" (Good afternoon Mrs. Alexander, Mr. Alexander is waiting for you.)

Mr. Alexander? She thought. "*Grazie, dove?*" (Thank you, where?)

"Egli è nella vostra suite, senora." (In your suite, ma'am.)

Claire nodded and tried to smile. Panic from years before bubbled from the depths of her soul. The past few months with Tony held no hint of domination, yet she knew it existed, and now, if he were upstairs in her suite, *what did that mean? Did he think she'd left him for his money? Did Catherine tell him? Was this all just a set-up, a test? Had she just failed?*

Claire decided company would be beneficial. "*Mi sembra di aver smarrito la mia chiave, potreste aiutarmi?*" (I seem to have misplaced my key, could you help me?)

"*Si, senora.*" The concierge accompanied *Senora Alexander* to the third floor suite. As they rode the elevator in silence, Claire's mind spun with questions. When the doors opened, anticipation prevailed. She prayed, *Please let Tony be here, and let us work this out.*

She foresaw anger, but she'd seen it before. Claire squared her shoulders and stiffened her neck. Once his impending tirade was complete, she'd explain. She wanted to face the man she'd just left.

The concierge inserted the key and penetrated the lock on the polished wooden door.

Before he pulled the opulent lever, the door opened. Instead of brown darkness, she saw intense hazel. Flecks of gold shimmered within her *husband's* gray-green eyes while his white hair lay casually over his forehead. Claire sighed as Phil beckoned her into the suite.

"*Il mio amore!*" (My love!) He pulled her hand toward him; her body followed. Instantly, his lips were on hers. She fought her urge to fight, knowing the concierge was watching their show.

Claire lifted her hands to Phil's shoulders and pushed, "*Lei mi sorprende.*" (You surprise me.)

In English, "Didn't they tell you I was here? I didn't mean to surprise you."

The concierge stood faithfully near, in the open door. Phil immediately

reached into his pocket, removed some Swiss Francs, and thanked him for his help. When the door closed Claire freed herself and retaliated, "They said *Mr. Alexander* was here, my husband. I didn't know who to expect."

"You seem disappointed?" Phil questioned. "I had to be your husband, to be allowed entry."

Grasping her arm, he directed her to the main room. The doors of the balcony were open to the lake below. For moments they stood silently and watched the docks as yachts came and went. The hum of people below filled the silence as the sun made its way toward the Alps elongating the shadows below.

Claire's mind tried unsuccessfully to prioritize her myriad of thoughts. After a time, Phil's arm surrounded her shoulders. She turned toward him; her words harsh, "The concierge is gone. The show is over."

He removed his arm. "Did you complete your transaction?"

"I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I had to get to you. I'm scheduled to return to the United States early tomorrow morning. I have an appointment with the ICPD. They want to discuss the disappearance of a woman I was hired to trail." His eyes twinkled. "You know, there is a 100 thousand dollar reward!"

"So you're here to turn me in?"

His hazel eyes closed, jaws clenched, and head shook. "No, Claire, I'm here to make sure you completed your little endeavor at the financial institution today and to set up a meeting to move you to your permanent residence. Where will that be?"

Claire's neck straightened. She walked onto the balcony and peered over the wrought iron rail. Phil followed closely behind. His words were a mere whisper against the sounds of the blossoming nightlife below. "You know, the last time I followed you on to a balcony, you played me for a fool. Is that your intent tonight?"

Claire turned toward him. "You know it isn't. Things have changed."

"Some things."

"In San Antonio, I was protecting someone."

"In San Antonio, you out smarted me. I can't tell you how much that impressed me." He stepped closer. "Until that trip." His breath bathed her cheeks. "I had preconceived ideas about you."

Claire stood her ground and looked up into his eyes. "Preconceived?"

His gaze searched her contact covered eyes. "I researched you, you know?" She didn't answer. "From the beginning of my assignment with Mr. Rawlings, I read all about *Claire Rawlings Nichols* and made assessments based on that research. I predetermined you to be this woman who tried to kill her multibillion dollar husband: a gold-digger. I assumed he hired me to keep an eye on you, to let him know if you were getting close. I assumed he was

afraid you might try it again, but then I saw you for the first time; you were walking down that street in Palo Alto. The wind was blowing your hair.” He reached out, removed the dark wig, and loosened strands of her once again chestnut hair from the confines of the hair pins. She shook her head, allowing the trusses to fall free. “I knew Mr. Rawlings wanted you, not because he was afraid. He wanted *you*. His insistence at knowing your every move proved he wasn’t willing to give you up. Then, you tricked me in San Antonio.”

He stepped away. Slowly, Phil settled at the wrought iron table, leaving Claire against the rail as the glow of the setting sun framed her beautiful face. She smiled at his reference as he went on, “I learned that week that you were so much more than a beautiful woman. You’re smart, strong, sneaky, and conniving.”

“If I recall, you called me a *bitch*.”

A grin filled his face. “I assure you, it was meant as a compliment. I find those qualities very endearing.” He leaned forward. “I immediately became enthralled. From that moment, I’ve fought an intense desire to have you for myself.”

Claire lowered her eyes. Although she didn’t want to encourage him, she needed his help. “Thank you,” she said demurely.

“For what?”

“For all you’ve done.”

His head tilted sideways, questioning her.

She went on, “Thank you, for your kind note in San Diego, for saving my life in Palo Alto, and for wasting your talents babysitting me for months on end.”

“Clair... *Isabelle*,” he corrected. “I wish I could’ve been there sooner, in Palo Alto.”

Her smile turned bashful; she walked back into the suite. Phil rose and followed her within. “You, Harry, Tony, and the security guy all saved me.” She turned her intense gaze on him. “Right now, I’m nervous. Phil, I have so many questions. Things aren’t adding up.” His gaze stopped her. She needed to collect her thoughts. Exhaling, she said, “I’m going to go get these damn contacts out. Help yourself to the bar.”

Phil smiled. “Good, I like your eyes much better green.” He turned and walked toward the highboy containing bottles of fine liquors. Phil poured himself two fingers of Cognac as Claire disappeared into the bedroom.

When she returned, wearing a casual pair of yoga pants, a t-shirt, and no contacts, she saw Phil’s intense glower. As their eyes met, he said, “I’ve watched both of you.” He finished the Cognac and added more to his glass. “I realize this whole thing is to hurt your ex-husband.” He shrugged. “Which could work out well for me, but I have to say, I’ve watched a lot of people. Love and hate are both strong emotions. You’ve sacrificed everyone you hold

dear to hurt Anthony Rawlings. You could've gone on living in California. The governor of Iowa wiped your record clean, yet your anger, your crusade, was continually met by him. You told me it was a game to him. I think it was a game to both of you: a real life chess game. Every move you made he countered. In order to get his king, you sacrificed your queen. A bold move. One I believe will work, but at what cost?"

Claire stood dumbfounded. She didn't understand Phil's words. "What are you saying? You think I'm here to hurt Tony?"

Phil swallowed the remaining contents of his tumbler. "That's what Ms. London said. She said you wanted away from him. You were afraid to leave him, of what he'd do... so this was the plan." Claire tried to follow. "Pretty creative; you exploited Mr. Rawlings' obsession with you, his Achilles heel, to penetrate his invincibility."

Claire didn't speak, she couldn't. Her mind swirled as the cyclone of thoughts became a category five hurricane. Phil took her silence as an invitation to continue his notion. "I read your theories of retaliation, for sins of past generations. I'm not saying they aren't true. Nonetheless, don't you find it odd? The only person who continues to survive is you."

Claire stuttered, "You-you read my theories? Where?"

"On your laptop. Of course."

Claire involuntarily took two steps backward. Her legs hit the sofa, and she crumbled into the soft cushions. "You found my laptop?"

"Yes, the night you were attacked. It was in Patrick Chester's hotel room."

Her eyes flashed. "And you gave it to Tony?"

He shrugged as he poured another two fingers. "I tried. He was preoccupied, with you. Actually, he was in the air when I found it. I reached Ms. London instead. She's the one who told me your plan; very ingenious." He tipped his glass in Claire's direction.

Claire realized the liquor was helping his honesty. "What *exactly* did she say?"

"She told me to bring it to Iowa; I did. You were still in the hospital."

"So, Tony never got the laptop?"

"She told me she'd give it to him. He contacted me after you woke. He told me you were going to Iowa, and my job was done. He wasn't happy with me. I think he blamed me for Patrick Chester getting to you. Honestly, I don't think we ever discussed the laptop." Phil cocked his head to one side. "Your ex can be difficult."

She lowered her head near her knees; the fullness of her mid-section restricted her motion. She straightened. "Yes, a very ingenious plan; however, I can't take credit."

Claire leaned toward Phil. "You told me before, you work for money. Who's paying you now?"

“You. Ms. London gave me the starter money, but you’re paying me for everything else. Did your transaction work?”

“Are you still reporting to her?”

“No, not since I told her you were out of the U.S. She didn’t want to know more—*plausible deniability*.”

Claire pointed to the house phone. “Would you call for some dinner? I have many questions and would prefer to not spend this evening in public.” She softened her tone. “If that’s all right with my *husband*?”

Phil smiled. “That’s fine; I enjoy the privacy.”

Claire smiled a tired smile. She was suddenly exhausted, mentally and physically drained.

After their dinner arrived, Phil and Claire settled onto the wrought iron table on the balcony. She needed more answers before she could decide her future or that of her child’s. Their discussion continued as the shadows turned to twilight and darkness prevailed. Though sitting in the center of nature’s beauty, Geneva’s abundant artificial radiance impeded the stars. Manufactured glitter extended everywhere, even onto Lake Geneva as the reflection added illumination to the night.

Phil informed Claire, “Due to your family’s insistence, Mr. Rawlings is currently being pursued by the police and media as a *person of interest* in your disappearance.”

Claire frowned. “That wasn’t supposed to happen. If anyone should be considered a *person of interest*, it should be the person who sent me the scary things and tried to run Clay off the road.”

Phil looked at Claire quizzically. “Well, that would make it difficult for me to help you, then. Wouldn’t it?”

Her hand suddenly trembled as she sat her water glass upon the table and stared. “What are you saying?”

Phil saw Claire’s sudden fear and casually covered her hand. “I never intended to hurt you.”

Her eyes widened as she retrieved her hand. “I don’t understand?”

“Claire, Ms. London said you were involved. It all paved the way to this escape. I would never have sent those awful packages or pushed your car if I didn’t think you were behind it.”

“Did Ms. London explain my plan when you delivered the laptop?”

“Well, afterwards. I received text messages telling me to travel around and mail different things. She was very specific about what to do.” Claire’s complexion paled as she listened to Catherine’s complex scheme, one that reduced both her and Tony to pawns in the ongoing game of chess.

“So, you had no intentions of hurting me or my baby?”

Wrinkles surrounded Phil’s hazel eyes. “I work for money; however, I believe I’ve already revealed my true feelings on this subject...” His

eyebrows rose. "...in San Diego?"

Claire held her breath.

He once again covered her hand. "I'd never hurt you."

She exhaled. Patrick Chester didn't have an accomplice. The sudden relief was intoxicating. Her expression mellowed. Instantaneously, the relief evaporated. There was another culprit—one Claire would have willingly allowed total access to her child. The thought nauseated her. Could Catherine have made Nathaniel the same promise Tony made to him?

If she did, now that she no longer needed Tony to keep Patrick Chester silent, wasn't Tony also a child, of a child? After all, Samuel helped convict Nathaniel. Catherine killed Samuel. Tony is Samuel's son. Everything was coming together.

Claire leaned closer. With their faces only inches apart, she whispered, "Phil, thank you."

"For what?"

"For what you're about to do. I promise, I'll make it worth your while."

His hazel eyes questioned, "The next step is getting you settled."

Claire turned her hand palm up and closed her fingers around his. She inhaled and exhaled as a devious smile overtook her face. "Senior Alexander, let's enjoy the beautiful view and discuss the *next step*."



HER PLAN SHOCKED, surprised, and disappointed Phil. She truly was much smarter than he'd initially given her credit. Now with the fortune she'd successfully acquired, the combination was impressive, and although his role was different than what he'd hoped, he was more than willing to accommodate.

Phil said, "I don't think you should stay here too long. Where do you want to go?"

With her tired eyes lingering on the vista before her, she thoughtfully replied, "Back to Italy, I've been thinking about Venice. I've never been."

"Then let's decide on a hotel. I'll meet you there in a week. By that time, I should have more information and some permanent destinations for you. Tell me your requirements again."

Claire shifted and met his expectant gaze. "You're worried about my plan, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'll feel better when you're settled and safe."

"Thank you. It's nice to know someone's worried about me." She said as she sipped her iced water.

"There're many people back in the states worried about you."



CLAIRE SAT TALL, her expression strong. She couldn't allow herself to think about those people, not yet. Now that she knew the truth. *She* was the one putting them through hell, not Tony, not Catherine. Nevertheless, it was Catherine's impending hell that forced her moves. Placing her hand on her mid-section, she knew winning this game was truly the difference between life and death.

If she was a child of a child, and Tony was a child of a child. Their baby was doubly doomed.

Her voice held no hint of emotion. "I like tropical, secluded, and remote. I truly don't care about amenities. Just give me warmth, water, and sunshine." She gazed over Lake Geneva and turned back to Phil. "And medical care needs to be accessible."

Claire looked at her watch, 12:02 AM. She glanced to Phil, and said, "I'm going to do it."

He nodded. "It's a little after 5:00 PM there, Wednesday evening. He may not be in his office."

"I have to try." Claire rose and went into the suite. Her disposable international phone was on the table. She reached for it and called information in Iowa City. "I need the office number for the Prosecutor for Iowa City, please." Moments later, she continued, "I would like to speak to Marcus Evergreen. I'm sure he'll talk with me. Tell him it's an *out of work weather girl*." Claire waited a moment and then smiled at Phil as her heartbeat quickened.

For the first time, she could see the entire game board. A few more moves and her opponent would be in *check*. Her call was being forwarded.

The voice came through the receiver, "Hello? This is Marcus Evergreen."

"Mr. Evergreen, I was wondering if perhaps this time you'd be willing to listen to the truth?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered. The trick is to discover them.

—Gallolao

TONY SETTLED INTO his plush leather chair. Perhaps because of the chaos happening around him or his desire to be away from people, his home office was the only place he could truly concentrate. He made daily appearances at his Iowa City office, but all traveling had been postponed, indefinitely. So far, none of the thousands of tips produced any clues into Claire's disappearance. Tony rubbed his temples; it was as if she evaporated into thin air... like every hope or dream he'd ever had for his future.

He didn't want to believe she chose to leave him, yet on another level, he did. If she left of her own free will, she was safe. Their baby was safe. If, as he suspected, she'd been lured away and was at the hands of some maniac, her future and that of their baby's were unknown.

With each passing day, doubts infiltrated his mind. If Claire left of her own free will, had any of the past four months been real? She'd accepted his ring. He told her every day how much he loved her. Had it all been a charade? Did she have her own agenda of revenge for his past sins? Tony didn't want to think so. He just didn't know.

Tony scanned his emails. Nothing caught his attention. He didn't care anymore. Thankfully, he had Tim, Tom, and Brent. For all practical purposes, Tim was running Rawlings Industries. Brent and Tom were busy with company matters as well as Tony's personal matters. The Vandersols were taking every opportunity to declare Tony's guilt to the world. Hell, at this point he'd turn himself in, if it would bring Claire home.

The large office doors opened. Catherine entered. "I came to check on you."

“I’m fine.” His furrowed brow and the dark circles under his deep wrinkled eyes said otherwise.

“Anton, I’m sorry I didn’t try to stop her.”

Tony shook his head. “I’m not having this discussion with you.”

“But the Vandersols? If they have their way, you will be taken in on questioning, soon.”

“They’re vindictive idiots. The prosecutor will see through them.”

“Yes. But if her memoirs are published, *it appears...*”

Tony’s eyes pierced. “What did you say?”

Catherine straightened her neck. “I said, if Claire’s memoirs are published, the world will know about your predisposition toward violence.”

His eyes darkened with each word. “Catherine, you know I had nothing to do with her disappearance.”

She sat as her tone mellowed. “I do, but I understand the Vandersol’s concern.”

Tony’s attention turned toward his emails. One caught his attention. He clicked and read. According to his informant, Sophia had returned to Provincetown following her parents’ funeral. Under normal circumstances, he would have attended their funeral. These, however, were anything but normal. He looked back to Catherine.

“You judge me? You haven’t given a damn about your daughter in thirty plus years.”

Catherine sat straighter. “I’ll have that discussion with you in another thirty years, when you haven’t had contact with your child; then we can discuss similarities.”

His hand hit his desk. The pen set and wireless mouse helplessly jumped. “I’ve told you your daughter lost her adoptive parents, yet you don’t give a damn!”

She leaned toward him, questioning, “Did you?”

“Of course not!” His eyebrows rose. “Did you?”

“You know I don’t even know her name.”

This was only their second open conversation on Sophia, Catherine’s daughter.

“I doubt there’s anything in this house you don’t know. Her information is and always has been, in my private files.”

Catherine exhaled. “How did it happen? How did her parents die?”

“I’m not sure.” Tony shrugged. “Her adoptive father was beginning to show signs of dementia. He was driving.”



CATHERINE'S EYES CLOSED. *Dementia...* her thoughts immediately went to Sharron Rawls. "How bad?" Her voice was but a whisper.

Tony sat straighter. "He wasn't like grandmother. Not yet."

"Then she's better off. At least she didn't need to witness..."

Tony closed his eyes. "Catherine, she could use a parent."

Her gray eyes stared; the silence grew. Finally, she replied, "*Mr. Rawlings,* I'm sure you will do whatever *you* feel is best. I've made my feelings clear." She stood and started toward the door. Suddenly she turned back toward the desk. "Mr. Evergreen called, again. He wants to speak with you in person."



TONY TURNED FROM Catherine back to the computer screen. The NASDEQ indicator for Rawlings Industries displayed the stock's continued downward spiral. It didn't matter that he wasn't responsible for Claire's disappearance. The effects of the Vandersol's claims were also being felt on the Dow Jones. He checked his watch. At least the weekend would stall the continued drop. There were only a few more minutes until the end of Friday's trading session. The fun would resume again on Monday.

He picked up the telephone. "Hello, this is Anthony Rawlings. I'd like to speak to Marcus Evergreen." "I see." "Please inform him I have business taking me out of town for a few days." "Provincetown, Massachusetts." "I should be back by Monday." "Thank you."

Next, he used his iPhone and called Eric. "Get the plane ready. I'm leaving for Provincetown in a few hours."



SOPHIA SHIVERED AS she walked into her art studio. After record setting heat over the summer, she couldn't believe the coolness of the autumn. She considered turning on the furnace to remove the cool dampness from the air and from her art.

Looking out the front windows, she stared past the sidewalk full of Saturday tourists at the low clouds. She came to her studio to get out of the cottage. With Derek on his way back to Taiwan to attend a few unavoidable meetings, she needed a reprieve from life's recent dealings. Next week, they'd be back together in California.

Sophia sighed as she set her purse in the back room. There were so many things to do regarding her parents' estate. Never had she imagined they'd incurred so much debt helping with her dreams. Thankfully, due to her recent

sales, she could settle their accounts. She wondered why they never said anything. No wonder they wouldn't consider hiring someone to help with Pop. Sophia's heart ached with *what-ifs*. Their love for her took everything, even their lives. Over the last few days, Derek repeatedly tried to convince Sophia they wouldn't have wanted it any other way; she hoped and prayed he was right.

The bell pulled Sophia from her sad spiral. Damn, she meant to lock the front door. It wasn't that she was afraid. This was a great town. She just wanted some quiet time alone.

As she stepped into the studio, the man at the counter looked familiar. Maybe he'd been at a gallery event, or she'd seen him on TV. She couldn't be sure, but his eyes were so dark and mesmerizing. "I'm sorry; I'm not open today. I just forgot to lock the door," Sophia said as she approached Tony.

"That is all right. I can come back," Tony said with an agreeable smile. "It's just that I travel a lot and happened to be in town. A friend of mine told me about your gallery. He was here a week or so ago and bought three pieces. I'm very interested in nature, and he said you have a wonderful selection."

Sophia exhaled and smiled. Of course, talk of her art could lift the dark cloud that held her hostage. "Are you a friend of Jackson Wilson?" Tony's smile widened as he nodded. She continued, "He's one of my biggest fans."

"I don't get this way often. Are you sure you couldn't give me a speed tour? By the way, my name is Anthony, Anthony Rawlings."

Sophia stuck out her hand. "Where are my manners? I'm so sorry. My name is Sophia, Sophia Burke. I would be happy to give you a tour." She couldn't help looking at those eyes.

"With one condition." Anthony said, his eyes shining. "You let me buy you dinner and a drink after the tour."

Sophia gently took the man's elbow and led him around the studio. After a few minutes of enjoying his charm, she decided, *why not? After the last two weeks, what harm could one dinner and a drink do—after all; a new investor could help with her parents' debt.*

Sophia's mind moved slowly with recent events; however, when the word *investor* came to her, she recognized the name of the man beside her. "Rawlings?" She stepped back. "Are you the Anthony Rawlings, as in Rawlings Industries and Shedis-tics?"

He grinned. "The one and only."

She tried to hide her shock. "I'm not sure if you know this... I mean you have thousands of employees, but my husband works for you at Shedis-tics."

Tony turned toward the painting. "This is lovely. What was your inspiration?"

Sophia tried to concentrate, but the mountains were from memory. "The inspiration was a mountain range in Geneva, Switzerland. It's a beautiful

place. Have you ever been?"

He nodded. Sophia saw sadness behind those mesmerizing eyes. "Mr. Rawlings, is everything all right?" She'd been so wrapped up in her own personal tragedy she hadn't been following the news.

His eyes refocused on her. "I'd like to purchase this."

She never remembered making an easier sale. "You don't have to do that, just because we identified our connection."

"Oh, Mrs. Burke, there's so much more. Could we possibly discuss it all over dinner?"

Sophia looked at her watch. "It's 10:00 AM."

He smiled. "Then lunch? Could I meet you at the Bistro at the top of Bradford Street, say 1:00 PM?"

"They don't serve meals until after 5:30 PM."

Tony exhaled. "Well, I'm not on my usual game. I'm staying at the Inn at Crown Pointe, so once again... dinner... say 6:00 PM?"

"Do you want to know the price of the painting?"

"You can tell me during dinner. I'll write you a check." He smiled. "If you think I'm good for it?"

Despite the absurdity of this encounter, Derek had said good things about Anthony Rawlings. "I accept. I'll see you at 6:00 PM."

Tony bowed gallantly. "Mrs. Burke, it's a pleasure to finally speak with you in person. I look forward to our talk."

She watched as he walked into the cool autumn morning. *Mmm, tonight's conversation with Derek will be interesting*, she thought as the bell on the door jingled signifying Mr. Rawlings' exit. Sophia quickly walked toward the handle and secured the lock. She'd had enough odd visits for one day.



TONY PACED THE confines of his executive suite, thinking about Sophia. He wondered what she'd be like if she'd been raised a Rawls, instead of a Rossi. In actuality, she was a London; however, that was irrelevant.

Nathaniel Rawls wanted to bring Sophia into the family as soon as he found her. At first, Tony wasn't sure; although, he never dared voice his opinion to his grandfather, yet over time, as Nathaniel's intention remained steadfast, Anton agreed. With Sophia's talent, an affluent education and influence, supported by the Rawls' finances, could have propelled Sophia beyond her current meager status.

Although Sophia's adoption was completely legal, the true reason Nathaniel's desire never materialized was Marie/Catherine. Even in 2013, she didn't want to know or even have knowledge of her daughter. As far as Tony

knew, Catherine didn't know Sophia's name, her occupation, anything...

He believed. Catherine knew he knew. Tony even suspected Catherine knew he'd been watching over her daughter. Until the death of Sophia's adoptive parents, they'd never discussed it. Tony wasn't sure how to approach the subject, especially now with Sophia married into a line connected to Jonathon Burke, yet he reasoned, Catherine was supportive of him and Claire; perhaps she could also be supportive of Sophia's choice.

Heaven knows, Tony didn't approve of Derek Burke—initially; however, over time the man passed every test Tony posed. Tony wanted to be sure Derek was the right person. After three years of enticements, Derek and Sophia were still together.

Tony thought pensively about Claire. If only he could say the same about them.

The knock at the door startled him. His original thought to ignore it evaporated as the rapping grew louder. "Mr. Rawlings, open the door." He stared toward the wooden barrier. "Mr. Rawlings, this is the FBI. If you don't open the door, we have a member of the Inn's staff present to open it."

His dark eyes stared as he pulled the door toward him. "FBI... is this about Claire?"

A man in a dark suit presented a badge. "Yes, sir."

"Have you found her?"

"Mr. Rawlings, we need to take you in for questioning."

EPILOGUE

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.
—Mahtma Gandhi

C LAIRE ROLLED ON the large bed, relishing the soft sheets against her skin. Smiling, she reached for the man whose warmth filled her days and nights. Instead, her touch met cool satin. Lingering in her cocoon, she enjoyed the ceiling fan's gentle breeze as it moved the humid air around the grand bedroom. When she closed her eyes, the scent of his cologne permeated her senses. Beyond her haven, she heard the sounds of morning: birds singing their morning wake-up songs and the ever present surf.

Forcing herself from the heavenly bubble, she reached for her robe and walked toward the veranda. A veil of tropical vegetation filtered the sun's sultry penetration. Stepping around the fragrant flowers and large lush leaves, she took in the marvelous view. Even after over two months, it still took her breath away. Leaning against the folding wall, one that, due to her instance, remained mostly open allowing the indoors to be outdoors; she relished the blue. Truly, *blue* couldn't describe the panorama: endless blue sky with wisps of white filled the space above the horizon. Below the horizon, Crayola would be at a loss to describe the shades. On most mornings, turquoise dominated. Sometimes, if the sun was just right, the waves sparkled florescent. Farther out, away from the shore and her paradise, the waters darkened. The blue became indigo, purple or gray, often reminding her of the fog covered mountains near Palo Alto.

Wearing a white bikini and white lace cover, she made her way to the front lanai. As her bare feet padded across the smooth bamboo floor, Madeline's friendly rich voice brought her to present. "Madame el, may I bring you tea?"

Claire smiled. "Yes, Madeline, thank you, but please, no food... I'm not hungry." The baby's increased growth reduced her stomach to a mere fraction

of its old size that she filled so easily these days.

Madeline and Francis were brought to this island paradise thirty-five years ago by their wealthy employer. He died, but they stayed. Since that time, they've worked and maintained this heavenly home, on the other side of the world from their native Haiti, for multiple owners. When Claire purchased the paradise retreat, the couple came as part of the package. They were invaluable, especially during the first few weeks while she was alone.

She couldn't imagine being there without them.

They did everything and anything to make Claire feel welcome and safe. Madeline's dark, radiant skin and cheerful smile brightened every room. She absolutely glistened when Francis was near. Being married for over forty years and unable to have children themselves, they have tirelessly cared for family after family. As a matter of fact, when they first learned the estate, the island, the retreat, was purchased by a single female, they tried unsuccessfully to hide their disappointment; however, as soon as Madeline saw Claire's mid-section, she praised God for giving them another child to tend.

Within days, customary staff—lady of the house, protocol was forgotten. Claire spent hours with Madeline in the state of the art kitchen, learning to cook foods she'd never previously tried. She also spent time with Francis, caring for the tropical gardens and fruit trees. The three would sit down together and eat. To Madeline's insistence, each meal began with a prayer. It was a ritual Claire hadn't practiced since she was young. After so much change and discord in her life, she's found it comforting.

Of course, as is always true, things change. Claire was no longer alone. It took some time for her husband to make his way to their paradise. Too many disappearances at once would add to the speculations of critics. Since his arrival, Madeline and Francis stepped back, some. Claire refused to allow them to be lost to archaic protocol. They may be her employees, but they were also her friends. With Claire's insistence, all four of them sit together for midday meal. Although breakfast remained a relaxed time for Claire, it was usually a rush for Francis and Madeline; they had things to do. Claire's husband's schedule varied, sometimes he joined her for coffee and breakfast, and sometimes he went out and about. He liked exploring the area, reading the internet news, or taking the boat to the local village center. Evening meals were reserved for the two of them. After all, they were officially newlyweds and as such, needed time alone.

"No, Madame el, you must eat. I'll bring you muffins and fresh fruit."

Claire shook her head as arguing would be pointless.

At the early hour, the lush vegetation entwined above the lanai shaded the lounge chairs near the pool. Claire settled into the cushioned seat, elevated her feet, turned on her iPad, and waited for the daily news to load. She may be thousands and thousands of miles away, but technology made the world a

smaller place. Events across the globe would soon be as visible, as if she were on the same continent.

It wasn't the first story to appear on her homepage, but her own picture immediately caught Claire's attention. She clicked and read the title:

Family Files Charges against Iowa City Police Department, Prosecutor, and Anthony Rawlings.

Shaking her head, Claire read:

Associated Press- John and Emily Vandersol have filed formal charges against the Iowa City Police Department, Marcus Evergreen, I.C. Prosecutor, and Anthony Rawlings (*in absentia*).

Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol have requested a hearing based on evidence discovered at the home of Anthony Rawlings. The request states the evidence, currently undisclosed, is sufficient to establish probable cause against Anthony Rawlings. The Vandersols also charge Mr. Rawlings with extortion. "Anyone else would be sitting in jail. It's only because of his wealth and influence that ICPD and Mr. Evergreen have not filed charges. Their delay is corruption." (Another of the many charges listed). The Vandersols claim the prosecutor and police department worked together to protect Anthony Rawlings. In doing so, the ICPD jeopardized the investigation of Ms. Claire Nichols' disappearance. Mrs. Vandersol also charged Mr. Rawlings (*in absentia*) with the disappearance and possible death of her unborn niece or nephew.

Claire's hand rubbed her very large mid-section. Now in her thirty-fifth week, she smiled knowing no harm had come to her unborn child. She honestly didn't believe that would be the case if she'd remained at Catherine's disposal. She continued reading:

Ms. Nichols was last seen September 4, 2013. Mr. Anthony Rawlings disappeared after his private plane made an emergency landing in the

Appalachian Mountains, September 21, 2013. The FBI will not confirm or deny the survival of Mr. Rawlings following this incident. The FBI refused additional comments claiming an ongoing investigation. Currently, no charges have been filed.

Rawlings Industries is currently operating with a temporary CEO and the same Board of Directors. It has been speculated that the pending charges will force the SEC to investigate Rawlings Industries. Since September the share price has dropped from \$142.37 to \$86.84 at last call.

Despite her reading material, when Claire realized she'd eaten all of Madeline's food, a smile appeared on her face.

Madeline's voice came above the sound of surf, "Madame el, may I get you more tea or perhaps some water?"

"Madeline, I'd love some water. It's getting hotter by the minute."

"Then perhaps you should be in the water?" The rich, husky voice came from behind. She couldn't see the handsome source, yet instantaneously her neck tensed and goose bumps appeared on her arms and legs. It amazed Claire how something as benign as a voice could continue to incite such a visceral response.

Madeline saw Claire's reaction and laughed. Francis and Madeline wanted Claire to be happy. It didn't take them long to realize this man was exactly what their employer needed. Madeline's laugh made Claire giggle.

Claire loved Madeline's laugh, so deep and rich, just like her voice. "Madame el, I will bring you some water, and Monsieur?"

"I would like some coffee please, Madeline?" He bowed toward the woman.

She laughed at his gesture. "Why, of course. I'll bring it out soon." With that, she disappeared, leaving the lady and gentleman of the house alone.

Her husband reached for Claire's shoulder and gently massaged. While the sound of his voice instigated chills, the touch of his hand sent her body into mayhem. It hadn't changed; she hoped it never would.



CATHERINE SAT AT Tony's grand desk. It wasn't like he'd be sitting there anytime soon. Thanks to his kind provisions in his absence, Catherine Marie London was listed as executor of Anthony Rawlings' estate and anything related to it. The title came with a nice trust fund. That money plus the large sum she'd accumulated over the years left her more than financially solvent.

It took almost twenty-five years, but Marie had finally fulfilled

Nathaniel's desire. She was finally the lady of the manor. Maybe her name wasn't Rawls, but that didn't matter. Nathaniel told her many times how he wanted her to live, and it wasn't as Anton's housekeeper. Catherine Marie leaned back against the plush leather and scanned the grand office. There was no doubt; the room was much more regal from this perspective.

Catherine opened the drawer on the lower right to inspect Anton's private files. She fingered the tabs... in this paperless world it surprised her he'd kept these printed documents. Thankfully, the ICPD hadn't felt the need to confiscate them as evidence.

She eyed the scribed names. There were so many. How could she figure out which one was her daughter? Catherine saw her own name. Maybe there was a clue in there. When she opened the file, she feared her heart would stop pumping. The writing wasn't Anton's. Catherine knew his writing well enough to duplicate it easily. This writing was Nathaniel's.

Scribbled in the margin of a contract was the name *Sophia Rossi*. Catherine went through the drawer again. The only Sophia was *Sophia Burke*. Suddenly, she no longer remembered her husband's love, she remembered his vendetta. *Burke?* *Burke?* There was no way *her* daughter could be connected to Jonathon Burke.

Catherine removed the *Sophia Burke* file and opened the folder. Above the typed name Sophia Rossi, was the scribbled name *Sophia Rossi Burke*... Catherine searched the pages. There was a plethora of outdated information. Nonetheless, written above the text on the second page was a telephone number. Catherine couldn't resist. She used the blocked house phone.



DEREK ANSWERED HIS wife's cell phone. The past few weeks were too much. She wasn't up for solicitors or blocked numbers. "Hello?"



CATHERINE HESITATED, QUESTIONING the correctness of the number. She expected a woman's voice. "I'm sorry, I'm looking for the beautiful baby girl I was forced to give away thirty-three years ago."



DEREK LISTENED. SOPHIA had said she didn't want to know her birth parents. Nevertheless, this may be their only chance to learn the truth. "I'm sorry; my

wife is indisposed right now. She's had a difficult few weeks."



"YES, THAT'S THE reason I'm calling. I never wanted to interfere with her and her adoptive parents. But now..." Catherine wasn't sure how to finish that sentence. *Now she was lonely and wanted to at least meet her daughter? Now she thought her daughter might be more open to learning about her birth mother? Now she had nothing better to do...*

Thankfully, she didn't need to finish the sentence. The man interjected, "Tell me the date you gave birth."

Catherine sat taller. Who was this man demanding information? She sure as hell wasn't intimidated. She'd loved Nathaniel Rawls and outlasted Anton Rawls... this man was nothing in comparison. However, she answered, "July 19, 1980."

Catherine heard muffled voices; then a woman's voice, "Please, don't call again. My parents are dead. I don't know you."

Marie sat straighter. Of course she deserved this response. Nonetheless, part of reasoned maybe she could fill a void left by the death of her daughter's adoptive parents. If nothing else, she could look out for the young woman from afar, as Anton and Nathaniel had done. "I'm sorry, I won't call you again."

Resolutely, the young woman swallowed her emotions, and continued, "Wait, if you could give me your number, I'll think about it. Then, when I'm ready I can call you."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief... this was more than she'd expected. "Yes, of course."

A man's voice came back through the receiver, "You may give me the number. When my wife is ready, *if* she is ready, she will call you. Please do not call her phone again."

Catherine heard her daughter's sobs in the background and gave the number of a disposable phone to her son-in-law. After he repeated the number, he disconnected the line.

Catherine grinned. She'd found her daughter. Her daughter was married—to a man named Burke. She needed more information. That was all right, as before, she had the time, and without a doubt, Catherine was up for a new challenge.

VOLUME THREE

CONVICTED

Book #3 of the bestselling Consequences series
By:
ALEATHA ROMIG

Convicted

You must stick to your conviction, but be ready to abandon your assumptions.
—Denis Waitley

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Be brave... and learn how with the TRUTH there are CONSEQUENCES... CONVICTED!

DISCLAIMER

This is the third book in the CONSEQUENCES Series. It's recommended to read them in order. The CONSEQUENCES series contains adult dark content. Although excessive use of description and detail are not used, the content contains innuendos of kidnapping, rape, and abuse—physical and mental. If you're unable to read this material, please do not purchase. If can enter this world of fiction, welcome aboard and enjoy the ride!

CHAPTER ONE

The evil you create will ultimately destroy, you cannot escape the consequences of your actions.

—Leon Brown

THE WOMAN STOOD silently, concealed within the shadows of the tall trees. With the Iowa wind rustling leaves above her head, she watched in fascination as children ran around the well-kept playground. Although many youngsters vied for position on the ladders and ramps, her attention centered on the beautiful, dark-haired little girl and blonde-headed little boy playing in the sandbox. She'd seen the children on numerous occasions, always from a distance. She knew the little girl was almost two and a half years old and the little boy was almost two years old. Steeling her shoulders, she decided today was the day she'd finally voice her appeal, face the barrier to her goal, and make her request known.

The children wouldn't know who she was or why she was there. There was no doubt, the woman with the eagle eyes of a mother and aunt, the woman watching the children's every move, wouldn't only know her, she wouldn't hesitate to send her away or call the authorities.

Inhaling deeply, New York Times bestselling author Meredith Banks stepped from the shadows into the sunlight. As the proximity of her goal increased, so did her anxiety. This wouldn't be easy. Emily Vandersol had made it crystal clear that she didn't want the children exposed to the media circus. That circus had already exposed too many family secrets—secrets which, for their sake, would've been better left hidden.

As Meredith neared the park bench, Emily's ever-present scan of the crowd zeroed in on her, and their eyes met. Before Emily could protest, Meredith rushed to the park bench and touched Emily's sleeve. "Emily, please let me speak. Please... let me finish their story."

Momentarily looking away from the children, Emily stared toward

Meredith, her green eyes burned with emotion. Her back straightened as her hushed words overflowed with intended harshness. “You’re *not* allowed to be this close to me or to her. I have a restraining order against *all* members of the press.”

“I know, but I’m not just the press. I’m Claire’s friend. I was.” Meredith added thoughtfully. “Please, I want the world to know the rest of their story.”

Emily leaned closer as her perturbed tone hardened. “Don’t you think you’ve told *enough*? One day, I’m going to have to explain your book to her. Don’t you think you’ve done enough damage? Or maybe it’s just the money you want. I’m sure revealing more private information will sell more books.”

Meredith didn’t like Emily’s tone. Although she knew she deserved it, she wouldn’t let it stop her quest. After all, engaging Claire’s sister in any conversation was more than she’d accomplished in the past. “I hope you know this isn’t about selling books. Claire approached *me* with her story. We had an agreement, and I followed through. I’m not denying that her story’s made me a fortune. What do you want me to say? I’ll donate all proceeds from the rest of their story to Nichol? I’d gladly do that, but we both know she isn’t lacking for money.”

Emily looked up as the dark-haired little girl came running toward them. Undaunted by the visitor, Nichol spoke loud and clear, “Momma.” Shaking her little head, she corrected, “I mean, Aunt Em, Mikey’s not sharing. I want my...”

Meredith stared, mesmerized by the young girl’s features. Her long, dark hair was pulled into two pigtails which swung side to side as she ran. Her light complexion emphasized her pink sun-kissed cheeks, and her deep brown eyes shimmered in the sunlight. Meredith recognized the intensity of the young girl’s stare, the perfect combination of her parents; however, the determination and diction in the small voice unquestionably came from her father.

This was the closest Meredith had been to Anthony and Claire’s child. With all of her heart, Meredith wanted to pull the little girl into her arms and hug her tight—anything to help make Claire’s daughter’s world a better place.

While Emily rectified the situation between the children, Meredith pondered the events that brought them all here today—the events that changed Nichol’s life forever. Meredith remembered the Claire Nichols of the past, the carefree young woman who skipped class at Valparaiso to spend the day at Wrigley Field. She recalled the woman who recounted horrific details of a life she never wanted or deserved, and she recollected the last time they met—almost three years ago.

Claire had arranged their meeting. She wanted to discuss Meredith’s first book *My Life as It Didn’t Appear*. Claire desired to stop the publication.

Momentarily, Meredith recalled Claire’s countenance: finally happy and

obviously in love. While they ate lunch in Chicago, Claire opened up, talking about her change of heart, and confessing her pregnancy. It was a leap of faith on Claire's part. Her pregnancy hadn't been publicly announced, yet during that luncheon, Claire entrusted her long-time friend with her special news. Undoubtedly, it could've been a great coup, but Meredith wouldn't leak the news. She'd done that to her friend once before, and the repercussions of that deception would haunt Meredith forever.

Unfortunately, the book was beyond Meredith's influence; it was in the hands of a publisher with specific instructions. Claire offered any amount of money to hide the story—forever. She worried that someday her child would learn the truth behind her parents' meeting, and Claire didn't want that to happen.

Meredith promised Claire she'd try. And she did.

Then, less than a month later, Claire disappeared. The disclosure clause of their contract went into motion. Publication was imminent. Meredith's efforts, along with a multitude of Rawlings' attorneys, were unable to keep the book from being published. Upon publication, *My Life as it Didn't Appear* entered the bestseller list and has broken records ever since.

Meredith hoped that by continuing their story, telling the world the rest of their saga, maybe—just maybe—someday Nichol would understand.

Emily's voice brought Meredith back to present. "The answer is *no*, and if you release any information about Nichol, I'll have you fined, and with my husband's help—arrested."

"I'm not here to expose Nichol," Meredith continued. "I'm here because I want to talk to Claire. The people at the Everwood facility said all visitors must be approved by you; therefore, I'm asking for your permission."

Emily sat taller. "Ms. Banks, I'm not sure what part of this conversation you're not hearing or comprehending, but the answer is *no*." Before Meredith could respond, Emily continued, "Besides, it wouldn't do you any good. Claire can't tell you her story. She can't answer your questions."

"Then let me just talk with her."

"Don't you understand? She can't *talk* to anyone."

"The staff didn't say visitors were restricted due to her condition. They said they're restricted due to your insistence."

"Ms. Banks, so help me God, if I read about this in a news release, I'll come after you myself. Do you understand?"

Meredith nodded and replied, "I want to help Claire. I truly do. I want to expose the truth so the world will know what happened."

Emily continued, "I'm only telling you this because my sister considered you a friend. Some of the doctors call it a psychotic break brought on by physical and mental stress. Others have said it's the result of multiple head injuries." Shaking her head, she added, "Claire hasn't spoken to *anyone* in

over two years!"

Meredith's mind swirled. She'd read about the insanity plea. She knew the history and read about the incident. Truly, if anyone had reason to be insane, it was Claire, yet Meredith hadn't considered the severity of the situation. "What do you mean?" She lowered her voice. "Claire can't talk?"

"No, not exactly, she speaks. Sometimes she carries on conversations, just not with anyone present. She doesn't know where she is or even that she has a child. Sometimes she's a child; other times she's with him. Honestly, out of context, it's difficult to tell what she's thinking at any given time."

"So, when Nichol just called you Momm—"

Emily interrupted, "Nichol knows I'm her aunt, but, sometimes, with Michael calling me Mom she forgets."

"Maybe I could help? I could talk with Claire and help bring her back?"

A tear slid down Emily's cheek as she watched the children's interaction. "If I thought there was a chance, I'd allow you access immediately, but honestly, if those of us who do visit can't reach her—if Nichol couldn't reach her"—Emily sat taller as her tone hardened—"No. Please don't come around or ask again."

"Emily, what about Mr. Rawlings?"

Emily abruptly turned toward Meredith, her tone now a resonating growl of a mother bear. "He's gone, and I will not allow anyone to mention his name around Claire or Nichol. His reign of terror over my family is done!"

"But one day—"

Emily abruptly stood, dismissing Meredith. "Goodbye, Ms. Banks. I'm taking *my* children home. If I ever see your face again or read any of this conversation, anywhere, I won't only press charges, but I'll make it my goal to see you behind bars. Good day."

Meredith nodded in understanding, remained upon the bench, and watched as Emily lifted Michael into her arms and reached for Nichol's hand. Without turning around or acknowledging their conversation, Emily held tightly to the children and walked away.

It was obvious Emily loved and cared for both children; nevertheless, Meredith questioned the fairness of Nichol's situation. If things stayed status quo, Meredith feared Nichol would never know the truth about both of her parents.

The sounds of the busy park were lost to the gentle whisper of the breeze as Meredith contemplated her own children; she couldn't imagine her life without them. She wondered about Claire, unable to imagine the emptiness and sense of loss her sorority sister must be enduring. Everything and everyone she'd ever held dear was gone. Before Meredith realized, the park blurred and tears coated her cheeks.

She'd read the news reports and knew in her heart that there was a story in

need of telling. Truly, she didn't care about the money or the fame. Her memory went to a pledge: one made a lifetime ago. She and Claire pledged sisterhood. It wasn't a blood bond like the one Claire shared with Emily. It was more; it was a commitment. Meredith refused to allow her sister to be lost forever. Somehow, she'd learn the truth.

She remembered the day, years ago, when she met Claire in San Diego. During their discussion, Meredith told her friend about a desire to tell the world the *truth* no matter the *consequences*. Perhaps Emily would choose to prosecute; however, as Meredith watched the small family disappear over the hill toward the parking lot, her mind was set. If Claire's mental health and Nichol's solace resulted in arrest, so be it. She'd rather be *convicted* for being a true sister than live her life free and allow that beautiful little girl to live uninformed.

The private mental health facility, Everwood, was as beautiful as the website boasted. It was an upscale residential mental treatment center exclusively for women located in the countryside near Cedar Rapids. On forty-eight beautiful acres it had walking paths and nature trails. Perfect for Claire.

Meredith knew Claire's initial institutionalization was the result of a legal plea. At the time of the plea, Claire had been placed in a state-operated facility. That placement was short-lived, and she was moved to this esteemed private facility with top-notch security, confidential care, and a respected staff.

As next of kin and power of attorney, Emily Vandersol had complete jurisdiction over Claire's treatment. Without Emily's permission, Meredith couldn't approach Claire in the facility's guest-accessible areas, much less Claire's private room; therefore, in order to access her sorority sister, Meredith had to devise a plan. She'd always dreamt of being an investigative journalist—now was her time.

The money she'd made from the sales of her book afforded her children the best education. Currently, that was at a respected boarding school on the East Coast. Although she hated having them so far away, that distance permitted Meredith the time and freedom she needed to learn Claire's story.

Her plan wasn't complicated. If she couldn't visit Claire as a guest, Meredith decided she'd frequent the facility as an employee. She didn't have the credentials to impersonate a therapist or doctor, but fortunately, the center was in need of kitchen staff.

A small investment to a questionable source provided Meredith with a falsified identification complete with a verifiable past work history. She wasn't sure she could remember to answer to a different name; therefore,

Meredith chose to use her husband's last name—one she rarely used. An interview and sob story later, Meredith Russel was hired by Everwood Behavioral Center. As Meredith looked in the mirror, smoothing the white cafeteria uniform, she smirked, a bit sarcastically and thought, my life's ambition is now complete. I have a minimum-wage position.

The first few days of her new job were merely research. She needed to learn the lay of the land and the ins and outs of Everwood. Almost immediately, she learned Claire was listed as *Nichols*. Claire didn't participate in group activities, group-counseling sessions, or eat in the common dining room. Meals were taken to her room, and the note on the computer indicated that on occasion, feeding assistance was required.

Apparently, Ms. Nichols sometimes went outdoors accompanied by her therapist, facility staff, or limited visitors. The first time Meredith saw Claire, her long ago sorority sister was returning from such a walk...



CLAIRE KNEW SHE loved the outdoors. She always had. The wind in her face, the smell of fresh-cut grass or newly fallen leaves, kindled warm feelings. She knew it somehow connected to her past. She didn't know how, or remember a name or a face, but something about nature brought a feeling of security. When she was led outside, she'd close her eyes, wanting to see the world as a new place. Oftentimes, flashes of a man in uniform came and went. Claire assumed these feelings and sense of safety also came from her past. Assumptions were much easier than questions.

She didn't question—anything. Claire understood her only access to the fresh breeze or the sun on her skin was when she was accompanied by another person. She didn't always know the person beside her, but she did know accessing the refreshing outside without someone else was against the rules. She knew all about rules and how to follow them. Oh, it was true that, in the past, she'd made mistakes, used poor judgment, or made poor decisions—decisions that resulted in unfavorable consequences. That's what Tony taught her: behaviors had consequences.

Claire preferred positive consequences. Yes, more than once she'd disappointed him. With each passing day, she vowed to not let him down again. After what she'd done, she wasn't sure it mattered; nonetheless, it was all she had left. She wouldn't let go. She wouldn't disappoint.

During her days, people with different faces and different voices came and went. Their words weren't real, and sometimes the food they delivered wasn't either. Oh, it looked real. She could even smell the aroma as they entered her room, but if it were real, she'd be hungry. Most of the time, she wasn't.

There were people who helped her shower, dress, and fix her hair. At first, she fought their assistance and intrusion; then with time, she chose to accept their help. In a way, it was comforting. She'd been taught the importance of maintaining appearances, and since day-to-day activities were too overwhelming, the assistance of these faceless hands helped her fulfill her responsibility.

Under no circumstance did she want to disappoint Tony. Sometimes the tears overwhelmed her. After all, she had to live with the reality; she surely disappointed him. Why else would he not make his presence known to everyone? Occasionally, people would tell her he was gone. Claire knew better.

She knew he was there. Even if the faceless people couldn't see or hear him, he was there. When he came to her, she could truly sleep and dream. She lived for his touch. It took away the suffocating ache that filled her otherwise empty life. Yes, there had been times when they were together that there was pain; however, it was nothing like the pain of not knowing when he'd return. Therefore, when they were together, she'd compartmentalize that pain away. While he was there, she'd refuse to show her misery. It would remain her private agony. After what she'd done—she deserved it.

Claire remembered every word, every syllable he'd ever said. He told her the offer of a psychiatric facility was to protect her. Now, whether she deserved to be or not, she was protected.

Sometimes people asked her questions. With each inquiry, she'd hear his voice, "*Divulging private information is still forbidden...*"

She no longer questioned what constituted private information. Whether it was her memories, their history, or what she wanted to eat, she wouldn't divulge. In an effort to refrain from revealing anything she shouldn't, Claire chose to not speak. With time, that decision became easier and easier. The faceless people's words rarely penetrated her bubble.

Then without warning, the people before her would morph into other faces, and she'd forget her vow of silence and speak. After all, it was so exciting to see long-lost friends and faces, yet as fast as they'd appear, they'd fade away. Most of the time, it didn't matter. Whether real or imagined, the people with her rarely understood her conversation. Whenever this occurred, she'd remember her disobedience. The overwhelming sense of shame instigated an internal turmoil that according to the voices threatened her well-being.

That internal turmoil would manifest in ways Claire couldn't control. She wanted to stop, to behave, but sometimes she couldn't make her body do what she wanted it to do, and then the faceless people would restrain her. So many images would race through her mind. She hated restraints. The faceless voices would tell her the restraints were for her own protection, so she wouldn't hurt

herself. Claire would still fight. After all, she'd never hurt anyone. But wait, she had.

Her history of violence had been well documented, and since she had the capability, it was better to be safe. Then when things seemed lost, when she least expected it, relief would come.

Claire would hear his voice.

She couldn't predict when it would come; she couldn't encourage it, or even beg for it. No, Tony appeared on his own schedule and of his own volition. His voice would come in a word, a whisper, or a long rambling speech. The deep baritone melody could soothe her like no drug.

When Claire first arrived at Everwood, the faces and hands that took her outside encouraged her to garden. They'd put tools in her hands, but she wouldn't grip. She couldn't. It was too painful. It reminded Claire of the gardens on the estate or those in paradise. In time, the faces gave up. That was Claire's assumption. She didn't ask. No matter the why, they no longer asked her to comply.

On the occasions, when she tried to remember her life, she couldn't. It all blended into the same grayness; the place where dark became light and light became dark, the place between places. There was before: earlier, long ago, once upon a time, when life had color, and there was then: the time when all life disappeared, when the grayness won, the time after the dark.

Her efforts to contain the grayness were useless, and with time, she no longer tried. It seeped from every compartment, leaked into her thoughts, and filled every void. Her world, her reality, was gray, colorless.

Then, unexpectedly, like his voice and without reason, hues of color would infiltrate her world. It was the color of unsolicited memories. She was powerless to stop them. Usually, they'd begin well enough with greens of spring and the blues of waves upon a lake. Without warning, an overwhelming pain, a demobilizing sense of loss would stop her. Worse than the gray, this was nothing: not white, not black. NOTHING!

This void wasn't only brought on by the loss of Tony. Oh, Claire knew his ways; he'd return long enough to rekindle the passion, ignite her need, and disappear again. This nothingness was something else, an emptiness she couldn't identify, one that even the gray couldn't penetrate, one that clawed at her heart. If she allowed her thoughts to linger in the nothingness for too long, it tore her soul to shreds, and she felt every slash. Fleeting memories of a baby and a fire. It was the most agonizing pain she'd ever experienced, and without a doubt, Claire was a veteran of pain. She'd endured loss, undergone tragedy, and withstood physical suffering. Hell, she'd braved death itself.

Without warning, this emptiness would approach, rattle her soul, and bring her to her knees. When it did, her body would collapse. She'd hear a primal plea escape her lips. Not a cry. Not simple tears on her pillow. She'd

hear a wail of torment that no one but she could understand. When this happened the people would come. They'd speak words she couldn't comprehend and a new pain would come to her arm.

Sometimes she'd scream just to feel the bliss of the sharp prick. The faces and voices didn't understand... she couldn't ask. That would constitute as divulging information; nonetheless, the sharp sensation led to sleep, a reprieve from the conscious grayness and suffocating nothingness. Life was no longer real. Perhaps it never had been and it never would be...

Sometimes Claire remembered black voids. Those thoughts didn't frighten her; on the contrary, the black overpowered the gray, consumed the nothingness and filled her with the promise of intense emotion. Nothing about Tony had ever been gray. There were always colors... blues, greens, reds, and browns. So much could be assessed by the shade of brown. The memory of that brown becoming black made her heart beat faster, pulse rage uncontrollably, and body hunger for the passion only he could provide.

At times, Claire fantasized about Tony's eyes, staring endlessly at anything, remembering his ability to communicate with a simple glance. The sight of something dark brown or black electrified every nerve within her body, but when she saw chocolate brown, it sent her entire being into spasms.

Claire stopped caring months or years ago. Time was no longer relevant. She had a new goal. It was to wait until he returned, held her, caressed her, and loved her. Until his gaze filled her being, until he consumed the nothingness and made the grayness go away, until he brought the color back to her bleak world.

Claire had been walking outside with a faceless voice. The voice had been talking, and she'd been walking. The air was warm and the sky was clear. Claire assumed it was blue, although she only saw gray—the way things appeared on black and white television. The woman beside her seemed familiar, yet not, as she spoke on and on.

Claire didn't try to listen; instead, she concentrated on walking with the talking woman. This obedience earned her temporary exodus from her desolate room. It was a compromise she could sometimes stand. As they entered the building and walked through the cafeteria, Claire peered beyond her bubble, long enough to see someone familiar. The realization sent her back, immobilized her. Memories sped by, colors flooded her gray. She couldn't compartmentalize fast enough.

Before Claire knew what happened, she was on the floor. Shoes and voices were all she saw and heard...



MEREDITH COULDN'T REACT fast enough. She knew the woman across the room was Claire. Despite her dull brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and her too pale complexion, Meredith recognized her sorority sister. It was her eyes. Yes, they lacked the luster of their youth, but Meredith had no doubt; the too thin woman with emerald eyes was definitely Claire.

Meredith wanted to call out, but if she did, she'd blow her cover. Briefly, their eyes met, bringing a momentary spark of recognition. Before Meredith could move, comment, or anything, Claire fell to the floor as if she'd been struck. Suddenly, she was lying in a fetal position, shaking her head, and mumbling incoherently.

The woman who'd been walking with her calmly knelt beside Claire and made a call. Within seconds, they were surrounded by other members of the facility's staff. Meredith moved forward in seemingly slow motion as they scooped Claire onto a gurney and slid an IV into her arm.

Meredith's ragged breath pulled at her chest as the needle entered Claire's skin. She quietly eased herself closer to the woman she once knew. By the time she was beside the gurney, Claire's emerald eyes held little sign of recognition. Under the guise of the commotion, Meredith gently touched Claire's forearm and moved her lips near Claire's ear. "Claire, it's me, Meredith. Please help me tell your story."

The trembling woman before her slipped away. Her last gaze toward Meredith was one of relief as the peaceful calm of medication overtook her body. Helplessly, Meredith watched the gurney being wheeled away.



THE PAIN IN her arm was back, but so was the calm. Before the dreams began, Claire tried to process the identity of that woman. She felt an undeniable belief that she should know her, but it wasn't right. The woman didn't belong here, not in her safe haven. Claire's thoughts were scattered... *her* story. No, the story wasn't just hers.

The story belonged to so many others, so many others, who like her, would never be able to tell the world what happened; so many others, who were now silenced—now and forever, yet Claire knew every word—she'd lived it.

Tell her story? No... some things were better left unknown!

CHAPTER TWO

People are stupid; given proper motivation, almost anyone will believe almost anything.

—Terry Goodkind

SIHING, CLAIRE FASTENED the final clasp on her luggage and turned toward Phil. “I’m glad you didn’t need to fly back to Iowa, to meet with the Iowa City Police Department.”

Golden flecks shimmered in Phil’s hazel eyes as he responded, “Well, Mrs. Alexander, it wouldn’t be very husbandly of me to let you travel to Venice all by yourself.” Nodding toward her midsection, he continued, “Especially, not in your condition.”

Claire’s hand instinctively moved to her growing baby. With a small smile, she replied, “Mr. Alexander, I certainly appreciate that.”

While Phil spoke, Claire made the final adjustments on her dark wig. She’d gotten good at making the fake hair look real. That didn’t mean it didn’t itch. She was beyond ready to forgo the disguises.

Phil continued, “It seems the ICPD no longer needs my information. The prosecutor’s office said they had new evidence to investigate and asked that I keep in touch.”

“Hmm,” Claire hummed in agreement as she placed a few more hairpins. When her lips were clear, she asked, “I wonder what new evidence came their way?”

Stepping behind her, he gazed into their reflection. When their eyes met, he grinned and answered, “Since I heard your end of the conversation, I’d say they were informed of a very—”

A loud knock interrupted Phil’s words. The straightening of his stance told Claire he saw the concern in her eyes. Every contact was suspicious and required scrutiny. Phil nodded silently, stood taller, and walked toward the door.

Claire didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she released it, hearing her husband announce, "It's the bellhop. Are you ready to leave?"

Allowing her shoulders to relax, Claire took one last look around the suite. The luxurious furnishings paled in comparison to the lovely view beyond the balcony. As the sun rose in the east, hues of blue and sparkling waves danced across the water of Lake Geneva. The unseasonably warm breeze bathed her cheeks as she paused and gazed at the sight for one last time. She knew it was time to go; their things were packed and ready. Exhaling, she replied, "Yes, I'm ready to move on."

Phil nodded as he opened the door and allowed the hotel employee to enter.

"*Signore, Signora,*" Although the predominant language of Geneva was French, the Alexanders were thought to be Italian, as such, even the staff addressed them in their native language. Truthfully, most residents of the metropolitan city spoke fluent French, Italian, or German, or a combination.

Claire silently reached for her purse as her husband instructed the staff regarding their luggage. Standing patiently, Phil placed his arm casually around his wife's waist and led her toward the elevator. Their performance remained flawless as they sat within the confines of the taxi.

The streets filled with people blurred as Claire contemplated her future. "Are our reservations set?" Claire asked in a whisper.

Phil leaned closer. "Yes, my dear, let's discuss it further in private."

Claire sat straight, gazed toward the driver, and nodded. No one could be trusted. She reminded herself to be mindful of listening ears. Disappearing into the night was Phil's specialty. Doing that with a pregnant wife and multiple pieces of luggage was a new test of his clandestine skills.

As the early morning streets of Geneva passed by the windows, Claire reflected on her last piece of business. She'd made one last visit to the financial institution, the one that only a few days ago made her an incredibly wealthy woman. If the bank employees were surprised to have *Marie Rawls* visit for a second time, they didn't show it; instead, they willingly took her to the safety deposit box where she completed her business. Claire couldn't be one hundred percent certain, but her intuition told her that when push came to shove, Tony would make his way to this hidden fortune. She decided his pot-of-gold shouldn't be totally empty. She also knew the contents she left wouldn't make him happy; nevertheless, this time, it was her game. She was the one holding the cards. He'd follow her rules, or he wouldn't. She had no intentions of trapping him. No, she knew what that was like. In their figurative game of chess, she had him in check. If she'd taken the conversation with Marcus Evergreen another direction then it could have been checkmate. Watching the sidewalks fill with people, Claire wondered if Tony deserved the opportunity she was providing.

Truthfully, she couldn't answer that question. She could only say that she wanted him to have the opportunity. With that said, what he did with the opportunity was his choice.

Phil gently squeezed her hand. "You seem far away. Are you going to be all right?"

Claire shrugged. "I don't know. I guess time will tell." She wondered how she and Phil had come this far, how their interaction had become so casual. Given their initial meeting in San Antonio, it seemed unlikely. Sighing, Claire turned back toward the window as the car slowed. It seemed very few of the relationships in her life could boast normal beginnings. Placing her hand gingerly over her midsection, she prayed for a normal ending.

Their reservations on *Air France* had them leaving Geneva early in the afternoon and flying directly to Rome. They both knew they'd miss their flight. Phil had a private plane waiting to whisk them away from Switzerland and take them directly to Venice. Claire's newfound wealth allowed him the luxury of creating a rather tangled web of trails. She wasn't sure if anyone would seriously try to unravel their trail, but if they did, she agreed Phil was making it difficult.

Once they arrived in Venice, their identities would again change. Sometimes Claire felt as though she needed a name-tag to help her answer to the correct name. She really didn't care what name she used as long as she could forgo the wigs and colored contacts.

Unfortunately, her sister, Emily, was working overtime to keep Claire's name and face in the news. The last information Claire read online said she was still missing and speculations were centered on Anthony Rawlings. It reassured Claire to know that her call to Evergreen cleared Tony's name.

If Claire could make one more call, it would be to Emily. As she and Phil rode toward the airport, she remembered how it felt to have her communication restricted by Tony. Ironically, she recognized she was once again in the same situation. This time, Claire didn't know who to blame. Was it Catherine's fault? After all, she was the reason Claire fled. Or was it Tony's? If he'd never taken her... Claire couldn't even imagine that scenario. Her life was so different than anything she'd foreseen in her youth; nevertheless, she reminded herself if Tony had never taken her then she wouldn't be having his child. Tears threatened to permeate her colored contacts as Claire accepted the truth. Her current state, current deception of friends and family was self-imposed. She couldn't place blame anywhere but on the woman in the mirror, no matter who she looked like at any given moment. Once again, her impulsivity played into her opponent's hand. When the cards were dealt, Claire should've demanded a re-deal. She should've stayed true to the agreement she'd made with Tony, and she should've trusted him; instead, she wagered with fear and went full in.

The payoff, the safety of her child, was too important. Claire needed to see the game through until the end. Folding wasn't an option.

Mr. Evergreen explained that the FBI would soon be involved and instructed Claire to check in periodically. Evergreen warned that the FBI would more than likely want direct contact; however, Claire wasn't willing to give the prosecutor anything more than Geneva as her current location. She'd lived through too many lies to trust anyone.

Claire agreed to Evergreen's terms in that she'd remain hidden and safe. During her conversation with Marcus, she didn't mention she had assistance. The information didn't seem relevant. In this high-stakes poker game, Phil was her ace in the hole.

Claire appreciated Phil's concern. His desires toward her had been acknowledged. She knew that she was more than a job to him. If circumstances were different, she might entertain the idea of reciprocation; however, he understood her stance. Her acceptance of his platonic affection was purely for her and her child's safety. She'd promised Marcus Evergreen she'd remain temporarily under the radar, and in return, he'd keep Tony safe. Phil helped her fulfill her side of that agreement.

Ten days later...

HARRY LOOKED AT the screen of his phone and his eyes grew wide. Glancing around the room, he saw Amber's expression. No doubt, by his sudden change in demeanor, she knew something was up. He steadied his expression and nodded.

"Who is it?" Amber asked in a hushed tone as the rest of the room continued chatting.

Harry didn't respond; instead, he stepped quickly from Amber's kitchen and the collective ears present. Before he knew it, Harry was standing in Claire's old bedroom and answering his phone, "Hello, this is Agent Baldwin."

The call was not only a surprise, but an overwhelming relief. He listened carefully as Agent Williams, Special Agent in Charge of San Francisco FBI, explained the new turn of events: Claire Nichols was alive, safe, and hiding overseas. She'd personally contacted the Iowa City prosecutor, who immediately informed the FBI. Even more interesting was the tale of deception Ms. Nichols spun to Mr. Evergreen. She claimed that though she'd left town because she feared for her safety, she now had reason to fear for the safety of Anthony Rawlings, and she emphasized, under no circumstances was she implicating her ex-husband of any wrongdoing.

With each word, the muscles in Harry's shoulders relaxed. Up until that

moment, he'd fooled himself into believing he wasn't worried about Claire. From the second Harry hung up the telephone after the bizarre call from Anthony Rawlings, asking him if he knew where Claire had gone, he told himself, Claire made her own decisions. She'd put herself willingly in Rawlings' sphere of influence and deserved to reap the consequences. Rawlings was responsible for her disappearance, either from his own doing or as a by-product of his wealth. Either way, it was no longer Harry's concern. Besides, she was pregnant with Rawlings' child.

Then, without warning, he'd remember her voice. For a split second, that time when the conscious mind wasn't fast enough to stop the unconscious thoughts, he'd wonder what would've happened if the child was his. He'd see Claire's picture flash across the television screen or hear Emily's worried voice and the concern, he'd told himself Claire didn't deserve, would flood his chest.

Listening to his supervisor, that concern now seeped out. Standing in Claire's room, hearing that she was indeed safe and alive gave birth to tears of relief, which trickled down his cheeks. Of course, Harry couldn't let that emotion infiltrate his voice. Hell, his attachment to his assignment was part of the reason he'd been relieved of his duties, their connection truly severed.

It was after Patrick Chester's attack and after the news of possible fatherhood that SAC Williams personally placed Agent Harrison Baldwin on temporary leave. Williams claimed the publicity over Chester's attack threatened to expose their longtime operation. Permanent termination from the bureau was threatened during more than one conversation.

None of that mattered anymore, as Harry listened and the SAC briefed him on the new developments. When Williams emphasized Rawlings' innocence, Harry could no longer hold his tongue. "I know what that bastard did to her in the past. Maybe she's speaking under duress?"

SAC Williams replied, "I haven't spoken to her directly, but Evergreen believes her."

"Sure he does. This time, her testimony helps Rawlings. Evergreen's a Rawlings pawn. When she had something to say against him, the damn prosecutor wouldn't listen and spun everything against her."

"Listen Baldwin, if the Deputy Director hadn't specifically asked for you to be back on this case, it wouldn't be happening. If you're going to make this work, then you need to get your head straight."

Harry nodded. Williams was right. If he were to help again and learn more about the secrets involving the Rawls' vendetta, then he needed to think like an agent, not a boyfriend. "Yes, sir, I understand. I'm grateful to be allowed back on this case."

"Be at our office tomorrow at 9:00 AM. You're taking a trip."

His chest burst with excitement. This was an opportunity he couldn't

afford to miss. "Sir, what about Rawlings? Where's he?"

"He's currently in FBI custody, although I don't anticipate that being the situation for long. We'll discuss this more when you arrive."

"I understand." Harry continued, "Special Agent, if there is questioning of Rawlings to be done, I request to be involved."

"I believe you were told Ms. Nichols cleared Mr. Rawlings of anything to do with her disappearance."

Harry leaned against the wall and took in the empty room. Claire hadn't lived there in almost three months. Her things had been packed and shipped, yet if he closed his eyes, he could see her face and hear her laugh. The scent of her favorite perfume lingered in the recesses of the room and lofted into his senses. He shook his head and tried to focus. "Yes, of course. I'll be there tomorrow."

"Agent, this goes without saying; however, I realize you've become close to Ms. Nichols' family. This information is classified. No one else can know."

Harry thought about the people in the kitchen: Amber, Keaton, John, Emily, and Liz. How could he possibly walk out there and not tell Claire's sister that Claire was alive?

Harry swallowed hard. "Yes, sir, I understand. Thank you, Special Agent, for this opportunity."

"Don't blow it, Agent Baldwin. It may be your last chance."

"I won't, sir."

After Harry disconnected the call, he walked into the attached bathroom. Looking at his reflection, he worked to subdue the smile that begged to fill his face. Finally, he gave in to the relief. Tears flooded his eyes, and his grin emerged as he whispered, "Thank you, God. Thank you for keeping her safe. Just help me nail that son-of-a-bitch once and for all!"

CHAPTER THREE

I regret those times when I've chosen the dark side. I've wasted enough time not being happy.

—Jessica Lange

TONY MADE NO attempt to subdue his glare. This ridiculous mockery had gone on for far too long. The walls of the small interrogation room were beginning to close in around him. He didn't try to keep his volume in check as he addressed the FBI agent across the table, "Agent Jackson, I've been listening to you for hours and I've—"

Brent interrupted, "What my client is trying to say is if you don't plan on charging him with a crime, we're leaving."

Agent Jackson pulled out a binder of papers. It was surprising he could locate anything within the clutter of jumbled stacks upon the table. While Brent had more recently arrived, Tony had been sitting there for hours, listening as the FBI agents tag-teamed his interrogation. One would ask questions and then disappear. Moments later, another agent would enter the room and resume the inquisition. The barrage was taking its toll; between the throbbing in his head and the ache in his back, Tony was ready to leave the small room. He didn't care how; he just wanted out.

Agent Jackson leaned forward. "I'll tell you what: I'm tired. You're tired, and I don't anticipate this ending anytime soon. The bureau has kindly arranged for you, Mr. Rawlings, to spend the night. Mr. Simmons, by signing the gag order and release forms, you too will be provided accommodations until this situation is resolved."

Brent stood. "This is Anthony Rawlings, CEO of Rawlings Industries. You cannot hold him without probable cause."

Agent Jackson stood to meet Brent's gaze. "Despite your client's recent

loss of memory, I guarantee we have probable cause; however, if you gentlemen aren't ready to call it a night..." He handed Brent the binder. "...then I suggest you and your client review this testimony. We can continue this discussion in a few hours."

Tony's blood boiled. He'd spent hours being questioned about Claire, their relationship, and her disappearance. Not once had anyone from the FBI volunteered information regarding her safety or whereabouts. Getting angry hadn't produced any results; he decided to try cooperation. Slapping his hand on the table, he exhaled. "If this will help you find Claire, I'll stay, but once again, I'm telling you, I had nothing to do with her disappearance. I want her found—safe and sound. If you have information regarding her whereabouts, I deserve to know."

Agent Jackson looked at his watch. "Mr. Rawlings, what you *deserve* has yet to be determined. Gentlemen, I'll have food delivered. I suggest you utilize this time as a meeting of the minds. This case has taken unexpected twists and turns, and I want answers when I return."

Tony looked down at his hands. This man and the whole damn FBI were holding him essentially against his will. He hadn't had this kind of restriction placed on his comings and goings since childhood. It was absurd. As Agent Jackson left the room, Tony didn't bother to stand; being polite to the man holding him hostage wasn't high on Tony's priority list.

His mind spun trying to decipher meaning from the agent's questions. Agent Jackson asked Tony when he last saw Claire. He asked if he'd spoken to her while he was in Europe. Why he cut his European trip short? Why he hired a bodyguard for Claire? What happened in California that led to Claire's hospitalization? After showing pictures of Claire with Harrison Baldwin, the agent asked if Tony was sure he was the father of Claire's unborn child.

Yes, that innuendo could have landed Tony in custody for assault, if Brent hadn't been quick enough to separate the two.

Looking around at the drably painted walls, he rolled his head upon his shoulders and looked toward his friend and attorney. It was their first opportunity to speak *alone* since Brent's arrival. Tony cleared his throat. "Thanks for getting out here to Boston so fast."

Brent's stance softened. "You know, it's true; they can hold you up to forty-eight hours without charges."

"Why won't they give us any information on Claire?"

"I'd assume they want to learn what you know first." As Brent spoke, he opened the binder. Tony watched Brent's face blanch as he scanned the pages. For minutes, Tony sat and studied his friend's expression. With each passing second, Brent's expression became harder and grimmer.

As the tension grew, Tony asked, "What is that?"

Brent didn't answer; instead, he walked to a chair in the corner of the

room, turned on another light, and continued reading.

"I'm getting fuck'n sick of no one answering my questions," Tony muttered, as he paced about the room. The day had been too long.

Tony thought pensively about Sophia and wondered if she'd shown up for dinner at the Inn at Crown Pointe, only to be stood up. Glancing at Brent engrossed in his reading, Tony collapsed once again in the metal chair, placed his elbows on the table and supported his head. In desperate need of a reprieve, Tony closed his eyes and tried to push his concerns for Claire away.

What did unexpected twists and turns mean? Could Claire be dead? No! Tony refused to believe that.

Behind his closed lids, he didn't see the darkness of escape; instead, emerald green filled his imagination. When was the last time he saw her? They asked him that over and over. He'd seen her image on his video surveillance getting in the car, but in person—he remembered it vividly:

It was early, very early, the morning he left for Europe: much earlier than Claire liked to wake. As the first rays of sunlight emerged from behind the heavy drapes, Tony was ready to leave. Claire wasn't stirring, yet he didn't want to leave without talking to her. Actually, she'd asked him to wake her; however, as he stood watching, she looked so peaceful and content. He hated disturbing her slumber.

Her rhythmic breathing moved pieces of her hair as they hung over her beautiful face. Before he could stop himself, Tony brushed the strands away from her cheek. Beneath the disheveled brown hair he found pink, slightly parted lips. Without hesitation he bent down and touched his lips to hers. The warmth of his kiss stirred her, causing her face to incline toward his. Though her eyes were still closed, her lips engaged as she reached for his neck.

Her sleepy voice questioned, "You woke me up before you left?"

"You told me to."

Her eyes opened, revealing a bewildered expression.

"Why are you looking at me that way? You said you wanted me to wake you."

"I know." She sat up, their gaze unbroken. "I'm just not used to you listening to me, or doing what I say."

He pressed closer, feeling the sensation of her breasts against his chest. "Well, we could go back to—"

Claire shook her head as she, once again, surrounded his neck with her arms. "No, I like this better."

His devilish grin couldn't be contained. "Well, last night you didn't seem to mind a few directions or should I say suggestions?"

Her cheeks reddened as she hid her face in his shoulder. “Yeah, well, I like that too.”

Taking her chin in his gentle grasp, Tony searched her eyes. He could get lost in the depths of the green, emerald green, so deep and rich. “I was hoping I could change your mind about joining me on this trip.”

Their noses nearly touched as her lids fluttered and her expression softened. “When do you need to leave?”

It wasn’t the response he wanted; he wanted her to say she’d come to Europe with him. “The plane’s ready. Eric’s waiting in the car.”

Claire’s expression beckoned, her fingers found the buttons of his shirt, and her words came between butterfly kisses to his neck, “I don’t think... Eric would mind... waiting a little longer... Besides... you’re going to be gone... for almost two weeks”

As Claire’s fingers moved toward his belt and her lips touched his newly exposed chest, Tony’s travel plans seemed suddenly insignificant. Then, before Tony could take this moment any farther, Claire kissed him, smiled, and said, “Give me a minute.”

“Seriously, you’re going to do this to me and walk away?”

Claire didn’t look back as she walked toward the bathroom, giggled, and mumbled something about ‘it’ being his fault. She was right. The pregnancy was his fault; nonetheless, watching her in nothing but her long silk nightgown, he couldn’t help grinning. Her normal clothes didn’t accentuate their growing baby, but in that nightgown, he could see her growing midsection plain as day. When she returned, he was back in bed. His travel clothes neatly piled on a nearby chair.

As Claire started to climb in bed, their eyes met and Tony shook his head.

“What?” she asked, as her smile melted his soul.

He tried for his most formidable voice. “Ms. Nichols, you started this. I believe you are excessively overdressed.”

Her demeanor looked anything but intimidated. She barely hesitated as she ignored his comment, climbed onto the bed, and pushed Tony back onto his pillow. Hovering above him, he inhaled the scent of toothpaste as Claire’s freshly brushed hair swept across his face. With a sexy smile she challenged his demand, “Then, Mr. Rawlings, I suggest you do something about that.” Within seconds, their worlds reversed. Claire was pinned to her pillow, her nightgown gone and her hands secured above her head. Her giggle quickly became a moan as her eyes closed indicating her approval of his actions.

It wasn’t just the moan that indicated her approval. No, her entire body approved, as did his. For the next forty minutes they were lost within one another. Tony couldn’t help caressing and kissing her midsection as he moved up and down her sensual body. Her soft skin and amazing scent dominated his thoughts. Any concerns of his impending departure disappeared.

When he finally redressed and started to leave, her aura pulled him back for one last kiss. “I love you and I’ll be back as soon as I can. I wish you were coming.”

Her eyelids fought an unseen weight. “Travel safely. I love you, too.”

As he pulled the covers over her soft exposed skin, he asked, “Are you going back to sleep?”

She nodded. “Yes, I think after that strenuous morning workout, I need a nap.”

Grinning, he kissed the top of her head and watched as her smile faded, her eyes closed, and she appeared blissfully serene. It was then Tony remembered something he wanted to say. With more authority in his tone, he added, “Claire.”

Her eyes immediately opened. His tenor wasn’t playful. Although Claire didn’t speak, she obviously recognized his change in meaning. Perched on the edge of the bed, Tony reminded her, “If you leave the estate—”

She stilled his words with the touch of her hand. The large diamond on her left hand glistened, as she responded appropriately, “I promise, I’ll take Clay.”

“This isn’t debatable.”

“Tony, I’m not debating. I’m trying to sleep.”

He kissed her lips. “I’ll call when I touch down in London.”

She nodded. “Be safe. I think Eric’s waiting.”

Tony hadn’t relived that memory in over a week. All the questioning from the FBI brought it back along with so many others. They seemed so real, he wanted to reach out and touch her. For just a moment, Tony believed he could actually smell her perfume.

The slap of the binder hitting the aluminum table pulled Tony from his fantasy and back to reality. He must have fallen asleep. “What the hell?”

“Food’s here.” Brent’s voice sounded strained.

“What were you reading?”

“I gave it to you, but you might want to eat first. It sure as hell ruined my appetite.”

Tony looked suspiciously at the binder as Brent continued, “Since I’m your personal counsel, we need to talk about it. As your friend, I don’t want to.” Brent grabbed a Styrofoam box and leaned against the wall.

With an overwhelming feeling of doom, Tony pushed the food aside and picked up the binder. Instantly, the words on the page assaulted him. They weren’t new. They weren’t a revelation. They were, however, supposed to be gone.

Over a year ago, Marcus Evergreen informed him of Claire's testimony. At that time he made deals and greased palms. This documentation was supposed to disappear. He paid quite a bit of money to get it lost in the shuffle. His pulse raced as he thought about promises he'd heard. Now—now not only was it present, it was in the hands of the FBI! Brent had just read it! Tony's heart sank. Brent was right, his appetite was gone. He paced the confines of the small room and began to read:

January 26, 2012: Claire Nichols Rawlings:

I swear my recounting to be true, to the best of my knowledge. I met Anthony Rawlings March 15, 2010, in Atlanta, Georgia at a restaurant named the Red Wing. I was tending bar and he was a customer. That night I agreed to meet him at the bar for a drink. We had wine and talked for about an hour or so. I left the bar alone. The next day, he called the bar and asked me out on a date. Initially, I declined his offer. He was persistent and I agreed to a date the next night. I knew his name, but didn't know who he was. I really didn't.

On the 17th of March, he picked me up at the Red Wing after my shift. Earlier that day, I went grocery shopping. I think that's significant. It proves I had no intentions of walking away from my life. I had milk in the refrigerator! After dinner, I agreed to go to his hotel room for dessert and some more wine. He was friendly and sensual. I do admit that I slept with him that night.

The next time I woke, I was in his home in Iowa. I didn't know where I was. I remember very little about how I got to Iowa. There are flashes of memories: none of them are good. I remember crying and banging on the door. I remember begging for someone to let me out of that room. I remember being restrained.

Oh, God, I remember him...

Tony's vision blurred. He didn't want to relive these memories. The ones of her smiling and happy, those he wanted. Not this. His stomach churned. *Had that really been him? Had he truly done those awful things?* Closing his eyes, he saw beyond the words. He remembered what Claire's account never would. He recalled the hours the drugs took away from her:

Claire dozed peacefully on the king-sized bed, in the Presidential suite of the Ritz Carlton as Tony eased himself out of bed. Watching her closely, he emptied one vial of GHB liquid into her wine glass. He'd been told combining

it with alcohol would accelerate his desired response. He poured more wine and sniffed. It didn't smell different than normal wine.

Easing himself back into bed, he moved toward her radiating warmth. This was really it! He'd wanted this for so long and it was finally here. When Claire accepted this dinner invitation, she'd secured her fate. Truthfully, that future had been secured years ago; her acceptance of dinner only made it easier. Watching her sleep, he thought about the sex. Yes, that would be a great bonus. She could pay the Nichols' debt and he could keep her busy. Running the tips of his fingers over her collarbone, he sighed. This was so much better than he'd imagined.

Now, he needed to get her to Iowa.

She turned toward him and smiled a sleepy smile. "I really need to get back to my place. I don't want to disrupt your schedule." Claire started to move away as she added, "I'm sure you're busy."

Tony reached for her arm. Her soft skin and toned bicep flexed slightly at his touch. She was everything a twenty-six-year-old woman should be and more. He wanted to explore every inch of her, but first he had a mission to accomplish.

Despite his efforts to the contrary, his sexual desires were making themselves known.

Trying for his most sensual tone, he said, "I promise this isn't a disruption, and maybe after some more dessert, we could have another glass of wine? There's still some in the bottle from room service." The dessert he had in mind wasn't the remnants of Crème Brûlée on the nearby table.

He waited for an answer. Though it wasn't verbal, Claire laid her head back on the pillow and looked into his eyes. Tony didn't want to see the trust in those eyes. They were too innocent and pure. In all his research, he'd never gazed into the depth of her emerald soul, and he didn't want to do it now. He lowered his lips to her collarbone and tasted her skin, moist from earlier "dessert." Her body arched as he tantalized the tips of her firm breasts. The knowledge that she'd soon be his for the taking—whenever and wherever he desired—threatened to push him to the brink too soon.

Would she always be this accommodating? How would she handle her new reality? As he nibbled at the now hard nubs, he didn't care. It didn't matter. What mattered was how he'd handle it. She would be as accommodating as he wanted: her penance for the sins of her forefathers.

Supporting himself above her petite frame, he lingered in the aftershocks of their merger, contemplating his acquisition. Each time his hips moved, her body responded in sync. He could stay like this for hours, but that would need to wait for another day. Smiling, he considered all the "another days" they had in their future. Not wanting to move away, Tony peered down to see her eyes part in that not quite open, not quite shut, satisfied gaze. He offered,

“Can I get you a drink or something to eat?”

“I really don’t think I want you to move.”

“Oh?” he cooed, as he teased her with each gyration. “Are you sure? Maybe some more wine.”

“Now, Anthony, I think it’s pretty obvious you don’t need to get me drunk.”

“Who said anything about drunk? I just don’t want you to dehydrate.”

Claire smiled as he slowly eased himself from the bed. Reaching for the glass, he added, “I mean, if you’re willing to stay, I’d like to make a toast.”

When he turned back around she was sitting up against the head board with the sheet wrapped tightly around her breasts. Her modesty intrigued him. Most of the women he dated were the type to flaunt their assets not cover them. Smiling a shy smile, she reached for the glass. “By all means, I’d hate to ruin your toast.”

The drug took effect faster than Tony planned. The cooperative, pleasant woman he’d spent the night with suddenly became agitated and combative. This new behavior didn’t last long. When it ended, her entire body relaxed and her head bobbed upon her neck. For a moment, Tony feared they’d need to carry her from the hotel. Despite her appearance, Claire wasn’t unconscious, only detached. The green eyes no longer held the window to her soul; instead, they were clouded with a veil of confusion and separation, as if Claire’s body was there, but her mind was somewhere else. She followed every command. In many ways, it was like dressing a child. He told her to stand. She stood. He told her to lift her arms. She did.

Once he had her dressed, he called for Eric. As they rode the elevator down to the lobby, Claire leaned into his chest. He hoped to interested bystanders, she merely looked tired. Although she didn’t answer, he spoke softly in her ear. Tony reasoned it would appear more natural on hotel surveillance. Next, he walked her to the car, kissed her goodbye and let Eric drive away. It was all part of the plan.

A few hours later, Tony met Eric at a side door and entered the backseat of his car. Sleeping soundly on the seat, covered with a thin blanket was his acquisition. The room at the Ritz was Tony’s for a few more days. After he had Claire in Iowa, he’d return to Atlanta and attend more meetings. More of the plan, his leaving town couldn’t coincide with her departure.

Walking from the car to the plane, she stumbled with unsteady footing. Once aboard, she paced, unwilling to sit. Each time Tony got near her, she pulled away and walked toward the door. Using more physical persuasion, he steered her toward the seat. When her knees bent, she spoke for the first time since the GHB took effect, “I donnnnn’t feeel well.”

He didn’t comment as he secured her seat belt. At first, she stared at the restraint. When the plane lifted off the ground, her head fell to her chest. Tony

wondered if she comprehended any of what was happening.

Suddenly, her limp head sprung upward and her slurred words filled the otherwise empty cabin, "I'mmm gonna be siccccccccccccccck."

Losing patience, Tony noticed Claire's sudden pallor. He unstrapped himself and walked toward her. He saw fear within her eyes as she frantically fought her seat belt.

"Stop it," he commanded. "You're on an airplane. You're not going anywhere."

She turned away, tears streaming down her cheeks, unable to move against the latched belt. He reached for her chin and turned her toward him; before he could reprimand her on the importance of maintaining eye contact, she wrenched and vomited. It covered her dress and his slacks.

"Shit!" he barked. It was disgusting!

"I told you... I was sick!" she cried.

He looked at the mess and then at Claire as she sunk against the chair.

"Don't get the damn chair dirty, too."

His words only increased her tears. As he reached for the seat belt and unbuckled, revulsion at the mess was somehow interspersed with sympathy.

"Come here," he said as he held out his hand.

Retracting further against the seat, she asked, "Why am I here? What are you doing?"

Tony tried once again for compassion, "Claire, you aren't feeling well; let me get you some water and clean you up."

Hesitantly, she stood, allowing him to walk her to the bathroom at the back of the plane. With each command, her compliance decreased while her defiance increased. He suspected she needed more of the drug.

"I shouldn't be here. Where are we going?"

"You'll feel better if you have some water."

Apprehensively, she took the cup laced with the second vial of GHB. He watched the liquid slosh within the confines of the glass as her hands trembled. Finally, afraid she'd spill it, he helped her get the glass to her lips where she took a drink.

She spit it in the sink. "It tastes funny."

"That's because you were sick, you need to rinse your mouth." He filled another cup with water and she rinsed. Next, he handed her the first cup. "Now drink."

Claire nodded and did as he said.

"We need to get you out of these filthy clothes."

As he tugged at her dress, she reacted violently, trying with all of her might to get away from him and out of the bathroom. Her screams echoed above the hum of the engines. It was like in the hotel when the drug first entered her system; however, this time, Tony didn't need to worry about

anyone else hearing.

Blocking the door, he let her have her tantrum. Her fight intrigued him. The blows to his chest with her tiny fists were almost comical, but when she tried to scratch, he had to make it stop. He had meetings and work. Scratches would be questioned. “That’s enough!” She didn’t stop. Her nails contacted his arm and blood trickled from their trail. Seizing her hand, he slapped her. “Stop it!”

The shock showed behind her clouded eyes as she covered her face, allowing one hand to linger on her now red cheek. In a way, it was humorous; she was naked, hysterical, and attacking him—and she seemed surprised he’d retaliate.

He leaned over her quaking body. “Get in the shower, now.” When she didn’t move, he reached for her arm and pulled her under the water. Although fully clothed, he joined her in the small cubical and held her under the streaming water until the fighting stopped.

Within minutes, the drug was once again in control, and Tony was directing her movements. With trembling hands, she obeyed, removing his wet clothes and following each command. Her fight was gone. The fire he’d momentarily seen in her eyes was now detached terror.

When he turned off the water, they were both clean. As Claire huddled against the shower wall, Tony contemplated his next move. There were so many possibilities; he told himself to take it slow. His plan had been in place for too long; he wanted to savor every moment.

Stepping into the small bathroom, he added his wet clothes to the pile containing her ruined dress and handed her a towel. Apprehensively, she took his offer and wrapped it around herself. Her long, dark hair dripped down her back as the water puddled on the floor.

Without looking up, she asked, “Are you going to hurt me?”

He’d read about the GHB. He knew these scenes would be forever erased from her memory. He could do whatever he wanted, and she’d never remember.

The sensual tone of seduction was gone; in its place was the authoritative tone of someone with an agenda. Tony refused to allow her fear or emotions to alter his plans. “That isn’t my plan. We’ll see how well you can follow directions.”

Tony pulled on the edge of Claire’s towel as she stepped back against the wall. Her clouded eyes opened wide and quickly looked away. He wondered if she could subconsciously fight the effects of the drug. He watched as she worked to form the right words. Finally, she mumbled, “Please.”

He stepped closer, his nude body still wet and his desire visible. “Please, what?”

“Please, don’t hurt me.”

*“I have rules, Claire.” He gently pushed her wet hair away from her face.
“Can you follow my rules?”*

Avoiding eye contact, she nodded.

Abruptly, he raised her chin. “Don’t look away. I asked you a question. I expect an answer.”

“Yes, I can follow your rules.”

“Rule number one is to do as I say. I suggest you learn to follow that rule, if you want to make the best of this.”

Keeping her eyes downcast, her shoulders quaked as she silently sobbed. Once again, his hand struck her cheek.

“I told you not to look away.”

Her eyes immediately flashed toward his. Instantaneously, the clouds returned as pools of tears spilled onto her cheeks. “I’ll do as you say; please stop hitting me.”

The memories made Tony’s stomach turn. Of course, none of that was in Claire’s testimony. The GHB hid those memories from her, as well as other memories of the things he did during that flight and once they returned to Iowa.

Her testimony picked up the next day, when the drug was fully out of her system. It wasn’t until then that she started to understand the magnitude of her situation; nevertheless, the truth hit Tony between the eyes. Perspiration drenched his face and the illness he’d felt in the pit of his empty stomach erupted into full-blown nausea. No matter what he did to make Claire’s life better or show her he’d changed, these memories would always linger in the recesses of his mind. For the rest of his life, he’d know what he’d done.

Tony hated himself for all of it. Hell, he always had *the end justifies the means* argument, but even *he* didn’t believe that anymore. Not now. Not now that he *knew* Claire and *loved* Claire. The thought of someone doing to her what he’d done filled him with rage. If it were another person whom she described, Tony would want him dead. He’d leave no stone unturned to make him pay for his sins.

Tears coated his cheeks before he realized Brent was standing right in front of him.

“I take it you’ve read Claire’s testimony?”

Tony nodded. He didn’t want Brent knowing about this. Now Courtney would know. He should deny it and argue, but the image of Claire—not from her testimony, but from his memory—on his plane, wrapped in that towel, trembling and scared wouldn’t let him lie.

“If the shit in that binder’s true, you’re one sick bastard.” Brent turned a

circle. “I’m your personal attorney and friend. Tell me what we’re up against.”

Tony remained silent, his eyes so clouded with memories he could barely see the room around him.

“Damn it, Tony!” The table vibrated with the slap of Brent’s hand as his fury and anger filled the air. “Tell me the truth!”

The ferocity within the room grew as Tony’s anguish also began to build. Springing from the chair, he pushed past Brent and paced. “Where the hell did they get this? What the fuck does it mean? Is Claire alive? Do they know where she is? Did she press charges? Is that what this whole damn day is about?”

Brent seized Tony’s shoulders, as he demanded. “Fuck’n tell me if it’s true.”

Never had Brent spoken to Tony with that tone. Tony couldn’t help but retaliate, “Let go of me, or I swear to God, I’ll punch you in the face!”

“Do it! Do it! Go ahead. Then maybe I’ll understand more of what Claire endured.”

Tony staggered backward. Brent’s words cut deeper than any knife and were more painful than a fist to the jaw. “It was before.” Tony’s fight evaporated as his knees buckled against the chair. “It was a *long time* ago. Things are, or were, different this time. I didn’t have anything to do with her recent disappearance.”

Brent fell into a chair and fought to control his words. Finally, he asked, “So you’re telling me this is true? You did this shit to a woman you claimed to love, a woman you married, a woman you charged with attempted murder and later wanted to reconcile with? You did this sick-ass-shit to the mother of your child?”

“No!” Tony stared at Brent. He felt the black fill his eyes as red filled his vision. “I’m not saying that. I’d never do that to the mother of my child or the woman I was reconciling with. Like I said, it was different.” He rubbed the stubble on his cheeks. Suddenly, his face weighed too much for his neck. Tony collapsed against the back of the chair allowing his head to rest against the cinderblock wall. “The only person who understands me or any of this is Claire.” Indignation returned and his neck strengthened. “Tell me this isn’t relevant. Tell me you can suppress this evidence.” Tony stood as the volume of his voice rose. “I paid a lot of money to have this disappear!”

Brent shook his head. “Shit! Did you just tell me, an attorney, that you paid to have evidence suppressed? Jesus, tell me you didn’t just say that!”

Tony felt the blood drain from his face, as his limbs suddenly felt heavy. “I-I...” Perspiration appeared on his brow as he contemplated his answer and sunk back against the cool cement wall. “...what I meant to say is that this evidence is old. Things change, people change. Please...” It may have been

the first time he'd ever used that word with Brent, but that didn't make it any less heartfelt. "Please, tell me you can convince them I didn't hurt her."

Brent stared.

"This time." Tony's tone hardened as he pushed back the emotions he refused to reveal. His words slowed, "I didn't hurt her this time." He paused momentarily and gathered his thoughts. "This time she came to Iowa of her own free will. We were having a baby." Shaking his head he corrected himself. "No, we are having a baby. She accepted her engagement ring." He held Brent's gaze. "You are my friend as well as my personal attorney; tell me you believe me."

Brent's shoulders relaxed and he said, "We should eat."

"No! Food doesn't matter."

Leaning forward, Brent steadied his tone. "Tony, listen to me—I know that's not your forte, but shut up and let me help you."

The air left Tony's lungs. "You're still willing to help me?"

"I'll be honest with you. We have been friends and maybe we still are, but right now I'm pissed as hell and friendship isn't why I'm willing to do this for you." He sat straighter while maintaining eye contact. "When this is all done, you can fire me, but going in, you should know, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for Claire. If she trusted you again, after all this shit..." He pointed to the binder. "...I will too."

Tony's neck gave way as his face fell forward. Rubbing his hand through his hair, he exhaled. "You're not fired. What can you do?"

"I'll make some calls. If the FBI isn't pressing charges, I think I can get you released, at least momentarily. When we're back in Iowa, we're gonna talk about this..."

CHAPTER FOUR

Only those you trust can betray you

—Nathan Rahl

“*M*

R. SIMMONS, WE believe it's in the best interest of your client to keep him here for at least forty-eight hours.”

Brent tried to clarify an earlier statement, “You’re saying you believe Mr. Rawlings is in danger? Yet you won’t tell us what threats or evidence you have to support this claim.”

“I’m not at liberty to divulge that information.” Hearing the mechanisms of the door, everyone turned to see another agent enter. Agent Jackson introduced the newest member of their conversation, “This is Special Agent in Charge Easton.”

SAC Easton stepped toward the table. Tony searched his expression; deep lines embedded in his forehead displaying years of concentration and stress. Though Tony looked for some sign of accommodation, Easton’s grimace, instead, warned of impending doom.

Clearing his throat, Easton began, “Agent Jackson, thank you for your diligence. Mr. Rawlings, it’s come to our attention that you’re to be released.” He straightened his stance, and added, “At this time we’re not prepared to formally charge you with any crimes.”

Tony exhaled. His gratitude quickly evaporated as irritation prevailed. Incredulously, he stood and glared at the federal officials. Before he could speak, SAC Easton continued, “Nevertheless, your safety is a concern and we want to again—”

Tony interrupted, “My safety? What about Claire? What about her safety?”

“Sir,” Easton shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “Your ex-wife is the informant who alerted us to this danger.”

Tony’s lungs deflated as he turned his gaze toward Brent. Sinking back

into the chair, he whispered, "She's alive. Thank God, she's alive." As quickly as the oxygen left, it returned, with a rush of blood to his cheeks making his face a bright shade of crimson in the poorly lit room. With each word, his volume increased and his stance straightened, "She's alive. My fiancée, the mother of my child, is alive and you've had me here for hours playing some sick mind games!"

Brent silenced Tony with a touch of Tony's sleeve. "Special Agent Easton, Agent Jackson, I believe you just said my client is free to go?"

"Yes, counselor; however, it is the recommendation of the—"

Brent continued, "Thank you. We'll be spending the night here in Boston. You have my number. If we don't hear from you by tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM, we plan to return to Iowa. If you need to speak with my client again, you may do so through me."

There was so much Tony wanted to say, so much he wanted to know, yet Brent's slight pressure on his arm told him to leave the room. Escape now before the FBI changed its mind. Momentarily, Tony's body refused to move. What else did these men know? Trying with all his might, he swallowed his words and walked toward the door; nevertheless, before he reached the point of exodus, he turned back around. "Where is she? Is she in danger?"

SAC Easton met his eyes. "Mr. Rawlings, she's the one who made contact with authorities. It's our understanding that she left the country, your home, of her own free will."

"Country? Did you say she left the country? Where is she?"

"Of. Her. Own. Free. Will. Mr. Rawlings. She doesn't wish her whereabouts to be disclosed. The danger she's alerting you to is still present."

The agent's words reverberated through Tony's thoughts *Out of the country. Own free will.* Did Claire leave him? Did she leave in a way to purposely create a public scandal? Had she been playing him? Some kind of sick revenge. Was it all a charade to get back at him? No! Tony knew that wasn't the case. He refused to spend another second entertaining that notion.

Brent's tug brought Tony back to present, as his counsel addressed the assembly, "Thank you agents, we'll collect Mr. Rawlings' things."

Tony glared one last time, momentarily speechless.

At a front desk, Tony signed for his belongings, which included his brief case and cell phone. He could almost taste the blood as he bit his lip, holding back the words he couldn't bear to think much less say. When they stepped from the building, the fresh air filled his lungs as the late hour registered. The FBI had come to Tony's hotel room almost twelve hours earlier. Turning on his phone, he managed, "I'll call Eric and get us to a hotel."

Brent shook his head. "No, I sent Eric back to Iowa. I didn't know how long this would last. I'll call for a taxi."

Tony nodded as he saw the number of messages and missed calls mount

on his screen. He tried to remember a time when he'd been unwillingly inaccessible to the world for twelve hours. While it was incomprehensible to think the FBI had removed him from his life, with total disregard for his personal or public obligations, he couldn't shake the agent's words. *Of her own free will.*

During the taxi ride to the hotel, neither man uttered more than a word or two as they both busily returned emails and text messages. The emotion of the day was finally gone—swallowed back into an unyielding hole. Unconsciously, Tony contemplated the possibility he'd been played. *Of her own free will?* The hairs prickled on the back of his neck.



IT WASN'T UNTIL they were checked into a two-bedroom suite that they began talking. "I don't believe them." Conviction came through Tony's voice stronger with each word.

"You don't believe the FBI?"

"If Claire left willingly, she was coerced."

"Why would the FBI insinuate otherwise?"

"Why would they keep me for the entire damn day and then drop that bomb at the end?"

Brent shrugged, so many thoughts bombarding his head.

The strength and concern in Tony's voice morphed into his familiar dominating tone. "I don't want you to tell Courtney about what you learned today."

Brent considered his words. Was this the time to tell Tony he'd known for years? He straightened his neck and stood taller than he had in his friend's presence in many years. "I told you, I helped you because of Claire. She's alive and safe. That's what matters."

"Apparently she is, and apparently we aren't privy to know anything more."

"No, we aren't, but at least we know she isn't in prison on trumped-up charges."

Tony spun and met Brent's gaze. "What did you just say?"

"I said, we don't know where she is." Brent continued his stare. "We know where she isn't."

"I'm going to assume that offer to fire you is still on the table."

Scanning the mini bar, Brent chose a bottle of whiskey, unscrewed the small lid and drank from the spout. Shaking his head, he laughed. "Sure, why not? I'm considering an early retirement anyway."

Even with his back toward Tony, Brent could sense the darkening of

Tony's eyes and imagine his expression as Tony repeated, "Don't say anything to Courtney."

Brent turned back around. He was done being bullied. "Tony, I'm not promising that. I don't keep secrets from my wife."

"This isn't debatable." Tony grabbed a similar bottle from the bar. As he unscrewed the lid, Brent saw his shoulders slump. His tone was no longer full of domination; Brent heard something new as Tony said, "I care what Courtney thinks..." He kept his gaze away, as if looking out the large window and the lights of Boston. "..and you."

Brent reeled. All the accusations and declarations he'd practiced in his head were suddenly gone. Brotherly love wasn't a comfortable gesture between the two of them. Clearing his throat, Brent managed, "You and Claire made it through this. Do you swear you never treated her like her testimony states since her release from prison?"

Tony nodded. "I swear."

"Courtney is pretty perceptive; I don't think she'd be too surprised." When Tony didn't answer, Brent continued, "Do you want to call for a jet to come and get us in the morning, or should I?"

"I already have. It'll be waiting by 10:00 AM." Throwing back the rest of the small bottle, Tony said, "She can be as perceptive as she wants. I don't want you confirming anything. Confidentiality! Hell, I pay you enough to at least expect that."

Brent's shoulders fell. So much for brotherly love. "Yeah, Tony, you pay me. Without a doubt, within the last twelve hours—hell, twenty years—I've fuck'n earned it!"

Tony threw the empty bottle on the bar. "I'm going to try to get some sleep."

"Wait!" Brent faced his best friend's dark eyes it was now or never. "That early retirement... firing... whatever you want to call it... it's still on the table, and you should know, I'm seriously considering it. I know too much shit to keep saving your ass."

"You know too much shit to ever consider walking away. It's not an option." Tony turned toward one of the bedrooms. Before he shut the door, he added, "I'm not accepting your offer. Good night."

It was after midnight when the knock came to the door. It took multiple raps before anyone from within the suite budged. Brent was the first to make it to the door. He'd spent most of the day with federal officers. It didn't take a genius to figure that the two men in dark suits were among those ranks.

"We're looking for Anthony Rawlings."

Before Brent could answer, Tony came up behind him. “I’m Anthony Rawlings. What the hell do you want at this time of night?”

The two officers displayed their badges and credentials. “Mr. Rawlings, may we enter?”

The last thing Tony wanted was a discussion with the FBI held in the hotel’s hallway. He and Brent took a step back allowing the agents to enter the suite.

Tony’s anger temporarily faded into concern. “Is this regarding Claire? Do you have new information?”

“There’s more information.” The men in dark suits went on to explain the threats upon Tony’s life have been verified and confirmed. The information Ms. Nichols disclosed was only the beginning. The bureau believes it’s in everyone’s best interest to get Tony home, safe and sound, where his security team can keep him from harm.

They also explained that Tony’s activity could be currently monitored by the perpetrator and insisted Brent remain in Boston. They emphasized that in the morning Brent needed to go to the FBI office and complete legal documents regarding this transfer. Of course, then Brent and Tony would be able to meet up in Iowa tomorrow after Brent finished all the legalities.

Tony considered their concerns. Looking toward Brent, he shrugged. Honestly, he wanted to be home. It made more sense than sleeping in a hotel room. “Give me a minute to gather my things.”

As he left with the agents, Tony told Brent, “I’ll talk with you more when you get back to Iowa. Come straight to the house once you land.”



BRENT AGREED AND watched as Tony left with the two plain-clothed agents. The feeling of foreboding lingered in Brent’s mind. He considered calling Courtney, but it was nearly 2:00 AM. She didn’t need to lose sleep just because his mind was racing. Finally, Brent fell into a restless sleep.

A mere four hours later, Brent rolled toward the vibrating phone echoing on the hard surface of the night stand. Before he could answer the call, his attention went to the loud pounding on the suite door.

Pulling on his slacks, he read the unknown number, rejected the call, and pushed the phone into his pocket. In a still sleep-deprived haze, Brent made his way toward the loud banging. This time, when he opened the door, Brent recognized at least one of the agents. “Agent Jackson, couldn’t you wait until I came to the office this morning?”

“So Mr. Simmons, you were planning on coming to the FBI office today?”

“Yes, that’s what I was told.”

“And what about Mr. Rawlings? Was he planning on coming too?”

Brent stepped back and allowed the two men entry. “He would, but now

—”

“Now...” Agent Jackson completed Brent’s sentence. “...now your client is gone, disappearing in the middle of the night?”

“No.” Brent shut the door. “Well, yes—because he left with your agents.” When the FBI remained silent and exchanged quizzical looks, Brent added, “The men from your office who came here last night. He left with them.”

“I assure you, we didn’t send agents here last night.”

“What?” Brent ran his hands through his bed-mussed hair, struggling with the new information. Could Claire’s threat have been real? Did someone take Tony?

“Mr. Simmons,” Brent focused as he attempted to subdue his impending fear. “A plane left Boston airspace, a private plane, contracted by one Anthony Rawlings. That same plane made an emergency landing in the Appalachian Mountains approximately an hour ago. No survivors were found.”

Brent collapsed onto the sofa. “As in dead?” The words hurt exiting his lips. Yes, there were times he hated Tony for what he’d done or said. That didn’t change the fact the controlling asshole was his best friend.

“No, sir, as in missing. The plane was empty. A FBI forensics’ team is investigating. So far, no signs of struggle or injury have been found and...” Agent Jackson emphasized, “...no signs of anyone.”

“But... the FBI took him. I saw their credentials and badges.”

“Do you remember the names of these agents?”

Brent shook his head. “No, it was late. Jesus... I didn’t really look. I assumed it was legitimate. I don’t remember.”

“Mr. Simmons, the FBI didn’t come here last night.”

“What does this mean?”

“For right now, it means you’re coming back with us to the bureau. We’re going to review hotel footage and discuss your late night visitors.”



SITTING IN THE familiar office of SAC of the San Francisco FBI, Agent Baldwin listened attentively to his supervisor. “Anthony Rawlings was in FBI custody. Now he isn’t.”

“I’m sorry. What do you mean he isn’t?”

“Due to persuasion from unnamed political sources, Agent Easton, SAC in Boston, was unable to keep him detained.”

Harry's blood boiled. "So, sir..." Although, well ingrained, the title left a bad taste on his tongue. "You're saying—he did it again? Anthony Rawlings played his political cards, flashed a little money, and got himself out of FBI custody?"

"Agent, despite the deputy director's request, you clearly aren't interested in pursuing your career in the service of—"

"I apologize. Sir, please go on. Claire Nichols. Where is she?"

"The last direct communication was from Geneva, Switzerland. That was over a week ago. We have local field agents who've confirmed her departure from Switzerland."

"She left? Where did she go?"

"This is a briefing, son. I inform. You listen. Agent Baldwin, you seem to have forgotten the protocol. If you choose to honor the deputy director's request and assist in this ongoing investigation. Your duty is to say, Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. If that duty is too difficult for you to fulfill, I'll gladly inform our director, and your duties can be reassigned."

Harry bit his tongue. Working undercover had a way of removing the bureau formalities from an agent's vocabulary. Harry had enough problems with his future in the service of the FBI; he didn't need to add insubordination to the list. Sitting taller, Harry said, "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll do whatever the bureau wants me to do."

"The bureau wants you to travel to Italy. We have two possible sightings of Ms. Nichols: one in Venice, the other in Rome. We have pictures of the woman suspected of being Ms. Nichols. You'll see she's always in disguise." SAC Williams pointed toward a large screen on the wall of his office. Still pictures projected. Some were grainy, as if taken from a distance and enlarged. Others were much more clear and detailed. Harry studied the woman in each photograph. The last time he'd seen Claire in person was in June. That was four months ago. The woman in question could be pregnant, or just heavy. Her hair color and length varied from photo to photo, yet there was something about her in a few of the photos when she smiled. Harry's chest tightened.

"Sir, I believe that *is* Ms. Nichols."

"This man has been seen with her on numerous occasions. Can you identify him?"

Repeated pictures projected, again with varied quality. "Most of these pictures don't show his face. It's like he knows to keep it away from cameras." The man's hair color varied, and he often wore a hat. "I'm sure it isn't Anthony Rawlings, sir." Harry studied the pictures closer. "He's familiar. Are they believed to be *together*?" The way he emphasized the last word made his meaning clear.

SAC Williams' eyes narrowed. "It appears so. Ms. Nichols told the Iowa

City prosecutor that she left the home of Mr. Rawlings of her own free will, and that she feared for the safety of her and her unborn child. She emphasized that the threat wasn't from Mr. Rawlings. Although you are aware, their relationship has had its perilous moments."

"Yes, sir. Ms. Nichols told me about that herself."

"She also informed Evergreen that she believed Mr. Rawlings is still in danger."

Harry shifted his footing ever so slightly.

"I'll ask this one more time, can you re-enter this case with a sense of impartiality? Our assignment is multifaceted. Agent Nichols was one of us. Though not publicly disclosed, his death is still an open case. The ME found traces of a rare toxin in his blood, *actaea pachypoda*, more commonly referred to as doll's eyes. This plant toxin has a sedative effect on the cardiac muscle tissue and can cause cardiac arrest. That same toxin has been identified in very few other deaths. A recurring denominator seems to be Mr. Rawlings or should I say *Rawls*. After years of nothing, it was Ms. Nichols's research and persistence that pulled these cases together. Upon further investigation, *actaea pachypoda* was also found in Mr. Rawlings' blood when he was poisoned in 2012. Interestingly, it was the first time it has been identified in a nonlethal dose."

Harry wanted to say, "That's too bad," however, he wisely chose to remain silent.

SAC Williams continued, "Honestly, it doesn't come up in a normal toxicology screen and could easily be missed. Not all cases lead to Mr. Rawlings directly. Since other drugs indicating poisoning were found in Mr. Rawlings' 2012 toxicology report, this toxin wasn't initially discovered. Thankfully, in criminal cases such as Mr. Rawlings' attempted murder, trace evidence is retained. When his blood was retested, the toxin was discovered. If it were left up to those idiots in Iowa, it would've never been found. We have no way of knowing how many other cases have been missed."

"May I see the other names and case files which have been identified?"

"Yes, Agent. You'll be leaving today for Venice. A debriefing file will accompany you on that trip. Familiarize yourself with it."

"If I locate Ms. Nichols, am I to maintain the ex-boyfriend from SiJo persona?"

"For the time being, yes. She trusted you. That's your role again, to regain her trust. As I said, this case is multifaceted. Ms. Nichols believes a significant threat exists, a threat which was severe enough to cause her to leave the country. Although she remains unaware, Ms. Nichols is our informant. We need her safe. Mr. Rawlings is an influential man with many connections. For the time being, it's in the best interest of many people for him to remain hidden and safe. With the political and financial climate as it is,

the collapse of Rawlings Industries could have global financial repercussions. That's not something the prominent U.S. government officials want to see at this time. After his location is confirmed, it's been determined to allow him to stay hidden. Actually, that was the bureau's plan. I can't say I agree with the Boston office's tactics. I think they should've been straight with him all along, but it wasn't my call. Now, we have to clean up their mess."

"What if the evidence points back to Mr. Rawlings?"

"If it does, we bring him in."

Externally, Harry maintained his neutral expression; internally, he smiled from ear to ear. Bring him in—yes, Harry liked the way that sounded. He wanted to be the person placing Rawlings' wrists in cuffs, and he didn't mean the thousand-dollar, diamond-studded kind. Harry's need for retaliation wasn't solely based on what he did to Claire, although admittedly it was a predominating factor. No, Harry's incentive stemmed from the implication of so many other criminal activities. Rawlings hadn't only taken Claire's life, but he'd also, potentially, theoretically, hurt countless others, taking and destroying lives at will. Yes, Harry wanted to see Anthony Rawlings behind bars more than he wanted anything else. Maybe, just maybe, when Rawlings' crimes were brought to light, Claire would see the truth. Oh, there was no doubt that when Claire learned that Harry's presence in Palo Alto was not coincidental, that he also lied to her, she'd be upset, but lying for good was much better than killing, beating, raping... it twisted Harry's stomach to think how long the list of Rawlings' sins could possibly be.

Snapping back to reality, the photo of the man on the wall screen registered, and Harry said, "Phillip Roach."

"Excuse me?" SAC Williams asked.

"The man in those photos with Claire Nichols? His name is Phillip Roach. He's a private investigator. I ran preliminary background checks on him. He has a military background and on multiple occasions he's fallen off the grid. He did work for Rawlings. I don't know why he'd be with Ms. Nichols now."

"Well then, that's on your list of things to learn."

"Sir, why am I suddenly in Europe?"

SAC Williams smiled. "Welcome back, Agent."

CHAPTER FIVE

Doubt separates people. It is a poison that disintegrates friendships and breaks up pleasant relations. It is a thorn that irritates and hurts; it is a sword that kills.

—Buddha

BRENT TIPPED THE Styrofoam cup upward, attempting to garnish the last drops of caffeine, praying for a jumpstart to his exhausted body and mind. He'd been sitting and watching the feed from the hotel's surveillance cameras for hours. Agent Jackson remained with him, but the second agent occasionally changed. The one who accompanied Jackson to the hotel was back; however, he'd left for a while and been replaced with another man, wearing the same customary black suit.

Regardless of who was within their room, they sat and watched the same loop over and over. It consisted of a hallway view of Tony and the two agents leaving the suite, the three men alone in the elevator, their walk through the lobby, and all of them entering a waiting black SUV. Brent wondered if Agent Jackson expected something to change, some new information. He wasn't seeing it; at this point, he was pretty sure he'd see the same video in his dreams—if he ever had a full night's sleep.

Without a doubt, Tony walked away willingly. There seemed to be little communication occurring between Tony and the agents; however, without audio, that couldn't be confirmed. Watching his friend disappear from the camera's view, Brent wondered, was Tony being taken by the person Claire feared? The FBI insinuated otherwise. Without coming out and saying it, Brent sensed that they thought Tony's departure, like Claire's, was of his own free will. Regardless of the reason, Brent saw no advantage to watching the same footage a thousand times. Shouldn't they be tracking down the SUV or something? Suddenly, Agent Jackson's voice refocused Brent's thoughts. "There it is! That's what I've been trying to see. I knew something seemed

odd.” The other agent hit pause and backed up the video; soon they were all watching the footage again.

Finally, Brent asked the question he could no longer contain, “What do you see? All I see is the man on the left sending a text.”

Agent number two replied. Brent gave up trying to learn all the different names of the different agents. Most of them looked alike. That’s what made last night’s charade so believable. He didn’t really look at the men. He momentarily thought of the movie *Men in Black*; they had it right by naming their agents with letters. *J* and *K* were much easier to remember.

Number Two replied, “Look at that phone. What’s the time on the feed?”

Jackson read the bottom of the screen, “01:36:58”

Suddenly, Number Two was typing feverishly on a nearby keyboard.

“Is someone going to tell me what you’re thinking? Will this help find Tony?”

Exasperation showed in Jackson’s expression. He exhaled and said, “See his phone. That isn’t an FBI-issued phone. It isn’t even a smart phone.”

Immediately, Brent recognized what Jackson was seeing. Looking at the phone in the agent’s hand upon the stilled image, he saw the same kind of phone Courtney used to use to communicate with Claire. Brent nodded, “Yes! It’s one of those throw away phones. Why would an agent have one of those? Or why would he use it?”

“Exactly—why indeed? While we may not be able to answer *why* with one hundred percent certainty, but I can, with one hundred percent certainty, say he isn’t texting the bureau.”

“Here it is!”

Brent and Jackson turned toward Number Two, who exclaimed, “At exactly 01:36:59, the nearest tower received and forwarded a text message!” He continued to type, then he added, “It originated from a disposable phone, purchased at a convenience store on the east side of Boston, from the coordinates of the hotel.”

“And it went to..?” Jackson asked.

Number Two exhaled. “Another disposable phone, purchased at the same store, same time, with cash.”

“Can you see the text receiver’s location?”

“Give me a minute.”

Brent sat back and lifted his cup again, trying to locate any remnants of coffee lingering in the depths of Styrofoam. He marveled at the FBI’s resources. Their impressive and intrusive technology gave him confidence they’d soon learn more about these fake agents. That both soothed and worried Brent. Despite the fact, he repeatedly told the story of the late night visit, each time emphasizing Tony’s surprise and agitation, they actually alluded to the possibility Tony arranged for the fake visit and his own

disappearance.

As the two agents talked, Number Two typed and typed, and Brent's thoughts went back to last night in the suite. He recalled Tony's declaration, saying that he didn't believe the FBI and feared Claire had been coerced to leave the country. Brent wanted to believe his friend. He wanted to believe that the Tony of 2010 was gone; nevertheless, the fact he once existed lingered in Brent's thoughts.

He knew Claire's theory on why Tony chose her all those years ago—a lifelong vendetta having to do with their grandfathers. Regardless of the reason, in 2010, Tony risked everything: money, appearance, everything, to kidnap and have Claire Nichols. To the outsider, it didn't make sense. Anthony Rawlings was incredibly wealthy and not bad looking. No one would believe he'd jeopardize all he'd worked to accomplish, to kidnap a woman from Atlanta, Georgia. As Brent's thoughts came together, he felt the rush of understanding. Suddenly, the picture made sense. It was like watching cards fall just right to close an inside straight. If Tony had been willing to bet everything to take Claire, then surely he'd be willing to gamble it all again, if he believed she needed rescue.

Closing his eyes and rubbing his temples, Brent allowed his thoughts to volley. One minute, he worried someone dangerous had taken Tony: the *someone* Claire told the FBI about. The next minute, he believed Tony arranged the escape, in an effort to find Claire on his own. If that were the case, his friend and his boss, Anthony Rawlings, was now a fugitive. If that were the case, Brent couldn't have been prouder!

With the sleep-deprived pounding behind Brent's closed eyes, he made a decision. He wouldn't quit, and he hadn't been fired; however, without a doubt—he wasn't getting paid enough to put up with this shit! He deserved a raise, and if Tony weren't around, then damn, that was something Brent could facilitate on his own! This shit deserved more money!



CATHERINE ANSWERED THE door to the estate, knowing who'd be on the other side. Large iron gates greatly reduced the odds of surprise visitors. When Marcus Evergreen checked in, security informed him that Mr. Rawlings wasn't home. He asked to come up to the estate anyway. Without Anton home, Catherine reasoned, she was the one to handle whatever the prosecutor wanted to discuss.

"Hello, Mr. Evergreen, please come in."

"Ms. London, I wanted to come out here personally. I hope you don't mind the intrusion?"

Leading him into the sitting room, Catherine answered, "I don't mind; however, I'm not sure what you want. Mr. Rawlings is still out of town. I haven't heard from him since he left Friday."

"Yes, that's what I'm here to discuss."

They sat, facing one another as Catherine replied, "Mr. Evergreen, perhaps you should talk to Mr. Rawlings' assistant, Patricia. She's usually much more abreast of his schedule than I. I'm sure if he's supposed to meet with you, he will. There's no reason he wouldn't." Catherine's words flowed faster as she spoke.

"Mr. Rawlings has no family, does he?"

"No, sir. Why are you asking?"

"You've worked for him for a long time, isn't that true?"

"Yes, I've known Mr. Rawlings for a long time. I'm sorry, but I don't understand where you're going with this."

"Ms. London, I received a call from the Boston bureau of the FBI yesterday. They instructed me to not release any information until everything was confirmed. This morning, they called and informed me that the news media would soon be reporting the incident."

Catherine's anxiety grew with each passing second. She didn't know what was about to be said, and the uncertainty made her inhale deeply. "Mr. Evergreen, what are you trying to say?"

"Mr. Rawlings chartered a private plane during the early hours of the morning, Sunday. That plane made an emergency landing in the Appalachian Mountains." He quickly added, "It didn't crash—it landed, and no one has been found."

Unexpectedly, tears formed in Catherine's gray eyes. Stoically, she pushed forward. "Why? How? That doesn't make sense. He has his own plane and access to many more. Why would he charter a plane?"

"All I know is that the FBI had reason to believe Mr. Rawlings' life was in danger."

Catherine's hand quickly moved to her throat. "In danger? By whom?"

"They haven't revealed that information to me. They said they're not making any declarations. Your employer is neither considered dead nor missing. They hope to locate him. Ms. London, if you hear from him, I'm imploring you, please contact my office immediately."

Catherine nodded. "Yes, Mr. Evergreen, of course. So, they think he's alive?"

"The FBI isn't being very forthcoming. I'm sure this'll result in all kinds of speculations." The prosecutor stood. "I need to get back to the office. I wanted to do something and informing you seemed like the best option. I realize he was your employer; however, after so many years of devoted service, I felt you deserved to hear the information firsthand."

“Mr. Evergreen, the FBI? Does this also involve Ms. Nichols?”

“I wish I could tell you more. I wish I knew more. As of now, both Ms. Nichols and Mr. Rawlings are both unofficially considered missing.”

Keeping her eyes downcast, Catherine led her visitor back toward the door. “Thank you, Mr. Evergreen. I appreciate the personal message. I’ll contact your office if I hear anything.”

“One more thing, Mr. Rawlings’ driver, Eric Hensley?”

“Yes, that’s his name.”

“Is he here?”

“Yes,” Catherine replied. “He left with Mr. Rawlings Friday evening, but returned on Saturday alone. We haven’t spoken; I’m not sure why he came home alone.”

“You haven’t spoken?”

“Mr. Evergreen, this is a large home and estate. We all have our duties and when we have the chance for some uninterrupted time, we take it.”

Marcus nodded.

It was true the prosecutor made a decent salary, but the way of life in the world of the extremely wealthy was a mystery to those who didn’t live it. Catherine believed her answer made sense, and Mr. Evergreen had no reason to doubt her.

He added, “Thank you, Ms. London. I, too, will let you know of any new developments which I am privy to share. Would you like me to be the one to inform Mr. Hensley?”

“If you feel the need to speak to him personally, by all means.”

“No, if you want to break the news to him, I won’t intrude. Once again, I’m sorry to be the one to inform you of this disturbing news.”

“Thank you for taking the time.” Catherine closed the door and leaned against it. Taking in the grand stairs and large glistening foyer, a smile crept upon her face. She’d give this some time. Although, she wasn’t sure what that amount of time should be; nevertheless, when that acceptable mourning time was over, she’d meet with Mr. Simmons or Mr. Miller. Catherine remembered the legal documents she’d signed years ago naming her the executor of Anton’s estate. They would have been null and void if Anton had family: a wife or children, but he didn’t. He was divorced, and Claire was also missing, as was the child she claimed was his. That all worked together to make those documents now valid.

Catherine’s smile grew as she made her way to his office. It was so nice of Marcus Evergreen to come all the way out to the estate to speak with her personally. She couldn’t have planned this better herself!



THE CAFÉ WAS outside. After almost two weeks in Venice, Claire couldn't stand to be held up inside their hotel suite another minute. Yes, the Hotel Danieli was stunning; nevertheless, Claire had experience at being held prisoner in beautiful places, and she needed air. If that meant more of the disguises, she'd do it. Sipping her warm tea, Claire leafed through the pictures one more time. The blue water and white sand reminded her of her honeymoon. The private island was amazing, but could it be home? She knew she needed to make a decision. Phil had been patient, but this was taking too long; even the two of them, being out in public made him uneasy. Claire knew he wanted an answer.

"I'm not sure. I mean it reminds me of Fiji, but what about my baby? Is there medical care?" She added with emphasis, "Real medical care nearby?"

"Yes, we discussed this. There's a town a mere boat ride away. In that town there's a UK-educated doctor. If more extensive medical care is necessary, the town has an air field. You can afford the necessary flight. In less than two hours you can be at a state-of-the-art facility with specialists."

Claire looked down. Maybe she wasn't ready to make this move. She hadn't checked the American news feed in a few days, honestly, she hadn't checked anything. As the adrenaline from her escape waned, the hidden fortune and impending move seemed burdensome. Claire was tired of making wrong decisions.

Phil leaned across the small table and covered her hand with his. The care and compassion she'd seen in his eyes was slowly turning to irritation. His voice was but a whisper in the din of conversation occurring on all sides of them. "Listen, it's your choice and your money, but if you don't make a decision soon, at the *very least* we need to leave Venice. I realize traveling is difficult for you; however, this is my job, to keep you safe—whether you accept it willingly or not." His last phrase held a bit more determination than Claire appreciated.

With the hairs on the back of her neck springing to attention, Claire's lingering sadness at what she'd lost gave way to her new independence. Sitting straight, she removed her hand from his and said, "You're doing your job because I'm paying you—very well, I might add. It *is* my decision and I'm sick and tired of making the wrong ones."

"Yes, you're paying me, and I've earned less for more. The fact remains, my job is to keep you safe." His voice lowered again. "All the damn disguises in the world won't keep you outside the radar on a public street in Venice. Despite the fact the FBI is probably looking for you, your ex-husband's reward makes everyone a possible threat."

As Claire moved to stand, so did Phil.

"Stop," she declared.

He lifted a brow.

In a hushed but determined tone, she said, "I'm going for a walk. I don't need a babysitter. I have my phone and I need to think. I'll be back when I get back." This time, she leaned toward him. "If you don't respect my privacy, I'll find another babysitter. I need a break."

She saw the turmoil in his eyes. She wasn't just a job to him: he genuinely cared about her. Claire knew that; nevertheless, she needed to think. Walking helped her do that. When he didn't respond, Claire nodded and turned away. Though the sky was clear, the temperature was brisk, especially with the breeze blowing between the buildings. Claire reasoned it had to do with impending autumn and all the water.

With the tirade of thoughts swirling through Claire's mind, the world around her was a blur. Unconsciously, her feet moved toward St. Mark's Square, and her eyes watched the pigeons while directing her body to avoid other pedestrians. Though surrounded in all directions, none of the historical beauty registered. Her mind was busy searching for answers. She thought about Tony. They hadn't seen one another for almost a month. Momentarily, memories of their last encounter filled her vision. She remembered him asking her again to go to Europe. The irony of the fact that she was now where he'd wanted her wasn't lost. If only she'd gone with him, perhaps she'd be enjoying the sightseeing, instead of hiding for her life. Berating herself, Claire recognized another bad decision.

She didn't want her move to be impulsive. Did she even want to move away—forever? Claire questioned: was Catherine truly that much of a threat? Then she remembered Tony's parents and her parents. Could Catherine have been responsible for her parents' accident as well? What about Simon? No, that didn't make sense. Why would Catherine care about Simon Johnson? Claire knew in her heart, if Simon's death wasn't a real accident, the guilt belonged with Tony. If Tony was responsible for Simon, was he also responsible for her parents?

Her entire body ached with indecision. How could the woman she'd grown to love as a mother be responsible for so much? How could the man she loved also be guilty? Claire shuddered against the cool breeze as she remembered scenes she'd compartmentalized away. The images from 2010 streamed through her memories. They weren't as vivid as they used to be—time does that. It takes away the color and dims the sound, yet as she wrapped her arms around herself and felt the tears fill her eyes, she knew, in early 2010, color hadn't been necessary. The only thing that mattered was black.

This unwanted realization struck hard. No matter how much she wanted to love and trust Tony, that black veil of fear would always be nearby. She'd suppressed it and compartmentalized it away; however, its presence was what Catherine used to her advantage. Conceding to this revelation momentarily immobilized her. She sat upon a concrete bench facing the lagoon and

watched the number of pigeons multiply at her feet. She didn't see the other people, although they were all around. It wasn't until she heard *his* voice that she even knew he was present.

Of course, she recognized it. Looking up, she saw his blue eyes penetrating her black veil. Her world was no longer concealed, yet it didn't make sense. How could Harry be there in Venice? Why was he there? Was he really there? New questions flooded her already saturated mind.

CHAPTER SIX

Listen to your intuition. It will tell you everything you need to know.

—Anthony J. D'Angelo

*T*HE FAMILIAR RING beckoned Sophia to the kitchen of their Provincetown home. She recognized the melody, telling her of her husband's waiting call. Hurriedly, clicking the ANSWER button, Sophia allowed her smile to radiate through the screen. They hadn't spoken in almost a week and her excitement at the handsome profile picture was hard to contain. Waiting for their conversation to connect, Sophia stared at his smiling face knowing that soon she'd see him, as if he were right there with her.

"Hi, honey," she answered as the video feed fought to catch up to the audio. Her thoughts and concerns from earlier in the day disappeared as her husband's soft brown eyes transcended miles, continents, and oceans.

"Hey, beautiful." After almost a week apart, merely the sound of his voice made Sophia melt into her chair. "Tell me you've heard the news."

Sophia's mind searched for recent information. She'd been so busy with her parents' affairs, art studio, old friends, and preparations to return to the West Coast, she hadn't looked at a newspaper or even her homepage in a couple of days. That was part of the charm of living on the Cape: it was a world of its own. Grinning at her husband's image, Sophia answered, "Oh, you know me, always up on the latest headlines!"

Derek grinned and shook his head.

Sophia continued, "I don't think I have. Whatever it is, it must be pretty big if it got to you in Beijing."

"Yeah, I'd say it's big. It's big enough that I'm heading back to Santa Clara tomorrow."

"I'm getting there tomorrow too! I already have my flight booked." Excitement about their reunion dimmed as Sophia pondered the possibilities

of Derek's agenda change. "I'm thrilled, but why? You aren't scheduled to come home for another week. What happened? Does it have something to do with travel? Has there been a safety alert? Are you all right?"

"No, travel is fine. I'm fine, but Anthony Rawlings is missing!"

Sophia stared incredulously at the screen, trying desperately to put her husband's words into a frame of time and space. She hadn't spoken to Derek since her strange encounter in her studio with Mr. Rawlings. Wrangling her thoughts into a manageable quorum, she asked, "When? What do you mean he's missing?"

Derek shrugged. "I'm not sure of all the details. A mandatory webinar just concluded. Roger gave everyone from Shedis-tics the basic information. I don't think he wanted any of us to learn it from the news or Internet. I haven't had a chance to look, but Roger said it'll be everywhere soon. The entire Rawlings Industries Empire is in defense mode. You know, circle the wagons, stand tall, and get ready for whatever happens."

Sophia shifted in her chair. "Honey, remember we were supposed to talk last Saturday?"

Derek's attention was suddenly diverted to something at the side of his screen. "Ah, sorry, babe, I couldn't get to Skype. Things were crazy. You know, being back in the States for your parents'..." His voice trailed off as he looked back to the camera, concern filled the blue eyes peering only at Sophia. "I'm sorry. Don't get me wrong. I didn't want to be anywhere else, but with you." The lines in his forehead disappeared as tiny creases formed around his eyes and a loving grin emerged. "That's where I want to be now, too."

Sophia smiled and shook her head; strands of long, blonde hair moved gently across her face. "I know that. Don't worry, but, Derek, I need to tell you something that happened on Saturday. First, tell me, when did Mr. Rawlings disappear? And what do you mean disappeared?" With each word, her volume increased, exposing her growing concern.

"I think it was last weekend, sometime. Something to do with the FBI and the disappearance of his ex-wife." The sound of an incoming call echoed behind Derek's voice. "I really need to go. I'll see you at home tomorrow. Things are insane! I love you!"

"Derek!" she yelled toward the small monitor. "Derek!" Making her words move fast, Sophia added, "He was here last Saturday! He was in my art studio!"

Her speed of speech was inconsequential. Her husband's image was gone. Their connection severed. Sophia stared at the screen for a minute. In place of her husband's moving, talking image, she once again saw his profile picture and name. It went without saying: things must be wild at Shedis-tics and all the other Rawlings' subsidiaries. No matter, Sophia wanted to know when Mr.

Rawlings went missing, and when did his ex-wife go missing? She did remember Mr. Rawlings saying he was off his game. It was *all* so strange.

Sophia had thought it was odd having him at the studio, asking her to dinner, offering to buy a painting, and then not showing to dinner. She remembered waiting at the restaurant for an hour before she left. Of course, she was perturbed and wondered why he'd invite her, just to stand her up. Then, as she sat alone at the table, Sophia recalled Mrs. Cunningham's remark during the gala last spring. She said Mr. Rawlings was well-known for his inclination for punctuality.

This new information added to the peculiarity of his visit.

Trying to make sense of everything, Sophia walked back to the bedroom to finish packing. Going home to California held much more promise now that Derek would be there too.



CLAIRE LOOKED UP to see Harry's customary blonde hair blowing in the brisk wind off the lagoon, while his blue eyes stared steadfast in her direction. The black veil covering her world ripped open, exposing her sudden vulnerability. Shaken by this new paradigm, she was unable to speak. Everything was out of context. She had a wig which made her hair black, and contacts that made her eyes a dark brown. She wasn't *Claire Nichols*, yet she was. Phil was the only familiar person who belonged in her new parallel universe. He was the only one she could trust. How many times had they both discussed that? How many times had they practiced what should happen if their bubble was indeed penetrated?

Words didn't form as she continued to gape. Her instinct told her to turn, run, and pretend she didn't know the man now close enough to touch. She could respond in Italian and act offended by his proximity. If she did, would Harry understand? He'd never mentioned his ability to speak other languages —nor had she. While her internal debate raged, Claire stood and faced the man she hadn't seen since the hospital in Palo Alto. The man who saved her and her baby's life. The man who, for a brief moment in time, thought he was the father of her child. Claire's hand fought the urge to flutter above her growing midsection.

Oh, she knew Phil would tell her to turn away. They were supposed to leave soon. If only she'd made her decision about their hidden location. If only she hadn't gone out alone. If only her life wasn't such a mess—alas, she hadn't. She did. And it was.

As Harry's gaze intensified and his hand reached toward her arm, better judgment prevailed and in near perfect Italian, Claire responded, "Excuse me,

sir. I'm afraid you have mistaken me for someone else." Immediately, hurt registered on Harry's face. It wasn't confusion brought on by a language barrier. No, she saw anguish caused by her deception.

He gripped her arm. With emotion-filled Italian rolling off his tongue, he asked, "Why Claire? Why are you hiding? You have so many people worried. Why, after *everything* would you lie to *me*?"

Claire nervously glanced from side to side. The people in St. Mark's Square came into focus. Not one of them looked in their direction or cared what was happening. She didn't know if this was what she wanted to see. Did she want to find Phil lurking nearby? Did she want him to save her and stop her from revealing any of her secrets? Or, was she confirming his absence—verifying her momentary freedom and ability to be honest with an old friend?

Looking down, away from his icy blue gaze, Claire whispered, "It isn't safe. I can't talk to you." There was no reason to speak in Italian.

When she looked back up, Harry wasn't looking down at her; he was scanning the terrain, perhaps assessing her concern for danger. In the next few transpiring seconds, his grasp of her arm controlled her movement and her, at first, unwilling feet. With quick uninterrupted steps, he directed Claire away from the open square, through a large stone archway, down a narrow path, and into a quiet, dark tavern. By the time they entered, Claire was no longer resisting. Appearances were too ingrained in her behavior. She couldn't make a scene even if she wanted. Besides, it wasn't like he'd kidnap her—Harry wouldn't do that. He was just an old friend, concerned about her safety. That's what she told herself as they passed the small group of customers near the bar. No one seemed interested as they pressed into a booth. Claire sat first while Harry eased in next to her. After so many months apart and the circumstances of their *break-up*, Claire found his approach and proximity unnerving. The warmth of the tavern, combined with the touch of his knee against hers, felt suffocating. The man beside her held an air of control she'd never witnessed in him before. Though she hadn't experienced it with Harry, Claire recognized the suffocating sensation. Her face flushed with a consciousness of captivity, as Phil's words, *no one can be trusted*, dominated her thoughts.

Keeping her well-used mask intact, Claire harshly whispered, "What's going on? What do you think you're doing?"

Before her eyes, the look of determination, which had overshadowed Harry's expression, melted away. She watched as the kind, hurt man from Palo Alto emerged. It was as if he were two completely different people. The familiar one looked down at the table and gently shook his head. His voice brimmed with emotion, as he asked, "Do you have any idea how worried your sister is? How worried we all have been?"

Claire wanted to trust him, she did. There was just something wrong with the whole scenario. "How did you find me? Why are you looking?"

The pain in his eyes, the same eyes that had said goodbye to her at the hospital, mellowed Claire's concerns. At the same time, they increased her sense of unease. After all, months ago, she'd been the cause of that pain. Seeing it right in front of her brought back her sense of guilt at the way things had transpired.

“Emily.”

More guilt flooded Claire’s overflowing emotions. “What about Emily?”

“She asked me to use my resources and try to find you.”

Claire looked down at the table as she weighed her words. With hormones raging and emotions swirling, the internal cyclone was difficult to maneuver.

Harry’s hand reached for hers. When his warm fingers contacted her skin, the cyclone stilled. She wasn’t seeing Emily or John; she wasn’t worried about Phil’s reaction to this encounter. Immediately, Claire retracted her hand as Tony dominated her thoughts. No matter what she’d done to him in the past, despite the fact she’d left him without a word, her heart was his. Yes, she’d been debating her memories, worried about their future, but none of that mattered. She told Marcus Evergreen Tony was in danger. She hadn’t told him the cause, but she would when the time was right. She’d asked Marcus to secure his safety. Once she was sure that Tony was no longer in danger, her accusations could be told. First, she needed to see Tony: her ex-husband, her fiancé, perhaps her ex-fiancé.

“I’m sorry, Harry. We’re friends, I hope.” Looking down at their hands. “But not that close of friends—anymore.”

“I assumed since you left him—”

“You assumed wrong.” Claire inhaled and softened her tone. “I know it looks that way. I left Iowa for my safety and the safety of...” She almost said *our*, thinking of Tony, but changed it to *my*, since she didn’t want to rehash old injuries. “...my child. I didn’t leave Tony. I know it doesn’t make any sense, but it will someday.”

The man with determination in his eyes returned. “Safety? If it wasn’t Mr. Rawlings you feared, then who?”

“Please don’t say anything to Emily. I’m not trying to hurt her; I’m trying to protect her. There’s a danger that can hopefully be stopped.” Looking directly into Harry’s eyes, she added, “And it isn’t Tony.”

“Claire, none of it makes sense. Does this have anything to do with Chester? Was he working with someone? Does Rawlings know where you are?” Sitting straighter, he asked, “Is he with you, here in Venice?”

Without thinking, Claire answered, “Of course not. He’s still in Iowa.”

“No, no he’s not. Haven’t you heard?”

Claire’s heartbeat quickened; her arm protectively covering her midsection, Claire asked, “Heard what?”

“A few days ago, a plane Rawlings chartered made an emergency landing

in the Appalachian Mountains.”

Claire’s mind went to Simon: his plane crashed in the mountains. Tears materialized as terror filled her chest. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

Harry continued, “They didn’t find anyone. The officials aren’t claiming anyone died. They also aren’t saying anyone survived. At first, I thought about Simon.” He reached for Claire’s hand. This time, their common bond united them, and the warmth of his skin fused their brief past. She didn’t pull her hand away. “But then...” He continued. “...I thought maybe it was a ruse for him to disappear and get to you. Emily was so frightened. At first, she assumed he was responsible for your disappearance, then she thought if you did leave, on your own, and not tell anyone, it was because you were scared.” He squeezed her hand. “I believe she’s right about that. Of course, she assumed it was Rawlings you were frightened of; then when he disappeared, she was overwrought with worry. She was sure that he’d track you down. She asked me to do it first.”

Claire felt the heat of his hand and heard the concern in his voice; however, something didn’t feel right. She didn’t know what it was. Maybe it was that the whole picture didn’t fit together. It was like trying to squeeze the wrong puzzle piece into the opening. The shapes were similar, but when you stood back and looked, the picture was wrong. Sitting with her hand in Harry’s wasn’t the right picture. She eased her fingers away.

“It’s amazing that you were able to track me down. I mean, I’ve tried very hard to stay hidden.”

Harry grinned and nodded. “I didn’t say it was easy.”

“Yes, but according to that scenario, you were able to accomplish it in, what, in just a few days? SiJo must have resources I never knew.”

The casual poise faded. “Well, I called some of my old law enforcement buddies.”

Smiling, Claire’s expression softened. “I guess it’s good you did. Otherwise, I’d never have had the chance to tell you how sorry I am about how everything ended.”

Shrugging, he started to answer when a dark-haired waitress came to their table. In Italian, she apologized for the delay and asked if they’d like drinks. Replying appropriately, also in Italian, Claire asked for warm tea while Harry ordered a beer. Before the waitress left, Claire spoke to Harry, still in Italian, “If you’d please excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

She saw the indecision sweep across his face. If he didn’t allow her to get up, it would look suspicious to the waitress. If he did, could he trust her? Claire spoke first to the server, “You know how it is when you’re pregnant. I know every restroom in Venice!” The young woman smiled as Claire turned to Harry and said, “When I get back, I want to hear what you were about to

say.”

His expression eased as he stepped from the booth. The waitress pointed toward the hall near the rear of the tavern. Claire’s eyes scanned from side to side as her feet eased down the back hall. Seeing the exit, she glanced back toward Harry smiling down at the screen of his phone, and she prayed the door wasn’t locked. One last glance over her shoulder to see him still looking down, and Claire was again out in the cool autumn air. Reaching for her phone, she dialed. Keeping her face hidden from the wind, she hurried toward Hotel Danieli and listened for a response.

Phil answered on the first ring, “Are you all right?”

“I don’t think so. Something’s weird. Where are you?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.

—George MacDonald

EACH STEP DOWN the west corridor seemed like a hundred. The call requesting his presence in Mr. Rawlings' office was more than strange. First, the news hit the wires over twenty-four hours ago: Mr. Rawlings' plane made an emergency landing. Eric wondered with each step who wanted to see him and what they wanted. If it were the police, he'd been advised to play dumb. After all, he'd used alternative identification to fly back East. That same identification was used to rent the vehicle he drove across the Canadian border. Yes, Mr. Rawlings also had alternative identification, which no one else knew anything about. They'd had them for years and had used them on occasion. Through the years, Eric never asked questions. Yes, he was paid exceptionally well for his service and discretion; nevertheless, he knew too much. They'd been through too much together.

From the time they were both young, back when Mr. Rawlings was a budding entrepreneur, Mr. Rawlings asked and Eric did. Maybe he didn't ask. Was it really a request, if denying wasn't an option? No matter, neither party ever questioned. It was the perfect working relationship.

Truly, Eric had planned on sleeping for the next few days. Meeting Mr. Rawlings, driving to Canada, seeing him make his way down the concourse on his way to Europe, and driving back to the United States, only to fly back to Iowa all within a forty-eight hour period wiped him out. No one at the estate should've monitored his activity, but if they did, Eric had a story for his recent absence.

During his long trip back to Iowa, Eric contemplated the activities he'd done, over the years, to help Mr. Rawlings. There'd been more than a few happenings which encroached upon the limits of the law. Abducting Ms. Nichols was, without a doubt, the most damning; however, Mr. Rawlings said

he saw her statement to the police and there was no recollection of her travel to Iowa. Eric's assistance was only known by his employer.

Since he hadn't officially been informed of Mr. Rawlings' disappearance, Eric planned to enter the office as he would on any given day. Unless he was told others were present, Eric usually opened the door without hesitation. He assumed Mr. Rawlings allowed this because there wasn't much that Eric didn't know. Years of overheard conversations and encounters gave Eric a database of information. Rarely had he opened any door to find something of surprise. On those numbered occasions, when the scene caught him off-guard, staying true to form, Eric neither reacted nor later mentioned the incident. In Eric's line of work, secrecy was a valued and essential commodity.

Standing before the grand double doors, he remembered the last time he'd been in the office. It was to retrieve the small key from the top right drawer. That, some cash from the safe, and the alternative identifications, including the *Anton Rawls* identification were Mr. Rawlings' only requests. Eric never said *no*; therefore, when the call came in the middle of the night from a untraceable phone, those requests, just like all before them, were carried out exactly as instructed. The last thing Mr. Rawlings told Eric, before he walked through security was to go back home and act like nothing happened. He instructed Eric to act like the last time they were together was in Provincetown. Eric didn't question; instead he said, "Yes, sir. Stay safe." Mr. Rawlings nodded in return. It was as close as they would get to an emotional goodbye.

Opening the door and stepping inside the regal office, Eric caught the hard gray stare as Catherine rose from the leather chair and said, "In the future, I'd appreciate you knocking before you enter this office, just as you would for Mr. Rawlings."

Although he had years of practice at maintaining a stoic expression, the scene before him incited a combination of shock and rage. His mind swirled with possibilities for Catherine to be behind Mr. Rawlings' desk. None of them made sense.

Reining in the emotion which threatened his impenetrable veneer, Eric stood before the grand desk and asked, "Catherine, where is Mr. Rawlings?"

"First, I'd like to know where you've been. I needed you two days ago and you were gone."

"I talked to Mr. Rawlings about my aunt a week ago. He gave me a few days to visit her."

Catherine sat again and nodded. "I see, an aunt. Have you mentioned her before?"

"I've mentioned her many times. I don't recall you being present during those conversations. Where is Mr. Rawlings? Mr. Simmons said they'd be back."

Catherine leaned back against the soft leather chair as her cheeks rose in a smile. In Eric's opinion, it was neither warm nor comforting. She began, "That's why I was looking for you. Haven't you listened to the news?"

Eric relaxed his stance. "Why so many questions about my personal habits? No, I usually avoid anything that isn't music or silence." He went on, "Before you ask, there's no real reason; I like quiet."

She motioned toward the chairs near the desk. "Have a seat. We need to discuss a few things."

Suspiciously, Eric eyed the chairs. "Before I sit, tell me what's going on Catherine."

Sitting straighter and squaring her shoulders, Catherine exhaled, "From now on, you and anyone else who wishes to maintain their position here on the estate will address me as Ms. London." When Eric didn't speak, Catherine's eyebrow raised. "Tell me, do you wish to maintain your position?"

Honestly, he had enough money to walk away and live contently for the rest of his life. He'd invested well and had little to no living expense; however, Mr. Rawlings told him to go back to Iowa and act normal. Maintaining his current position would be *normal*. "Yes, Ms. London." The title only hurt the first time. Eric Hensley was a man of service; as such, he'd accommodate whomever necessary. "I would like to retain my position." With that, he made his way to the chair and listened as Ms. London informed him of Mr. Rawlings' disappearance.

While she spoke about the plane and the emergency landing, he did his best to maintain his facade, while showing the appropriate amount of concern and shock. The best part of being a man of service was that silence was considered accommodating. He didn't need to agree or disagree with Catherine. He only needed to maintain eye contact, nod occasionally, and say, "Yes, Ms. London." He had years of practice.



THE TEXT HARRY received was exactly what he'd wanted. He looked up and glanced toward the young waitress. With a sly grin, he nodded. Oh, he'd already paid her for her photography skills, and now he had his proof. On his phone were two pictures of him with Claire. There was one of the two of them in the booth talking, and there was the one of them in the same booth with, her hand in his. She was in disguise, but to the knowing eye, it was Claire Nichols. Within seconds, Harry forwarded the non-contact picture to his superiors in the FBI with a text message:

"CLAIRE NICHOLS FOUND AND SAFE." After he hit *SEND*, he

saved both photos to his card. He didn't know if they would be useful.

His confident grin began to fade as he realized Claire hadn't returned. It was true: a woman in her condition needed to use the restroom, frequently, but looking at his watch, he thought it seemed odd she hadn't returned. It wasn't until the waitress returned with his beer and no tea that Harry questioned her absence. "Where is my friend's tea?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Signore. I assumed, since she left..."

He didn't wait for the rest of the story. Harry pulled a few euros from his pocket, placed them on the table, and hurried towards the restrooms. Seeing the rear exit, he quickly reached the door. Harry couldn't believe she'd left. He never assumed she'd slip away that fast. As the cool autumn air filled his lungs, Harry scanned the crowds. Since she'd left the booth over five minutes ago, he truly didn't expect to see her.

After a brisk walk through the Piazza, Harry leaned against a pillar and pulled out his phone. Hitting a few buttons, he found the beacon. According to the locating device he'd successfully dropped in the pocket of her jacket, Claire wasn't far away or moving. Following the pulsating dot, Harry headed toward what he assumed to be Claire's hotel.



PHIL HELPED CLAIRE with her coat and led her to the sofa. He must have felt her trembling as he said, "Calm down and tell me everything."

Claire stared into his eyes. She'd expected him to be upset. Obviously, he was unhappy when she left him at the cafe; however, instead of anger, she saw concern as golden flecks shone from the depths of his green eyes. Taking unexpected solace in his calming presence, Claire began, "I was sitting on a concrete bench, in St. Mark's Square, looking out at the water..." As she told Phil about her unlikely encounter with Harry, he remained quiet and supportive. She also told him about Tony's plane. When she finally finished, she said, "I'm so sorry. All this work you've done to keep me and my baby safe and in one afternoon I throw it all away."

Phil stood, leaving Claire alone on the sofa, and paced the width of their suite. Claire watched as he contemplated her story. Finally, he answered, "First, you didn't throw it all away. You and your baby are still safe. Also..." He turned towards her and smiled. "...your instincts are getting better, I'm glad you're learning to listen to them."

Claire opened her eyes in question.

"Claire, you've been far *too* trusting of *too* many people for way *too* long."

She nodded. "I realize that. I suppose it's the way I was raised. I never

expected my life to be like this. Truthfully, I can't even remember what I expected." She shrugged. "Something like my parents, I guess. Isn't that the basis of everyone's expectations? You either want the same as them or better. My parents were married twenty-six years when they died—together. I never once dreamt that I'd be twenty-nine, divorced, and pregnant with my ex-husband's/fiancé's/ex-fiancé's child. Nor did I imagine that I'd be hiding from some crazy woman who's a threat to me and my child. Or that I'd be filthy rich, because I stole my child's father's secret money." Claire shook her head and grinned. "I don't think I could've even made up that scenario!"

Phil sat back down. Claire marveled at the emotions she saw in his expression. It wasn't that long ago that he was her shadow, her voyeur; now she considered him a trusted friend. Phil's voice reflected his earlier concern. "No one signs up for this. It is what it is, and life goes on, or it doesn't. I've made choices I regret. I'd assume everyone has. I also made the decision that life would go on. Perhaps some of the things I've done are less than scrupulous; however, my more recent endeavor, despite the legalities, could be considered one of my most honorable. I will *not* fail. You and your child will be safe. I realize you're paying me, well, as you stated, but even you should understand this is about more to me than money."

Claire fought the urge to look away. She knew what he meant. Claire knew she meant more to Phil than anyone ever had. Over the weeks they'd been together, she learned a lot about Phil. She knew about his military background and some of his special ops. She knew he had no family and no connections. From the time he was very young, he succeeded in his assignments and moved on. This was the first, the only time, he'd made personal contact with anyone. Claire also knew he respected her enough to keep their friendly relationship professional. Or was it, their professional relationship friendly? Either way, it was more than he'd ever had, and she was grateful for his commitment.

"I don't know what it was about this afternoon," Claire said. "Something didn't feel right. I have no reason to be suspicious of Harry. He's never been anything but nice to me. It's just... I mean, I know how hard you've worked to keep our location secret, and with the help of some California policemen, he tracked me down?"

"See, that's the kind of intuition that'll keep you and that baby safe." Phil sat straighter. "I should also tell you, I've known about Mr. Rawlings' plane since it happened, or since they released the information. I thought you knew and weren't saying anything."

"No, I've been avoiding news from the States lately. I'm so tired of hearing about Emily's quest to find me. It makes me feel guilty." She looked back to Phil. "If we're confessing, I should tell you, I left something for Tony in the safety deposit box in Geneva."

Phil's brows creased.

"It wasn't like I told him where we're going. I hoped that after Marcus Evergreen, or the FBI, contacted him, he'd know to get away from Catherine. I assumed he'd eventually get to Geneva, to the safety deposit box. I figured after he opened it, he'd want to contact me." She snickered. "He won't be happy to find his money is mostly gone."

Incredulous, Phil asked, "You left something in the box that allows him to contact you?"

"I promise, he's the only one who'll know. I have a back-up plan if someone else gets in the box."

"Is that why you've been so hesitant to leave Europe?"

She shrugged. "It was; however, after this afternoon, I'm ready."

Phil patted her hand as it rested upon her knee. "Good, we'll leave soon." Standing once again, he asked, "And where, Ms. Nichols, are we going?"

Claire smiled, and this time, despite the colored contacts, even her eyes joined the celebration. "You swear it's a real medical facility?" Phil nodded. "Then, Mr. Roach, I trust you, and we..." She paused and widened her grin. "...the Alexanders, are going to paradise!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

I cannot say whether things will get better if we change; what I can say is they must change if they are to get better.

—Georg C. Lichtenberg

DEREK LISTENED AS Sophia talked about her unusual encounter with Mr. Rawlings. Although she held all the information, her expression was that of a doe in headlights, wide-eyed with wonder. He couldn't understand why the CEO of his parent company would travel all the way to Provincetown and visit Sophia's small studio.

"I agreed to meet him for dinner, but he never showed. I guess that's when he went missing. I've thought about calling the authorities and letting them know he was in my studio that Saturday morning..."

"I don't know if that's necessary. I asked Roger a few more questions and did a few online searches. Apparently, prior to his disappearance, he was in FBI custody. All I've been able to figure is that it has something to do with Claire Nichols."

Sophia took a sip of her wine as they watched the waves of the Pacific Ocean crest and crash along the strip of shoreline. It was one of their favorite places to visit. Sophia would bring a blanket, and Derek would bring the picnic basket with wine and food. On this autumn day, the beach was virtually empty with the exception of a few dog owners allowing their pets the rare opportunity to exert energy. Sophia assumed the weather was too cool for the Californians. For a woman from the East Coast, the warm sunshine and brisk wind were perfect; sharing it with her husband made it heavenly.

Thoughtfully, she asked, "Didn't you tell me she's missing too? When did she disappear? Don't you think it's strange that they're both missing?"

"She disappeared a little over two weeks before him, and her family thinks he's responsible. They're making all sorts of noise to anyone who'll listen. Stocks in all of Rawlings holdings are dropping fast now that the news

has gone viral.”

Snuggling against her husband’s shoulder, Sophia sighed. “I’m sure this will be huge for you and everyone employed by one of his companies, but I’m tired of talking about it.” Turning her face toward his, their noses touched. She smiled and whispered, “I’ve missed you so much.”

Derek may have answered verbally, but with the sound of the waves and the wind combined with the pressure of his body laying her back on the blanket, she didn’t hear him. Concerns for Ms. Nichols, for Mr. Rawlings, and for anyone or anything outside the two of them were forgotten. Yes, Sophia loved her studio in Provincetown; nevertheless, home was definitely wherever she could be with her husband.



FOR THE SECOND day in a row, Harry followed his electronic breadcrumbs along Venice’s characteristic slab streets to the Hotel Danieli. The luxurious hotel was made up of three beautiful Venetian palazzi. Staring at the magnificent historic structure, he wondered how Claire could afford her accommodations. All of the information he’d read regarding her disappearance claimed she left without accessing any of her available funds. She didn’t take her credit cards or any known cash. As Harry read that information, he remembered thinking, well, at least this time Rawlings gave her access to funds, or so it appeared; then Harry reminded himself, appearances have been known to be deceiving.

Harry knew the beacon on his phone wasn’t deceiving or misleading as it had led him to the same structure two days in a row. Claire Nichols was within the walls of this well-known, beautiful hotel. Yesterday, with help from the bureau, he learned she wasn’t registered—at least, not under her name. The hotel had 225 guest rooms and suites; 72 rooms were registered under only a man’s name, 23 were registered under a woman’s name, and the rest had Mr. and Mrs. in the registration. The rooms and suites registered to residents of the United States were immediately eliminated for one reason or the other. That left only 174 rooms/suites as possibilities. When he remembered Claire’s near perfect Italian retort in St. Mark’s Square, Harry asked for a search of either single women or couples from Italy. Once again, the results were excessive.

Entering the very impressive lobby filled with glass chandeliers, pink marble columns, antique carpets, and gilded ceilings, Harry knew the hotel was too large to hope for another *chance* meeting. He also suspected that after yesterday afternoon, Claire would remain within the confines of her room. Taking in the opulence of his surroundings, Harry decided to go another

direction. Obviously, Claire had funds. Once again, he called the bureau. This time, he asked for information on the suites at the Hotel Danieli, particularly the executive suites. If Claire were staying in one of the top hotels, Harry reasoned she was also staying in one of the best rooms. Within seconds, he learned all were occupied by couples; however, there was only one that caught the attention of the agent on the other end of the line. It had been retained by a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander of Paderno del Grappa, Italy, for the last ten nights. There was a note on the registry indicating that Signore Alexander had recently informed the front desk that they'd be leaving first thing in the morning.

Writing down the suite number, Harry grinned. His instincts told him that he'd found her; then, without warning, his satisfaction waned. If she were registered as Signora Alexander, and Signore Alexander called the front desk, who was Signore Alexander? She acted genuinely surprised by the news of Rawlings' emergency landing. Her reaction caused Agent Baldwin to assume she wasn't here with Rawlings, but then he remembered the pictures at the San Francisco bureau and wondered, could the person in question be Roach, and if it was—was their cohabitation all an act? Or could it be real?



CLAIRE PACKED HER luggage while trying to convince herself that leaving civilization for a while was the best move. Although Phil asked her to limit her baggage, she wondered how she'd get the things she needed in paradise. It wasn't like she imagined paradise with a drugstore on the corner or a boutique just a boat ride away.

Her thoughts went back to Fiji. Claire remembered the suitcases of clothes she took with her on her honeymoon and how very few of them were ever worn. The memories warmed her and—despite her sweater and slacks—left her chilled at the same time. Sadly, Claire's anticipation for this trip to paradise was significantly different; instead of love and romance, she sought peace and tranquility. It wasn't the allure of moonlit strolls on the beach or the stone shower reprieves from the sultry humidity that Claire envisioned. It was the calmness that came with knowing you can go inside or outside without fear of danger. It was the knowledge that she had done everything—sacrificed everything—to ensure the child growing within her would be able to live in peace.

Grasping the long gold chain that hung from her neck, Claire's knees buckled as she sat on the edge of the king-sized bed and shed a tear—or two. With all her heart, she wanted to hear from Tony. She wanted to tell him that she hadn't left him; she'd left because of Catherine. Claire longed to explain,

to have him acknowledge her fear as real; however, part of her, a part that grew every day, also feared him. It wasn't the fear of physical retaliation: right or wrong, she'd compartmentalized that away. No, it was the fear that he wouldn't accept her reasoning, wouldn't acknowledge Catherine as a threat, and wouldn't forgive her for wavering in the trust she promised to give to him. After all, her leaving was the first flake resulting in an avalanche of problems.

Sobbing quietly behind her closed door, Claire decided, *no*. Catherine was the one who covered their world with the deadly depths of snow. Claire's leaving was only the final flake to start the tumble. A simple flake, that became a small snowball, and lead to the avalanche which threatened to cover them all—forever. The last time Claire looked, stocks in Rawlings holdings were still falling, the publisher was threatening to publish her book, and Emily and John were stirring up noise and doubt at every turn. Placing her hand over her midsection, Claire felt the fluttering of butterfly wings.

Did her child understand what she was doing? Did her little one know that this was all for him or her? Claire vowed that she'd do anything and everything to keep this baby safe. By the time Phil knocked on Claire's door, she had two suitcases filled. The rest of her things would remain in the suite. After all, the difference in climate alone didn't necessitate much of her attire. Claire knew she'd be glad to be rid of jackets and coats!

Acknowledging Claire's puffy eyes, Phil asked, "Do you want to go down to one of the restaurants, one last time?"

Claire looked toward the dinner dresses she'd left hanging in the closet. "Thanks, but no. I'm still freaked out about yesterday. Would you please call, and have dinner brought up here?"

Phil nodded. "You know, I'm pretty sure you're going to like it."

"I'm sure I will. How long will you be able to stay?"

Phil shrugged. "Long enough to be sure you're all right with it. I won't leave you, if you don't want to be there."

The fluttering in her midsection suddenly felt like her baby was doing flips. Her hand went to her belly as her eyes opened wide. Oh, she'd felt movement before, but this was different. Her entire stomach moved. Claire believed it was probably even visible. More than anything, she longed for Tony. She wanted to share these moments with him; instead, she saw Phil's concerned expression. When he asked if she was feeling all right, tears filled her eyes. "Yes, I'm feeling fine." The baby moved again. With more vulnerability than she intended to show, Claire asked, "Would you like to feel my baby? He's really moving around."



PHIL HAD NEVER imagined placing his hand on a pregnant woman's stomach, but there was something in Claire's voice: a need he wanted to fill. He knew she didn't want him the way he wanted her; however, at that moment, she needed someone—someone to share in this experience. Being her second choice was more than he'd ever been before to anyone.

Tentatively, he stepped toward her. When he hesitated, Claire reached for his hand and placed it on top of her stomach. He was afraid to press, but her petite hand pressed his down. Without warning, from under his hand, her stomach moved. *He felt it!* When his gaze met hers, he saw the excitement in her beautiful eyes. "I felt that," he whispered.

Claire nodded, her smile breaking some personal sadness. "Isn't it amazing?"

Phil nodded. "It is." Although he was apprehensive to allow his hand to rest too long, Claire kept her hand pressed against his, taking away his choice. Once the movement slowed, her pressure released. Never in his life had he experienced such an amazing sensation as that of a new life moving beneath his touch. Smiling down at her, he said, "Claire, thank you. That was unbelievable."

Blushing, Claire replied, "It is. Maybe my little one is excited about a place to call home, even for a little while."

Phil couldn't help but respect the woman he'd come to know. "It'll take some travel time, but we'll be there soon." Looking down at her packed luggage, he asked, "Do you need anything before we leave? I can go to a shop before we call for dinner, or we can go out together."

Focusing once again on the world around them, Claire shook her head. "I do need a few things, but first I'll need to sit down and make you a list. If we're traveling early, I'd like to get some sleep; maybe you can go after we eat?"

A few hours later, Phil left the suite in search of the items on his list. With each step and the turn around each corner, his clandestine skills worked overtime. Claire's story about Harrison Baldwin didn't make sense. He didn't want to upset her any more than she already was, but the entire encounter worried him. He'd worked too hard to create an untraceable trail, and it wasn't like he was new at this. Claire was right; contacting some California cops would *not* suddenly unlock the secret to their location.

Walking along the slab streets illuminated by lamplight, Phil's thoughts continually looped back to Claire's child. He wanted Claire safe. Now, after the experience of feeling the baby move, he was suddenly concerned about the kid as well. Phil knew that he wouldn't hesitate to assure that both Claire and her child made it to paradise unharmed. Knowing his own history, nothing was beyond the realm of possibilities—Phil would willingly lie, steal, cheat, or kill to fulfill his quest.

Scanning each new location for Harrison Baldwin, he wondered, would one of those actions be necessary when it came to him? Claire assessed Catherine London to be her main threat. Phil contemplated. Could it be more involved? He'd done a background check on Harrison and Amber for Mr. Rawlings; however, he had to admit, he took the preliminary information at face value. Phil ascertained, he'd get Claire settled, then he'd look further into the backgrounds of the nice siblings who took Claire under their wings.

Phil's pocket vibrated.



CLAIRE WAS NEARLY ready for bed when she heard the knock on the door to the suite. Reaching for her phone, she sent a text:

"IS THAT YOU? WHY ARE YOU KNOCKING?"

Before she received a response, the second round of knocks echoed through the suite. Cautiously, Claire moved to the peephole. The lump in her throat grew as she saw Harry with flowers and a sign that read:

CAN WE PLEASE TALK?

She debated her movements when the phone within her hand vibrated. Looking down, she read:

"IS WHAT ME? NO! DON'T OPEN THE DOOR. I DON'T CARE WHO IT IS! I'M ON MY WAY."

The next time she peered through the hole, Harry's sign had changed:

I HAVE SOMETHING I NEED TO TELL YOU—PLEASE?

Wondering how he'd located her again didn't pass through her mind, and what he wanted to tell her didn't seem as important as the look on his face. It was the sadness. She'd left him in Palo Alto. They'd said goodbye at the hospital, but she left without seeing him again. Then yesterday, she'd allowed the stress of her escape to overpower her feelings of friendship. He was her

friend, wasn't he? They'd been together, he helped her start a new life, and he'd been encouraging and supportive—up until Tony came back in the picture.

Claire placed her hand on her stomach. Their baby wasn't moving. What was her little one trying to say? Should Claire take the advice of her child and be calm? After all, tomorrow she and Phil were leaving. If she didn't talk to Harry tonight, would she ever again have another chance?

CHAPTER NINE

Let us not be content to wait and see what will happen, but give us the determination to make the right things happen.

—Horace Mann

PHIL WASN'T FAR from the hotel, and his list from Claire wasn't complete. Without a doubt—none of that mattered. Getting back to Claire was his only thought as he pushed through the crowded streets. His stomach clenched with an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. All at once, he was back in Palo Alto outside of her condominium—

Phil knew Claire was with Baldwin. He'd followed them from the airport, and then, he read his computer—telling him about the sensors. He ran as fast as he could. It didn't matter; he couldn't get to her, to her condominium, in time. When he reached her it was too late...

With blatant disregard for anyone else on the streets of Venice, Phil's adrenaline-filled veins helped him maintain a full-out run. Some people cursed as he pushed past them, while others sent him hateful looks. None of it registered. The only image in his mind was that of Claire laying on the floor, and Chester reaching in the pocket of his jacket...

Phil didn't stop to ride the elevator; instead, he took the stairs two and three at a time. By the time he reached the door of their suite, no one was outside. The hallway was empty and calm. Instinctively, he leaned his head against the door and listened. No sounds were registering from inside the room. All he could hear reverberating in his ears was his own heavy breathing and the sound of his pounding heartbeat. Slipping his key into the lock, he

opened the door.

It took only a second for Phil to assess the scene. Claire was sitting on the sofa, her expression neither happy nor sad. It was a look he recognized: the one she wore when she was suppressing her feelings. From the doorway, Phil saw the back of a man's head. Even before the blonde-headed man turned toward the sound of the opening door, Phil knew it was Harrison Baldwin. Phil wasn't thinking about his movements; it wasn't planned; nonetheless, as Baldwin stood, Phil found himself suddenly across the room and chest to chest with the younger man. The fear Phil felt for Claire and her child over the last few minutes came bubbling out. "Tell us what you want! How in the hell did you find her?"

"Hey, man." Harry's open hands came up in a commonly accepted sign of surrender. "I'm not the bad guy here. Claire's in no danger from me."

Phil's volume decreased, yet his tone remained hard. "Then why are you here?"

Claire interjected, "Phil, Harry was just telling me an interesting story. Please..." She looked toward Phil. "...please, let's hear him out." Then she added, "Together."



SHE'D NEVER SEEN such rage in Phil's eyes. He'd told her of jobs he'd done, never with too much detail; however, at that moment, when he entered their suite, she saw military, special ops, private detective, and bodyguard all rolled into one. It wasn't that she'd ever questioned his ability to protect her, but at that moment, there was no room for doubt. Phil's eyes stayed fixed on Harry as he stepped backwards toward Claire.

Despite Phil's obvious displeasure, Claire believed he'd be as surprised as she at Harry's news. Yes, Claire had the monopoly on hurt; that went without saying. Even so, Phil would definitely be surprised. Both men stared at one another. Finally, Claire broke the lingering silence, "Harry, why don't you show Phil what you showed me? Show him the reason I finally opened the door." She wanted Phil to know she hadn't acted impulsively.

When Harry reached for his pocket, Claire felt Phil flinch. Reflexively, she placed her hand on his arm and whispered, "It's all right. It's not what you think." The calmness of Claire's voice released some of the tension from the suite; nevertheless, Claire sensed that if it was necessary, Phil was ready to pounce.

Harry opened his wallet and offered the contents for view. Phil stared for a moment, processing the sight before him. Inside the confines of the leather billfold was a badge. Phil turned questioningly to Claire and then back at the

badge. Reaching for the wallet, he looked closer. The golden eagle, the woman with the scales of justice, and the words: *Federal Bureau of Investigation*. Next to the badge, in its own compartment, was a card which read in bold letters, FBI, with Harry's picture and the name: Agent Harrison Baldwin.

Clearing his throat, Harry began again, "Mr. Roach, Claire's been telling me what a wonderful job you've been doing keeping her safe. I'll add that it's taken a lot of time and manpower to locate the two of you. I applaud your abilities."

Phil looked once again at Claire. His displeasure at this turn of events was evident in his voice. "Mr., or Agent, or whoever the hell you are—what do you want with her? Why are you utilizing federal manpower to locate her?"

"I can't exactly divulge that information at this time." Shifting slightly in his chair, Harry added, "To be honest, I shouldn't even be divulging my position. It's that we, the FBI, learned of your plans to check out of Hotel Danieli tomorrow. After locating Claire, we don't want to lose her again."

Phil sat straighter. "I don't believe that's your choice. We're leaving."

"All I'm asking is that you..." His blue eyes softened with his plea. "...Claire, remain in contact with me. I'd like to know your location and that you're safe."

Phil interjected, "She has been and will continue to be *safe*. Maybe the FBI should worry about things like terrorists and leave private citizens like Ms. Nichols alone."

Ignoring Phil, Harry urged, "Please listen." He leaned forward. "You and I—we—Claire, I'm worried about you. There's reason to believe..." Harry shifted in his chair. "...we have reason to believe that Rawlings will be looking for you. Currently, his resources are limited. We know that. However, there are rumors that Rawlings has funds outside the United States. If he accesses those funds, we can assume..." His icy blue eyes turned to Phil. "...despite your best efforts, Mr. Roach, that Rawlings will locate Claire."

Claire concentrated on her hands lying calmly in her lap. She didn't want to make eye contact with either man; both knew her too well. When the silence became palpable, Claire took a deep breath, looked up, and green met blue. "So, Harry, did my sister send you?"

"No," he answered truthfully. "She is worried and rightfully so. Claire, I wish you acted more concerned about Rawlings."

"Did you receive help from your law enforcement friends?"

"Yes, but they are FBI, not California—"

"Were you ever employed by the California Bureau of Investigation?"

Harry looked down. "At one time."

"SiJo, were you ever employed by SiJo?"

Harry's eyes met hers. "Yes, and I knew Simon. He wasn't only my

sister's fiancé; he was my friend. This case has meaning to me!"

Claire's jumble of emotions steadied. She knew Phil's presence helped; nevertheless, she also realized she was once again facing someone who had lied to her on more than one occasion—someone she'd trusted. With her voice rising an octave, Claire asked, "Tell us, what else have you lied to me about in the past seven or eight months? I'm very curious. What about *us*? Was that a lie too? Was there any meaning there?"

Harry looked from Claire to Phil and back. "Claire," Harry's voice calmed. "Perhaps this is something we could discuss in private?"

Placing her hand again on Phil's arm, she replied, "I don't intend to have that, or any other discussion with you in private. Please leave."

"You're in danger. You know that. The FBI wants to help you. Don't be stupid and trust the wrong people."

Claire stood. "Hmm," Straightening her shoulders and feeling the fire flash in her eyes, she replied, "Yes, I've definitely been *stupid...*" emphasizing his word, "...in the past. I believe I'm finally learning from my mistakes. Goodbye, *Agent Baldwin*."

Harry took a step toward her. "Claire."

Phil quickly moved between them.

Harry continued speaking, "Listen to me. I didn't call *you* stupid. It's just that you have a blind spot when it comes to Rawlings. Even after everything he's done." Harry spoke quickly, "What I mean is that you never would have left, like you did, if there wasn't some part of you who still feared him." When Claire started to turn away, Harry reached for her hand. "Just give it some thought. Seriously, I don't blame you for being upset with me, but I never kidnapped you, raped you, hurt—"

Claire interrupted and pulled her hand free, "No, you didn't, but you weren't honest with me either! You misled me into believing you were someone you're not. At least Tony was honest with who he was."

"Really? Was he honest when he said his name was Anthony Rawlings or Anton Rawls?"

The intensity of Claire's eyes grew with each word. "*Anthony Rawlings* is his legal name. That isn't, nor was it, a lie; however, I have yet to be assured of *your* legal name." When Agent Baldwin failed to respond, Claire continued, "I will repeat, Tony *has* changed, and *he* isn't the person who I'm running from."

"Then tell me, who *are* you running from? Who scared you enough to leave him, let your family and friends think you're possibly dead, and hide out in another country?"

"You're the FBI. Figure it out."

Phil's deep voice entered the conversation. His steadfast tone didn't invite debate. "I believe Claire asked you to leave."

Once again disregarding Phil, Harry continued, “Claire, how about if you don’t leave?” His tone mellowed. “Stay here a day or two longer and think about what I said. Tell me who you’re running from. Let me tell you what we know about Rawlings and his connections to other open cases.”

Claire stepped past Phil and walked toward the door to the bedroom. “Phil, please show *Agent Baldwin* out.” With that, she disappeared through the threshold, shut the door, and left the two men alone. If she tried, she could hear their words, but Claire didn’t want to try. She didn’t want to think about how yet another person, someone she’d trusted, had lied to her. Tears formed as she remembered late nights with Harry, sitting with him on the sofa of Amber’s condominium and recanting details of her private life. During those times, she’d felt safe and supported as she recounted things she never thought she could share with another man. Today she felt used.

Harry’s words from only a few minutes earlier came back to her: *I never kidnapped you, raped you, hurt...* Before she walked into the bathroom to get ready for bed, Claire whispered, speaking aloud, yet not for anyone to hear, more as a validation to herself, “You’re wrong, Harry. Now you’ve hurt me.”

When she returned to her room, Phil was standing in the open doorway. His presence surprised her. He usually knocked before he entered her room. “What are you—?”

“Are you all right?”

The concern in his voice wouldn’t allow Claire to be upset by his invasion of her private space. She swallowed and nodded.

Phil grinned. “You see, your instincts were right.”

A renegade tear slid down Claire’s freshly washed cheek. She didn’t want to be sad. After all, she’d left Harry for Tony. She wanted to compartmentalize Harry away; however, from the moment she watched Harry walk out of that hospital room, she’d thought she was the monster, the one who took advantage of his feelings and crushed them. During those months in Palo Alto, she considered Amber and Harry her reinforcements, her chess pieces fortifying her with the strength to face Tony. She wondered, was she just a pawn in a much bigger game? Was anything real?

With a lump in her throat, Claire answered, “Why doesn’t that make me feel better?”

“It will, one day. Just keep listening to them. What are they saying right now?”

Claire shrugged. “That I need to push this away, get some sleep, and concentrate on getting to paradise.”

“Are we still leaving?”

“Oh, yes.” Her eyes brightened. “Can you get us away from Catherine and the FBI?”

Phil smirked. “I’ve always done better under pressure, and just in case my

recent babysitting assignment has in anyway caused you to doubt my abilities, you should know, I love a challenge! Tell me, how attached are you to the things in those two suitcases?"

Claire smiled. "I've started over from nothing before. I could care less about the contents of those suitcases, and for the record, I think you've done an amazing job with your babysitting assignment. If I didn't, then I wouldn't continue to trust you with me and my baby's lives."

"Good." Phil casually leaned against the door jam. "We'll keep our reservations for 10:00 AM. There's a taxi scheduled to pick us up; however, we'll leave earlier. There's a seldom-used private water entrance to the hotel. We'll be going by motorboat. It'll be cooler, so you might want..." Phil grabbed Claire's jacket, the one that had been lying on the chair since Claire's afternoon outing, and flung it toward her. When he did, something dropped from the pocket.

His casual demeanor evaporated. Putting his finger to his lips, he picked the object up and turned the small device all different directions. Claire watched as his eyes shone and his lips turned upward. With new excitement to his voice, Phil said, "You get some rest. I have a little work to do. This just got easier."

Claire nodded.

As he started to walk away, Phil added, "Oh, and Claire, no matter what sort of ID someone shows you, please don't..."

She grinned. "I won't open the door. I'm going to sleep."

Phil closed the door to her bedroom. Seconds later, she heard the door to the suite open, close, and lock.



BY THE TIME they reached the plane, Claire wasn't sure where they were, or *who* they were. The *Alexanders* were gone—forever. At Phil's urging, she agreed to keep Harry's card with a phone number tucked inside her carry-on bag. Phil said it was *just in case*. Prior to their departure, he examined everything—her purse and clothing—everything, to be sure there were no more tracking devices. The best part of his plan, in Claire's opinion, was when he found another couple scheduled to leave Venice the same time as their reservations. Ingeniously, Phil planted the tracking device in their luggage. Eventually, the FBI would learn it wasn't Phil and Claire; in the meantime, his diversion bought them some additional time.

It wasn't that Claire wasn't willing to work with the FBI or any other branch of law enforcement to bring Catherine down. It was—well, she was hurt. Yes, it may be petty in the grand scheme of her troubles; nonetheless,

she needed time to process the new notion of who Harry was and who he wasn't.

He was an FBI agent.

He wasn't her friend, or at least, he wasn't the friend she thought he was.



THE HAZE OF sleep faded slowly as the harshness of Tony's new reality filled his consciousness. Fighting the need to wake, he heard the sound of another person breathing. Instinctively, he reached for the source. As his hand brushed the rough surface of the cheap sheet covering the twin-sized mattress, he pushed away the disappointment and contemplated the turns in his life. Forcing his eyes to open, he faced the drab, dimly lit interior of the hostel.

The room where he'd slept held ten twin beds—all occupied. As he looked about the room, Tony even noticed that one bed contained two people. Laying his head back on the pillow, he exhaled and questioned this reality. Venice, Italy, had always been the lap of luxury. From the first time he visited with his grandfather, it was a milieu of opulence. Looking up at the cracked plaster and listening to the sounds of multiple sleeping people, Tony knew the customary five-star suites and gourmet meals were nearby; nevertheless, until he reached Geneva and accessed the safety deposit box, they might as well be a million miles away.

Rubbing his face, the softness of his recent beard growth continued to catch him by surprise. It was part of his new persona. The proprietors of the hostel didn't know him as Anthony Rawlings or even as Anton Rawls. No, the identification he carried, as well as the passport he held, contained a different name.

His departure from the United States had been well-planned, well-executed, and well—sudden. After the FBI agents removed him from his hotel suite, Tony was given two options: be retained on charges stemming from harming Claire Nichols or disappear and allow the FBI to continue an ongoing investigation. The Federal Bureau of Investigation guaranteed the charges would eventually be confirmed, amended, or dropped, though their disclosure was less than full. The fact the FBI offered an *out*, a plan B, seemed preposterous. Tony knew something wasn't as it appeared. After all, when it came to deceptive appearances, he was the master.

It was, without a doubt, the card game of Tony's life. As he listened to the potential choices, he maintained his *poker* face and kept his cards close to his chest.

The FBI made it perfectly clear: he was going to be protected from the undisclosed threat. How he chose to accept that protection was up to him:

incarceration or temporary vanishment. Although the agents offered a minimum security prison with many liberties, incarceration didn't sound appealing, even if it was, as they said, for his own good.

Tony chose option number two.

Of course, Anthony Rawlings wouldn't take their offer at face value. Being the true businessman, Tony negotiated the terms of his disappearance. During those negotiations, he failed to mention the hundreds of millions of dollars he had socked away in Swiss bank accounts. The FBI made demands: all contact with anyone from his past was forbidden. No one could know about his current situation, with the exception of Brent, since the bureau had a gag order signed by him. Tony agreed to the loss of contact and offered anonymity; in return, he was free to travel. Tony told them it was his opportunity to see the world without the responsibilities of his empire—a rather transparent lie—if he had time to work on it, Tony knew he could've come up with something better. Not buying their story about Claire leaving on her own, he needed the ability to search.

Agreeing to his proposal, the FBI provided Tony with a new identity. With that, they even provided limited funds, including credit cards; however, they too had stipulations for their negotiations. They wanted to be able to reach Tony at all times. When he countered their demand, they remained adamant, determined that they needed a way to contact him in the event of new information regarding Claire. It was clearly an attempt at manipulation. Move—countermove.

Honestly, in Tony's opinion, the FBI had been less than forthcoming. Why would he all of a sudden believe that they needed to contact him to reveal deep secrets? There was no reason to believe that the distance between he and them would suddenly make them forthcoming. On the other hand, Tony couldn't take the chance of missing information if they were willing to share.

After their negotiations, the agents gave Tony his new identity and a cell phone. The final words from Agent Jackson still infiltrated Tony's consciousness from time to time, Mr. Rawlings, this phone must be with you at all times. You're not to re-enter the United States or contact anyone. If you fail in these directives, option two is gone, and you are suddenly a fugitive on the run from the federal government. Be confident—we will find you.

Tony stood straighter. Although his mind was dominated by thoughts and concerns about Claire, the agent's words registered. He considered retorting: perhaps like you've been able to find my ex-wife? In a brief moment of decorum, he chose to remain silent. Maintaining his look of indifference, he replied, "I find this extremely unusual. All this deception and secrecy over a possible charge of domestic violence."

"Oh, Mr. Rawlings, we both know it's more than that, and when the evidence presents itself, I know of more than one agent who's looking

forward to contacting you, via your phone.”

Tony tried to make sense of the agent’s innuendos; his mind swirled with possibilities. While he debated his response, Agent Jackson added, “Rest assured, when it comes to our own we never forget, and we never stop. No case is ever too old or trail too cold.”

“Agent Jackson, I seriously have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

“Of course not, Mr. Rawlings. That seems to be a recurring theme with you. Perhaps, while abroad, you should look into treatment for your memory issues.”

Tony’s jaw clenched. Fighting with the man who was presenting him with temporary freedom would be counterproductive; nevertheless, the displeasure rang clear in his voice. “I *don’t* have *memory issues*, Agent. I’m sure we’ll be talking again.”

“Yes, I’m sure we will—soon.”

Tony knew that his current paradigm was his own doing. He could’ve taken the bureau’s credit cards and identity and maintained a better standard of living than he was currently enduring, but he wasn’t willing to play by their rules. He had his own rules.

Before Tony left the clandestine meeting with Agent Jackson, he made one request. Tony asked that Brent *not* be informed of this new reality. It was one of the few unselfish moves Tony had ever made for Brent. It was strange how, when faced with the possibility of never seeing him again, Tony finally saw the friend Brent had been. This nondisclosure was a gift. If things turned out badly, and if undisclosed truths became evident, then Tony didn’t want Brent suffering the consequences. Agent Jackson promised to continue the ruse.

With his newly issued government identity, Tony made it to the airport with a ticket in hand. After passing security, he slipped from the terminal, and with a newly purchased phone, he contacted the only man Tony knew, without a doubt, would respond. He didn’t consider it breaking the FBI’s rules. Tony considered it playing by his own rules—the way he’d always lived his life.

Tony’s requests to Eric were simple: money from the safe, not enough to raise suspicion, the key to the safety deposit box, and his alternative identifications. In case Eric was being tracked, Tony told him to also use alternative identification. As Tony predicted, Eric didn’t question Tony’s directives or motives. He never had.

Tony did keep the FBI-issued phone, for a little while. After purchasing an international disposable phone, with the government given credit card, he texted the new number to the only contact listed within the FBI phone. Tony knew too well that phones could be tracked, and he was pretty confident the phone he’d been given was a constant beep on someone’s radar. Leaving the phone in a bathroom in New York State, that beep would now remain

stagnant. As Eric drove him across the U.S. border into Canada, Tony received a text:

“WE’LL ASSUME THIS IS OUR NEW CONTACT NUMBER?”

Tony grinned. They’d given him an offer he couldn’t refuse. He’d replied with a statement of noncompliance. Their cooperation within his parameters wasn’t a win, but it was something. Right now, Tony would take that. With a grin, he replied:

“YES” and hit *SEND*

The cover story: the small plane’s emergency landing in the mountains, was completely fabricated by the authorities. Tony didn’t even know he’d supposedly chartered a plane, or that it landed unexpectedly until he heard the news. The length the FBI was willing to go for this case proved to him that it was something much bigger than it appeared. Like an iceberg, Tony believed he’d only been allowed to see a small portion. As far as he was concerned, that was fine. They’d created a cover story, which allowed him to do the one thing he wanted to do. He was now free to assess the table, determine the odds, and decide for himself what cards he should play. He was free to search for Claire.

Flying from Montreal to Brink, Slovenia, Tony then took buses and trains in an indirect route toward Geneva. Before he could start his full-out search for his ex-wife, Tony needed money. The days ran together as they were filled with cheap transportation and accommodations. Every nonstrategic thought was dominated by Claire and their child. During the course of his exodus, Tony concluded her disappearance was somehow related to the gifts and letters they’d received on the estate. Although the thought hadn’t occurred to him before, Tony found it interesting that the mailings stopped after her disappearance. Tony hoped and prayed that if Claire were truly running *of her own free will*, that she was ahead of—not with—the asshole who’d sent the threatening packages and tried to run her and Clay off the road. As his thoughts ran together, Tony also worried about her finances. He didn’t want Claire and his child living in conditions like he was enduring. Hundreds of times a day, he’d question why. Did she plan to leave and if she did, why would she do so without money? As much as he wanted her safe, Tony couldn’t wrap his mind around her being alive and talking to the FBI. None of it made sense.

As he planned his return to financial freedom, Tony felt a trace of guilt. It was true, he’d always been the one to move and invest the money, but truthfully, half of it belonged to Catherine. Tony knew Nathaniel entrusted him to take care of her. Taking this money without disclosure seemed wrong; nevertheless, he reminded himself, half did belong to him. Catherine was safe in Iowa, sleeping in *his* house with access to more of *his* money. Honestly, the feeling of guilt didn’t last long.

His indirect trail to Geneva was planned and plotted. He had enough cash to lay low and watch things unfold. He wasn't using the federal credit card; it was too obviously a means to track him. Tony was listening to his instincts. They'd served him well in the past. Throughout his life, he'd accomplished many goals. Those goals took time and patience, and without exception, they were all done *his* way. His extremely high rate of success was proof of his own abilities. Tony didn't see a reason to change his strategy. Despite the FBI's directives, this endeavor would be on his terms, and his terms alone.

The financial institution in Geneva was his ace-in-the-hole, one of the cards he didn't reveal. With his current plan, the institution wouldn't be reached for at least another week. He'd love to move faster; however, perseverance was essential to his plan. His profile was low; he maintained anonymity, even if it was with his own false identity and not the one provided for him. He was also doing what he said—traveling. After his financial reserves were accessed, he'd continue to travel; however, at that time, his goal would be to find Claire. The money would make all of it more tolerable.

With Agent Jackson's words replaying in his mind, Tony vowed that after he had his money and located his family, he'd learn more about Agent Jackson's innuendos. What did the FBI know or think they knew? What was meant by 'one of our own?' Though he was a master at multitasking, his current situation required his full attention. Tony pushed the agent's words away. He had more pressing matters consuming his thoughts.

CHAPTER TEN

Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning.

—Albert Einstein

MEREDITH'S JOURNAL:

June 24, 2016

Finally! It's been almost two weeks since Claire collapsed in the cafeteria. Since I don't have clearance to go anywhere except the cafeteria and kitchen, I haven't been able to learn anything about her progress. That was until today; it was after the lunch, before dinner that a few patients and visitors were sitting in the dining room, talking when I noticed Claire and Emily enter the dining room. They were traveling that same path from the outside toward the residential wing.

I only glanced momentarily; Emily was scanning the room with her eagle eyes! Damn, that woman is suspicious of her own shadow! I turned away just as she looked in my direction. Good thing! If she'd recognized me, then it would have made the last three weeks a complete waste of time.

It was after I turned away that I received my first tidbit of information. At the time, I was delivering coffee to Ms. Juelz and her visitor who'd left the room for a few minutes. Ms. Juelz has been at Everwood on and off for years. I'm not sure of her exact diagnosis, but if gossiping were a possibility, I'd put my money on that! Even in my short time getting to know some of the residents, I've realized that Ms. Juelz seems to have her finger on the pulse of Everwood.

“Can I get you any cream or sweetener?” Meredith asked, as she placed the ceramic mugs on the table.

Ms. Juelz spoke, her voice barely a whisper, “You’re smart to turn away from that woman. She’d probably have you fired if she thought you were looking at them.” At first, Meredith wasn’t registering Ms. Juelz’ words; it wasn’t uncommon for some of the residents to speak about something completely off base from what was said to them.

Keeping her eyes diverted, Meredith watched Emily lead Claire hurriedly along the edge of the dining room. Neither woman seemed to be talking. She tried to read Claire’s expression; however, all she noticed were Claire’s eyes remaining downcast, avoiding everything as she walked with her arm linked in the crook of her sister’s elbow. Refocusing on Ms. Juelz, Meredith asked, “Why, who is she?”

“She was the wife of that rich guy. But no one can say his name. That woman with her is her sister. She’s super protective, but it’s a pain in the ass! I mean, everyone here deserves confidentiality, but that woman has that poor lady so isolated she’ll never see the outside again.”

It was then Ms. Juelz’ guest returned to the table. “Aunt Juelz, you aren’t talk’n about people you’re not supposed to, are you?”

Looking her niece straight in the eye, Ms. Juelz replied, “Who me? Can’t believe a word I say. I’m crazy, you know!”

Her niece reached over and covered Ms. Juelz’ hand with hers. Looking straight into her eyes, she said, “I think you’re the sanest person I know, Aunt Juelz.”

Ms. Juelz laughed. “Honey, you need to meet more people!”

Meredith walked away, contemplating Ms. Juelz’ information. Her words broke Meredith’s heart and hardened her resolve at the same time. One way or the other, Meredith was going to get herself to Claire!

July 7, 2016

I can’t believe how tired I am at the end of my days at Everwood. It isn’t mentally tiring; it’s physically draining. I’ve never cleaned so many tables or picked up so many dishes in my life, but I think it’s about to pay off! After almost a month, I believe that I’ll finally be allowed to deliver meals to patients’ rooms. Tomorrow, I have a meeting with Ms. Bali, my supervisor. She said we need to discuss the “parameters of increasing my job duties.” I have to give the whole facility credit; they don’t allow just anyone to interact with the patients. Considering the amount of money these people spend for their treatment, I guess it’s a good thing Everwood makes sure that everyone’s

following their rules. I'd write more, but honestly, I'm exhausted. I'll write more tomorrow.

July 8, 2016

I did it! I've been "promoted"! I'm calling it that, but there's no increase in pay, only an increase in clearance. I think the stories I've recently been telling about caring for my ill grandmother helped me get this additional duty.

Starting next week, I'll be part of the residential room rotation. There are six women who eat all their meals in their rooms. Ms. Bali took me around to each of their rooms today, and I met three of them. The other three, including Claire, weren't in their rooms. Before we went from room to room, I was shown how to review the ICP on each patient. That's their "Individualized Care Plan." I hadn't been able to access more than the generic information before, but now I have a code where I can see specifics. Most ICPs include food allergies, likes, and dislikes.

Claire's Food ICP was very specific, with certain rules spelled out:

Ms. Nichols will have three meals delivered each day. Upon delivery, attendants will assess Ms. Nichols' ability to eat unassisted. If she engages, leave food and return to remove tray in thirty minutes. If she doesn't engage, direct her to her table and explain your actions as you assist in feeding her.

Talking is recommended by Ms. Nichols' doctors; however, Mrs. Vandersol will not allow any conversation regarding Ms. Nichols' previous life. Under no circumstance can the name Anthony/Tony Rawlings be mentioned. If Ms. Nichols brings up this name, staff is to change the subject immediately and notify a supervisor.

Failure to adhere to the set rules will result in immediate dismissal.

I was surprised to see her room. Unlike the other rooms we visited, Claire's looked generic and sterile. The colors were all pale. She didn't have any pictures or personal items, other than her clothes and hygiene items. Even the bedspread and window treatments were neutral; there were no bold colors. Since Ms. Bali was with me, I couldn't look around too much, but I mentioned the starkness in passing.

"Is this patient new?" Meredith knew the answer; nonetheless, she was fishing.

"No, this is Ms. Nichols, the patient you read about with the specific rules regarding discussion. She's been here for over two years."

"Her room isn't as personalized as the other ones we've been in."

Ms. Bali dismissed Meredith's observation. "That's none of our concern.

It's Mrs. Vanderson's doing, and I do believe it goes along with the conversation rules."

I wanted to ask more, but was afraid I'd raise suspicion. As we walked toward the kitchen, Claire passed us with a tall, pretty blonde woman. She looked our direction momentarily, but didn't seem to recognize me. I don't know if that's good or bad, but I guess in a way it's good. I've been concerned that she'd react as she did in the cafeteria the first time we saw one another. If she did that again when I entered her room, I surely wouldn't be able to continue doing it.

After they passed, Ms. Bali whispered, "That was Ms. Nichols with Dr. Brown. It's sad, you'll see when you start visiting her, but she's lost all sense of reality. You may have read the book about her, but she's had a pretty rough life for someone so young. I keep hoping that one day she'll snap out of it."

Meredith paused for a moment before asking, "Is that possible? Can people really *snap out* of it?"

"I've been here for over twenty years, so I've seen a few cases; however, we shouldn't keep our hopes up. Cases like that are extremely rare..."

I'm going to do some research and see if I can find out how you can facilitate that "snapping." Oh, I told her I hadn't read the book, but I'd look it up. Then she told me not to, that she probably shouldn't have told me, and it would probably bias my opinion.

She has no idea how biased I already am!



EMILY ENTERED THE waiting room of Everwood's counseling center. She knew the facility backwards and forwards, and this was her favorite area—that is, if she had one at all. It was airy and open, with plenty of sunlight. They'd paid extra to get Claire a window that faced east. Emily knew her sister loved sun and hoped that the sunrises would help her; however, according to the reports, each morning when the staff entered her room they found her draperies still closed. At first, Emily had been more willing to entertain suggestions for Claire's recovery, but with each passing day, week, and month, Emily's optimism waned.

This was Emily's bi-monthly meeting with Claire's doctors, where she'd listen to their theories and suggestions. Once a month, she met with the administrators and discussed confidentiality. At those meetings, she emphasized the importance of maintaining her rules. With these obligations, as well as visiting Claire at least three times a week, Emily's schedule was very full. She also had a family at home that needed her attention. That family was larger than it would have been without Claire, and for that reason, Emily swore she'd never be regretful. Nichol was a joy, whom she and John were honored to raise. Of course, sometimes she wondered if Michael suffered because of loss of attention, but then she'd see the two cousins interacting like siblings and realize, Nichol was a blessing, despite her parentage.

"Mrs. Vandersol," the receptionist's voice brought Emily back to present. "Dr. Brown is ready. May I take you back to her office?"

"No, Sherry, I know the way."

Sherry smiled. "I'm sure you do. Please help yourself."

As Emily walked the corridor toward the doctor's office, she thought about Claire's various doctors and therapists. At Everwood, every employee was female. Since a number of the residents were victims of domestic violence, the belief was that decreased male interaction helped to facilitate their recovery. Even male visitors were restricted to special rooms, away from the general population of patients. Emily had visited those rooms too, the first few times John visited. Now, at least once a month, he'd come visit Claire. The moment he laid eyes on Nichol, he abandoned his anger regarding Claire and Anthony's reconciliation. John not only stepped up as an uncle and a father-figure, but also as a brother-in-law.

After everything happened—the incident—John needed to return to California. After all, he worked for SiJo and had obligations. Of course, Emily stayed in Iowa with Claire. At first, Claire was too frail and Nichol needed care; then there was the trial. With time and Emily's pregnancy, traveling became difficult. Staying in Iowa was convenient; nonetheless, she never assumed they'd make it home. Truthfully, they didn't consider it until Timothy Bronson approached John.

Tim was named acting CEO of Rawlings Industries by the board of directors, when Anthony initially disappeared. Although he was young, he'd proven himself to both the board and investors. Considering all she and John had done to harm Rawlings Industries, it seemed unbelievable that Tim would ask John to help rebuild the empire, or that the board of directors would approve his request. Tim did and so did the board. Emily recalled the lengthy discussions by both John and Tim and her and John. The final deciding factor was the court's decision allowing Claire to enter a private mental-treatment facility. The court had one stipulation: Claire couldn't leave Iowa. Prior to that, Claire had been in a state-run facility. It wasn't awful, but Emily hated it.

She visited almost every day to assure Claire's well-being. Of course, back then, Emily's hopes for her sister's recovery were much higher.

There was no question, Everwood was a much better facility; nevertheless, Emily didn't feel right leaving Claire and living across the country. In the beginning, Emily believed having Nichol near her mother would be beneficial. Unfortunately, those visits proved to be another failed attempt to facilitate Claire's recovery. Once Nichol was old enough to understand the situation, Emily believed her niece's best interest needed to be considered. Nichol hadn't been to Everwood in over a year.

The court no longer dictated Claire's treatment; as next of kin with power of attorney, Emily had complete control. Iowa was now their home, and John was gainfully employed by a recovering Rawlings Industries. Meredith Banks was right when she said Nichol didn't lack for money, and neither did Claire. That was John's incentive. This time, when he considered the offer to work for Rawlings, he wasn't accepting charity from a family member. No, this time, he was providing help to his family. Claire and Nichol couldn't manage or grow their fortune. Since Anthony was gone, John did what he'd done years earlier when Emily and Claire's parents died. He stepped up.

Emily squared her shoulders and knocked on Dr. Brown's open door. The pretty blonde psychiatrist stood and welcomed her, "Emily, please come in. I hope you don't mind, but I've invited Dr. Fairfield to join us today."

It was then that Emily noticed the older gentleman sitting off to the side of the room. The fact he was male caught Emily by surprise. "Hello." She extended her hand as Dr. Fairfield stood and shook it.

Before Emily could say more, Dr. Brown began, "I've asked Dr. Fairfield to join us today because he's a research professor at Princeton, specializing in traumatic brain injuries. I heard him speak a few weeks ago at a conference and believe he could give us a fresh perspective on Claire."

Emily sat taller. "Research? I'm sorry, Doctor, but I don't want anyone *experimenting* on my sister. She's been through enough already."

Dr. Fairfield spoke with a thick English accent, "Mrs. Vandersol, I assure you, I'm only here to offer my opinion. I won't use any of the data regarding Mrs. Rawlings without your permission."

"Ms. Nichols, Doctor. I need you to understand that the name *Rawlings* may *never* be used in the presence of my sister. No exceptions."

Dr. Fairfield looked toward Dr. Brown. Dr. Brown smiled and spoke, "Emily, I've only shared the medical information with Dr. Fairfield, nothing personal. I promise we'll review all of that before he examines Claire. Currently, he's only seen her CT scans and read my notes. I believe there's something I'm missing. I don't know what it is; however, Dr. Fairfield has documented cases of spontaneous recovery—"

Emily interrupted, "I've done my research. Most recoveries occur within

the first year. After that, the likelihood is greatly diminished. Isn't that right?"

Dr. Fairfield replied, "That's correct; however, the cases to which Dr. Brown is referring were significantly outside the normal time period for recovery." Emily contemplated his words as he added, "One case was four years out."

Four years! Emily thought about that. It'd already been over two. She'd come to terms with the idea that Claire would never recover, but was that a life? "What does this mean? What will you do to Claire?"

Dr. Brown replied, "We need your permission for Dr. Fairfield to examine Claire and possibly perform more tests."

"More tests? What other tests could you possibly perform which other doctors haven't already done?"

The doctors spent the next forty minutes explaining Dr. Fairfield's research. The tests weren't invasive, and Emily's rules would be maintained. They may introduce some medications or combination of medications that have been previously untried. First, Dr. Fairfield wanted to determine if the cause of her psychosis was indeed head injury, or if it could be something else.

Emily reluctantly shared Claire's history. She didn't like the idea of more treatment. After all, Claire was content. Why make her uncomfortable or uneasy? Then again, if there was even a remote possibility, Emily couldn't say no.

That night, at home with John and the kids, she watched as Michael and Nichol played. When she looked at her niece, she saw Claire and the same carefree ambition her sister once possessed. She also saw the dark eyes of Anthony Rawlings. There were times she detested those eyes. When that negativity crept in, Emily reminded herself, nurture versus nature. Nichol wouldn't know the life of revenge that her father had allowed to destroy him and anyone else unfortunate enough to be within his sphere of influence. Her eyes would see the world as a place of endless possibilities where love and forgiveness prevail. Emily vowed that with her and John's help Nichol would see the world as her mother once had before...



JULY 15, 2016

I finally did it, but I don't know if I'm happy or not. I delivered Claire's lunch and was able to talk to her. When I entered her room, she was sitting at the window, looking out at the bright skies. Although I spoke and made noise, she didn't acknowledge my entrance. At first, I hesitated to make eye contact.

What I didn't realize was that I couldn't. I stepped in front of Claire, but

her expression didn't change. She continued her gaze, exactly as it had been, as if I weren't there at all. I tried speaking, quietly at first: then louder. Although she didn't speak or look at me, she eventually got up and walked to the table where she allowed me to feed her.

After Claire ate about half of the lunch, she abruptly stood and walked back to the chair by the window.

Truthfully, I'd been so emotional while she ate that I'd forgotten to speak. When I looked at my watch, I realized I still had ten minutes before I was expected back to the kitchen, so I went back to her. Kneeling in front of her, I touched her knee...

“Claire, can you hear me?” Meredith desperately tried to keep emotion out of her voice; however, with the tears sliding down her cheeks, she wasn’t sure it was possible. Intellectually, Meredith knew the rules regarding Ms. Nichols. Truthfully, she wasn’t thinking. Her heart was breaking at the sight of her friend, now a shell of the vivacious woman she’d once been. “Claire, it’s me, Meredith. Don’t you remember me? We went to Valparaiso together...” Meredith was careful not to mention Anthony, Nichol, or anything else from the last six years. She did, however, ramble on for ten minutes about life as it had been when they were college students.

Never once did Claire’s expression change; although, at some point, she began humming. Undeterred, Meredith rambled about their sorority house and Chicago. It wasn’t until Meredith was out of Claire’s room, nearing the kitchen, that Claire’s tune resonated in her mind. Meredith recognized the song: *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*—the seventh inning stretch at Wrigley.

July 15th, 2016 continued:

I want to believe she heard and understood. I don't know—maybe I'm grasping at straws. After all, most of what I've read says that if recovery isn't made in the first year, it rarely happens—but that song! I was talking about Chicago and baseball games. I don't think I even mentioned the Cubs or Wrigley, but I know I mentioned baseball...

Without a doubt, I know she was humming “Take Me Out To The Ball Game!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Contentment consists not in adding more fuel, but in taking away some fire.
—Baldwin Fuller

C LAIRE MARVELED AT the shades of blue as the small plane circled over the island, completing the final leg of their journey. Although her mind constantly went back to her honeymoon, Claire reminded herself this was another place and another time. On her honeymoon in Fiji, Tony was with her, and he was in control.

Here, instead of Tony, she had Phil by her side. With each passing day, Claire appreciated his devotion and presence more and more. His honesty exposed her true threat, and his skills freed her from Catherine *and* the FBI, keeping her and her baby safe. She knew, without a doubt, she wouldn't be where she was without him, yet despite all they'd experienced, their roles were so different than anything she'd ever known with Tony. In every matter of importance, Claire had control. After all, her money purchased this paradise retreat. Phil presented her with choices, but every decision was hers. At times, that power was intoxicating; at other times, it was daunting. After years of submission, it was a whole new way to live. Surprisingly, there were times she found herself missing the sense of security that accompanies that loss of responsibility.

As the scenes below her, those of a tropical paradise, bright blues, greens, and whites faded from her consciousness, Claire recalled memories of her recent life in Iowa, the one she left, walked away from, or more accurately, the one from which she ran. In the depths of her heart, she knew, for a short time, she had everything she wanted and more. She and Tony had an understanding; he had the control he needed, but so did she. She came and went as she pleased. Yes, she informed him first, but that was it. Claire *informed* Tony. She didn't ask permission, nor did she seek his approval. He allowed it because they *trusted* one another. In the pit of her stomach, Claire

knew she'd been the one to break that trust—to break the promise they'd made in their meadow of confessions. Perhaps that was Catherine's plan: by convincing Claire to flee, Catherine successfully broke the trust she and Tony had built. Even if Tony contacted her, Claire wondered: could it be rebuilt?

What they had, before Catherine took it all away, was the perfect blend. Claire knew her sister, Emily, would never understand, and with the recent news of Meredith's book's pending publication, the rest of the world would probably never understand. Claire wished she could explain. Thankfully, she didn't need to. It was one of Phil's most endearing qualities. He didn't pry.

Understandably, she never gave Phil the word for word, action for consequence, reminiscence of her life with Tony. At least, not like she'd done with Harry; nevertheless, Phil's job involved knowing. If he hadn't been good at his job, then he'd never sent the note in San Diego. Phil knew her past and never once had he questioned Claire about it; instead, Phil encouraged. He encouraged her to stay strong, protect her child, and trust her instincts. Right now, although she longed to hear from Tony, her instincts told her that she was finally safe. They reassured her that the trust she'd bestowed on Phil wasn't misplaced. For once, she'd made a right decision.

As the plane's pontoons touched the surface of the shimmering water, Claire pushed her memories and desires away. This was her experience, her new life, and the future she was choosing to have with her child. The sound from the plane wouldn't allow them to converse; therefore, Claire straightened her neck and squared her shoulders as she touched Phil's leg. When he turned to acknowledge her, Claire smiled.

She wanted him to know that she enjoyed the view outside of the plane. She was content. Phil probably realized her expression was forced; nevertheless, as far as Claire was concerned, it was real. She was tired of compartmentalizing. Her new theme was *fake it until you make it*. Maybe in reality it was a bluff, but she had a lot riding on this bet. She'd secure her poker face and see it through.

As Phil helped Claire out of the plane, she held onto his hand for stability, and looked all around. Below their shoes was a white, sand lined beach, and behind them was the shimmering lagoon which opened to an endless horizon of blue sea. Waiting patiently on the shore were two people.

Phil's research of possible destinations included staff members' biographies as well as complete histories of the locations themselves. On this island, the main house was built in the late 1970's by a wealthy Englishman who arrived with his staff of two. Francis and Madeline were married in Haiti prior to traveling to this destination. When the Englishman died, they stayed, and over the past thirty plus years, they've maintained the estate and cared for multiple families. Claire's new house had many bedrooms and would have more than enough room for her and her child. Apparently, some of the

previous owners had multiple children and grandchildren.

The isolation of this retreat was one of its most appealing aspects. There was a time when Claire didn't like being alone; however, she was tired of unknown threats. This retreat would provide her child with the security that only comes from seclusion. For her child, Claire was more than willing to accept the loneliness that came with an island that was only accessible by boat or plane. Civilization, or something close, could be reached by a thirty-minute boat ride; weather provided. This region boasted 363 days of sunshine a year; however, the lush vegetation required rain. Though usually short in duration, Phil's research reported storms which could be intense. Deluges of rain followed by powerful sun created the perfect combination for a sultry, humid climate. After nearly a month in cloudy, cool Italy, Claire was ready for the warmth.

As they stepped toward the warm smiles of the caretakers, Madeline, a large woman with dark skin and a deep, rich voice, was the first to speak, "Welcome Madame el and Monsieur Nichols! I am Madeline and this is my husband, Francis."

Claire looked at Phil and grinned. She liked the sound of Madeline's voice; it added to the warmth in the air. Offering her hand in greeting, Claire said, "Hello, thank you. I'm Ms. Nichols, but please call me *Claire*, and this..." She looked to Phil. How could she possibly explain who he was? His definition had changed so drastically over the last year. "...this is my *friend*, Phillip Roach. He helped me find your wonderful island."

Francis shook Phil's hand. "Madame el, but this is *your* island, and we are so very happy to help you with anything you need."

Placing her hand over her midsection, Claire sighed. "I'd love to see the house."

Madeline nodded and led Claire toward a path. Her smile shone brightly as she said, "Why of course, let me show you your home, and I'll get you something to drink. We cannot let you dehydrate. The sun here, it is very strong, even now, before noon." After a few steps, Madeline asked, "Your baby, Madame el, when is she due to join us?"

She? Claire didn't know the sex of her child, but she'd always referred to it as *he*; the dark-haired, dark-eyed little boy who would look like his father; however, the little boy in her dreams would never know the sadness his father did. Her little boy would grow up with love and support; then, one day, he'd become the man his father finally became. "Oh, I don't know if I'm having a girl or boy." Madeline didn't speak, but her deep brown eyes sparkled knowingly. Claire continued, "And my little one is due the middle of January; a New Year's baby."

"We love babies. Francis and I, we were never blessed with children of our own; however, we've shared our hearts with babies who now live all over

the world. Thank you for bringing us another baby to love.”

Although Claire hesitated to trust anyone ever again, she instinctively liked this woman. It wasn’t just what Madeline said, but it was her whole aura that pulled Claire near and filled her with promise. When they passed the threshold to her new home, Claire exhaled. For the first time in ages she was home. Her home was beautiful, light, and open, everything she’d always desired. Claire walked to the open doors, inhaled the sea breeze, and listened to the sound of the surf. Madeline’s voice refocused Claire’s thoughts. “We like to have everything open; there’s usually a refreshing breeze, but if it’s too hot for you Madame el, we do have air conditioning.”

Although the perspiration dripped between Claire’s breasts, and she needed to lift her hair off her neck, she grinned. “It’ll take me a while to get used to it, but I will.” Adapting was one of her specialties. “Please don’t use the air conditioning. I love the fresh air and the heat.”

Her heels clicked on the shiny bamboo flooring as they entered the master bedroom suite. “This is your...” Madeline hesitated. “...and Monsieur Roach’s room?”

Claire placed her hand on Madeline’s arm. “No, Madeline. Phil is my friend. He and I are not *together*. He isn’t the father of my child.”

“He loves you. I see that in his eyes.”

Claire stared. They were friends, but *love*? She’d have to think about that another time. “He’s helped me a lot.”

“It’s not my business. I simply work for you.”

Claire wanted to explain that her baby’s father would hopefully be coming to the island; however, she didn’t know if that were true. Besides, her story was so complicated that she didn’t have the energy to share; instead, Claire nodded and walked beside Madeline as she learned more of the amenities of her new home. The master bedroom also had a wide, closable opening to the lanai. When they stepped back outside and peered around the drape of flowered vegetation, the view took Claire’s breath away. The sea below was multiple shades of blue. Staring at the water, Claire wondered if depth influenced the hues. As she scanned toward the horizon, the waves blended seamlessly into the crystal blue sky. Walking further out into the sunlight, Claire realized the lanai wrapped around the house. It was the same porch she’d seen from the living room, the one with the large infinity pool, umbrella-covered tables, lounge chairs, and groupings of chairs all perfectly arranged.

When Claire entered the kitchen, she couldn’t contain her grin. They were in the middle of paradise, not even a dot on most maps, yet she was in the middle of a high-tech, state-of-the-art kitchen. “Wow!” was all she could say.

“*Oui*, the last family loved cooking. The previous owner, she had the kitchen rebuilt, making it even bigger than the original.”

“I love it! She did a great job, and so have you. Everything’s amazing!”

Madeline’s eyes brimmed with pride. “There is so much more. Francis and I have a home too. You may see it, and there are gardens, paths, orchards, and so much more.”

“I want to see it all; however...”

Madeline nodded. “*Oui*, Madame el, you’ve had a long trip and need to rest. Let me bring you some water and maybe some fruit?”

“Thank you, that sounds wonderful.” Turning to return to her suite, Claire said, “I’m not sure where Phil is...”

“He is with Francis, Madame el.”

“When he returns, can you please show him to one of the other bedrooms?”

Madeline agreed and promised to bring Claire some water and a snack soon. Once Claire was back in her private suite, she decided to investigate her surroundings a little further. The attached bathroom was modern and bright with a skylight above a large, sunken tub. There were two other doors she hadn’t yet opened. The first one led to a small, private office. Nodding approvingly, Claire knew it would make a perfect little nursery. Fleetingly, thoughts of the nursery in Iowa came to mind; instead of compartmentalizing them away, she stared at the office and imagined it filled with a crib and changing table. The new thoughts overpowered the old. Her cheeks rose as she focused on her future.

The next door led to a closet, only slightly smaller than the office/nursery. The clothes she’d ordered filled the drawers and hung from the racks. Slipping off her heels, Claire fingered the soft fabric of the sundresses and contemplated changing out of her traveling clothes. She also considered a relaxing soak in the big tub when she smiled. The realization gave her a sense of peace she’d been missing for too long. She was doing it—she was adapting to this new normal.

Her epiphany, Madeline and Francis’s friendly greeting, and Phil’s unrelenting support, all worked together to bring happiness back to her life. When the knock came on her door, Claire called, “Come in, Madeline.”

The door opened, and Phil answered, “I’m not Madeline.”

Seeing the golden flecks in his green eyes, Claire thought about Madeline’s assessment. She didn’t know if it were true; she didn’t see love in Phil’s eyes. She saw concern. Wanting him to know how delighted she was about the island and all he’d done, her voice brimmed with excitement. “You’re right! I love everything about it!”

Phil exhaled. “I’m glad to hear that. What do you think about Francis and Madeline?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think I like them.”

“Good, so do you think you can stay here?”

Claire grinned. "I do. What were you doing with Francis?"

Phil explained that Francis showed him around the outside of the estate. There's a boat at Claire's disposal—any time she wants to travel into town, Francis will accompany her. There's also access to a helicopter or plane in case of emergencies.

Claire sat on the edge of her bed. "Well, I hope they won't be necessary; however, I want to schedule a doctor's appointment for a check-up."

"Talk to Madeline; she can help with that. Remember, there's a real doctor in town."

"I think this'll work. Thank you so much, for everything."

Phil nodded. "You're welcome, Claire. It seems my job is done here..."

Her newfound contentment evaporated with his declaration. Suddenly, the remoteness of the island filled her with angst. "You're leaving?" she asked. "But I-I just asked Madeline to show you to one of the other rooms."

"She did, and it's great, but if you're happy and safe, I don't think I should—"

Tears teetered on the edge of Claire's eyes as she stood and asked, "Will I be able to contact you?"

"Is that what you want?"

What did she want? Claire knew she didn't want what Phil wanted, or at least what Madeline said he wanted; nevertheless, she didn't want him to go. The way she'd introduced him to Madeline and Francis was accurate: Phil was her *friend*. She trusted him, and she wanted him around. For most of the last year, he had been. Even before she really knew him, he was there watching, protecting, a constant in her world of change. Claire blinked her eyes, and the teetering tears slid down her cheeks. "I want to have people around me that I can trust. I don't know Madeline or Francis not yet."

"I did a thorough background check. They're very transparent, so what you see is what you have."

Claire nodded.

"I have another job waiting."

Claire's neck stiffened. "I understand. You're tired of babysitting."

"Claire, I asked the pilot to wait. I think this is best."

"Thank you. Thank you for protecting me, getting me here, for everything." She wanted to reach out and hug him; however, she couldn't bear to hurt anyone else. If Madeline's assessment was true then Phil was right, his leaving was best. "Maybe someday—"

He interrupted, "I'll leave you my number, but remember, only make emergency calls And also for you and your baby's safety, don't contact anyone but me or the FBI."

Claire swallowed and nodded.

Before she could think of anything else, Phil was gone. An overwhelming

sense of seclusion engulfed the room as she watched the door shut. Inhaling deeply, Claire fought the feeling of suffocation, suddenly threatening her ability to breathe. When the air finally filled her lungs, a sob erupted from the depth of her chest. The trip from Venice had taken days. They'd created an intricately woven web designed to detour anyone's efforts in finding them. Suddenly, the trip and Phil's departure were too much. Claire collapsed on her big, lonely bed.

The ceiling fan that moved the hot, sticky midmorning air did nothing to cool the room. Despite the oppressing heat, Claire wrapped herself in the soft comforter and cried herself to sleep.

When she woke, her eyelids felt swollen. Claire wasn't sure how long she'd slept. The clock near the bed read 3:18, and the sun on the horizon told her it was afternoon—not morning. Rubbing her temples, Claire realized she needed food to help her aching head and settle her nerves.

As she neared the table by her door, she knew Madeline had been in her room. There was a pitcher of water and a covered bowl within a bowl of ice. Lifting the lid, Claire's stomach growled as she saw the luscious fruit. She tried not to think about Phil or being alone; instead, she ate the fruit, drank the water, and talked out loud to her baby. Perhaps if she explained how everything would work out, in a calm, reassuring voice, then she'd believe it too?

Within days, the customary staff/lady of the house, protocol was forgotten. Claire spent hours with Madeline in the state-of-the-art kitchen, learning to cook foods she'd never previously tried. She also spent time with Francis, caring for the tropical gardens and fruit trees.

Madeline arranged for Claire to visit the doctor, and Francis accompanied her. Traveling by boat was something that would take time to get used to. Once on the mainland, Claire loved how Francis helped her feel welcome and secure.

She was both relieved and happy to learn that the doctor Phil promised truly did exist. He was educated in the UK and spoke English as well as many of the native languages. His clinic was modern and even had an ultrasound. Claire was now twenty-six weeks into her pregnancy. Since it had been over a month since her last visit, the doctor recommended an ultrasound. The image amazed Claire—so unlike the original peanut-shaped picture she'd shown to Tony. This time, she saw her baby's profile, as well as little hands and little feet. When he asked if she knew the sex of her child, Claire remembered the conversation she'd never had with Tony; the one asking him to go with her to her next appointment. With tears in her eyes, Claire replied, "No, doctor, I

don't, and I don't want to know—not yet." He willingly kept the information hidden.

Every midday and evening, Claire would sit down to eat with Madeline and Francis. The idea of eating each meal alone was too daunting. Within no time at all, meals became Claire's favorite time of day. She loved to watch the two of them interact, as Madeline's expression absolutely glowed when she was near Francis. They had so many stories to share; Claire could sit and listen for hours. To Madeline's insistence, each meal began with a prayer. It was a ritual Claire hadn't practiced since she was young, and after so much change and discord in her life, she found it comforting. It wasn't what Claire imagined her life would be, but at least she felt safe and accepted. Considering everything she'd endured, that was a lot—more than she could ever ask for...

CHAPTER TWELVE

Those who have trusted where they ought not, will surely mistrust where they ought not.

—Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach

*A*LTHOUGH IT WAS only a little over two weeks since Tony was with the FBI in Boston, it seemed like a lifetime had passed. Even he didn't recognize his reflection in the mirror. His beard growth and unkempt hair, along with his uncustomary clothes, created a person Tony was tired of being. As he lay within the hostel in Geneva, he knew his first goal was in sight. He'd sacrificed comfort to maintain the cash necessary to once again become Anton Rawls. That wasn't who he planned to be forever; nevertheless, *Anton* was a necessary step to accessing his hidden treasure.

The new suit hanging near his bed took more of his cash reserve than he'd used on living expenses for the entire two weeks. That, plus the razor he'd just bought, was waiting to reveal the man beneath. Tony tried unsuccessfully to sleep as thoughts of his morning filled his mind. In the morning, he'd finally access the financial institution and resume a more accustomed lifestyle.

During the past seventeen days, Tony had done more than travel. He'd spent time at Internet cafés, learning what he could. At first, he followed the developments of Rawlings Industries. The Vandersols were continuing to taunt the press with accusations. With each statement or news release, the price of stock in Rawlings and its many subsidiaries took another hit. One article said the board of directors named Timothy Bronson temporary CEO, in the absence of CEO Anthony Rawlings.

Tony wasn't sure how he felt about their decision. Did they truly feel he was that easily replaced? Then, as the days passed, Tony came to the realization that he supported Tim's new role. After all, over the past few years, he'd been grooming him for just such a move. It wasn't like Tony

planned to disappear, but Tim had shown promise from the beginning. It was good to know he was the man in charge.

Once that realization struck, Tony experienced an unexpected release from his business obligations. He could spend his time watching his empire struggle to survive and still do nothing, or he could spend his time learning more about Agent Jackson's odd remarks and tracking down his family. For the first time in his life, Rawlings Industries paled in importance.

Whenever he could, Tony researched rabbit trails of information. Nothing came together. He knew he was missing too many pieces of the puzzle.

He'd also taken two short calls from Agent Jackson. He read somewhere that fifty-six seconds of connection was necessary to track a call. He wasn't sure if that were true, but to be safe, he kept their conversations under that mark. Understandably, the FBI wanted more; nevertheless, Tony divulged just enough to keep them pacified.

"Yes, I'm in Europe." "No, I haven't been in contact with anyone in the States." "Yes. If I didn't have the damn phone, then you wouldn't be talking to me now." "Goodbye." Although he hated the monitoring, thinking about the calls made Tony grin. Each time he kept the information limited and heard the disdain in Agent Jackson's voice, Tony felt like he'd accomplished a small victory. Maybe it was only one hand in an all-night card game; nonetheless, each winning hand adds to the final jackpot.

The razor pulled at his facial hair as Tony worked to once again become Anton Rawls. The financial institution was a mere drive from the hostel where he'd slept. Although his body ached from the too-soft bed, it was nothing compared to the mayhem coursing through his mind. After all these days, his goal was so close.

During the last few weeks, he'd learned to utilize public transportation, but Tony knew that wouldn't do for the bank; therefore, dressed in his new finest suit, Tony entered the lobby of one of the nearby five-star hotels and casually ate breakfast in one of its finer restaurants. No one questioned his presence. He obviously belonged. Tony wanted to enjoy the fine cuisine. Undoubtedly, it was the best he'd eaten in a while, but his thoughts of the safety deposit box wouldn't allow the aroma or taste of Eggs Benedict to register. When he was done, he exited the front door, told the bellman to flag him a cab, and rode to the bank. On any other day, it would have been a customary thing for him to do, but today it was revolutionary.

No one within the financial institution questioned his identity. Even if they'd seen him before, he was the same Anton Rawls who always visited the institution—the only one to access the safety deposit box in the last twenty-five years.

When presented with the customary ledgers, Tony stared at the list of signatures. There were his own—or more accurately, Anton Rawls, written

repeatedly; however, that wasn't what caught Tony's attention. *That* wasn't what caused his neck to straighten and his jaw to clench. The last two signatures, directly above where he was about to sign, were from *Marie Rawls*. The first signature was dated: 11-09-13. It always took a minute to remember that not everyone dated as Americans did. The numbers he saw meant: eleventh day, ninth month of the thirteenth year. The second signature was signed two days later.

Speaking perfect French, Anton inquired, "Who is this? Did someone else access my box?"

The employee looked puzzled, read the signature, and then referred to some documents. When he was done, he sheepishly replied, "Yes, sir, your safety deposit box can be accessed by two individuals: you and a Marie Rawls. It appears that the woman who was here presented the clerk with appropriate identification." Then he asked, "Mr. Rawls, is there a problem?"

Tony could barely see. He didn't know what this meant, except that he needed to see inside his safety deposit box and verify his accounts. His short, curt words revealed his obvious displeasure, "There better not be. I want to see my box immediately."

"Yes, sir, I need your key, please."

Tony handed him the key and followed the nervous man into the vault. The process of inserting both keys took longer than Tony ever remembered. He knew it was his impatience; however, he swore the whole thing was happening in slow motion. Once the box was removed, Tony followed the employee into a private room.

"Sir, do you want me to stay?"

"No, leave." His directive was more of a growl as his dark gaze assaulted the bank's employee. Tony didn't care; he wanted the man gone. He needed to see what was inside the box or more accurately, what may be missing, in private.

The employee stepped quietly from the room and Tony opened the box. In all the years he'd transferred and reinvested Nathaniel's funds, never had the contents of this box taken him by surprise—until now.

Instead of the customary documents, Tony reached into the depths of the steel container and removed a disposable international cell phone. It was very similar to the one he had for the FBI. Along with the phone, there was also a charger and an envelope.

He wasn't sure if his shaking hands were from rage or fear. His entire plan rested on the collection of these funds. If his money wasn't here, where was it? Tony thought back to the dates on the signatures: September 9 and 11. During those days, Catherine *was* in Iowa—with him. Who else could know about this?

Tony opened the envelope to a letter that was very short—and unsigned:

*Congratulations, you've found your way to this clue.
I can't be sure who'll be reading this note, so I can only say that you've passed your first test. Congratulations. I believe that deserves a positive consequence.*

I realize you're not accustomed to being the student, but please know that I sincerely hope your educational experience is glitch-free.

If you are who I believe you are it will all make sense.

I didn't leave you without resources. I wouldn't do that. I've heard it's a difficult experience to be removed from your life and left at the complete disposal of another; therefore, as your positive consequence, I've created one account which is available to you. It can be accessed through the information below.

To continue your education, I've provided you with a cell phone. I assume a lecture in general operating instructions won't be necessary; however, choose wisely. Remember all actions have consequences.

The temperature of the small room increased with each word. The weeks of worry about Claire and-and it was all some kind of ruse, some kind of game, a way to steal his money! But why? He had money in the States, more money than she accessed in these accounts. She could've had anything she wanted. Thoughts came too fast. Was it about the money, or was it to bring him down publicly—public failure, public humiliation, appearances. Red infiltrated the room. Perhaps it came through the low buzz of the fluorescent lights. He tried to stop it; tried to maintain control. After all, there was an explanation; Tony knew there was. How? How did Claire even know about this account? How could she access it? He had the key!

Inhaling deeply, Tony closed his eyes. Glitch-free? Consequences? Was that some kind of sick joke? Maybe it wasn't Claire; after all, she told her story to Meredith. Tony didn't know how much she'd said. Hell, she told her story to the attorneys in Iowa. The FBI had that account, He'd read the opening sentences. Suddenly, he wished he'd read more when he was with the FBI. Maybe, just maybe, this was some FBI set-up?

Tony had no choice. He had to take the bait and turn on the phone. He couldn't remember ever feeling so trapped. In their game of chess, he was in figurative check; however, he didn't know for sure who'd put him there. Tony looked around the room for an outlet. Finding one, he plugged in the phone. While the small gadget came to life, he worked to still the mayhem in his

head.

What about the account? The last time he checked, he and Catherine had over 200 million dollars invested. What stipend had he been allowed to keep? Red seeped into his thoughts as he considered the possibilities. If the fuck'n FBI thought they could take away his life and his money, then they were sadly mistaken. He was going to get to the end of this, come hell or high water, and damn it, the last seventeen days had been hell!

When the screen finally lit, Tony accessed the contacts. There were three. The first programmed number wasn't associated with a name. It was an asterisk (*). The second was the name: Claire. The third was his name: Anthony. He felt the muscles of his neck tighten. Was the information about Claire's cell phone in that FBI report? The shit about the asterisks? Or was this Claire's way of saying it was her? Claire's way of saying, now I've done it to you, and didn't he deserve it? Tony knew he did; nonetheless, he wouldn't accept it willingly or play her damn games!

The signal within the room was too poor to assure a connection. He refused to live in fear. If there was fuck'n teaching to do, he'd be the teacher. Slipping the phone into the pocket of his jacket, Tony collected the charger and the note. Channeling his business-self, he made his way to the front of the bank to learn the contents of his account.



CLAIRE THOUGHT DAILY about the items she'd left in the safety deposit box. Tony's plane reportedly went down over two weeks ago. She never considered the possibility that he was truly injured; nevertheless, with each passing day, she felt the need to entertain the possibility. After all, if he were able, wouldn't he be in Geneva accessing his fortune?

There were times she worried that he had accessed the box and had chosen not to call. In her mind, she created all different scenarios for his decision. Claire knew, no matter what he decided—whether to call or not to call—his decision wouldn't be based off his understanding or misunderstanding of her clues. She knew beyond a doubt, Anthony Rawlings was the only man who'd know what she was saying.

He would know the correct number to call; however, she needed to entertain the possibility that he wasn't the person who accessed the box. If that were the case, Claire had a back-up plan. She had cell phones associated with each number. The only phone she'd answer was the one identified by the asterisk. During their marriage, when Tony finally allowed her to own a cellular telephone, he programmed her contacts. The only calls she was permitted to answer were those programmed with an asterisk preceding the

name. No one else knew this part of their history; she hadn't shared it with anyone, not even in her memoirs.

If someone else discovered the safety deposit box, then they would more than likely call one of the numbers associated with a name. If that happened, if one of the other two phones rang, Claire decided she wouldn't answer; instead, she'd destroy all three international disposable phones and focus on *her* future.

She'd spent the morning in the gardens with Francis. The fertility of the soil, combined with the sun and rain, produced yields Claire could never have imagined in Iowa or Indiana. After a cooling swim in the pool, a shower, and lunch, Claire was spending her afternoon relaxing on her bed and reading a book. The tranquility of the sea breeze and the sound of the surf had her in a near hypnotic state. An afternoon nap was growing nearer as the words of her book lost focus and her eyelids fought to remain open.

The ring to her untraceable international phone made her jump, evaporating the tropical serenity. It was the correct phone—the one linked to the asterisk. Although she was apprehensive about his initial reaction, she had no option. Claire wanted to answer. It was now or never. *Ring... ring...*

Steadying her voice, despite her trembling hands, Claire hit the *RECEIVE* button and spoke, "Hello, Tony."

"My God, it *is* you!" As his volume increased, she imagined his dark eyes and the vein in his neck pulsating. She recognized the change in his tone as his words came in a low growl from behind gritted teeth, "What have you done?"

Staying steadfast, Claire spoke with confidence, "If I hang up, then you'll never be able to contact me again. The choice is yours."

Closing her eyes, Claire listened as he struggled for composure. It took a few minutes until he finally sighed and said, "I'm glad you're alive. Do you have any idea the hell we've been going through? What about... our... baby?"

A smile broke through her concerned expression. With relief, she replied, "Our baby is well."

Finally, he spoke coherently, "Thank God." She didn't know if it was anger or pain; either way, his words were laced with emotion. "How in the hell did you do this? Where are you? And where is my money?"

"It's nice to hear from you, too. I'm sure you're confused, but..." Her tone mellowed. "...I've missed you, and I'm glad the reports of your untimely demise were also exaggerated."

"Claire, what the hell is happening?" He repeated, "Where are you? And

where is my money?"

"I'm here, and your money is nicely invested. You'll be happy to know it's made some unexpected positive returns of late. You know, with the recent increase in oil options."

"I'm thrilled." He exhaled. "Where is *here*?"

"Of course, I'm considering a heavier investment in logistics. I've read that it's the wave of the future. Manufacturing has so many variables."

"Could we forgo the discussion on investment options? I want to know what you've done."

"And I want my life—the one we just had. Can we both get what we want?"

His voice reminded her of the business Anthony Rawlings; assessing the climate and gathering the facts. "Were you taken? Or did you leave me?"

"Tony, do you trust me?"

"What?"

"Do you trust me?"

"I want to, but you left me—*again*. You took my money." His volume, once again, increased. "How? How did you even know about it?"

Her resolve was fading. If he hung up, then it was over. She didn't want that. "Tony, I made a mistake, many mistakes. I believed someone else instead of trusting you and living up to our promise. I've learned the truth, and I want you to know that I trust you, and I'm so sorry."

Tony struggled for words. "Someone else? W-what are you talking about?"

"We're *both* children of children... and so is our child..."

Initially, he remained silent. Claire wondered if he was truly processing her meaning. Finally, he asked, "How did you pull this off?"

"Trust me, and we'll see it through together."

"I don't seem to have any other choice."

"Actually, you do," Claire said as she looked at the large diamond engagement ring hanging from the gold chain around her neck. Although she hadn't been wearing it on her finger, she never gave it away, sold it, or let it be far from her. She'd followed his rules; nevertheless, she needed to give him an out. If she didn't then she'd always wonder if he wanted her or the money.

"Claire, don't play games. You're not making any sense."

"I can assure you, this isn't a game. I gave you an out, similar to the one you presented to me years ago. You may leave, with your freedom and a new identity. Being the generous person I am, I left you one million dollars, of your money, which is more than you gave me when you divorced me." Claire heard an exasperated *humpf* on the other end of the line. She waited, but when Tony didn't speak, she continued, "That's enough to support you for the

rest of your life. You may need to cut a few coupons, but I believe you'll eat regularly, otherwise, you may agree to be with me, on my terms, and we'll work together to right some wrongs. The choice is yours."

"Are you serious?"

"Am I serious? Well, I realize you've been removed from your life. I realize your reputation has taken a hit. I also realize your company is suffering. I can't and won't take responsibility for most of that, but believe me, I know what it's like to have your entire world turned upside down." She waited; he didn't respond. "I also know who's done this to both of us. I know that disappearing for a while is our best option, and most importantly, I want to spend my disappearance with you. Do you want to spend yours with me?"

He exhaled. "Claire, I'd give up everything in the world to be with you and our child."

"Tony, that's not enough for me. I want you—I want our baby—and I want our life back. Will you help me?"

When he didn't immediately respond, Claire's heart dropped. Would he take the out? "Tony?"

"I want it all too. What do you mean, *your terms*? Who did what to us? And who told you about the money?"

"Really, Tony? How many people knew about it? How many people would consider us both children of children?"

Claire waited as tears once again coated her cheeks. He was supposed to understand, forgive, and trust. That's the scenario she'd imagined. *That* was what she planned. Unable to contain the sound of her cries, Claire took a ragged breath and lay back on the bed. While she waited for Tony to respond, she felt their child moving within her.

When she once again heard his voice, she immediately knew it wasn't the tone she'd hoped for. "Are you and our baby safe?"

She managed to say, "Yes."

"Claire, if I call this number again, will you answer?"

Her head nodded, but her lips wouldn't communicate the same message. Damn him! Didn't he understand she'd been through hell too? "Are you saying you don't want to be with us?"

"No." He lowered his voice. "You don't understand what I've been through."

She clenched the ring on the golden chain. "Tony, it hasn't been easy for me either. I need you. We need you." It was more of an admission than she wanted to make, but somehow she wanted to make him understand.

He repeated, "Will you answer?"

Claire knew he didn't like to repeat himself. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she said, "All I wanted from you was a simple yes. Was that so difficult?"

“Will you answer?”

She couldn’t lie; then again, she couldn’t be truthful. At that moment, Claire wasn’t sure of what she’d do. “I don’t know, Tony. Will you call?”

“I don’t know.”

The line went dead...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For every good reason there is to lie, there is a better reason to tell the truth.

—Bo Bennett

A

GENT HARRISON BALDWIN settled into his hotel room in Zurich, Switzerland. It had been two weeks since Claire and Phillip Roach left Venice. Baldwin wasn't making points with the bureau. They definitely weren't happy with his unnecessary trail of the Italian couple from the Hotel Danieli. Although it thankfully went unnoticed by the Italian embassy, SAC Williams didn't hesitate to lecture Baldwin, at length, on his failed attempt. Maybe Baldwin had been undercover for too long. Without sounding conceited, Baldwin truly believed his tracking device would lead him to Claire's next destination. Honestly, he'd underestimated Phillip Roach.

The bureau had agents throughout Europe looking for Rawlings. Baldwin truly didn't know where he'd be. Each time Rawlings answered a call from the bureau, he hung up before his location could be confirmed. The only reason Baldwin was sitting in Switzerland was because of *rumors*. It wasn't high-tech FBI probing. No, it was hours of research, drinking untold amounts of coffee, and reading article after article. The gossip that brought him to Zurich was actually from Claire's research. There were rumors that Nathaniel Rawls hid money overseas. Although discounted by people who knew him and never confirmed, Harry reasoned that Rawlings wouldn't have willingly walked away from his life and agreed to exist on the measly compensation from the FBI if he didn't have more money to access. Common sense told him that Switzerland was where one would hide money. Of course, there were other options. Currently, more Americans probably used the Cayman Islands or Bahamas; however, Baldwin reminded himself that these funds were originally hidden by Rawls in the 1980's.

Harry wanted—and needed—to prove to the FBI that Rawlings was ultimately responsible for multiple unsolved crimes. In effect, not only were

they concentrating on the murder of an FBI agent, but more than likely a string of murders. Baldwin ran his fingers through his blonde, unruly hair. Why couldn't Claire understand that Rawlings wasn't just a monster who abused her? The man was essentially a serial killer. He tried to think about the case and not remember her green eyes. He knew he blew it at their last meeting. Truthfully, he didn't mean to call her stupid. She was just too willing to trust Rawlings. Baldwin vowed that he'd stop Rawlings before he could hurt Claire again.

Harry decided to start at the beginning. Utilizing the bureau's databases, he worked to identify a list of individuals who died with the confirmation of *actaea pachypoda* in their system. Not all of the individuals on the generated list could be connected to Rawlings or Rawls; however, the number that could be connected—even with a *possible* connection—was too high to allow for coincidence. The first documented case, the cause of this entire investigation, was Agent Sherman Nichols. His cause of death in 1997 was publicly declared as *natural causes*. Agent Nichols was seventy-three with a history of high-blood pressure; nevertheless, as a retired federal agent, a full autopsy was required. The toxicology workups took time. When unidentified markers were found, it took more time. To Agent Nichols' family and the public, the original cause of death was confirmed. To the bureau, the case remained open.

Actaea pachypoda was next identified during an autopsy in 1989, by the minimum-security federal correctional facility, Camp Gabriels, in upstate New York. The inmate's name, Nathaniel Rawls; again, blood workups took time. The simple answer was heart failure. That's what SAC Williams said. *Actaea pachypoda had a sedative effect on the cardiac muscle tissue, causing cardiac arrest.* Baldwin wondered why Rawlings would want to kill his own grandfather. Jotting down a note, he wanted to research the record of visitors at Camp Gabriels Correctional Institution. Being a minimum-security prison, visitors came and went with regularity.

The biggest problem with Harry's search, even with the help of the federal database, was that *actaea pachypoda* wasn't commonly sought in toxicology screenings. Truthfully, a search of all cardiac-related deaths should be done; however, that would produce an overwhelming list of possible victims. Even Harry had to admit that Rawlings was probably not responsible for every person who died of cardiac-related problems; nevertheless, if Baldwin included Rawlings' parents, his grandfather, and Agent Nichols, that was four deaths in a relatively short period of time. From Forensics 101, that fit the definition of a serial killer, and then add Simon Johnson, and the killing spree had not stopped.

Harry had compiled health history workups on his entire list of potential victims. Not all fit the possible profile for heart disease as well as Agent Nichols and Nathaniel Rawls. Simon, for example, was very healthy. The

only indications found in health records were allergies: sulfa drugs and penicillin, as well as sensitivity to H1 antihistamines. If his death had been ruled to have been due to natural causes, then red flags would have finally flown. Luckily for Rawlings, Simon's body was too badly burnt in the crash. Harry had requested a new toxicology screening from tissue samples recovered at the time of Simon's accident—but that would take time.

Harry was about to start a state-by-state search of medical examiners' records, searching specifically for *actaea pachypoda*, when his phone rang.

He answered, "Hello?"

The voice on the other end expected action. "Agent Baldwin, Rawlings has been spotted leaving a well-known bank in Geneva. According to the agent, he's not trying to disguise himself."

Baldwin wanted to say, "What an arrogant son-of-a-bitch." Instead, he said, "I can be there in less than an hour, sir."

"The bureau has a plane ready. Be on it, ten minutes ago."

"Yes, sir."

"Agent, while you're flying to Geneva, you can review your assignment. I'd like to assume you won't fail again; however, we both know what happens when we assume."

"Yes, sir. I won't fail."

His research needed to wait.



SETTLING INTO A suite at the Grand Hotel Kempinski, Tony sucked back the best two fingers of Glen Garioch Bourbon he'd ever tasted. There were too many thoughts swirling through his mind to think about one in particular. One thing he knew for sure, he'd had enough of the common life. One million dollars wasn't much, but it would sustain him until the FBI came for him. He didn't care anymore. What the hell? Agent Jackson's cryptic threats needed to be supported. The way Tony saw it, the fuck'n bureau needed to ante up or get out of the damn game!

Tony had stayed at the Kempinski before, and decided that due to its size and reputation for excellence, he'd stay there again. He reasoned that a businessman spending money—enjoying what life could offer—would get lost in the crowd. Anonymity, plus the modern, clean-line decor and opulence were exactly what Tony wanted and needed at the moment. He could spend a few days in his suite, soaking the stench of hostels and common living from his skin, while he drank the thoughts of Claire leaving him and stealing his money from his head. It seemed like the perfect combination.

Another two fingers of bourbon and he might just go down to one of the

clubs. Hell, he hadn't been with another woman since before he and Claire married, not even when she was in prison. He went out on dates and made appearances *that's who* Anthony Rawlings was. Nevertheless, his heart wasn't in it. He was always polite and gentlemanly, even when advances were made on him. It wasn't that he didn't have needs. It was that during the instances when his lips touched another woman's and he closed his eyes, all he saw was the sparkling emerald he wanted to have in his arms. When he opened his eyes and the sight before him wasn't what he truly desired. The rest of his body wasn't interested in proceeding. Although there were many women willing to help the situation, Tony wasn't interested.

Of course, that didn't mean Claire had afforded him the same exclusivity. In Tony's current condition, that was somewhere he shouldn't go. One thought opened the floodgate to many more. Had she left him to be with someone else? Was she with someone now? There was always that thought that periodically infiltrated his thoughts: what if the baby wasn't his? Refocusing on their conversation—where the hell was *here*? What kind of an answer was that?

Tony snickered as he poured his third glass. Damn, if he weren't so refined, then he'd drink the shit from the bottle. He may still be using the same name as the man at the hostels, but he wasn't that man. He'd drink like culturally duped men do—out of a glass.

He definitely had more questions swirling through his head than answers. Tony thought back to the research he tried to do. There were too many pieces of this puzzle still missing.

Slumping back into a plush chair and gazing out to the twilight sky above Lake Geneva, Tony acknowledged the FBI was right. Claire left him. *Of. Her. Own. Free. Will!*

Slightly dimmed by the onslaught of ninety-six proof liquor, Tony's thoughts were forming slower; nevertheless, Claire's words were coming back, *Really, Tony? How many people knew about it? How many people would consider us both children of children?* He knew that answer in the pit of his stomach. With each second, the truth burnt within him: Catherine knew. She knew they were both children of children. Catherine knew about Nathaniel's money. Catherine knew how to access Nathaniel's money. *Catherine knew!*

Reaching for his nearest phone, Tony almost spilled his drink. As he steadied himself, he thought about Catherine's number. Not hers, no *his*! The idea that he could call *his* house and she'd be there fueled the rage coursing through him. Just as he considered entering the number with the phone in the palm of his hand, it rang.

He almost dropped it!

With a slight slur to his speech, Tony answered, "Hello, Agent Jackson,

“how are you this fine evening?” The momentary silence made Tony laugh. “What’s the matter, Agent? Cat’s got your tongue?”

“Mr. Rawlings, we have word that you’re making yourself visible.”

“Oh, you see, that’s not true. No-no one can see me, right now.” Tony scanned the corners of the room for signs of cameras. “Or, can you?” He lifted his free hand to wave. “Can you see me?”

“No, Mr. Rawlings, I can’t see you; however, you’ve been spotted.”

“Well, is that so? I’m not using my real name.”

“Mr. Rawlings, we’d like you to meet with a field agent. He’ll instruct you on better ways to stay hidden.”

“I don’t think I’m up for more learning today. You see, I’ve already had a lesson or two, so I’m really over the entire educational system at this moment.”

“That wasn’t a request. You’re staying at the Kempinski; our agent will meet you in fifteen minutes at Mulligan’s near the train station.”

Tony looked at his watch. “I’m going to have to pass. You see, I had room service in mind.”

“Mulligan’s. Fifteen minutes.” The line went dead. On the corner of the screen, the time said 02:24. So, they were finally able to trace a call. It didn’t matter. They already knew where he was staying.

Tony made his way to the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and straightened his tie. If he were expected to meet with some FBI asshole, then he’d at least do it with dignity.



PHIL WATCHED TONY leave the Kempinski. If Rawlings was supposed to be in hiding, Phil didn’t think he was doing a very good job. His demeanor, swagger, and aura all screamed *Anthony Rawlings*. It truly didn’t matter what name he chose to use; no one who knew him would mistake him for someone else. Hell, Phil was good, but anyone could’ve found him.

From the time Phil left Claire on the island, he’d been staking out the bank. She’d told him the name of the institution where she’d secured her new fortune. It only made sense that sooner or later, Rawlings would show up at the same place. Claire never told him what she’d left for Rawlings in the safety deposit box, but whatever it was, Rawlings didn’t appear happy about it when he left the bank. He hardly looked like a man who’d just accessed his hidden millions.

Flagging down a cab, Phil instructed the driver to follow the cab up ahead. It may not have been the best detective work he’d ever done, but this wasn’t about learning. Phil didn’t want to know any more about Anthony Rawlings

than he already did. In all honesty, he knew more than he wanted to know. Phil had something he wanted to *tell* Rawlings.

The cab with Rawlings pulled up to a small tavern, Mulligan's, not far from the train station. Again, Phil wondered what Rawlings was thinking. This was way too public for someone who was supposedly missing. When Phil entered the tavern, it took all his self-control not to stand and gape at the scene unfolding in front of him. Even Rawlings seemed bewildered as he tried to comprehend the reality. Harrison Baldwin was meeting Rawlings mid-room. Yes, there were other patrons, sounds, talking, music, chairs moving, yet as Phil slipped into a dark corner, none of that registered. It was like a movie where the rest of the room turns to fuzz. All Phil could watch were the two men standing chest to chest. If it were a western, then their hands would be on their revolvers.

When Rawlings left the hotel, he didn't look happy. Unhappy was an understatement to describe his current demeanor. Phil couldn't hear their conversation, but he could feel the waves of tension radiating from their encounter. For a second, when Baldwin took out his badge, Phil was afraid Rawlings would deck him. It wasn't true fear—actually, Phil would've enjoyed the show; however, for Claire's sake, it was something that shouldn't happen, at least, not in public.

Phil wanted to hear what they were saying; however, slipping into the neighboring booth wouldn't add to the warmth of their reunion. If Phil were to trust his own intuition, this meeting had blindsided Rawlings. Phil wondered whom Rawlings thought he was meeting. Shaking his head, he assessed if this were set up by the FBI, it seemed pretty shitty.

Phil ordered a beer and continued to watch. Neither man in the booth across the room ordered when the waitress approached. Although they sat calmly, an aura of discontent fell like a cloud all around them. Phil didn't think it was his imagination or the fact he knew their background. Even strangers were steering clear of that corner of the bar. Despite their too low voices, their body language suggested a heated discussion. Baldwin was talking, and Rawlings wasn't interested; however, when Baldwin pulled out his phone and showed something to Rawlings, Phil thought he saw virtual sparks fly. Rawlings' finger pointed at Baldwin and moved to emphasize every word of his retort. Without warning, Rawlings stood and headed toward the door.

Phil watched to see if Baldwin would go after him. When he didn't, Phil laid a few Euros on the tabletop and slid out after Rawlings. As he watched the cab stop and Rawlings begin to enter, Phil let out a breath and told himself, *this is for Claire*.

The next second, Phil reached for the handle of the cab's door. When it opened, he eased onto the seat next to Rawlings.

“Excuse me, this cab is—” Tony’s words, in French, stopped when their eyes met. It’s understandable that he didn’t recognize Phil right away; after all, they’d only met a few times in person. Most of their correspondence had been via email and text message, but when Rawlings realized who’d just entered his cab, his eyes darkened and he growled, “What the hell?”

Also in French, Phil replied, “I’d address you by name...” Phil moved his eyes to the driver. “...however, I’m not sure what that is.”

“Collins,” Rawlings said, as he exhaled and laid his head against the seat.

“Monsieur Collins, I’m sure you’ll want to hear me out.”

“This fuck’n day won’t ever end, will it?”

The cab driver looked back at Tony and asked if everything was all right. Tony nodded and replied, “*Oui*, to my hotel.” Then under his breath, he continued the conversation, “Monsieur, I assume you’ll be joining me?”

Phil nodded. “*Bien sûr.*”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A little more persistence, a little more effort, and what seemed hopeless failure may turn to glorious success.

—Elbert Hubbard

EACH DAY WAS a little better than the last. Claire only allowed herself to cry or acknowledge her loneliness when she was alone in her suite. It wasn't compartmentalization: she'd accepted her fate. These weren't the cards she'd been dealt; no, they were the ones *she'd* drawn.

She reasoned that Madeline and Francis didn't need to be burdened by her sadness, and her child didn't need to experience the anguish coming from its mother—all of the time. Claire kept the sadness defined, and the rest of the time, she bluffed her way through. *Fake it until she made it*—her new mantra.

The odd thing, the thing that surprised Claire, was as she *bluffed* and feigned happiness, the real pleasures of day-to-day activities seeped into her life. One afternoon, while in the kitchen with Madeline and without pretending, Claire heard her own laughter. The light, foreign, and whimsical sound surprised her more than anyone else. It had been so long since she'd truly laughed that she almost didn't recognize it.

On the afternoon after she and Tony spoke, she lay on her bed, phone in hand, for what seemed like hours. Her plan was well thought out and well designed; nevertheless, he hung up. The pain from his decision and her situation was physical. She'd experienced physical pain before, and this was equally as immobilizing. Had it not been for the child inside of her, Claire might have chosen to remain forever on that big bed; however, as the life within her moved and grew, she knew that she too must go on.

The tides still rose and the sun still set. Madeline and Francis still did

what they did. Claire had a decision to make; she either centered her life on waiting for his call or moved on. It wasn't a desire. It was a need. Claire needed closure. With strength she didn't know she possessed, she turned off the phone Tony called, gathered the cords, and placed all of the phones associated with the safety deposit box in a container. She wouldn't trap him, and she couldn't persuade him. All Claire could do was move on.

When her reality finally hit, Claire realized she was facing her greatest fear. Catherine had won. It didn't matter that Claire knew the truth, or that she told Tony. All that mattered were the consequences of her betrayal. On a warm night in June, she and Tony stood in an open field and promised to trust one another. Even at the time, Claire knew it was a difficult promise for Tony; nevertheless, they made a vow. It wasn't said in front of family and friends, but it was an oath. Although some of Tony's promises over the years were made for the wrong reasons, he showed Claire more than once that he was a man of his word.

On that same night, Tony asked Claire if she was afraid of him. Claire replied: *Of you—personally—not anymore. There was a time, but I've changed, and you've changed. No, I'm not.* If only she'd focused on that: on her promises.

All vows endure tests. These tests were rarely planned, but they happened. Catherine planned Claire's test, deceptively using Claire's experience, her fear, and her maternal instinct against her. By failing that test, Claire was hurt. Tony was hurt, and ultimately, their child was hurt—all the children of children. Truly, it was an impressive win on Catherine's part. She could live on that jackpot for a long time.

It was a few days after their conversation, when Claire saw the irony. In this strange world of vengeance, Claire did what Tony said Nathaniel had done: Claire had trusted the wrong people. She couldn't take it back. Not only had she trusted the wrong people, she'd pushed away the ones who truly cared. Whether it was Emily, John, or Phil, they were all gone, and Claire knew it was her doing.

When she sat down to eat and Francis held one of her hands and Madeline the other, Francis' words spoke to an entity who Claire remembered from childhood. It wasn't that she didn't believe—she did. It was that she wasn't sure she deserved the blessings Francis described. One day, in the gardens, Francis told Claire about his personal journey. He wasn't only a believer, but ordained.

Each day and each meal opened Claire's mind a little more. Before she knew it, Claire was talking to God too. No, it wasn't audible, yet it was comforting. She didn't ask for anything. There was nothing more she wanted. She made promises, promises to focus on her new friends, her child, and her well-being. The more she talked, the more she listened. The replies weren't

words: they were peace. Claire didn't know how it would work, but somehow, she believed it would. In a way, it was like being with Tony: she willingly gave over control of her life.



TONY TOOK A deep breath. Although the multi-colored sea below him reminded him of his honeymoon, the tension in his neck and shoulders was something completely different. It was no secret: Anthony Rawlings didn't like or want to be indebted to anyone. Truly, he could count the number of people on one hand, besides himself, who deserved credit for anything in his life. Unfortunately, that short list went all the way back to his childhood; nevertheless, someone who was no longer obligated to him in any way may have changed his life forever. The jury was still out. As the small plane continued toward some mysterious island, Tony closed his eyes and remembered the happenings of the other night.

He'd bet everything on the money in his accounts. Hovering somewhere around 200 million, the possibilities for that money were limitless. His world began to crack and cave in when he signed the ledger. Tony knew, without a doubt, Catherine hadn't traveled to Switzerland and accessed their accounts. She hadn't stolen Tony's money out from under him; nevertheless, on the ledger, and on two separate occasions, he saw the signature: *C. Marie Rawls*.

When he first heard Claire's voice, Tony's world exploded—the relief was instantaneous. Claire was alive! Their child was safe! He almost experienced a giddiness he'd never known; then all at once, the sensation evaporated and crimson saturated his happiness. No longer did he think about Claire's safety that was apparently assured. Now, the obvious dominated his thoughts: Claire willingly left him and stole his money.

As she spoke, he heard memories of her proclamations. Over the years, Claire had repeatedly told him that his money didn't matter, yet somehow, he was standing on the street in Geneva, Switzerland, minus almost 199 million dollars. Claire quipped something about growing his investment. The only damn investment she needed to grow was inside of her. No, he reminded himself, she'd stolen that too.

Claire's accusation made no sense. Who would know they were both children of children? The only person was Catherine, and Tony and Catherine had been together forever. It wasn't like they were *together*; however, they'd always been there for one another. He recalled catching her when she fell down the stairs, helping her after the incident—or rather accident—with his parents, and securing her freedom with annual payments to Patrick Chester.

It hadn't all been one-sided. Catherine had helped Tony too. After Claire's

accident, Catherine was the one who convinced him not to call the police. She contrived the story that later became their statement. She helped with Claire, especially when he first brought her to the estate. Catherine taught her lessons that Claire needed to know. Tony knew he loved Claire, but he also knew he couldn't abandon Catherine, not after everything they'd been through.

Anthony Rawlings was a businessman. He looked objectively at information and analyzed the ledgers. When he compared the two columns, he unfortunately saw more cons on Claire's side. Catherine had been his rock, and more importantly, Tony's connection to Nathaniel for as long as he could remember.

Then, there was the arranged meeting! Agent Jackson wanted Tony at Mulligan's. From Tony's perspective, it was ridiculous. If the FBI knew where he was then why not come to him? No, the directive was to meet at a public place.

Even days removed, the memories fueled Tony's rage. Agent Baldwin—Agent! Harrison Baldwin was an FBI agent?! Why? And how? And when? Was it before or after he was with Claire?

After the initial shock, Baldwin convinced Tony to sit. It was then that Baldwin began some tirade about plants. Baldwin asked about Tony's knowledge regarding plants. Although a few smart-ass answers came to mind, Tony honestly replied, "Nothing. I don't know shit about plants; well, other than what I've learned from Claire."

It was after the mentioning of Claire's name that Baldwin got some sick smile on his face and smirked. "So, Rawlings, how is Claire?"

"I haven't seen her in a while. You know that. I called you when she first went missing."

"Missing? I guess she is... depending on whom you ask."

Tony's patience was spent on the call with Claire—no more remained. "What the hell do you mean?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, just the other day..." Baldwin offered his phone, turning the screen toward Tony. "...I was in Venice, and she was in Venice. You can see she's well. Oh, she's staying in disguise." He lowered his voice, "I believe that's because she's hiding from some threat, someone possibly, but if you look closely, I'm sure you can tell it's her."

Tony stared at the picture. Claire and Baldwin with their hands entwined. Tony didn't know what else was said. The rest of their conversation vanished behind a rush of rage. In hindsight, it was a good thing Baldwin made his federal status known. If he hadn't, Tony might have been able to add *bodily harm of a federal agent* to his resume. Before Tony left the pub, he turned back to Baldwin and asked, "One question, asshole. Was Claire some kind of informant? An assignment?"

It was the first sign of true emotion Tony saw on Baldwin's face as he

replied, “At first, she was, but it became more.”

Walking away, Tony contemplated his question and Baldwin’s answer. Although Tony wanted to lay him out and wondered if Claire knew she started out as some FBI project, as he settled into the cab, Tony realized he was no better than Baldwin. The relationship he started with Claire wasn’t meant to be personal either. Then, in the midst of his epiphany, the door to the cab opened. Tony started to speak, to ask the man to leave, when suddenly, Tony recognized him: Phillip Roach, the private detective he’d fired: the one who failed to protect Claire.

Education had always been important to Tony. He finished his bachelor’s and master’s with honors. Whenever possible, he read, researched, and acquired knowledge; however, in the past twelve hours, he’d been told by three different people that they possessed information he *needed to learn*. By the time Roach entered his cab, Tony’s receptiveness to tutelage ceased to exist.

After they entered Tony’s suite, Roach told him a story. If Tony hadn’t been one of the major players, then he would’ve thought the man was crazy. Yet every date, every instance, and every detail was verifiable in Tony’s mind. Tony had an uncanny ability to remember dates, names, and conversations. Somehow, through Roach’s story, everything he knew and believed took on new meaning.

Roach explained that he was the one to mail the gifts and cards to the *Rawls-Nichols* baby. He was the one who purposely breached the estate’s security and tried to run Clay off the road. He emphasized that on no occasion was Claire ever in danger. It was all a ploy to create fear and suspicion.

When Tony asked *why*, Roach’s answer was simple. “It was a job. Ms. London hired me.” The story of the laptop made Tony’s stomach turn. He couldn’t believe it had been in his own closet.

Yes, Claire should’ve waited and talked to him, but hearing it from Roach, seeing this new perspective, Tony’s heart broke for the woman he loved. He understood, Claire was too frightened to wait. It pained him that at that moment she was frightened of him; however, that’s how it was meant to be—how Catherine planned it. Roach also explained that Claire defended Tony to Evergreen and Baldwin. He also mentioned how Baldwin caught her off-guard.

Taking the time to listen and consider the timeline, Tony understood Claire’s reasoning and justified her fear. It was then that he remembered the phone call and reevaluated her words: *Tony, I made a mistake, many mistakes. I believed someone else, instead of trusting you and living up to our promise. I’ve learned the truth, and I want you to know that I trust you and that I’m so sorry.* After everything, she still wanted him and he’d hung up on her.

Now, as he and Phil approached her hiding place, he knew that the two of them had much to discuss, so much to say. He could've tried to call; however, he didn't want to give her the opportunity to tell him to stay away. Honestly, he feared she would—the possibility still existed. Technically, he could argue that it was *his* money that bought the island, but he wouldn't. Tony wanted to see Claire, to look into her eyes and tell her the truth. If she wouldn't listen, then he'd leave.

Above all, Tony wanted to hold Claire in his arms, tell her how sorry he was, and how much he loved her. As the plane neared the water, Anthony Rawlings hoped she would give him that opportunity.



AFTER AN AFTERNOON in the orchards, Claire took a leisurely swim, sunbathed by the pool, read, and napped. When Madeline woke her, she showered and readied for dinner. It was a variation on her normal routine, and with everything considered, Claire didn't think it was too bad.

Running her fingers down the fabric of her pink sundress, Claire pondered her dinner companions. It wasn't like she needed to look good for Madeline and Francis. It was an ingrained behavior—dinner meant formal. Truly, Claire enjoyed that. It was the climax to her day. Securing the shell necklace, she observed her hair—pulled up with ringlets of blonde and brown hanging down over her neck. In only a few weeks, the sun had successfully lightened her hair. Claire smirked. Of course, what did she expect by living this close to the equator?

As they were about to sit down to eat, the sound of an airplane filled their ears. Where only moments earlier the sound of birds and surf dominated, now the roar of propellers amplified over the island. Claire's first thought was Phil. Who else would know their way to her island?

When she stood, Francis placed his hand on her arm. Claire stopped as he warned, "Madame el, it is better if you wait to see."

Instinctively, she hugged her midsection and nodded. Standing on the lanai, she looked down at the lagoon. As she watched the small plane land on the sparkling water, she felt her heartbeat in her throat. The landing and stopping of the propeller seemed to take hours rather than minutes. Perhaps it was the anticipation of greeting the first plane to land in the lagoon since Claire arrived, or more likely her excitement at again seeing a familiar face. Regardless of the reason, Claire stood on the lanai with baited breath. It wasn't until she saw Phil emerge from the small vessel, that she allowed herself to smile.

Losing her heeled shoes, Claire ran down the path, toward the shore. The green vegetation, colorful flowers, and lush trees hid her view of the beach. She was just about to call out, to shout to Phil, when she emerged from the foliage. As her bare feet hit the beach, they stopped and slowly sank into the soft sand.

Stalling under an arch of flowers and vines, Claire experienced one of those moments where time stood still. The sun and moon forgot their roles. The earth no longer turned, and the tides no longer ebbed or flowed. She stood speechless as a second passenger emerged from the plane and stepped toward the path. When he looked up, he stopped mid-step. Claire bravely met his gaze, taking in the darkest, most intense eyes she'd ever known.

Claire knew she'd seen every emotion in those eyes, from anger to adoration. Currently, she saw a mixture of apprehension and desire. With each second, desire overpowered apprehension, desire overpowered everything—everything else, everywhere.

Perhaps there were stars falling, volcanoes erupting, or epic winds blowing. Truthfully, at that moment, the entire world could've been lost and neither one would have known. Later, when she reflected, Claire believed Phil had been speaking. He was giving reason or explanations. At the time, all Claire heard was the beating of her heart maybe, just maybe, it was their baby's heart. No matter, the *whoosh-whoosh* was what filled her ears and her consciousness. Unable to move, Claire stood, waiting for Tony to make his way to her.

Tears filled her eyes and spontaneously escaped her lids as she watched each elegant step. How could a world as perfect as the paradise, where she'd been living have been lacking? In the last moments, seeing Tony gracefully move toward her, Claire knew her sphere was now whole.

When he was within reach, Claire remembered all she wanted to say, all the questions she'd compiled in her thoughts. Though the questions came to mind with increased vigor, no words materialized on her lips. Standing tall and proud, Claire remained silent. She couldn't calm the mayhem long enough to decipher her words. The best plan was silence until...

Without warning, one of Tony's arms surrounded her growing waist and the other captured her neck. The sound escaping her lips couldn't be classified as words. On the contrary, it was more involuntary as her body submitted to his. Every touch, every move, and every angle was determined by him. Claire's body no longer waited for internal instruction. It was programmed to respond to the contact of the man towering above her, inhaling her aroma, and caressing her body.

His hands held her tightly within his grasp. She didn't fight. Why would anyone fight their rightful place? Instead, the sounds from her mouth, the moans from her chest were a plea, a request for more. Truthfully, Claire

wasn't even aware she was making the noises, yet she heard them. Within seconds, his fingers were intertwined in her hair. It wasn't much, but Claire suddenly felt the need to apologize. "I'm so sorry."

The strong, determined mission of his lips quieted further commentary, until he came up for air and said, "No, *I'm* sorry."

Could six words mend an insurmountable gorge? At first, Claire wasn't sure—until they did. As the words left their lips, the gap disappeared. They were together, and nothing could separate them. Claire was in Tony's arms, tasting his kiss, and inhaling his amazing scent. The world beyond their bubble was suddenly insignificant. She wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, on the beach, holding one another.

His eyes held the key to her heart and soul. Peering into Tony's dark gaze of desire, her world lightened into the place she wanted to be. Claire knew she could remain there for a lifetime. Then, slowly, the world around them infiltrated her senses; soft sand materialized beneath her toes, a gentle, salt scented breeze moved strands of her hair, the orange glow of the setting sun created an orange hue, and sound of propellers told them that the plane was leaving.

Unable to contain her sudden panic, Claire held tight to Tony's hand and looked beyond their bubble. Heading back toward the plane was the man who'd made their world right. Claire gasped and looked up to Tony with her head shaking. "We can't let him leave." Then louder, she yelled toward the plane, "Phil!"

He looked their direction.

"Stay," Tony commanded.

Phil's progress stalled. He turned back as they walked toward him.

When they were all together, Tony held out his hand. While the two men shook, Tony said, "Thank you. We can never thank you enough."

The glowing sun reflected in the golden flecks of his eyes. Phil looked to Claire and then to Tony. "You already have."

Tony said, "I was wrong to fire you. You've kept Claire safe and brought us back together. I want you to work for us. Stay."

"With all due respect, Mr. Rawlings, my bank account is quite healthy. There's only one person for whom I'd be willing to postpone my early retirement."

The rush of panic that moments earlier had filled Claire's chest, as she saw Phil leaving, subsided. Smiling, she released Tony's hand and took a step toward her babysitter, her bodyguard, her friend. When she was but inches away, she lifted her arms. "Please stay. You've given me back everything. I know I can never repay you... but I hope you know I want you to be part of our lives."



THEIR HUG WASN'T intimate. It was nothing like the display he'd witnessed moments earlier; nevertheless, it was a connection, a bond he'd never before experienced. As Claire's arms encircled Phil's neck and her petite frame leaned against his chest, Phil knew that he'd stop at nothing to protect her, to protect her baby, and to facilitate her happiness.

He spoke softly, "Do you want me to stay?"

Her green eyes spoke volumes, but it was her words that secured his future, "Oh yes, more than I can say, but the decision is yours."

"I have one stipulation."

Tony stepped forward, protectively placing his arm around Claire's shoulders. "And that would be?"

"I don't do diapers."

The lingering sound of the plane faded into the twilight sky as Tony, Claire, and Phil made their way up the path toward the house.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

***Do what you feel in your heart to be right—for you'll be criticized anyway.
You'll be damned if you do, and damned if you don't.***

—Eleanor Roosevelt

STEPPING THROUGH THE doorway into a sea of familiar faces, Emily held tight to John's hand. Everwood's conference room bustled with counselors, therapists (speech, occupational, and physical), doctors (primary care, neurology, and psychiatry), rehabilitation nurses, and administration representatives—all with one patient in mind: Claire Nichols Rawlings. Various members of Claire's care team greeted the Vandersols as they made their way to some empty seats at the table.

When it came to planning and treatment, Everwood was well known for their excellence. This was true with all their patients, but some patients received extra attention. It was no secret—Claire Nichols Rawlings wasn't the average patient. First of all, she was incredibly wealthy. Second, her sister, next of kin, and power of attorney was excessively demanding, as well as incredibly involved, and lastly, Claire's brother-in-law was an attorney, well versed in medical law. If pertinent revelations regarding her case were to be discussed, it required the presence of all members of her care team.

Today's meeting was in regard to the information in Dr. Fairfield's report. Dr. Carly Brown eased herself into the chair beside Emily. Squeezing Emily's free hand, she whispered, "Don't worry. Dr. Fairfield wouldn't be addressing this entire crowd if he didn't have some valuable theories."

Tired of theories, Emily feigned a smile. Fighting the emotion building in her chest, she managed, "Thanks, Carly, I'm just afraid to get my hopes up."

Dr. Brown smiled. "Hope is all we have. Don't give up on your sister."

Breathing deeply, Emily blinked back the tears. "It's one thing for me to be disappointed. I'm used to it, but I keep thinking about Nichol having to deal with this one day."

John leaned over, keeping his voice low as the rest of the room continued to murmur, “Let’s concentrate on Claire. Nichol’s young We can keep her uninformed as long as possible.”

Emily nodded as she swallowed her tears. Everyone was taking a seat, some around the table and many in chairs at the perimeter. The overflowing room quieted as Dr. Fairfield began his presentation.

“Thank you all for joining me here today. I’ve spoken to many of you in the last few weeks, many over the phone. It’s nice to meet you in person. Let me begin by explaining my role as a neuropsychologist...”

Emily listened as Dr. Fairfield reviewed Claire’s condition. At first, it wasn’t anything she hadn’t heard before—

“It’s well documented that psychosis like what Ms. Nichols is experiencing can be the result of traumatic brain injury. Recent studies have supported the theory of delayed psychosis. This has been well documented in veterans as well as NFL players. It’s characterized by slowly developing psychosis or delayed rapid onset. There are case studies which have documented rapid onset occurring as long as fifty-four months post injury.”

Emily liked to think that Claire’s psychosis was *slowly developing*. Although previously undiagnosed, that theory justified Claire’s decisions over the last years. As Claire’s sister, it made it easier for Emily to accept some of Claire’s actions and decisions—especially regarding Anthony Rawlings. Emily mentally reviewed the timeline: Claire’s initial concussion resulting in prolonged unconsciousness—hell, a coma (although, when she was capable, Claire refused to use that word) was in September of 2010. Though not a concussion, her second brain injury was in June of 2013, when she was attacked by Patrick Chester. Claire’s break with reality occurred in March of 2014...

“There have even been suggestions that a hormonal imbalance as well as weight gain, like that associated with pregnancy, could have exacerbated previous injuries...”

To Emily, it seemed very cut-and-dried and the timeline worked.

Dr. Fairfield continued, “...Although Ms. Nichols’ brain scans support a history of traumatic brain injury, I do not share the theory that this has led to her psychosis...”

Emily’s neck straightened, and she turned to her husband. What was he saying? Of course TBI was the cause of Claire’s psychosis! It was all Anthony’s fault! He injured her. If it weren’t for him, she never would have been Patrick Chester’s target. Emily’s internal monologue drowned out the doctor’s words. She needed to listen.

“...The studies are less conclusive on the rate of recovery, from non-TBI-induced psychosis. It’s true; this patient’s current scans indicate previous damage to the right hemisphere of her brain.” He projected various scanned

images on the screen and utilized a small blue arrow to point to Doppler-generated specifics. “You’ll note, as is consistent with TBI, the damage is most pronounced in the temporal and parietal lobes. What’s of specific significance with Ms. Nichols is the reduction in gray matter. As that reduction occurs, patients tend to feel pain. Ms. Nichols’ history does suggest problems with headaches. Now, if we compare the MRI of 2013 with the one taken two weeks ago, you can see...”

Emily listened, trying to remember the previous evidence. Everyone had said it was the TBI which indeed had caused Claire’s psychotic break. She recalled discussion of injury—evidence of concussion, yet as she tried to focus, Emily realized, Dr. Fairfield wasn’t nullifying that evidence. He had acknowledged that the injuries occurred, but he was also stating that he didn’t feel that the injuries were the cause of her psychosis.

Turning to Dr. Brown, Emily whispered, “Is he saying the head injuries aren’t the cause of her psychosis?”

Dr. Brown’s eyes opened wide as she turned to Emily, nodded, and shrugged.

Dr. Fairfield continued, “If the injuries prove to be the cause of the patient’s current state of mind, then in that case I’d have to agree with the conclusion of others that no further recovery will occur.”

Emily’s mind spun. Who said that? No one had voiced that opinion to her.

Dr. Fairfield went on, “I have based my current prognosis on the patient’s most recent DTI, or diffusion tensor imaging. This is relatively new imaging and wasn’t commonly available at the time of Ms. Nichols’ break. As many of you know, I’ve worked with the NFL on this subject and have been personally involved with many of the more public cases. Accurately monitoring and measuring brain activity is essential in any prognosis. Let me show you this segment of consecutive DTI.” Again, everyone’s attention was brought to the screen. The image before them moved, or, more accurately, it pulsated. The defined areas of color moved, reminding Emily of an intense area of thunderstorm activity on a weather map. “Note the increased activity in this area of gray matter. What’s significant is that this image was recorded during one of the patient’s hallucinatory episodes. Let me also show you the increased stimulation in this patient’s auditory cortex. For those of you less versed in the medical terminology...” Emily knew he was specifically rephrasing for her benefit. “...I’m saying that even though we may not hear what Ms. Nichols hears, or sense what she senses, she is indeed hearing and sensing. More importantly, her brain is active. Yes, there are areas of damage, but the human brain is very powerful and is quite capable of regeneration and compensation. I conclude that with the right antipsychotics and a significant change in therapy, progress can be made to bring Ms. Nichols back from her current state.”

As everyone discussed this new prognosis, the room buzzed with whispers. John leaned over Emily in an attempt to speak with Dr. Brown. Emily remained silent, contemplating the possibility that Dr. Fairfield's assessment could possibly be true. Her mind fluctuated between hopeful optimism at the possibility of recovery and less than guarded indignation at the possibility that Anthony's guilt could be more indirect than direct.

When the room began to quiet, Emily stood. Slowly, silence prevailed. Clearing her throat, she utilized the voice she'd reserved years ago for addressing students. "Dr. Fairfield, if brain injury wasn't the cause of my sister's condition, please enlighten us on what was the cause?"

Everyone turned toward the good doctor, watching as he shifted his footing. "Mrs. Vandersol, psychotic breaks can occur for a number of reasons. Let me emphasize that I'm not insinuating that your sister isn't truly in the throes of such a break."

Defensively, Emily stood taller. Pressing her lips together, she refrained from speaking as she waited for the doctor to continue.

"The most common causes of psychotic breaks include brain injury and drug use; however, it's also well documented that a significant life event can precipitate such a break." For all of his large words and doctor attitude, Emily saw a sudden shift in countenance as he asked, "Your sister had a significant life experience. Wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Vandersol?"

"Yes, Doctor, I do; however, the length of my sister's break has, in the past, been reason to believe that there was more than a significant life experience to blame."

It was as if they were the only two in the room. No one else dared breathe, much less speak. Dr. Fairfield continued, "As I stated earlier, the human brain is a truly amazing organ—one that's essential for each of us to continue living. Without it, we would be incapable of simple involuntary behaviors such as breathing or the beating of our heart. That same amazing brain can also protect us." He paused and waited; silence prevailed. "It's my opinion that this patient's break may have been initially associated with previous injury. It's also possible that the swelling of blood vessels during pregnancy, her difficult childbirth, and even the hormones associated with breastfeeding could have contributed." Dr. Fairfield cleared his throat and pushed on, "After observing more than one of your sister's hallucinatory episodes, I believe your sister is where she wants to be."

Momentarily, Emily was at a loss for words. She stuttered as she looked to both Dr. Brown and John. "Ex-excuse me, do—"

John's voice prevailed. "So, am I correct to understand you believe Claire is willfully keeping herself in this state? Are you saying she's faking?"

"N-no, Mr. Vandersol, I believe she's in a true psychotic state. She's obviously delusional, blissfully unaware of her surroundings or the burden her

behavior has had on others. I also believe she doesn't know she's a mother nor of the fate of her husband." When Emily shifted, Dr. Fairfield added, "I didn't ask her those questions specifically. Mrs. Vandersol, your directives were maintained; however, in an effort to assess Mrs. Rawlin-Ms. Nichols, I breached some subjects that had no effect on her. Which I may add, I feel is a shame—"

John interrupted, "Dr. Fairfield, could my wife and I continue this conversation with you in private?"

"Yes, I under—"

Emily stopped his response. "No! I want answers, and I'm sure the others here will need to know. First, is Claire uncomfortable or in pain?"

"Mrs. Vandersol, the patient has been maintained in a static state of comfort—which I believe is the problem."

Everyone in the room turned toward Emily. To the observers, it was like watching a tennis match: all heads turned one way and then they turned the other.



JULY 26, 2016

Today, Ms. Bali called and asked me to come in early. Since Claire has been doing well with me bringing her meals, she asked if I'd take her on a walk. Apparently, there was some big meeting regarding her diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. Everyone associated with her care had to attend. I wish I'd been at the meeting, but Emily was probably there, so it was better I wasn't.

I know I should write about the walk. That's the whole point, right? Record my thoughts and comments so that I can later come back and see if any progress was made—have a basis for writing the follow-up to my book. Well, here's the thing: I don't want to. Oh, I want to stay with Claire. I want to help her, but for a journalist who's supposed to be indifferent, I picked the wrong project.

Just in case I don't remember when I come back to read—on the way home from Everwood, I stopped at the store and bought a bottle of wine. No, it isn't the normal size. It's the big one!

I hated it today! I went to her room and surprise Claire was sitting in the chair by the window. When she saw me and heard my voice, she went to the table to eat. Keep in mind, she'd just eaten! I explained that I was taking her on her walk. At first, she didn't budge. I just kept talking about the outside. Finally, she stood. I stepped closer, like I'd seen the other woman do and Emily do. Claire didn't move. I had to reach for her hand and place it on my

arm.

After that, she stayed in step as we walked through the facility. The part that broke my heart was that when we went outside she didn't look up. She kept her eyes downcast and walked wherever I led. I remember her stories, the ones of her at her lake on the Rawlings Estate. She'd talk about her love of the outside, the breeze in her hair, and the sun on her skin. I think I was expecting to see some sort of recognition or excitement; instead, there was nothing.

I hated that she had to be subdued when our eyes first met in the cafeteria a month ago, but honestly I'd rather have a negative reaction than none! I think I'm done writing for tonight. I have more wine to drink!



MICHAEL, NICHOL, AND John finished their dinners while Emily continued to pick at the food on her plate. She heard the chatter, but her mind kept replaying Dr. Fairfield's words: *No, the patient has been maintained in a static state of comfort—which I believe is the problem.*

Indignantly, she listened as Dr. Fairfield hypothesized that Claire's current provisions were *too good*. In essence, he blamed Emily's directives on Claire's compliance. He went on to discuss Claire's history of compliance and adaptability.

Emily argued internally, *too good?!* Her sister was detached from the world, living in a place that wasn't real. How could he possibly think that was *too good?* Besides, Dr. Fairfield's resources weren't primary! Wasn't that an essential element of research—primary resources? The only way he could've learned about Claire's past, from those who knew firsthand, those who were there, would be to interview Claire or Anthony. Obviously, that hadn't happened. He had to have researched not only Emily's accounts, which she confessed were second hand, or read Meredith's book. Yes, the book was relatively accurate, but even that had an element of fiction. The blatant truth would be too difficult for the world to read.

So what? So Claire had survived her ordeal by complying and adapting. That was because if she didn't, then Anthony would punish her. Claire's current situation wasn't even remotely similar. How could he suggest it was?

That was what he'd said—he said: *the accommodating surroundings worked to mold Claire's behavior. By not requiring her to face the consequences of her past, they were allowing Claire to live in her make-believe world.*

The way Emily saw it, she was affording her sister the safe haven she'd been denied.

The sound of laughter returned Emily's thoughts to present. Focusing on the table, she watched Michael giggle as Nichol blew bubbles in her milk.

"Nichol! What are you doing? Don't teach your cousin those things!" Emily's unusually harsh tone surprised everyone. She saw the shock in her husband's eyes.

Nichol's brown eyes, that only seconds ago glistened with laughter, were suddenly brimming with tears and looking down. "I'm sorry, Aunt Em."

John stood and reached for the children's plates. Keeping his voice steady, he reassured, "It's all right, honey. Aunt Emily's tired. You're fine, no mess. How about you two go upstairs and let Becca help you get your pajamas on, and we'll make some popcorn."

Peeking her eyes upward, Nichol asked, "Can we watch a movie?"

"Sure we can," Emily's voice softened. "I *am* tired; I'm sorry that I snapped. If you two hurry then we can all cuddle in our bed." As small feet rushed out of the dining room with their nanny, Emily's head dropped and her tears flowed. It wasn't until John's hands massaged her shoulders that she found the courage to speak. "Do you think he's right?"

"I don't know, but I do know that we haven't seen much progress in the last year. I think it's worth a try."

"I don't want her to have to face... I don't want her to have to deal with..."

John helped Emily stand. "I know what you want. You want Claire well, and her past gone. That's not going to happen."

Emily's cheek settled against John's chest. She listened as he repeated everything Dr. Fairfield said earlier. It may have been the quiet setting of their dining room, his tender embrace, or the relief from allowing the tears to finally surface. No matter the reason, John's words made sense. Nodding her head, Emily replied, "I guess I get it, but I still don't want her to have to deal with memories of *him*."

Pulling her close, John whispered, "She's survived more than most. Maybe these past few years have been a well-deserved break. As much as you want to, you can't keep the truth from her forever. When she's stronger, she'll be able to face it, and perhaps this new protocol will help her get stronger."

Emily conceded, "I'll call Dr. Brown tomorrow and give my okay."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Darkness restores what light cannot repair
—Joseph Brodsky

*M*ADELINE AND FRANCIS met Claire and her guests on the lanai. Francis shook Phil's hand as the two men exchanged familiar greetings. Still holding Tony's hand, Claire introduced him, "Madeline and Francis, let me introduce Anthony Rawlings."

Madeline's smile lit the room. "Monsieur, we're so happy to have you with us before your *fille* arrives."

Claire smiled. She'd never mentioned Tony to Madeline; she wondered how she knew he was the father of her baby. Looking up at Tony's expression, Claire realized what Madeline had just said and squeezed his hand. "No, I haven't learned our baby's sex; however, Madeline seems to believe we're having a girl."

Tony bowed his head. "Madeline, Francis, I too am happy to be here before the arrival of our *bébé—fille or fils*; either is fine with me."

The smiles coming from Madeline and Francis warmed Claire's heart and continued her inner peace. She hadn't considered that they might not be receptive to him. After all, they weren't married. They had been, but Madeline and Francis didn't know that.

Claire said, "I know dinner's ready and I'm sorry, but first, I'm going to show Tony to our room. Could you please show Phil to the room he didn't take before?" Her eyes sparkled teasingly toward Phil.

Phil replied, "That won't be necessary; I remember."

Madeline announced, "I'll have dinner ready for you. After you're done, Francis and I will eat at our house."

Although Claire and Tony had started to walk toward their room, Claire turned back. "Oh no, I don't want you to do that. We'll all eat together—all of us. I'm so happy to have everyone here, and I want everyone to get to know

one other. Please, give us a little time. We'll be back in fifteen minutes."

No one argued with *the lady of the house* as Claire led Tony down the hallway. When they reached their suite, Claire entered, expecting to show him around. The sound of the closing door surprised her. When she glanced back toward Tony and saw his expression, the deep yearning, she thought was forever gone, ignited. The heat immobilized her; she couldn't move toward him or away. Her only option was to stare into the dark, velvety depth of his gaze. For seconds or days, Claire was lost in his eyes. The black penetrating stare no longer filled her with fear; instead, it was a beckoning, a desire that only she could fill—truly an overwhelming and exhilarating responsibility. Within seconds, his strong arms surrounded her and their lips united.

Once again, her world was no longer her own. He didn't take it. On the contrary, Claire relinquished it willingly. Not the control of the island or the money, those were truly insignificant. What belonged to Tony, probably before she ever knew him, was her heart and soul. As their bodies touched, her growing breasts pressed against his chest and his hands caressed her skin; Claire was totally and completely lost. Any thought of life outside their suite disappeared as the scent of his cologne and the taste of his kiss took on life giving power. Eventually, his deep baritone voice penetrated their world while each word, each syllable dripped with desire. "God, I've missed you. I thought I'd never hold you like this again."

Claire couldn't respond verbally. Not only because her mouth was preoccupied—which it was. No, she couldn't respond because the overwhelming sense of relief that was washing over her had removed her ability. It drained her and set her hormone-filled emotions into a new and terrifying cyclone. Tears fell from her eyes as she broke away from his kiss and buried her face in his wide chest. When her shoulders began to shudder from the sobs she couldn't contain, Tony led her to the sofa. His sultry expression turned questioning. "Do you want me to leave? Isn't this what you wanted?"

Claire shook her head and wiped her eyes. "No! I don't want you to leave. This is *exactly* what I want." She sniffled. "I can't believe you're really here. When you hung up—"

Tony knelt before her, his sad eyes a stark contradiction to the passion she saw moments earlier. "I was wrong. Everything was overwhelming." She heard the restraint in his voice as he tried to subdue his shock and anger. "I had everything planned: how I was going to get the money and look for you." His volume rose with each phrase. He shook his head. "I've told you before that you're the only person in this world, who can keep me on my toes. I never imagined you'd access the accounts before me. I was totally blindsided! When I saw the signature of Marie Rawls, my gut told me that something was wrong! I still wasn't sure until I called the number..." He exhaled and waited.

Finally, he took her petite hands, surrounded them with his own, and reined in his tone. “I wasn’t even sure it was you. I couldn’t fathom how you could possibly gain access, and then, when I heard your voice—”

The hint of anger faded into a sadness Claire couldn’t identify. She’d never heard so much pain in his voice. With all her heart, she wanted to make his world better; however, she couldn’t take away his sense of betrayal: initially from her and then from Catherine. He needed to say what he was thinking. While tears silently overflowed her eyes, Claire kept her gaze locked with his. Even with his visible pain, his dark eyes completed her world.

He continued, “It wasn’t that I didn’t want to believe you, but to believe you meant admitting that Catherine deceived...” His head bowed to Claire’s lap.

When he didn’t speak, Claire ran her fingers through his hair and waited.

Swallowing his emotions, Tony looked back up to her eyes. Dark windows of remorse matched the anguish she heard in his tone.

“I put you in harm’s way,” Tony said. “Since Roach explained everything, that’s all I’ve thought about. I took you away from California and put you in the worse place possible. Tell me—tell me you know I didn’t know. I never would’ve, never thought she was capable of hurting *you* or *me* or...” He touched Claire’s stomach and rubbed, causing Claire to smile. “...our child.”

The baby kicked Tony’s hand, and Tony’s eyes opened wide. “Did I just feel that?”

Claire nodded.

“That was amazing!” For a moment, their excitement and joy overpowered the shadow brought on by Catherine’s name.

Despite her moist eyes and tear-covered cheeks, Claire giggled, “I’ve been praying for you to feel our little one move and kick. I think we have a soccer player on our hands.”

Tony sat straighter and tipped his head. When their noses touched, he said, “Mighty fine!” Tenderly wiping her cheeks with the back of his hand, Tony brushed his lips over hers. “We’ve both made mistakes, too many to count, but this little life inside of you isn’t a mistake. He or she isn’t a Rawls or a Nichols. It’s a Rawlings! I’ve had many accomplishments in my life, and in comparison to this little life, they all pale. Beyond a doubt, this child is my—no, *our*—greatest achievement.

“I don’t deserve you or an innocent child in my life. Thank you for keeping both of you safe. Roach explained how scared you were. If only I’d been home—”

Claire interrupted, “No, Tony. Don’t you see? It was all planned to happen with you away. Neither one of us is to blame for what happened.”

The nodding of his head moved hers. His words were barely a whisper,

“For this one—”

Claire’s fingers touched his lips. “Stop, please. I know we have a lot to talk about. We both have questions, and hopefully we both have answers, but right now and tonight, can we please just have us?”

Tony kissed the tips of her fingers, which only moments earlier stopped his words. “You’re right. Besides, Madeline and Francis are waiting.” Claire stood, yet Tony refused to relinquish her hand. Standing close, he looked down and said, “I need to know one thing.”

Tipping her eyes up, Claire saw need in the depth of his dark eyes and her heartbeat accelerated. “What? What do you need to know?”

“Has all of this changed our relationship? I mean—are we still engaged?”

Claire smirked. “We definitely have a lot to talk about; however, if this little one is to be a *Rawlings* and not a *Nichols*.” Her eyes twinkled. “I believe we only have a few more months to move our status to married.” She paused. “If that’s what you still want?”

“So me being an ass and hanging up on you didn’t change your mind?”

“Well, you see, I’m used to you being an ass. It’s the part where you recognize it. That’s new, and that’s the reason my mind hasn’t changed.”

Tony pulled Claire closer and encircled her with his arms. “Well, how about I work on not being such an ass, and you work on restraining that smart mouth of yours?”

Claire pushed up to her tip-toes and kissed his neck. The familiar growl rang like music in her ears. “I was under the impression you liked my mouth.”

His lips seized hers. Without hesitation, she met him with equal ferocity. When their force eased, their eyes met, and his sparkled as he replied, “Oh, I do. I love your mouth, your eyes, your neck, and every other part of your amazing body; however, some of the things you do with that amazing mouth I like better than others.”

“Really?” she bantered, as she purposely suckled his neck.

Tony seized her shoulders. “Do you plan on going back out there for dinner? I’m asking because if you don’t stop, it isn’t happening.”

Claire smiled. It was true: they had a lot to discuss, and a lot to work out; nevertheless, she felt empowered. She knew at that moment dinner could be a memory. If she continued her persuasion, then they could be naked and in bed in seconds; however, she needed food. Somewhere in her memory, she heard his advice, *I suggest you eat. You’ll need your strength.* Grinning, she replied, “I do, and they’re probably waiting.” Pointing toward one of the other doors, Claire said, “The bathroom is over there. I’m going to freshen up. I’m afraid with my crying I look like hell.”

“You, my dear, could never look like hell. You’re radiant!”

“Oh, really?” Claire smiled knowingly at Tony. “Give me a minute.” She kissed his cheek. “After dinner, when we get back here, you can remind me

what it was you liked my mouth to do.”

Again, he pulled her close for one last embrace. “It’s a date. I certainly hope Madeline doesn’t cook twelve course meals.”

Once Claire was ready, Tony disappeared into the bathroom, and Claire went into the closet. She found the box from the other day, the one with the cell phones and sat it on the floor. Kneeling, she looked into the depth of the container. At the bottom was her long gold chain with her engagement ring. Until a few days ago, she’d kept it close to her heart. After her conversation with Tony she’d decided that there was no longer a reason to wear it. Begrudgingly, she tucked it away in the container.

Now, things were different. Claire removed the ring from the chain and placed it on the fourth finger of her left hand. Feeling his presence, Claire sighed and looked up. Tony was standing in the doorway, his dark eyes watching. By the erratic beating of her heart, she knew he saw everything.

“I took it off the other day,” she confessed.

Taking her left hand in his, Tony helped her stand. Though his eyes hadn’t softened, his words were more of a plea, “I hope you never feel the need to take it off again.” Peering into the box, Tony added, “It seems as though it would’ve been difficult to hear that phone ring, tucked away in a box, in the closet.”

Claire smiled and pushed herself against his chest. “Since I don’t believe it ever would have, we’ve someone to thank. My guess is he’s waiting for us for dinner too.”

They left their suite hand in hand. While they’d been alone, the sun had fully set. In the middle of nowhere, the beautiful blue that filled the daytime view was now hidden behind shades of black. A star-filled sky sparkled above a dark sea, and the gentle rush of the waves filled the air as a soft breeze blew through the open doors of the dining room. Before they reached the others, Tony squeezed Claire’s hand. “This place is amazing. Now that I look around, it’s beyond words.”

Claire agreed. “Now, it’s truly paradise.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The evil that is in the world almost always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding.

—Albert Camus

CATHERINE SAT AT Tony's grand desk. She didn't consider it *his* any longer—it was hers, like so many other things. Besides, from all the reports she'd heard, he wouldn't be sitting there anytime soon. Though the FBI wouldn't confirm or deny, Catherine was under the impression Tony was either in custody or on the run. All she knew for sure was that he wasn't in Iowa. After meeting with Tom and Brent, the provisions of Anthony Rawlings' trust went into effect. Catherine Marie London was officially the executor of the Rawlings' estate and anything related to it. The title came with a nice trust fund. That money, plus the large sum she'd accumulated over the years, left Catherine more than financially solvent.

Once in a while, she thought about the money she'd given to Claire. Catherine wasn't sure exactly how much it was; however, whenever she started to regret giving it all away, her mind would go to the possibility of Tony on the run. If he were out there, she knew, without a doubt, he'd go for that money. Imagining him finding an empty box brought a smile to her face.

For almost twenty-five years, Anton had been in control, or so he thought. It was true; right after Samuel and Amanda's *accident*, Marie had offered to work for Anton. After all, she was alone, and he was all she had left of Nathaniel. The arrangement wasn't meant to last a lifetime. Nathaniel told Marie multiple times how he wanted her to live; never once did he say he wanted her to work as Anton's housekeeper.

It wasn't that Anton had ever been unkind. On the contrary, if anything, he'd been indifferent. Perhaps that was worse. He seemed to take Catherine for granted—she just was. It never appeared as though he worried if she would or wouldn't be there, if she would or wouldn't carry out his objectives.

He never *asked*. Smirking to herself, she admitted that his complacency worked to her advantage on more than one occasion.

Maybe her name wasn't Rawls, but what did a name matter? Now that she had the legal documents confirming her title as executor, Anton's office was gone. It was hers: as was the house, the grounds, and the estate. Catherine Marie leaned back against the plush leather chair and scanned the room. The regal decor was very similar to Nathaniel's office from a quarter century ago. She'd always liked that. Smiling, Catherine decided the view from her current side of the desk was definitely the more appealing perspective. She also decided the room could use a feminine touch.

Catherine opened the drawer on the lower right to inspect Anton's private files. She fingered the tabs; in this paperless world, it surprised her he'd kept so many printed documents. Thankfully, the Iowa City Police hadn't felt the need to confiscate everything as evidence.

They did take all of Claire's documents. That didn't matter to Catherine; she'd already gone through everything on Claire's laptop and was honestly impressed with the amount of research Claire had accomplished during her short time in California. Catherine never imagined Claire would uncover Patrick Chester. The entire turn of events was far better than Catherine could ever have imagined or planned. The only possible better scenario would have included Chester actually killing Claire. If he had then Catherine would have been able to watch Anton's anguish firsthand.

Reminiscing, Catherine admitted she did get the pleasure of witnessing some of it right after Claire's disappearance; however, to see Anton's face in Geneva when he realized Claire wasn't taken, but, instead, she'd left him again, and disappeared with his money and his bastard child—oh, that would have been priceless! Well, not priceless. It cost Catherine whatever amount of money had been in those accounts.

It wasn't that Catherine originally planned on extending Nathaniel's decree to his grandson. Anton was safe as long as he stayed focused and on task. All the time and effort planting seeds, watering them, and watching them grow paid off on more than one occasion. Everything was going the right way until—until his damn obsession with Claire Nichols.

Catherine knew something had changed after the Nichols' funeral. At first, she feared Anton had discovered her undertakings, or the true extent of them. That wasn't it. He'd been watching the Nichols family for a while; however, Catherine misinterpreted the depth of his fixation. How unrealistic of her to think Anton's actual desire was to honor Nathaniel. Although Anton claimed that was his goal, his actions proved otherwise. Bringing Claire to the estate was even acceptable—at first. It was when he began to take her out into public that Catherine knew his motivations were changing.

That was all right. Catherine could adapt too. As long as Catherine was

covertly in control, she was able to keep her goals in sight. Besides, Claire and Anton were both so easily read and played. Even though it appeared to be a high-stakes game of poker, it was more like *Old Maid*. The trick for success was in knowing the opponents. The fact that they didn't know they were opponents also aided her effort.

Catherine knew Anton better than he knew himself. She knew his limits and his needs—not sexually, of course. No, Catherine understood Anton's craving for control. It was his unspoken aspiration to be like Nathaniel. The grandfather he knew dominated everyone and everything. Some might say it was a disservice that Nathaniel showed so few people his gentler side. In hindsight, that omission proved very useful to Catherine. She could fuel Anton's need and depend upon his impulsiveness. Truly, it was a comical contradiction. For a man who prided himself on control, with the right triggers, he could lose it all. Anton didn't hold the monopoly on impulsivity. Catherine could also continually depend upon Claire's impulsiveness.

To be good—very good at manipulation, a person must understand their opponents' motivation. Anton possessed a lifelong yearning to please Nathaniel. Claire was much simpler. She craved interaction and affection. The smartest move Catherine ever made was sending only Carlos into that suite while Anton was away. Looking back on it, the move had been pure genius. In a way, Catherine hoped it paralleled Claire's current situation. Oh well, perhaps Claire could learn the language of wherever she was?

Claire's impulsiveness turned the key on each car that drove her off the estate. That same impulsiveness led her to burn the documents in her prison delivery. At least she read them before she destroyed them. That information was the seed that later grew to her impressive research and blossomed into the police department's evidence.

Besides impulsivity, Claire proved exceptionally obedient. The note in the box told her to read the entire contents—of course—she read it all. Catherine admitted the manipulation of Claire was amusing. After she was gone and in prison, Catherine even missed it. Claire and Anton's obliviousness throughout the whole game was the best part. This was especially true in the beginning, when he thought Claire knew him well enough to behave accordingly, and Claire feared his reaction if she misbehaved. Neither one realized Catherine was the one setting the rules. It was perfect.

If Governor Bosley hadn't pardoned Claire, Catherine believed Claire would've used that information in the box to expose Anton's secrets. The knowledge combined with the isolation would've energized Claire's retaliation. After all, who wouldn't want vengeance after what Claire experienced?

That was as far into the past that Catherine would allow her mind to wonder, because it was during that time that her plan took an unexpected turn.

Anton was upset; his anger was piqued. Claire *should* have been angry. They *should* have worked to bring each other down. That wasn't what happened. Not only were they not adversaries, their behavior with one another changed to a more even playing field.

Catherine encouraged Claire's return to the estate for one reason: to intercede, to put things back on track; however, mild, meek Claire didn't return. Oh, she wasn't suddenly loud and boisterous. She also wasn't obedient and accommodating. What she was made Catherine's blood boil. Claire was a Nichols who had the audacity to think she was the lady of the house! She was a Nichols who was pregnant with a Rawls baby!

In 1985, that had been Catherine. She had been the one expecting a Rawls baby and waiting patiently to become the lady of the house. After all, Sharron was gone. Well, she wasn't dead; nevertheless, she was *gone*. Watching that woman die slowly had been excruciating. Catherine vowed to, never again allow that to happen to anyone she loved.

Then, that same year, it was all taken away from her. Not all—she still had Nathaniel. He taught her how the world worked and showed her that she was loved. Those were gifts she'd never had from her own family. When Nathaniel presented her with the deed to her father's car dealership, it was the greatest gift, the most anyone had ever done for her. He showed her that his love was limitless; he'd do anything to make her happy. Catherine felt the same way. There were no lengths she wouldn't go to for Nathaniel—even today. Catherine would never allow a *Nichols* to live in Nathaniel's home and produce a child. It didn't matter that Nathaniel's home was in New Jersey. The estate where she sat was a worthy facsimile. Catherine was truthful when she encouraged Anton's construction of the estate and told him how proud Nathaniel would be; he wouldn't have been disappointed.

As the tips of Catherine's fingers ran across the top of the private files in the desk drawer, she contemplated the one thing she hadn't done for Nathaniel. Now that she truly was *where* he wanted her to be, Catherine Marie owed it to him to do *what* he wanted. He'd wanted her to contact her daughter. He wanted Marie to raise the girl, but that ship had already sailed.

She eyed the scribed names. There were so many. How could she figure out which one was her daughter? Catherine saw her own name. Maybe there was a clue in her file. When she opened it, she feared her heart would stop pumping. The writing wasn't Anton's. Catherine knew his writing well enough to duplicate it with ease. This writing was Nathaniel's.

Scribbled in the margin of a contract was the name *Sophia Rossi*. Catherine went through the drawer again. The only Sophia was Sophia *Burke*. Suddenly, she no longer remembered her husband's love—she remembered his vendetta. Burke? *Burke*? There was no way *her* daughter could be connected to *Jonathon Burke*.

Catherine removed the *Sophia Burke* file and opened the folder. Above the typed name, *Sophia Rossi*, was the scribbled name *Sophia Rossi Burke*... Catherine searched the pages. There was a plethora of outdated information; nonetheless, written above the text on the second page was a telephone number. Catherine couldn't resist; she used the blocked house phone.



DEREK ANSWERED HIS wife's cell phone. The past few weeks had been too much, and Sophia wasn't up for solicitors or blocked numbers. "Hello?"

Initially, there was silence. Derek was about to hang up when he heard a voice. "I'm sorry; I'm looking for the beautiful baby girl I was forced to give away thirty-three years ago."

Derek listened. He remembered that after Sophia's parents' funeral, she said she didn't want to know her birth parents, yet this moment in time may be their only chance to learn the truth. "I'm sorry; my wife is indisposed right now. She's had a difficult few weeks."

"Yes, that's the reason I'm calling. I never wanted to interfere with her and her adoptive parents, but now—"

Derek interjected, "Tell me the date you gave birth."

Sophia's eyes widened as she heard her husband's question.

"July 19, 1980."

Derek turned to Sophia. Her beautiful gray eyes, which had finally stopped crying over her parents, were now moist once again.

"What did she say?" Sophia whispered.

With his hand over the phone, Derek nodded. "She said your birth date. I think it might be your mother."

"My mother died in a car accident." Sophia straightened her neck and took the phone. "Please don't call again. My parents are dead. I don't know you."

The woman on the other end of the line spoke, "I'm sorry. I won't call you again."

Derek watched his wife's countenance melt. He knew it was the first time Sophia had heard her birth mother's voice, and he couldn't imagine the questions that were rapidly firing through her beautiful head. Why did she give her up? Has she ever regretted her decision? What kind of person was she? What did she look like? Did they look alike?

Sophia swallowed the tears threatening her speech and said, "Wait. If you could give me your number, I'll think about it. Then, when I'm ready, I can call you."

The woman exhaled and replied, "Yes, of course."

Sophia's strength was spent. It broke Derek's heart to see her fighting this new upheaval of emotion. Wrapping her in his arms, he took the phone from her hand. His voice was neither welcoming nor rejecting, "You may give me the number. When my wife is ready—if she's ready—she will call you. Please, do not call her phone again."

The woman hesitated only a second and then rattled off ten numbers. Derek repeated the numbers. Not offering a closing salutation, he disconnected the line. His concern wasn't the woman on the phone; it was the distraught woman in his arms.



CATHERINE GRINNED. SHE'D done what Nathaniel had wanted her to do—she'd contacted her daughter. From the information in the file, Catherine could tell that Anton had been watching Sophia. She wondered what, if anything, he'd done for her. Catherine needed more information.

Anton had a list of private detectives and others who'd proven themselves helpful in the past. Briefly, Catherine thought of Roach, Phillip Roach. He'd done an excellent job with Catherine's directives. Of course, it helped that he'd been unhappy about losing his job with Anton. Catherine wasn't sure she'd be able to reach him. If she did, did Catherine want to know Claire's location?

Oh, she had so many things to consider. Truthfully, Claire could wait—she wasn't going anywhere. Right now, Catherine wanted to know more about *Sophia*. It was a pretty name—not one she would have chosen, but it was pretty. There were no pictures in the file, well other than a few of a very young girl. Catherine wondered what her daughter looked like. Did she look like her? Or perhaps she looked like... Truthfully, that was why she didn't want to do this in the first place.

Catherine Marie London was *no longer* that scared, lonely, and abused teenager at the mercy of her drugged-out uncle. No, she was a strong fighter and a go-getter! She'd loved Nathaniel Rawls and outlasted Anton Rawls; both were impressive accomplishments.

Thanks to both, Catherine now had time and resources. She also had a plethora of questions. What did her daughter do for a living? Did she go to college? Were her adoptive parents good to her? Catherine told herself they were. If not, Nathaniel or Anton would've known, but what about Sophia's husband? Could it be possible? Could Sophia really be married to someone associated with Jonathon Burke? And who did he think he was, talking to her the way he did, demanding her telephone number? Catherine sure as hell wasn't intimidated. If a Rawls didn't intimidate her, a Burke never could.

She, once again, searched the drawer of private files. As she fingered the tabs, Catherine remembered the saying, no sense reinventing the wheel. Knowing Anton better than anyone, Catherine was quite sure of his attention to meticulous detail. Surely he'd already researched Sophia's husband. It was true, she could glean more information, but why not start with whatever Anton had already accumulated. When she passed the B's without a Burke, her hopes began to fade. Then she saw the D's—*Derek Burke*. Removing the folder, she laid it across the desk and began to read. The first page was a series of emails:

To: Anthony Rawlings
From: Cameron Andrews
Re: Ms. Rossi
Date: January 12, 2011

As I wrote in my previous email, Ms. Rossi took an unscheduled trip to Europe. I have since learned the reason for the trip was to wed. I'll remind you, I first mentioned Derek Burke in a December 18, 2010 email. They met at a Christmas party.

I apologize for not relaying the information of their nuptials sooner. I did not expect that to be the reason for her trip; however, a red flag came up when I received notice of her application for marriage license.

Please inform me how to proceed.

CA

To: Cameron Andrews
From: Anthony Rawlings
Re: Ms. Rossi—Burke???
Date: January 14, 2011

It's nearly midnight here, and I just saw your message. I want information and I want it yesterday! How could this have happened so quickly?

Information, pictures, details... now!

AR

To: Anthony Rawlings
From: Cameron Andrews
Re: Ms. Burke
Date: January 26, 2011

Although Ms. Burke is now living in Boston in her husband's apartment, I've just confirmed that they've made an offer on a small cottage in Provincetown, Mass. I'll notify you immediately if their offer is accepted.

Derek Burke's employment record is straightforward. I've attached his dossier. I'll continue to monitor. Please inform me if you would like my activities to change in any way.

CA

To: Cameron Andrews
From: Anthony Rawlings
Re: Ms. Rossi-Burke
Date: January 27, 2011

Let me know the value of the cottage and their offer.

It was reassuring to Catherine—she *did* know Anton, probably better than he knew himself. She could only imagine how upset he was to have Sophia elope without his knowledge! Catherine felt a sudden affection for her estranged daughter—if it wasn't for the name of the man she chose to marry!

Leafing through the pages, Catherine found Derek's lineage:

Father: William Burke—Grandfather: Randall Burke—Great-grandfather: Truman Burke.

It was the notation under Truman's name, the one scribbled in Anton's writing that caught Catherine's attention: *two sons: Randall and Jonathon. There was*

the connection!

Catherine's daughter was married to the great-nephew of Jonathon Burke!

Catherine continued to read:

Derek Burke hired in 2013—Shedis-tics Corporation, Palo Alto, California (Rawlings subsidiary).

When there was nothing else for her to learn, she turned on Anton's computer and accessed his private list of contacts. This list was how she'd found Phillip Roach, in the first place. When she last spoke to Anton, he quipped something about Catherine knowing everything *that went on in the house*. Smiling at her access to his private information, Catherine doubted Anton had any idea how truly right he'd been.

Although she may know everything within these walls, Catherine wanted to know more. One of the names on this list would be just the person to help her accomplish that goal.



SOPHIA WIPED HER eyes. "Thank you. You'd think I'd be all cried out."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with being emotional about this. I mean, you were just saying a few weeks ago that you didn't want to get to know any parents other than the great people who raised you, and if you still feel that way, then you have my support. If you've changed your mind, then I'll support that too."

Sophia shrugged. "I don't know what I want."

Derek's grinned. "Then don't decide right now. There's no rush."

Leaning into her husband's embrace, Sophia crooned, "Whatever I did to deserve you is beyond me. Thank you, for everything."

With her head under his chin, Derek sighed. His only desire was for Sophia to be happy. Lingering in the pit of his stomach was the feeling of trepidation. He worried that by engaging in that conversation, he'd set her up for more disappointment. The last thing he desired for his wife was heartache. She'd already had too much.

The Rossi's were wonderful, loving parents, and there was a part of Derek that wished he'd hung up on Sophia's birth mother before the conversation

even started.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princes who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

DURING DINNER, FRANCIS offered Tony and Phil clothes. It seemed that over the years, a large accumulation of items had been left and stored away on the island; these clothes would suffice until ones more to their liking could be ordered and sent into town. Mumbling under her breath, Claire mentioned, “I was planning on ordering some, but a call changed my mind.”

The only person who heard her comment was the man at her side. Truthfully, he was the only one she wanted to hear. With a table of onlookers, Tony didn’t verbally respond; however, he did reach over and squeeze her hand.

After dinner, Francis and Madeline left Tony, Claire, and Phil alone, and Tony explained his current status. He told Claire about the questioning and the FBI’s ultimatum. He explained how he’d been instructed to stay in contact with the bureau otherwise he’d be considered a fugitive—based on charges of domestic battery.

Claire shook her head vehemently. “No! That’s *not* what I said to Evergreen. I told him I was running, but *not* from you! I never said anything about pressing charges.”

“I know.” Tony didn’t sound upset. This wasn’t new territory to any of them; they all knew Claire and Tony’s history. “Roach told me what you said to Evergreen. It’s some ploy of theirs. Brent said it was to get more information.”

“Brent?” Claire asked. “Do Brent and Courtney know the truth? Do they

know we're all right?"

Tony shook his head. "No. It's safer for them that way."

Claire lowered her eyes and looked at her lap. She understood; however, it didn't lessen the pain of knowing she'd lied to her closest friends—again.

Tony described how Eric helped him leave the United States, and how he traveled around Europe. When he talked about specific stops along his journey, they were shocked to learn how close their paths had been. Tony also asked questions: How did Claire find the island? Where exactly were they? Had Claire been in contact with anyone since arriving?

Claire deferred some of his questions to Phil, while she responded to others. "I haven't been in contact with anyone. I do have a non-traceable phone Phil left here, and I have Har... a number for an FBI contact."

Tony sat straighter and looked at Phil. Speaking to no one in particular, Phil asked, "Is that my cue to leave this discussion?"

Claire answered first, "No, you know the answers to more of his questions than I do, but before you two discuss the coordinates of our location, I should tell you, Tony, I saw Harry in Italy."

"So did I." His voice lowered a pitch. "He told me he'd been with you. Actually, he showed me a picture."

"A picture!?" Claire stood. "What sort of picture did he show you? And what are you, or was he, implying *with* him? I saw him. I *wasn't* with him!"

Tony reached out and took her hand. The hardness she'd heard seconds before disappeared as his thumb rubbed the top of her hand. "It wasn't anything, just confirmation he'd seen you."

"Well, did he tell you that he's a FBI agent? I didn't get the impression it was a recent change in profession."

Tony nodded. "He did. Apparently, he's supposed to be my contact." Grinning again, he added, "I'm not supposed to leave Switzerland without contacting him first."

Phil interjected, "Damn," Also with a smile. "I knew we forgot to do something."

"Do you think he'll trace you here?" Claire couldn't hide the panic from her voice.

Phil answered, "As many twists and turns and name changes as we've had? I'll be lucky if I can explain where we are."

Claire exhaled. "Good, I'm so glad you're here—both of you, but the last thing I want are unexpected visitors."

It was Madeline who interrupted their conversation, "Excuse me, Messieurs, Francis has clothes for each of you. They are now in your suites." After they both thanked her, she continued, "Madame el, if there's nothing else, we'll also retire."

"That's fine, Madeline, thank you."

A few moments later, Tony and Phil went into the house to clean up. They'd both been wearing their current clothes for over twenty-four hours and couldn't wait to change.

Sitting alone on the lanai, Claire closed her eyes and listened to the sea. The surge of emotions over the last few hours combined with raging hormones intensified the familiar pounding in her temples. She knew her headaches bothered Tony, and she didn't want anything to upset tonight's reunion. There was a part of her that felt like a newlywed about to join her husband for the first time. It was a silly thought, one that couldn't be further from the truth; nevertheless, the butterflies in her stomach and the tightened anticipation added to her stretched nerves.

She didn't hear Madeline's footsteps or even know she was still present until she spoke, "Madame el, are you all right?"

Claire jumped. "Oh! You scared me. I thought you were gone."

"We were, but I came to check on you. Is it your head again? Does it bother you?"

Claire reached out and touched Madeline's hand. "Please don't mention my headaches around Mr. Rawlings."

"I'm sure he knows. He looks at you with so much adoration, like he knows your thoughts. I knew right away that he was who you've been waiting for."

Claire grinned. "I never said I was waiting for anyone."

"No, Madame el, you didn't." Madeline noticed the diamond on Claire's hand. "Are you to be wed?"

Twisting the diamond, Claire sighed. Her smile tried to disguise the sadness in her eyes. "Oh, it's a very long story."

"You are too young to have a long story."

"You're right, I am, but I do. In a nutshell, Mr. Rawlings and I were married, we divorced, and he asked me to marry him again, and I said yes. Madeline, I've made a lot of mistakes, especially in the last few years. I don't want to make another one."

The whites of Madeline's eyes shone like beacons in the darkness. "Madame el, I don't know your *long story*. I can see you are blessed with people who love you, and in the short time I've known you, I understand why. When Monsieur Rawlings arrived, I saw the love and joy in your eyes. Why are you now reconsidering?"

"Oh, I'm not. I love him. I do." Claire hoped Madeline wouldn't notice the tears quietly descending her cheeks. She worked to keep her voice steady. "Before we marry—again—I need to know some things. I need some answers."

"It isn't my place, so if you don't want my advice, I will leave."

Claire shook her head. "I didn't grow up with *places*. This way of living is

part of my long story. So, Madeline, I'd be honored to hear your advice."

"Madame el, things happen for a reason. If your long story is all happy, that's wonderful; however, I believe there's more to it. Some of the answers you seek... you are afraid of what you may learn, *oui*?"

Claire nodded.

"You love him, despite that long story, *oui*?"

Claire nodded again. "I do."

"And, Madame el, he loves you. Does he know your story?"

"Yes. He knows my story."

"What we fear is what we do not know. When something is cloaked by the darkness of uncertainty, it's a mystery. Allowing light to penetrate that darkness makes everything clear." She pointed out to the dark sea. "Look at the ocean. In the darkness, all you can do is listen to the wind and the waves. You ask yourself, are there creatures, boats, or untold dangers lurking? We don't know, and then, in our minds we create perils that do not truly exist. In the morning when the sun shines and you see into the depths of the crystal blue water, or all the way out to the horizon, you know you are safe." Squeezing Claire's hand, she added, "In the light of day, I see your love. Please don't allow the dark of night to hide what is right in front of you. Even if those answers are not what you want to hear, do you think they can be as bad as you imagine?"

Claire shrugged. "I really don't know. I know I want to not think about them right now and worry about them later."

Madeline's voice slowed. "If that will make you feel best; however, I've found that the longer I put off turning on the light, the bigger the monster under my bed becomes." Once again, she squeezed Claire's hand and then reached into her pocket and handed Claire a tissue. "May I get you anything else?"

Claire wiped her eyes and cheeks. Miraculously, the tears served as a vent, releasing some of the pressure from her temples. Her headache wasn't as intense. With a sad smile, she replied, "You've given me a lot, thank you. Have a good night."

"Good night, Madame el."

Enjoying the calm of the darkness, Claire reflected on Madeline's words. If only Madeline knew the truth. At one time that monster in the dark was actually the man in the other room. Now the monster was a woman Claire trusted. *Could she ever trust her own instincts?* A faint smile came to her lips as she remembered Phil's words. He told her to do just that: listen and trust her instincts.

When Claire stood to move to their room, she saw the shadow near the end of the lanai move; instead of going through the house, Claire followed her intuition and walked toward the darkness. Just outside of their suite, Tony

stepped from the shadow and gently took Claire into his arms.

His freshly showered scent overpowered the salty sea breeze and penetrated her senses. Claire loved the scent of his cologne. In the morning, she'd order some.

Tony looked down into her eyes. "I like that smile. After what I heard, I wasn't expecting to see it."

"How much did you hear?"

He led her to a lounge chair, sat first, and tugged Claire down in front of him. It was their talking position—where their bodies touched, their worlds connected—yet their eyes remained private. Claire felt his chest rise and fall. While she waited for him to answer, he wrapped his arms around her, hugged her chest, and splayed his large hands across her midsection. Settling against his chest, Claire felt the warmth of his toothpaste scented breath blow against her neck. Their bond held a sense of intimacy she'd never shared with anyone else. His hands on her body didn't feel foreign; they felt right. By the time he spoke, she'd almost forgotten her question. His Anthony Rawlings, CEO, tone told her that he'd contemplated his answer. "Enough, I heard that you love me and that, before we marry again, you have questions that you want answered."

Claire nodded. "I do." However, at this moment in time, her heart wasn't in the asking mood. It wasn't that she wanted the monster Madeline mentioned to grow bigger. It was that, for the first time in over a month, she felt secure. His embrace completed the release of pressure her small cry had begun. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against his shoulder and enjoyed the internal peace. Never had anything felt so right.

"Do you want to ask anything?"

"I do, but not tonight."

Tony turned her shoulders so that they were facing one another. "You aren't concerned about that monster growing?"

Claire shook her head as their lips touched. "No, it's not going anywhere, but I'm pretty sure it can't get any bigger. Remember, I said I wanted tonight to be just about us."

In the faint moonlight, Claire saw Tony's grin. His tone was lighter, with a hit of seduction. "I do remember that." His finger traced her lips. "I also remember something about that beautiful mouth."

She stood with her emerald eyes shimmering and the butterflies of desire stirring deep within her. Offering her hand, she grinned. "Come and remind me."

Tony didn't need to be invited twice. As they disappeared into the master suite, the cares and concerns remained outside. There were cards to be revealed, and in time, they would. Theirs was a long, complicated story with a monster and a knight. What made their story unique was that these two

players were the same person.

At that moment, Tony was her knight in shining armor. She'd been alone in paradise, imprisoned by the evil witch. Her future had seemed uncertain; then, out of the blue, he arrived. Just like in the fairytales, he came to her rescue, freeing her from her prison of isolation.

The rest of the world disappeared as his lips teased the sensitive skin between her neck and shoulder. Despite the tropical heat, her arms and legs prickled with goose bumps. A familiar moan escaped her lips. With skilled hands, he eased her sundress over her head and dropped it into a pink puddle. Taking a half of a step back, Tony's eyes scanned her exposed body. His approving smile radiated to his eyes, as dark desire swirled with the chocolate shades of love.

Seconds later, Tony fell to his knees and tenderly kissed her enlarged stomach. Fighting to remain standing, Claire exhaled and wove her fingers through his hair. Instead of enjoying the sensation of his caresses and kisses, she was momentarily overwhelmed with relief. In the last six weeks, their baby had grown, and her body had changed. "I was so afraid..." she mumbled.

Still kneeling, he looked up. "Of what?"

Though Claire didn't want to admit her insecurity, she couldn't look away. She couldn't lie. "That you wouldn't want me. That you wouldn't think I was sexy enough—"

The fire behind the brown raged. Her legs buckled. Suddenly, on her knees, wearing only lace panties, they were eye to eye. Still fully dressed, he framed her face with his hands. She heard a combination of pain and adoration in his voice. "How could you ever think that? My God, you are the most beautiful woman in the world. You always have been." Bending to kiss her stomach, he regained eye contact. "I didn't think it was possible, but now, with my child inside of you, you're even more beautiful." Grinning, Tony directed Claire's hand. "It should be very obvious; I think you're incredibly sexy."

He was right; it was obvious. She smiled and smirked. "If that's the case, which I admit it does seem to be, why am I the only one undressed?"

"Because, you are *mighty* sexy, and I want to see you."

Unbuttoning his shirt, Claire sucked his freshly shaven neck. "That doesn't seem fair," she purred. Her kisses moved down his chest until she couldn't bend any lower. Sitting straight, she inhaled. "This does have its disadvantages."

"One person's disadvantages are another person's advantage," Tony said with his devilish grin melting her world. No longer did she feel large and awkward. Claire saw herself as Tony saw her. With her hand in his, he led her to the big bed, where his clothes and her panties disappeared into the pink

puddle of the sundress.

Before she could consider or question, their world became one. It didn't matter that her body and shape were changing. They belonged together.

Metaphorically, the wolf was at the door. Realistically, their life was upside down; however, in that moment, in their room, in their home, on their island, and in their paradise they had one another. It was a victory. Catherine had tried to keep them apart, and they had overcome her ploy. They didn't know if they'd won a battle or the war. At that moment, celebration was their only goal.

"Tony?" Claire said as she nestled against his chest with the sound of his heart beating in her ear.

"Hmmm?"

"Tell me something."

His arm wrapped around her bare shoulder. "I thought tonight was a no question night—a just about us night."

She lifted her head, to see his face. "It is. I'm not asking about anything. I want you to tell me something."

"Oh, you do? What do you want me to tell you?"

"I want you to tell me that we're safe, that Catherine, the FBI, that no one can take this away from us."

The amusement of her demand faded. She watched as Anthony Rawlings, CEO, emerged from the man she'd just held tight. She immediately recognized his voice; it was the one he used with business, the one that left no room for debate, the one she used to hate. It was the tone she needed. "We're safe. No one and I repeat *no one* will ever take my family away from me."

Claire kissed his cheek and settled back into the crook of his arm. She knew what he'd just said was beyond his control; however, she could pretend. The illusion filled her with the momentary peace she needed. Within minutes, she was sound asleep on Tony's hard shoulder.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.

—John Wooden

 OR THE HUNDREDTH time, Agent Harrison Baldwin read the screen of his phone and wondered if he could avoid the multitude of text messages any longer. If he didn't respond, would SAC Williams suddenly forget the tirade and possible demotion that was undoubtedly coming his way? There was no question, he deserved it. Harry had done exactly what SAC Williams told him not to do: he'd allowed the case to become personal. Harry knew that wasn't true. The Nichols/Rawlings case hadn't *become* personal; it had *been* personal from before he saw Claire Nichols in Italy.

Harry decided that his inability to keep his assignment professional was in part due to his own screwed-up personal life. Unfortunately, he'd allowed both lives to intertwine. When it came to an FBI agent, that was *never* a good thing.

The best part of his personal life had been his more recent reconnection to his sister. Without a doubt, Amber was his closest family, and after his divorce, that was what he truly needed.

Throughout the history of time, Harry had been too quick to fall in love. Ilona was no exception, and when they were young and living the dream in southern California, there had been love, or so they both thought; then life happened.

Harry's fascination with law enforcement started in childhood. He wasn't sure how or why, yet from a young age, he knew that was the path he intended to pursue. It began with a degree in criminology, which led him to the California Bureau of Investigation. Ilona knew she'd married a police

officer and was all right with that; however, she hadn't signed up to be the wife of an FBI agent.

Harry's initial enquiry into the FBI was actually on a dare—a late night out with police buddies and booze; nevertheless, before he knew it, things started happening. He passed phase one and two of the testing, passed the skills tests, and received the conditional letter of appointment.

Although he and Ilona had discussed his aspirations, neither one of them fathomed the consequences or the repercussions on their recent marriage. After passing the physical test, background check, and medical exam, the goal he never expected to obtain was right in front of him.

The bureau had five career paths. Based on Harry's education and experience within the California Bureau, he was selected for the Criminal Investigative Division (CID). This division coordinates, manages, and directs investigative programs focused on financial crime, violent crime, organized crime, public corruption, violation of individual civil rights, drug related crime, and informant matters associated with these investigative areas. Coincidentally, Agent Nichols was also in the CID.

The most daunting consequence of Harry's dream job was the time away from his new bride. It wasn't a gradual process, not something they eased themselves into. No. One moment, they were together every day, the next, he was gone. That first separation they endured was when Harry went to attend the FBI Academy in Virginia. He should say that, during that time, he missed his wife; however, the training was intense. During those twenty-one weeks, he lived and breathed FBI and loved every minute of it. At least during his training, he and Ilona could occasionally talk.

Following the academy, it's customary for new agents to rank their desired locations for their first assignment. Ilona wanted to stay in California, so Harry made that his choice. With four field offices in the state, he used every one of his selections to accommodate his wife. Placement wasn't solely based on preference; it was also based on need and budget. The Baldwins were both shocked when Harry was assigned to Seattle, Washington. Ilona didn't like Seattle. The weather was too cool and rainy, and she missed her friends in California and family out east.

During Harry's second year out of the academy, while still within his probationary period, he was selected for an undercover assignment. It was quite an honor; however, the assignment left Ilona alone again. This time, she was stuck in an area she detested and her husband was gone—totally unreachable for an undisclosed amount of time. To make matters worse, during his absence, she learned she was pregnant. Reflectively, Harry understood her isolation and depression. At the time, he was oblivious. He was too busy concentrating on the job. An undercover assignment for a junior agent was a monumental boost to his career; the experience was exhilarating,

and his evaluations were stellar. Agent Baldwin loved the covert world.

When he returned to Seattle, Ilona's pregnancy was visible. They'd had no communication during his assignment, so the pregnancy revelation was—to say the least—shocking. Harry's initial reaction was less than positive. It wasn't that he didn't want kids. He'd never given them any thought. Ilona presented him with an ultimatum: his job or his family. Harry should've chosen his family.

He didn't.

Before their child was born, Ilona moved back east to live near her parents, and Harry asked for reassignment to San Francisco. This time, they granted his request. Since that time, Ilona has remarried. The assignment in San Francisco made sense to Harry. It was the one place he could have his job and some family. Amber McCoy, his half-sister, lived there.

Although the two of them grew up in the same home, they weren't close. Amber was younger, and the one with both parents. Her dad tried to fill the gap for Harry; however, until the FBI, he always felt something was lacking. Sadly, he recognized that he was no better than the man who contributed to his gene pool. Someday, the daughter he only saw in pictures would be faced with the same unmet need.

When Harry moved to San Francisco, Amber was living the dream. She had it all except the ring. Simon Johnson and Amber were living and working together. He was a great guy, very intelligent, a wonderful entrepreneur, and excellent to Harry's sister. Harry and Simon became instant friends. It might be safe to say Harry enjoyed Simon's company more than he did Amber's; nevertheless, during that time, they all became close.

Harry worked out of the San Francisco field office and occasionally left for undercover fieldwork. When SiJo started having issues with security, Harry offered his resources. Since he was employed by the federal government, he could only do contract work for SiJo. His friend, Lee, from the California Bureau of Investigation took over as head of SiJo's security. Although Harry wasn't officially with SiJo, he felt a connection to the company that his friend and sister were working so hard to grow.

After his divorce from Ilona, Harry wasn't interested in a relationship with anyone else. He promised himself that his days of falling fast and hard for a beautiful face or cheeky personality were over. The FBI was his life.

It's true, sometimes it felt as though life stacked the deck. Harry wasn't always sure if it was in his favor or against him.

The more Harry worked with SiJo Security and spent time with Simon and Amber, the more he questioned his vow of remaining unattached. Honestly, when he first met Amber's assistant, they were just friends; however, the more their paths continually crossed, the more their relationship blossomed. Over time, they started seeing one another, meeting Simon and

Amber for dinner, going to a movie, long weekends cohabitating.

This time, Harry entered the relationship with full disclosure. They both agreed they were consenting adults with no intentions of a long-term commitment. Harry explained from the beginning that his work could call him at any moment, and he'd need to leave. He told Liz that their relationship could end suddenly if he needed to go undercover. Harry didn't intend to leave another woman waiting for his return as he'd done to Ilona.

When Simon finally proposed to Amber, Harry was equally as happy. Unfortunately, Harry was on an assignment when Simon's plane crashed. As soon as he heard and received clearance, he traveled back to California. Following Simon's death, Harry and Liz moved into Amber's building. Perhaps it was the loss of Ilona and Jillian from his life, but Harry had finally recognized the importance of family, and he couldn't leave Amber alone in her time of need.

When Claire Nichols first contacted Amber, Harry remembered that his sister was upset, both by the content of the email *and* by the sender. Probably more out of curiosity, Amber chose to continue the correspondence. After they exchanged more emails, both Amber and Harry saw the logic behind Claire's allegations.

The investigation surrounding Simon's plane crash had never fully been closed. Harry knew that uncertainty added to his sister's angst and hoped Claire's insight into Anthony Rawlings would help his sister have final closure.

The preliminary results of the National Transportation Safety Board's, NTSB, investigation regarding Simon's crash centered on operator error. The agency painstakingly reconstructed the plane and looked into the flight plans. Simon Johnson was an accomplished pilot, weather conditions were ideal for flight, and there were no signs of malfunctioning equipment or tampering. The numbers didn't add up.

As Claire's suspicions mounted, Harry decided to take this new evidence to his superiors at the San Francisco field office. He not only took the allegations regarding Simon, but the entire recalled contents of Claire's prison delivery. Harry had no idea that he was presenting the FBI with information on one of *their* cold cases. In light of the new allegations, the San Francisco field office assigned a new team to revisit the bureau's old evidence regarding Agent Nichols' death.

When Claire's attorney unexpectedly contacted Amber and requested her help with relocating Claire to Palo Alto, Amber called Harry. Harry called the bureau. Since Harry wasn't undercover at the time, SAC Williams decided, Claire would be Agent Harrison Baldwin's new assignment. It was the FBI who recommended changing Claire's reservations and having her travel via private plane. The bureau had multiple reasons for this change in plans: the

intricacy of the case, assurance of Claire's location, and time needed by the bureau to have their cover stories ready.

The morning Harry walked into Amber's condominium he wasn't sure who he'd meet. There was the woman Simon remembered fondly—and there was the gold-digging, ex-bartender, who tried to kill her rich husband, got lucky with a pardon, and was stupid enough to burn the real evidence woman. Without question, this was an unusual assignment.

Harry understood the FBI's interest in Claire Nichols and their hope that she could bring new information to the cold case involving her grandfather. He also knew that his assignment was one of right time right place. By all accounts, Harry should *not* have been assigned to any case that potentially involved Simon Johnson's death. Truly, the case was personal from the beginning. There was no question, even before meeting Claire, Harry wanted to prove Anthony Rawlings' guilt.

When Liz and Harry started dating, she promised she understood his commitment to his career. Truthfully, she demonstrated that on numerous occasions. Each time Harry was called away, she'd go on with her life. She didn't ask questions about what he did while he was gone, and if she had, he wouldn't have been able to answer. It wasn't that he had sexual exploits on each assignment. Claire was his first; nevertheless, Liz had shown Harry the support Ilona didn't or couldn't.

Understandably, neither Liz nor Harry ever anticipated his undercover assignment occurring right under Liz's nose. The evening the SiJo plane arrived with Claire Nichols on board, Harry relocated Liz from their condominium to an apartment of her own. He told her what he'd said a million times, when faced with the ultimatum, he'd always choose his job. He also told her that Claire Nichols was just another assignment—a job. It was what he believed at the time. Initially, Liz remained supportive.

As Harry got to know Claire, her definition changed. With that change, came a change in Liz's understanding. From Harry's perspective, he was never unfaithful. He'd told her that, while on assignment, they were no longer a couple. It wasn't Harry's fault that when faced with seeing him every day she didn't understand.

For a brief moment in time, when Harry believed that he could be a father once again, Harry told Amber something he never thought he'd say. He told his sister that he wanted the job at SiJo; instead of pretending, he wanted to be the president of security operations and planned to resign from the FBI. Harry wanted to give this child the father he hadn't provided for his own daughter. At that moment, sitting with his sister alone in the hospital cafeteria, Harry decided the only part of the undercover case he cared about was keeping Claire and their child safe from Anthony Rawlings.

Again, life happened. This time, the damn cards were definitely against

him. Claire informed him that he wasn't the father of her baby. In retrospect, Harry didn't know for sure if his decisions that afternoon in the hospital cafeteria were based on Claire or the baby. Now that he and Liz were reconciling, he leaned more toward the latter; nonetheless, he still wanted to keep Claire and her child safe.

SAC Williams reviewed the case and Harry's actions. He decided Agent Harrison Baldwin needed a break from the bureau; he wasn't fired or demoted; instead, the FBI put him on temporary medical leave and required him to attend counseling sessions. These sessions with a bureau psychologist were supposed to determine why he overstepped his professional bounds with Claire Nichols. While he did as they said, it made Harry laugh. This was the first time he'd ever gotten personally involved with an informant; however, he'd been around the bureau long enough to know that it wasn't a unique situation.

In addition to personal counseling sessions, he was required to attend sexual harassment seminars. Apparently, if Claire Nichols were so inclined, she could press charges against Harry. In actuality, six months ago, he'd jeopardized the case and sullied the bureau. Now, by showing Rawlings the picture of Claire and him holding hands, Harry had done it again.

He'd located *and* lost both of his assignments: Claire Nichols and Anthony Rawlings were *missing in action*. If Harry ignored the FBI's text messages any longer, they would consider *him* MIA!

Pacing around his hotel room, Harry contemplated the case. He didn't want to be taken off of it again. He knew he shouldn't have shown Rawlings the picture of him holding Claire's hand. He knew that before he did it. It was unprofessional. Harry could argue that his intentions were honorable. He'd hoped that by creating a ruse, making Rawlings believe that he and Claire were together, it would keep Rawlings away from her. The bureau would never approve of his actions or even his motivation. They'd remind Harry that Claire never pressed charges against Rawlings. In fact, she explicitly said that Rawlings *wasn't* the one she feared.

It wasn't just the connection with Claire. Harry didn't want to be relieved of the case because even before he'd been officially assigned, he'd been researching it. With each passing day and new nugget of evidence, Harry knew that Rawlings was exactly the person Claire Nichols should fear. It was his goal to make the powers that be realize that Anthony Rawlings was connected, not only to the death of Agent Nichols, but multiple others. Some of the deaths, like Claire's parents and Simon Johnson's, had been classified *accidents*: car crashes, airplane crashes...

That didn't matter. Claire had told Harry about Rawlings and *accidents*. Harry had a gut feeling that there was more to this case. He was on the hunt for hard evidence, but in the meantime, he had his gut feeling. To an FBI

agent, that was significant. At one time, even Claire had told *Harry* that she believed Tony may have been involved with these accidents. Harry figured that if he could prove to her that her previous suspicions were correct, then maybe she'd see the light.

Not only had Harry messed up the case, he'd messed up any possible reconciliation with Claire as well. No longer could he or the bureau rely on her feelings of familiarity with him for insight. In Harry's opinion, the only feelings Claire currently had for Harry were anger and betrayal. The way Harry saw it, he hadn't betrayed Claire. In fact, the truth was the exact opposite. He'd been placed with her to protect her and learn from her. Without a doubt, in Harry's mind, the protecting was paramount. Besides, he reasoned that if Claire could forgive Rawlings for his plethora of recognized sins, once she learned the whole truth of Rawlings' doings, then Harry's considerably shorter list of transgressions could also be forgiven.

Above all, Agent Baldwin didn't want Claire Nichols in danger. Even if she refused to believe it, Harry knew Rawlings jeopardized her safety. Closing his eyes, he remembered the look on Rawlings' face when he showed him the picture of him and Claire. Reading people was part of Baldwin's training. The wrath he saw in Rawlings' eyes was palpable. It didn't frighten Baldwin—as a matter of fact—he would've loved for the man to attempt an assault. The rage Harry saw in the man's eyes made Harry's blood boil. Claire's stories came rushing to the forefront of his mind. More than anything, at that moment, in that pub in Geneva, Harry wanted to give Rawlings some of what Rawlings had given to Claire years before. In his mind, Rawlings was a ticking time bomb, and he didn't want him exploding around Claire or her child.

Harry's motivation that evening in Geneva was to keep the two of them apart. He believed he could accomplish that personal goal as well as the FBI directives. Harrison figured he could keep Rawlings in Italy, disinterested in pursuing Claire while locating Claire and keeping her safe. It was a great plan. Unfortunately, the results didn't provide the intended consequence.

Agent Baldwin's phone vibrated again. This time it wasn't a text, it was a direct call. When he read the screen, Harry expected to see SAC Williams' direct line. His heartbeat accelerated as he read the name: *Deputy Director*. Straightening his stance, Agent Baldwin knew that ignoring *this* call wasn't an option.

Clearing his throat, he hit the *RECEIVE* button and said, "Agent Baldwin here."

"Baldwin. We need to talk."

The use of his name without the title wasn't a good sign.



IN THE SHADOW of the vegetation intertwined through the trellis, Claire rested on the lanai, reading her iPad. The scent of the fragrant flowers and soft breeze from the sea combined to bring her peace. While listening to the waves, Claire read the news from around the world. According to her window to the world, she and Anthony Rawlings were still missing. Rawlings Industries was floundering as temporary CEO Timothy Bronson reached out to the stockholders, asking them to have faith in their founder as well as the companies he brought under the Rawlings' umbrella. Claire wondered about Sue and worried how Tim's stress would affect his family.

Every such thought directed Claire back to Catherine. Ripples of vengeance continued to expand in all directions. It was like throwing a rock into Claire's lake. The resulting circles of water went out and out until they faded away. Momentarily closing her eyes, Claire relished the thought of Catherine fading away. Never could she remember feeling such vengeance for one person. When she hated Tony, it was for what he'd done to her. This was different. Catherine's ripples were reaching people who never deserved this vendetta.

Claire knew Catherine wouldn't be stopped until she told the FBI the truth. She looked at the table and read Harry's card for the millionth time. He was her contact. He was Tony's contact. In the three days since Tony arrived, neither of them had bothered to connect their *contact*. Before she made a decision one way or the other about her impending call, Phil's voice refocused her thoughts.

"Claire, do you have a few minutes?"

She grinned. "Well, you know, I'm super busy." He pulled out a chair at the umbrella table beside her. Although it was still morning, the intense sun warranted shade whenever possible. Phil's shorts and shirt amused Claire. It was a much more casual look than he normally wore. "I thought you were going into town with Tony and Francis?" she asked.

"I changed my mind. I'd like to talk to you privately for a minute."

Immediately, she bristled. She and Tony hadn't breached major topics in the last few days—no specifics; however, they had talked about trust, giving and receiving it. "Phil, I won't lie to Tony."

"I'm not asking you to. I want to discuss something with you alone. I've no doubt he'll give his opinion, but nevertheless, I'd like yours first."

Claire pulled herself up and sat taller as her legs remained outstretched on the soft chaise lounge. "What do you want to discuss?"

"You know I have a few different phones?"

Claire nodded.

“By using a remote server with multiple redirections...” Phil paused, as if knowing Claire didn’t need the technical reasons. “...never mind the *how*. Anyway, I’m positive the phones aren’t traceable, nor are the ones you and Rawlings have. Earlier today, I turned on my old phone.”

Claire wasn’t sure if it was his voice or his tentative cadence, but something about Phil’s speech brought concern to her consciousness. “I don’t know if you’re trying to or not, but you’re making me nervous. Please just say whatever it is. Do you want to leave?”

“Do I want to? Not really. Security on this island isn’t a bad gig. Many would agree that I have the ideal job. The thing is that, when I turned on my phone, I had multiple messages from Ms. London.”

Claire’s heart stopped, and she felt the blood drain from her face. “Why did you want to talk to me privately about this?”

“I’m assuming that I still work for you?”

The way he emphasized the last word, Claire knew he wasn’t referring to her as part of a couple. “Theoretically, yes, you work for me.”

He cleared his throat. “In my previous experience, it’s usually the person with the bankroll who tells me what I should be doing. Like when I was trailing you, Rawlings told me what he wanted. I don’t mind watching the sky for planes or the horizon for boats, but I think I could be more useful to you, to both of you, back in Iowa.”

“Why?” Claire asked with increased volume and pitch coming through her one word.

“None of her messages asked specifically about you. She asked if I’d completed my job. If so, she has another one for me. If I go, I could keep an eye on her and report back to you.”

Claire knew it was selfish to want Phil to stay on the island; however, she couldn’t help it. She never would have predicted that having both Tony and Phil nearby would give her such an overwhelming sense of comfort. After the last few months, she didn’t know she’d ever experience this sense of peace again; she didn’t want to lose it so soon. Claire responded, “I don’t know what to think. I think we should discuss it with Tony.” Claire saw Phil’s grin and imagined his green eyes with golden flecks smirking behind the dark glasses. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Three days. Don’t you dare let the woman I spent a month with in Europe disappear in *three days*.”

She looked down at her lap and exhaled. “I haven’t disappeared.” Looking back up, she went on, “It’s called *team work*. Part of that is refraining from making unilateral decisions.”

Phil nodded. “All right, I’ll buy that. Now, how about that instinct we talked about? What’s your instinct saying about this idea?”

Claire considered and replied, “It’s saying this *is* a good idea. If we don’t

have someone back there keeping us informed, we'll have no idea what she's doing." Before Phil could respond, Claire added, "That's my *instinct*. My *heart* is telling me not to let you leave. Everyone is safe here. If I could, I'd give you a list of people and tell you to have them all brought here. I'd even authorize kidnapping. I know from experience that it's an effective means of relocation."

Phil lowered his voice. "Speaking of which, is that the only reason you don't want me to leave?" He hesitated. "Are you and Rawlings... all right? I mean, if I leave, are you safe?"

Claire's shoulders relaxed. She hadn't been sure where he was going with his question. "Yes, Phil, we're good. I'll be fine. I worry about you out there —especially with her."

"I've handled worse adversaries."

"I'm curious to know what she wants."

"So am I," Phil admitted. "She wanted you gone from Iowa. She wanted you to get the money and disappear. I accomplished both of her goals. Maybe I've proven myself worthy. If that's the case, I could possibly learn more valuable information."

Claire smiled. "You've proven yourself *very* worthy. If you go, will you do one thing?"

"I don't know."

"Will you stay working for me? I don't care if she's paying you too. I want to know you have our best interest at heart."

"Claire, it doesn't take a financial obligation to verify that commitment."

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "Thank you... I don't say that enough."

"You say it too much. Now, how are we bringing this up to Rawlings?"

Laying back with her hands on her midsection, Claire sighed. "I'll do it. I'll tell him that you told me about the messages and that my *instincts* tell me that you should go to Iowa and infiltrate the wicked witch's castle..." Removing her sunglasses, Claire peered at Phil. "...just promise me that you'll watch out for those flying monkeys! They've always given me the creeps."

Later that day, after lunch, Claire and Tony were alone in the living room when Claire approached the subject of Phil's departure.

"Whose idea was this?"

Claire stood taller. "It was his, but I like it."

"You like it? Claire, you don't seem to understand how this employer/employee relationship works."

She didn't like his tone. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not sure I trust him." Tony's dark eyes drank her in. "If you think you're going to retain control of my money and the staff that my money bought, you need to start acting like the employer—not like a friend who sits to listen to everyone's ideas."

"Why? I personally think it's working for me."

His volume rose. "It isn't working for you. Don't you see how easily you can be manipulated?"

"I'm not being manipulated."

Tony turned toward the open doors; she watched as the muscles in his neck flexed. Finally, his words came out louder than before, "Everyone can be manipulated. It's most successful by people who're closest to you. Claire, you let everyone get too close!"

Claire tried to rein in the fire she felt growing in her eyes. "Tony, I trust Phil explicitly. I trusted him with my life and our child's life." She exhaled, softened her tone, and stepped toward her ex-husband. Taking his hands in hers, she said, "He brought you to me. I didn't ask for that. It was *his* idea to go get you. Personally, I'm glad he has his own initiative."

"Initiative is fine. What about agenda?"

"What would you like to know about my agenda?"

They both turned to the sound of Phil's voice. Tony's neck straightened as his business tone emerged. "Excuse us; we're having a private discussion."

Phil shrugged. "There are only five people on this island. I can guarantee all five could hear your *discussion*. I'd say, all things considered, it wasn't private."

In the heat of the moment, Claire wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or hide. Most members of a staff would be smart enough, or respectful enough, to feign ignorance. Whether it was not hearing discussions or not noticing bruises; Tony was more accustomed to a different type of employee. It was at that moment that Claire realized the difference. This staff wasn't *his*; they were *hers*.

Her mind went back to San Diego. Just now, when Phil entered the room, he did so to do what he'd done that night at the hotel with his note. He'd entered to verify Claire's safety. She knew Tony wasn't accustomed to this behavior. She chuckled, thinking, poor Tony—his world is upside down, and said, "Despite the volume, we *are* having a discussion. Since it's about you, I'd like you to join us."

Though Tony didn't respond or rebuff her statement, she felt his stare penetrate before he said through clenched jaws, "Yes, please, since privacy doesn't seem to be an issue, join us. I was just asking about your agenda regarding this job offer in Iowa."

"My agenda is to learn Ms. London's plans."

“And to what means are you willing to go?”

Phil shrugged. “I don’t have many limits.”

Tony stepped forward. “That’s my concern. What if she offers you more money than we’re paying you? Would you give up our location?”

Claire interjected, “I told you, Tony, I trust Phil. I believe he has our best interest at heart. I believe that where *we’re* concerned, there *is* a limit.” She looked to Phil.

He grinned. “When it comes to my current employer, I do have limits. Your location won’t be shared by me.”

Claire reached for Tony’s hand once again. “See, he wants to go. He wants to help us.”

Tony’s dark eyes went from Phil to Claire and back again. He exhaled. “I think of you as the man I hired to watch Claire. I have to keep reminding myself that you’re the reason she’s here and safe. Don’t disappoint me—us.”

Phil extended his hand, and the two men shook. “I wouldn’t.”

They discussed the plan, including how Phil would stay in touch. They also discussed contacting the FBI. Although Phil didn’t believe their calls from the island could be traced, he recommended that if Claire or Tony felt the need to contact Baldwin or anyone else, they keep the calls relatively short.

With time, they all agreed. The island was a safe retreat and the best place for Claire. She wanted Tony to be with her. So, he’d stay. Being safe wasn’t enough; they needed to know what was happening outside of their bubble. Phil would do his best to learn what they couldn’t.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Maybe all one can hope is to end up with the right regrets.

—Tom Miller

C LAIRE DIDN'T FEEL the soft restraints keeping her body pinned to the moving gurney or hear the loud noises from the echoing machine. During another time, in another life, the solitude of the diffusion tensor imaging machine (DTI) would have frightened her. Perhaps it would today, if she was aware, but she wasn't.

Yes, her body lay prone in a cold room, covered with a blanket, but the soft cotton sheet wasn't providing the pleasurable warmth radiating through her. No. Claire was somewhere else. The heat emanating through every fiber of her being came from a strong, yet gentle touch and circulated to places where that touch had yet to explore.

Closing her eyes, Claire enjoyed the basking rays of sunshine on her skin and the scent of surf in the humid air. Though her recently applied sunscreen filled her senses, the lingering aroma of cologne comforted her thoughts and lulled her away to a peaceful, dreamless state; then, without warning, the sensation of large hands caressing her ankles and moving toward her thighs reignited her world. Claire's lips turned upward as goose bumps materialized. Often times, people associated those small bumps to cold. On the contrary, at that moment, Claire wasn't cold.

Opening her resting eyes behind her sunglasses and focusing on the handsome face before her, Claire saw his devilish grin. It was a smirk of lust and pleasure, which with only a glance could melt not only her insides, but her world. With the intense tropical sun, his eyes were also covered by dark glass, yet as his smiling lips neared hers and her smile morphed to a willing

pucker, she knew there was an unseen intensity waiting for her behind those dark glasses.

Reaching up, she lifted the dark barrier and saw what she expected to be present. Just because she anticipated it, didn't mean the dark reality didn't affect her. Claire's insides quivered as he removed her sunglasses and their eyes met. There was a moment when she thought to speak, but it was short-lived. So much more could be said without words.

When she woke earlier that day, he was gone. Madeline had said he'd gone out early. Claire hadn't worried; she knew he'd return, but after only a few hours apart, she now realized their reunion would be more than a simple, *Hi, how are you today?*

It was true, her body had been thoroughly fulfilled and used the night before; nevertheless, it now yearned for what was being silently offered. When his full, soft lips engaged hers, the passion of the night before returned with a vengeance. Only moments earlier, her lungs had inhaled without instruction, yet as acquiescing moans escaped her lips, breathing required thought. Maybe it wasn't thought as much as it was timing. Inhaling needed to occur in unison. If it didn't, his unrelenting approach would rob her body of the oxygen necessary to go on. As her bathing suit covered breasts ached for the friction of his chest, Claire decided breathing was overrated. She wanted what was slowly overtaking her—to be consumed by the fire smoldering in the dark penetrating eyes. If in the process she forgot to breathe, did it really matter?

With the open doors looking out to the crystal blue sea, their room was only slightly more private than the lanai; however, it was their room. Madeline and Francis respected their privacy. As Claire's bathing suit fell to the floor, she realized they'd yet to speak, and still, they'd conversed more than some couples did in a lifetime. They'd greeted one another, discussed the pleasantries of the tropical morning, and assessed that each was doing well.

Laying on the soft comforter with her arms above her head, the man she loved gazing down at only her, and the large ceiling fan methodically moving the humid air, Claire's world was right. Had she planned on her morning taking this turn? No. Was she willing? Without a doubt.

The large, talented hands claiming her body also had her soul. While his approach could at times be forceful—it was always gentle. Yes, her mind held memories of contrary times, but those memories were so long ago that they were difficult to resurrect. At this moment, she willingly surrendered, as she'd done a thousand times, to the whims and desires of the man above her. Without any words, he could manipulate and dominate—move her from a state of sleeping bliss to the throes of erotic desire. Similar to years ago, his dark eyes held the passion and emotion that allowed her world to spin. Because he willed it so, the world was right. Without him, the entire planet would spin out of control, lost forever in the darkest depths of the universe.

It didn't seem to matter that her body was changing. The tips of his fingers lingered as he taunted her sensitive breasts. So little was needed to entice her yearnings: a simple puff of air on a taut, wet nipple made Claire's back arch and her insides liquefy. Teasing her to the point of begging, yet satisfying every desire was his specialty. Despite the way she'd changed, the way her body had changed, she felt wanted and sexy as he skillfully caressed and suckled, moving south over her enlarged...

Claire shook her head and tried to reason.

Enlarged. Baby. No. Gone. Everything gone.

She fought the thought the idea. No!

Dr. Fairfield watched in horror as the patient, who only moments earlier had been experiencing something which none of them could see or hear, was suddenly flailing against the restraints. The machine wasn't meant for movement.

"I told you to sedate her!" Dr. Fairfield yelled into the microphone.

Trying to remain calm, the nurse beside him replied, "We did, Doctor. She shouldn't be waking."

It didn't matter if she shouldn't be—Claire was fighting the restraints with all she had. Her mouth opened, yet with the roar of the machine, the feverish attempt of the medical staff to halt the DTI, and the doctor's angry shouts, Claire's pleas for her unborn child went unheard and unnoticed. By the time the others entered the lead lined room, Claire's flushed cheeks were covered with tears and only wordless whimpers escaped her lips.

Dr. Fairfield slammed his fist against the counter as the staff sedated and moved the patient from the gurney. Speaking to everyone and no one, he said, "This is her fifteenth day on medication. Do you know how much time and money was spent on that scan?! Now it's useless! She's barely a one-hundred-and-ten-pound woman. How damn hard is it to get her sedation right?"

Though he asked questions, he didn't want verbal answers. Flinging the door to the windowed room so hard that it rebounded off the wall, he called over his shoulder, "When the results we *did* get from this scan are available, bring them to me."

Dr. Fairfield's recently prescribed treatment was both proven and new. There were documented results with these medications; however, Dr. Fairfield was taking it a step further, combining medications and requiring more intensive therapy. It was more than had been tried in the published literature. This scan was supposed to show the first marker. Obviously, even without the DTI, the patient was experiencing a hallucination; however, observation wasn't measurable. The DTI was meant to document increased brain activity.

This sedation screw-up would postpone the next DTI for at least a couple of days. Frustrated, the doctor stormed back to his office.



DRIVING TOWARD EVERWOOD, Meredith reconsidered her objective. She'd been at this *research* for two and a half months. Soon, her children would be home for a small break before the next boarding school session. The hours she spent at Everwood would seriously detract from time she could spend with them. Was this story really worth the effort?

The tightness in Meredith's chest told her what she already knew: she wasn't a detached investigative reporter, like she'd always wanted to be. She was a friend, one who for lack of a better word, was *compensating* for the pain she'd brought her friend years ago. This wasn't about a story. It was about saving Claire and preventatively restoring pride to a little girl who one day would learn terrible things about her father. Meredith wanted Nichol to know there was more to the story—a *page two* as Paul Harvey used to say. It wasn't that Meredith didn't trust Emily to one day enlighten Nichol to Anthony Rawlings' attributes, although she wasn't sure she did. It was that, even though Claire came to her with the story of her and Anthony's introduction, Meredith was the one who wrote it and made it common knowledge. *If* Claire never recovered and *the rest of the story* never came out, how would the book that's made Meredith millions affect the beautiful, innocent little girl whose last name was *Rawlings*?

Meredith parked her car in the employee parking lot, smoothed her ugly, white uniform, and stood tall; she knew this assignment was more about guilt and obligation than investigation. Until she was convinced Claire was beyond hope, Meredith couldn't stop. Thank God her husband understood. He'd make their children's two-week break memorable. Maybe one day, not only would Nichol be proud to carry the name *Rawlings*, but Meredith's children would be proud to share their parents' name. Not only because their father was a wonderful, loving person, but because even when it was difficult, their mother had learned to do the right thing. It wasn't an easy lesson. Although Claire carried the scars, Meredith would never forget that she'd been the one to start the wheels of that *lesson* in motion.

Ms. Bali informed Meredith of Claire's change in protocol a few weeks ago. As a member of Claire's *food care staff*, Meredith had been included in meetings centered on Ms. Nichols. It was during one of those meetings that she'd met Claire's new lead doctor, Dr. Fairfield. They weren't introduced. Meredith sat attentively and listened to his directives. Being on Claire's *direct food care team*, she also had access to Claire's records, including the recently

prescribed medications. Meredith researched each drug thoroughly, most fell under the class *controlled* and categorized as *antipsychotic*.

Since the induction of the new drug regime, Meredith assessed, Claire had become *more* depressed and agitated. Getting her to eat anything, of late, was difficult. She now became irritated at any change in routine. Even the suggestion of going outdoors, the activity she enjoyed most, provoked angst. It wasn't that Claire spoke, but non-verbally, she fought; her body tensed and her glare intensified. The compliant patient of two months ago no longer existed. Meredith reasoned *any* change was positive, yet her heart told her otherwise. She truly wondered how much Emily knew, and how much longer she'd allow it to continue. Was it better to have Claire content in her own world or upset in the real one?

Today, Meredith's shift began at 4:00 PM, which meant she'd deliver dinner. After a few days into the new protocol, Ms. Bali rearranged assignments, making Claire Meredith's only responsibility. Although Dr. Fairfield wanted Claire responsible for her own feeding, nutrition was important, and any hope of her feeding herself was currently gone. Her sister wouldn't allow her to go without meals. Without a doubt, Claire required more consistent care. It wasn't Meredith's qualifications that landed her this opportunity; it was Claire's positive response to her. The people in charge were willing to do anything to avoid conflicts. Ms. Nichols didn't like change; therefore, anything the doctor didn't demand changed wasn't—that included Meredith.

The more time Meredith spent with Claire, the more she feared Emily would discover her interaction. That's why Meredith requested the later shift: 4:00 PM to 11:00 PM. On the days Emily visited, it was usually earlier in the day.

As Meredith approached the bank of employee lockers behind the kitchen, she saw Ms. Bali. It was obvious that she was waiting for her. Cautiously, Meredith asked, "Hi, Ms. Bali, is there a problem?" Looking at her watch, she saw that there were still ten minutes before the beginning of her shift. "I wasn't scheduled until 4:00 PM, was I?"

Ms. Bali didn't answer; instead, she tilted her head toward the offices and said, "I need to speak with you, privately."

Meredith's heart raced; perhaps her concerns about her children's impending break were unwarranted. If Emily discovered her presence or Everwood discovered her fake credentials, her investigative or guilt-filled endeavor was over. Trying to contain her concerns, Meredith asked, "Do you want me to come right now, or can I put my things in my locker?"

Ms. Bali's strained expression mellowed. Forcing a smile, she replied, "Oh, you can put your things in your locker. We've had a rough day, and I need to fill you in."

Remembering to breathe, Meredith nodded, placed her purse and *lunch* in her locker, and fell quietly in step with her supervisor, walking toward her private office. Once inside, Ms. Bali shut the door and asked Meredith to sit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The truth that makes men free is for the most part the truth which men prefer not to hear.

—Herbert Agar

THEY WATCHED AS Phil's plane rose above the crystal blue sea and became smaller and smaller as it neared the horizon, eventually fading away. Watching him leave the island, this time, wasn't as difficult for Claire as it had been the first time. Claire knew it was because now she wasn't alone. She had the strength of Tony's arm tenderly wrapped around her waist. Sighing, she tipped her head back to his shoulder and closed her eyes. The diesel fumes from the small propeller plane had faded as the combination of sea breeze and cologne dominated her senses.

Since Madeline wanted to be sure Phil ate before his trip, they all had eaten an early dinner. Now, with Madeline and Francis at their own house, for the first time in months, Tony and Claire were truly alone.

"Do you want to take a walk along the beach?" His baritone voice created the lyrics sung perfectly in tune with the melody of the waves.

"Hmm, that would be nice."

With their fingers entwined, Tony stepped forward, leading Claire along the shoreline. Since their sandals were waiting near the path to the house, their bare feet sunk with each step. Claire glanced back and noticed how the recurring waves erased their footprints. For quite a while, they walked in silence. The birds sang and the sea whispered, yet neither spoke. When they finally did, it was at the same time, "Do you think it's time..." Claire said, and simultaneously, Tony asked, "Are you ready to..."

Their walking stopped. Looking up to his handsome face, Claire reached toward his cheek. The slightest stubble abraded the tips of her fingers, and she momentarily imagined the sensation on other parts of her body. "I'm scared," she admitted.

He didn't answer; instead, he dropped her hand and encircled her body with his powerful arms.

"Tony, I'm so afraid that if I ask what I want to ask, that what we have right here, right now, will end. You know the saying ignorance is bliss?"

He nodded.

"I'm enjoying my bliss."

"We don't have to discuss anything you don't want to discuss."

She nestled her cheek against the soft cotton shirt. "Do you know what questions I need to ask?"

As he replied, his chest vibrated against her cheek, "I have some idea, but I don't want to go anywhere you aren't ready to go. You deserve to know the whole truth. The thing is I never imagined telling anyone the whole story, the whole truth. The only person who knew it all... well, we never needed to discuss it." Looking directly into her eyes, he continued, "It's as if, if I say any part of it, or all of it out loud, it makes it real."

Claire shook her head and spoke into his shirt, "No, Tony, whether you say it aloud or not it's real."

He gently lifted her chin, creating the connection that over the years glued them together. "Do you remember me telling you that sometimes the whole truth is too much to handle?"

"I do. I also remember you saying many other things and doing many other things. I need to know why. I need to know what *you* did, and what was done by someone else. If I don't know the truth, my imagination takes me places I don't want to go." Tony looked away and gazed over her head toward the setting sun; Claire reached up and redirected his eyes back to hers. "We have a child coming, sooner rather than later. I love you. You're the father of my baby. I want a family; however, if we don't have complete honesty, we have nothing."

His chest rose and fell. The eyes looking down at Claire were once again filled with remorse. There was a part of her that longed for the black voids of the past. Those she could change and pacify. The pain she was witnessing behind the intense brown was his doing. She couldn't take it away. All she could do was share the burden.

Tony sighed. "If after you hear it all, you want me gone from your life and from our child's life, I wouldn't blame you."

Claire smirked. "I've wanted you gone before, but you're still here."

He grinned. For a split second, she saw the gleam she loved emerge from the sadness. "I believe I've told you what I think about that smart mouth."

Her lips grazed his exposed neck. "Yes, I believe you've said you like it."

Tony reclaimed her petite hand, and they continued walking. "How far have you walked? Can you circle the entire island?"

"I haven't tried. I've only been as far as the orchards. I did leave the

island once, when I went to town with Francis. I went to see the doctor. Other than that, I haven't wanted to leave the grounds around the house."

Tony's cadence slowed. "I don't say it enough. Even though it's deserved, it's difficult for me to say, but Claire, I'm sorry. You're living in fear, on an island and it's entirely my fault."

Her tone hardened. "No, Tony, it isn't. At least, I don't believe it is—completely. I know some of it's *your* doing, but I need to know how much."

After a prolonged silence, he replied, "I don't doubt you can handle it; you've handled so much. You've always been so strong. It's what—"

"I know. It's what infuriated you about me."

He squeezed her hand. "Yes, and it's what made me fall in love with you." He seemed lost in thought until he went on, "I fell in love with you while you were with me in Iowa. Like I said before, it wasn't supposed to be like that, yet every day you'd do something or say something that would stay with me. I'd be at work or in the gym, and I'd remember it. Sometimes it made me angry, but most of the time it made me smile." He stopped their progress and peered into her eyes. "Do you have any idea what that's like? To suddenly be thinking about another person when you least expect it?"

She looked up and smiled a closed lip smile. The emerald of her green eyes shone with the spark of the setting sun as she answered, "I do."

Tony shook his head. "I didn't. I never had. Never in forty-plus years, but then, when you were in prison, I reflected back and I realized—I had. There was someone who appeared in my thoughts over and over for years. Someone whose life interested me, someone I watched, and someone who I paid to have followed. It was a different obsession, different than the other people on our list. Without me realizing it, that person consumed my thoughts, and though I didn't think it possible, she took my heart."

Claire's heartbeat quickened. Did she want to know who dominated his thoughts and took his heart?

He grasped her shoulders. "It was you. I fell in love with you while you were supposed to be my prisoner; however, I've loved you since before I knew love existed." He touched her cheek and bathed it in his warm breath. "Claire, you've been the captor of my heart since you were a freshman in college."

His eyes were wide with need. He'd just confessed something monumental. Claire knew he needed affirmation; nevertheless, she felt the blood drain from her face as her knees gave way. Suddenly, she was sitting in the sand at his feet. Despite, or perhaps because of, his honesty, Claire felt nauseous. Lifting her knees as high as she could, she rested her head against them. Tony immediately knelt beside her. When his arm encircled her shoulder, her body tensed.

Of course he felt it. He had an uncanny way of sensing her thoughts and

moods. It was what had always made lying so difficult, even when she was his *prisoner*. She recognized his tone: guarded and aloof. “You said you wanted to know, so I’m trying to start at the beginning.”

She shook her head, unsure if she could speak without vomiting. After a few more minutes of silence, his embrace disappeared. Though her eyes remained closed, she felt him move away. When she opened them, she was alone. Claire saw his figure rounding the bend of the beach, going the direction they’d been walking.

Tears coated her cheeks and the gasps of ragged breaths replaced the sound of the surf. This was much more difficult than she ever imagined. Claire wanted to know, yet the thought of being watched, since the age of eighteen or nineteen, made her literally ill. If it were true, if he had truly been watching since that time, then her other suspicions were probably true. He was probably responsible for Simon’s internship and job offer. He was probably responsible for her parents’ death, her scholarship, her job loss at WKZP... He’d orchestrated her entire life! The possible confirmation was too much to bear.

By the time she stood, the sun had set and a blanket of black velvet peppered with stars covered the island. The moon’s rays glistened on the now calm lagoon. Each step took effort. Lost in thought, she didn’t see her surroundings or hear the sounds of the night. In time, she reached the path. Lying on the sand, all alone, were her sandals. She didn’t know how Tony could’ve gotten back to the house without her seeing him. Then again, she didn’t know how long she’d been on the beach. The aching in her head that came with the sudden onslaught of nausea, increased. She wondered if he’d left. Had her reaction been so hurtful that he’d forget her and their child? Claire’s thoughts went to the boat. If he’d taken it, surely she would have heard the motor; then she remembered Francis’ warning the day they went into town. He told her to always schedule morning appointments. *The seas—they are unpredictable after the sun sets.*

While her temples throbbed at the idea of Tony out in a boat alone, her thoughts were dominated by the words and meaning of his revelation. Claire berated her reaction as she passed the threshold of their dark home. She’d asked for truth. He’d given it, yet instead of facing it with strength, as he said she would, she crumbled at his feet. Damp sand fell from her dress and bare feet as she mindlessly walked through the unlit rooms to their bedroom. Once at her destination, she gazed about their room. The doors to the lanai were open wide with moonlight as the only source of illumination. The room and beyond was filled with shadows. As she was about to turn on a light, she heard something, or someone, on the lanai.

Earlier...

TONY DIDN'T KNOW where to go. He was on a damn island! Each step away from Claire became more and more determined as his feet pushed deeper and deeper into the sand. He trudged forward with his mind a whirlwind of thoughts. She said she wanted truth; he gave her the damn truth. Was that some kind of sick joke? Ask for something—no, demand it—and then when you get it, throw it back! When he stopped and looked back, all he could see was beach. He wasn't sure if she'd gone back to the house, or if he'd rounded too many bends.

As he continued walking, the beautiful scenery around him went unnoticed. Before he realized, sunlight was waning. Straight ahead, through the twilight, near the shore, he saw a structure. Curiosity propelled him forward until he recognized the building. It was the boathouse he'd been to the day before with Francis. Tony followed the path through the vegetation until he reached the door. It wasn't locked. Watercrafts weren't his normal means for transportation; then again, he'd never lived on an island before. Yesterday, he'd watched Francis maneuver the boat, and he reasoned it wasn't that much different than a car.

Turning on the light, Tony walked through the garage-like area onto the floating docks and around to the other side of the boat. Francis explained how changing tides made the docks rise and fall. He also mentioned that, occasionally, there were storms which caused the calm seas to rage. A motorized lift hung the boat and kept it suspended above the water. In the case of rough seas, this device protected the watercraft from striking the docks. As Tony neared the controls of the lift, he heard the door to the boathouse open.

Francis entered and asked, "Monsieur, you want to go for a boat ride, *oui?*"

Tony didn't know what he wanted. Taking the boat out on the open sea, pushing the throttle all the way down, and feeling the wind against his skin seemed like a good release. "I was thinking about it."

"Madame el, she'll go with you?"

"No, she's... tired."

Francis nodded. "*Oui, bébés*, they do that." He chuckled. "God has not given Madeline and me *bébés* of our own, but I've watched many families multiply here on this island, and the *mères!* *Oui*, the *bébés* make them tired."

Tony nodded; his mind was busy analyzing the control panel of the boatlift.

Francis continued, "And sometimes—sometimes the *bébés* also make the *mères* very emotional. Ladies who usually are quiet—having the little *bébé* inside of them—it makes them loud—and the tears!" He laughed.

Francis's deep laugh caused Tony to look away from the levers and focus on the man near the doorway.

Francis went on, “The tears, *oui!* For no reason at all!” Smiling approvingly, he added, “It’s a wonder the *pères* don’t all go crazy.”

Tony nodded.

“Monsieur, may I help you with the boat? You need to go somewhere? If it is something Madame el needs, perhaps Madeline or I have it at our house?”

“No,” Tony said tentatively. His mind no longer on the boat but on the woman he left on the beach. “It isn’t anything she needs. I was thinking about going for a ride.”

“*Oui*, of course, you are right.” Francis’ jovial tone lightened the dim boathouse. “Since you’ve arrived, Madame el, she doesn’t need anything. You can see it—the two of you.” Francis walked to the control panel. “Monsieur, this lever here...” He pointed. “...it is how we bring her down.” As he depressed the lever, the boat began to descend.

Tony placed his hand over Francis’, stopping the movement of the boat. “No,” Tony said. “I don’t think I need to go for a boat ride right now, but perhaps in the morning?”

“*Oui*, in the morning! In the morning, I’ll show you the channels and markers. They’re very difficult to see at night if you aren’t used to them.”

Tony patted Francis’ shoulder. “Thank you.” As Tony left the boathouse, they both knew Tony’s gratitude wasn’t for the lesson on the boatlift or the promise of tomorrow’s boat ride.

Following the path during the night wasn’t difficult. Through the years, Francis had done a superb job of controlling the vegetation and creating clear, well-traveled trails. With the addition of the silver rays of moonlight, which occasionally penetrated the lush canopy, Tony’s steps remained confident.

When the path opened to a clearing, Tony saw the warm glow of light coming from Madeline and Francis’ home. As he neared the light, the faint sound of music filled the otherwise quiet air, and the aroma of something delicious taunted his non-existent hunger. Thinking about how early they ate, Tony figured Madeline was making Francis dinner. Looking up the hill, Tony saw the big house. There wasn’t a light glowing from any of the many windows or doors. It looked empty. He wondered if Claire were there or still on the beach. Though he could’ve accessed the house from that side, Tony walked out to the beach to retrieve his sandals. Under the cover of the vegetation, he found them lying in the sand beside Claire’s and picked them up. Looking out toward the beach, he worried. If she were still out there, he needed to go find her. As he scanned the dark shore, he saw her figure coming toward him. Quietly, he slipped up the path.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.

—Marcus Aurelius

C LAIRE'S EYES WERE accustomed to the darkness. Turning towards the sound, towards the open doors to the lanai, she saw Tony's silhouette. Again, their words came in unison, "I'm sorry."

They both stepped forward, and when their bodies touched, the pressure which had been building evaporated into a sweet release. The tension he sensed on the beach was gone; Claire's body was liquid in his hands: molding and conforming to his. Their lips united as a different tightness began to build deep within.

Claire was his. He was hers. It had been that way since before she even knew him—or knew of him. She could fight that revelation, but why? It wasn't debatable; she couldn't rewrite history. She didn't want to. It all worked to put them where they were right now. Besides, every fiber of her being ached for his touch. Her body wanted him, that was undeniable. Each one of his caresses was but a tease, arousing sparks that only he could ignite into flames. The desire was obviously mutual as he pulled her closer. They didn't say words, yet they both understood the meaning of their sounds. Heavy breaths and moans echoed through their cavernous room out to the sea.

With their sandy clothes lost somewhere on their bedroom floor, their fervent passion led them to the large bed. Though the soft hum of the ceiling fan whirled above their naked bodies, the heat they felt couldn't be cooled. Claire's lips teased his broad shoulder as his skillful hands roamed the familiar and new curves of her figure. His touch stirred her desires, making her plead for more.

Though faint moonlight cloaked the room in shadows, Tony could see Claire's sleeping mask on her bedside stand. It was black satin, and helped to

keep the morning sunlight away while she slept. Reaching for the mask, Tony held it in Claire's line of vision and asked, "Do you trust me?"

Seeing the mask and his devilish grin, Claire's heart began to beat erratically. Yes, she put the mask on herself before she fell asleep; however, it was never something they'd done for fun. Her mind raced back to a room with a lock that beeped. There was a time long ago, in the beginning, when there were blindfolds and restraints, but she never considered any of that fun. "No," her small hands pushed against his chest. "No!" She wasn't seeing the man on top of her. She was seeing the man from those memories. "I don't want to wear that. Please, please don't make me."

Perhaps he made a sound; Claire wasn't sure. Something made her eyes open, and suddenly, she saw the man who was truly there. In his eyes she again saw pain. "Oh, Tony." Her arms surrounded his neck. "I do trust you. I just don't want to wear that." Her heart broke as he nodded and rolled off of her, onto his pillow. Lifting her head to look at him, Claire started to apologize, but before she could speak, he placed his finger on her lips.

Never could she have predicted her ex-husband's next move. Claire Nichols would never have imagined Anthony Rawlings placing such a high bet as to wager himself, yet that's what he did. Lifting his head to gently kiss her lips, he whispered, "I trust you." Then he covered his own eyes with her satin mask. As absurd as he looked with the black satin ruffles around the sides, she'd never been so honored. *He was hers!* That was what he'd tried to tell her on the beach. Yes, the whole idea of him watching her over the years was creepy, but that wasn't what he'd tried to convey. Seeing him lay still with his eyes blinded to her every move, Claire understood. She had him, his heart, his soul, and his body. They were hers to do with what she wanted.

Easing herself to her knees, she allowed her lips to brush his neck. His growls encouraged and the stubbles abraded. Claire loved every sensation and every minute. Next, she moved to his chest where her hands caressed his muscles as her fingers wove through his chest hair. When she licked and sucked a nipple, his arms encircled her.

Within this new paradigm, Claire was empowered. Sitting up, she pushed his arms back to the mattress and said, "No." His grin from below the satin melted her. She was afraid she wouldn't be able to do all the things she imagined; her body was on a precipice, and at any moment, she'd be lost in earthshaking bliss.

It wasn't like anything they'd ever experienced, nor was it how Claire always wanted it to be; nevertheless, on this one night—it was perfect. After Claire's world exploded and Tony's did too, she collapsed against his chest and fought to breathe. Finally, she lifted her head and removed the satin blindfold. The spark within the chocolate bliss made her reconsider her desire for sleep.

Tony's grin infiltrated his words, "Since you removed the blindfold, does that mean I can now hold you?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Rawlings, please do."

Although nothing about their recent history seemed wrong, it didn't take him long to right their world. Turning Claire, he gently laid her upon the bed and fanned her hair on her pillow. "Just so you know," he whispered in a deep, raspy voice. "Your hair sweeping over my face and chest when I couldn't see it was incredibly erotic."

Claire giggled. "Well, that's good to know. I'll remember that for next time."

His brow cocked upward. "Next time?"

She nodded.

Tony shrugged. "Well, my dear, they do say variety is the spice of life."

Claire ran her finger over his pink lips. Before she could remove it, Tony sucked the tip into his mouth. Pressing her breasts upward, her eyes fluttered shut and she purred, "As long as that variety is with me, I think I might be willing."

Nearing his lips to her ear, Tony whispered, "Only you. It's only been you for a very long time."

Before going to sleep, they decided to go for a late night swim. Although they wore robes to the pool, they didn't bother with bathing suits. With the water near the same temperature as the humid air, the only difference was the degree of moisture as they became submerged. Tony disappeared under the water and swam the length of the infinity pool and back. Claire giggled as he came out of the water right in front of her. Taking her hands, he led her out to the deeper end. Holding his shoulders, she wrapped her legs around his torso and gazed up at the stars.

Tony kissed her neck. "What are you thinking about?"

Claire shrugged. "A lot of things: our baby, our friends, and my family."

"It's all right to miss them."

"I've been away from them before, but this time, it's different. This time, I feel like I've betrayed them. I'm the one who left without telling anyone."

"What do you think would happen if they knew the truth?"

Claire contemplated. "They might be in danger? At this point, I wouldn't put anything past Catherine."

Tony nodded. "By keeping them ignorant, we're protecting them."

Laying her head against his shoulder, Claire ran her hand over his arm.

Tony reached for her left hand and looked at the diamond on her finger. "You know that this ring gave me hope and broke my heart at the same time?"

Claire raised her eyebrows.

"When the police found your belongings in that motel in Illinois and this ring wasn't with them, I wanted to believe you were all right, that you were making your own decisions, and you weren't in the hands of some crazy stalker, but then I realized, if that were true, then it meant you'd left me. It meant you didn't want to be with me and you'd never return."

She freed her hand and wrapped her arms tighter around his neck. "I'm so sorry. I was scared and misled." She kissed his cheek while her fingers ran through his hair. "I should've spoken with you." She buried her face in the crook of his neck. "I couldn't leave the ring. I'd promised to keep it. I just couldn't leave it." Tears teetered on her lids.

He gently pushed her away and gazed into her eyes. "Claire, what's the matter?"

She smiled behind the tears. "I think it's the hormones. Sometimes I just cry."

Tony smiled and hugged her tightly. "Just today, someone mentioned something about that."

"Today? Who?"

"It was Francis. I know I've only been here a few days, but I think he and Madeline are great people. This island wouldn't be the same without them."

Claire nodded into his shoulder as she tried to suppress a yawn. "I agree."

Carrying Claire, Tony walked slowly toward the steps. "I think you need to get some sleep."

When they reached the steps, Claire let go of his neck. "I'm getting too fat for you to carry me out of the water."

"No, Ms. Nichols, you're not fat; however, I agree. I'd never forgive myself if my wet feet slipped and I hurt you or our son."

Claire looked back to Tony. "Son?"

He shrugged. "Or daughter—I really don't care."

Taking his hand, Claire said, "While we were apart, I prayed for a boy. I wanted him to be just like you."

"Like me?" He shook his head. "I know you're smarter than that."

As they reentered their suite, Claire said, "Well, the Nichols had only girls—at least, the last generation, and it seems the Rawls had only boys... so soon, we'll learn which family dominates."

Tony kissed her neck. "Sweetheart, the man determines the sex."

Her eyes twinkled. "Not tonight he didn't."

"If you're up for round two, I'm pretty sure we could even the score."

"I think I'm going to wash the chlorine out of my hair. If it's not too dominating of a suggestion, as you already know the shower is quite large, you may join me?"

Tony smirked. "Are you suggesting water conservation? I mean, I'm all

for conserving resources.”

Later that night with the score one to one, Claire fell sound to sleep, listening to the soothing rhythm of Tony’s heartbeat. Fleetingly, she thought about Tony’s revelation. It was only the beginning, and they both knew there was much more to discuss. Their conversations in the past and in the future always had one rule: honesty. Tony had followed that rule and in essence, so had Claire. If she’d pretended his statement didn’t bother her, then she wouldn’t have been honest. Her last thought as she drifted away was of Tony’s warning. Claire decided he was right: the truth could be better handled in small manageable pieces. It was like her old way of dealing—compartmentalization. The difference was instead of hiding the secrets in the compartments this time, they were bringing them out.

When Claire woke in the morning, her world was still dark. As her eyelids fluttered and her lashes grazed the satin, she realized the darkness was her sleeping mask. Claire removed it from her eyes and reached toward Tony’s empty place in bed. It was already after 9:00 AM, and he was gone, probably off somewhere exploring the island or with Francis. Thankful for the extra sleep the mask brought, Claire thought pensively about the night before, and warm memories filled her thoughts. When she thought about falling asleep, she realized that she hadn’t been wearing the sleep mask. Shaking her head ever so slightly, a smile came to her lips. That’s another point for Tony! Perhaps soon she could even that score.



“I UNDERSTAND, SIR,” Agent Baldwin said into his phone.

“Yes, Deputy Director, I’ll be back in San Francisco tomorrow evening.”

“Thank you, goodbye.”

Harry hit the *DISCONNECT* button and collapsed into the hotel chair. The conversation wasn’t as bad as he’d imagined. Although *he’d* lost track of both Claire and Rawlings, through the use of digital face recognition, they’d been identified at different times at airports in Papua, New Guinea. Claire was identified at the Baimuru Airport, whereas Rawlings was identified at the Daru Airport.

It’s believed they are staying somewhere in the South Pacific. Recognizably, this was a broad generalization. The area in question contained thousands of islands of varying sizes. Many of the island nations in this region rely heavily on tourism and have been known to be very welcoming and accommodating to wealthy residents. As a rule—questions were rarely asked.

Since they were no longer in Europe, Agent Baldwin was ordered to

return to the field office in San Francisco. Although he didn't mention it on the phone call, Harry vowed to share his research with SAC Williams or anyone who'd listen. He needed FBI resources to request blood samples from Simon Johnson and Jordon Nichols. Harry wasn't even sure whether the samples would be available. If nothing else, he wanted to access the toxicology reports that were available.

If he couldn't locate Claire and Rawlings, then his research would be his number one priority. Writing a note, Harry pondered, does the presence of *actaea pachypoda* create any unusual markers visible during toxicology screenings? Since most agencies don't routinely test for it, maybe there was something else that could identify its presence. The fact it affected the heart—creating heart attack-like symptoms was too broad.

Harry had a few hours before he needed to get to the airport. While he waited, he reviewed medical histories. First, he looked at the known victims:

Nathaniel Rawls: died in 1989, at the age sixty-four. Interestingly, he died with only two months remaining on his reduced sentence. He had a history of high blood pressure, depression, vitamin deficiency, recreational alcohol usage, and nicotine dependence. He was being medicated for the high blood pressure and depression. According to the records, when he died, he still smoked a half of a pack a day. It was fair to assume his death was heart-related until *actaea pachypoda* was positively identified in his blood.

Agent Sherman Nichols: died in 1997, at the age of seventy-three. He also had a history of high blood pressure. In 1995, he had a heart catheterization resulting in the placement of two coronary stents. He was medicated for high blood pressure and high cholesterol, past history nicotine dependence. Again, it would be fair to assume cause of death to include heart disease. Again *actaea pachypoda* was positively identified in his blood.

Anthony Rawlings/Anton Rawls: survived poisoning, January 2012, at the age of forty-six. Wife, Claire Nichols Rawlings, pled no contest to charge of attempted murder. Governor Bosley extended a pardon which absolved Claire (Rawlings) Nichols of guilt. The state of Iowa hasn't revisited the case due to Mr. Rawlings' insistence. Also at the time of his poisoning, Mr. Rawlings had a clear medical history. His only medication was vitamins, recreational use of alcohol, and no history of smoking—family history would be the only connection to heart-related problems leading to his possible death. Upon arrival at the hospital, *actaea pachypoda* was positively identified in his blood.

Harry also reviewed his list of other possible victims:

Samuel and Amanda Rawls: COD gunshot wounds. The ballistics reports contradicted the released hypothesis of murder/suicide. The gunshot wounds were quite obviously not self-inflicted on either victim. They died in 1989, at the age of forty-five and forty-four. As much as Harry wanted to pin this on Rawlings, since they had his statement and the police reports verified his

presence at the home the night of the murder, he couldn't forget his discussion with Patrick Chester. It was clear that, during that discussion, Chester was being paid by someone to keep quiet about a woman—a woman in a blue Honda.

Jordon and Shirley Nichols: COD head trauma related to automobile crash. They died in 2004, at the age of fifty and forty-nine. Indiana State Police reports indicated the Nichols' car was structurally sound. The crash was ruled *accidental*.

Simon Johnson: COD combustion, related to the crash and fire of a Cessna aircraft. He died in 2011, at the age of twenty-eight. NTSB reports indicated plane was structurally sound. To Harry, that confirmed that poison was indeed the cause of death, but he needed proof.

Although he couldn't be sure about Tony's parents, Harry's gut told him the other deaths could all be traced to Rawlings. As he was about to leave for the airport, Harry scribbled another note, *Check New Jersey, 1989, car registrations for blue Hondas*. He stuffed the note into his laptop bag and headed to the airport.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves.

—Victor Hugo

C LAIRE LOVED LUNCHTIME. Despite Tony's request for her to *better* understand the whole employer/employee relationship, she refused to give up eating with Madeline and Francis. Breakfast was a free-for-all. Madeline and Francis had things they wanted to accomplish early in the day. The intense sun and heat made early morning and late evening the best times of the day to do labor. Tony had always been a person to wake early. The fact he no longer had work to attend, or thousands of jobs under his reign of responsibility, didn't change his internal clock. Claire, on the other hand, enjoyed her sleep. While everyone else on the island could be up and going at the break of dawn, 8:00 AM or 9:00 AM was a much more acceptable waking hour for her. It was true that years ago, on Tony's estate, she constantly woke about 8:00 AM. In her opinion, the difference was the seventeen extra pounds resting on her bladder. These days, she woke every two to three hours. Sleeping until 9:00 AM gave her the same total sum of sleep. It made perfect sense, and besides, no one complained.

The midday meal was a great time for everyone to connect. Claire knew it was a whole new world for Tony. In private, while he voiced his approval of Madeline and Francis, he still maintained his concerns regarding Claire's ability to preserve the appropriate employer status. Claire didn't care. She explained how instrumental Madeline and Francis had been to her initial adjustment, and they all knew it was her decision. As long as she wanted it, they would all continue to eat their midday meal together.

The day after Tony's revelation, as their lunch was about to conclude, Claire asked Francis a question, "I remember you telling me you're ordained. Does that mean you can legally marry two people?"

Claire ignored Tony's wide-eyed micro-expression as Francis answered, "Oui, Madame el, here in this island nation I am, as you say—licensed."

She clarified, "What does that mean in the United States? Would we still be married?"

"Oui, after you file for your license."

Tony couldn't remain silent any longer. "Claire, my offer still stands, but you had things you wanted to discuss, so perhaps we should..."

Claire reached into the pocket of the lace cover up. Her fingers found an offering that only he would recognize. She gathered it into her fist, and extended her closed fist to Tony. "I have something for you."

His eyebrows knit together in question as he trepidatiously opened his hand. Although there were very few secrets on a private island, as Claire released the offering with one hand, she closed his fingers around it with her other. In a low voice and with a smile that radiated to her emerald green eyes, she whispered, "I trust you."

Tony nonchalantly glanced into his hand. Claire wasn't the only one to see the spark in his dark chocolate eyes.

"Monsieur, this is your wish?" Madeline's question pulled Tony's gaze away from Claire's.

"Oui, Madeline. It is my wish. I wanted to be sure it was Claire's."

Straightening her neck, Claire said, "Well, just so we're all clear, I'm not the one who filed for divorce." Tony momentarily bowed his head. What could he say? Before he returned his gaze to Claire, she worried that she'd said something she shouldn't.

Her concern melted with his upturned lips and evaporated into nothingness with his words. "I admit it wasn't the first mistake I've ever made; however, it is the one I regret the most."

"Tonight?" Madeline asked as her volume increased. "May we have the wedding tonight?"

Claire giggled. "Tonight is very fast. I don't have a dress—"

Madeline interjected, "Madame el, a wedding isn't about a dress. A wedding is about the unification of two souls." She paused. "In your case, the reunification."

Tony corrected, "Reconciliation."

Claire reached for his hand. "I believe that began a while ago at a gala in a faraway land."

"I believe it happened before that," Tony said. "Perhaps in a dream?"

Claire couldn't help but smile. She knew from experience it radiated to her green eyes.

It was Francis who brought the two of them back from their personal memories. "I'll go into town right away. Your marriage will be legal here, once you sign. As for legalizing it in the U.S., I'll help you."

It was enough for Claire. She scooted her chair by Tony's and laid her head against his shoulder. Soon after, they were alone as Madeline and Francis had much to accomplish to fulfill Claire's request. It was then that Tony handed Claire back her sleeping mask and asked, "What happened? Why are you suddenly in a rush?"

"Are you complaining?"

He placed his hand on her leg. "No, concerned."

Claire lifted her eyebrows. Tony sighed and took her hand. "Come with me."

She didn't question; instead, she willingly followed Tony out to a lounge chair in a shady, yet breezy part of the lanai. "First," he said, "you need to put your feet up. Second, we need to talk."

Claire obediently sat, laying her legs out in front of her. When Tony perched himself on the edge of her chair, Claire reached forward, framed his face with her petite hands, and brought his lips to hers. So many things can be said through a kiss. Some people kiss *hello* or *goodbye*. A kiss can be happy, sad, passionate, or regretful. The emotion Claire tried to convey was *forgiveness*. When their lips parted and their eyes met, Claire replied, "I love you. There are probably millions of reasons why I shouldn't, but I do. I've been without you..." She blushed. "... since my dream, and I don't like it. I've felt every possible emotion while with you. You asked me to be Mrs. Rawlings again. You said our child isn't a Nichols or a Rawls but a Rawlings." She straightened her neck and squared her shoulders. "I want that."

"I want that too." Taking her hands in his, Tony continued, "However, you need to know what you're signing."

"What I'm signing?"

He smirked. "Do you think Madeline has any paper napkins?"

"I doubt it. Is cloth more legally binding?"

He quickly kissed her lips. "There it is again."

"Oh, you love it!"

"I do. I love your smart mouth, and more importantly, I love you. Just think about how upset you were last night. My dear, our discussion is an iceberg. That was only the tip."

"Don't you understand why I handed you my sleep mask?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Because you wanted to have kinky sex."

Claire shook her head, trying to hide her blushed cheeks. "No. Last night you asked me if I trusted you. Again, there are probably millions of reasons to say no—"

Tony sat straighter as his tone deepened. "I believe there are reasons, but my dear, I'd appreciate it if you discontinue the use of the modifier one

million. You have misjudged the size of the iceberg.”

“Actually, I don’t recall using the modifier one.”

His finger traced her lips as they formed a smug smile. “So many better uses of that beautiful mouth than to continually spurt out smart comments.”

“Tony, last night I felt like too much was riding on our conversation.” When he started to speak, she touched his lips so that he wouldn’t interrupt. “What you tell me, and I do need to know, won’t change the fact I want my family together. I want to be your wife again.” Claire felt the tears begin to build. “I want it more than I wanted it in December of 2010.”

Tony gently wiped a tear from her cheek. “In 2010, I didn’t realize what a truly amazing wife I was getting. I never appreciated her for who she truly was.” He lifted Claire’s left hand and touched his lips to it. “This time I know that I’m the luckiest man in the world. That’s why I want you to enter this marriage with your eyes open.”

“Tony, will you do anything for me?”

“Anything within my power.”

“Today, for lunch, I had water to drink, but I really wanted iced tea. Can you get me iced tea for today’s lunch?”

He looked at her quizzically. “For today’s lunch? No, but I can get you some tea now, if you’d like.”

“Why can’t you get it for me for today’s lunch?”

“Claire, you aren’t making any sense, lunch is over” A smile of recognition came to his face. Claire saw it in the depth of his deep brown eyes.

“Yes, yes it is,” she said. “All you can do is try to fulfill my desires for the future. We can’t change the past, and even if we could, I’m not sure it should be changed. It brought us here now. I’m confident that I won’t like all the answers I get from you. That doesn’t change that I want them and deserve them, but to say that our entire future is riding on them was too much pressure. That’s why I was so upset last night. It freaked me out so much that you’d been watching me for so long that I missed the part about you saying that I’ve had possession of your heart since before I knew you.”

“You have, and as a man of my word, when you’re ready to know the answers to your questions, I’ll be honest with you. Most importantly, you and our child will always be my number-one concern. You’ve changed me in ways I didn’t know I could be changed. Your happiness and well-being are my top priorities. If you’re sure of what you’re getting yourself into, I will spend the rest of my life atoning for my sins against you and against others. I want my name to be something you’re proud to carry.”

Claire couldn’t control the tears any more than she could change the past. From the man with the dark eyes, in the suite on his estate, to the man with his head resting on their child was undoubtedly a change. Was she

responsible, or was it life? After all, she wasn't the same woman who stood in the blue dress and blue heels trembling in fear. Was that Tony's doing, or was it life? The man with the eyes devoid of color and emotion wouldn't have wanted the woman Claire was today, and the woman in the blue dress wouldn't have wanted anything to do with the man caressing his unborn child. So to say they changed each other may be incorrect, yet to say they had changed was an understatement.

Standing in the glow of the setting sun with her toes in the sand, Claire gazed lovingly into the deepest, darkest eyes. The dark no longer proclaimed anger. The darkness from years ago was different—void, or more accurately, devoid—without. At that time, his eyes were windows to a tormented core whose only outlet was rage and cruelty, but the dark brown that returned her gaze today wasn't empty. It reeled with emotions that the void eyes wouldn't have understood. The new darkness swirled with an all-consuming passion that could ignite Claire in impossible ways with a single glance. They churned with love and adoration, pride and understanding, sorrow and regret. These eyes drank her in, claimed her, and fulfilled her every desire. They were the windows to a man who once upon a time, signed a napkin that he knew was a contract. As an esteemed businessman, he forgot one very important rule. He forgot to read the fine print. It wasn't an acquisition to own another person as he'd previously assumed. It was an agreement to acquire a soul.

The acquisition was long and painful. There were contract disputes and labor issues, but in the end, the soul found residence within the businessman. No longer were the rules clear or was the world black and white. Now, color prevailed—especially shades of green.

Francis' rich, deep voice echoed into the breeze. Claire remembered the day in 2010 when she was asked the same question: *do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death do you part?* Her answer hadn't changed. Despite the traumas and her desire to forfeit that promise made three years ago, Claire suspected that in her heart, she never did. This ceremony was a reaffirmation of that prior commitment and a promise of a better relationship. With her long white sundress blowing around her legs—perhaps she was subconsciously planning this when she ordered her clothes—Claire inhaled without effort. The salty breeze penetrated deep into her lungs as the sensation of suffocation was gone.

While Francis prayed, Claire did too. It was a prayer of praise and gratitude. She admitted to disliking parts of the journey, but the destination was true paradise. As Francis announced their union, Claire and Tony kissed.

When he backed away, she saw his devilish grin and heard him whisper, “Mrs. Rawlings, you are mine once again.”

Her retort teetered on the tip of her tongue. Finally, she swallowed the words and smiled at her handsome husband, deciding that a smart-mouthed response wasn’t appropriate in the middle of her wedding. It didn’t matter. The gleam in Tony’s eyes told her he knew—he knew what she wanted to say and loved her as much for her restraint as for her cheekiness.

Madeline somehow had found time to bake a cake. Since Claire couldn’t drink alcohol, it wasn’t even discussed. The four of them celebrated their wedding, with cake and lemonade. Claire wondered if October 27th was now their anniversary, and whether it meant that December 18th no longer was. Perhaps they could find reason to celebrate both dates. After the reception, Francis and Madeline excused themselves to leave the newlyweds alone.

Within their suite, they found chilled fruit and sparkling grape juice. That, however, wasn’t the discovery that made Claire giggle and Tony’s devilish grin emerge. It was when he pulled the black satin mask from the pocket of his linen shorts and lifted a brow. That was when she couldn’t hold back her snicker. He’d kept it with him throughout the entire ceremony.

“I thought you wanted me to go into this marriage with my eyes wide open?”

Each one of his graceful steps lessened the distance between them and pulled an invisible cord, tightening Claire’s insides. Her sensitive nipples ached as their chests touched and he pulled her close. Slowly widening his grin, Tony answered, “That, Mrs. Rawlings, was meant metaphorically.”

Looking up to his handsome face, Claire opened her eyes wide and replied, “Oh, see, I thought you meant it literally.”

Bending down, he neared his lips to hers, and when she closed her eyes, she felt the sweet connection of their kiss. Before she could inhale, Tony’s teeth caught her lower lip, and Claire gasped.

He gently tugged and released. His lips moved to the nape of her neck and up to her ear. After he gently nipped at her lobe, his raspy voice sent shivers down her spine. “I knew it couldn’t stay hidden for too long.”

She opened her eyes wide, displaying her most innocent expression. It was too late. Tony’s seductive tone resonated through the suite. “No, my dear, no look of innocence, no deer in the headlights, you know exactly what I’m saying.” Once again tracing her lips with his finger, he added, “I believe it’s time we find something better for that smart mouth to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Nothing can prevent you from learning the truth so much as the belief that you already know it.

—Jon K. Hart

SOPHIA WALKED THROUGH their Santa Clara condominium one last time and took inventory of the moving boxes. Calling over her shoulder, she asked for the umpteenth time, “You’re sure Rawlings Industries will get all of this to Iowa for us?”

Derek came from the bedroom, magic marker in hand. “They said they would. We only need to have everything packed and labeled. They’ll even put the boxes in the appropriate rooms in our new house.”

Sophia contemplated his words: *House*—it sounded wonderful! Iowa didn’t. There wasn’t an ocean near Iowa City, no beaches—well, unless you included the rivers. Sophia had never imagined herself living in the middle of the country, surrounded by corn. Her husband’s embrace refocused Sophia’s thoughts. He whispered in her ear, “Tonight, they’re putting us up in an amazing hotel in San Francisco. Tomorrow, we’re flying by private jet to Rawlings Industries corporate headquarters. Timothy Bronson, the acting CEO, wants to meet both of us.” He nibbled her ear. “Baby, you can paint from anywhere; you’ve told me that before. This is a big break—corporate headquarters!”

“I’m happy for you, I am. I just don’t understand how this happened so fast. You said *Anthony Rawlings* wanted you there? Honey, that’s great, but he’s been missing since September. What happened?”

Exhaling, Derek peered deep into his wife’s beautiful gray eyes. “I’ve told you all I know, all that HR told me. When they scanned Mr. Rawlings’ home computer, they found a file about me. He even had a job proposal started. Timothy Bronson was made aware of the file, so he took it to the board of directors. They felt it was something Mr. Rawlings wanted, and together they

reviewed my dossier and called. Mr. Bronson believes I can help in the effort to pull Rawlings Industries from its downward spiral.”

Sophia’s mind whirled. “Who scanned his home computers? Why would they do that?”

“Baby, I don’t know. This is a huge promotion, not just the money, or the title, but the responsibility. I’m going from a junior peon in a small subsidiary, to a junior peon at corporate!”

Sophia sighed. “Honey, I’m proud of you. I’m just not used to living so far inland. I’ve always lived near a coast, and the whole thing seems strange. I mean, after Mr. Rawlings was at my studio... I’m sorry. I just have a strange feeling.”

His arms tightened around her small waist, allowing his hands to linger on her firm, round behind. “Mrs. Burke, we’ll be busy! I learned one of the corporate lawyers—Miller, I think his name is—his wife has a design firm in Bettendorf, and...” His volume increased. “Timothy Bronson, who I keep mentioning. His wife used to work at an art museum in Davenport. They’re a little younger than us. Sue’s pregnant with their second child, but I’d bet you two would get along very well!”

Sophia closed her eyes and dropped her head to Derek’s shoulder.

He grasped her shoulders and pushed her back, trying to see her face. “Baby, what’s the matter? You weren’t happy about California at first, but now look at you.”

Sophia nodded. “You’re right. I wasn’t. I guess, since my parents died, this has been home.” She feigned a smile. “No, home is with you. You’re right; I can paint from anywhere, but please do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

Sophia squared her shoulders. “Let me develop my own relationships. I’ll paint and I’ll move, but don’t pair me off like a preschooler looking for friends.”

Derek embraced her once again. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I’m trying to do. I know how hard the move to Santa Clara was for you, so I was trying to make it better.”

She kissed his lips. “Don’t. It’ll be alright as long as I have you.” Quickly, Sophia added, “I know you’ll be busy and that there will be late nights. I’m more than willing to do the wife thing at events.” Under her breath, she added, “I’m not sure what kind of events occur in Iowa.” Once again louder, “Nevertheless, I will, because I love you, but you have to let me adjust at my own speed.”

“Mrs. Burke, you’re amazing. You do whatever it is you need to do. Just know that I love you, and when you’re on my arm at the Iowa City Corn Husker’s Convention, I’ll be the proudest husband in the room!”

Sophia smirked. “Oh, jeeze! Please tell me you just made that up.”

His lips brushed hers. “I did. Now, if everything is packed then I believe I have reservations in San Francisco with the most amazing woman!”

She kissed his cheek. “You do? Well, don’t let me interrupt your plans.”

Derek’s lips lingered near her ear, purposely exhaling on her exposed neck, creating goose bumps up and down her arms. “I may have even called ahead and asked for a few things to be delivered to our room. You can come too; maybe you’d like to watch?”

Sophia giggled. “I think you know me better than that. Watching has never been my thing.” Grasping his hand, she offered, “I’m much more of a participant!”

Derek smiled. “Then let’s go participate.”



As HARRY’S PLANE taxied toward the small airport outside of San Francisco, he removed his phone from airplane mode. His thoughts volleyed between his research and Deputy Director Stevenson. Although the Deputy Director didn’t sound upset on the phone and even offered information about Claire and Rawlings’ possible destination, Harry worried about his future. He wasn’t ready to lose his badge. He’d worked too damn hard for it!

His phone began to vibrate as messages appeared on the screen. The small plane still hadn’t reached its destination on the tarmac when Harry looked down to see calls from unidentified numbers. For a split second, he thought about the new practice of solicitation on cellular phones—it was a travesty. He didn’t have time for that! Then he saw that he had messages. Tapping his voicemail icon, Harry accessed his messages.

“You have three unheard messages...” Harry entered his numerical code and waited. Just as the plane came to a stop, he heard Claire’s voice. “Hello, Harry, or Agent Baldwin, I wish I knew your real name.” The sound of her voice took his breath away. The pilot was looking at him. Harry hit 7 and saved Claire’s message.

He couldn’t get out of the plane fast enough. As he walked toward the waiting car, he replayed Claire’s message. It seemed to take forever to get through the preliminary crap. All at once the FBI terminal, the people, the waiting car, everything disappeared. Harry was hearing Claire’s voice. At the very least, hearing her voice confirmed that she was safe. He covered his other ear and listened. “Hello, Harry, or Agent Baldwin, I wish I knew your real name. I’m sorry I didn’t reach you. I won’t leave a number, but I wanted you to know, I’m fine and I’m safe. I would appreciate the assistance of the FBI, and I don’t have a lot of time. Harry... the woman in the blue Honda wasn’t Samuel Rawls’ sister. It was Catherine. The woman I’ve trusted. The

woman at Tony's estate I told you about. She's who I'm hiding from. She killed Amanda and Samuel Rawls and maybe even others. She isn't just after me, but she wants Tony and our child. Please have the FBI stop her." Silence filled his ears. Momentarily, Harry wondered if Claire had hung up, but then her voice came back. "Please, Harry. I want my child to have a normal life. Where I am... it's great... but it's not where a child should live. Please help us and make a case against her: Catherine Marie Rawls London. Harry, she was married to Nathaniel. I need to go, bye."

Harry stood motionless with the phone to his ear. The voice was asking if he wanted to save or erase. What a dumb question. He wanted to save! Save the message. Save Claire. Save her child, and save Rawli—Harry wasn't ready to go that far; nevertheless, he had heard the desperation in Claire's voice. How could he have been researching this for over a year and not realize Nathaniel had a second wife?

"Agent Baldwin?"

Harry's blue eyes focused on the world around him. He saw the man in the dark suit and heard him say his name. "Yes, I'm Agent Baldwin."

"Please follow me, sir."

Harry didn't question as he followed the driver and sat in the back seat of a large black SUV. While they pulled away from the curb, Harry considered his other missed calls and hit the VOICEMAIL icon, once again.

Message two: "Baldwin, Anthony Rawlings. I intend to fully cooperate with the FBI. I know that picture was bullshit, but I'm calling. I don't intend to make my whereabouts known until my child is born, or after. I will. I can't now. If... if Claire ever meant more to you than a damn assignment then just let us have this. We'll call back."

When the line disconnected, Harry let out the breath he'd been holding. How the hell did Anthony Rawlings believe he, Harrison Baldwin, had that kind of power? Yeah, right? Like Harry could suddenly say, "Hey, let's leave Anthony Rawlings and Claire Nichols alone before their big day, for the birth of their child."

As the large SUV neared the San Francisco field office, Harry pulled up his third voice message. "Agent Baldwin, our car will be late; please be advised."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

HEELING CLAIRE'S DINNER down the long, quiet corridor, Meredith contemplated Ms. Bali's concerns and directives: Ms. Nichols underwent tests earlier in the day. Due to an unforeseen glitch, additional sedation was required. As Ms. Bali uttered the word *glitch*, the hairs on the back of Meredith's neck prickled. The supervisor once said that she'd read Meredith's book. Could she possibly understand the significance of that word? Fighting to remain stoic, Meredith continued listening. Ms. Bali explained that the tests were scheduled for the entire morning and the additional sedation resulted in prolonged hours of unresponsiveness. Ms. Nichols hadn't eaten all day. Actually, she'd just recently awakened. Her sister had been here most of the afternoon and had only recently left, waiting until Claire was fully awake. The staff who assisted with daily showers and hygiene, should be just about done. Mrs. Vandersol wasn't happy with the day's mishaps, including an entire day without nutrition. Ms. Bali couldn't emphasize enough—Claire must eat! She also praised Meredith's past interactions and offered her confidence in Meredith's ability to accomplish their goal.

With each step toward Claire's room, Meredith questioned that ability. She assumed that, with Claire's new uncooperative state and today's excessive use of sedation, tonight's dinner could go less than smooth. Taking a deep breath, Meredith knocked respectfully and slowly opened Claire's door. It wasn't as though she expected a greeting.

Claire was alone. The people who helped her bathe and dress were gone; however, she wasn't sitting in her normal seat by the window. She was pacing near her bed. Despite Meredith's knock and greeting, Claire didn't turn or acknowledge her entrance.

Something about Claire looked different: determined, purposeful. Meredith saw the straightness of her posture and clenching of her jaw. Each time she changed direction on her invisible track—back and forth—Meredith saw an intensity in her eyes. Meredith hadn't seen that look for a long time; however, she *had* seen it before. It was the expression Claire wore during the hours recalling difficult times in her and Anthony's relationship. Even then, when she'd repeat a particularly bad time, Meredith remembered Claire's expression. It was as if she were seeing the scene before her, which wasn't visible to anyone else. That was the exact expression Meredith saw now. Years ago, Meredith assumed it to be Claire's internal debate. She'd agreed to share her story, knew it was accurate, but she felt conflicted, especially later in their interview process as her and Mr. Rawlings' relationship began its reconciliation.

During those interviews, Meredith waited patiently and allowed Claire the necessary time to sort her thoughts. When she did, Claire would recall the scenarios with eloquence. On some occasions Meredith had to remind herself to type rather than simply listening. Later, when she'd review Claire's dictation, rarely was there need to change or modify. Everything was obviously well deliberated. Watching her now, Meredith wondered what she was thinking.

Meredith placed Claire's food on her table and called to her, "Claire, it's me, Meredith. I brought your dinner." Not surprising, neither Claire's stance nor pace wavered. If anything, her internal debate intensified. Claire's step quickened.

Walking slowly toward her friend, Meredith spoke again, "Claire, can you hear me? You haven't eaten all day. Aren't you hungry?" The pacing continued.

As Meredith reached for Claire's arm, Claire pulled away and momentarily glared. Instinctively, Meredith stepped back to apologize; however, as she did, she realized: Claire had just acknowledged her presence. It wasn't verbal, but she deliberately pulled away and looked right at her!

Meredith wasn't sure where the words came from. She didn't want to hurt her friend; nonetheless, after eight to nine weeks of interaction—or no interaction—Meredith chose to break another rule. "You're thinking about him, aren't you?" No response. "I've seen you like this before. I know you're thinking about Ant..." She started to say *Anthony*, but remembered Claire referred to him as *Tony*. During the book interviews, she recalled how that familiar title was a gift, a positive consequence he bestowed upon her while she was still his captive. "...I mean, Tony. Claire, it's all right. You can think about him. Why shouldn't you think about Tony?"

Each time Meredith uttered his name, Claire's pace slowed. By the fourth or fifth time, her neck, shoulders, and jaw relaxed. Finally, Meredith tried one

more plea, “Claire, Tony would want you to eat. He loved you very much. You don’t want...” She stuttered, wondering if she should say what she was thinking. Swallowing her hesitation, Meredith continued. “...You don’t want to *disappoint* him, do you?”

Claire didn’t speak; however, stepping around Meredith, she walked to the table with the food and sat. When she didn’t feed herself, Meredith went to the table, sat opposite her, and lifted the lid on Claire’s plate. “Well, it looks like you have salmon. That’s one of your favorites, isn’t it?” Her eyes didn’t register, and the earlier intensity was gone, but each time Meredith lifted the fork, Claire obediently opened her mouth and ate. The exercise continued slowly: food, food, and then drink. By the time Claire finished, her plate was mostly empty. She didn’t stand and move to the window as she usually did. Instead, her head dropped, and she looked down with her hands demurely resting on her lap, compliant and obedient.

Meredith praised Claire for her cooperation; nevertheless, it wasn’t until she whispered, “I know Tony would be proud of you. Thank you for helping me,” that Claire raised her chin and looked toward the still light sky.

August 10, 2016

...Claire didn’t speak, but she acknowledged... she cooperated! I want to tell someone what happened today, but if I do, they’ll probably fire me. I mean —I’m not supposed to mention Anthony’s name or have as much knowledge about Claire as I do.

I can’t believe how she responded! She ate! Ms. Bali said she hadn’t eaten all day. That wasn’t all. When she looked out at the sky, I asked her if she wanted to go outside. For the last two weeks, she hasn’t wanted to do anything—but sit in that damn chair. When I asked if she wanted to go outside, she walked toward the door! I don’t think that’s ever happened. Usually, she’ll stand, but wait for someone to lead her to the door. I barely had time to call and request permission to take her out.

I know what did it. It was the mention of Tony’s name. Emily will never listen to me, but she’s wrong to keep the truth from Claire. How can Claire deal with everything if she isn’t allowed to face it? I wonder how much she remembers. I mean, I don’t know what happened for sure, just the information I read and saw on the news. There was the information released from the trial, but despite it being such a high profile case, the courtroom was closed to the public, and very little information was made available. I’ve tapped every resource I know. Everything is sealed. I guess it goes with the money. That can keep everything quiet.

That’s why I started this, to learn what happened, but now I wish I knew

so that I could help her face it. Emily probably knows. I'm sure she does. She and her husband were at the courthouse every day of testimony. I remember seeing images of them coming and going from the courtroom on the news. Who else was there? What about Claire's friend, Courtney? I don't know if she'll talk to me. If I contact her and she calls Emily, then I'm screwed.

I guess this needs more thought. Maybe I should just wait and see if this behavior continues or if it ends as fast as it began. I'm not scheduled again for two days. I sure hope the progress we made today isn't lost in that amount of time.

Oh! Did I mention when we went outside, Claire lifted her face up to the sun and closed her eyes? I think we need to find her sunglasses. She's never needed them before. She never raised her face or opened her eyes enough. I know I have an extra pair somewhere. I need to remember to take them in Friday! I don't think I've ever been so excited to get back to Everwood!



FOR AN ACCOMPLISHED attorney, who at one time specialized in courtroom tactics, John Vandersol's voice revealed more emotion than he intended. "Dr. Brown, I'm directing this inquiry to you, because after three hours of trying, I've been unable to reach Dr. Fairfield!" "I understand you're no longer in charge of Claire's care, but my wife and I want answers." "So are you saying you weren't briefed on yesterday's mishaps?" "I see." "Yes, I'm well aware of confidentiality regulations. I'm also confident you're well aware that Emily and I are Claire's documented next of kin and as such are named under her HIPPA clause to be privy to any pertinent information." "Yes, Emily was with Claire until she woke yesterday, which I'll add wasn't until after 3:00 PM." "I understand." "I hope I'm being perfectly clear, if I don't hear from Dr. Fairfield by noon, then my wife and I will be at Everwood by 1:00 PM. When we arrive, make no mistake, we *will* put an end to this new protocol. It seems that..."

Emily sat wide-eyed, listening to John's side of the conversation while nursing her third cup of coffee. Though she tried to decipher what Dr. Brown was saying on the other end, she wouldn't know for sure until John hung up the phone. It had been a long night. Neither of them had slept much. When Emily got home, the nanny, Becca, was still there. Usually, her day was done after dinner. Luckily, they had a few trusted people they could call at the last minute if there were evening emergencies. Having help was especially nice on occasions like yesterday, when calls came demanding Emily's immediate attention at Everwood. Last night, instead of taking the risk of the children overhearing their conversation, she and John left the house so that she could

fill him in on the problems at Everwood. With each word, each description, John's anger grew. Ever since the new protocol began, Claire's response has been negative instead of positive, add to that the recent sedation incident, and Emily was ready to call it quits.

Yesterday, the nurse tried to explain—*too much* sedation would reduce the necessary brain activity keeping Claire from her visions, hallucinations, whatever they wanted to call them; nevertheless, it was obvious, *too little* resulted in a traumatic episode for Claire and for Emily. It was almost 4:00 PM before she left Everwood, and Claire still hadn't eaten. Emily refocused on John's words.

His tone was more inquisitive. "...do you have any more specifics?" "Has this aide worked with Claire in the past?"

Emily tapped his arm and raised her eyebrows in question. When he didn't respond, Emily whispered, "Does she know if Claire ate anything yesterday?"

John nodded as he continued, "All right, thank you, Dr. Brown, but we still need to hear from Dr. Fairfield. I have questions about yesterday's DTI, questions which apparently only he can answer." "I will, thank you." "Goodbye."

Emily sat her coffee cup down, as sleep deprivation overtook her tone. "Why didn't you ask her about eating?"

For the first time since he came home last night, John smiled. "I didn't ask, because she volunteered. Claire not only ate last night—compliantly, she went outside. According to the aide who works with her..." John's eyes widened. "...Claire *wanted* to go outside."

"Really?" Sarcasm prevailed. "And how did this aide know that? Did she say that Claire spoke?"

Shrugging his shoulders, John replied, "I didn't ask. I'm just happy she ate and moved from that chair where she always sits. Maybe you should be too?"

Emily stood to leave John's home office. "You know that if I believed them, I would be, but come on, she was incoherent all day. Couldn't sit much less stand for hours after the last dose of sedative. Now they want me to believe she ate and *wanted* to go outside. Fine. I'll play their game; however, if she's not greeting me with a *Hi, Em* today, I'll know they're lying to pacify us."

As she reached the doorway, Emily turned around. "Are you going into Rawlings today?"

"No, I'm waiting for Dr. Fairfield's call. If it doesn't come, then you and I are going to Everwood. Be sure Becca isn't planning on going home anytime soon."

"Thanks, John. I know things have been difficult at work since Patricia

left.”

Shifting in his chair, John replied, “It was at first. Her knowledge was invaluable; however, the new assistant is catching on fast.”

“You never told me, why was she let go?”

Smiling, he said, “You know the old saying? I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you. And well, I like having you around.” Smiling wider, he added, “Most of the time.”

Emily shook her head. “Yes, sorry. Sometimes I forget that Rawlings Industries is as top secret as the government.”

“Even more so...” she heard John say as she walked away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is strength.

—Arnold Schwarzenegger

HARRY'S HEAD THROBBED, his face ached, and breathing was more comfortable with shallow breaths. Pushing through the dark veil of unconsciousness, he tried to make sense of his condition. Momentarily, the memories wouldn't come. There were sounds that Harry didn't recognize as he tried to focus on his surroundings. Through blurred vision, he realized he was in a hospital room, and for some reason, his left eye refused to open. An IV ran from his left arm to someplace behind him. Looking beyond his bed, Harry saw SAC Williams in a chair near the window. Fighting to find his voice, Harry whispered, "What happened?"

As if propelled by an electric shock, Williams was instantly at Harry's bedside. "Baldwin, nice of you to finally join the party."

Harry winced as he reached for the controls to raise the bed, so Williams pushed the button for him. As the bed began to move, Harry held his breath: the pain in his side was excruciating.

"Hey, son," Williams said. "You have a few broken ribs. You might want to take it easy for a while."

At that moment, Harry's last memories returned with a vengeance. Suddenly, the pain was forgotten. Panic flooded his system, causing his heart to accelerate and his voice to come too loud. "Jillian! SAC? Jillian, someone needs to make sure she's all right."

SAC placed his hand on Harry's arm. "She is, son. Your daughter and ex-wife have been moved to a safe house."

Relief replaced the panic as the pain from his ribs came back. Exhaling, Harry winced and said, "Good, but I bet Ilona's pissed!"

"Her daughter is safe, but you're right, Ilona isn't happy about the situation, but she understands the threat. We need to know what happened."

Before he could respond, SAC William's phone rang. He held up a finger and walked toward the window to talk.

Harry closed his eyes, laid his head against his pillow, and remembered the whole terrible episode. Behind his closed lids, he saw the driver of the SUV, the one who picked him up at the airport. When he'd first entered the dark vehicle, Harry hadn't paid the man much attention. He was a driver: the FBI had plenty. It wasn't until he'd saved Claire's message and was listening to Rawlings' that he began to notice the driver's eyes in the rear-view mirror, periodically watching him; then Harry heard the voicemail from the bureau. Before he asked the driver why they were no longer headed toward the field office, Harry casually removed his gun from his holster.

"Give that to me." The man's voice held the slightest of a Lebanese accent. Harry couldn't remember if he hadn't noticed the accent before, or if the man hadn't spoken until that moment.

Harry pointed the gun to the side of the driver's head and calmly commanded, "Pull the car over, asshole."

Laughter filled the otherwise silent vehicle. Seemingly undeterred by the threat, the driver tilted his head to the right. Harry glanced toward the passenger seat, half expecting to see someone materialize. No one did. Instead, the driver reached over and pulled down the sun visor. Taped, where the mirror should've been, was a picture. Staring at Harry, with big, beautiful blue eyes and light blonde hair was Jillian. The picture could've come from Facebook or been taken in person. Either way, it didn't matter: Harry was living his worst nightmare, his Achilles heel, his vulnerability. This asshole was threatening Harry's four-year-old daughter. Panic erupted in his gut as adrenaline flooded his system.

"Where is she?" Harry growled.

"She's still with that pretty little ex-wife of yours."

"How do I know she's safe?"

"You don't." The driver lifted a well-worn stuffed bunny—pink and thread-bare. Harry had only seen the bunny once in person, when he purchased it. At the time, he wasn't even sure Ilona would give it to their daughter; however, through the years it'd been a recurring item in many of Jillian's pictures. Harry knew, without a doubt, it belonged to her.

Turning the barrel around, Harry willingly handed his gun to the driver. Through the windows, Harry saw that the neighborhood was becoming seedier by the second. He pushed his fear inward and summoned his negotiating voice. "There, you've got my gun. Now tell me what the hell you want?"

The driver didn't answer. Instead, he spoke into his phone, "Yes, we're

almost there.” “No idea.” “Fuck’n FBI and clueless!”

While the driver was talking, Harry eased his own phone out of his pocket and began to text the bureau while simultaneously turning on his GPS finder.

“No way, asshole! Give me your phone—now!”

When Harry hesitated, the driver tilted his head toward Jillian’s picture. Harry had the training, and he knew the protocol; none of it mattered. He’d activated the GPS but hadn’t had time to complete the text. His life no longer counted; protecting his daughter was Harry’s only thought.

Jillian’s safety and well-being was why Harry had signed away his parental rights, and why he’d only corresponded with Ilona in secret. Jillian had a father. In reality, he was her stepfather, but she considered him her *dad*. One evening, about three years ago, Harry had flown east and met with Ilona and her fiancé. It wasn’t an easy meeting, but Harry knew, without a doubt, the man across the table from him would add more to Jillian’s life than he could. Seeing the gleam in Ilona’s eyes and feeling the ache in the pit of his stomach, Harry knew the man had already done more for his ex-wife than Harry ever had.

The legal arrangement didn’t stop Harry’s interest. He watched his daughter’s childhood from a distance: each birthday and Christmas, each recital and soccer game. Social media was a wonderful thing, and thankfully, Ilona allowed Harry’s voyeurism. After Harry signed the documents surrendering his rights, Jillian’s last name changed. Today it was George, the same as her mother and father’s.

Harry believed his own happiness was inconsequential to Jillian’s safety. Now, the man slowing the SUV near a seemingly abandoned building made all of Harry’s sacrifices worthless. For some reason, Jillian was in danger. In Harry’s opinion, during their short conversation, the driver had even made veiled threats against Ilona.

Damn, Harry wasn’t prepared. Usually, he wore an extra revolver in a leg holster; however, since part of his trip was on a commercial flight, the gun was packed away in a sealed container. Easing the shoestring from his boot, Harry gripped it firmly in each fist and quickly brought it down over the man’s head. With all his strength, he pulled it tight against his throat. As garbled sounds came from the driver, the SUV spun wildly. Gasping for air, the driver simultaneously slammed his feet against the brake and gas pedals and released the steering wheel. His hands fought Harry’s grip as he clawed backwards.

When the SUV finally came to a stop, the driver’s head fell to one side and his hands quit the fight. Harry’s relief was short-lived. The doors to the vehicle flew open, and he was pulled to the ground. The concrete was wet as he assessed his situation. Three large men were shouting things he couldn’t understand. Harry’s linguistics training told him the language was Middle-

Eastern, but he didn't recognize the dialect. His heart raced even faster when the sound of a woman's crying came into range. Harry didn't need to see the woman to recognize the voice calling out to him between sobs.

SAC Williams touched Agent Baldwin's arm, bringing him back to present. "Agent, what can you tell us?"

Harry's right eye opened wide with concern. "Liz?" His voice cracked. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, son, she wasn't harmed. Apparently, Ms. Matherly's presence was meant only as a witness. She's filled us in on her story and is anxious to see you, but first, we need your version."

Harry inhaled, taking the throbbing in his ribs as penitence for the pain he'd caused those he loved and cared about. After he explained the pick-up and ride, Harry went on, "I got up off the concrete and asked what they wanted, what *it* was all about. Instead of answering, they taunted, punched me, and yelled. I fought back, more than once, I connected." Harry looked down at his hands. The right one was covered in bandages. "They said I needed to *stop*. I asked *stop what?* They kept saying *leave the past alone. It won't change anything now. Just stop digging around where you don't belong.* When I asked who they were working for, they laughed and said I mustn't be a very good FBI agent if I couldn't figure that out."

Harry's voice lowered with determination. "SAC, I know it was Rawlings. I know it was! I saw his face in Geneva. When he left that pub, he was mad! He's the one who's responsible for this. I'm getting too close to something in my research."

Williams pulled the chair beside Harry's bed. "Did you tell Rawlings about your research?"

With his head and ribs throbbing, Harry reached up and touched his left cheekbone and confirmed his suspicions. The skin was tender and felt swollen.

Williams nodded. "You have quite a shiner. Ms. Matherly said you put up a good fight, but once the driver came to, you were outnumbered four to one."

Harry remembered. He was thrown to the ground, and the driver started to kick him. Finally, one of the other guys pulled the driver off. Liz was crying. The men all got back into the SUV and left. "Did Liz get help?"

"Yes, the men took your phone, but Ms. Matherly still had hers. She called 911. Once the police arrived, she called the bureau. Son, do you remember any more details? Did you tell Rawlings about your research?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I didn't have the chance to tell him, but somehow he found out. It's the only thing that makes sense." He paused. "My

phone? Did you say they took my phone?”

“Yes, the bureau tracked it, and it was found with your other belongings in an alley dumpster about a half of a mile from where you were attacked. Your phone was destroyed.”

Harry exhaled. “Good.” He knew the saved information was backed up on the bureau’s servers. Suddenly, he had a thought. “Was the SD card still in the phone?”

“I don’t remember seeing it, but the phone was pretty mangled. Besides, everything should be on the server.”

Harry tried not to reveal too much emotion in his voice. “Not everything, sir. There’s a picture of Claire Nichols with me on that card.”

SAC Williams sat straighter. “With you?”

“No, not like that. Just sitting together in a booth in Venice.”

“We received that picture.”

“There were two. The one I sent and another one.” He swallowed. “Now I’m concerned about her safety too.”

“We haven’t located her yet, but according to the messages we accessed from your phone, it sounds like she’s with Rawlings. If you think he’s responsible, and he sees that picture, then she may be in danger.”

Harry nodded. He wasn’t ready to tell his supervisor that Rawlings had already seen the picture. “I need my phone back. It’s the number Clai-Ms. Nichols called. It’s her only way to get in touch with me or the FBI.”

“We have your number being monitored. If she or Rawlings calls, it’ll be answered.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry wanted to be the one to answer either one of those calls; however, he understood. Right now, he wasn’t in the best condition to do that. “Can I see Liz now?”

SAC Williams smiled. “We have more to discuss, but I don’t see any harm in that. First, I believe you need to be checked out by the doctor. They made me promise I’d alert them when you woke.” As he began to leave the room, he paused and said, “Oh, Agent, your sister’s here too.”

Harry grinned. “Good, I’d like to see both of them as soon as the doctor’s done.”



BY THE TIME the nurses were done checking Harry out from every angle—yes, he knew that wasn’t their intent, but he sure felt like it was—he was exhausted. He wondered how he could be tired after being unconscious for over ten hours. Next, the doctor came in and probed and prodded; then he asked Harry questions. The doctor didn’t ask how Harry received his injuries.

Harry couldn't have answered if he did; however, he asked questions like, does this hurt? How many fingers am I holding up? Do you know who the president is? All in all, Harry believed he passed.

He was just about to doze off when his door opened again. Each time someone passed the threshold, Harry saw the uniformed officers posted outside of his door. Their presence gave him comfort. If Rawlings was bold enough to have him attacked in broad daylight, anything was possible.

The expressions on Liz and Amber's faces told him more about his appearance than SAC Williams or any of the nurses or doctors. He must really look like shit! "So, do I really look that bad?" His attempt at levity was lost as both women began to cry.

It was Amber who reached his bedside first. She started to hug him and stopped. "Oh my God, will I hurt you if I hug you?"

Harry lifted his arms and Amber leaned in. When she backed away, she asked, "Why Harry? Why would someone do this?"

He heard her question, but it was Liz standing near the wall with her arms crossed over her chest who had his attention. She was looking his direction with her lower lip sucked into her mouth as she tried to control the sobs she muffled. His heart broke. He couldn't imagine how scared she must have been when those men took her. He reached out his hand. It seemed like she was moving in slow motion; however, after an eternity her hand finally touched his. "I'm so sorry they involved you in this. You must have been petrified!"

Liz nodded. "I didn't know what they were going to do to me..." She allowed the ragged breaths to overtake her words. Amber got up from the side of Harry's bed and Liz sat down. He pulled her close. As she collapsed across his chest, Harry's ribs screamed out in pain; however, he didn't wince. He wrapped his arm over her shoulder.

"Shhh, you're all right. Williams said they didn't hurt you." His voice changed hardened, slowed, deepened. "They didn't hurt you... did they?"

Liz looked up. Her eyes were red and puffy. "No, but I couldn't help you. I wanted to save you... they made me watch..." Her voice trailed away as she buried her head into his chest.

"Hey, I'm fine. No saving necessary."

Amber laughed sarcastically. "Yeah, bro, you look great! Maybe now you'll decide to take that SiJo job for real?"

He looked at his sister like she had three heads. "What are you talking about?"

"If being in the FBI is going to do this to you and Liz, you need to have a safer job."

"No freak'n way! This wasn't about the FBI. It's about my research. Rawlings wants me to stop, but I'm not doing it."

Liz lifted her head. "Please, Harry, think about this. He didn't stop at

anything when he wanted Claire back. You already know he's capable of murder. Think about Jillian. You have to end this madness—now!"

"Jillian is safe and so is Ilona." He took a deep, painful breath. "And so are we. All three of us will have around the clock surveillance until Rawlings is found."

"Three?" Amber asked. "I don't need to be watched by the FBI. I'll have SiJo take care of me."

Harry shrugged. "I don't think it's my call, sis. It's pretty standard procedure in cases like this. Why do you think I have those nice greeters at my door?"

Amber asked, "How do you know Jillian is safe?"

"I really can't say. I just do."

"Well, I'm going to call Ilona."

"No, you're not."

Amber's eyes narrowed. "The FBI has them, don't they?"

"I can't say." Of course, that was all he needed to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It takes two to speak the truth: one to speak, and another to hear.

—Henry David Thoreau

C LAIRE WOKE UP to darkness. She wasn't wearing her mask; the darkness was the time of day, or more accurately, night. This was her new routine; waking two to three times a night to accommodate their growing baby. Sometimes, when she looked in the mirror, Claire wondered if her skin could possibly stretch any farther. The changes to her body only confirmed the miracle living within her—well that, and the reaffirming movements of their child. She enjoyed the sensation of their baby's movements. Claire told herself, if she were still alone, she'd feel the same way about her growing midsection; however, Tony's constant reassurance made each pound and stretch mark easier to bear. It amazed her how he could sit for hours with his hands on their child. Often, she'd be in front of him on a lounge chair with her back against his chest. Sometimes they talked; often she napped; at times they read, but they were always connected.

When Claire returned to bed, it was empty. Looking to the clock, she saw it was only 3:18 AM "Tony?" She called to the open air. No answer. "Tony?" She called again as she stepped onto the lanai.

He was standing near the railing, looking out to the lagoon. In the distant sky, lightning flashed, and seconds later, the low rumble of thunder rolled through the night air. Wrapping her arms around his back, Claire laid her cheek against his warm bare back.

"Hmmmm," he said as he seized her arms and pulled her in front of him. "You need your sleep." His lips brushed her lips. "You should go back to bed."

"I don't like being alone."

Placing a quick kiss on her stomach, Tony smiled. "You're not."

"Why are you out here?"

With his arm around her waist, he caressed the satin of her nightgown as his palm dipped down over her round behind. “I heard the thunder. Do you think the storm will make it here?”

Claire shrugged. “I don’t know. Francis talked about the storms and rough seas, but so far, all I’ve experienced have been afternoon showers. They seem to pop up out of nowhere and disappear just as fast.”

“Come now, Mrs. Rawlings, you’re a meteorologist; will that storm make it to our island?”

“Well, you see, if I had a computer with the right programs where I could assess wind speed, direction, and see the different fronts—”

His lips seized hers, stopping her words. When he spoke again, it wasn’t about weather, “You really do need to go back to bed.”

There was something in his voice. Claire couldn’t determine the meaning or decipher its origin. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” He smiled and stood taller. “Good night, Mrs. Rawlings.”

Claire took his hand and led him back to their room. When they were both under the soft, satin sheet, Claire cuddled close and asked, “Please tell me what woke you, and I know it wasn’t a low distant rumble of thunder.”

“You woke me when you got out of bed.”

She lifted her head to her elbow and looked down at her husband. His skin was darker from only a few weeks on the island. It was his eyes that held her attention. They contained the multi-tasking look she knew too well. “Fine, I woke you. Sorry. What made you go outside?”

The tips of his lips moved upward. “Will you take the answer, thunder?”

Claire shook her head. “No, I won’t. Remember our promise?”

“I have a lot on my mind.”

“A lot that you don’t want to share?”

Tony exhaled. “I don’t want to tell you anything you’re not ready to hear; however, talking about everything has brought back memories I’d forgotten. Sometimes I feel like I’m talking about another person.” He paused. “A person I’m no longer proud to have been.”

Claire rested her head on his shoulder and gently wove her fingers through his chest hair. Tony’s eyes stared up to the dark ceiling as his voice resonated distantly, overflowing with pain. Although there were times Tony’s confessions upset her, Claire knew in her heart that there was nothing she could say that would punish him more than he was already punishing himself.

He spoke slowly, revisiting the subject of him watching her through the years. He explained how, at first, it was done as a means of identification. He and Catherine had a list: the children of the children. In the early years, Tony was busy creating CSR with his business partner Jonas Smithers. Later, his energies were used creating and building Rawlings Industries. He supported his grandfather’s vendetta, but Catherine did, or had most of the research

done. He emphasized that he wasn't blaming her. "I never tried to stop her. It never occurred to me. I mean, it's what my grandfather wanted. He mentioned it to me; Catherine knew more of his plans, so I went along." He stressed, "Claire, I more than went along. She would never have been able to afford to have the people, like you, watched, or have things occur, if I hadn't bankrolled everything. I knew what I was supporting."

Claire nodded into his chest. It was her way of encouraging his words, without interrupting his thoughts.

"You were different." His arm tightened around her shoulder, pulling her closer. "You were the first person who personally interested me. You were so young. I was curious if I could actually influence someone's life without them knowing it. The first thing I did... well, it wasn't really to you. It was—"

The warmth radiating from within Claire suddenly increased; she couldn't stay silent any longer. The subject he was approaching was one of her greatest worries. *Simon!* She lifted her head to see Tony's eyes. "It was Simon, wasn't it?" She tried to keep her voice and breathing calm. "His internship with Rawlings Industries wasn't a coincidence, was it?"

Tony closed his eyes and didn't respond.

As the silence prevailed, Claire exhaled, lay her head back on her pillow and stared at the ceiling. The fan in the darkness hummed while the blades created a hazy blur. In the time it took her to blink, Tony's face was over hers. She'd wanted to see his eyes and understand his emotion, and now, she had him right on top of her. His palpable rage filled their room, the humid air no longer moved, and it was suddenly difficult to breathe. Claire's training told her to walk the fine line; however, somewhere in the three years since that training began, she'd taught herself to disobey. Defiantly, she asked, "Are you going to answer my question?"

"No." His warm breath bathed her face, adding to the still, humid air.

She waited for more clarification. When he didn't continue, she asked, "No? You aren't going to answer?"

"No." Each syllable was strained. "It wasn't a coincidence."

The fury, which had saturated their conversation, evaporated as Claire's muscles relaxed and the air re-entered her lungs. With his confession, she realized the anger she felt wasn't directed at her or her questioning; it was directed back to Tony. He was upset with himself.

The rumble of thunder loomed louder and closer. With their noses almost touching, Claire smiled. "Thank you. I know this is hard on you. I also know that revelation should upset me." She lifted her lips to his. "Honestly, it was more of a confirmation than a revelation. Somehow, I think I feel better knowing the truth, no matter what it is."

Tony sighed. "I hope so, because my dear, there's more."

Claire closed her eyes, unsure how much more she was ready to hear.

“Open your eyes.” Tony demanded. “I need to see what you’re thinking.” Obediently, she did as he said. His next confession came with more emotion than she was accustomed to hearing from him. “My life hasn’t been perfect, yet I’ve never wasted my time envying anyone else. If something wasn’t the best it could be. I made it better. Never did I want to be someone else. That’s still true; however, there’s one person of whom I was jealous.”

“Simon? Why?”

“He was the only man I knew of that you loved. I did what I do. I made it better for me. I separated the two of you.” Tony shook his head. “So you can imagine how shocked I was when he showed up at the symposium in Chicago. When he approached us, I didn’t know who he was until he asked to speak with you privately. Suddenly, I recognized him.” He paused. “Then... it was you I didn’t recognize.”

Claire couldn’t process fast enough to respond. There were so many thoughts, yet all she could do was listen.

“You were usually so perfect in public—flawless.”

She remembered what could happen if she wasn’t; nevertheless. She stayed silent, her thoughts monopolized by this conversation’s destination.

“Your expression and then...” Tony’s words trailed away as he privately relived the encounter. “You could hardly speak. Even the introduction was difficult for you.” Tony’s sudden restraint became visible as the muscles in his neck tensed and his tone hardened. “For maybe only a split second, because Mrs. Rawlings, you quickly remembered to play your part, I saw something in your eyes I’d never seen. When you recognized him, before you remembered who you were, who I was... for only a moment, you were that eighteen-year-old girl I’d seen in pictures.”

She tried to speak, although she didn’t know what to say. The Claire from 2011 would have known the exact appropriate response. She wasn’t that Claire anymore. “Tony,” she steadied her voice. “If you saw that, I’m not denying it was there. Honestly, I don’t remember feeling anything except panic. I guarantee, I was more afraid of you being upset than I was happy to see Simon.” The warmth from his body covered hers. She continued, “If you expect me to apologize for that split second, then I’m sorry. Not for that split second, but that you’re not getting that apology.”

Tony shook his head. “No, I wasn’t expecting an apology. *I’m* trying to give one.”

Claire lifted a brow.

“Don’t you see? Instead of having confidence in our marriage, I was jealous. You were the woman I manipulated into marrying me, and Simon was the man you loved.” He paused. “To say I behaved badly would be a gross understatement...” Tony inhaled and exhaled, and continued, “...to Simon and to you.”

“I do love you.”

“Now.” He kissed her. “It’s all right. Remember, we promised honesty?” His rage, which moments earlier filled their bedroom, faded into the stormy skies. “That look, the one I saw for only a short time, I see it now, every day, every time your beautiful green eyes look my way. I think perhaps it’s a look that one must earn. When we saw Simon in Chicago, I hadn’t earned it. I’d demanded it.” He closed his eyes. “It isn’t the same thing.”

She reached up and caressed his cheek. Her touch opened his eyes, revealing the storm of brown behind his lids.

“Claire, I don’t want to lose that look. I promise, I’ll never demand it again... I don’t want that. I want what I have today. I’m concerned that when all my confessions are out, it’ll be gone.”

“I’ve told you, my love won’t change, but you started this story, so are you going to finish it?” Her stomach twisted with each word. Her accelerated heartbeat throbbed behind her temples.

“I apologize for how I reacted in Chicago.”

“Tony, you opened this door; I need the rest of the story. Do you know how Simon died?”

She felt his body tense as he said, “I do.” His words came quickly as if speed could take away their sting. “His plane was tampered with, but I don’t know who did it or how they did it. It’s a very complicated network of connections to allow the person paying the fee to stay anonymous.”

The air left her lungs. “Oh, God...” She pushed against his shoulders. “Please get up, I can’t breathe.”

“Open your eyes.”

Claire shook her head.

“Claire.” His tone now softer. “Please open your eyes.” Slowly, emerald green met sad brown, as Tony offered, “I can call Roach. I can be gone before noon.”

She shook her head against the pillow. “Stop that! Stop threatening to leave every time I’m upset. I deserve to be upset!”

Tony lay back onto his pillow. “I’m not threatening, I’m offering.”

For a while, they lay in silence, both staring up at the ceiling. Only the sound of their breathing and the rumble of thunder getting louder and louder filled her ears. Finally, Claire said, “I wanted so badly for that not to be true. I wanted you to be totally innocent. I tried to blame Catherine for everything, but...” Claire reached for his hand, their fingers intertwined. “...I think I’ve known it for a long time.”

“When the FBI questioned me, they insinuated other crimes. I believe they know about this. I’m not sure if they can truly trace it back to me, but I think they at least suspect. Claire, I’m going to confess.”

Her eyes sprang wide. Her sadness for Simon dwarfed in comparison to

her sudden panic for Tony. “No, you can’t! They’ll arrest you. I need you.”

“Maybe I can make a deal. I’ll tell them about everything with Catherine.”

Claire’s eyes filled with tears. When she wrapped her arms around the man she loved, the moisture spilled onto his chest. It had taken them a long time to reach this destination—not the island—the place of complete honesty. Claire didn’t want to lose it.

His voice resonated through their room, dominating the impending storm and echoing thunder. “You deserve to be with a man who’s faced his past. I can’t live with the threat that any day the FBI could come and arrest me in front of you or our child.”

“Tony, don’t do anything rash. Let’s work *us* out first, please.”

Tony smirked. “Now, I bet you wish we’d have talked about this *before* we were married. Then you could still say no.”

Claire shook her head from side to side. “No, you’re wrong. That’s a bet you’d lose. You’re laying your cards on the table, and I still think I’m the one coming out a winner. When I said I’d love you, no matter what you told me, I wasn’t bluffing.”

The morning sky lit with intense lightning. As the thunder roared, the skies opened and large raindrops fell, splattering the inside of their room. Tony and Claire jumped from their bed, their bare feet rushing from open door to open door throughout the house. By the time everything was secured against the storm, they were both drenched. Claire made her way to the bathroom, her nightgown plastered against her skin and droplets falling from her soaked hair. When she was about to take off the wet gown, Claire turned toward the doorway. He hadn’t made a sound. If he had, then it had been covered by the raging storm; nevertheless, she felt his stare and knew he was there.

“I *am* sorry.” Tony’s expression matched his apologetic words. Stepping into the bathroom, he straightened his stance. Claire expected more words of regret. Instead, she heard, “I wasn’t, not even when we were at the funeral. I felt bad for you. I didn’t expect you to take it that hard, and though I tried to be supportive, I’ll admit, your grief upset me.”

She stared and tried desperately to register each of his words. “*My grief?*” She asked in disbelief. “What about his mother’s?”

“What about her?”

“You shook her hand. You talked to her. She told you that Simon admired you!” Each phrase was a little louder.

“I didn’t think about it. To me, the deed was justified. I made a business deal. Deals happen all the time.”

She stood silently and contemplated her husband. “Then why do you feel sorry now?”

He moved closer. “I don’t know if I can explain this, especially to you.”

Claire glanced to the mirror. In the opulent bathroom, in the middle of paradise, they both looked like drowned rats. Near their feet the puddle grew. “Try,” she said.

“I didn’t feel anything before, not just about Simon, about everything. It was why business was second nature to me. It’d always been about numbers and formulas.” He wrapped his arms around her lower back. “I’m not making excuses. You want the truth, that’s it. From the time my parents died until you were with me in Iowa, I didn’t feel. Sometimes I wonder why anyone wants to. Not feeling was a hell of a lot easier.”

Claire stepped forward, leaning her chest and midsection against him. “It can also feel good to feel.”

Tony wrapped his arms around her. “You’re cold. You need to get out of this wet nightgown.”

“I probably do, but I want to know more.” She buried her face in his chest. “There was a time I did what you’re saying, a time when I didn’t feel. I just remember it being very dark.”

He tilted her chin upward. “I probably don’t need to ask what or who caused that time.”

“It’s over. I can tell you who brought me out of it.”

His eyebrow cocked in question.

Her lips touched his and she asked, “So does that make us even?”

Tony’s shoulder’s shrugged. “I doubt it. That dark time was a lot longer for me; you had more work to accomplish to rescue me.” His lips grazed the top of her forehead and his eyes shimmered. “Your influence went beyond my personal life.”

“Oh?”

“You probably don’t remember, but one time you asked me about something, and I told you about a company. It was one I was considering buying. You asked me how I could buy a business and close it without thinking about the people.”

Claire nodded. She had recollections of such a conversation.

“Until that moment, I’d never considered the people.”

“What happened to that company? It was in Pennsylvania, right?”

Tony grinned. “That’s right. Good memory. The company’s CEO and shareholders accepted my low-ball offer. Their major competitor, a company where I’m a major stockholder, took over their company. All forty-six employees were given the option to retain their jobs if they stayed and worked for the new company.”

“Really?” It wasn’t the answer she’d expected. She recalled him talking about closing the doors.

“Really.” He moved a strand of wet hair from her face. “Some of the employees declined and they received a severance package. The last time I

looked into the data regarding that company, over seventy people were employed, and my profits were higher than projected with the original proposal.”

“What made you change your mind? Why didn’t you go with your original plan and just close the company?”

“My dear, there has only been one person who has ever made me do anything or question my beliefs, and since she has become a real, true part of my life, my world has never been the same.”

Despite their wet clothes and skin, Claire filled with pride and warmth. “So I helped save those peoples’ jobs?”

“You didn’t help. Not one of my employees, or anyone, had ever had the nerve to question my motivation or decisions. You were the first.” His eyes shone with pride. “Claire, you didn’t *help* save their jobs—you saved them.”

Her smile beamed upward. “I told you some of your confessions would upset me. That doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

Tony pulled her closer. “You need a warm shower. It sounds like the storm is slowing down. When you’re done, you can get a few more hours sleep.”

She lifted her arms. “Only if you’ll help me get out of this wet nightgown.”

Pulling her gown upward, Tony replied, “I told you before, you made a great business negotiator.” Once it was completely over her head, he kissed her lips. “You still do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The family you come from isn't as important as the family you're going to have.

—Ring Lardner

*A*MBER ENTERED HARRY's condominium. Sitting in the living room, surrounded by stacks of papers, open file boxes, and multiple computers, she found her brother. Glancing around the cluttered room, she sighed.

Harry hadn't heard her enter, but he heard the sigh. Looking up, he asked, "Hey, have you heard of knocking?"

"I've heard of it. I didn't know you understood the concept. It's not like you use it when you enter my place."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, sorry. I didn't know Keaton was over the other day."

Her cheeks blushed. "Well, since Liz's at the office, I figured it was safe to enter. What are you doing? I thought you were on medical leave."

"I am, but Williams had some evidence shipped over here. I was going nuts with nothing to do."

Amber reached out and gently touched her brother's left cheekbone. The bruise was no longer red and puffy. His left eye now opened as well as his right; nevertheless, the skin around the eye and down his cheek was still discolored. A greenish-yellow tint replaced the dark blue that followed the red.

Harry groaned.

"I guess that modeling career you've had on the back burner is out of the question."

Though Harry tried to appear offended, the corners of his lips rose revealing his amusement. Smugly, he replied, “That’s not nice. I’ve been told I’m still *very* handsome.”

“Well, Liz is biased.” Amber picked up a stack of papers from the sofa, relocated them to his coffee table, and sat down. “Seriously, Harry, what are you doing?”

“You know I can’t give you the details.”

“Fine, no details, but you’re still working the case against Rawlings, aren’t you?”

“No details, Amber.”

Her shoulders sagged. “Harry, look at you. Think about Ilona and Jillian. Think about Liz. She’s still traumatized. It’s not worth it!”

His blue eyes bore towards her. “How can you say that? What about Simon? Don’t you care that Rawlings hasn’t been punished for what he did?”

“Can you prove he did it?”

“Not yet, but my unexpected meeting in a back-alley confirmed he’s involved.”

Amber leaned forward. “No, Harry, that meeting confirmed what you know, what you already knew. Remember what you told me when you thought Claire was pregnant with your child? That attack confirmed that you should leave the FBI and come to SiJo. Simon would want you safe. He wouldn’t want you risking your life or the life of your child or anyone else to prove something that can’t be changed. I mean, so what if it *is* Rawlings? It won’t bring Simon back. What if you’re wrong? What if Simon’s crash was what the NTSB said in the first place? What if it was an accident? Either way, Simon won’t be coming back.”

“You don’t get it. People can’t go around changing other people’s lives without consequences. We know for certain that he kidnapped Claire.”

“So what? I may have felt sorry for her when I first heard her story, but, seriously, if she’s stupid enough to go back to him. She deserves whatever has or will happen to her!”

Harry stood ready to defend Claire’s decisions, even though he hated most of the ones she’d made. When he did, a wince escaped his lips as his back straightened and his ribs ached.

“See, that’s her fault too! You’re obsessed with this because of *her*. Don’t tell me it’s Simon’s memory. It’s because of Claire.”

“No! It’s not her fault any more than it’s yours.”

Amber’s eyes widened. “Excuse me? My fault. What the hell?”

“I met Simon through you. Yes, I want to prove that prick is responsible for *his* death. Would I care as much if Simon wasn’t a friend? Probably not. Does that make you responsible? No! You’re losing focus. Rawlings *is* responsible, and I’m going to prove it.”

"The position of president of security operations at SiJo is yours. All you need to do is say the word. Walk away from this. Don't let Rawlings ruin any more lives."

Harry didn't answer. He sat back down to his makeshift desk with multiple computer screens and concentrated on his research. He knew there was nothing more he could add to the conversation—nothing productive. Amber must have realized he wasn't turning back around. He heard her huff and get up before the door to his condominium slammed shut sending aftershocks back to the living room.

With no one around, Harry read the screens. SAC Williams had gotten him access to the bureau's server. The databases of information were a wealth of knowledge. Unfortunately, in real life, results for searches didn't materialize as fast as they did on television shows. That was all right. Currently, Harry's only commodity was time. That was one of the reasons the Deputy Director allowed him to remain on the case. That—and Harry's acceptance of beefed up-security.

He hated having an agent posted outside his door. It was even worse having one accompany him everywhere he went; nevertheless, in his current state, Harry agreed. He wouldn't be much of a threat if he were to be attacked again.

As he read the screens and entered more data, Harry thought about his sister's words. He understood her concern and appreciated her offer of a job. Harry liked the time he'd spent at SiJo. For anyone else, it would be a great career. Amber had even offered him a real position on the board of directors.

When he considered how far their relationship had grown since his divorce, he felt an unfamiliar sense of contentment. Maybe he did have the family he'd always wanted. The fact that he'd had it since he was a young boy, but hadn't realized it, almost made it better. He wasn't as alone as he sometimes thought. Harry hoped that one day Amber would understand his determination to nail Rawlings to the wall was for her too. She needed closure on Simon's death. No *beat-down* in an alley would change that.

He reached for his phone and texted Amber.

**"THANKS FOR THE OFFER. I'M SORRY FOR BEING AN ASS.
DINNER?"**



Claire held tight to Tony's hand while Francis maneuvered the boat through the crystal waters. The trip from the island to town took anywhere from thirty to forty minutes, depending on wind and the roughness of the sea. Since this was only Claire's second excursion off the island, she was surprised by the

number of other islands they passed. The first time Francis took her into town, she was too nervous to truly register the world outside of the boat.

Today, through sunglass-covered eyes, she took in the beauty around her. The bright, tropical sun danced off the waves and glistened both near and far. The sea was neither calm nor rough. In more open water, the waves were bigger. As they traveled between the islands in narrower straits, the seas calmed, reminding Claire of their lagoon. The islands they passed en route varied immensely. Some were small, like hers. Others were large with multiple homes. Many were uninhabitable with cliffs and ragged stone mountains. Claire understood how under the cover of darkness, maneuvering around the channels between the islands could be dangerous. If the seas were too rough, a boat the size of theirs could easily find itself thrown against the large rocks and cliffs.

Despite having been born elsewhere, Francis knew the language and the culture of the area well. He was also known by many of the townspeople. Once they were ashore, Claire watched Francis' interaction with the natives. Over the years, he'd obviously earned their respect.

Claire didn't see any motorized vehicles other than watercraft. She whispered to Francis, "Does anyone drive cars here?"

"*Oui, Madame el.*" He pointed toward a large mountain in the distance. "There's one road that comes around the mountain, but driving it takes much time. Most traveling and shipments, they come by plane or helicopter. The airport is not far."

Claire remembered Phil telling her that by air she could be at a state-of-the-art medical facility in less than two hours.

Tony asked, "Are there always planes at the ready and pilots? Or do they need to be reserved in advance?"

"Reserved is better," Francis answered. "However, most requests can be accommodated quickly."

Tony decided, since they had time, he wanted to see the airport. Claire wasn't interested. She decided to spend her time walking around the town until her doctor's appointment. First, she entered what she considered to be the equivalent of a grocery store. Many of the town's people spoke enough English to help Claire if she had any questions. There were also stands or booths along the side of the road with items for sale. It appeared many of the natives did more bartering than buying and selling. The road was defined and hard, but not paved—well-tried dirt. On her way to the doctor's office, Claire passed two taverns and decided alcohol was a universal language.

The waiting area of the doctor's office was full of people, yet when Claire entered, the nurse immediately led her back to one of the examination rooms. "My husband will be here in a few minutes. I'd like to wait for him."

"Your husband?" The nurse beamed. "But of course. Will you learn your

baby's gender today?"

Claire smiled. "I sure hope so. Can we please do another ultrasound?"

"Let me check with the doctor. It's his decision."

After a few minutes of being alone, the door opened. When Tony entered, Claire knew why she hadn't heard the customary pre-enter knock. Grinning toward his handsome face, Claire thought how knocking had never been his forte. Tony's deep voice and sparkling eyes revealed his excitement. "I thought your appointment wasn't for another half an hour. I didn't miss anything, did I?"

"No," she reached out to hold his hand. "They brought me back as soon as I arrived. I have a little habit of being early for appointments."

Tony snickered. "I like that habit."

"I know you do."

As their lips united, there was a knock on the door. Claire's eyes twinkled as she called, "Come in."

The nurse entered, "Oh, hello, you must be Mr. Nichols?"

Claire watched as Tony's lips twitched. Suppressing her giggle, she replied, "This *is* my husband. Rawlings is our last name. Nichols was my maiden name."

The nurse apologized and explained that, after Claire's exam, the doctor would allow another ultrasound. When they were alone again, Tony asked, "Are you sure there isn't a problem using our real names?"

"Francis assured me and so did Phil. This place as well as others like it, are known for their discretion. Apparently, we aren't the only people here, or in the world, willing to pay big money to hide. It's a great source of income for areas where resources are limited. They're paid very well to keep our information private."

Tony nodded. "If they're paid that well, then I'd think we could have an ultrasound whenever we wanted." He squeezed her hand. "And I want one!"

She grinned. "Me too!" Her smile faded. "Tony, I hope you aren't disappointed, I mean, I know you keep saying you don't care if our baby is a boy or a girl, but I think you do."

"I really don't. I promise I won't be disappointed. Healthy is what I want. I also want you healthy and safe. The only things that we'll accomplish today will be learning whether we need to order blue or pink baby things and narrow our name discussion to one gender."

Claire smiled. They'd discussed names a little bit—mostly, they seemed to discuss boy's names. When they Googled the most popular names for the last year, Sophia came up for girls and Aiden for boys. Tony immediately

nixed Sophia. When he explained his reasoning, Claire was shocked. She had no idea Catherine had a daughter. The story was especially wild when he explained that Sophia was the artist who painted Claire's wedding portrait. Apparently, he'd been watching her since Nathaniel died. It wasn't done for vengeance. Tony's voyeurism of Sophia was the fulfillment of a promise to Nathaniel, to watch over Catherine's daughter. Tony didn't know why Catherine didn't want to see her, but the night he was taken into FBI custody, Tony was about to tell Sophia the truth about her mother. Obviously, he never got the chance.

Claire agreed. The name Sophia wasn't in the running.

Neither one had a reason for not liking Aiden. They just didn't. Tony didn't want to use family names. As much as he had admired Nathaniel, he now realized that perhaps his grandfather wasn't as good of an influence as he had once thought. Claire contemplated names from her family. She knew without asking, Emily was a no. Her mother's name, Shirley, was very close to Tony's grandmother, Sharron. Claire's grandmother Elizabeth was close to Emily. None of them seemed worth arguing for. So far, the only girl's name that they were both receptive to was Courtney.

When it came to boy names, for every suggestion Claire made, Tony had a counter. He liked names that could be shortened. He said, from experience, he believed it made a nice separation between business and personal. Claire didn't ask if Tony assumed his son would follow him into business. After all, if—and that was a very big *if*—their public issues could be resolved, Anthony Rawlings was a man worthy of having a son follow in his footsteps; however, late at night, when Claire would wake and stare up to the ceiling while Tony slept soundly, she worried. Anthony Rawlings, businessman, had so many worries and concerns. Did she want that for her son or daughter? The larger looming concern was Tony's predilection for perfection. Claire had no way of knowing the personality of the child within her, yet if he were anything like his father, would the combination in a professional setting be potentially combustible? Would it be different with a daughter? Claire didn't know.

When the doctor entered, Tony stood near Claire's head, kept his hand on her shoulder and listened. She loved his presence; just knowing he was near gave her more confidence. The doctor reassured Claire, her weight gain was within normal limits and expectations. When she complained about filling so fast, he recommended multiple small meals as opposed to three larger ones. She looked up to Tony's knowing eyes and realized he wasn't only filling the role of father and offering emotional support, but also acting as informant. Madeline would know the new meal requirements before Claire made it home.

After the exam, the nurse led them to a different room for the ultrasound. The doctor used the same machine he'd used during Claire's last visit. She

and Tony watched silently as the grainy image came to the screen. Again, he used lines and made measurements. They both breathed a sigh of relief to learn their baby was right on target for thirty weeks, measuring fifteen and a half inches long and weighing about three pounds.

"Three pounds," Claire repeated. "Then why have I gained almost twenty?"

The doctor laughed and said, "Because, Claire, you aren't just carrying a baby; there's a whole lot more in there."

She knew he was right.

"And..." the doctor continued, "...your baby will continue to gain, about a half a pound a week from now until you deliver, so eating those small meals is important."

Before Claire could respond, Tony answered, "Don't worry, she will."

The doctor moved the large wand around Claire's abdomen. The coolness of the gel didn't register as she watched the screen. Ever present in the background was the steady heartbeat of their child. As usual, it brought back memories of her lake. They watched in amazement as the doctor pointed out the baby's nose in a profile. When he repositioned the wand, they were able to count fingers and toes—they weren't able to see the gender.

"I'm sorry. Your baby's being modest. I'd hoped if we continued, he or she'd move and reveal their secret. So far, that hasn't happened."

Though they were both disappointed, Tony and Claire understood. Tony replied, "That's fine, doctor. The most important thing is that everything is going as it should."

"Yes, Mr. Rawlings, everything is perfect."

Claire smiled. She knew that *perfect* was exactly the way Tony liked it!

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Let us not be content to wait and see what will happen, but give us the determination to make the right things happen.

—Horace Mann

PHIL CREATED A VPN, virtual private network, for both Tony and Claire. This allowed them access to websites and emails while virtually untraceable. When connected through a proxy and the multiple shell accounts he'd established, Phil believed their transactions were completely untraceable.

To communicate with one another, Phil, Tony, and Claire utilized email as well as occasional instant messaging. They could call; however, Phil still emphasized that calls needed to remain short. During the first week of November, Phil sent the Rawlings his second email:

To: Nouveau Alexanders
From: PR
Re: Current assignment
Date: November 7, 2013

Our initial meeting went well. I reminded Ms. L of her original directive. Ms. N's location wasn't to be divulged. She hasn't pursued the subject. My assignment is to watch a woman named Sophia Burke. Her husband, Derek, is employed by Rawlings Industries and was recently transferred to corporate headquarters in Iowa City.

They recently moved to Iowa from California, and I'm gathering background information. Though this seems benign, I have a feeling there's more to it. The name *Burke* concerns me. I don't remember reading about a Derek in Ms. N's research. Is there a connection to Jonathon? I'll learn, but your assistance may speed my research.



SIMULTANEOUSLY, THEIR iPADS notified them of the email. Claire saw the icon and looked across the room. "It has to be from Phil. I'm nervous."

"His last message wasn't very enlightening." Tony opened the message. Tell me again why he's addressing us as the *New Alexanders*?"

Claire shrugged. "I think he's avoiding using our real names." *Was it wrong to have a private joke?* She hoped not. There was no way to explain her and Phil's relationship without inciting unwarranted concerns from Tony, and there was no reason for him to be concerned. There was nothing between her and Phil but trust and friendship. It was the kind of friendship that comes when trust has been tested by fire and survived.

She and Tony both read the email. The last time she'd heard the name Derek Burke, it was Brent who brought it to her attention. Although she and Tony pledged honesty and full disclosure, Claire didn't believe their promise included harming his relationship with his closest friends. He was unaware of their support; it seemed best.

Claire had recently learned the story of Sophia. She looked up from her screen. "Tony, is this the same Sophia? Catherine's daughter?"

She saw the darkness return to his eyes as they moved from the screen toward her. "Yes. How in the hell did she manipulate moving them to Iowa? Executor of my estate has no control at Rawlings Industries."

Claire put down her tablet, walked to her husband, and touched his shoulder. "Why would she do that? Why, after all these years of not wanting to know her daughter, would she suddenly move her to Iowa?"

He covered her hand with his. "I don't know, but I don't like it."

"What are you worried about?"

"Accidents."

The word still caused the hair on the back of Claire's neck to stand to attention. "What kind of accidents? You don't think Catherine would harm her own daughter, do you?"

"I'm not sure she has boundaries. Look at what she's done to us."

Claire saw the restraint in his expression, exposed through the bulging veins of his neck. His jaws were clenched as he modulated his voice to its most accommodating tone. "It's the middle of the afternoon and too hot for

you to be out in the sun. You should rest and keep your feet up. I need to go for a walk.”

Claire wanted answers to her questions. How did Tony’s promise to Nathaniel influence his clandestine protectiveness of Sophia? What exactly were Catherine’s capabilities? Where were Tony’s boundaries? However, sensing his distress, she didn’t ask. They’d been down too many difficult roads lately. This situation wasn’t her battle, her family, or her promise. Tony needed to work it out for himself. She exhaled. “All right, I’ll rest in our room. Please come wake me when you get back.”

As he kissed her cheek, she saw something in his eyes, something that made her pulse race. “Tony, please don’t leave the island.”

Her plea pulled him from his thoughts. “What? How did you know I was thinking that?”

She held his hands. “I won’t be able to rest if I’m thinking about you out in the boat. I know Francis showed you how to drive it and has taken you out, but I can’t bear to lose you again.”

“Claire, I hate this feeling of helplessness.” He let go of her hands and paced near the open doors to the lanai. “This place is amazing. You’re amazing. I *want* to be here with you and our child; however, when I read about Rawlings Industries and now this, I feel like a caged animal. There are so many things I could be doing if I were back home.”

“I hoped you’d consider yourself home.”

She saw his shoulders slump. His expression of amusement was short-lived. “How many times am I to hear my own words and phrases repeated to me?”

Claire shrugged. “I don’t have a definitive number. What can I say?” She stepped toward him and reached for his cheek. Brushing it gently, she allowed the afternoon stubble to abrade the tips of her fingers. “You’re a wise man, and I’ve learned a lot from you. You should consider it an honor. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”

“I think there are others who you’d be better to imitate.”

Kissing his lips, she lingered on her tip-toes and whispered, “Right now, I’m going to lay down. When I wake, I’ll trust that you haven’t disappointed me.”

As she turned toward the bedroom, Tony seized her arm and pulled her back into his embrace. His sudden surge of power would’ve frightened her in the past. Today, she found it more than mildly erotic. “Tell me.” His dark stare intensified with each second. “Why it took an electronic lock to hold you captive and mere words are doing it to me? Because I’ll be honest, I want to get in that boat and talk to a pilot. I promised to look after Sophia. She has no idea what kind of a woman her birth mother is capable of being. I’m the only one who can explain, yet with a few words from these beautiful lips...” His

finger gently traced her lips. "...I'm again helpless."

"Because you love me, and as committed as you are to Sophia, which is honorable, you're more committed to me and our child."

Tony nodded. "I do love you, more than life itself; nevertheless, I'm going for that walk. I feel trapped, and at this moment, I need to remind myself Catherine is the one responsible. Not you. As much as I love you..." He seized her shoulders. "...and never forget that I do, right now, I'm not fond of the control you seem to have."

Claire nodded. She wanted honesty. That didn't mean she liked everything she heard. She didn't; however, wasn't that the risk with honesty, accepting the truth no matter how it made you feel?

Besides, deep down, Claire completely understood his position. She'd been there herself.



PHIL EASED INTO the art gallery behind a twenty-something couple. It was the third one he'd visited in Davenport this afternoon. It looked similar to the others—artwork highlighted by spot lights and three dimensional art showcased on stands. It wasn't his thing. He wasn't even sure how to pretend he liked any of it. Most of it didn't look like art to him anyway. Who decided what constituted art, Phil wanted to know.

As he walked slowly, pretending to appreciate the paintings which looked like something a five-year-old child could create, he saw Sophia out of the corner of his eye. She was moving from painting to painting, taking a painstaking amount of time to devour each piece. This was the third Friday in a row she'd gone to Davenport to visit the galleries. Once he found her, his directive was clear: text Ms. London and let her know Sophia's location.

Stepping into a side hallway, Phil did as he'd been told. He texted his employer:

"MRS BURKE IS AT THE JOHN BLOOM GALLERY ON 12TH STREET."

Next, he stood back and waited. As he stared at the canvas before him, he listened to two women discuss the use of color and shadowing. There were many things Phil knew. He could probably teach a course on surveillance. Technology was his passion. He loved learning about new devices to make his job easier and more precise. When it came to computers, he could talk programming and hardware with the best of them; however, when it came to colors and shadowing, he didn't have a clue!

His phone vibrated. The text was simple. His job for the day was done. Phil couldn't have been happier. Trailing Claire had been a cakewalk.

Following Sophia was brain numbing. She spent most of her time at home. When she did venture out, it was either with her husband or to places like this. The gallery was filling with patrons. Apparently, his lack of interest wasn't shared by others. As he made his way toward the door, a waiter stopped him with a tray of champagne in tall glasses. He asked if Phil would like a glass. With the refusal on the tip of his tongue, he saw Catherine enter the gallery. She looked different than she had at any of their meetings. Her hair was shorter, her clothes stylish, and her face made-up.

Curiosity was his new downfall. It's what had pulled him into Claire's world. Many times, when Rawlings told him to end surveillance for the day, Phil would continue. Now, nodding and smiling at the waiter, he lifted a flute from the tray, worked his way into a crowd, and watched. It wasn't the art that interested him—it was the woman who had been so determined to rid herself of Claire. Phil was anxious to learn more about the woman who thought she employed him.

Through the next few hours, Catherine mingled in Sophia's vicinity. In time, they began discussing the pieces of art. He couldn't hear their discussion; he could watch their body language. It was alarmingly similar, little mannerisms, the way they tilted their heads or crossed their arms. Phil wondered if they noticed the similarities or if it was more obvious from afar.

The two women were becoming friendly, laughing and talking, until a tall, dark-haired man arrived. Phil recognized him from his research: it was Derek, Sophia's husband. It appeared as though Sophia introduced Catherine to her husband, and then shortly thereafter, Catherine excused herself and left.

One last glass of champagne with a side of brie and Phil was done for the evening.



CLAIRE WAS ASLEEP on their bed when she felt Tony sit on the side of the mattress. His soft touch gently rubbing her back eased her concern. He wasn't gone. He hadn't disappointed her. Turning toward her husband, Claire smiled a sleepy smile. "Hi, honey, how long have I been asleep?"

"A couple of hours."

"And where did you go?"

"For a walk around the island. I also made a call."

That last sentence held Claire's attention. "A call, to whom?"

"I thought I was calling Baldwin."

Claire sat up and scooted to the headboard. "Tony, why would you call Harry?"

"He's our only FBI contact. The only one we know how to contact."

Although the air had cooled over the last few hours, it still sat warm and heavy; nevertheless, as goose bumps cloaked her skin, Claire wrapped her arms around her chest. “Why did you need to speak with the FBI?”

“I told you the other night that I’m willing to make a deal.”

The sea was still blue, the sky was still clear, and the colorful flowers still filled the air with beautiful scents, yet Claire’s paradise disappeared: peace and contentment were gone. Tears filled her eyes as she fought the sudden pounding in her temples. She’d been asking questions for weeks. During that time, she’d also been getting answers, many she didn’t want. Before she could ask the question on the tip of her tongue, Claire pushed herself off the bed. The sudden movement made the room sway. She reached for the bedside stand, closed her eyes, and waited for it to stop.

Before the room ceased spinning, Tony was at her side. His distant tone was replaced with concern. “The doctor said you need to be careful; the bigger the baby gets, the harder it is for your blood to flow. He said that sudden standing can cause fainting spells. You need to move slower.” His strong arms encircled her body and stabilized her world during each word of his lecture.

Instead of leaning into him, Claire stood straight. “I’m fine. I stood fast because I couldn’t breathe. I needed to stand and have more room in my lungs and I heard the doctor. I was there.”

“Laying down would accomplish the same thing.”

She wanted to argue, but the swaying room and headache had her stomach in knots, or perhaps it was the thought of Tony’s deal. No matter the cause, she chose to press her lips together and stare up into her husband’s eyes.

“You need to sit back down.”

Her tongue remembered to speak. “I *need* to use the bathroom,” she retorted, followed by a decline for Tony’s help. When she returned to the bedroom, he was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. Before he could speak, she volunteered, “I don’t think I want to know about your call.”

“Baldwin isn’t our contact any longer.”

Claire exhaled. She didn’t have a choice. He was going to tell her anyway. Claire sat at the small table. The straight-backed chairs helped her lower back. “He never should’ve been. It seems like an obvious conflict of interest.”

Tony nodded. “Are you feeling better?”

“Not really. Why would you make that call without talking to me about it first?”

“I had to do something.”

“Please, Tony, tell me what was said.”

“I thought you just said you didn’t want—”

“I don’t, all right?” Her volume increased. “I don’t want you to make a

deal. I don't want you to confess anything to anyone—except to me.” Her voice cracked as tears rushed down her cheeks. “I don't want to be without you. I don't even care if it's the right thing to do. I-I we need you!”

His resolve melted before her eyes as his defiant stance eased and his voice mellowed. “Claire, my God, this isn't to hurt you or our baby. It's to help you. Since I left Venice without contacting Baldwin, I'm officially a fugitive. In essence, you're harboring a fugitive.”

“I-I don't care.”

Tony pulled Claire into his embrace. “I'm not leaving. I spoke to Agent Jackson. He's the one I talked with in Boston. I told him that I'd make him a deal: I'd tell him about someone who I've helped over the years, and confess my wrongdoings, if the bureau would agree to allow me to turn myself in, in January of 2015.”

Claire pulled back and looked into Tony's eyes. “2015—why?”

“We have a child coming in January. I asked for one year.”

“Did he agree?”

“He said it wasn't in his power, but that he wanted to know what I knew.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Only the tip of the iceberg. I told him about Simon's plane and that I knew for sure who killed my parents. I told him there was more, but I needed my deal first.”

Claire lifted her brow.

“I'm supposed to call back on Monday.” Tony added, “Today's Saturday, but it's still Friday in Boston.”

Claire grinned; it was difficult to keep track of days. She leaned into his chest and listened to the strong steady rhythm of his heart. “One year?” She felt him nod. “I hope it goes very slowly.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

There is no greater misery than to recall a time when you were happy.

—Danté

S

EPTEMBER 12, 2016

Shit! It's the only word that keeps coming to mind! I have a meeting in two days with the Vandersols! I've done everything to avoid this—minus quitting my job. I've had sick children, dead grandparents: none of it real. I think I've finally run out of personal tragedies. Ever since Claire started making progress, they've wanted to meet the "aide" who works "so well" with her. That's according to Ms. Bali.

I'm about to go in for my shift, and Ms. Bali will be there. I'm sure she'll ask if I'll be there Thursday. The truth is I've run out of ways to avoid it. I don't want this to end. Lately, I've gone beyond mentioning Tony's name. I've done homework; at night I've read my book and my notes. I tried listening to audio recordings of Claire's recollections. Hearing her voice, full of emotion, was too difficult; however, reading has helped refresh my memory of Claire's life.

Then over the past month, whenever we've been alone, I've shared my research. I've recounted the stories she told me. I started with good memories, talking about her wedding and honeymoon. Over time, as I talked, I watched the stress leave her body. She's even started eating by herself, as long as I talk. If I stop, so does she. I have no idea what results the doctors are getting.

After not liking Claire's initial reaction to this new regime, I was afraid the Vandersols' were going to stop the new protocol. Ms. Bali said they almost did. Apparently, there was some big blow-up between them and Dr. Fairfield. She said that Claire's "wanting" to go outside with me was the small sliver of hope which persuaded them to allow the treatment to continue.

I don't know if they're seeing the same positive results as I am. She goes to therapy four days a week, and I have no idea what they do there. Whatever

it is, when she returns, she's tired. I've tried to learn what it entails; however, the answer I continually receive is, it's a "need to know" thing. I've suggested her fatigue affects her eating; therefore, knowing would help me. Sometimes I forget my job description. Aides aren't supposed to question policy. Long story short, I still don't know what they do.

After Thursday it won't matter.

I don't know if I should go to the meeting and let Emily call me out, or if I should jump ship. It's no secret, I don't want to quit. Well, I need to go. As the weather has continued to stay nice, I'm hoping for a little walk outside and time to tell Claire more stories.

Meredith told Ms. Bali she'd be in Thursday morning to meet with Ms. Nichols' family. The woman looked like she was about to burst with relief. For the last month, at the end of each shift, Meredith has been required to complete a patient assessment. It's a simple computer form asking what she did and what the patient did. Ms. Bali said the Vandersols and Dr. Fairfield wanted to discuss some of her entries.

Meredith suddenly wished she'd kept copies for herself. She knew she hadn't been completely forthcoming. She also hadn't padded her reports with false hopes. Everything she'd reported was true, minus the preceding stimuli.

Trying to keep the impending meeting out of her thoughts, Meredith went on with her daily duties. After Claire finished dinner, she helped her with a light jacket, and they went for an evening walk. Although each night seemed cooler than last, Claire didn't seem to mind. As they traveled the paths of the facility, Meredith talked about the changing leaves. They were just beginning to turn with the start of golden and red hues infiltrating the normally green landscape. The air held the slightest scent of autumn filling Meredith with memories of Claire's story. It was fall of 2010 when they had ran into each other in Chicago.

The meeting had been planned. The other reporters had posted pictures of Claire and Mr. Rawlings in Chicago. Even though Meredith lived in California at the time, she couldn't pass the opportunity to get the story everyone wanted. At the time, she was so proud of using someone else's story to further her quest. Another article had said Mr. Rawlings was spotted at Trump Tower with the mystery woman: Claire Nichols. It was sheer luck Claire decided to get coffee that evening. Meredith had been lurking with her photographer when they saw Claire enter. The rest was history.

Perhaps it was Meredith's concern about the impending meeting that caused her to speak without a filter; whatever the cause, she did. Soaking in the impending autumn and feeling Claire's hand on her arm, Meredith felt the

unrelenting need to repeat the apology she'd voiced to Claire years ago in California. Of course, that time it was combined with shock at the consequences of her actions. Today, it was more heartfelt and thought out. After all, it'd been festering for years. "Claire, I know I've told you before, but I hope you know how sorry I am about your *accident*. I know you loved Tony, but what happened to you—because of me—I can never apologize for enough." She didn't expect a response. It felt good to say this out loud, and honestly, saying it to someone who may or may not understand, but wouldn't interrupt, was comforting. "As a reporter I wanted nothing more than to get the big story. It's no secret, you and Tony were big news. I hoped to use our familiarity to learn what you'd been so careful not to reveal." Tears came to Meredith's eyes as she realized her time with Claire was about to end. "I had no idea why you'd been so careful, and you didn't say anything to me, but having you there—a picture of us—I could use the clues to infer what you wouldn't say." Sobs erupted from somewhere deep, somewhere that doesn't exist in a truly hardened reporter. "How could anyone have suspected what you were living through? I mean, never could anyone know what was happening. Claire, he did such terrible things. I don't know *how* you survived. I don't know *why* you survived; most people couldn't. I don't think I could."

They were deep into the wooded path, and the setting sun caused shadows to loom in every direction. Removing her sunglasses, Meredith wiped her eyes with her sleeve and pleaded, "I hope someday you can forgive me, as you forgave him. You may not realize it..." She snickered at herself. "...I'm sure you don't, but your ability to love him after all of that—well, it has been inspirational. I mean, my God, Claire, the man almost killed you!"

"Stop."

Meredith's feet stopped moving by command. As if on cue, so did Claire's. Inhaling her emotion, Meredith stood still, wondering if she'd imagined the one word. When she heard only the sound of leaves rustling in the gentle twilight breeze, Meredith questioned, "Did you just talk?"

Still wearing Meredith's sunglasses, Claire's face was downcast. Meredith couldn't resist. She removed the sunglasses and lifted her friend's chin, revealing tears streaming down Claire's cheeks, overflowing her unfocused eyes. "You spoke," Meredith whispered. "I heard it. Oh, God! Claire, tell me I didn't just imagine that!"

The silence grew. With each second, each minute, Meredith's excitement diminished. She was so upset about the meeting and losing this connection to Claire, she must have imagined the whole thing. Finally, she reached in her pocket, produced a tissue, and wiped Claire's tears. The sky was now closer to dark than light. Surely, someone would reprimand Meredith for having a patient out past dark. She smirked again, *it won't matter. I'm getting fired in two days anyway.*

Lightening her voice, Meredith continued her monologue. The apology was done. She'd talk because, until they fired her that was her job. "Let's get you back to your room. I'm sure they won't be very happy that I kept you out so late." Waiting for Claire to turn around, she continued, "I'm sure I'll hear about it."

Securing Claire's elbow, Meredith felt her tremble. "Claire, are you cold? I'm sorry. Let's get you back." While Claire stayed steadfast, Meredith remembered the night of Claire's *accident*. She'd been out at the lake, and it got dark. "Oh shit, I'm making this worse. You're fine. No one will be upset with you. Don't worry. There won't be any problems—no *accidents*."

"Stop." Claire's whisper was so low that Meredith had to strain to hear her above the sounds of the country night. Keeping her eyes downcast, Claire continued, "I lived it." "I don't want to hear it." "I want to hear the good times."

It was against protocol, but what the hell? At this point, what harm was there in breaking another facility rule? Throwing caution to the wind, Meredith wrapped her arms around her long-time friend and cried. The sobs of earlier, the anguish over the last six years, the fear of losing her job—everything came out.

Slowly, Claire's arms encircled Meredith, and she whispered, "Shhh, I'm sorry." "Please don't cry."

The absurdity of Claire consoling her hit hard. Meredith's tears turned to laughter.



AT FIRST, CLAIRE thought she was imagining it. Then again, she wasn't sure what was real. Tony's visits were becoming less frequent. The bland room with one window was becoming more real, and she didn't want it to be. With Tony, life was filled with colors of varying intensities. This reality was not only colorless, it was lifeless. She yearned for more time with him and longed for his touch; however, day in and day out, the drab room and the people who talked about nothing filled more and more of her hours.

Sometimes she'd focus and see her sister. It was Emily—although, she looked much older. Then again, so did Claire. The people with plain faces and colorless eyes often combed her hair into a ponytail. It was the hairstyle of a young girl. Claire didn't feel young. The reflection she saw, if she focused in the mirror, didn't look young. As a matter of fact, her hair was wrong. There was a time it was blonde, because, he wanted it to be. Now the highlights weren't blonde: they were white. *How could she possibly have graying hair?* The last thing she remembered was...

That was so difficult. She tried to remember. In that room they took her to, they asked her to look at pictures. Sometimes those pictures would trigger something. When that happened, she tried with all her might to keep the emptiness out. Sometimes she'd cover her eyes or her ears.

There were other times where they asked her to do simple tasks like picking up things and putting them in the right places. They didn't tell her what was right. She didn't know if it was acceptable to ask, so she avoided their tasks until they insisted. Claire didn't like to hear people tell her what to do, especially if they sounded upset. Finally, one day, she picked up the miscellaneous items and put them in the small little compartments. Instead of releasing her from the room, they came up with more things for her to do.

The constant that Claire began to anticipate was Meredith's visits. It was only recently she realized who the woman was. After all, even with saying her name, the context was wrong. Why would Meredith Banks be feeding her? Then Claire realized it wasn't meant to make sense, it just was, and Meredith did what no one else would do: she talked about Tony.

Since his visits had lessened, when Claire tried to think of him, she felt waves of sadness. He was gone. He had to be gone. Why else wouldn't he visit any longer? Meredith's stories of happy times brought him back. The memories were difficult for her to recall on her own. Meredith's recollections gave her sustenance that no food could. She'd replay the words over in her head and remember. She couldn't feel his touch as she once had, but she could picture the scenes as Meredith spoke.

It recently became obvious that the stories flowed more freely outside. When they walked and were alone, Meredith's stories took on a life of their own. As she went on about dinners or engagements, Claire pictured her dress and Tony's tuxedo. When she talked about trips, Claire's mind saw the snow of Tahoe or the crystal blue waters of Fiji.

There were some memories Claire didn't want to remember. When Meredith mentioned the bad times or the bad Tony, she tried to stop the visions in her mind. She didn't want to feel the fear resurrected by those stories.

She questioned the reality of everything, yet in life or fantasy, Claire had promised Tony she'd keep their private life private. That's what made Meredith safe: she already knew their private life. Claire had disobeyed Tony a long time ago; she wasn't telling Meredith anything. No, Meredith was telling Claire. So she reasoned, telling her to stop was acceptable. After all, Tony wouldn't want Meredith telling someone else these stories. That was why Claire had to stop her.

She didn't mean to make Meredith cry. Claire didn't want her sad. She was the only person willing to help her remember. "Shhh... I'm sorry." "Please don't cry."

Suddenly, Meredith laughed.

Claire was sure she was having another delusion. People didn't cry then laugh. Maybe Claire wasn't really on a walk with her old friend. Maybe she'd soon feel that too familiar sharp pain in her arm. Settling to the ground, Claire waited. The people would come and then she'd wake up somewhere else. Closing her eyes, she hoped when the sharpness came Tony would be waiting...

"Claire, you need to stand. You'll get cold out here on the ground." Meredith's voice had regained the composure it momentarily lost.

Claire looked up, then side to side. Where were the people?

"I know you heard me. You spoke to me. Don't worry, you won't be in trouble, but we need to get back." Meredith put out her hand. "Please, let's go back."

Claire reached up. The sensation of her hand in Meredith's was real. At least, Claire believed it was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

You must stick to your conviction, but be ready to abandon your assumptions.

—Denis Waitley

HARRY STARED AT his notes and relived his recent conversation with Agent Jackson from the Boston field office. Jackson was very specific: Anthony Rawlings *was* cooperating with the FBI and would *not* be apprehended at this time. When Harry questioned the attempt on his own life and the threat to his family, Jackson reminded him that there was no proof of a connection to Rawlings.

He was right: there was no proven connection. Could Harry's gut be telling him he wanted Rawlings guilty, instead that the man was guilty? Maybe the whole beat down in the back-alley accomplished the exact opposite of its intention. Since it occurred, Harry was more focused and determined to close the case. He needed assurance that everyone he cared about was safe. Surprisingly, that list of people, people whom he cared about —*really* cared about—was more static than he'd previously realized. Harry had family who'd been there for him and friends he could count on. Those people deserved his attention.

Everything became clearer the other day when the deputy director allowed Harry to speak with Ilona. Although he wanted to be assured of her safety, he was prepared for her tirade. The call progressed much differently than he'd anticipated.

“Ilona, are you all right?”

“Harry?”

“Ilona, I’m so sorry. I never imagined there’d be a connection from me to

you. I thought you were safe.”

“I know. Ron knows.”

Harry couldn’t believe Ilona’s resolve: if only she’d been that strong when they were married. Then again, maybe strength came with the love and support of a devoted spouse, something she now had in Ron. “Is Jillian all right?” he asked.

“She is.” Ilona chuckled. “She thinks we’re on vacation.”

Harry smiled.

“Do whatever you need to do, Harry. I have no idea who you’re after or what this is about, but if there’s a connection to us—please take care of it.”

“The threat was meant as a warning for me to back off.”

Ilona’s voice rang through the field office’s telephone. “I think I know you better than that—at least, I hope I do. You nail this person, whoever it is who’s threatening us. I know you can!”

“Thanks, Ilona. I expected you to chew me out for getting you into this.”

“You’re a few days late. I would’ve, but I’ve had time to think. Someone feels very threatened. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t resort to this. I’m fine and Jillian will forget this vacation as soon as it’s over.”

When they hung up, the indecision that had been looming like clouds around Harry since he’d re-entered the case evaporated. Claire was where she wanted to be. Her message said so. There was a time he’d let his personal feelings get in the way. Now, it was strictly business. Claire Nichols was an informant and the granddaughter of an agent who’d been murdered. If the Boston office was confident in her safety then Harry would concentrate his talents where they were better utilized: interrogation and research. Currently, with his ability to communicate with Rawlings severed, research was his mode of operation.

Harry looked over his recent findings. An inspection of the bureau of motor vehicles for the state of New Jersey found twenty-two-thousand-plus blue Hondas registered in 1989. The search could be considerably refined if Harry could enter a year or model for the Honda. He couldn’t. However, thanks to Claire’s phone call, he had a name: *Catherine Marie London*. When he ran her name, he hit the jackpot: *1987 Honda Prelude registered to Catherine Marie London*. Further scrutiny of the registration revealed the color: *blue*.

To further follow up on Claire’s information, Harry searched marriage records for New Jersey. His search came up blank. Thinking of the Rawlings’ somewhere in the South Pacific, he realized that people can go anywhere and get married. The FBI’s databases weren’t restricted by state or country. Utilizing the bureau’s database, Harry tried again. This time, he hit pay dirt:

marriage license issued by the state of New York, February 25, 1988, to Nathaniel Rawls and Catherine Marie London.

Harry referred to his timeline: Nathaniel Rawls was convicted on charges of multiple counts of insider trading, misappropriation of funds, price fixing, and securities fraud in 1987, and sentenced to three years in Camp Gabriels, a minimum-security prison in upstate New York. Nathaniel's sentence was reduced to twenty-four months due to prison overcrowding. It made sense that he and Catherine Marie London were married in New York, at the prison where Nathaniel was incarcerated. Harry wondered why Catherine hadn't kept the name Rawls. Was she hiding from Nathaniel's crimes as Rawlings had done with his change of name?

The search he'd started on Nathaniel Rawls continued to generate information. The screen of his computer sustained a non-stop scroll listing a plethora of civil suits. Scanning the generalities, most cases named *Nathaniel Rawls* as *defendant* and asked for financial restitution. Perhaps that was Catherine's reasoning, distance herself from the financial ramifications of Nathaniel's crimes.

Out of curiosity, Harry scrolled the list of plaintiffs. The name Rawls caught his attention. He clicked: *Samuel Rawls seeks to void marriage of Nathaniel and Catherine Marie Rawls*. Harry's head spun. The complaint was initially filed with the New York state court in March of 1988. Harry rubbed his temples. Damn, Samuel didn't waste much time voicing his disapproval of Daddy Dearest's new wife.

It appeared the complaint met substantial roadblocks until June of 1989, less than a month after Nathaniel's death, when the case went from summons to disposition in record time. Based on *mental incompetence* and *undue influence*, Samuel Rawls's complaint was granted, and the marriage of Nathaniel and Catherine Marie Rawls was voided by the state of New York.

Harry knew without checking that three months later Samuel and Amanda Rawls were found dead in their rented California bungalow. He also knew that Patrick Chester was the only witness to a commotion the same day at the Rawls's home. In the initial interrogation, Chester mentioned a woman: Samuel's sister and a blue Honda. No wonder Amanda Rawls wasn't anxious to introduce Chester to her step-mother-in-law. Her husband had just had the woman's marriage voided. Wow, and Harry thought his family life was screwed up!

Harry shoved his chair backward and paced about the living room of his condominium. How in the hell did the police in Santa Monica not put these pieces together? The ballistics evidence alone should've sent up red flags. Damn, flares! A rookie cop should've seen that it wasn't a murder/suicide!

Harry's questions continued: What did Rawlings do, besides pay off Chester, to cover it all up? Why? Why would he help the woman who killed

his parents, unless he was involved in their murder? This may be circumstantial, but it created a connection and a reason why Catherine would want Amanda and Samuel dead. Was there a reason Rawlings would want them dead?

Picking up his phone, Harry called Agent Jackson. After a string of button pushes and requests, his call was finally answered.

“Agent Jackson, this is Agent Baldwin from San Francisco.”

“Baldwin?”

“I believe I have significant information in the Rawlings case.”

“Are you well enough to travel, Agent?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“We’ll see you in Boston, tomorrow.”

Harry exhaled. “Thank you, sir. I’ll be there.”

His blue eyes sparkled with excitement. Traveling cross-country was a hell of a lot better than sitting in his damn condominium. Maybe, just maybe, there was more to all of this. Harry couldn’t shake the thought that somehow Rawlings was still involved; nevertheless, Catherine London was the reason Claire ran, the person who scared Claire into leaving the country, her family, friends, even at the risk of sullying Rawlings’ reputation and company in the process. Claire wouldn’t have done that if the threat wasn’t real. Now, Rawlings was cooperating with the bureau. How deep did this go? Did Rawlings have information on Sherman Nichols or Nathaniel’s murder? Harry wanted to know what Rawlings had told Agent Jackson.

He’d share his information, then Jackson could share his—*quid pro quo*.

Gathering his research, Harry made a mental list. He needed to call SAC Williams and let him know he was going to Boston, and since he’d been forbidden to travel, he needed to be sure to emphasize: this trip was at the request of Agent Jackson. While Harry waited for the computer to finish running a backup, he pulled out his phone and sent a text.

“FYI—LEAVING 1ST THING IN THE MORNING—BUSINESS.”

He entered Amber and Liz’s names and hit *SEND*.

One last computer search, Harry entered Catherine’s current full name: *Catherine Marie London*. Very little information surfaced, not even a reference to her one time husband or his last name. As he was about to exit the search, something caught his attention:

*Executor of Anthony Rawlings estate, effective: September 18, 2013—
fourteen days after the disappearance of...*

The short article described the efficient and unaffected running of the Rawlings' estate, due in essence to Ms. London's ability to oversee day to day operations. It was a small counter article to one about the ramifications of Anthony Rawlings' disappearance in relation to Rawlings Industries.

Hmmm... maybe Harry should visit Iowa City? Did he want to see Rawlings' estate: the place Claire lived, was held captive, and returned to? He shrugged. The past was what it was. Closing this case was his number one priority. First, he'd see how things went in Boston. Then, he'd consider Iowa a definite possibility.

His phone vibrated. Looking to the screen, he saw he had two text messages. The first one was from Amber:

"NEW INFORMATION? WHAT? WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

Harry shook his head and replied.

"LOVE YA, SIS. I'LL LET YOU KNOW WHEN I'M BACK."

The second text message was from Liz:

"TOMORROW MORNING? DOES THAT MEAN YOU'RE STILL IN TOWN TONIGHT? COINCIDENCE, SO AM I!?"

He smiled. They'd been through a lot, but finally, Liz seemed to understand the whole work and personal life separation. And maybe, just maybe, he was starting to understand what it meant to have that special someone in his life, someone who supported you, no matter what. Harry replied.

"YOUR PLACE? I'M SICK OF THESE FOUR WALLS!"



PHIL WAS THANKFUL Rawlings had projects for him to research. Sophia Burke continued to be uneventful. Honestly, Phil sensed his assignment would soon be over. Ms. London hadn't shared her reasoning for his reconnaissance; nevertheless, with the information from Rawlings, it wasn't difficult to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Ms. London requested to know Sophia's habits and schedules. Once she did, she purposely intertwined their lives. Suddenly, Ms. London's routine included lunch at a deli near the University of Iowa, visits to art galleries in the Quad Cities, and frequenting art museums in Cedar Rapids. At each encounter, the women appeared more at ease.

Phil had no reason to believe Ms. London had revealed her true identity to Sophia. She hadn't shared it with him either; nonetheless, his job was to help arrange their *coincidental* meetings.

Although the Rawlings had Internet, the jumping through servers, private networks, and shell accounts slowed things down considerably. It was much

easier for Phil to do the Internet surfing for him. Phil's current project was *Nathaniel Rawls*. He knew Rawls' basic information from Claire's research, and from Rawlings, he learned Nathaniel was married to Ms. London when he died in prison. Numerous news articles discussed Nathaniel's demise from natural causes: a heart attack only two months prior to his release. Rawlings wanted to learn more about Nathaniel's medical records, especially while in prison. His inquiry was in relation to the civil case awarded to Samuel Rawls. The case claimed *mental incompetence* and *undue influence* and resulted in the successful voidance of Nathaniel's marriage to Catherine London.

Rawlings admitted he never saw his grandfather as being mentally incompetent. He wanted to know if there was any evidence which aided the court in its decision. To Phil it seemed irrelevant: the man was dead; the marriage was voided. What good would it do now to learn if he were or weren't off his rocker?

Then, Phil would walk into another gallery, see tin cans glued together with paint splashed over it, and remember—research! Infiltrating the records of a state penitentiary as well as the state and federal court systems was much more fun than deciphering art.

Phil sent his latest findings:

To: ARA

From: PR

Re: Research

Date: November 25, 2013

Nathaniel Rawls' medical records are indicative of person with heart condition: history of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, vitamin B12 deficiency, and nicotine addiction. Nathaniel took several high blood pressure medications, a cholesterol medication, and an anti-anxiety medication. According to the records, he smoked a half of a pack of cigarettes a day until he died. I'm not well-versed on medicines, but I can send the list if you want.

Records indicate that Samuel Rawls was listed as medical power of attorney. It doesn't appear that this changed after Nathaniel and Catherine were married. That's strange?

There were no specific instances of mental instability listed in the records that I've accessed thus far. I will continue to dig as well as access the court's records for the justification of their verdict.

Surveillance—nothing new, Ms. Burke and Ms. London appear to be becoming friendlier. They have now started to meet for lunch once a week.

PR

Phil reread the email. He couldn't help but smile at the *ARA*. It was his secret way of saying *Anthony Rawlings Alexander*. Having something, anything, private with Claire made Phil smile. He wondered how she was doing, if she and the baby were well. He didn't feel right asking, but if Ms. London ended this ridiculous assignment, Phil knew he was taking a long flight back to paradise.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Time passes by so quickly... change happens all around us every day whether we like it or not. Enjoy the moment while you can, one day it will just be another memory.

—Unknown

DAYS PASSED. THE sun rose bright and yellow in the east and set like a ball of orange fire in the west. As their candidness grew, so did the strength of their bond. The world was present: they could see it or read about it, yet they were separate and safe. Tony's offer to cooperate with the FBI in exchange for an one-year reprieve received Agent Jackson's approval, as well as whoever needed to sign off from above. The bureau's stipulations were clear: Tony must remain outside of the United States, stay in contact with the bureau, and not contact anyone from his past life. There were very few people who knew Anthony Rawlings was actually in a strange state of witness protection/fugitive status. To the world, he was simply missing.

Agent Jackson promised Tony leniency regarding possible sentencing and preferential treatment regarding the court system as long as he fully cooperated; he agreed. Before Tony would allow the FBI to speak with Claire and receive her assistance, he secured their promise of full immunity. Tony didn't want any possibility of his wife being charged with aiding and abetting a fugitive. They agreed. During the course of multiple short, untraceable calls, Claire disclosed all she knew first-hand and through Tony. When the FBI requested her testimony against Catherine, if the case were to go to court, Claire replied, "There's nothing that can keep me away from her trial. I want to see her face when she's sentenced. When she's in prison, like I was, I want her to remember that I helped put her there!"

They both exposed their cards and revealed all they could, except one. They still had an ace in the hole. They had Phil. His emails came daily, as well as pictures, and an occasional call. He was fully aware of Tony's deal,

Claire's immunity, *and* that his communication and assistance was under the FBI's radar. Their contact could be considered a breach of the FBI agreement.

The newly remarried Rawlings knew their time together was limited. In the grand scheme of life, a year was such a short time. Each day, each hour, they vowed to make better than the one before. Revelations came and discussions ensued. Claire no longer feared that Tony would leave each time he took the boat away from their island. She reasoned that his expeditions were like her walks in his woods during their past life. At that time, she needed time away from the estate: it soothed, healed, and strengthened her. Claire said once that she survived the early times on Tony's estate because of Catherine. No longer did she feel that way; however, when she reminisced about her walks and her lake, Claire knew those times were invaluable. Tony went to town, explored other islands, snorkeled at nearby reefs, and always returned. He may not have recognized the importance of his excursions, but each time he returned with his eyes soft as suede and a spring in his step. Claire did.

She, on the other hand, had no desire to leave the island. Unless she had an appointment with the doctor, Claire preferred to stay near the house. Being in the southern hemisphere, the hottest time of year was approaching. If Claire didn't keep her feet elevated, her ankles and feet swelled. The infinity pool allowed her to float and stay cool. Madeline doted on her constantly, encouraging her to eat small meals and get plenty of liquids. Home was Claire's cocoon. She knew if they stayed there, they'd remain safe.

In her third trimester, sleeping at night had its problems, so oftentimes, daytime activities morphed into napping. She'd be sunbathing or reading, and the next thing she knew, she was waking. The early day was her favorite time for sun before it became too intense. With her iPad at hand, she'd begin each day reading the news from the other side of the world. Sometimes it held her attention, and other times she'd lay the tablet face down and be lulled into a peaceful, dreamless state where her senses filled with the warm sun on her skin, lingering aroma of cologne mixed with her recently applied sunscreen, and the omnipresent roar of the surf.

Claire was in such a state, when without warning, large hands caressed her ankles and moved sensually toward her thighs. No longer was she on the edge of sleep. Her world was reignited as the tips of her lips turned upward and goose bumps materialized.

Opening her resting eyes, behind her sunglasses, and focusing on the handsome face before her, Claire saw her husband's devilish grin. It was a smirk of lust and pleasure, one which with only a glance could melt not only her insides, but her world. His eyes, too, were covered by dark glasses, yet as

his smiling lips neared hers and her smile willingly changed to a pucker, she longed for the unseen intensity waiting for her behind that dark glass.

Reaching up, Claire lifted the dark barrier. Tony's eyes were the windows to his soul. She loved reading his emotions, especially when desire was part of the mix. In response, Tony, slowly and deliberately, removed her sunglasses and their eyes met. There was a moment when she thought to speak, but it was short-lived. So much more could be said without words.

Earlier that morning when Claire woke, Tony was gone. Madeline said he'd gone out on the boat. Now, after only hours apart, Claire realized their reunion would be more than a simple, Hi, how are you today?

It was true, her body had been thoroughly fulfilled and used the night before; nevertheless, it yearned for what was silently being offered. When his full, soft lips engaged hers, the passion of the night before returned with a vengeance. Only moments earlier, her lungs inhaled without instruction, yet as acquiescing moans escaped her lips, breathing required thought. Maybe it wasn't thought, it was timing. Inhaling needed to occur in unison. If it didn't, his unrelenting approach would rob her body of the oxygen necessary to go on. As her bathing suit-covered breasts ached for the friction of his chest, Claire decided breathing was overrated. She wanted the heat that was overtaking her, to be consumed by the fire smoldering in the dark penetrating eyes. If in the process she forgot to breathe, did it really matter?

With the doors to their suite open to the crystal blue sea, their room was only slightly more private than the lanai; however, it was their room. Madeline and Francis respected their privacy. As Claire's bathing suit fell to the floor, she realized they'd yet to speak, and still they'd conversed more than some couples did in a lifetime. They'd greeted one another, discussed the pleasantries of the tropical morning, and assessed that each was doing well.

Laying on the soft comforter with her arms above her head, the man she loved gazing down at only her, and the large ceiling fan methodically moving the humid air, Claire's world was right. Had she planned on her morning taking this turn? No. Was she willing? Without a doubt.

The large talented hands claiming her body also had her soul. While his approach could at times be forceful, it was always gentle. Claire willingly surrendered, as she'd done a thousand times, to the whims and desires of the man above her. With no words, he could manipulate and dominate, move her from a state of sleeping bliss to the throes of erotic desire. Similar to years ago, his dark eyes held the passion and emotion which allowed her world to spin. Because he willed it so, the world was right.

Their past was significant, yet insignificant. Years ago, Tony had told Claire not to talk about the past. He'd said they had a future and they needed to look ahead; nonetheless, at her prompting, the first month of their new marriage had been spent primarily in the past. She hadn't asked to know the

truth: she'd demanded it.

When Claire was young, her grandmother told her to be careful what she wished for. Without a doubt, Tony and her grandmother were correct. There were times she wished for ignorance. Times she wanted not to know all he'd told her; however, she did know, and in knowing she wanted to put it all behind them. Claire wanted to look ahead toward a future with the man making love to her, seducing her, and fulfilling her every desire. She knew from experience that life with him could be difficult—but without him the entire planet would spin out of control, lost forever in the darkest depths of the universe.

Claire closed her eyes and concentrated on his talented fingers as they caressed her skin. Beginning at the nape of her neck, they trailed lightly down her body. Uncontrollably, Claire heard her own voice, truly nothing more than a ragged breath surrounded by a moan as her back arched, pushing her chest toward his touch—wanting, needing more.

He taunted her sensitive breasts, tweaking and suckling. Though she wanted the jubilation to last, it took so little to propel Claire to the edge of ecstasy. Sometimes something as simple as a deliberate puff of air on a taut, wet nipple instantaneously liquefied her insides and removed reasoning from her thoughts. Teasing her to the point of begging, yet satisfying her every desire was her husband's specialty. Despite the way she'd changed, the way her body had changed, she felt wanted and sexy. He skillfully caressed and kissed as he moved south over her enlarged midsection: her baby, his baby—their baby. Its presence only intensified their union.

As their little one grew, creativity became a necessity. *What was it they said? Necessity was the mother of invention.* When they were both satisfied, Claire nestled her cheek against Tony's chest, and he broke their silence. Instead of listening to his words, she enjoyed the reverberation of his raspy voice while mindlessly contemplating his next invention.

A few moments later, Tony tilted Claire's face toward him, lifting her chin with one finger and repeated, "I believe I said, good morning, Mrs. Rawlings."

"Mmmm," she cooed. "It sure is, Mr. Rawlings."

Tony scooted up to the headboard with his arm around Claire's bare shoulder. His voice brimmed with excitement. "I found a nearby island. It isn't large, and it's uninhabited. I've been there a few times. Before I found you at the pool, I asked Madeline to pack us a lunch so that I could take you there."

Claire's satisfied smile faded, and her body stiffened. "I don't know."

"You need to get off this island for more than doctor's appointments."

"Why?" she asked. "I can order anything I want. Francis will pick it up and bring it here." She placed her nose near his neck and inhaled. "I got your

cologne.” Claire smiled as her lips touched the spot below his ear, and his famous growl filled her ears. “It’s not like we can go visit friends. There’s no reason to leave.”

Stopping her kisses, he said, “I have one.”

“Oh, you do? And what would that be?”

“I said so,” he answered smugly.

Claire eased herself from bed and shook her head from side to side. “Sorry, sweetheart, that one doesn’t work anymore.” With the sheet wrapped around her curvaceous body, she stepped toward the bathroom and asked, “Would you like to join me for a cool shower?”

Perhaps it was because she had the sheet or maybe because it wasn’t that great of a distance, but as he swiftly got out of their bed and gracefully moved toward her, Claire couldn’t look away from his gorgeous body. Totally nude, he reached her in only a few steps. When Claire remembered to focus on his face, she found an expression she didn’t expect.

Before it could register, he gripped her shoulders and stared down into her eyes. In his voice, Claire heard the determination and saw the darkness that she felt in his grasp. “I realize our options are limited; however, I won’t allow you to be isolated or imprisoned again, by anyone. For the record, that includes you.”

“Tony, that’s ridiculous. I’m not imprisoning myself. I’m comfortable and happy. There’s a difference.”

He exhaled, lifted her chin, and spoke slowly and deliberately. “I’d love to join you for that shower. I’d love to help you reapply your sunscreen, and...” His words were controlled, not loud or harsh, or open for debate. “...I know you wouldn’t want to disappoint Madeline... or me; therefore, after the shower, you and I are going to the small island that I found, and we’re having lunch.”

His thumb and finger continued to hold her chin captive. The forced tilt of her head wasn’t necessary; Claire wouldn’t look away even if she could. She knew his tone and saw his restraint. She also knew he was doing what he did, trying to control a world that was uncontrollable.

While she contemplated her response, he spoke. “Do you want to discuss this more?”

After a prolonged silence, her green eyes began to shimmer. She didn’t speak, yet by the softening of his gaze, she knew he was listening. Finally, she said, “Fine, I won’t discuss it, but if we’re going out without Francis, I want to drive the boat.”

Tony released her chin and their room filled with his laughter. Brushing his lips over hers, he replied, “Oh, my dear, over my dead body!”

Claire didn't know why she'd been so hesitant. The water was beautiful, glistening and sparkling in all directions. Every trip she'd taken had been to town. Tony's island was the opposite direction with all new sights. As they passed island after island, Claire wondered how anyone could possibly know which direction they were traveling or where they were.

Tony explained the instruments he'd only recently learned to read. They had a compass, a depth finder, and a virtual map with a grid and coordinates. They also had their cell phones and two-way radios to access help if necessary. When the islands came close together and the strait in between narrowed, Tony showed Claire how the depth finder indicated the boat's proper position. Running into underwater rocks could be as detrimental as hitting one of the above water cliffs.

While they were still a ways away, Tony pointed toward the west. Claire followed his hand. The view took her breath away. The island he'd discovered was beautiful, the perfect South Pacific deserted isle away from the numerous islands they'd just passed. It didn't take a depth finder to tell them that the water became shallower closer to their destination. The sea lightened with rings of turquoise as it surrounded the white sandy beach. Beyond the shore were palm trees and other lush plants. As they neared the island, colorful flowers dotted the terrain. When Tony finally anchored the boat off the shore, Claire was equally as excited to see this new land.

Hand in hand, they walked on the soft sand as Tony showed Claire all he'd already discovered. She loved the sound of his voice. Never could she have imagined Anthony Rawlings so excited about something like a hidden freshwater waterfall. Under the canopy of vegetation, they ate the meal Madeline prepared and listened to the soft breeze through the palm trees. Helping Claire down to the cool, shaded sand, Tony insisted she rest.

With her head and back against his chest, she drifted between her reality and a dream world. It was during one of those states where Claire realized they were the same. For a short time, they had the dream. As she lingered between wake and sleep, the sweet aroma of flowers filled her senses and she tentatively opened her eyes. Orange, yellow, and red filled her vision. The most colorful bouquet of flowers she'd ever seen was right in front of her.

"Oh, Tony! They're beautiful!"

The lush shades of green and bright colored flowers didn't right Claire's world as much as the chocolate brown eyes smiling down at her.

"Not as beautiful as you."

"I'm glad you talked me into coming here. It's amazing."

He helped her to her feet and they walked toward the shore. The tide had come in making the beach narrower and the boat farther away.

"How long did I sleep?"

Tony shrugged. "I don't know. You've had so much trouble sleeping at

night lately... I wanted to let you rest as long as you could.”

“If we wait then the tide will go back out.”

“And the sun will set. I don’t want to try to get us back in the dark.”

Claire smirked. “You could let me drive. I’ve had a nap.”

“My dear, you could sleep for hours, and I’m not giving up the helm.”

“So are we swimming for it?”

Claire saw the wheels turning in Tony’s head. He was working out the possible scenarios in his mind. To her, it was simple: they were both good swimmers.

When Claire began to remove her sundress and expose her bathing suit, Tony reached for her hand, stopping her movement. “No, I’ll swim for the boat, and bring it back closer.”

If she weren’t pregnant, Claire would argue; however, she obviously was. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she lifted herself on her toes and kissed his lips. “Be careful.”

Tony promised, as he shed his shirt, kissed her one last time, and waded into the sea. Claire watched nervously as he dove under the crystal water. It was then Madeline’s words came back to her, reassuring her—darkness versus light. The sun was still bright. Scanning the panoramic scene, Claire was able to see under surface of the clear calm water. “It’s safe,” she said aloud, to no one in particular, as the familiar pounding in her temples and new tightening in her midsection screamed out their warning.

Lowering herself to the sand, Claire took deep breaths and searched the horizon for her husband. With each passing minute, his figure became smaller and smaller. It was then she realized, not only was the tide coming in, but the boat was drifting out. Could the rising tide have lifted the anchor?

The radios and their phones were on the boat. She got back to her feet. The boat was now on the edge of the turquoise circle. Beyond that ring, the waters deepened. Pacing a track in the sand, Claire spoke reassuringly to their child, “It’ll be all right. Your father’s a good swimmer. He can do this. He can save us.”

Were her words meant to comfort the little life within her or to comfort her? Claire didn’t know. She wanted to scream his name, call him back, have him beside her, but she knew he’d never hear her. She could yell until she was hoarse, but no one could hear her.

The sun sank lower, and Claire refused to move. Sometimes she’d imagine she saw the boat coming toward her, and then she’d blink and it would be gone. Her mind went all directions: Would—could she survive? Would anyone find her? Was Tony still swimming? How long had it been?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

SOPHIA WAITED INSIDE the downtown Iowa City Restaurant, shivering inside her thick wool coat. Growing up on the East Coast, she wasn't unaccustomed to cold; however, there was something excessively bitter about the Iowa December wind. As she watched the snowflakes swirl through the air beyond the windows, she buried her hands deeper into the pockets of her coat. The gray skies weren't producing enough snow to cover the drab ground, just enough to exacerbate her spirits. Experience told her that December was only the beginning of the miserable cold. Iowa would get worse before it got better. I wish we were back in California. Even Sophia was surprised by the thought. She never would've imagined considering the West Coast home.

Straightening her neck, Sophia encouraged herself, if I can have those thoughts about Santa Clara, maybe one day I'll be able to consider this home. It was more wishful thinking, but she was trying. After all, things were going very well for Derek.

He loved his new job, even with the challenges Rawlings Industries faced. Each evening, when he'd return home to their new house, Sophia saw pride in her husband's eyes. She knew he was a hard worker, yet to be singled out by Anthony Rawlings, even under such strange circumstances, Derek considered it his noble duty to help this company stay afloat.

Timothy Bronson took a personal interest in Derek. Sophia thought it was funny how Tim and Derek were so close in age, while many of the others she'd met at the Rawlings corporate headquarters were older, probably closer to Mr. Rawlings' age. Tim was forming his personal team of consultants, men and women with fresh ideas ready to take on the challenges of a struggling

Fortune 500, multibillion dollar conglomerate. He wanted people willing to face cameras, the press, and boards of directors, people who when confronted would stand firm in the belief that Rawlings Industries *will* survive. It was likely that very soon, the SEC, Securities Exchange Commission, would be investigating Rawlings Industries. Many times, personal wrongdoings by high ranking business people translated to professional wrongdoing. Tim was determined that Rawlings Industries would make it through such an investigation. In the process, he declared that not only would every division be transparent, but without blemish. The founder and CEO may be missing, and there may be continued allegations regarding issues in his personal life; however, the company Anthony Rawlings started from nothing was steadfast.

Claire Nichols' sister and brother-in-law continued to cause Rawlings Industries headaches. An entire division of the Rawlings' legal team, whom Derek explained *should* be concentrating on company matters, was fully devoted to Anthony Rawlings' personal legal issues. To date, they'd managed to stall production of Claire Nichols' memoirs, but Derek said they probably couldn't be delayed much longer. Apparently, it was a publication tactic from the Rawlings' team. Traditionally, books released near the holidays don't fare well in sales. Knowing they'd eventually lose the war, the legal division's plan was to continue the fight until a time when the release would be theoretically less successful.

In this instance, Sophia questioned their tactics. As an artist, she knew publicity was publicity. The additional exposure the memoirs received from the suits and countersuits would likely propel the book *My Life as It Didn't Appear* to number one in no time.

Thankfully, Iowa wasn't as backwards as Sophia had feared. The Quad Cities and the universities all helped to make it more than a large cornfield thousands of miles away from the nearest coast. Sophia had met many of the people in Derek's new circles. Their wives were nice. Sophia especially liked Sue, Tim's wife; however, with one small child and one on the way, their priorities were considerably different. Sophia and Derek discussed children and the possibility was there. Right now, he needed to concentrate on work. Sophia knew that when she had a child, she wanted to do it for the right reason. Being lonely in a new state, in her opinion, wasn't the right reason.

Deep down, Sophia knew that before she became a parent, she needed to work through some personal thoughts and feelings regarding her birth parents. Since the phone call back in California, Sophia hadn't heard from the woman claiming to be her mother. Of course, she had told her not to call. Sometimes she'd wonder about the woman. Was she still married to Sophia's father? Was she ever married to him? If they're not together, did she know where he was? What about siblings? Did she have any?

The Rossis were always open about her adoption; it never bothered

Sophia—until they were gone. While they were alive, they did everything to fill her life with all the love and support parents do. Perhaps now that they're gone, it was a void Sophia subconsciously wanted filled; however, how did she know if the woman from the phone call was capable of filling that void?

Sophia wasn't completely without friends. She'd met an acquaintance, repeatedly, at different venues. Although admittedly, Marie was slightly eccentric, Sophia found her presence comforting. There was something familiar about the woman that Sophia couldn't pin-point. With time, when at gallery openings or invitation-only showings, Sophia found herself scanning the crowd for the older woman's face. With so many changes, Marie seemed to be a recurring constant; therefore, when Marie invited Sophia to lunch at the *Atlas* on Iowa Ave, near the University of Iowa's campus, Sophia gladly accepted. She decided that it was nice to have someone to talk with, someone with similar interests.

"Can you believe how cold that wind is today?" Marie's voice pulled Sophia from her internal thoughts.

Smiling, Sophia shook her head. "No! I know we didn't live out in California for very long, but I miss the climate out there. I liked the more constant temperature."

Marie laughed. "Oh, my dear, this is just the beginning; wait until the snow really starts to fly."

After settling at a table, they chatted about nothing in particular. It was nice to forget the wind outside, the move to a new state, and just talk. Marie's gray eyes gave Sophia a sense of warmth she didn't understand. As an artist, she often dissected people's faces without realizing she was doing it. Sophia saw sadness and loss in Marie's eyes; however, there was also a spark of excitement that tugged at her like a magnet. When Marie would suggest a new exhibit or a museum, the ideas seemed extraordinarily inviting. In some ways, it was like a mirror at a circus. Marie's eyes reminded her of her own, yet they were different: complicated, multi-tasking. Sophia couldn't put her finger on it... nevertheless, she was drawn, like a moth to a flame.

"Did you enjoy your trip out east for Thanksgiving?"

Sophia nodded. "We did. It was short, but it was nice to see my in-laws."

"Since you visited your husband's parents for Thanksgiving, will you be traveling to your parents for Christmas?"

Sophia looked down. "No."

Reassuringly, Marie's hand covered Sophia's. "I'm sorry, did I say something upsetting?"

"It's all right. It's just that... my parents are no longer with us."

"Oh, my dear, I'm so very sorry. I won't pry."

Forcing a smile, Sophia sat straighter. "Really, it's all right. I've had wonderful parents, but they've only recently passed away, late last summer. It

was a car accident.”

Marie shook her head. “I had no idea. I’m truly sorry.”

“Oh, my in-laws have been wonderful. It just takes time.”

“Now, your husband, Derek, is that his name?”

Sophia nodded.

“Does he have siblings?”

Sophia went on to describe Derek’s family: he’s an only child. His parents were very anxious for them to add a branch or two to the family tree.

“How do you feel about that?” Marie asked.

Shrugging her shoulders, Sophia said, “We’ve been talking.”

Marie grinned. “I’m sure you know that’s not how it happens.”

Sophia’s cheeks reddened. “Yes, I believe my mother gave me that talk, when I was quite young.”

After lunch, they walked through some of the college shops before parting for the afternoon. Later, when Sophia told Derek about her day, she wouldn’t remember the exact words of their conversation, only that it flowed without effort.

With all Derek had happening with his new responsibilities, Sophia knew that he was pleased that she was getting out of the house and meeting people.



As THE SUN set below the horizon, and the lingering shadows cast their last shades of what might have been onto the isolated beach, a hand fell to Claire’s shoulder.

At first, she hesitated, unsure if the connection was real or imagined. When she could no longer decipher, Claire turned to see the face, the eyes, the man for whom she’d prayed.

Claire’s resolve melted with his touch. The sobs she’d been suppressing erupted as Tony pulled her up to his embrace.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you...” Her words were barely audible behind the bellowing cries.

“Shhhh...” If he hadn’t been holding her, Claire wasn’t sure she’d have been able to stand. As she nestled near, his bare chest quivered with exertion. After a moment, they settled on the soft, warm sand.

“Did you ever reach the boat? Or did you finally swim back?” Claire asked, realizing the boat wasn’t in sight.

“It’s anchored around the bend.” He squeezed her tighter. “Believe me, I considered turning around, but I didn’t know which way was shorter the longer I swam; then, as I came back, I couldn’t tell which beach was which.”

“How long did you swim?”

Tony shook his head as a tired grin emerged across his lips. “A lot longer than I’d planned.”

She buried her head into his shoulder. “I kept praying and telling our baby you were safe, but...” The tears came back.

Smoothing her hair, he explained, “I contacted Francis. He knows where we are. He recommended we spend the night on the boat.”

“On the boat?” Claire questioned.

“Yes, we don’t want to be separated from it again, and there’s a small bed in the cabin under the deck.”

Claire nodded. She’d been below in the boat before. It was a calmer ride if the seas were rough.

“In the morning, when the sun comes up, I’ll get you home. I promise.”

She looked up to his tired eyes. “I don’t care where I am, as long as you’re there.” She struggled to stand. “Let’s go. You must be exhausted.”

Taking what was left of Madeline’s lunch-time feast, they walked the shore around the bend. With the silver glow of moonlight, Claire saw the boat only a short way out, bobbing silently in the virtually calm sea.

When they were both on board, Tony lifted the anchors and took them into slightly deeper water. “When the tide goes down, we don’t want to be marooned,” he explained.

Claire grinned. “I’m impressed. Who would have ever imagined Anthony Rawlings learning the ins and outs of marine navigation?”

Lowering the anchors once again, Tony purposely left slack in the rope. When he looked up and saw Claire’s questioning emerald eyes, he added, “See, Francis so nicely mentioned perhaps I didn’t do that the first time.” Somewhat sheepishly, he added, “He’s right, I didn’t.”

She reached for Tony’s cheek. “I’ve said it before, and I still believe it’s true, you can teach—”

Tony interrupted, “My love, now that the adrenaline is gone, I definitely feel like that *old dog*. Let’s go below and get some sleep before the sun rises.”

If the cabin had been truly meant for sleeping, the designers didn’t plan for it to be shared by a 6’6” man and a pregnant woman. Regardless, Claire and Tony worked their way into the small space. The rhythmic bobbing of the boat was surprisingly comforting as Claire maneuvered herself in an effort to become comfortable. Once they were settled, Tony said, “Do you know what this reminds me of?”

“Sardines?”

She heard his laugh in the dark cabin. “No, I was thinking of our trip to Europe—the yacht on the Mediterranean.”

Her mind went back in time. It seemed like two other people in a different life. “I suppose if I pretend this four inch foam mattress is really a king-sized bed and the ceiling is six feet above my head instead of two—”

Tony's lips found hers, stopping her words. "Yes, there are a few differences." Trailing the tips of his fingers along her shoulder and down her midsection as Claire lay on her side facing him, he continued, "Perhaps it's the rocking of the waves, or the sweet sound of your breathing in my ear, regardless, it reminds me of then."

"I suppose I can see a few similarities."

"One day, one day we'll go back, and the yacht we rent will have enough room for all of our children."

Fighting once again to relieve the pressure in her lower back, Claire replied, "Children? I'm pretty sure the ultrasounds have only shown one baby."

His voice fought the exhaustion to which his body had already surrendered. "Oh, but think how much fun it will be to create more..."

When his words turned to breathing, Claire kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear, "Good night, Tony."

He may have said it was her breathing that reminded him of the past, but it was his breathing that gave her hope for their future. Only hours earlier, the world turned gray, color was gone, now in the darkness of the boat's cabin, Claire remembered the colors of the flowers Tony had picked. She saw the blue of the sunlit ocean and the greens of the plants. It didn't matter that they weren't in their bed or their room, all that mattered was that he was safe. She was safe, and they were together.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Intuition will tell the thinking mind where to look next.

—Jonas Salk

*H*ARRY CONFERRED AGAIN with the Boston field office. Since their face-to-face meeting almost a month ago, Agent Baldwin was again fully assigned to the Sherman Nichols/Anthony Rawlings case; however, now it had the added dimension of Catherine Marie London Rawls. As much as Harry personally hated to admit that Rawlings' cooperation and confessions fit perfectly into the Harry's timeline, gaps still existed.

During his confessions, Rawlings recalled the death of his parents. He claimed an irrational commitment to his grandfather as his reason for protecting Catherine London Rawls. His parents were gone; therefore, as a tribute to his grandfather, he did what he could do to save London from a life in prison. At the time, he believed his parents' deaths were the result of an *accident*—a discussion that became heated and grew out of control. He knew at the time, there was a history of bad blood between Catherine and his parents. After his father, Samuel, had successfully voided Nathaniel and Catherine's marriage, she'd been pushed to her limit. Rawlings tried to reach his parents first, hoping to utilize his stellar negotiation skills. He failed, not in the negotiation, in reaching his parents before Catherine.

Rawlings recounted personal knowledge of his grandfather's mission: to make the people responsible for his incarceration *and* their families pay. The first person on their list was *Sherman Nichols*; however, by the time Rawlings had the money to fulfill Nathaniel's vendetta, Sherman and his wife had already passed. The next person was *Jordon Nichols*, Sherman's son. According to Rawlings, there was a network of connections which when utilized and well-compensated, would provide any target with an untraceable deadly accident. He didn't know the details, didn't have time for them, but

agreed to supply the money. Rawlings and Catherine discussed the plan ad nauseam. Rawlings willingly admitted a sense of obligation to fulfill his grandfather's agenda. As an entrepreneur and businessman, he would and could affect the lives of others; however, giving the order to take a life was significant, even for him. Rawlings claimed to have procrastinated with that order, making London wait even though she protested.

According to his confession, Rawlings claimed there were other parts to the plan which he told Catherine needed to be confirmed before he'd authorize the Nichols' demise. One such task was securing the scholarship for Valparaiso University. Before Rawlings finally agreed to the deal, fate stepped in. The Nichols' car crashed in a true *accident*.

The other family that was unknowingly involved in the vendetta was that of Jonathon Burke, the securities officer who helped build the FBI case on Nathaniel. During the span of time between Nathaniel's death and Rawlings ability to financially fulfill the vendetta, Burke also died of natural causes. The next in line was Allison Burke Mason, Burke's only child. Certain that fate wouldn't be as kind as to help their cause again—Rawlings agreed to pay the money to ensure her demise. The network was utilized. Rawlings claimed that he didn't know the details of the impending accident until after it occurred. Both Allison and her husband perished.

These were people completely off the FBI's radar. Upon further investigation, Harry learned the Masons' deaths had been officially ruled *accidental*—a tragic fall from a trail, while hiking in the Grand Teton National Park. If Rawlings hadn't admitted to knowledge of this incident, it would never have been found. Each year, about 150 people die in national parks. Most went underreported; some visitors slipped on wet trails or leaned too far over guardrails. Regardless of the incident, they made poor publicity for the nation's national parks and received little attention. Up until that moment, no one suspected that the death of Jonathon Burke's only daughter, Allison, and her husband were anything other than a true *accident*.

Soon, the FBI would contact their niece, their only surviving relative, and seek permission to exhume their graves. Tissue samples were needed to confirm the presence of *actaea pachypoda*.

The next people on Rawlings' and London's list were Emily and Claire Nichols. This was the next generation: children of children of children. Rawlings admitted to watching Claire off and on for years. He didn't know why he was obsessed, but he was. Although a fatal accident had always been the plan, Rawlings found it unacceptable. He told Catherine that there were some fates worse than death and created the perfect storm of events for what he assumed would be Claire's worse fate. It involved orchestrating circumstances in her life which would lead to Claire's need for money—his one expendable asset. He coordinated her disappearance, with the intent to

allow Claire to *work off* her family's debt while discrediting her credibility at the same time. When he was done, her arrest, humiliation, and incarceration would secure the payment of her debt and allow her to live. He didn't foresee emotions derailing his plan.

Reading Rawlings' account of his *acquisition* nauseated Harry. He couldn't help but compare it to hearing Claire's account months earlier. The difference was the emotion. Claire recounted a private hell: Rawlings recited a well-calculated plan.

Claire also answered FBI questions. Her accounts mirrored Rawlings. He'd confessed everything to her before the questioning. Never once did either one of them mention *actaea pachypoda*, or any connection to poison. Months ago, Harry petitioned for blood samples from Jordon Nichols and Simon Johnson. His requests finally came through. It took longer than he expected, which didn't matter. Since Claire and Rawlings were playing house somewhere in the South Pacific, time wasn't an issue. The results were irrefutable: Jordon Nichols' retained blood sample tested positive for *actaea pachypoda*. Simon Johnson's did not.

Interestingly, the transcripts of Rawlings' admissions, which Agent Jackson shared with Harry, also contained information on Simon Johnson. He wasn't associated with the Sherman Nichols' case, yet Rawlings included Johnson in his list of confessions. He stated Johnson's demise was simply a byproduct of learning what was possible. Rawlings had learned it was possible to make people disappear. His first choice was by business. If that didn't work, then there was always plan B. Rawlings utilized the network he'd discovered years ago. This time, he willingly paid the money to have Simon's plane altered, forcing it to cease functioning in-flight. Rawlings knew Johnson was an accomplished pilot and said he wasn't sure if Johnson would be able to maneuver out of the situation; nonetheless, he paid to have a job done.

When the case began, Harry thought verification would give him peace. He was wrong. It was just as Amber had said: Rawlings was still out there, and Simon was still dead. There was something else. Harry's law enforcement gut wouldn't drop his suspicions. The evidence didn't match. The NTSB's report indisputably claimed Simon's plane was in topnotch inspection worthy condition. No evidence of tampering was found during their investigation. Why would Rawlings confess to a crime he didn't commit?

And Jordon Nichols? Harry had more questions than answers. Why would Rawlings admit to knowing about the plan, claim it was never fulfilled, yet have him poisoned? Could it be that Rawlings was trying to mislead Claire? But why plan an auto accident if poisoning were already on the agenda? Was Rawlings just that big on overkill—literally, or was there more?

The back-alley attack and threat to Harry's family also bothered Harry.

Why would Rawlings want him off the case and threaten Harry's child, if he were planning on confessing everything?

Of course there was still London. Perhaps she was the one threatening Harry. Claire said she threatened her child. Did she want him off the case? How did she even know he was on the case? All of the interaction with London alluded to her being blissfully unaware that she was under suspicion. According to Marcus Evergreen, London was only cognizant of the case against Rawlings for the possible recent abduction of Claire Nichols.

The entire country was aware of such allegations. After all, John and Emily Vandersol were still pursuing that angle to anyone who'd listen.



CLAIRE ROLLED ON the large bed, relishing the soft sheets against her skin. After their campout in the cabin of the boat a few weeks ago, their bed was much more comfortable. Smiling, she reached for the man whose warmth filled her days and nights. Instead, her touch met cool satin. Lingering in her cocoon, she enjoyed the ceiling fan's gentle breeze as it moved the humid air around the grand bedroom. When she closed her eyes, the scent of his cologne permeated her senses. Beyond her haven, she heard the sounds of morning: birds singing their morning wake-up songs and the ever present surf.

Forcing herself from the heavenly bubble, she reached for her robe and walked toward the veranda. A veil of tropical vegetation filtered the sun's sultry penetration. Stepping around the fragrant flowers and large, lush leaves, she took in the marvelous view. Even after over two months, it still took her breath away. Leaning against the folding wall, she relished the endless blue sky with wisps of white filling the space above the horizon. On most mornings, turquoise dominated. Sometimes, if the sun were just right, the waves sparkled fluorescent. Farther out, away from the shore and her paradise, the waters darkened. The blue became indigo, purple, or gray, often reminding her of the fog-covered mountains near Palo Alto.

Wearing a white bikini and white lace cover up, she made her way to the front lanai. As her bare feet padded across the smooth bamboo floor, Madeline's friendly rich voice brought her to present. "Madame el, may I bring you tea?"

Claire smiled, "Yes, Madeline, thank you, but please, no food. I'm not hungry."

"No, Madame el, you must eat. I'll bring you muffins and fresh fruit."

Claire shook her head—arguing would be pointless. She settled into the cushioned lounge chair, elevated her feet, turned on her iPad, and waited for the daily news to load. It wasn't the first story to appear on her homepage, but

her own picture immediately caught Claire's attention. She clicked and read the title:

Family Files Charges against Iowa City Police Department, Prosecutor, and Anthony Rawlings.

Shaking her head, Claire read:

Associated Press—John and Emily Vandersol have filed formal charges against the Iowa City Police Department, Marcus Evergreen, I.C. Prosecutor, and Anthony Rawlings (in absentia).

Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol have requested a hearing based on evidence discovered at the home of Anthony Rawlings. The request states the evidence, currently undisclosed, is sufficient to establish probable cause against Anthony Rawlings. The Vandersols also charge Mr. Rawlings with extortion. “Anyone else would be sitting in jail. It’s only because of his wealth and influence that ICPD and Mr. Evergreen have not filed charges. Their delay is corruption.” (Another of the many charges listed). The Vandersols claim the prosecutor and police department worked together to protect Anthony Rawlings. In doing so, the ICPD jeopardized the investigation of Ms. Claire Nichols’ disappearance. Mrs. Vandersol also charged Mr. Rawlings (in absentia) with the disappearance and possible death of her unborn niece or nephew.

Claire’s hand rubbed her very large midsection. Now in her thirty-fifth week, she smiled, knowing that no harm had come to her unborn child. She honestly didn’t believe that would be the case if she’d remained at Catherine’s disposal. She continued reading:

Ms. Nichols was last seen September 4, 2013. Mr. Anthony Rawlings disappeared after his private plane made an emergency landing in the Appalachian Mountains, September 21, 2013. The FBI will not confirm or deny the survival of Mr. Rawlings following this incident. The FBI refused

additional comments claiming an ongoing investigation. Currently, no charges have been filed.

Rawlings Industries is currently operating with a temporary CEO and the same board of directors. It has been speculated that the pending charges will force the SEC to investigate Rawlings Industries. Since September the share price has dropped from \$142.37 to \$86.84 at last call.

Despite her reading material, when Claire realized she'd eaten all of Madeline's food, a smile appeared on her face. Madeline's voice came above the sound of surf. "Madame el, may I get you more tea or perhaps some water?"

"Madeline, I'd love some water. It's getting hotter by the minute."

"Then perhaps you should be in the water?" Her husband's rich, husky voice came from behind. She couldn't see the handsome source, yet instantaneously her neck tensed and goose bumps appeared on her arms and legs. It amazed Claire how something as benign as a voice could continue to incite such a visceral response.

Madeline saw Claire's reaction and laughed, which in turn, made Claire giggle. Claire loved Madeline's laugh, so deep and rich, just like her voice. "Madame el, I will bring you some water, and Monsieur?"

"Madeline, I'd like some coffee, please." Tony bowed toward the woman.

Laughing at his gesture, Madeline replied, "Why, of course. I'll bring it out soon." With that, she disappeared, leaving the lady and gentleman of the house alone.

Tony reached for Claire's shoulders and gently massaged. Closing her eyes, she sighed momentarily lost in his touch. His lips unexpectedly met her exposed neck, causing goose bumps to erupt up and down her arms and legs. His baritone voice brought her back to reality. "My dear, your shoulders are tense. You saw it, didn't you?"

"Yes."

He nuzzled her neck. "I had hoped to make it home before you did."

"Because..." She paused. "...you wanted to stop me from seeing it?"

Still massaging her shoulders, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "No, I wanted to be here while you read it."

Her shoulders relaxed. "I just wish John and Emily would back off. It's hurting Rawlings Industries."

"We'll be alright."

She inhaled. "I know. I understand their ignorance is best, but I can still wish for Iowa."

He came around in front of her, sat on the lounge chair near her tanned,

shapely legs and caressed the silky skin of her thighs. “We’ll get there again. I promise. First, we have a little one who needs to join us.”

Claire reached for his hand. “It’s getting closer every day.” She placed his hand on her hard midsection.

“Why is it so hard?”

“I think it’s one of those contractions, not the real ones: Braxton Hicks. Remember Dr. Gilbert told us about them? They’re happening with more regularity.”

“Do they hurt?”

Claire loved the concern in his voice. “No. They just feel strange.”

“How will you know when they’re real?”

She shrugged. “From everything I’ve read, I’ll know when they are real.”

His lips engaged hers. It wasn’t the fervent passion they were known to share. Instead, Claire felt reassured that Tony would be by her side as they welcomed their child into the world. He removed his shirt, revealing his tanned abs, swim trunks, and a mixture of dark and white chest hair. Finally, he found his voice. “Are you up for a swim?”

She smiled. “I just ate. Aren’t I supposed to wait for a half an hour?”

“I promise to keep you from drowning.”

His devilish grin captivated her once again, rendering her defenseless to his desires. With a smirk, she replied, “I think I should’ve learned a long time ago not to trust you.”

He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head to the side. His tone held a hint of amusement as he leaned toward her. “I should’ve learned: I’m helpless to your beautiful emerald eyes.” Her fingers threaded through the curls on his chest as her gaze lingered on his chocolate eyes.

In the pool, Claire held tightly to Tony’s shoulders relishing the coolness of the water. Her thoughts went back to the article and her sister and brother-in-law. “I’m so sorry about John and Emily. I hate what they’re doing to Rawlings Industries.”

“I’ve been watching it too. It seems to me that Tim is doing an excellent job of building confidence in Rawlings Industries from within. He needs that inside support to get the support outside the company. I’ve always had a good feeling about him.”

“I remember you telling me that, a million years ago, when we went to the Simmons’ barbecue.”

Tony laughed. “That was a million years ago, wasn’t it?”

Laying her head against his shoulder, she nodded. “It sure seems like it. Is there any new information from Phil or Agent Jackson?”

“Well,” he hesitated, causing Claire to look up. Although she couldn’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses, from his secretive smile she knew he was up to something.

“What?”

“Phil said he’s been released from his current job. He doesn’t believe Sophia’s in any danger. Catherine has worked very hard to introduce and include herself into Sophia’s life.”

“Then I’d say she’s in danger.” Claire added quickly, “But not enough for you to go protect her. I need you here.”

“Yes, you do. You may be pleased to learn who else will be here... let’s say for your Christmas present.”

Closing her eyes, Claire sighed. “A little Claire or a little Tony would be the best present. I’ve loved most of this. It’s just lately, I’m so tired and uncomfortable.”

“We really do need to pin down some names. I’m not comfortable with either a little me or a little you?” He smirked. “You see, I really like the big you, and when I think of the name *Claire*, the feelings that ensue are totally inappropriate for my daughter.”

“Big?”

Laughing. “You know what I mean. Now first, back to your Christmas present.”

“Yes?”

“Well, it won’t be the exact one. Phil can’t exactly ask Catherine to go through our bedroom, but he did see your wedding band. After all, he’s the one who bought it back and brought it to me.”

Claire’s voice perked up. “You’re getting me a wedding band for Christmas?”

“More than that, Phil will be here in less than a week to deliver it. I thought you might enjoy company, and since he’s the only one we can have, my choices were limited.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love it! Thank you.” Then she realized. “But wait, what can I get *you* for Christmas?”

Kissing her lips, he said, “I’m not picky. A girl or a boy would be fine.”

“I’m not due until the second week of January. Will you take your gift late?”

“Only under one stipulation.”

“So, now there are stipulations on gifts?”

“Yes, my dear, and before you start with that beautiful, smart mouth of yours, let me say that this one isn’t debatable. I must insist upon it.”

She shrugged. “Rather demanding, but I guess I’m used to it. What do you want?”

“That nothing happens to you while my gift arrives. I’ve read a few things too. I thought maybe if Phil were here, if we need anything, well, the man is very resourceful.”

“I’ll be fine.” She kissed his cheek. “But I love that you’re concerned.”

“My dear, *you* are my only concern.”

Claire felt the tightening sensation once again. “Oh, I think someone else wants to be your concern, too.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Truth, like gold, is to be obtained not by its growth, but by washing away from it all that is not gold.

—Count Leo Tolstoy

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EPTEMBER 13, 2016

Last night, I was too shocked to write. I had to think about what happened, mull it over, and figure it out. By the time I got Claire back to the facility, she was no longer speaking. I don't understand. She was still hearing me; every now and then her eyes would register and lock onto mine. Then she'd look away.

I've decided she gave me a test. She knows that I know her story. Her recognition of her surroundings is new; it didn't exist last month, week, or even a day ago. If she isn't ready to share this revelation with others, I guess it isn't my place to divulge it. I just hate that I won't be around to help her move beyond this milestone.

I'm off to my last day. I've decided that I owe it to Claire to allow Emily to fire me. My husband reminded me last night that I've been in violation of their restraining order. I'd actually forgotten that—which is in a way comical. This whole exercise has morphed through so many phases—curiosity, investigative reporting, recognition of guilt, and finally, a deep agonizing friendship. No one will believe that I'd given up the reporting to help Claire. At least, as I sit in jail, I'll know the truth.



CLAIRE PACED THE trek she'd created next to her bed. Since she'd found her voice last night, she was anxious to use it. Yes, she considered speaking to some of the other people, but she was afraid. There were so many things she

couldn't recall, so many voids, and so many things that didn't make sense. It was painfully obvious: this *facility*, as Meredith called it, was a *mental* facility. She had recollections of discussions about that. Each day, more memories surfaced. Some were clearer than others. She remembered Tony telling her that the offer of a mental facility was to protect her. Was that why she was here? Was she being protected?

That's why she needed to talk with Meredith. Claire's speed increased as she walked exactly six steps one way, turned, and stepped six paces the other way. She didn't mean to count, but behind her thoughts, concerns, questions, she heard the numbers: *one, two, three, four, five, six—turn—one, two...*

There wasn't a clock in the drab room. As she truly looked around, there was nothing. No pictures, no personal items, nothing that gave the room her personality. Claire wondered how long she'd been there... *two, three, four, five, six—turn...* The only indication of time was the gray in her hair, and what did that tell her? ... *five, six—turn... one...*

Claire heard the door open. She wanted to look, but what if it wasn't Meredith? She wasn't prepared to speak with anyone else.

"Hi, Claire, it's me, Meredith."

She wanted to turn, but she was only on *two*. Claire waited until it was time to turn. That was a better time to break the cycle; however, by the time the voice behind her thoughts said *turn*, Meredith was talking again, "...when I got here. They told me you were all right after our late night. I think that was their way of reminding me not to do that again. They also said there'd been no changes with you."

Claire turned toward Meredith's voice. She wanted to look up and see her friend's eyes. No, she didn't want to see Meredith's eyes. She wanted to see Tony's. As she forced her glance toward Meredith's face, she saw dark blue irises. Her knees weakened. It wasn't the dark brown she sought, but it was color! For so long, there'd been no color. Inhaling deeply, she smelled the food that Meredith had placed on the table. If she ate it fast, they could go outside. If they went outside, she could ask her questions. It was too risky talking in here.

"Why, Claire? Why haven't they noticed any changes?"

She didn't answer; instead, she walked to the table, uncovered the dish, found her silverware, and began eating. Each bite she took faster and faster.

"Slow down; I can't have you choking on my watch. I'm already on probation for our late night escapades."

It wasn't funny. Claire knew she was supposed to be concerned about appearances. Following rules and behaving was essential for appearances; however, listening to Meredith talk about breaking rules made her smile. It was either that, or the blue in her eyes. All the people around the facility wore white scrubs. Well, except for Emily, the doctors, and therapists. Suddenly,

more than food, Claire wanted *color*. Wasn't that an odd request? Maybe that was what being crazy was all about, seeing things differently and wanting things that others didn't realize were gone.

When her plate was clean, Claire stood and went to the closet for her jacket. The voice that had been counting told her to look down. She knew to obey; disobeying could have negative consequences, but hadn't Meredith just been talking about breaking rules? Shyly, Claire lifted her eyes. There was Meredith watching her. Before she could stop it, her lips morphed into a smile. The rush was intoxicating. The voice would be mad; however, if Tony wasn't going to visit anymore, Claire wanted to talk with her friend.



MEREDITH ASKED, "Do you want to walk by yourself?" The panic in Claire's eyes was enough of an answer. Meredith gently tucked Claire's hand into the crook of her arm and led her toward the outside. As she did, she spoke calmly about the weather and the changing leaves. The entire trip down the corridor, through the multiple doors, along the perimeter of the cafeteria, Claire kept her eyes downcast and walked in step.

Dr. Fairfield had instructed the staff to be less accommodating, to wait and see if Claire would recognize her needs, and then ask to have them fulfilled. In Claire's excitement to go outdoors, Meredith noticed she'd forgotten the sunglasses. That was all right, Meredith had remembered. As they walked toward the outside doors, Meredith wondered if she should've waited for Claire to *ask* to go outside; however, it seemed that when Claire got her own jacket, it was more of a request than she'd previously made. Dr. Fairfield may not agree, but to Meredith it was enough of a request to propel Meredith to walk the ends of the earth if Claire so desired.

When they stepped into the courtyard, Claire lifted her face and momentarily basked in the sunshine. At that moment, she opened her eyes and immediately closed them. Turning her face toward Meredith, Claire's eyes made the unspoken request. The friend in her wanted to reach in her pocket and hand her the glasses; instead, she contemplated this being her last chance to help Claire and placed her hand over Claire's and walked forward. When Claire's steps stopped, Meredith asked, "What's the matter? I thought you wanted to go for a walk."



CLAIRE KEPT HER eyes half open and half shut. That action should've been

enough to tell Meredith what she needed; however, instead of helping, Meredith continued walking. When Claire didn't move, Meredith said, "If there's something you need, just ask."

Oh, Claire had heard that before; she knew this routine. She also reasoned, if Meredith was using Tony's words, it couldn't be against Tony's rules to ask. Nearing her friend's ear, she whispered, "Sunglasses."

Claire then remembered Tony's requirements from a long time ago. He'd never acquiesce to one word. If Claire wanted something she needed to ask—in the form of a request. Just now, she hadn't asked. Looking from side to side, being sure no one was listening, she cleared her throat and proceeded, "Did you bring them?" "Can" "I" "please" "wear them?" Her words didn't truly form a sentence, more phrases glued together with silence.

Meredith didn't answer. She reached into the pocket of her white scrubs and removed the sunglasses. Once again, Claire let her smile shine and reached for the glasses. Although Meredith didn't require it, after they'd walked a short distance, Claire said, "Thank you."

It was the most she'd said, or wanted to say since before she could remember. By the time they reached the far side of the courtyard, Claire was ready to ask the question she knew would take away her happiness.

Although the sun was bright, the breeze blew with cooler gusts than the day before. It didn't bother Claire. She actually appreciated it. The colder weather kept others from going outside; they were alone in this remote area of the grounds. Looking down, Claire summoned the little bit of strength she'd acquired throughout the day. She'd silently practiced her question a hundred different ways. In her mind, it started with an eloquent preamble. Now that the opportunity was present, she blurted the words she could no longer contain, "Is Nichol... dead?"

Before Meredith could respond, the counting voice came back loud and clear. Claire had to obey; it was the only way to make it quiet.



MEREDITH MOMENTARILY STARED. Why would Claire think Nichol was dead? Her heart broke. Hadn't Emily told her anything?

The focused, smiling woman evaporated before her eyes. Claire began pacing, her eyes seeing something no one else could. Meredith reached for her arm. This time, she didn't back down when the determined expression turned toward her, she answered Claire's question, "No! Claire, your daughter's alive! She's beautiful and healthy."



CLAIRE COLLAPSED INTO Meredith's embrace. Burying her face into Meredith's lapel, she willingly accepted her friend's comfort. Trying to quiet the counting, Claire concentrated on Meredith's words. Slowly, they morphed from words to a murmur and back to words. Yes, she'd missed some of what Meredith had said, but now she was listening, "...brown hair and beautiful brown eyes. Emily and John have been taking care of her. Claire you should be so proud."

Timidly, she faced the reality of her insanity. If that wasn't an oxymoron she didn't know what was. Wiping her eyes on the tissue Meredith offered, Claire asked, "How old? I can't remember" "how long I've been here?" Fighting the tears she added, "I just don't know" "It's blurry."

Holding Claire's hands, Meredith answered, "She'll be three in December." With a look of concern, she added, "This is September."

It was as if the wind had been knocked from Claire's chest. Two years! She'd missed two years of her daughter's life. Her knees buckled, and Claire sunk to the ground. This time, Meredith didn't instruct her to rise. No, she too moved to the cold, hard earth and sat knee to knee.

"I can't imagine what you're thinking. I've only seen her a few times. Emily and John seem to be doing a great job. They've also worked very hard to keep her out of the public eye." Claire feigned a smile as tears coated her cheeks, and she nodded. Meredith continued, "They've done a very good job taking care of you, too."

"Why hasn't" "anyone mentioned her" "or To—" Claire couldn't make herself say his name aloud.

"We aren't allowed to say anything about your previous life, which includes names."

"Whose rules?" "The doctors'?"

"They thought that they were helping you."

Claire sat quietly and thought pensively about her family. That family was now with her sister and brother-in-law. She wouldn't ask about Tony. She couldn't bear to hear the truth of what she'd done. Why else would they lock her up in this place? "Thank you" "For being honest" "with me."

Smiling, Meredith answered, "Thank you for talking to me. I'm not sorry that I've broken their rules, if it's helped you."

Claire nodded. "I want to be better. I'm not sure what's real and what's not." She looked back toward the ground. It hadn't rained in some time, and below the blades of grass the earth was cracked. "If I tell you something" "You'll think I'm crazy" Claire giggled. "But then, I am" "aren't I?"

Meredith squeezed Claire's hand, "Sometimes I wonder who's really sane. What do you want to tell me?"

"Up until a short time ago" "he'd come visit me."



MEREDITH DIDN'T KNOW what to say. She knew that was impossible. Claire must have imagined his visits. Meredith also believed this confession would be better shared with a doctor or a therapist. Perhaps her departure would be beneficial and force Claire to talk to the appropriate people. Meredith didn't comment. Instead, she nodded.

Claire continued, "He didn't come to that room" "We'd be in other places" Her voice momentarily hardened. "I don't like that room" "No color!"

Meredith smiled, "I agree. Why don't you tell Emily you want color?"

Although her eyes were covered with the sunglasses, whose need with the setting of the sun had diminished by each minute, they became terrified at the mention of *telling Emily*.

Meredith soothed, "You don't have to talk to anyone you don't want to. I won't say anything. You decide when you're ready to talk to the others. I know when you do, they'll be thrilled."

Claire's breathing calmed. "Maybe just you, right now?" "You're the only one who says *his* name."

"What can I say, I'm a bad influence. I've never been good at following rules."

Claire turned away, her voice was only a whisper. "I've been too good."

That night, Meredith returned Claire to her room before the alarms sounded and the reinforcements came. She debated telling Claire about her impending meeting. Her good sense told her to stay quiet. The poor woman had dealt with enough, but as she was about to say good night, Meredith worried what Claire would think that when she didn't return, it was because she didn't want to. And since there was a chance that tomorrow morning, she'd be escorted from Everwood in police custody, Meredith couldn't allow Claire to think she'd abandoned her.

Looking around the colorless room, Meredith made a promise to herself. If by some miracle she made it through tomorrow, she'd buy Claire pictures, drapes, and a bedspread with color.

"Claire, what's your favorite color?"

Claire hadn't spoken since they returned to the facility. Meredith wasn't sure why, but it seemed that Claire wasn't as comfortable speaking within the walls of Everwood, as she had been out on the grounds. Meredith watched as Claire walked into the bathroom and reached for her toothbrush. Returning, she handed it to Meredith and smiled a sly smile: the handle was pink. Understanding her unspoken word, Meredith nodded and asked, "Can you please put this back?"

When Claire was within the bathroom, Meredith followed close behind.

To reassure her friend, Meredith spoke in more of a whisper, “I don’t think your room is monitored. If it were, I think I’d already be in trouble for discussing Tony.” Claire’s change of expression made Meredith reconsider, finally, she pressed on, “Please let me talk. I don’t have much time. They’ll wonder where I am.”

Claire nodded.

“Tomorrow, I have a meeting with your lead doctor and your sister and brother-in-law.”

Claire’s eyes widened.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell them what you’ve accomplished. Remember, I told you Emily has done a great job keeping you and Nichol out of the public eye?”

Claire very slightly nodded.

Meredith hurried on, “I know you remember that I’m a reporter.” Quickly she added, “I’m not here to do a story. I’m here because I want to help you, but Emily doesn’t know that I’m here. I may have lied about a few things to get this job. When Emily and John find out I’ve been with you for the last few months—”

Claire’s eyes widened again.

Meredith seized her hand. “Yes, Claire, it’s been months. When they learn who I am, and that I lied, I won’t be allowed back to see you.”

Claire’s new expression of terror broke Meredith’s heart.

Meredith continued, her words still forming rapidly, “I’m so sorry. Please keep working, and be honest with your family. They love you.”

Claire’s voice was barely audible as she asked, “When?” “When’s your meeting?”

“Early tomorrow morning.” Shrugging her shoulders, Meredith added, “By the time you finish your breakfast, I might be in police custody.” Standing tall, she continued, “I’m only telling you so you know that I didn’t abandon you. No matter where I am, I’m thinking about you.” Placing her hands on her friend’s shoulders, she added, “Claire, I know you’ll continue to get better and soon you’ll be with Nichol.”

Before she gave into the emotions demanding her recognition, Meredith turned away. In her most even voice, she called, “Good night, Claire. Please know that I have faith in you.”

The tears didn’t begin until she was safely down the hall from Claire’s room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Life consists not in holding good cards but in playing those you hold well.

—Josh Billings

SEA FOAM GREEN walls with pink, blue, and yellow puffy wall-hangings adorned the small nursery attached to their bedroom. Compared to the nursery they planned back at the estate in Iowa, it was quite small; nonetheless, it was ready for their arrival. The cradle, baby crib, changing table, and rocking chair were all handmade by local craftsmen, giving the nursery a bit of island flair. The linens and colorful wall decorations, as well as most of the clothes, diapers, and necessities were ordered from around the world. Without a doubt, it was a room fit for a little prince or princess.

When their baby decided to play shy and not reveal its sex, Tony and Claire made the decision to wait. Not knowing if they were having a boy or girl added to their anticipation and daily discussions. Sometimes they'd talk about the advantages of a daughter and then later proclaim the advantages of a son. It was entertaining to listen as Tony considered the possibilities of a little girl, one who would grow into a young lady. Claire pitied the young man who one day would show up at their door to take their daughter on a date. Without a doubt, both Claire and Tony knew how men could behave. If memories of his treatment of Claire upset Tony, the idea that someone could do that to his child was beyond his comprehension. Without a doubt, impending fatherhood had changed his perspective. That time of their life, their past, was something Claire didn't want to discuss or remember. Unfortunately, it was the topic of discussion all over the world. Despite the best efforts of Rawlings attorneys Meredith's book had been recently published and was selling like crazy.

Claiming sole access to Claire's firsthand account, the publisher used Tony and Claire's current disappearance to its advantage. Since its release, *My Life as It Didn't Appear* had found permanent residence on both the *New York*

Times and *USA Today* bestseller lists. Almost daily, Claire regretted her decision to go public with their past. One day she'd need to explain to their child how she and his father met. She only prayed it wouldn't be until after their child was much older.

Another subject they rarely discussed was Tony's deal with the FBI. With her due date rapidly approaching, Claire upset easily. Sometimes she'd snap; more often than not, she'd cry. No matter her reaction, Claire didn't want to consider the possibility of Tony's incarceration. She admired his strength and resolve and knew that facing his demons wasn't easy for him. On the nights when she'd awaken and he'd be gone, she knew he was wrestling unknown emotion he'd never before faced. Some nights, he sat on the lanai or walked the beach alone. At first, during these times, Claire tried to approach him. Though he never fully explained his state of mind, she believed it was more his inability to verbalize his new rush of feelings, than his unwillingness to share. His confessions were not only earth-shattering to her, but in some ways, to him. He'd distanced himself so much from the human aspect of what transpired, that facing it was difficult; nevertheless, when she woke to an empty bed, Claire believed Tony was working through another situation that only he could fully comprehend. She willingly gave him his space.

Without a doubt, despite everything, Claire didn't want to be without Tony, even for a short time. Her mind knew of his sins, but her heart had their future safe and secure. In her imagination, they'd live peacefully on the island for another year while the FBI built an iron clad case against Catherine. When they returned to the States, Tony's testimony and honesty would earn him complete absolution. With his name clear, they'd move back to Iowa and live *happily ever after*. She imagined picnics at her lake with her on a blanket while the gentle breeze rustled the leaves and Tony taught their son to fish. Claire knew it was a fantasy, but on many occasions it sustained her.

The softness of the baby blanket caressed her fingers as she gently rocked and contemplated their future. Claire truly had no idea what it would be like to be a mother. Could she do it? She didn't know. She knew she didn't want to do it alone. In the past, when her life took unforeseen turns, Claire had survived by concentrating on herself and her responses. Now everything was different. Life was about more than her and more than Tony: it was about their child. As much as she longed for the perfect family, the uncertainty of their future loomed omnipresent. It was like a fog unexpectedly seeping into their daily lives, rolling in from the sea and filling the corners of a room. Perhaps that was why Claire loved sunshine; it dissipated the fog and made everything clear.

“Blaine.” Tony’s baritone voice permeated the haze and brought sunlight to the small nursery.

Claire freed her hands from the white baby blanket and smiled at her husband’s bright grin. “What?” she asked.

“I was looking at names online and found the name Blaine. I like it!”

“For a boy or a girl?”

Tony cocked his head to the side. “Can it be both?”

“I think, but I like it for a boy,” Claire murmured. “Blaine Rawlings... Yes, I like that, but I thought you wanted a name that could be shortened?”

“I did, but I think it sounds regal. We could call him B or something for short.”

“What about Anthony for a middle name?”

Stifling a chuckle, Tony replied, “His initials would be BAR. I don’t think so.”

“It would be appropriate if he became a lawyer.”

“Or a drunk. Yes, to Blaine. No, to Anthony.”

“Anton?”

Tony pressed his lips together and shook his head.

Claire shrugged. “Well, at least we’re closer.”

Tony knelt beside the rocking chair. “Francis made arrangements. After next week’s appointment with Dr. Gilbert, we’re staying in town.”

“I’d rather be here.”

“I’d rather have you there, closer to the doctor. As soon as you and our little one are declared healthy, we’ll come back.”

Claire knew from experience, some arguments would never be won. If Tony’s mind were set, rarely did she have a chance at changing it. “I should pack a few things.”

“Madeline has already packed a bag for us and for the baby. I mean, Blaine or...?”

Claire grinned. “Alyssa?”

“Raquel?”

From a distance, the hum of an airplane infiltrated their consciousness. They both stilled and waited for it to pass. Soon, it became a roar, indicating its increased proximity to their island. Claire’s eyes widened. “Oh, do you think it’s Phil?”

Standing straight, Tony replied, “It better be.”

They made their way to the lanai, joined shortly by Madeline and Francis. When the small propeller plane came to a soft landing on the lagoon, Tony said, “I’ll go down to the beach.”

Claire’s days of excursions were done. Even walking to and from the beach was a struggle. In addition to her increased size, she’d lately been plagued by intermittent lower back pain.

Francis offered, "Monsieur, I'll go with you."

Tony nodded. The men disappeared into the vegetation as they walked the path toward the sea. Madeline commented, "Madame el, you should sit down."

"Not yet. I want to see who gets out of that plane. I want to be sure it's Phil."

"Of course, who else would it be?"

That's what worried Claire. Supposedly, they were hidden, but would it truly be that difficult for the FBI to find them? As she and Madeline watched, the door to the plane opened. At the sight of white hair, Claire exhaled.

"Now, Madame el, you can sit. The men will be up shortly."

"I'll sit. Can you please get us all iced tea?"

"*Oui*, be sure you put your feet up."

It seemed as though Claire never lacked for people willing to tell her what to do. By the time she settled on the lounge chair, the men's voices floated into range. Closing her eyes, she felt her smile grow. She couldn't believe how excited she was to see Phil again. Although he'd only been gone from the island for two months, it seemed much longer; then, without warning, the voices faded as the plane's roar momentarily drowned out all sound. Claire looked up in time to see the small white plane leave the lagoon.

When the three men stepped onto the lanai, Claire awkwardly stood. She couldn't hide her happiness as she wrapped her arms around Phil with a welcoming embrace. "It's so good to see you." Tears glistened as her green eyes shone with sincerity. "Thank you for coming all the way back here."

He leaned back and took in Claire's appearance. "My, Mrs. Alexander, it appears as though you're about to have a baby!"

"Really?" she said, putting pressure in the small of her back and arching her shoulders, "I hadn't noticed. I thought I was just enjoying Madeline's good cooking a little too much."

Tony laughed. Lowering his voice, he leaned toward Phil. "Be careful, someone, who shall remain nameless, has been increasingly sensitive lately."

Claire eyed her husband. "After you carry around an extra twenty-five pounds in one-hundred-degree heat for months, then we'll discuss being sensitive."

The men smiled knowingly at one another.

"Fine," Claire said with a feigned pout as she sat back down.

"Monsieur Roach?" Francis interrupted. "Would you like me to show you to your room?"

"Thank you, Francis, but if it's the same one, I know the way." Turning to Tony and Claire, he added, "If you don't mind, I'd like to get cleaned up after that long flight."

Forgetting her sensitivity, Claire grinned. "Please make yourself at home.

"We're so glad you're here." Phil excused himself while Madeline and Francis disappeared into the house. For a brief time, the newlyweds were alone.

Exhaling, Claire lifted her face toward the sea and closed her eyes. Renegade strands of hair stuck to her moist, warm skin. She pried the wayward tendrils from her neck and relished the growing, refreshing breeze. When she opened her eyes, the softest hues of chocolate brown filled her vision. Surprised by Tony's closeness, Claire lifted her chin causing their noses to touch, and with a giggle she asked, "What?"

"Don't let Phil fool you; you're beautiful."

She pursed her lips together and reached for his cheek. The slight stubble tickled her fingertips. "I'm glad you think so." It was then she noticed his position. "Why don't you bring that other chair over here? Why are you on the ground?"

"Because, Mrs. Rawlings, I wanted to be on one knee when I gave this to you." From his pocket, Tony produced a platinum band embedded with diamonds. It was nearly identical to her original ring.

"Oh, Tony! It's beautiful. It looks just like my first one."

"Hopefully, one day, we can get back to Iowa, and you can have both of them."

Her eyes twinkled. "Do you know today's date?"

She watched as recognition overtook her husband's expression. "I hadn't realized," Tony replied. "I'd say Roach's arrival couldn't have been better timed!" He leaned forward and kissed her gently. "Happy third anniversary, my love. I seem to acquire more and more regrets, but without a doubt, the fact that we aren't still in our first marriage is one of my greatest."

She framed his face with her petite hands. Before looking into his eyes, she took a moment and admired the sparkling band above her engagement ring. "It's beautiful and somehow, believe it or not, I think this is better. We can have both." She tried to explain. "Those people, the ones we were when we married three years ago, were in a very different place than we are today."

His devilish grin emerged. "I'd say they're about half a world away."

Kissing his lips, she replied, "Literally and figuratively."

Their journey wasn't complete. If their relationship had been a poker tournament, unquestionably, they'd not been dealt the best cards. When faced with the same odds as Tony and Claire, many players would have folded and walked away. They hadn't. They'd continued to play. In the process they'd grown and changed. At one time, they were opponents, strategizing against one another. Now they were teammates, yet their tournament wasn't over. It was too early to declare the winner. They both knew there were more cards to be revealed.

When Phil joined them for dinner, he looked much more relaxed, and told Tony and Claire all about Catherine and her quest to learn more and more about Sophia. “She seems different than when she hired me to send you the packages.”

It amazed Claire how casual he was with both her and Tony about what he’d done. Maybe it was true: honesty made even the most absurd circumstances less bizarre.

Phil continued, “I took a few pictures of her with Sophia. Ms. London looks different to me, don’t you agree?”

He showed his phone to Tony first. Claire’s husband’s countenance changed before her eyes. His posture straightened and the veins in his neck became visible. When he continued to stare without speaking, Claire asked, “May I see?”

Phil moved the phone to her line of vision. The golden flecks in Phil’s green eyes danced as he murmured something about once seeing a picture on Claire’s phone. Her mind immediately went to San Antonio. Thankfully, Tony was too lost in his own thoughts to process what they were saying. She reached out and covered Tony’s hand with her own. The diamonds embedded within the bands of her wedding and engagement ring sparkled behind the beacon of the engagement solitaire.

“She does look different,” Claire confirmed. “Her hair is shorter and darker, but there’s something else... I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Confidence,” Tony replied, his tone restrained. “She looks like she did when my grandfather was alive. I’d say she feels very confident in her future. I’m sure she thinks that I’m hiding out somewhere, and she’s safe to sit back and enjoy spending my money.”

“Can she do that?” Claire’s voice raised an octave.

Phil was the one to answer. “The way Mr. Rawlings’ estate is set, Ms. London has access to a very nice trust fund designed to help her manage the estate; however, the provisions are rather non-restrictive. How she chooses to spend the money won’t be questioned.”

Tony looked skeptically toward Phil. “Did she share this with you?”

“No. I could only spend so much time looking at art. I spent a great deal of time researching different trails. That was one. Your grandfather was another.”

Tony nodded as his dark eyes questioned.

Still holding Phil’s phone, Claire asked, “Have I met Sophia? She looks very familiar.”

“Not to my knowledge,” Tony answered. “But then again, you did live close to one another in California.”

Claire shrugged and gave Phil back his phone. “I hope she’s safe. I no longer trust Catherine, even with her own daughter.”

Everyone looked up to the blue sky as a rumble of thunder echoed in the distance. Phil commented, “That’s why the pilot rushed to leave the island so fast. The weather predictions had quite a storm coming through this area tonight or tomorrow.”

“Typhoon season was officially over the end of October,” Claire said, remembering some of her meteorology education.

“Over or not, I saw the weather models and paid extra to get here before the storm hit.” Phil grinned. “Okay, you paid extra. My other option was to wait until it passed. They told me it could be a one to three day delay, depending on the severity of the storm.”

“Most of the weather systems never make it here,” Tony offered. “We hear the rumble; however, all we usually get is a steady rain, often in the night, then nothing.”

“That sounds encouraging,” Phil answered. “I hope you’re right. From what little I know about weather, the models looked intense.”

Claire sat straighter. “I’ve read about barometric pressure affecting delivery. I know I’m early, but that would be fine with me.”

Tony’s eyes screamed alarm, nonetheless his voice remained calm. “Yes, once we’re near the doctor that would be great, not before.”

Fighting the resurgence of pain in her lower back, Claire feigned a smile. “There are still a few things you can’t control.” She stood and reached for his hand. “And, I love that you think you can.” Her grip tightened.



TONY LOOKED UP to Claire’s expression. He recognized the clouds of pain settling behind her emerald eyes. He’d seen them before, but he didn’t want to see them again. Unconsciously, his concern for the child lessened proportionally to his increased worry for his wife. “Claire, it’s still early in the day. The sun won’t set for hours; let’s go into town.”

She shook her head from side to side. “I think I just need to lie down for a little bit. Dinner isn’t sitting too well.” Turning toward Phil, she managed, “I’m sorry that I’m not being more hospitable. It seems that eating is more uncomfortable than it is satisfying.”

“Let me help you—” Tony interjected, as he began to stand.

Claire stopped him. “Don’t be silly. You two talk about whatever Phil’s learned about Nathaniel. I need a nap, and by later tonight, I’ll be fine. Then you two can fill me in.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll be down to check on you soon.”

She released his hand and brushed his shoulder. “All right.”

Tony watched as she disappeared through the archway toward the hall.

The anticipated delivery was wearing on him as much as it was her. Placing his elbows on the table, he lowered his head to his hands, and ran his fingers through his hair.

He wanted to put Claire on a plane and fly her back to the United States. He wanted the satisfaction of knowing she had the best medical care possible. He was a fuck'n billionaire! His wife shouldn't be giving birth in the middle of nowhere. Tony knew he'd put Claire in harm's way in the past, both intentionally and unintentionally. Now he'd do anything to keep her safe.

Roach's worried voice caused Tony to look up. "Francis and I can go for the doctor?"

There was a time when having another man so obviously care for his wife would've upset Tony; however, looking across the table, he knew it was right. Tony felt no more threatened by Phillip Roach than he would have by Eric or Brent. He actually welcomed the common bond. Roach was their *ace in the hole*. Tony didn't like admitting that he needed help, and he probably never would verbally; however, having Roach present to go for help or be their eyes and ears back in the States was reassuring.

Tony replied, "Let's give her some time. She goes from one hundred miles an hour to zero a lot lately. One minute, she's going through baby clothes, folding and refolding. The next, she's in the kitchen helping Madeline; then next, she's asleep. I'll check on her soon. If she's still having these pains, I think it'd be a good idea." Looking down at his hands, Tony softly mumbled, "Thank you."

Phil nodded. "In the meantime, do you want to know what I've learned about drug interactions?"

"I have the feeling I do, but mostly, I'm thinking I don't give a damn."

Phil leaned back in his chair, inhaled and exhaled. "You will, I promise."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Tony replied, "Okay, my man, care to enlighten me?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*We all have time machines. Some take us back, they're called memories.
Others take us forward, they're called dreams.*

—Unknown

C LAIRE MADE IT to their suite before the nausea hit with a vengeance. Stumbling into the bathroom, she fell to her knees and her trembling hands held her head over the toilet. It was the first time since morning sickness that she'd vomited. Perspiration drenched her skin as she her meal projected into the water below. When she was done, Claire laid her head on her arms and waited. As if awoken by her violent lurches, her temples throbbed and her midsection contracted. Gaining strength, she made her way back out into the bedroom. If she lay down, Claire believed the discomfort would stop. After strategically placing the pillows of the bed around her, she hugged another. The fetal position seemed ironic, yet with another pillow between her legs, it was the only position that gave her solace.

The curtains billowed as a refreshing breeze moved the previously still air about their suite. Claire relished the coolness on her clammy skin and concentrated on her breathing. Officially, she was just a little past thirty-six weeks into her pregnancy. Everything she read said thirty-eight to forty weeks were considered full term. Although she was ready for the pregnancy to be done, Claire didn't want their baby born too early. Unexpectedly, she flinched as thunder rattled the windows. She looked around the suite bathed in the early evening light and listened to the low howl of the growing wind. Suddenly, the room filled with a flash of light.

As she inhaled and exhaled, Claire counted. It was a trick her grandmother taught her as a child. When she saw the lightning, she'd count until she heard the thunder. Grandma said the number between events was the distance in miles from where the lightning struck. Claire knew from meteorology it wasn't accurate; nevertheless, it was a ritual that gave her

comfort. Although her head still ached, her midsection had relaxed. Lost in her thoughts, she didn't hear the knock on her door until it was repeated.

She answered, "Come in."

Claire saw the concern in Madeline's eyes. "Madame el, you are in pain?"

"No," she lied and did her best to smile. "I'm having trouble eating. I'm hungry, but I fill too fast, and then I'm uncomfortable." As she spoke, her back suddenly tightened, sending a jolt of pain down her right leg. She didn't mean to wince, but she did.

Madeline sat on the edge of the bed and waited. When Claire's expression softened, Madeline gently took her hand. "Madame el, you are warm. Please tell me about your pain."

Salty tears stung Claire's eyes. "It's in my back. It's been getting worse all day."

"It could be infection. I remember it happens often in late pregnancy. Perhaps Francis could take you to the doctor. If you go now, there'll be enough light. I worry about the storm. They say it is big."

Claire closed her eyes and waited. Another jab tightened her back, stronger than the one before. When she opened them again, she nodded as the tears escaped down her cheeks. "It might be. That makes sense. I read about bladder infections. Besides, I don't think it's labor. First, it's too early."

"Oh." Madeline chuckled. "Babies don't have calendars."

Claire grinned. "Well, second, I'm not feeling it in my stomach. I just feel nauseous. The pain's in my back."

"Although I've helped bring many babies into this world, the doctor is the best place for you. Sometimes things in real life aren't like they are in the books."

Claire considered telling Madeline she'd read it online, not in a book, but the pain returned. It felt like being stabbed, quick, sharp, and intense! She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. Through gritted teeth she asked, "Can they bring the doctor here? We can call; maybe they can fly Dr. Gilbert to us?"

"Normally, *oui*." Madeline walked to the doors to the lanai. Her hair blew away from her face, and her dress flowed backward. "No pilot will fly a plane or a helicopter with this wind."

Regaining her ability to speak, Claire replied, "I don't think I can handle the bouncing of the boat, if the waves are big." The dim room flashed bright then back to dark. Claire watched as Madeline pulled the doors shut. "Oh, the breeze felt so good."

"It's time to turn on the air conditioning. You need to be comfortable."

Despite her affection of the open house, Claire agreed. Droplets of sweat rolled down her back and front. Her breasts were damp with perspiration, and she knew her hair was stuck to her skin. "All right. It might help me sleep." Again the thunder rattled the windows. "It's still far away."

“Madame el?”

“The storm. It’s still far away. It took a long time for the thunder to reach the lightning.”

Madeline patted her hand. “I’ll go turn on the cool air and bring you some water. I have an island remedy that may help, if the pain is infection.”

Claire’s eyes widened.

“No, Madame el, it’s natural. It will not hurt the *bébé*.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Do you want Monsieur Rawlings?”

Closing her eyes to a momentary relief in the pain, Claire answered, “No, I’m feeling better. He and Phil can talk while I sleep.”

After Madeline left, darkness prevailed. Their normally open suite was now enclosed; its only source of illumination was the remnants of a clouded twilight penetrating the panes of the windows. Claire rearranged the pillows. With pressure in just the right area of her back, she found relief from the stabbing.

When Madeline returned, Claire drank the remedy she provided, all the while praying it would stay down. When alone again, she settled into her nest of pillows. Another flash of lightning brightened the room and she began to drift away...

Light filled their suite as Claire awoke. The morning noises greeted her as she looked out beyond the open doors to the beautiful blue water. Her arms reached out, stretching to relieve the stiffness of a long sleep. She felt more rested than she had in weeks or months. A full night’s sleep and the pain was gone. Lifting the soft sheet, Claire marveled at her own movements. It had been so long since she’d been capable of changing positions without concentration and effort.

On her left hand, the sparkling wedding band caught her eye. It was truly as spectacular as the first. As her bare feet touched the tile of the bathroom floor, Claire looked up to her reflection and the air left her lungs. Her hands immediately moved to her flattened midsection as panic boiled from within.

Unable to refrain, Claire fell to her knees and screamed Tony’s name. She yelled until the sobs within her chest wouldn’t allow her to articulate any longer. With her cheek against the cool tile, Claire heard the door to their suite open. “What happened? Where’s our baby?” The questions formed and started to flow until her eyes met gray.

It wasn’t Tony who’d entered the room. It was Catherine. Her gray eyes no longer appeared comforting; instead, Claire saw vengeance. She scrambled to her knees and tried to shut the door between the bedroom and bathroom.

Catherine was quicker. Claire pushed the door with all her might, yet she was weak. When Catherine came around the door, Claire asked, “Why? Why are you here?”

Her voice cracked like an old vinyl album. “I own this island. It was bought with my money. Why wouldn’t I be here?”

“No! You gave me access to the money. It’s mine—a gift.”

Catherine laughed. “I wouldn’t give a gift to a Nichols.”

Claire stood straight. “I’m also a Rawlings! Leave me alone!”

“A Nichols is all you are and will ever be. That’s all that stupid baby was too!”

Strength from an unknown source coursed through her veins. Claire lunged forward, her petite hands surrounding Catherine’s neck, pushing the front toward the back. Both women fell to the floor. “Where’s my baby?” Claire yelled.

Catherine pushed Claire away as Claire held on tightly and continued to squeeze. “With Anton.” Catherine spewed as she gasped for air.

“Where?”

Catherine’s eyes rolled back and her lids fluttered. Claire couldn’t kill her, not yet. She needed to know where Tony and the baby were. Releasing her grip, Claire asked again, “Where? Where are they?”

The gray eyes focused directly on her as her lips curved upward. “Gone. They’re all gone. You’re all alone! I’d kill you too, but... some fates are worse than death.”

The air, once again, left Claire’s lungs as Catherine’s words immobilized her. Through the haze and fog of disbelief, Claire struggled to stand.

Catherine was gone.

Claire was alone.

In the distance of the attached room, she heard the door close. It was as she opened the bathroom door that she heard the beep.

Looking toward the lanai, the sea was gone and so was their paradise. Instead, Claire’s surroundings came into focus. Golden drapes covered large windows. White woodwork and beige plush carpet surrounded her. The vibrant colors of the tropics were gone, replaced by muted, dulled tones. Claire peered beyond the drapes, past the French doors to a stark landscape. Skeletons of leafless trees and thick gray clouds were visible for miles.

Falling to her knees, Claire cried out. Her words were meant for the man who would never again hold her close and for the child she never met. “Gone! No, please God, no! Tony, Tony, Tony...” Eventually, the words faded into nothingness...

Nothingness is worse than gray—it’s nothing.



WITHIN THE CONFINES of the living room, Phil explained to Tony what he'd learned. "It was the notes from the nurses or aides at Camp Gabriels that made me stop and think."

Tony was interested. He wanted to know more about Nathaniel, his life in prison, and how Samuel was able to void his marriage. Perhaps a portion of Tony's curiosity was the realization that one day he'd follow after his grandfather in that endeavor, too. Anthony Rawlings wouldn't be incarcerated for business fraud. No, Rawlings Industries was legitimate and so were all of its holdings. Tony demanded that. He surrounded himself with people who also demanded fair business practices, people like Brent, Tom, and Tim. Of course, he made money off of others' misfortunes and poor decisions; nonetheless, each business acquisition or closing was done legally. His sins were more personal and arguably worse. The matter could be debated—the number of victims and the extent of the reach; nevertheless, Tony, too, had sins which required restitution.

"When I accessed the prison's inner files, I found comments about Mr. Rawls' behavior and attitude. Nothing appeared for the first few months of his incarceration. It was after he began taking anti-depressants that there were notations about forgetfulness. Sometimes it was a small rather insignificant entry: *prisoner asked what day it was*, or *prisoner thought it was Friday*. *When he learned it was only Thursday, he became belligerent*. What I found interesting, were the correspondences between the prison and Samuel Rawls."

Tony tried to concentrate. His mind continually went from Phil's words to Claire. The mention of his father's name snapped him back to the present conversation. "Why were they contacting my father? Shouldn't they have been contacting Marie, I mean Catherine?"

"When Nathaniel was first incarcerated, he and Ms. London weren't yet married. Samuel was the contact: his next of kin and power of attorney. Apparently, to change those titles to a new person required compliance by *all* individuals. Samuel Rawls refused to relinquish his power over his father."

Tony stood and paced as the storm continued to threaten. Torrents of rain blanketed the windows. Seeing his reflection in the glass and unable to see beyond the prematurely dark sky, Tony said, "That's ridiculous. My father never visited the prison. Not one time!"

Phil shook his head. "I saw that too. Ms. London visited every Friday like clockwork. Your visits coincided with long weekends and college breaks."

"Damn!" Tony looked at Phil with newfound admiration. "Is there anything you can't learn?"

"Me personally?" Phil smirked. "Not if I know where to look."

“So, what did you learn in the correspondences?”

Phil explained, as Nathaniel’s dementia-like symptoms increased, the prison contacted Samuel. One of the doctors cited a concern regarding drug interaction. He stated that some reports, at that time, claimed a possible connection between anti-depressants and a vitamin deficiency, which produced forgetfulness, restlessness, and agitation. The doctor requested Samuel’s permission to take Nathaniel off the anti-depressants.

“My father refused, didn’t he?”

“He did. He authorized vitamin supplements, but vehemently denied approval to change or alter Nathaniel’s anti-depressant regime.”

“When was this correspondence?” Tony asked.

“Do you want the date? Or are you more interested to learn if it was after your grandfather married Ms. London?”

“B.” Tony replied. B—the letter propelled his thoughts to Blaine—his son or daughter. Hearing about the vindictiveness of his father and the deep-seated hatred that flowed through his own family, Tony wondered why the universe was willing to entrust him with a child. The Rawls in him didn’t deserve such a monumental blessing. He never thought he deserved any blessings. Everything he’d ever acquired he’d earned, through hard work, except this child. Perhaps the Nichols down the hall, balanced out the Rawls. In a way, it was like Catherine’s threats:

Rawls-Nichols

Except, that wasn’t the correct equation. It wasn’t Rawls *minus* Nichols. It was Rawls *plus* Nichols. It was now clear: Rawls plus Nichols equaled Rawlings.

Before Phil could answer, the sound of Claire’s scream echoed through the house, only to be drowned out by the rumbling of thunder. At first, Tony considered he might have imagined his wife’s plea, but when he saw the look on Phil’s face, Tony knew it was real.

“Did you just hear?” Tony asked as Claire’s scream rang from the other side of the house. Both men ran for the master bedroom suite. They reached the door at the same time as Madeline. Tony’s heart beat frantically as he reached for the doorknob, pushed the door wide, and declared, “I’m going in alone. Then, I’ll let you know.”

Madeline and Phil both nodded.

Claire lay still near the center of their bed with her back toward the door. The fullness of pillows surrounding her body brought a momentary smile to Tony’s worried expression. Lately, she’d brought more and more pillows to bed. He’d teased her, saying a wall of pillows couldn’t keep him out, but Tony knew the pillows helped Claire to be more comfortable. He didn’t care if she slept in a bed of pillows.

His smile quickly faded when he realized she hadn’t turned toward the

sound of the opening door. Quickly, he walked to the far side of their bed and stepped closer. Despite her damp hair pressed to her face, Tony thought she looked beautiful. When he spoke, he expected to see her beautiful emerald eyes. "Claire, are you all right?"

She didn't move. In the dimly lit, master bedroom suite, her skin glistened with perspiration and her eyes remained shut. He reached toward her. While only inches away, Claire's head tossed violently from side to side as she whispered, "No... Tony..."

Just as quickly as she called out, her body stilled. He waited. Was she telling him not to come nearer? Tony asked in desperation, "Claire, no—what?"

When she didn't respond, he sat on the edge of their bed and tenderly reached for her shoulder. Shaking her gently, he said, "Claire, I'm right here. Are you dreaming?"

She didn't respond. He shook again. Nothing. "Madeline!" he yelled toward the door.

The sky was now dark, with intense flashes of light. The thunder and lightning occurred almost simultaneously. Phil, who'd been joined by Francis, paced silently in the hallway, while Madeline and Tony attended to Claire. Despite his gentle encouragement, Claire wouldn't wake; however, her pleas and the calling of his name ceased.

The temperature of their suite had decreased very nicely. That, combined with the gentle breeze of the ceiling fan, made their room quite comfortable; nevertheless, Tony noticed Claire's blouse stuck to her clammy skin. As he brushed her sun-lightened hair away from her face, he felt the warmth radiating from her body. "She's burning up!"

"Monsieur, may I?"

Tony hesitantly stepped away as Madeline approached the edge of the bed where Tony had been perched. She turned her palm upward and moved her hand over Claire's forehead.

"I'm afraid she has an infection. Before she fell asleep, I gave her something to help fight it and help her sleep. She said she didn't want to go to the doctor."

His back straightened. "What did you give her?"

"It's an island remedy. When she wakes, she'll feel better."

"The baby?"

"The *bébé* will be good, much better than having infection in her *mère*."

His shoulder's relaxed as he stepped toward his wife. Before he could speak, Madeline pulled the sheet back and revealed Claire's body.

Tony gasped. "What? What happened? Why is she so wet?"

"Her water, it broke. The baby is coming."

Tony fell to his knees and reached for his wife's hand. With his lips near Claire's sleeping face he begged, "Please, please be all right." Holding back tears, he straightened his neck and lowered his voice. The tone he created was one of authority, beyond debate. "You told me you'd be fine. You promised." Lightning and thunder crashed. Softness, once again, took residence in his words, "Claire, please open your eyes. I need to see your beautiful emerald eyes."

His chest tightened with *déjà vu*. He'd said those words before, almost verbatim. Seeing her on the bed, with her clothes glued to her skin by moisture, Tony cursed under his breath. This—like the *accident*, like Chester, was his fault. Why did she continually need to suffer because of him?

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

I always trust my gut reaction; it's always right.

—Kiana Tom

HARRY TOOK ONE last look at his acquired evidence from the Sherman Nichols' case, all boxed and catalogued. The digital data was secured in the FBI system. Soon, it would be gone from his condominium—gone from his life. He hated to admit the case was done. Well, the case wasn't done, but *he* was done with the case. After all the time, effort, and attachment, Harry had been ordered to move on. Last night, the call came from the deputy director, Agent Baldwin was needed elsewhere. The new assignment required traveling, and he was finally fit to travel. Despite the disappointment of losing the Nichols case, Harry was looking forward to getting away. Even though Christmas was around the corner, he needed a break from Palo Alto, his sister, and even Liz.

Amber's decision to hire John Vandersol at SiJo added to Harry's discomfort in Palo Alto. They had to create a story to explain his abrupt exit from SiJo. One day he was SiJo's president of security operations—the next he was gone. Privately, on a personal level, Harry berated Amber for hiring John; however, on a professional level, Vandersol was talented, even gifted. Nevertheless, Harry didn't appreciate the added angst. It was increasingly difficult to deal with Rawlings and Claire while simultaneously faced with her *only* family. Harry wondered how Amber and Liz were able to handle the farce on a daily basis.

Since John's law license was reinstated, it seemed as though he itched to make the move from corporate financial investments back to legal. The thing was, John Vandersol had a problem called *loyalty*. He obviously felt indebted to Amber and to SiJo for hiring him at such a difficult time in his career. Many corporations wouldn't have taken a chance on him despite the fact the charges resulting in his incarceration were later dropped, and his record was

expunged. Harry assumed John would remain diligent to SiJo's needs as long as his presence was requested. Amber said she had no intentions of asking him to follow his heart. His assistance with investments and procurements had already helped SiJo immensely. Amber may have initially hired him to solidify her faux friendship with Claire, but as a business decision, it was one of Amber's best.

Sometimes Harry questioned Simon's business sense in naming Amber as vice president of operations of SiJo. Simon's confidence and recommendation undoubtedly secured her future with the board of directors upon Simon's death. As much as Harry liked Simon, the man definitely thought more with his heart, or perhaps other parts of his body, than he did his head when it came to women. The fact he'd spent eight years waiting for Claire was another example of Simon's emotional handicap. It sure as hell wasn't a mistake that Harry planned on repeating.

As CEO, Amber McCoy often surprised and delighted her brother. She'd definitely learned from Simon's intuition. Now, with John, the company was once again making waves throughout the gaming world. Granted, they were little ripples, but movement nonetheless.

The knock on his condominium door brought Harry to present. He was expecting someone from the San Francisco field office. They were coming to pick up the boxes of research. When he opened the door, it wasn't a fellow FBI agent, but Liz.

Harry scanned her work clothes. He liked the skirts that got all tight at the waist and stayed tight until her blouse, emphasizing her round breasts. Noticing her black high heels, Harry tried not to think about other times she'd worn those and not much else. Unable to hide his sly smile, Harry said, "Hi, come on in."

She took a few steps, scanned the stacked boxes, and raised her eyebrows. "You're really moving on to other cases."

Harry gently clenched Liz's shoulders, pulled her close, and kissed her cheek. "Between you and Amber, I don't know who has more difficulty remembering I can't talk about it."

Liz grinned. "I know, or you'd have to kill me; but hey, this case almost cost us—us. So to say I'm glad you're moving on is an understatement."

Going into Harry's kitchen, Liz opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water. Harry was close behind when he asked, "Even if it means that I'm traveling?"

Liz shrugged. "I like it better when you're here. How much of your schedule can I know?"

Leaning against the counter with his faded jeans, tight black t-shirt, bare feet, and messy, blonde hair, Harry grinned. "I can tell you when I'm home."

"But not when you're coming home."

He stepped toward her, put his arms around her waist, and pinned her against the counter. Inhaling deeply, he took in the sweet smell of her perfume. As he exhaled, his warm breath bathed her neck. Before he spoke, his lips caressed her shoulder and his fingers traced the edge of her scoop cut blouse. Liz tilted her head back, giving him full access and involuntarily moaned. His words were spaced and breathy. “No” “not when I’m coming home” “I promise” “when I’m home” “I’m all yours.”

Liz sighed, momentarily allowing her hips to be pulled toward his; however, when his hands lowered to her round behind, Liz pushed away. “Well, I think we need to talk. I mean, what’s this relationship anyway? What am I?”

Harry lifted a brow. “What do you mean?”

“Are we dating again, or just having sex?”

Running his fingers through his hair, Harry sighed. “I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. I don’t want you stuck in some holding pattern. It could be a few days or a few months. That’s not fair to you.”

Liz set the bottle on the counter with enough force to allow droplets of water to escape onto the granite top. “Fine,” she said as she turned toward the door.

Harry grabbed her arm and turned her back toward him, pulling her into his strong embrace. Looking down into her light blue eyes, he softened his tone. “What is this? I thought we’d been through this. You know it’s my job.”

Liz nodded into his chest. “I do. I just don’t know what that means.”

Harry lifted her chin. “Why are you suddenly upset?”

“It’s not suddenly, Harry. It’s still!”

Exhaling, Harry took Liz by the hand and led her to his sofa. “It was a job. I let it get out of hand. It’s over. She’s remarried. She’s having someone else’s kid!”

“You told me it was over with her after you found out about the kid not being yours.”

Harry’s voice became louder. “It was! We’ve, you and me, have been back together since then. What is this?”

Liz stood and paced about his living room pretending to have interest in all the things lying around. Finally, she answered, “I want to believe you. I do. I can do the whole secret-agent girlfriend thing. Christ, Harry! I was kidnapped and forced to watch some assholes beat the shit out of you!” She inhaled deeply and wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand. “I kept my mouth shut the whole time that stupid slut was here.” She turned her eyes to Harry.

He knew she was waiting for a reaction. Luckily, years of training allowed him to remain stoic.

Liz continued, “I did! I smiled and played nice, even after Amber told me

you two were sleeping together.”

Harry exhaled. Damn his sister! He knew she'd been the one to inform Liz, but hearing it reminded him how Amber needed to learn to keep her mouth shut! Agent training summoned, Harry stood and walked to Liz. Lifting her chin, he kissed her lips once again softly and slowly. “I’m sorry. The whole thing put you in a terrible place. Is this something we can ever get past, or will I hear about it every time you’re mad at me, for the rest of our lives?”

Her lips curved upward. “The rest of our lives?”

“Or until you tell me to hit the road.”

Her blue eyes closed, and her lashes fluttered on her cheek. “You’ve never talked about the future, even when we were living together.”

Harry shrugged. “The whole kid thing.” He pulled her close. “Sorry, but it made me realize I might want that.” He felt her breasts against his chest. The tighter he held her, the harder her nipples became under her blouse. “Then, when Jillian was threatened, I thought about her. She’s beautiful and happy. She doesn’t need me showing up in her life, but another kid...” His lips brushed hers. “...maybe, I’m growing up?”

With her hand in his, he again pulled her toward the sofa. Leaning over her, their lips met. Harry gently pulled her blouse from the confines of her skirt. Within seconds, his hands were under her blouse and bra, caressing the firm, round breast he’d moments earlier been imagining. When his thumb began to trace circles around her nipple, Liz’s head fell back and a moan escaped her lips.

“Harry... Harry...”

Later that evening, while they lingered in Harry’s bed, Harry watched Liz sleep. With his head on his elbow, he took in her beautiful features. Everything about her said California, from her blonde hair to her tan skin. She grew up in southern California and moved north after college. Working at SiJo wasn’t her lifelong dream; she’d shared her desires for her future. That was part of her allure: they had a past. He and Liz had lived together, had good times together, and made mistakes together. It was real, not created by the FBI. She even knew what he did for a living and still wanted to be with him. Damn, hearing her talk about being kidnapped pulled at Harry’s heart. As much as he wanted a future with her, he had every right to worry about her safety.

As it was, Ilona and Jillian had only recently been allowed home and still had surveillance. Ilona had been much more understanding than Harry ever expected. Now that Harry was off the Nichols/Rawlings case, the bureau

believed the threat to his ex-wife and their child would soon be gone; however, in Harry's mind that attack still didn't make sense.

About a month ago, Harry made a visit to the Rawlings estate. He had to see Ms. London in person. He fully monitored every one of her reactions. The first came when Harry introduced himself as Harry Baldwin, Claire's ex-boyfriend and friend of John and Emily Vandersol. London appeared genuinely surprised to learn Claire had dated anyone else while in California. She offered her condolences regarding Claire's disappearance. She also promised to contact him or the Vandersols if she learned anything. To make the conversation more believable, Harry mentioned Emily and how upset she was about her sister, especially with her emotions running high, due to her recent pregnancy.

Never once during the conversation did Harry get the feeling she knew of Claire's location or that she knew anything about him. That reaction begged the question, why would Catherine London order an attack on him or threaten his family? Obviously, the person who did it knew him, knew he was FBI, and knew about Ilona and Jillian. Even though the deputy director had reassigned Harry, he knew that he couldn't let go of this particular piece of the puzzle. One day, he'd learn who threatened his family, his life, and his investigation.

Liz stirred, murmuring as she rubbed her cheek against his pillow. Her blonde hair and soft skin pulled him closer. He wanted to be honest with her, he really did; nonetheless, it wouldn't do either one of them any good for her to know that he still thought about Claire from time to time. Sometimes when he's alone he remembered what it was like to be with her. It wasn't just the sex. He thought about how scared she was when she first moved to Palo Alto. Every time he remembered her buying her first cell phone, a smile came to his lips. He didn't mean for it to happen, but he felt his cheeks raise. When he first met Claire, she was like a frightened fawn exploring the world on her own. He was drawn in by a need to protect her from all the dangers including Anthony Rawlings. Even before Harry knew the details, he knew that she'd been hurt. Looking into her emerald eyes, he knew that it was something he didn't want her to experience again.

Harry cared about Liz. He could even see spending the rest of his life with her. She was different than Claire—so strong and independent. How many women would take him back after what he'd done? Granted she gave him hell about it; he deserved it. Harry admired her strength and strong will. With an appreciative smile, he knew he also admired her ingenuity. Never once did she blow his cover with Claire or the Vandersols, yet her jealousy played a significant role in his and Claire's first big fight. When Amber received the call, at the last minute, about Rawlings being at the gala, Harry knew Liz had withheld the information on purpose. He even told Amber.

Watching her sleep peacefully, Harry moved her soft blonde hair away from her neck. Damn, he loved that neck. Fighting the urge to wake her, he smiled.

There was no doubt that he was pissed during the night of the gala. He was pissed at Liz *and* at Claire; however, now Harry had to give Liz an A for effort. She took the cards she'd been dealt and played them. She played them very well.

"Why are you smiling?" Liz asked as her eyes opened.

"I was just thinking about that sexy neck of yours." His fingers went to her collarbone and traced a winding path over her neck and down to her breast.

Liz reached for his hand. Momentarily, their palms touched and their fingers intertwined. "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"One more question, and then I'll drop it. I promise."

He exhaled and laid his head on his pillow. "Go ahead."

"How do I know that if you run into her in the future that you won't still have feelings?"

"I don't know. Some couples have this thing called *trust*. I realize I'm the one who needs to earn it back." He lifted his head and allowed his lips to lightly trail over her neck. Breathlessly he whispered, "I will."

"In Venice?"

Harry lifted his head and raised an eyebrow. "In Venice—*what*?"

"Did you want to be with her again? Did you sleep together? Or anything?"

"No!" Harry pulled the covers back and abruptly left the bed. "Why are you on this kick? No! She was planning on meeting up with Rawlings." Pacing nude by the bed, Harry lifted his arms. "I screwed up. All I can say is I'm sorry."

Liz moved to her knees and crawled to the edge of the bed. With her face lifted, she cooed, "I believe you. I can tell you're upset. I'm sorry. It's just that after I saw that picture of the two of you holding hands... well, I guess I needed to know."

"You saw the picture? How?"

"Amber showed it to me." She lifted herself on her knees, kissed his lips, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pressed her breasts against his hard chest. "I believe you. If you say it's over, it's over." She moved slightly away to look into his eyes. "Oh, please don't tell Amber that you know I saw the picture. She just wanted me to be sure that I knew everything so that I could make an informed decision."

Her grin widened as she pulled Harry back down on the bed. When his head hit the pillow, she leaned over him. The warmth of her flattened breasts

covered his wide chest as their skin united. Liz continued, "She told me not to tell you." Her words came between butterfly kisses to Harry's cheek and neck. "I probably shouldn't have. But Agent Baldwin... now that I know... my decision is informed... and... I don't want... to let you go... again!"

Harry flipped Liz onto her back.

Before he could speak, she begged, "Please, Agent, can you show me how much you'll miss me? Please?"

Harry couldn't resist her begging, her flushed cheeks, her trusting gaze, or her disheveled hair. It was more than he could take. Any thought unrelated to becoming one with the woman below him momentarily slipped away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Focus on things you can control

—John Wooden

“*M*ONSIEUR?”

Tony pulled his gaze away from Claire and looked toward Madeline. In her arms, she held a stack of towels and sheets.

“We need to clean her and cool her.”

Tony nodded and reached for a washcloth. After going to the bathroom and saturating it with cool water, he folded it in thirds and gently placed it on Claire’s forehead. His soft tone resonated through their suddenly cavernous suite. “I know you haven’t been sleeping well.” Thunder shook the house. Tony continued, unfazed, “If you need to sleep now, it’s all right, but pretty soon, our little one will be here. He or she needs their mommy.” Tony fought the emotion boiling in his throat. “Claire, I need you. With you I’m someone I’m proud to be. Please don’t leave me.”

The pressure of someone’s hand fell on Tony’s shoulder. He was on the edge of a dark abyss. Fear pulled at him, inciting emotions he couldn’t control. Anthony Rawlings controlled everything and everyone. The sudden impotence filled his world with red. Other than Claire, he was surrounded by employees. Didn’t these people know anything? They didn’t address him without a title, and they didn’t touch him! Tony inhaled and looked toward the touch. His gaze met Madeline’s as she smiled a sad smile. Instantaneously, the red faded. Tony covered Madeline’s hand and relished her support.

Madeline said, “Monsieur, Madame el, she’s not gone. She’s resting. The island cure I gave her is helping her. She needs her strength for your baby. We must make her comfortable.”

Tony didn’t respond. He didn’t know what to do. It was an uneasy situation under normal circumstances. With Claire’s life on the line, Tony felt

completely helpless. Swallowing his pride, he asked, “H-how can we make her comfortable?”

Madeline explained her plan. Once Tony approved, she put it into motion. First, she instructed Francis and Phil to carry a chaise lounge in from the lanai. Rain covered the floor when they opened the door and brought the long lounge into the bedroom. Madeline immediately dried the moisture from the floor and from the lounge cushions; then she proceeded to cover the chair in towels and sheets.

Phil and Francis went back to the hall and kept silent vigil, while Madeline and Tony removed Claire’s wet clothes. They cleaned, rinsed, and dried her with cloths and towels from the bathroom. Once she was dry, Tony gently lifted her to the lounge chair where they dressed her in a nightgown and covered her shivering body with a clean sheet. The chase lounge was much lower than a normal bed; however, since the mattress of their bed was saturated, it gave her a clean place to lie.

No longer did station matter. Madeline was no longer house staff or an employee—Tony willingly submitted to her control of the situation. If she told him to jump, it would be he who asked, *how high?* For the first time in his memory, Tony didn’t want power. He knew nothing about giving birth. Without a doctor, Madeline was their best bet. She was the dealer. She controlled the deck and had his full respect and attention.

As the sky darkened and nighttime came, Tony did the only thing he could. He sat by Claire with one hand on their unborn child. When he’d feel the baby move, he’d tell Madeline, “I felt something.” His other hand continually touched Claire. It may have been her hand, her cheek, or her forehead. He didn’t care where they connected—as long as they did.

Throughout the night, Claire’s pulse remained steady, and their baby continued to move. It wasn’t until dawn when Claire began to wake. At first, it was the incoherent mutterings of earlier. She pleaded, “Tony... no... gone... Tony... no...” Eventually, the pleadings morphed into tears. With each outburst, another piece of Tony’s heart broke. Claire was fighting a battle only she could see. He would’ve said, paid, or done anything to bring her relief. He couldn’t.

All he could do, was offer himself. Never leaving his wife’s side, Tony repeatedly wiped her tear-coated cheeks with a soft handkerchief, and each time she’d mutter, in his calmest tone, he’d reassure, “I’m right here. I’m not leaving you. No one is gone...” He didn’t know if she could hear his words; nevertheless, saying them brought a sense of comfort to their suite.

By the time the sun rose behind the still billowing clouds, Tony’s head rested quietly on the side of the chair. There hadn’t been a change in hours. He didn’t intend to fall asleep, but the rumbling of thunder, rhythm of rain, and constant in Claire’s condition allowed him to slip into a false sense of

security.



CLAIRE COULDN'T REMEMBER where she was. Her last memory was of the suite in Iowa. The copper-colored walls she remembered were gone; instead, the white woodwork and golden drapes of 2010 were back. The fear that infiltrated her thoughts and drained her world of color was the overwhelming sensation of isolation. Claire was once again alone. No longer did she wake to the sounds of her paradise. Birds no longer sang, and the surf no longer roared. The only recurring noise was that of the beep. She didn't need to look, to know why it occurred. Claire knew too well: the beep happened whenever the door to the rest of the world opened.

Alone forever, the beep was a continual reminder of her fate. Claire didn't want to hear the sound or see the person who'd enter. There was a time, somewhere long ago, when Claire yearned to see Catherine, she prayed for that. Now, each time the door opened, she prayed for someone, anyone else. Yet each tray of food, each outfit set out, everything necessary for life, came at the hands of the woman who was no longer her comforter but her tormentor. If Claire turned, she knew she'd see Catherine's sadistic gray eyes.

Though her life was hell, it no longer mattered. Claire's will to continue vanished with her husband and child. She saw the food which arrived three times a day. Never once did she desire to eat. She saw the French doors which opened only upon request. There was nothing beyond the panes she craved. Colors were gone. Showering, dressing, sleeping, and waking were inconsequential. Claire's thoughts and actions were consumed with one desire: to be with her family. If her goal could only be obtained through death, she willed it to occur.

This sense of doom overwhelmed her as she woke. She didn't want to open her eyes. She didn't want to see the golden drapes. Tentatively, more from reflex than want, Claire pried her eyes open. As she tried to focus, the world she feared was gone; instead of white woodwork, a thatched ceiling filled her view. A slow, methodical fan twirled above her bed and cooler than normal air moved through their suite.

Though the angle didn't seem right, she knew she was in paradise. When she attempted to move, stiffness affected each joint. Claire felt as though her body were bruised. With pressure on her stomach, she suddenly remembered their baby. Tears of loss filled her eyes as she reached for her midsection. Before her hand moved that far, her fingers brushed a full head of hair.

Raising her face, Claire's lips morphed into a grin as she saw the familiar head of dark hair highlighted with renegade white. It was the most perfect head of hair she'd ever seen.

Reaching below the perfect head of hair, Claire felt her enlarged midsection. The slight pressure she'd felt was Tony's large hand splayed across their unborn child. For a moment she lay perfectly still, relishing her reality. The night of terror was only a dream, a nightmare. As if for confirmation, their child moved. The small, strong life pushed against her skin from within. Every muscle in Claire's body relaxed. Their child was still inside of her. Tony was beside her, and no matter what the future held, she was exactly where she wanted to be.

Weaving her fingers through his hair, Claire whispered his name, "Tony?"

Though his head didn't move, the hand over her midsection shielded protectively, as he murmured, "I'm right here. I'm not leaving you. No one is gone..."

Again, she whispered, "Tony, what happened? Why are you on the floor?"

His tired eyes found hers. Though he looked exhausted, the sparkle behind the soft brown filled Claire with love and hope. He reached up and touched her cheek. "Oh, thank God, you're not hot."

Her lips twitched upward. "Thanks a lot. You don't look all that *hot* yourself."

His lips gently found hers. When he pulled away, Claire watched as his grin emerged, coming from some dark place, and a tear slid down his cheek. Had she ever seen him cry? Claire couldn't remember. It was the relief in his voice that overwhelmed her and brought tears to her cheeks. "Mrs. Rawlings, have I ever mentioned how much I love that smart mouth?"

Claire nodded. "A time or two."

He smoothed the hair from her face. "You've had us all very scared."

It was a day of revelations: first a tear and then an admittance of fear. Claire almost asked who this man was, and what he'd done with her husband; however, the sincerity in his voice didn't deserve a quick retort. Instead, she reached for his hand and kissed his palm. "I'm sorry, I scared you. I don't remember. What happened?"

Their voices must have been overheard because before he could answer, the bedroom door opened and Madeline came rushing in. "Oh, Madame el." Her deep dark eyes smiled. "Madame *Claire*, our prayers, they have been answered."

Something as simple as a name shouldn't make her cry, yet hearing Madeline call her by her name, a request Claire had made months ago, ignited warmth. Again, Claire felt movement within her. Smiling, she asked, "At the risk of sounding redundant, would someone please tell me what happened?" At that moment, she noticed the back pain was gone.

"Yes, my dear, we will. We don't want you to have to ask again." She could hear the smirk in her husband's voice.

"Thank you, I don't believe I'm the only one who doesn't like to ask the same question twice." Claire saw the gleam in Tony's eyes and squeezed his hand. It truly amazed her that a simple phrase could possess so much meaning.

"Madame Claire, how do you feel?"

"I think... I feel good..." Claire tried to sit. Tony moved to the back of the lounge chair and repositioned the back. When he did, Claire realized something leaked. With a surge of panic, she confessed, "I think I just..."

Madeline reached for her hand. "Your water broke. Your baby is coming soon."

Claire knew she should be excited, yet looking at her husband and then past him, she saw the gray skies. It was then the drumming of steady rain registered. "Dr. Gilbert?" she asked.

Tony shook his head and grasped her hand. "It's too dangerous. Phil and Francis have both offered to go after him; however, even if they get to town, Dr. Gilbert may not be willing to travel back here."

Claire tried to think. "Madeline, did you say you've delivered babies before?"

"Oui, I've helped."

It was more experience than either of them had. Claire nodded, then, she asked, "My water broke? When?"

"Last night," Tony replied.

"Then why am I not in labor?"

"Oh, but Madame you are."

Claire closed her eyes and assessed. She felt more comfortable than she had in weeks. The lower back pain was gone. The tightening was gone. The pressure down low was gone. A tear escaped her eyes.

Tony tenderly wiped it away. "Why are you crying?"

Her words came between ragged breaths. "I don't think this is right." "If I'm in labor, then I should feel something." "My water broke." "It isn't safe for the baby *not* to be born." She looked back to Madeline, "Why am I not contracting?"

Madeline answered truthfully, "I do not know, but you will. Your baby will want to come out."

The lines around Tony's eyes deepened. "I'll go to town. I can't ask someone to do something I'm not willing to do."

Claire grasped his hand. "No! No you won't. I don't want Phil or Francis risking their lives either, but under no circumstance are you allowed to leave me." Not bothering to smile, Claire added, "This is *not* debatable."

His grin twitched, and he whispered close to her ear, "Do you want me to

get the satin mask?"

She tried to suppress her smile; however, suppression of any kind was impossible. Her emotions were too raw. The days of figurative masks were gone. With her emerald eyes shining, she replied, "Maybe later, but right now, you're not leaving me!"

"Yes, ma'am." Tony looked up to Madeline. "Do you think she should eat?"

Claire remembered the night before. "I don't want to. Last night, I threw up after dinner."

"Madame el, you can drink? No?"

"Yes, Madeline, I can drink."

"I'll be back."

When Madeline opened the door, Claire saw Phil and Francis standing just through the opening. Suddenly, she remembered modesty. Looking down to her feet, Claire realized she wore a nightgown that she didn't remember putting on and was covered with a sheet. "Please let Phil and Francis come in for a minute. They look worried."

Tony kissed Claire's forehead as he fought to stand. Sitting on the floor all night appeared to have stiffened his muscles as well. "My dear, we were all concerned."

It was nice to have everyone near. Claire wished for the doctor, but the camaraderie was much better than being alone. Francis explained that, although the forecast wasn't promising, if a break occurred in the weather, he'd take the boat to Dr. Gilbert. If he couldn't help Madame el and her *bébé* in that way, he'd do what he'd been doing all night—he'd pray. When he squeezed Claire's hand, the tension from the storm and impending labor dissipated. The sunshine of faith overpowered the fog of doubt.

After Francis reassured Claire and Tony, he slipped from the room. When Madeline entered with a concoction of fruit juices, Claire noticed Phil. Since he hadn't spoken, she hadn't been aware of his presence. With his arms crossed over his chest, he'd been leaning against the wall, observing. Claire reached out her hand. "Phil, I didn't see you. Please come over here."

His steps were dutiful and painstakingly slow. In all the time she'd known Phil, she'd never seen his current expression. It wasn't anger; she saw that the day he found Harry in their hotel suite. It wasn't concern; she saw that multiple times as they worked to hide. Claire wasn't sure what it was. When he reached her hand, Claire was the one to reassure. Squeezing his, she said, "I'm fine, Phil. The baby's fine. Please don't risk your life to get the doctor. We'll be all right."

He didn't speak. He nodded. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with the whole intimacy of the situation. He'd seen her in a nightgown before; however, this was understandably different.

Claire looked to Tony. When their eyes met, Tony repeated Claire's words, "If anyone's risking their life to get the doctor, it will be me." Tony looked back to Claire, "However, at this point, no one will."

She exhaled.

After Claire drank most of Madeline's fruit juice, Tony helped her stand. She read somewhere that walking could help induce labor. Her first stop was the bathroom; she wanted to be clean. When she turned to close the door, Tony entered. "I'm not leaving you alone. You're stuck with me."

Claire smiled. "Thank you." There were some things that were difficult to ask, but when they were offered or *demanded*, it was comforting. At that moment, Claire was thankful for her demanding husband.

By midafternoon, the rain stopped, the sky began to clear, and patches of blue infiltrated the gray sky. As evening approached the blue dominated, even as the wind continued to howl. The sound of surf filled their ears as the normally calm lagoon produced waves with white tops.

With Claire's arm in Tony's, they walked the length of the lanai and back again. Claire didn't believe anyone else had slept, yet no one complained. It was during their fourth or fifth lap when Phil approached. "Excuse me, Francis believes we have enough time to get to town and back before dark."

Claire looked anxiously toward Tony. The contractions had come back; however, they weren't occurring with any sense of regularity. Thankfully, they also weren't in her back. They were a tightening that encompassed her entire midsection. Claire wouldn't authorize a venture that could harm the people she loved. Reaching out, Claire took Phil's hand. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

His neck straightened, and his tone sounded formal. "Mrs. Rawlings, I can assure you, I've had more difficult assignments than a boat ride in the tropics of the South Pacific."

Tony nodded. When he began to speak, Claire gripped his arm. Both men looked to her as she closed her eyes and repeatedly exhaled.

Perhaps there was an unspoken connection between Phil and Tony. Both men wanted to help, needed to help, yet felt helpless. This was Phil's chance to do something for Claire. Tony replied, "Be safe and be fast." Claire didn't argue. When she opened her eyes, she saw Phil's nod before he hurried away.

Moments later, the distant roar of the boat's motor filtered through the reverberating sound of the surf. Claire grasped Tony's arm again. The contractions were getting closer.

CHAPTER FORTY

Forbidden to remember, terrified to forget; it was a hard line to walk.
—Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon*

*W*HEN MEREDITH LEFT her husband Thursday morning, she couldn't stop the tears. He didn't want her to go, but he didn't argue. He hadn't been married to his college sweetheart for ten years without understanding her desires. Avoiding the scheduled meeting would be the equivalent of the first story Meredith wrote about Claire. It would be lying and cheating. Very ironic, considering the stance she was about to support as *truth* was in fact a *lie*.

It took Meredith a moment in the parking lot to regain her composure, but summoning all her strength, she pushed the thoughts of her children and husband aside and concentrated on Claire. The meeting would be short-lived; as soon as Emily saw her, it would be over. Her only hope was that she'd be released on bail. Unbeknownst to Meredith, her husband was spending the morning securing their assets in anticipation of such a call.

She wished she could tell everyone the progress Claire had made; however, Meredith wouldn't do that. She'd promised Claire she wouldn't tell anyone, and she wouldn't let her down again.

Making her way to the conference room on the first floor of the doctor's tower, Meredith had a fleeting feeling of pity for Ms. Bali. Yesterday, her supervisor was almost giddy about this meeting. It was unusual for someone as low as a *food aide* to be recognized for contribution to a patient's care. Having the family and lead doctor desiring to speak with someone under Ms. Bali's supervision was the biggest compliment she'd received in over twenty years. Before Meredith went to Claire's room yesterday afternoon, Ms. Bali went on and on about the years of under appreciation. Meredith hypothesized this meeting was why she received a mere verbal reprimand for keeping Claire out so late the other night. Among her other prayers, Meredith hoped

Ms. Bali wouldn't be penalized for hiring someone with false credentials.

As Meredith neared the conference room, she fought the urge to make one last trip to Claire's room; instead, she willed her feet forward. She wasn't wearing her uniform. Looking down at her blouse and skirt, Meredith grinned. She'd spent quite a bit of time choosing a blouse she thought would look good in a mug shot.

Stepping through the threshold, Meredith scanned the room. Smiling to those in attendance, she hid her surprise at the empty seats. She'd expected the room to be fuller. The faces smiling back at her were ones of staff members she'd seen periodically in corridors and patients' rooms. The meeting was scheduled for 8:30 AM, and Ms. Bali arrived with minutes to spare. Her normal uniform was replaced with a nice skirt suit. Smiling, she sat beside Meredith. 8:30 AM came and went. The Vandersols weren't present, nor was Dr. Fairfield. By 8:45 AM, the staff present began to fidget. Ms. Bali's expression began to waver, exposing her concerned eyes as she watched the clock on the wall.

At 9:00 AM, a confident, professionally-dressed woman came into the room and apologized, "Excuse me, Ms. Russel and everyone else, my name is Valerie, I'm Dr. Fairfield's assistant. I've been sent to apologize to you for this inconvenience. Ms. Russel, your help with Ms. Nichols has been noticed and appreciated. Dr. Fairfield apologizes for his inability to attend this meeting, as do the Vandersols. Something unexpected has come up. They wanted you to know that your assistance has been, and is, acknowledged. They hope you'll continue working with Ms. Nichols; she works very well with you. Thank you everyone for coming. This meeting is done."

Meredith stared, trying to comprehend Valerie's speech. When Dr. Fairfield's assistant turned to walk away, Meredith suddenly realized the only possible reason for everyone to miss this meeting. It had something to do with Claire. Meredith asked, "Excuse me, Valerie?"

The assistant turned around. "Yes, Ms. Russel?"

"Is Claire, I mean, Ms. Nichols, all right?"

"Yes, Ms. Russel. May I speak with you privately?"

Meredith couldn't resist. Although she'd just received a pardon, she needed to know what kept everyone away and that Claire was well. Meredith followed Valerie into an empty elevator. Valerie pushed the button for the floor of Dr. Fairfield's office and whispered, "Dr. Fairfield said if you asked that I was to bring you up."

"Are you sure she's all right?"

Valerie didn't answer verbally, but her expression morphed from stoic business assistant to a school girl with a secret: one she was dying to share. Meredith decided not to push any further. If she were being included in this gathering, then it was something big.

The relief Meredith felt at the conclusion of the non-existent meeting dissipated as she neared Dr. Fairfield's office. She suddenly realized she was seconds away from facing the Vandersols. "Are you sure I'm welcome?" she asked as they entered the quiet hallway.

"You are, but first let me show you what's happening. Come with me."

Meredith's anxiety grew with each step. Valerie took her to a room. The nameplate beside the door read: *Observation*. Inside, there were four chairs all facing a large mirror. Valerie pointed toward the mirror and pushed a switch. The dark glass transformed into a window, giving them visual entry to a well-lit room. On the other side of the glass, Meredith saw a surreal scene. Claire was sitting in a chair, maintaining eye contact with her sister. Emily was also sitting, bent at the waist, holding Claire's hands with their knees touching. Claire looked uncomfortable, but it was Emily who appeared visibly shaken. Her eyes were puffy with dark streaks of mascara coating her cheeks.

There was no sound; nevertheless, Emily's lips were moving, Claire was nodding and shaking her head, answering questions that Meredith couldn't hear. John's blotchy face caught Meredith's attention as he knelt next to Emily with his hand on Claire's knee. Dr. Fairfield and Dr. Brown were observing and conversing near the far corner.

"What happened?" Meredith finally asked, choking back the emotion which bubbled in her chest.

"When the staff arrived to Ms. Nichols' room to help her shower, she was already showered and dressed. Then she told them she didn't want eggs for breakfast; she wanted fruit." As Valerie recounted the scene that sent every member of Claire's care team into overdrive, Valerie couldn't contain her smile.

Meredith, however, was having difficulty holding back her tears. "Do they think this is real? I mean, will it last?"

"Oh, Dr. Fairfield is beside himself. Ms. Russel, he's invited you to join them. Your care has helped in getting Ms. Nichols to this point."

Meredith knew that was true, but she also knew Claire's public declaration was done for one reason—to save her. If she entered that room, then she'd defeat Claire's efforts. Unable to keep the emotion from her voice, Meredith replied, "I want to, but seeing her with her sister and brother-in-law... I don't want to interrupt this family moment. Besides, I don't want her to see me crying. I don't want to upset her."

Valerie placed her hand comfortingly on Meredith's shoulder. "I understand. This has been very emotional for everyone."

"May I see her later this afternoon? I'm not scheduled to work, but I'd like to bring her dinner to her, if I may?"

"I don't see why not. Does Ms. Bali have your number?"

"Yes, she does."

"If there are any concerns, we'll call you; otherwise, please come back." Valerie patted her shoulder. "Ms. Nichols mentioned you by name. She does appreciate all that you've been doing for her."

Meredith couldn't answer; the soft tears now flowed too freely. She took one last look at the scene through the window, nodded to Valerie, and left the observation room. After retrieving a tissue from her purse, Meredith walked to the kitchen offices. Ms. Bali would want to know what happened and transformed their meeting.

As soon as Meredith reached her car, she called her husband. In retrospect, she understood how he misconstrued her tears. Of course, he thought she'd been arrested. When she explained what Claire did, he promised a celebratory dinner. Meredith agreed, with one stipulation: it needed to be a late one. First, she wanted to come back and see Claire, after the Vandersols left.



SIX STEPS. THAT's the length of Claire's trek near her bed. Her mind swirled with the onslaught of new information. It was all she could do to slow thoughts. The repetitive counting, as she methodically paced back and forth, helped to calm her: *One, two, three, four, five, six—turn—one, two...*

She told herself this technique was normal. Not crazy.

No matter how much she tried to focus on other issues, Meredith kept coming to Claire's thoughts. What if she stayed away or didn't know what Claire had done? What if she didn't come back?

Unfortunately, Claire knew the answer to her own questions. That knowledge propelled her steps. If Meredith didn't return, there'd be no one to help Claire remember the man she loved. No one to help her remember the man who would never return. Meredith was the only person willing to break the rules. *Four, five, six—turn—one*. Oh, Claire knew rules, but this rule couldn't be maintained. As much as she wanted to show everyone that she could behave, obeying this rule wasn't an option.

Claire knew her memories weren't right. There were gaps the size of craters! When Claire tried to remember Tony, real memories mixed with illusions. Meredith's stories helped her remember; they helped to bring color back to the dimming scenes from her past. As Claire tried to recall specific times from her past, panic bubbled up from her chest. *Two—three, four, five, six—turn—one, two*. Sometimes she'd be able to picture a place, but not the faces. Other times she'd imagine the faces, but the scents were gone. Her pacing quickened as she feared her sacrifice, telling everyone she was getting better, was all for naught.

Concentrating on his face, the color of his eyes, and the scent of his cologne, the sound of the opening door or moving cart didn't register. Perhaps ignoring the worker was a conscious decision. Claire was tired of talking. *Turn—one, two, three.* The day had been so full! There'd been so many different people asking so many questions. She wanted time to process, time to sort things out, time to spend alone with Tony. Yes, she knew that wouldn't truly happen; nevertheless, memories were better than nothing.

Claire didn't notice the woman beside her until she felt the hand on her arm. Turning toward the touch, her friend's voice quieted the numbers and slowed the torrent of thoughts. Although she hadn't heard what Meredith was saying, Claire bowed her head and whispered, "Oh, thank God... I was worried about you."

"About me?" Meredith lifted Claire's chin. "What about you? Are you all right?" Hugging her friend, she added, "Thank you!"

Walking toward the table where Meredith had placed Claire's food, Claire replied, "I'm tired... That's normal though... isn't it?"

Smiling, Meredith nodded. "Yes, Claire, it is. But what you did, oh my God, it was beyond normal. It was amazing!"

"I can't lose you... Please don't follow the rules" Claire spoke in quiet short bursts. "I need you to help me remember... You're my only connection to him."

"What you did was a big risk. You told me you weren't ready. Thank you." Reaching for Claire's hand, Meredith squeezed and said, "I'm not your *only* connection. Did you talk to Emily about Nichol?"

Claire's relieved smile disappeared. "I did... She doesn't want me to see her... Not yet... Until they're sure... I'm better."

Meredith's heart broke. "What do you want?"

"She showed me pictures." Claire's voice lightened. "She's beautiful!" Lifting her moist green eyes toward Meredith, Claire added, "I want to hold her... in my arms." When she closed her eyes, a renegade tear slid down her cheek. "I've missed so much."

"But there's so much more to experience. We'll get you better. You'll be holding Nichol in your arms soon." Meredith questioned, "How did your family reunion go?"

Claire sighed and shrugged her shoulders. She lifted her fork and began to eat. After a few bites, she offered, "There were a lot of questions... I'm tired of talking."

"It's all right. You don't need to tell me anything."

Hurriedly, Claire offered, "I didn't tell them your last name... I just said... Meredith... That won't get you in trouble... Will it?"

"No, I'm using Jerry's last name, Russel."

Claire exhaled. "Good... can you keep visiting? ... Will you... Please?"

“Oh, yes!”

Though most of her sentences were incomplete and her words slowed with each sentence, Claire told Meredith she didn’t know what to do when Emily and John walked in. The last memories she could recall of her sister, Emily was mad at her. Thankfully, Emily wasn’t mad; instead, she was relieved! During most of the meeting, they talked about Nichol.

It was a much busier day than Claire had experienced in a long time. Although it wasn’t late, after Claire stopped eating, Meredith asked if she wanted help getting ready for bed. Claire didn’t want to accept Meredith’s help. She’d already accepted too much; nevertheless, fatigue prevailed.



SOON, CLAIRE WAS in her nightgown and ready for sleep. As Meredith was about to leave, she remembered something else she’d brought Claire. “I almost forgot. I have a present for you.”

Meredith went to the food cart and removed a large package, wrapped in pink paper with a brighter pink bow, from the bottom shelf. The colorful box was a stark contrast to the bland room. When she turned back toward Claire, she saw a spark in Claire’s eyes she hadn’t seen in years.

“Do you want to open it now?” Meredith asked as she set the box next to Claire on the bed.

Claire nodded and whispered, “Yes.” Yet, instead of moving, Claire stared at the box.

“Is there a problem?”

“The paper... It’s so pretty.”

Meredith eased the bow off and carefully ran her finger under the tape. With the paper loosely covering the gift, she left it beside Claire on the bed. Apprehensively, Claire removed the paper and took off the lid. Pushing the tissue paper aside, she revealed three bright pink throw pillows. Two were circular and one was a square with ruffles. Hugging one of the pillows close to her chest, Claire smiled and asked, “Can they stay here? ... It would be great to have color.”

“Yes, and I’ll bring more color! We’ll get this room to reflect how much better you’re doing!”

“Oh, I’d like that.” Closing her eyes, Claire added, “I wish...”

Meredith waited for Claire’s voice to regain strength. When it didn’t, she asked, “What do you wish?”

“You’ve done too much... I can’t... ask for more.”

Meredith lifted Claire’s chin until their eyes met. “You saved me from jail today. What do you wish?”

“For the gray... to go away.”

“It will. Each day, we’ll make everything more colorful.”

Claire shook her head. “No... The gray in my hair... I’m not that old... What will Nichol think?”

Meredith smiled. “Oh, honey, I’ll be back tomorrow, and we’ll bring color back to your hair. What color do you want to be?” With a grin, she added, “More pink?”

With her head settled on her pillows, a faint smile came to Claire’s lips. “No, I like brown... I like brown... a lot.” Her eyes closed.

Meredith set the box on the floor, placed the pillows next to Claire, and covered her with a blanket. Gathering Claire’s dinner dishes, she thought about Claire’s words. Yes, Meredith remembered the stories of Claire’s hair. She also knew the color of Tony’s eyes. It went without saying: Claire definitely liked brown.

Tomorrow, Meredith had a new goal: Claire’s hair would return to the beautiful, shiny chestnut color she had in college. As she turned off the light and closed Claire’s door, Meredith giggled. Her job description was ever changing. Soon she could add beautician to her résumé.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

It's not so important who starts the game but who finishes it.

—John Wooden

THE TROPICAL SKY darkened; hues of orange and red faded to black. Tony looked out toward the now calm sea as the ball of fire which warmed their world once again found its home below the horizon. As evidence of the ravaging the sea had endured at the hands of the tropical storm, seaweed and driftwood littered the normally pristine white sand surrounding the lagoon. The shore wasn't its only victim. Palm trees lay precariously strewn across paths, over one another, all around the island, downed by the strong winds.

Tony paced between the windows and Claire's delivery bed. Their mattress needed to be replaced. What difference did it make if their baby was born upon it? Madeline exchanged the cool compress on Claire's forehead for a cooler one and fed Claire ice chips. Tony watched; however, his attention was divided between his wife and the men he'd sent out to sea. Every so often, he'd look out toward the water hoping, praying, for signs of Francis and Phil. Nearly two hours earlier, he'd received a call saying they were on their way back with Dr. Gilbert. The trip usually lasted thirty to forty minutes, so they should've arrived over an hour ago. Occasionally, Tony's gaze would meet Madeline's. Though she didn't say a word, he knew by her furrowed brow that she too was worried. He just didn't know if it were solely because of Francis, who'd warned them hundreds of times about navigating a boat after dark, or if it was also about Claire.

Claire's stifled cries brought Tony away from the reflective glass panes to their brightly lit suite. Every light in their room was on, along with multiple additional lamps that Tony had retrieved from around the house. Claire's contractions were occurring closer and closer together. He knelt beside her bed, kissed her cheek, and waited for her response. One moment, she wanted

him near; the next moment, she didn't want to be touched. At one time during the evening, Madeline cornered Tony in the bathroom while he dampened more cloths for Claire's head. "Monsieur, what Madame el is saying and feeling, it is normal. She needs you to stay strong."

Tony nodded. He didn't know what normal was anymore. His whole world was different than he'd ever foreseen. The addition of their child would only further propel it into an oblivion he never before knew existed, and as for strength—he could do that. It was his thing. If he could endure the pain he saw in Claire's eyes in her stead, then he would without hesitation.

"You don't have to be strong," Tony encouraged. "Scream if you need to scream." This time, she took his hand and squeezed. For a moment, he considered screaming. Never before had his petite, gentle wife exhibited so much strength. He worried the bones in his fingers may not survive; and then all at once, her grip lessened and the clouds of pain floated away revealing shiny emerald eyes as tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Where's Dr. Gilbert?"

"He'll be here soon." Did he sound confident? Tony hoped he did. He tried multiple times to contact Phil by phone, but Tony knew the phones had poor reception when out to sea. The only way to make contact was the two-way radio. The transmitter and receiver were in the boathouse. Earlier, Tony mentioned going to the boathouse and trying to reach them, but Claire's sudden look of panic stopped him in his tracks. She was determined that he needed to be with her. Didn't she understand, he was useless, and Dr. Gilbert was the one she needed?

"Tony? Tony!?"

"I'm right here."

Her face contorted as she made a sound he'd never heard.

"I'm right here. What can I do?" he asked.

Breathing through the pain, she spoke in but a whisper, "There's so much pressure."

Madeline lifted the sheet and felt between Claire's legs. When her hand emerged, it was covered in blood. Tony felt his own blood drain from his face. Mercifully, he was on his knees. If he'd been standing, Tony feared his show of strength would fail as he'd be prone on the floor.

Madeline looked directly into his eyes. "Monsieur, we're going to bring your *bébé* into this world."

Tony nodded, at least he thought he did.

Madeline emphasized, "Now, Monsieur!"

Claire screamed as Madeline, once again, explored below the sheet.

Although Madeline's voice was calm, her words took the air from Tony's lungs. "I'm not feeling your *bébé*'s head. It's too soft. She's coming bottom first!"

Before he could respond, Claire's hoarse voice pleaded, "Oh, please, please help my baby."

Tony soothed her forehead with his hand, unsure what else to do. "Madeline, tell me what to do."

"Let me see your hands, Monsieur."

He did as she asked and held up his hands.

"Too large. I will help your child come. I worry about the cord. Did the doctor ever mention *breech*?"

Claire shook her head, tears flowing easier than words. "No, but the last ultrasound was almost two months ago."

"She has turned, but it is all right. Many women deliver *bébés* this way. I worry about pulling if the cord is where it should not be."

Claire's breath was a ragged plea, "Please... I don't care about me, save my baby."

The hair on Tony's neck stood to attention. "I care! We will save both of you!"

Before he finished declaring, Claire screamed again. The sound echoed through the house and over the island. Blood now covered Madeline's hands and arms. Tony saw splashes on the front of her dress.

Madeline instructed, "Go to the kitchen. In the cabinet near the stove, there is a case. It is brown. Bring it to me."

Tony looked down into Claire's now clouded eyes. Again, she cried out.

"I'll be right back," he promised as he kissed Claire's damp head and stepped away. Rounding the end of the bed, Tony's shoe slipped on the wooden floor. Looking down, he stopped. On the floor, seeping into the cracks between the bamboo planks, he saw a puddle of blood.

"Go, hurry!" Madeline's command propelled his stilled feet.

Tony wasn't well-versed on anything in a kitchen; however, he knew a stove and a cabinet. Flinging open the doors he found a brown case. When he opened the case, his heart stopped beating. The cutlery was shiny and clean with sharp looking blades. Bile rose in his throat as he imagined one of these knives being used on his wife. Tony couldn't let Claire endure this pain without something. Quickly, he grabbed a bottle of bourbon. He'd make her drink if he had to; or perhaps it could be used to sterilize the knife. Tony didn't know the exact reason; however, as he rushed back toward his bedroom, he held tightly to both the case and the bottle.

When he entered the brightly lit room, Claire's eyes were closed and her chin rested against her chest. "What happened? What did you do?"

"Nothing, Monsieur, it's her body. It knows. Her muscles must relax, and this way, she will not feel the pain. Please open the case."

He did.

"That one, with the shorter blade." Then she saw the bottle. "Pour the

bourbon over the blade.”

He wasn’t sure how he managed to move. Everything was on high alert, yet in slow motion at the same time. The red filling their room wasn’t that of anger, it was Claire’s blood. Tony wanted it all to stop.

As he handed the knife to Madeline, their eyes met. “Monsieur, I’m doing my best to save your child.”

“And my wife, Madeline. Save my wife.”

She nodded.

At that moment, they heard the voices on the lanai. Turning, the doors to their suite opened and they saw Francis, Phil, and Dr. Gilbert. Francis said something about trees blocking their way as the doctor entered and assessed the scene. Looking to Tony, he said, “Mr. Rawlings, I need to wash my hands. Follow me and tell me everything.”

It was the abridged version. They didn’t have time for a full length novel. Tony emphasized the main points: Claire’s water broke roughly twenty-four hours ago, the contractions returned about six hours ago, and had gained in intensity over the last two hours. She’d lost what appeared to be a lot of blood, had recently gone unconscious, and Madeline believed the baby was breech.

Dr. Gilbert nodded as he opened his bag. With a paper gown covering his clothes and surgical gloves over his hands, he took Madeline’s place at the end of the bed. When he eyed the knives, he nodded toward Madeline. “You have good instincts. Go wash your hands. I need an assistant.”

Tony moved to Claire’s head and stayed at her side. He talked in her ear and smoothed her perspiration drenched hair from her face. With all of his might, he tried not to listen to Dr. Gilbert and Madeline’s words. This wasn’t his personality. He was a take-charge person, a man who demanded all of the facts. Right now, he wanted to pretend everything was all right, especially when Dr. Gilbert asked, “Mr. Rawlings, I hope it won’t come to this; however, if you must choose between your wife and your child, what is your decision?”

How can anyone answer such a question? The life of the woman he loved more than life itself or the life of an innocent child who’d never experienced the world. Inhaling deeply, Tony looked Dr. Gilbert directly in the eye, and despite his new feeling of impotence, found his CEO voice, “Doctor, that decision will *not* be necessary. You *will* save them both.”

There wasn’t time to debate. Claire’s body continued to contract. Although she was unconscious, her muscles worked to expel their child. Tony heard the awful pop, sounding much like the puncturing of a piece of plastic. Burying his face in Claire’s shoulder he spoke, about what, he didn’t know. He talked about walks, lakes, and beaches. In the background, he heard a suctioning sound and the call for a scalpel. It wasn’t until he heard the cry of a

baby, while still feeling the drum of Claire's pulse under his fingertips, that he had the strength to lift his head.

In Dr. Gilbert's hands, with Madeline gently wiping it clean, was the pinkest, most beautiful baby Tony had ever seen. He'd told himself that, if he needed to decide, it would have been Claire. He knew that was the way he would have gone. Once again, his life was a contradiction. He still would have chosen Claire; however, seeing the round face, tightly-shut eyes, and open mouth, his body shuddered with relief, thankful he hadn't been forced to make that decision.

Above the loud and proud wails of his child, Madeline proclaimed, "Monsieur, welcome your daughter."

Before he could move, he squeezed Claire's hand. "Doctor, is Claire..?" His voice trailed away, as he was unable to finish his question.

"She's lost a lot of blood, as you said, but I believe once we deliver the placenta, place some stitches, and get her some fluids, your wife will be okay."

With that reassurance, Tony stepped toward Madeline who now held his perfect baby girl wrapped in a blanket. Her eyes were shut, and she appeared content with the new warmth. The top of her small head had a thin layer of dark brown hair. Leaning near, Tony cooed, "Hello, my princess. I'm your daddy."

The angst of the last few hours dissipated as Tony moved the rocking chair from the nursery and placed it near Claire's head. After he washed his hands, he sat and Madeline placed their bundle of joy in his arms. Never had Tony imagined another woman taking residence in his heart. It belonged to Claire and had for a very long time. Once again, he'd been wrong. It wasn't that the little girl he held replaced her mother, that wasn't possible. No, this little girl expanded his heart, making her own space. It seemed unbelievable that his heart could grow. It wasn't that long ago that Tony didn't even know it existed. Gently, Tony kissed his daughter's forehead and watched her nose crinkle.

"Monsieur, what is her name?" Madeline asked with anticipation.

"We'll wait until Claire awakes. We never pinpointed one girl's name."

Tony saw the exchange of looks between Madeline and Dr. Gilbert. Dr. Gilbert explained their concern, "Mr. Rawlings, it's almost midnight. The people of these islands are strong in their traditions and beliefs. No child should enter the next day without their proper name. It'll bring uncertainty and unhappiness to the rest of its life."

Tony looked at his watch; it was 11:53 PM. His mind went back over all of their naming discussions. They had gone through list after list of names. She'd said *Blaine* could be for a girl too, but that didn't feel right. The conversation that came to Tony's tired mind was one from when he first

arrived on the island. This baby, he'd said, wouldn't be a Rawls or a Nichols but a Rawlings. She was a Rawlings; nevertheless, Rawls was part of Rawlings no matter how much Tony tried to run or hide from the fact, and his daughter was also a Nichols, something he wanted her to know with pride. Clearing his throat, Tony looked up at Madeline and Dr. Gilbert's expectant eyes, and said, "May I introduce our daughter, *Nichol Courtney Rawlings*."

Madeline's smile beamed, reaffirming the joy that now filled the suite.



WHEN CLAIRE AWOKE, she was lying on a bed in her room. Somehow, she knew it wasn't their bed, but nonetheless, next to her propped against the headboard was her husband. When she turned toward him, her eyes opened wide and her lungs forgot to inhale. In his arms, wrapped in a blanket was a sleeping baby. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Claire lifted her head. Her body ached, yet she could move without effort. "I did it?" she asked as his tired eyes met hers. The soft chocolate color drew her nearer.

"Yes, Mrs. Rawlings, you did." He leaned down and their lips met. Looking lovingly into her eyes, he added, "You did a superb job."

Claire righted herself to sit beside her family. In the bend of her right arm was the too familiar pinch of an IV. Choosing to ignore the painful sensation, Claire concentrated on her family. Despite Tony's obvious exhaustion, she saw the pride behind his expression. Once again, Tony brushed his lips against hers before he placed their baby in her arms. "May I introduce our daughter?"

Claire's heart melted. "A girl. M-Madeline was right."

Shaking his head, Tony replied, "I don't think she should ever be doubted again."

"We didn't decide on a girl's name." Claire's words came as she gently unwrapped the blanket, exposing the present she'd been carrying for nine months.

"She has a name."

Claire looked up. "Oh?"

"There's some island wives' tale that forbids the changing to the next day without a name. I hope you don't mind. I didn't want to risk our daughter having any unnecessary ill fortune."

Claire tried to grasp the reality of not only having a daughter, but that she was already named. "Is it Raquel?" It had been his go-to name in all their debates.

"No, I wanted a name that would unite our family; one that said the Rawls vendetta is over."

Claire didn't know what to say. Tony's words were more emotion-filled than she could remember hearing. "What is it? What name did you choose?"

"Nichol." Tony's eyes begged for understanding.

Claire's lips parted and her eyes sparkled. The game was done. No more strategizing or manipulating; instead of declaring a winner, they'd called it even. Their daughter's name was Claire's ultimate prize. Claire's heart filled with pride. Immediately, she knew it was Tony's way of telling their daughter she was both a Nichols and a Rawlings. "Oh, Tony, I love it! We never even talked about that."

Tony's chest moved as he exhaled with relief. "Nichol Courtney Rawlings."

It was the most beautiful name she'd ever heard. As Nichol's eyes opened and Claire saw the chocolate brown she loved, she whispered, "I wanted your eyes. You wanted a girl. We've been blessed with both of our wishes." Nichol's mouth rooted toward Claire's breast.

Tony's eyes drifted closed as his head fell back to the wall. It had been a long forty-eight hours. Before he fell asleep, Claire heard him say, "A wish, a dream, a miracle. Whatever it is, it's real."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

It has been said, ‘time heals all wounds.’ I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone.

—Rose Kennedy

SOPHIA EASED HER car onto the circular brick drive in front of Marie’s massive house. On her cell phone, she heard Derek’s voice, “Have a nice lunch, babe. Is the house as nice as you anticipated?”

Her mouth gaped open as she looked up at the Romanesque-style mansion with facades of river stone, limestone, and brick. It was like something out of a 1940’s movie. “It’s amazing. I can’t believe she really lives here. Do people actually live like this?”

Derek laughed. “Well, she worked for Rawlings. That’s his house, or it was. No one knows if he’s alive or dead, but it’s probably not great table-talk for your lunch.”

“I’ll try to remember that. Keep conversation topics away from missing employers. What did you say? She’s named the executor of his estate?”

“Yeah, the information I found just named her as a long-time trusted employee—”

Sophia interrupted, “Hey, honey, the front door’s opening. I should get out of the car. I’ll call you when I’m on my way home.”

She heard him say he loved her as she turned off the car and the Bluetooth disconnected. “I love you, too,” she said to the warm air within the confines of her car. It was a stark contrast to the cold February chill between her and the mansion she was about to enter. Sophia secured her coat and gloves and bowed her face to the snowflakes as she hurried toward the grand doors.

The gentleman within nodded as her shoes hit the marble floor. Looking down, she saw the traces of snow that had fallen from her shoes and created puddles within the beautiful foyer. “Ms. Sophia?”

“Yes,” she said sheepishly. “Hello.” Sophia offered her hand.

The gentleman nodded again and said, “Ms. London is expecting you. May I take your coat?”

Sophia tried desperately not to gawk at her surroundings as she removed her coat and gloves and handed them to the butler—um—servant? She didn’t know who he was, only that apparently, he didn’t shake hands. “Yes, thank you. Where is Mar-Ms. London? Is she here?”

“Yes, Miss. She’s waiting for you in the sitting room. Please follow me.”

Each step reminded Sophia of a fantasy. Growing up in New Jersey and being a fan of the arts, Sophia loved watching old movies, especially those in black and white. If there was singing and dancing, it made it all the better. When she’d go to bed at night she’d think about the movies and the places the characters lived. She dreamt about mansions, servants, and opulence. As she grew up, Sophia learned that a life like she saw in the movies was mostly a world of fantasy. She could glean inspiration from it, but it didn’t truly exist. Stepping down into a warm sitting room, Sophia hypothesized: maybe this world did exist. She glanced toward a fireplace that was nearly the size of her living room in Provincetown. Within its limestone walls a warm fire roared, filling the room with warmth.

“Welcome, Sophia!” Marie said as she stood, placing the tablet she’d been reading on the nearby table.

Sophia leaned toward her friend and accepted her welcoming hug. “Marie, your house is amazing.”

Marie shrugged. “I know it seems that way, but after so many years, it’s just home.”

Looking through the windows, Sophia saw a sunroom. Beyond, there was a large yard where blades of grass showed their heads through the thin layer of snow while more flakes swirled in the frosty air. Trees lined the yard, creating a private haven. Refocusing on the room, Sophia concentrated on the heat radiating from the fire. “That fireplace is huge! On a day like today, it feels fantastic.”

Marie smiled. “It does feel good. Can I get you some coffee?” Before Sophia could answer, Marie corrected, “No, it’s tea you like, isn’t it? Would you like some warm Earl Gray?”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.”

Within seconds, a woman was in the sitting room taking instructions from Marie. Sophia was sitting on the sofa talking with Marie when the woman returned with Sophia’s tea. Apparently, lunch would be ready momentarily. A few minutes later, a young girl rushed into the room with a piece of paper in her hand. Her voice cracked with each word, “Ms. London, I’m sorry to bother you.”

“Cindy? Is there a problem?”

The young lady shook her head. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I know you’re busy; however, perhaps later, I could speak with you...”

Marie turned her gaze toward Sophia.

Sophia didn’t know what to say. It was obvious there was an issue. “Marie, I’m in no hurry. If there’s something the two of you need to discuss, then I’ll gladly enjoy the fire.”

“Thank you, Sophia.” Marie turned toward Cindy. “Come with me to my office.”

As the two of them walked away, Sophia heard Cindy mention something about a letter, the FBI, and her parents. Before she could truly glean any meaning from the conversation, Marie and Cindy had disappeared down a long corridor. Sophia sighed. This was a strange and different world from anything she’d known. The owner of this house was missing, yet no one seemed concerned as they carried on their daily lives, and the young maid received letters from the FBI... Sophia leaned back against the plush sofa and looked into the flames. The crackle and snap of the wood added to the allure. In Provincetown, she and Derek’s home had a real fireplace. Everywhere they’ve lived since then had gas logs. Supposedly, the two were the same. Inhaling the distinct wood aroma, Sophia knew they weren’t.

“Are you ready for lunch?” Marie asked, pulling Sophia from the hypnotism of the flames.

“Yes, is everything all right?” Sophia saw Marie brush her palms against her thighs. It was the same technique Sophia used when she tried to hide her uneasiness.

“Yes, let me show you to the dining room.”

As they walked, Marie mentioned that Cindy had worked for this estate for quite a few years. She was only eighteen when her parents died in a tragic accident. Now, it seemed the FBI was interested in their death and wanted to exhume their bodies.”

Sophia gasped. “Oh my! How terrible! I’d never let anyone do that to my parents.”

Marie’s hands again brushed her thighs as they sat. “Perhaps you’d be better to speak to Cindy than I? I knew her mother. We were friends. I recommended that she deny the FBI access. There’s no good to come from digging up the past.”

Sophia sat back against the high-backed chair and gazed around the lovely dining room. The built-in cabinetry at one end of the table held exquisite china. When her gaze moved upward, Sophia saw the ornate ceiling with reflective gold flecks. “I agree. It’s better to move on.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent back in front of the fire, discussing art and upcoming events in the Quad Cities. Before Sophia was about to leave, she asked, “Marie, do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Not at all. I can’t promise I’ll answer, but ask away.”

“I really don’t have many people to talk to—not here anyway. The thing is...” Sophia hesitated. “...before we left California, I received a call from my birth mother.”

Marie stared and slowly asked, “You received a call from the woman who recently died?”

Sophia shook her head, the absurdity of Marie’s statement made her grin. “No, the people who raised me were wonderful. I loved them and will love them forever; however, I was adopted. My parents were honest about it. I never felt deprived or less loved because my mother didn’t give birth to me. Honestly, I never really gave a damn about the woman who gave birth to me, or my biological father, until I got that call.”

Marie’s hands were again experiencing the sensory input of her slacks. “What happened after you got the call?”

“I started wondering about her and about him.”

Marie’s head tilted as her brow rose. “Him? You started wondering about your father?”

Sophia’s breathe expelled. “Well, yes! I mean, the woman who gave birth to me called, but what about my biological father? Are they still together? Did they love one another or do they still? Do they regret giving me up?”

“Oh, I see. Did you ask any of those questions?”

“No, I have a telephone number, but sometimes I think not knowing is better. I mean, I can make up my own answers.”

Marie smiled. “So what’s your question, dear?”

Sophia readjusted her legs, curling one under herself as she leaned back into the plushness of the large chair. “I don’t know.” Her voice sounded far away. “I guess I just need to talk about it. Derek listens, but he’s protective. He doesn’t want me to get hurt.”

“Do you think you will?”

Sophia’s lips pressed together and she feigned a smile. “I’ve thought about the possibilities from all directions. If I learn I have this great set of biological parents who have a great life, then I’ll wonder why they didn’t want me to be a part of it. If I learn they didn’t stay together or they’re not good people, then I’ll wonder if dealing with me was part of the cause.”

Marie leaned forward and put her hand on Sophia’s knee. “That’s quite a decision. I’ve known many people who have done things they regret. Perhaps that’s why the woman called, or perhaps she regrets what she did thirty-three years ago; however, I don’t believe you should feel responsible for anything other than who you’ve become.” Marie’s gray eyes shimmered in the firelight. “Sophia, you’re an accomplished, lovely woman. The woman you spoke to should be proud.”

The scene melted as Sophia fought stoically not to cry. “I miss my mom

and pop.” With the back of her hand, she brushed a renegade tear away. “Thank you, Marie. I suppose the holidays left me feeling lonely.” She reached out and held Marie’s hand. “Thanks for listening.”

“Anytime.”

“You know, we don’t seem that different in age, yet look, Cindy came to you when she had a problem, and now, so did I.” Sophia chuckled. “You’re probably sick of listening to everyone else’s troubles.”

“Not at all. I’m honored you feel comfortable enough to talk.”

“I do, and I think you’re right before. No good comes from digging up the past. I don’t want to know that woman. I’ve been blessed with great parents, a fantastic husband, and good friends. Why push my luck?”



AFTER A DELIGHTFUL afternoon, Marie walked Sophia to the door. Once Marie watched Sophia’s car pull away and the barrier to the outside was closed, Catherine murmured, ‘Eighteen years; that’s our age difference, and you do not want to learn about the man who donated his DNA to make you. I refuse to consider him any kind of father. He doesn’t deserve any credit for the beautiful woman you are today! The way things are now *is* much better than bringing memories of that monster into the equation.’

As she walked toward her office, Catherine smiled, her words not audible to anyone, “In time, my dear, I promise, that it’ll be even better.”



HARRY FINISHED HIS report. His case in West Virginia was done. Tomorrow, he’d fly back to Palo Alto. He considered calling Liz and warning her, but as a sneaky grin came to his lips, he decided it would be more fun to surprise her. Since he’d been called away before Christmas, they hadn’t had a chance to celebrate the holiday. With Valentine’s Day just around the corner, he’d try to think of some way for them to enjoy the next one. Harry believed if he gave it a little thought, something would come up.

With a few minutes to spare before leaving the field office, Harry decided to utilize the bureau’s database. It didn’t take him long to back-door his way into his old case. Within seconds, he’d accessed the Rawlings/Nichols files. When he did, he was rewarded with new information. It appeared Anthony Rawlings had continued to stay in contact, as ordered by the FBI. Claire Nichols Rawlings had given birth to a healthy baby girl. For a split second, Harry wondered if the baby had blue or brown eyes. As fast as the thought

entered his mind, he pushed it away. That wasn't his purpose for this walk down memory lane. For the last two months, Harry had successfully distanced himself from all things Rawlings/Nichols. He wanted to keep that distance—forever; however, there were a few things that kept eating at him. If he were to truly ever have closure. He needed to resolve some issues.

He accessed the tissue-sample analysis for Simon Johnson. Since Rawlings confessed to paying for Simon's demise, no one had taken the time to verify the Johnson case. Harry wanted to let it go. He wanted Anthony Rawlings to rot in jail for a very long time. Without a doubt, hiring someone to sabotage a plane was a crime, and of that, without a doubt, Rawlings was guilty. Of actually murdering Simon Johnson, Harry wanted to say yes: Rawlings was responsible. But he couldn't. Johnson's body had been so badly burnt, the forensics were difficult.

The toxicology report came back with one-hundred-percent accuracy that *actaea pachypoda* was not in Simon's system. Over the last few months, Harry had begun to wonder, what was in Simon's system. Now, as he accessed the data, he found the answer to his question. The only foreign substance detected in Simon's tissues was diphenhydramine. Harry scrolled to the raw data: diphenhydramine, micrograms/liter 17.5. Saying a silent prayer that his snooping would go undetected, he wrote down the information and backed out of the system. He was finally getting his life and his head where they needed to be. Harry didn't need the powers that be to know he was still obsessing over a closed case.

A quick Google search on his phone confirmed Harry's thoughts: diphenhydramine was more commonly known as Benadryl. He and Simon had been friends for a few years. Harry tried to remember if Simon had allergies. After all, his plane did crash in the late fall. With the dryness and fires often associated with autumn in California, it would make sense that he'd take Benadryl during allergy season. Harry had Simon's medical history on his laptop back at the hotel and made a mental note to check for allergies. One last search, then Harry was done. He wanted to know the lethal volume of distribution for diphenhydramine. He waited.

After a few clicks, the answer appeared: lethal volume of distribution for diphenhydramine in adults—19.5 mg/L, children 7.5 mg/L, and infants 1.53 mg/L. Simon's volume of distribution didn't fall in the lethal range. Once again, Harry had more questions than answers.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.

—Mark Twain

C LAIRE STARED DOWN at their three-month-old daughter. She remembered to breathe, as air fought with pride and love, to fill her chest. Staring at Nichol's big brown eyes, she watched the chocolate come and go as her stubborn little girl fought unsuccessfully to keep her eyes alert. The lids fluttered slower and slower, each blink lasting longer than the last, until sleep overtook her round, angel-like face. While her pink lips pursed and her long, dark lashes rested upon her rosy cheeks, Claire swooned helplessly, finding it difficult to look away from the child resting peacefully in her arms. Claire wasn't the only one held captive by Nichol's charm. It reached out to anyone within her sphere, including Madeline.

Claire rocked Nichol gently as Madeline's rich laugh and hearty voice filled the tropical air, "Madame el, she eats well! Your beautiful daughter, she's growing every day. Look at those cheeks!"

Both women peered at Nichol's soft skin nestled against Claire's breast. Answering in a stage whisper, Claire replied, "She is! Too fast! I want to hold her and rock her forever."

"Enjoy, because soon she'll be crawling all over this floor. Next, she'll be running all over the island."

Claire shook her head. She couldn't imagine her little baby girl crawling, much less running. Enjoying the even pace of the rocking chair, Claire closed her eyes and sighed. "I never imagined it would be so amazing."

"Madame el, do you want me to put the princess in her crib?"

Claire started to say, no, when she looked up and saw Tony enter the room. The gleam which normally occupied his soft brown eyes, especially since the birth of their daughter, was gone. In its place, Claire saw darkness. She wasn't sure the cause. Was it worry or concern? His stoic expression hid

any revealing clues, yet she knew there was something. It wasn't just his eyes; she could feel the tension radiating from his every pore. It'd been so long since she'd seen him this way. Instinctively, she understood he wanted to speak to her alone.

Feigning a smile toward Madeline, Claire relinquished the sleeping bundle. "I'd love to sit here all day; however, I'll admit, Nichol needs a good nap in her crib if we're going to ever get her on the right schedule."

"*Oui, Madame el, we will.*" Madeline looked toward Tony and back to Claire. Her smile faded as the lines in her forehead deepened. She continued, "If you need anything, or you, Monsieur, please call for me. After I put the little angel down, I shall be in the kitchen."

Tony remained silent as Claire acknowledged Madeline's words and watched her walk away. Once they were alone, Claire made her way toward her husband. With each step forward, she analyzed the man before her, standing silently, staring out at the beautiful, blue sea. Despite his casual attire, Claire recognized his stance, the tightness in his shoulders and clenched jaw. She knew he was contemplating a thousand things: he was, once again, the CEO of a billion dollar conglomerate, the man with unfathomable responsibilities: the man before paradise. She needed to know why.

Reaching for his arm, Claire looked up into his dark eyes. "Tony, what is it? What's the matter?"

"I need to tell you something." His tone matched his gaze, strong and demanding. "But first, I want you to promise that you'll do as I say."

Claire stood a little taller. "I love you. I promise that. What I'm going to do has yet to be determined." The muscles under her fingertips tensed. Softening her pitch, she implored, "Tony, please tell me what happened. You're scaring me."

Turning, he clutched her shoulders as his stare bore down from above. Undaunted, she waited for his explanation. Behind his eyes, where she used to see only darkness, Claire now saw fury, indecision, and love. The sound of the surf filled the void while Tony wrestled to organize his words. Finally, his warm breath hit her cheeks and he implored, "Don't you understand? I need to know that you and Nichol are safe."

"We *are* safe. We're all safe. What's this about?"

Squaring his stance, he relayed the information emotionlessly, as if addressing a board of directors, "I just got off the phone with Eric. I'm going back to Iowa."

Claire pulled herself free and took a few steps backward in disbelief. "No! No you're not! We talked about this. Catherine can wait. Nichol needs you." Reaching for his hand, she continued, "I need you."

"Let me finish."

Claire nodded. "Fine, finish, but you know what Agent Jackson said.

There are charges and a case against you. You helped hide Catherine's crimes and ran from the FBI. When you step foot on U.S. soil, they'll take you into custody." Tears trickled from her eyes. She'd begged for less. Begging to keep her husband safe, with her in paradise, came without hesitation. "Please, Tony. Please remember, we said one year. Let Nichol celebrate her first birthday with us, all of us, here together."

"Damn it, you're killing me," he said as he wiped the tears from his wife's cheeks. Gently taking her hand, he led her out onto the lanai, to a shaded chaise lounge. Sitting, he directed, "Look at this view."

She turned toward the horizon. It was the same view she'd seen each day for months. Some days, she could stare at it for hours, but now she wanted answers.

Tugging softly on her chin, Tony pulled her gaze toward him and kissed her lips. Claire's heart ached at the sadness she saw. He continued, "I need to know you two are here, safe and sound. I won't inform the FBI I'm back in the States." As Claire's rebuttal began, Tony shook his head in an effort to keep her quiet. Obediently swallowing her protest, she nodded and he went on, "Then-then, I'll be back. I've contacted Phil. With his help, we can finish our objective sooner rather than later."

Phil had returned to the States after the first of the year. He stayed in constant contact, and Claire hadn't seen any worrisome emails. "Why?" Her voice quivered as she tried to voice her multitude of concerns all at once. "Why would you take that risk? What's so important that it can't wait a year? And how did you talk to Eric? Both the FBI and Phil told you not to contact anyone who doesn't know our location. What if he told Catherine?"

"He won't. If there's one person in this world I trust explicitly besides you, it's Eric. He's proven himself over and over."

"Yeah, you used to say the same thing about—" Although Claire stopped herself before she completed the sentence, it was too late. In the pools of black staring at her, she saw the pain she'd just inflicted.

Tony's volume rose. "You don't think I know? You don't think I've berated myself over and over for trusting her and putting you and Nichol in harm's way." Claire reached out, but when the tips of her fingers neared his arm, he pulled away. His response was as much a confession as a wish, "I thought the estate was a haven. Hell, you were probably safer in California with—"

Claire wouldn't let Tony go there, she interrupted, "I'm sorry. I know you trust Eric. I also know you thought you were protecting us. We can't rewrite history. If we could, our pen would probably run out of ink." This time, as she touched his hand and intertwined her fingers with his, he didn't stop her. "Please tell me what's happening."

"I have to go back and be sure everyone is safe. It's a responsibility I can't

avoid.”

“Is this about Sophia, Catherine’s daughter? Do you really think Catherine would do anything to her own daughter? Besides, not to sound selfish, but I don’t think she’s worth you leaving us and taking the risk.”

“It’s not about Catherine’s daughter.” Tony hesitated.

“Then who is that important?”

“Emily.”

Claire’s heart stopped. Despite the warm ocean breeze, her body shivered while goose bumps formed. “Emily? What do you mean? Did something happen?”

“Not yet, but Phil called, and he’s concerned. Emily and Catherine have been communicating quite a bit recently, via email and phone. His instincts told him something wasn’t right.”

Claire studied her husband’s features. In her heart, she knew she’d misjudged his sincerity involving her family in the past. She reminded herself that things had changed. They had changed. Seeing the lines around his eyes and the angst in his expression, she believed that he truly looked worried. She continued to listen.

“Phil didn’t know any more, so I decided it was worth the risk to call Eric. Our cell is blocked. Phil’s made sure that it can’t be traced. When I got a hold of Eric, he agreed: there’s something going on with Catherine and Emily. He said your sister and brother-in-law have agreed to come to Iowa next week. Catherine convinced Emily to visit and retrieve some of your things.”

Claire stood and paced near the edge of the infinity pool. The beautiful surroundings no longer registered. Her mind was on the other side of the world. “That doesn’t make sense. Why would Emily be talking with Catherine? She shouldn’t trust anything Catherine says.”

“But Emily doesn’t know that. All she knows is that you trusted Catherine. I’d bet you told Emily multiple times how wonderful Catherine was to you.”

The bile rose from Claire’s stomach as her mind recalled the glowing endorsements she’d bestowed upon Catherine in her recollections of life on the estate. “I did, but...”

Tony put his hand out, and Claire walked toward him, tears teetering on her lids, as he continued her sentence, “but Emily doesn’t know the truth.”

“Then I’ll call her. After all, you just called Eric. I’ll call Emily.”

“You’ve been missing for six months. How do you think that conversation will go?”

Claire knelt before Tony and laid her forehead on his knees. “Do you think...” Sobs of fear resonated from her chest. “Do you think Catherine would hurt Emily?”

Although she looked up to her husband for confirmation, Tony didn’t need

to answer. Claire knew the truth before she posed the question. Emily too was a child of a child.

He stroked her hair reassuringly. "I will stop this. It can't go on. We can't live in hiding forever, and John and Emily shouldn't live in fear of a threat they don't even know exists."

Taking a deep breath, Claire said, "You're right."

Standing, she brushed her lips against his. Tony pulled her into his lap, exhaled, and said, "Thank you. It'll be a relief to know you're safe."

Claire leaned away, her voice stronger. "You're right. This can't go on, but you're not right about Nichol and me staying here. Phil better get us an extra seat because we're going with you." She saw his finger moving toward her, about to silence her talking, but Claire shook her head and leaned back. Momentarily, their eyes meet. Hers contained a fire she didn't try to subdue. It was a fire with a purpose. The flames masked the growing fear coiling through her thoughts. "Tony, this isn't debatable. I'm not asking. We aren't staying here and worrying. Besides, Emily is my sister. I'm going."

Breaking their stare-off, Claire ended the conversation by surrendering herself to his embrace. She concentrated on the steady beat of his heart as her head rose and fell with his deep, exasperated breaths. The sounds resonating from his chest pacified her. She fought the desire to stay this way forever, safe and secure in her husband's arms.

Claire had played this game before. She'd just called his bluff. Now, it was up to Tony. He needed to decide to call, raise the stakes, or fold. She didn't think folding was an option. Although he wasn't happy with her proclamation, and it jeopardized his sense of control, they both knew the money to pay Phil, keep them hidden, and secure their return technically belonged to her. Ultimately, Claire would decide who would travel and who wouldn't.

As minutes ticked by, Claire lay silently in his embrace. She didn't need to see his eyes. The color didn't matter. If she wanted to go, then she was going. Claire could've yelled or fought to make him understand; instead she waited. Tony needed to justify this reality on his terms. When his arms squeezed her tighter, she knew his decision was made. With a sigh, Tony acquiesced, "I'll call Phil. We'll see what he can do; however, I'm confronting Catherine alone. I don't want you or Nichol in her presence, unless she's in police custody." He kissed the top of her head. "Hell, even then, no! I'd don't want Catherine to ever be near Nichol!"

Claire nodded in agreement. He believed he'd made a compromise. Truthfully, she'd won, yet if making his declaration helped Tony accept her company, she didn't care. Claire didn't want Catherine near Nichol either. Her priority was keeping both Nichol and Tony safe. After they assured Emily and John's safety, Claire wanted her family back in paradise. Eventually, Tony

would need to surrender to the FBI. It was inevitable, but she wanted her nine more months of paradise.

The last five months had been magical. Tony and Claire were finally partners with all the ups and downs accompanying those roles. They didn't always agree; however, after a life with false conformity, they learned disagreeing wasn't negative. It didn't mean disobedience or insubordination; instead, it meant discussion, voicing opinions, perhaps arguing, and then making up. Even this last conversation illustrated their recently established equality. They'd faced the demons of their past and chosen a future.

Parenthood was an excellent induction. It took them both into uncharted waters and evened the playing field, which admittedly had at one time been tilted in Tony's favor. Every day with Nichol was an exciting new adventure. Claire didn't want it to end any sooner than necessary. For the first time, she had her dream. It was the relationship she witnessed with her parents and grandparents. At one time, she believed happily ever after was outside of her reach. Now, it was her reality. She wasn't ready for that to end. After all, it wasn't supposed to end. The fairy tales her dad read to her as a child ended with *they lived happily ever after*.

Claire wanted to believe that was the end of their story, but she feared it wasn't.

That night, Claire lay in bed and listened to the sounds of her paradise. Unless she concentrated the ever-present surf no longer registered. What brought the smile to her face and peace to her heart were the sounds coming from the attached nursery. The rockers of the chair creaked against the bamboo floor. Claire closed her eyes and pictured Tony holding Nichol.

Tonight, their daughter had made it all the way until 3:00 AM before waking to eat. Before her cries registered to Claire, Tony was out of bed. Minutes later, he brought a freshly changed, cooing bundle to Claire. The middle of the night feeding was their special time. It was as if their room, their bed, and their family existed in a bubble which no outside force could penetrate; then, as was their routine, when Nichol's belly was full, Tony told Claire to sleep, took their daughter to the attached nursery, and rocked her back to sleep.

Normally, Claire would drift away as his deep baritone voice spoke softly in the other room. Some nights, she'd try to listen to his words; however, sometimes she felt like an intruder on their private talks. Tonight, she gleaned words here and there as he lulled Nichol back to her world of slumber. The words that registered were Tony's affirmations of devotion. She couldn't help but notice that the word *safe* seemed to be tonight's recurring theme. Claire

twisted on the satin sheets realizing that hearing him repeat that word had the opposite effect on her.

When Tony finally climbed back to bed, Claire nuzzled against his chest. The lingering scent of cologne combined with a faint aroma of baby powder overpowered her senses. Her voice cracked as she tried to sound strong, "I love you." She didn't want him to know how scared she was. After all, she was the one who demanded to accompany him to the States.

Tony stroked her back and whispered, "I love you, too." As if to reassure not only Claire but himself, he pulled her tighter and proclaimed, "It'll all be all right. I won't let anything happen to you or her."

Claire nodded into his chest. She knew, even with his hushed tone, he meant every word, but at this moment, it wasn't hers or Nichol's safety Claire doubted. "What about you? Who's keeping you safe and assuring your return?" Her tears ran onto his chest as she no longer attempted to feign strength. "I'm not just worried about Catherine." Her words came in snippets, interspersed with deep painful sobs. "What about the authorities? I don't want to lose you. I don't want this to end."

Tony's head fell against the headboard as he continued to rub circles on the soft, exposed skin of her back. "I don't deserve to be kept safe."

She sat up and stared at him through the darkness. "Don't you dare say that!"

"It's true. I've done awful things, and I deserve to pay for them."

"Tony, please stop."

He sat taller, pulling Claire close and tried to explain. "The thing is, if this had all come down years ago, before you, I would've thought it was undeserved: an injustice. Like how I used to see my grandfather's consequences, but now—now I know I deserve it. Back then, I would've gone away concerned only with Rawlings Industries. Now, everything's different. The idea of being away from you and Nichol kills me. That separation, no matter if it starts sooner or later, will be worse than anything they could've done to me before."

"You're turning state's evidence against Catherine. With Brent, Tom, and all your legal team, maybe you can avoid jail time?"

"Damn it, Claire! You don't deserve any of this. Maybe we shouldn't have remarried; then you wouldn't be married to someone who's discussing jail time, and you sure as hell wouldn't be harboring a fugitive."

Claire smirked. "I don't know. You're married to someone who's been in a federal prison."

His head fell to hers, as if he couldn't allow any part of him to not be in contact with her. "You're so much stronger than I."

"I hardly think that's true."

"I don't know if I could survive what's happened to you." She felt him

stiffen as he corrected, “What I’ve done to you.”

She let her fingers swirl through the soft hair on his broad chest. “It’s over, and you will survive it. We’ll survive it. We’ve made it this far.”

“I’ve never asked, and you’ve never said. What was it like?”

“Tony, please—”

He rolled her over to her back. From the faint light of the nursery and the moon over the sea, Claire saw the emotion in his eyes. She saw regret, sadness, and perhaps even fear. Instead of making that pain worse, she wanted to take it away. Swallowing her memories of prison: the memories of loneliness, the desperate need for fresh air, and the ever-threatening depression, she answered, “It was very routine.”

He raised his brow.

Claire reached up and caressed his cheek. The stubble made her smile. She loved the sensation of that stubble on her skin. “Every day is the same. You wake at the same time, eat, go from place to place, shower, sleep. Everything is scheduled.”

“You’ll never know how sorry I am that I’ve ruined your life. You deserve so much better than me.”

She arched her back so that her lips contacted that same stubble. After a lingering kiss, she replied, “Are you saying you wish we weren’t here, right now? That you wish we weren’t together?”

Tony shook his head. “You know I’m not.”

She pressed her breasts upward. The sensation of his hard chest brought her over-sensitive nipples to attention. “I’ll admit there were parts of the journey I’d prefer to forget; the destination is...” She teased the rough skin. “...worth it and amazing.”

His eyes closed and tone turned sultry. “Mrs. Rawlings, you’re playing with fire. I’m fighting a lot of thoughts and emotions right now. If you aren’t careful, then I can’t promise I’ll be able to control my actions.”

Again, she arched upward this time, her teeth playfully nipped the lobe of his ear. She smiled as she received her desired effect: the familiar growl resonated from the back of his throat. His words were gone.

While he pulled the satin gown away from her breasts, she ran her fingers through his hair and whispered, “I’ve played with fire before. I like it.” Feeling his desire against her leg, she murmured, “And sometimes control is overrated.”

The sandpaper-like stubble scratched the soft skin of her enlarged breasts. With each turn of his cheek, her senses electrified. Currents of yearning coursed through her body. The combination of pain and pleasure melted into ecstasy. Claire hugged Tony’s face to her breasts while his hands caressed and encouraged. Nichol wasn’t the only one who enjoyed the liquid feast Claire had to offer.

The next few minutes faded into a cloud of passion. Her nightgown lay upon the floor in a puddle of satin, and his gym shorts disappeared. The tropical humidity added to the sultry moisture molding their bodies together. His broad chest weighed heavily upon her breasts as he pinned her petite body to the soft sheets. Skin to skin they were lost in one another. She closed her eyes as she mindlessly responded to his caresses. Endlessly, his fingers probed as he teased and taunted her desires. Claire couldn't stand the anticipation any longer. Her entire being cried out as she begged for relief.

No other man had filled her so completely. No other man had taken her to the pits of hell and the uppermost parts of heaven. Her fingers clutched tightly to his shoulders as they momentarily forgot their troubles. Their world was right here and right now. Her body convulsed as she cried out to the only man who knew her completely. Before she could think coherent thoughts, before her body settled from its intense state, Tony too found relief. It was a brief reprieve from the demons surrounding them; nonetheless, it was a break. With the breeze from the ceiling fan stirring the early morning air, they fell asleep in each other's arms, pretending their safety in paradise would last forever.

Phil secured their new identifications and accompanied them through the multiple TSA checkpoints. Not once was his documentation questioned, as they safely re-entered the United States. Claire's wig was short, and Tony's contacts made his eyes a shade of green. Their travel clothes mimicked those of everyone else, and they traveled economy class. Although Nichol didn't wear a disguise, the four blended well into the anonymous masses.

Before they left their haven, Claire hugged Francis and Madeline and promised their safe return. The couple didn't know the ins and outs of the Rawlings' legal issues. They did know they'd all grown fond of one another, and Nichol was the light of their world. Tony explained that he had created a trust fund that would assure the island retreat's financial solvency. He assured Francis and Madeline everything would remain flush until they returned.

They both promised the couple that their return would be sooner rather than later. Claire's heart broke as Madeline's large tears dampened her shoulder during their farewell. She knew if it wasn't her sister's life at stake, she'd never have left their island.

It took two full days flying commercial, but finally they arrived in Cedar Rapids. It was late at night—after midnight, and thankfully, the airport was quiet, calm, and uneventful. After spending six months in the tropics, the cool March Iowa air chilled Claire to her bone. She shivered in the backseat of the van Phil had arranged to have waiting. With each shiver, Claire covered Nichol with another blanket.

While Phil drove, Tony reached over the babyseat and held Claire's hand. "You're trembling. Are you all right?"

"I think I'm just cold."

Rubbing her gloved hand, he moved it to his lips. "No one noticed us, Mrs. Rawlings. You can relax."

She exhaled and watched her breath create a frozen mist. "I can't believe we're going to show up on Courtney and Brent's doorstep. I'm excited to see them, but what will they say? We lied to them."

Tony and Phil's eyes meet in the rearview mirror. Claire asked, "What? If there's something, tell me. I'm sick and tired of secrets."

Tony squeezed her hand and tried to explain, "Knowledge is leverage for the law. Right now, I'm wanted and you've been harboring me. If the Simmons were caught communicating with either of us, they could be charged with aiding and abetting a fugitive."

"Then let's stay in a hotel. I don't want to put them at risk."

This time, Phil answered, "Claire, they want you there."

"But how? How would they know?"

Tony replied, "They've known since before you and I met up in paradise. Brent's known you're alive since the FBI questioned me. The authorities wouldn't allow him to share. Of course, he told Courtney."

"All these months! Why didn't you tell me? I've been berating myself over lying to my family and friends. Do Emily and John know the truth?"

Tony's tone became businesslike. "If you'd have known, you would have wanted to communicate, and no, it made more sense for the Vandersols to remain in the dark."

Claire stared.

Tony continued, "We'd hoped their pursuit of me and Rawlings Industries would keep them safe. That as long as they were helping to hurt me, we hoped that Catherine would leave them alone."

Tears coated Claire's cheeks as she turned toward the dark, dead landscape. Thankfully, there wasn't any snow, but each tree along the way was leafless and the fields were empty and dark. Claire wasn't sure why she was crying. Perhaps it was exhaustion or stress. Maybe it was anticipation at seeing Brent and Courtney and John and Emily again.

Her thoughts evaporated as her husband's hand reached for her chin. With his thumb and forefinger, Tony turned her gaze toward him. Through the darkness of the van she saw his clenched jaw. "Can you please be mad at me later? We've got a lot going on."

Not trying to move away from his determined tone, Claire closed her tired eyelids causing more tears to rush down her cheeks, and explained, "I'm not mad. You're right. I would've thought about calling daily. After Nichol was born, I probably would've done it, even if I knew I shouldn't." Claire used her

gloves to wipe her face. "I'm tired and scared."

Tony reassuringly took her gloved hand in his. Phil interjected, "The Simmons know about Nichol, and they can't wait to meet her. Emily and John aren't due to arrive until tomorrow afternoon."

Tony smiled and said, "We'll get some sleep and you'll feel better." His devilish grin reappeared as he whispered, "Or not sleep?"

Claire shook her head. "I'm afraid our princess won't understand the time change. We may spend the night up, in shifts, with her."

Still holding his wife's hand, Tony shrugged, leaned against the vinyl seat, and sighed. "That's not quite the up I was imagining."

Claire's eyes darted toward the rearview mirror. Courteously, Phil appeared lost in his own thoughts, unable to hear the whispers which only moments earlier he'd answered. Claire shook her head and peered under the blankets at a sleeping Nichol. With a weary smile, she placed one hand over their daughter, and enjoyed the sensation of her little chest moving up and down.

For a moment, Claire envied Nichol's ignorance. As long as she was fed, clean, and loved, their daughter didn't know the evils that lurked in the shadows. With her other hand, Claire clung tightly to Tony. Closing her eyes, she said a prayer to keep her family safe.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Friends show their love in times of trouble, not in happiness.

—Euripides

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS of traveling took its toll. Claire must have fallen asleep because, when she opened her eyes, Phil was pulling the van into the Simmons' garage. Even in the dark of night, she recognized the brick drive. Inside the garage directly in the beams of the headlights, Claire saw Courtney and Brent. Her heart leapt. "Oh! I can't believe we're really here." Turning to see Tony's face, she read a hundred emotions. Happiness or even relief didn't seem to be the top contenders. She asked, "Aren't you happy to be here?"

"I am." He squeezed her hand. "I just realized the last time I saw or spoke to Brent we discussed something I'd rather forget. He probably told Courtney—" The van stopped as did Tony's words. Claire watched Brent hit the button to close the door as she and Tony reached for their handles.

Phil stopped them. "Don't open the van doors until the garage is closed. I don't think we were followed. I took a lot of back roads, but you can't be sure their house isn't being watched."

The reality of their situation came rushing back with the familiar pounding behind Claire's temples. She'd taken some acetaminophen during their last layover before Iowa, but that was hours ago and the dull ache was becoming a nonstop pound. Trying to relieve the tension, she rolled her neck right then left. She wasn't thinking, or she wouldn't have done that in front of Tony.

"Do you have a headache?"

Claire smiled and shook her head. Telling him wouldn't make her feel better, and she knew how much he hated her headaches. They reminded him of a time long ago. "I'm fine; what did you two talk about?"

Before he could answer, Phil had his door open and Courtney was rushing

toward the van. Claire's door sprang open, and without warning, she was swallowed in Courtney's hug. "I'm so glad you two came here! Let's get you in the house where it's warm."

Freeing herself from her best friend's embrace, Claire interjected, "Thank you for letting us come... all three of us!" Tony had unbuckled the baby seat. Claire moved it to her lap, pulled back the blankets, and revealed their daughter. The biggest brown eyes stared up toward her mother's voice.

"She's beautiful!" Courtney squealed.

Tony was now to Claire's door. "May we introduce Nichol Courtney Rawlings?"

Courtney put her hand to her lips as tears moistened her eyes. "Nichol Courtney?"

Tony nodded as a proud smile emerged.

Courtney hugged Tony and whispered, "We've missed *all* of you."

Brent put out his hand. Though Tony had worked to mask whatever he was feeling, Claire saw a micro-expression of relief as the two men shook hands. She wondered again what they'd discussed, many months ago.

Within the warmth of the kitchen, Claire removed Nichol from her seat while Phil casually asked where he could retire. Claire's pulse quickened when Brent said, "Mr. Roach, let me show you to your room. Tony, would you like to join us for a minute?"

Although Tony showed no outward signs of concern, Claire knew from his earlier comment there may be need. As the three men disappeared, she wondered what they needed to discuss. If it was about Emily or Tony, then Claire wanted to know. Courtney's voice brought Claire back to present. "We had no idea you named her after me." Her blue eyes glistened as she asked, "May I hold her?"

"Her name's a long story, but Courtney was a name we both agreed upon. You've always been so good to both of us. Of course you can hold her; let me change her first."

Courtney couldn't pry her eyes away from Nichol. "I don't mind. Oh my, Claire, look at those eyes."

Placing her daughter in her best friend's arms, Claire replied, "Aren't they beautiful? Just like her daddy's."

Claire followed Courtney through the house to one of their guest rooms. The men were nowhere in sight. Hearing Courtney talk on and on loosened the tight muscles in Claire's shoulders and relieved the pain behind her temples.

"I'm so glad Mr. Roach contacted Brent," Courtney said.

"Cort, you do realize this is illegal, right?"

"Honey, I'd break any law to have you here, safe and sound."

Claire added, "And Tony?"

Courtney nodded before she closed the bedroom door, and asked in a hushed tone, “We don’t have a lot of time before the men get back. You promised you’d be honest with me.”

“I know.” Claire looked down. “I’m sorry about the way I left. Do you know about Catherine?”

“Yes, Mr. Roach filled Brent in on everything. We understand what you did and why you did it. Who would’ve ever imagined, sweet Catherine? We’ve been careful to never let on to anyone what we know. Mr. Roach said the FBI’s still working to put it all together.”

Claire listened as she changed Nichol and settled into a plush chair to feed her.

“I’m sorry,” Courtney said. “Do you want me to leave?”

“I don’t think I’d invite Brent in.” Claire joked. “But I’m fine with you.”

Glancing toward the door, Courtney lowered her tone. “I want you to know, we *really are* glad you’re here and safe. I don’t want to upset you, but I have to know.”

Claire braced herself for something. She didn’t know what; perhaps it was about what Tony had said. “What do you need to know?”

“Are you sorry?”

“Am I sorry? That I left without telling anyone?”

Courtney leaned forward. “No, are you sorry you allowed Tony back in your life? Is it truly different? You know, than the first time...”

The trip had been exhausting, yet Courtney’s directness continued Claire’s relaxation. It felt so good to be talking openly with her friend. There’d been too many secrets; she longed for truth. Claire settled against the soft cushions as Nichol, hidden discreetly behind a blanket, suckled her breast. Smiling, she answered, “I don’t know what I was afraid you were going to ask, but that wasn’t it. Without a doubt, it’s different! He’s changed. I know some people say that people don’t change, but they do. I have too. The life we shared in our first marriage and before is a distant memory. For Nichol’s sake, I wish it could remain hidden. She doesn’t need to know any of that. Her father *is* a good man.”

Courtney replied, “But some new things have come up, things from that box you told me about, allegations and suggestions of other things Tony may have done or at least, he may have been involved with.”

“I promise, I know everything. I’m not saying he was *always* a good man or a good husband. I’m saying he is *now*, and when we were here in Iowa, before I left, he was also. Courtney, he knows what he’s done, and he’s sorry.”

Courtney knelt beside Claire. “I believe you. I can see it in your eyes.” She reached out and held Claire’s hand. “I hope this can all be worked out. You’ve been through enough.”

“I’m sorry that I’ve dragged you along.”

“Oh goodness, don’t be sorry.”

Claire sighed. “As always, you’re there for me. Hopefully, someday I can repay the favor. I know it’s late; do you want to go to bed? We can talk in the morning.”

“If you don’t mind me being here until the men get back, I want to talk, and maybe when she’s done eating, I can hold Nichol *Courtney*.”

Claire smiled, her heavy lids fluttered as she stifled a yawn. “I’d love that.” Suddenly, Claire had a thought. “Tony knows that you two know about our past, doesn’t he?”

Courtney nodded. “The FBI showed him and Brent your testimony from 2010 when he was being questioned. After keeping his thoughts silent for almost two years, Brent confronted him.”

“Tony never told me. Well, not until we were almost here. Even then, he didn’t finish.”

“Brent didn’t tell Tony it wasn’t new information, but he did call him out.”

Claire smiled. “Tell Brent thank you. I know that must have been very difficult for him.”

Courtney shrugged. “It was good for them. Now, with all Brent’s done in Tony’s absence, I think they too will be better than before.”

Claire squeezed her best friend’s hand. “I’ve missed you so much. I only learned in the van that you’ve known our secret all along.”

“Once Tony disappeared, Brent knew he was out looking for you. He never thought he was hurt in the emergency landing. The FBI were too elusive. Eventually, Mr. Roach contacted Brent with a message from Tony. They hoped it would escape the FBI’s radar. After all, Brent was the one who hired Mr. Roach to track you last year.”

Claire listened in marvel as all the memories of the past twelve months cascaded through her mind. It seemed impossible that she’d been released from prison only a year ago; so much had happened.

Courtney proceeded to fill Claire in on her and Brent’s children. Maryn, their daughter, was about to complete her doctoral thesis, and Caleb and Julia were doing well. As Courtney took Nichol from Claire’s arms, she added, “No grandchildren, yet.”

Claire remembered how Courtney wanted them. “Well, hopefully one day we’ll be living back here, and you can be *Aunt Cort or Grandma* if you’d prefer.”

“Oh no, Aunt is just fine. Even when I am a grandma we’ll need to come up with a younger sounding title.” Claire went to their bags to get her things, when Courtney’s voice rose in volume. “Oh, my goodness, you probably don’t know!”

Startled, Claire turned and asked, “Know what?”

“You’re going to be an aunt!”

Staring at Courtney’s nodding head, Claire teetered between excited and scared. “Emily’s pregnant?”

“Yes, but she isn’t due until July. We started talking periodically after you disappeared.”

“And, even after you knew we were safe, you didn’t tell her?”

“It was difficult, but not telling her was supposed to keep her and John safe. Brent hated what they were doing to Rawlings Industries, but Mr. Roach assured us that Tony thought it was best.”

Claire collapsed on the edge of the bed. She was too tired to censor everything she said. Shock and disbelief were evident in each word, “Tony knew? He knew you had information that would convince John and Emily to stop their pursuit of Rawlings Industries, and he told Brent *not* to use it? He chose my family over his company?”

Courtney’s blue eyes twinkled. “He did, sweetie. He didn’t know about Emily’s baby, probably still doesn’t, but he knew about the plan to keep them safe. Actually, I think the plan was his idea. That’s why I thought you were all right. I hoped and prayed.” She squeezed Claire’s knee. “It was just that seeing you... I needed to be sure.”

“I am. Now, I’m even more worried about Emily. Oh, my God, she’s pregnant! I wonder if that’s why Catherine wanted to see her. I mean, now there will be *another* child of a child.” Her hands trembled. “Why would Emily agree to visit Catherine?”

“I wanted to tell her not to come. I even tried to dissuade her. I told her I could get things from the house. She said she wanted to see everything herself.”

“That’s my sister. She probably thinks she’ll learn more about me if she goes to the estate.” Claire tried to focus on all the issues. “With all the bad publicity she and John generated, how bad is it for Rawlings Industries? I’ve tried to keep up, but it isn’t the—”

Before Claire could finish her question, the ladies turned to see the opening door with Tony’s questioning eyes peering toward them. Grinning, he opened it wider and exposed Brent. “I wanted to be sure Nichol was done eating,” he explained as both men entered the room.

It was obvious that Tony and Brent’s issues were resolved. The four friends had entered a new world. Too much time had been lost to secrets. In the midst of chaos, they’d reached understanding and openness.

Tony large hands massaged Claire’s tight shoulders as Brent stepped closer to Nichol. She was sleeping soundly in Courtney’s arms. Approvingly, he remarked, “You did great, Claire. She’s beautiful!”

Courtney added, “Wait until you see her awake. She has the biggest, most beautiful brown eyes.”

Tony laughed. "Evidence that Claire had a little help."

"I hope we can all be together tomorrow evening. I have a meeting in Chicago..." Looking at his watch, Brent added, "...in less than six hours, so perhaps we should get some sleep."

Courtney asked, "Do you know how long you two will be here?"

Claire looked to Tony. She wanted him to be in control. No. She needed him to be in control. She knew, in order for everything to work, he needed to take charge. Finally, he answered, "We don't. We'll need to see what happens tomorrow."

Courtney kissed Nichol's head as she handed her back to Claire. Before the Simmons left the room, Brent added, "Claire, I can tell you're scared. I like Roach. He's good. As long as he and Tony work together, everything will be fine."

They all knew there were no guarantees. Too many things could happen in the next twenty-four hours. Claire refused to consider the possibilities; instead, she nodded and smiled at their best friends as they closed the door. Claire laid their sleeping daughter on the soft sheet of a portable crib near the foot of their bed and covered her with a thin blanket. Envyng Nichol's innocence, she knew it was like her glass house from years ago. Quietly, she said a prayer, "Please, God, help us all work together and not allow it to shatter."

Before Claire walked to the bathroom to get ready for bed, Tony seized her arm and pulled her toward him. "Brent's right. You were right. Roach is great. His knowledge and expertise has exceeded my expectations, and I'll listen to his advice. Tomorrow, after I get back, we'll decide when we're leaving."

Claire nodded. She couldn't respond verbally if she wanted. The lump in her throat was too big to swallow. Burying her head against his chest, she enjoyed the sensation of his arms around her, a shield to keep all the bad away. For the moment, she could pretend everything was all right and forget about the danger. After all, compartmentalization was her specialty.

As they settled into bed, Claire asked, "The thing you remembered in the van, about the last time you talked to Brent, is everything settled?"

Tony wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. Claire's head rested on his shoulder, she inhaled his musky scent, and listened to his confident tone, "Yes, I believe we've reached an understanding."

"They didn't have to help us like this."

"You're right. Someday, we'll repay them."

Nuzzling against his skin, Claire considered pressing Tony to confess the subject of his and Brent's argument. She wondered if he'd tell her, but then she wondered why she wanted him to confess. After all, that testimony was about another time, another life, a life she had no desire to discuss or

remember. Soon, her thoughts faded into nothingness. Traveling had worn her out. Sleep would no longer wait.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

A friend is one who walks in when others walk out.

—Walter Winchell

MEREDITH DESPERATELY TRIED to scroll the contacts in her phone. Her trembling hands, combined with the emotion coursing through her veins, made the simple task more complex. Did she want to go to jail? Was that her goal? If it wasn't, why then did she continually find herself in these precarious situations?

It had been almost two weeks since Claire came *out* to her family. With each passing day, she seemed stronger and more resilient. She now engaged in flowing conversation: her one word or phrased responses were a thing of the past. Meredith surmised it was a testimony to Claire's thoughts. Instead of having fleeting, individual ideas which Claire felt the need to protect, her thoughts now came together in embellished trains, much more conducive for speech.

There were also marked improvements in Claire's appearance. Truthfully, it wouldn't have taken much to enhance the lost vacant expression she'd possessed for so long. Just the addition of recognition to her green eyes made her appear a different person; then add hair color and some light make-up, and Claire Rawlings was back. Of course, no one referred to her that way. She was still Nichols as far as the staff at Everwood was concerned. As long as Emily was in control of her care, that wouldn't change. Emily's control was undeniably the cause of Meredith's trembling hands. Claire was more than capable of making her own decisions, yet Emily's power of attorney hadn't been lifted.

It wasn't that Claire's demands were unreasonable. She wanted access to her daughter, to see her, to touch her, and to love her. The pictures of Nichol, that now decorated Claire's more colorful room, were a blessing upon arrival; however, with each passing day, they served as a reminder of the beautiful

young girl who remained two-dimensional. Maybe it was too early. That was Emily's continual answer to Claire. What if Claire relapsed? It wouldn't be fair to Nichol.

While Claire's desire to see Nichol sparked Meredith's fury, it was Claire's desire to see anyone that fueled the vehemence to the point of this impending phone call. Courtney Simmons' number had been programmed into Meredith's phone for a while; however, since the Vandersols were still unaware of her true identity, calling that number was a risk, perhaps even an invitation to a potential jail sentence.

Closing her eyes, Meredith remembered the tears of her friend only minutes earlier when Meredith exited Claire's room. For two years, Claire had been unaware of her surroundings, yet content. In two weeks, she'd made phenomenal progress and experienced recurring disappointment. Although Meredith hadn't left Everwood's parking lot, she decided to throw caution to the wind, yet again. The corner of her phone read 8:57 PM. Swiping the screen, she found Courtney's number and prayed. She couldn't guarantee that her current willpower would be present tomorrow or even in ten minutes. Meredith needed to make the call now.

On the second ring, she heard Courtney's voice, "Hello, this is Courtney."

"Hello, Courtney, please don't hang up. This is about Claire Rawlings."

The momentary silence accelerated Meredith's heartbeat. Finally, she heard, "Who is this?"

"My name is Meredith Rus—Banks."

"Goodbye."

Meredith spoke quickly, "Please, Courtney, I know you know who I am, but this isn't about a story. It's about Claire. She's my friend too, and she needs you." The words came so fast, Meredith hoped they were separated by enough space to make sense. When the line didn't go dead, Meredith continued, "She's doing much better. She's asked for you."

"How do you know this?"

"I'm in Cedar Rapids right now. Will you please meet me? I think it's better if I explain in person."

After what Meredith assumed was cautious deliberation, Courtney replied, "Fine, perhaps I should call John or Emil—"

"I know Emily hasn't allowed you to visit. You don't have any reason to believe me, but I can help you and Claire if you'll please meet with me—alone. If you call them, I don't know when you'll be able to—"

This time, Courtney interrupted, "All right. Where can I meet you?"

Meredith remembered to breathe. "Thank you, I can be in Iowa City in..."

Short's Burger and Shine was a popular bar, and although Meredith thought a drink to calm her nerves sounded like a good idea, that wasn't the reason the two women had come to this particular establishment. Basically, it was a matter of convenience; the hour was late, and the small quaint pub on Clinton Street was open. When Meredith arrived, she saw Courtney seated at the last booth. The long, narrow room with the brick walls echoed with the sound of happy patrons; nevertheless, Courtney's expression, as she watched Meredith approach, told Meredith that Courtney didn't share the joyous elation of the others.

"Thank you for meeting with me," Meredith offered as she eased herself up the platform and into the hard booth.

"I'm not usually a rude person, but I hated your book, and I guess I've transferred those feelings to you. Tell me why I'm here and make it quick."

Meredith momentarily looked down and took a deep breath. "I understand. This isn't about my book, or even a new story, although I admit it started that way."

Courtney raised her brow.

"About three months ago, I asked Emily's permission to visit Claire. She denied me."

Courtney nodded in agreement.

Meredith continued, "My goal was to learn *the rest of the story*. I guess I wanted to write something that would make Nichol proud of her parents."

Courtney continued to listen silently.

"Since I couldn't go to Everwood openly, I decided to apply for a job there. I did. I got it. Over time, I worked my way into Claire's room as part of her dietary team."

"I'm pretty sure there's a restraining order—"

The waitress interrupted, "Ladies, what can I get you?"

The thought of that drink was getting better and better. Finally, Meredith asked, "Can I get you something for joining me? Or are you leaving to pursue the violation of that order?"



STILL SOMEWHAT STUNNED by Meredith's open confession, Courtney answered, speaking to the young girl near the end of their table, "I'd like a glass of white Zin, please."

Meredith added, "Make that two." When the girl walked away, Meredith leaned forward. "Thank you, I knew it was a risk to come to you. You could turn me in to the police, to Everwood, or to the Vandersols, but if you don't, maybe I can help you see Claire."

Courtney nodded. "I've been trying to see her since she was first admitted. Each time I ask, I'm met with comments about not having visitors *for her own good.*"

After the wine arrived, Meredith walked Courtney through her three-month journey. She shared everything. When she spoke about Claire's original condition, Courtney was unable to suppress the tears. "I'd heard she wasn't talking, but I had no idea it was that bad."

Meredith told her about the recent change. "She wants to see you. I think she's trying to put the pieces back together. She's trying to recall what happened to get her where she is today. She also wants Nichol, but I can't do anything about that. I thought maybe if you spoke with her. Maybe you could help her with some of the details. I mean, you were at the trial, right?"

"I was. What does she remember?"

"I'm not sure. One of her therapists told her to journal. She's supposed to write about her feelings and things that happened. I haven't read them; she hasn't offered. Claire did say she's writing about Tony."

At the mention of his name, Courtney looked into her near empty glass. "I was told that if I were ever to get the opportunity to visit then his name couldn't be mentioned."

"As was I. It's a documented means for immediate dismissal, but, well..." Meredith shrugged. "...I broke that rule too. He was the topic that I believe brought her back. Oh, it was the medications that helped her hallucinations go away, but it was his name that pulled her back. She said she missed seeing him, and when I started recounting the stories she'd told me, it helped her remember."

"I want to go." Courtney's blue eyes smiled. "I've been known to break a rule or two myself. Thank you for including me. I'm sorry I was so rude when you first arrived."

"I understand. Despite all that the book has done for me and my family financially, if I could do it again, I wouldn't write it." After Meredith took a drink, she rephrased, "Maybe not. I mean, that knowledge helped me to help Claire, so I understand where you're coming from, but it might have been written for this reason. Who are we to know the grander scheme?"

Courtney shrugged. "How can we do this?"

With the animosity gone, the two women worked toward a common goal and brainstormed ideas. During their second or third glass of wine, Courtney and Meredith devised and tweaked their plan. Though it was almost October, the days were staying warm with a sunshine whose rays shone until early evening. Meredith would take Claire on a walk, and Courtney would join them at the far west end of the grounds. It would be a short hike for Courtney to park and meet them undetected, but she didn't mind. As long as it didn't rain, they planned a visit for the next evening. When they left the restaurant,

Courtney hugged Meredith. “I can’t tell you how excited I am. Thank you for all you’ve done.” Still gripping her shoulders, Courtney’s speech slowed and she added, “And, if you use any of this to write another book, I will personally come after you.”



THE LATE AFTERNOON September sun glistened through the trees. Claire didn’t know why Meredith rushed her dinner. It wasn’t that she minded, but she could tell something was different. It wasn’t until they were away from Everwood’s immediate grounds and into the paths through the woods that Meredith finally explained, “I have a surprise for you. I hope you’re all right with it.”

Claire eyed her friend suspiciously. “I trust you; however, I’m just not a fan of surprises.”

“I think you will be this one time. I know Emily has made it difficult for you to reconnect with anyone.”

Claire exhaled. “*Difficult* is a nice word. I mean, I understand her reasoning with Nichol. I do. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to see her. I think about her constantly. It’s just that I want to see others. It almost feels like—”

The squeeze of Meredith’s hands stopped Claire’s words. She saw a figure up ahead, through the darkening forest. Unconsciously, her steps slowed. Claire could tell it was a woman. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard the numbers. Suddenly, she realized she was counting her steps: *twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five*. She worked to block out the numbers and concentrate on the person ahead.

Claire continued walking.

Slowly, the figure came into view. The person took shape and her face became clear. Gasping, Claire realized it was Courtney merely yards in front of her. She dropped Meredith’s hand and ran to her friend. By the time they embraced, tears covered both of their cheeks.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.

—Mahatma Gandhi

C LAIRE WOKE WITH a start. Blinded by the sunlight streaming through the unblocked window, she tried to focus. The split second of disorientation faded as she remembered they were at the Simmons' home. Reaching for her husband, she found only an empty bed. Claire crawled to the end of the mattress and peered into the empty crib. Her eyes searched for a clock while questions bombarded her thoughts: How late had she slept? Why hadn't Tony brought Nichol to her to feed? Was he still here or had he and Phil already left?

Panic boiled through her veins as she wrapped a robe around her nightgown and rushed toward the kitchen. By the time she reached her destination, tears teetered on her lids and breathing required thought; then all at once, the tension severed. Her world was right. Tony was seated at the table, coffee in hand with Nichol in his arms. Phil was seated across from them as Courtney stood by the stove. The wonderful aroma of coffee and fried food filled the room as Courtney's voice chatted on about nothing. Despite the worries of the world, Claire had entered the calm in the midst of a storm.

Hearing Claire enter, Tony looked up. Immediately, his expression darkened. "Claire, what's the matter?"

Shaking her head, she exhaled the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Nothing." Going to him and Nichol, she kissed his cheek and reached for their daughter. "I was afraid you'd already left for the estate."

"I wouldn't do that," he answered. Petting Nichol's head, he straightened the fine strands of brown hair, and his tone lightened. "We were going to need to wake you soon. Someone was becoming impatient."

Claire's breasts ached as she settled into the nearby sunporch with Nichol. The windows offered a bright spring view. The earth had yet to wake from its winter nap, but the blue skies and warm rays of sunshine were promises of a greener world to come. The porch offered Claire modesty while keeping her close enough to hear the men discussing the logistics of the upcoming day.

Emily and John were due to arrive in Iowa around 3:00 PM. Eric filled Phil in on the itinerary, would keep them up-to-date, and promised to get them into the house unnoticed. While they talked options and scenarios, Claire had visions of a bad spy movie. Tony knew every inch of the estate. He explained entrances and exits while discussing security. For the first time, it seemed as though Tony wished he hadn't installed the *finest* in security software.

Phil assured him, he'd check everything first. There wasn't a security system he couldn't disable or manipulate. With Tony's intimate knowledge of the surroundings, Phil promised he could have it figured out in no time. Tony wanted to get to Catherine before the Vandersols arrived. His plan was to talk with her and stop anything from happening, before it even started. He had a valid concern that the Vandersols wouldn't understand his presence, and, therefore, contact the authorities. Early intervention was safer for everyone.

Claire liked their confidence. For a plan that sounded like *James Bond* meets *Inspector Gadget*, they actually made it sound plausible. By the time she joined them at the table, she began to feel more confident herself. Hadn't Phil once told her about his military career? Hadn't he mentioned his history with the special ops? Surely, he'd dealt with enemies better trained and more frightening than Catherine London; besides, Tony had the element of surprise on his side. As long as Eric was truly trustworthy, Catherine should be caught unaware.

It was nearly noon when Phil's phone buzzed and everyone stared. "It's Eric, excuse me a second." When he stepped from the room and walked down the hall, the room where they sat was once again taut with tension. The earlier calm evaporated with the sound of Phil's fading steps. Even Courtney remained silent as they waited for Phil's return.

From out of nowhere, a forgotten memory returned to Claire. The room where Phil now stood talking on his phone was the same room where Marianne and Bonnie stood years ago. She remembered the cattiness in Bonnie's voice as she discussed Claire's clothes and undeserved devotion from Tony. At that time, Claire's world was a lie. Every move she made and every word she said was solely to pacify the man Bonnie deemed as her sugar daddy. Looking at Tony now, she recalled the man he'd been and remembered the fear of disappointing him.

Today, her fear wasn't the same. Claire didn't fear disappointing Tony. She feared *losing* him. While they waited for Phil to return with his news, she yearned for the simplicity of a life with one goal: to please one man. The

obstacles currently before them seemed insurmountable: Emily and John's safety, Catherine's plan for vengeance, the authorities, and their safe return to paradise. For a moment, she wished for the two of them alone in the beige-walled suite with heavy golden draperies. Never had she imagined those memories would be her go-to safe spot.

The sound of Phil's determined steps claimed everyone's attention. He spoke as soon as he entered the room, "Change of plans. It seems that John and Emily caught an earlier flight. Eric said he just dropped them off at the estate. He didn't know about the change of plans until Catherine informed him they were going to the airport. This was his first chance to call." Tony stood, but before he could speak, Phil continued, "There's something else. Sophia Burke is at the estate."

"Why?" Tony asked. "Has Catherine told her the truth?"

"Eric said that Sophia doesn't know who Catherine is. The two of them have become friends, and since Derek is out of town with work, Sophia is staying with her friend Catherine."

Courtney interjected, "Yes, Derek Burke is with Brent. Remember that meeting in Chicago? Another member of the Rawlings legal team was supposed to go instead of Brent, but she had a conflict, so last night, Brent volunteered to go, but they left early this morning and are coming home this afternoon. Why would Sophia need someplace to stay?"

Phil shrugged. "We can't get you to Catherine before the Vandersols arrive."

Tony stood straighter. "We need to go now. I don't trust her alone with them any longer than necessary. Besides, it's a big house. With the security monitored I should be able to avoid encountering..." He looked toward Claire. "...your family. It would be nice if I could get in and out without additional conflict."

Phil answered, "I'll text Eric, and we'll confirm our meeting point."

Claire summoned every mask from her past. She wasn't trying to hide her feelings. She wanted to be strong for Tony. Hoping that her voice didn't reveal her insecurities, she said, "Good."

He raised a questioning eyebrow.

Claire continued, "The sooner you get this done, the sooner we can get back. Once you've secured Emily and John's safety, if there's any threat of them calling the authorities, call me. I'll convince them to give us our year as a family."

"No! Claire, you're not getting close to the estate. You're not getting involved. We discussed that." Authority filled every word. He had no intentions of his directive being disobeyed.

"I know that. I still might be able to help." Tony's eyes spoke volumes. It was a look she'd seen too many times. Claire didn't want to distract him from

his objective. She softened her voice. “If you need me, call. I won’t come unless you assure me it’s safe.”

Gripping her shoulders, he said, “I love you. Your safety isn’t debatable. Do not disappoint me.”

She stared for only a moment, knowing Tony and Phil needed to leave. The vast darkness pulled her in. His tone sounded like the man from years ago; however, behind the darkness, within the black holes, she saw love, possession, and protection. She wouldn’t look away; she never could. For a split second, she marveled at how warm and secure his gaze made her feel, such a contrast to the memories of coldness. Lifting her face, she brushed her lips on his and replied, “I won’t, Tony.” Then with a knowing grin, she added, “Don’t disappoint me, either.”

He hugged her and paused a moment to kiss Nichol, who was laying in Courtney’s arms. His lips lingered on her fine hair, as he seemed to be inhaling her fresh baby scent. Claire fought the lump in her throat as she watched him close his eyes, savoring their daughter. Seconds later, he walked away, saying, “We’ll call when it’s done.”

They were gone.

Claire stared at the hallway in silence. Staying strong was no longer necessary. When the empty corridor became blurry, she turned toward Courtney. The tears continued to flow as her anguish came out with each word. Claire wasn’t looking for validation. She knew her statement was correct. Instead, she took comfort in the ability to relay her thoughts honestly and audibly. “Our lives are so fucked up!”

Courtney’s laughter filled the room. “You certainly do know how to sum it up!”

“Well, you said you wanted honesty.”



SOPHIA EXCUSED HERSELF from the dining room, once again marveling at Marie’s home. It didn’t matter how many times she visited, she always found something new. Although she rarely watched television, Sophia enjoyed a good movie, especially the classics. Quietly, she made her way to the lower level and the movie room. As she searched the menu of hundreds, if not thousands of titles, she thought about the couple upstairs, the Vandersols. Marie explained that they were Ms. Nichols’ family, and since her disappearance was still unsolved, they wanted to retrieve some of her things. Truthfully, they were polite enough during lunch, but Sophia couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something happening below the surface. For one thing, they didn’t refer to Marie as Marie; instead, they called her Catherine.

Spending a few hours in the theater would allow the Vandersols and Marie, or Catherine, some privacy. It was the least she could do for Marie after all she'd done for her.



TONY NEVER THOUGHT much about Eric. He just was. He always had been. From Tony's first million, Eric was by his side. In all those years, they'd never sat down and had a heart to heart. He'd never asked Eric about his personal life. Did he even have one? Yet Eric knew Tony's deepest, darkest secrets. Not only did he know, he'd participated, without question, without hesitation, just like a good, trustworthy employee. It was true, Eric was paid exceptionally well for his loyalty; however, as Tony and Phil waited in the shadows of an old country church, with the van safely stashed along a side road, Tony wondered if Eric's devotion had a price, one that could be bought by someone else.

Phil had made his price known from the beginning. Yes, Tony understood Phil changed allegiances from Catherine for more than money. Tony would be an idiot not to see the man's devotion to Claire; however, Tony acknowledged that while Phil was unsuccessful at stopping Patrick Chester in California, for weeks on end, he'd kept Claire safe in Europe. Tony also knew that if this were a trap with the FBI waiting, Phil would continue to devote himself to keeping Claire free from harm. Anyone capable of doing that was worth their weight in gold.

Things with Eric were different. Over the years, his responsibilities morphed and grew with Tony's expectations. Not once, no matter the directive, could Tony remember Eric disappointing him? Had he ever told Eric he appreciated all he did? Tony couldn't remember that either. After all, men don't discuss their feelings regarding one another. More than that, Tony had never given gratitude much thought. Eric had a job. He did it. When everything goes down and Tony turns state's evidence, he would not take Eric with him. Most of his activities were done without Eric's knowledge, and when he was required to participate, it was coerced and done under duress. If asked, that was the story Tony planned to maintain.

Now, as he watched the dark limousine come into view, Tony wondered if his devotion was truly reciprocated. Could Eric have been bought out? Could Tony and Phil be walking into a trap? They needed to be prepared. Tony leaned toward Phil and whispered, "I've changed my mind."

Phil's normal facade cracked. "You came all this way, and you're not going through with this?"

"No," Tony corrected. "When we get to the estate, I want you to go with

Eric to the command center of the house. I want you to verify what cameras are working and that the house is free of feds. I also want you to stay with Eric to be sure my encounter is being recorded. Maybe I can get Catherine to talk.”

The limousine was now rolling to a stop. Tony didn’t need to voice his possible concern of insubordination. Phil understood the hidden meaning. No one person could be trusted. This new plan would assure them of Eric’s honesty.

Watching Eric get out of the car, Tony hoped that he was only being paranoid. After all, he and Eric had been through a lot; nonetheless, when Eric opened the back compartment, Tony glanced at Phil who nodded in return and touched his side. Tony nodded. Phil had a gun and was willing to use it.

As Tony stepped passed Eric, he realized how genuinely glad he was to see him. Perhaps life on the run had made him suspicious. Tony patted Eric’s shoulder and said, “Good to see you, my man.”

With a tip of his head, Eric responded, “And you too, Mr. Rawlings.” It was as if Tony had been gone on a business meeting, not hiding on the other side of the world.

Once the car moved, Tony began, “Tell us what’s happening at the estate.”

“Ms. London is preoccupied with her guests. I’m sure taking the car out for maintenance wasn’t one of her concerns.”

Phil interjected, “The limo was a smart move, dark windows.”

“Thank you, sir. I figured I can get the two of you in the garages without any issues.”

When the gates to the estate opened, the dam on Tony’s anger broke. Previously, it had been held back with thoughts and feelings he didn’t care to visit. Honestly, there were too many other concerns; however, hiding in the back of his limousine, driving through his iron gates, and onto his property Tony saw red. He couldn’t believe he’d become the victim. He hadn’t been played by some business associate. No, he’d been victimized by the woman he’d trusted for most of his life. If he’d ever wanted revenge, it was now. The fleeting thought of killing Catherine made the tips of his lips rise. Not that he’d ever physically murdered anyone before, but with all he’d done, would the addition of justifiable homicide really matter?

When the car entered the large garage, Tony said, “I’ll wait here for your call.”

“Sir,” Eric answered. “The garage cameras, as well as those in the garage to house corridor, stopped working yesterday. We weren’t sure of the issue.

Someone is coming to work on them tomorrow.”

Phil took the lead. “Smart thinking. That’ll help you and me get to the command center. While I get a feel for this fortress’s technology, you can scan the security footage and verify Ms. London’s location as well as Mrs. Burke and the Vandersols, then we’ll call Raw—Mr. Rawlings.”

It wasn’t their original plan, but Tony was obviously in line with it. Eric had never challenged Tony’s orders, and this wasn’t going to be the first time. “Very well, Mr. Rawlings, please wait for our call.”

Phil and Eric disappeared through the doorway toward the house. The silence in the empty car was deafening. By the time Phil’s text came, Tony was ready to confront whoever he saw, but with all his might, he wanted it to be Catherine.

Tony and Eric looked nothing alike, yet they did have a similar build. Wearing Eric’s jacket and cap, Tony kept his head low and walked through the corridor toward the house. Once inside, he’d likely encounter other members of the staff. His plan was to walk by, unnoticed. It took all his concentration to keep his posture dutiful, far from his normal confident gait.

When Tony passed through the kitchen, two women stood discussing the evening meal. He recognized them immediately; however, as he kept his head and eyes down, they seemed oblivious to his intrusion.

Each step toward the west corridor became more determined. The dutiful pose forgotten, Anthony Rawlings was on a mission. With his shoulders back and his head high, he advanced toward the grand double doors. This was his office. His command center. Eric’s text a few minutes earlier said that Catherine was in her suite. Tony wondered if in the time it had taken him to get to the office, if by chance he’d find her sitting at his desk. Did she too have rules about entering? Tony didn’t care. He consciously fought the red infiltrating his vision.

Not only had this woman jeopardized Claire and Nichol’s lives, she’d blatantly lied to his face. He knew he needed to control the rage. This encounter demanded diplomacy. The fleeting thought of murder was nice, but if he could play nice and save the Vandersols, then the FBI would take care of the rest. His desire for physical retaliation would only result in more time away from his family. Catherine wasn’t worth it.

Pushing the door ajar, he scanned the room. Overall, it was the same: the same cherry paneling, trim, and bookcases. His mahogany desk, which mimicked Nathaniel’s, stood facing the doorway, yet there were subtle differences: picture frames, light-colored draperies, and flowers. His masculine domain had taken on a feminine hue. The door to the attached bath

was closed. Slowly, he approached the barrier and laid his head upon the wooden door. The only sound he heard was silence. Tony opened the door to find an empty bathroom. Catherine wasn't here.

As he eased himself into his chair, behind his desk, he assessed his mission. Suddenly, the pictures on the desk caught his attention. There was one of Nathaniel and Marie. He stared at his grandfather's likeness. If someone didn't know better, they'd think it was him. Tony had never seen the photo before, but then again, he couldn't recall ever going into Catherine's suite. There was another picture, one that Tony recognized. It was of Sophia as a young girl. Obviously, Catherine had found all the information he and Nathaniel had accumulated and knew that Sophia was her daughter. What kind of game was she playing with Sophia? Was it as dangerous as the one she played with Claire and him or with the Vandersols?

Eric said that the Vandersols had come to get some of Claire's things. Would they be in the suite he'd shared with Claire or in her old suite upstairs? Had Phil scanned each monitor and found their location? There were many cameras and each image was relatively short-lived as the monitors rotated their feed. Scanning each frame took time.

As these and many more questions raced through his mind, the door to the office suddenly opened. Catherine casually entered, oblivious to her unexpected company. She didn't even notice Tony until she looked up. Her initial expression verified her surprise as an audible gasp escaped her lips. Tony instantly knew that Eric could be trusted. He hadn't set a trap. Quickly, she closed the door behind her. Tony remained silent as Catherine Marie straightened her shoulders and appeared to gather her thoughts. After a prolonged silence, she glared in Tony's direction and said, "Anton."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The evil that is in the world almost always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding.

—Albert Camus

TONY INCREDOULOUSLY STARED, wondering what he'd planned to say. Thoughts formed fast and furiously as he rose from the chair and walked slowly toward her. With each step forward, he watched Catherine analyzing his expression. She wanted to know his thoughts, and if he knew her master plan. Striving to keep his gaze indifferent, he stopped inches in front of her. "Good afternoon, Catherine."

She exhaled and brought her hands to her chest. "Oh, thank God. I was afraid you were dead. Tell me, where have you been? Did you find Claire?" Each statement came a little quicker than the last.

He turned and walked back to his desk, contemplating his plan. Shaking his head, he sat and pointed to one of the chairs next to the desk. Her lips tightened into a flat line as she walked toward the seat he'd just assigned. Tony waited for her compliance. Once she was seated, he answered, "I've searched everywhere. It's like she fell off the face of the earth." Leaning back, he purposely hesitated and furrowed his brow.

Taking the bait, she asked, "What is it?"

"She stole our money."

"What?"

"I went to Geneva, and the money Nathaniel left for us..." He paused. "...for you and for me... the bulk of it was gone. To the best of my calculations, she took somewhere over 200 million dollars!"

"How? How did she know about it? And how have you been able to survive? I mean, when they wouldn't say if you were alive or dead. I assumed you were using that money for your search."

Tony explained how he made it to Geneva and found the almost empty

safety deposit box. The only documentation inside was to a savings account, in his name, with merely half of a million and an unsigned note.

“Oh, what did the note say?”

Tony lowered his eyes and cleared his throat. “It said, *this time, I’m not walking away empty-handed.*”

Catherine gasped. “Oh, Anton, she did leave you. So the reconciliation was bogus, nothing but a sham for your money.” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry. Did you keep looking?”

Blood rushed to Tony’s cheeks as he fought his emotion, fought to continue the charade, and fought the red. Although Catherine probably assumed the rage that threatened to erupt was meant towards Claire, the true recipient was a mere few feet away. Pounding his fist against the desk, he replied, “Of course I did! She’s alive and took my money!”

Catherine leaned toward him, her voice only a whisper, “Anton, lower your voice.”

His tone softened, yet remained equally determined, “I’ll scream from the damn rooftops if I want.”

“I have guests. You don’t want anyone to find you, do you? Last I heard, if you’re alive, then you’re a wanted man.”

Enunciating each word, he asked, “Guests? Who, Catherine? Who’s here?”

Catherine glanced toward her hands. As she hesitated, he took in the woman before him. When she first entered the room, he’d been preoccupied. Now he saw her, really saw her. Just like his office, she too had changed. The transformation wasn’t dramatic, not one stark difference; however, it was like the picture Roach showed them months ago. Her hair was shorter, more stylish, and the color was lighter. She wore more make-up than before, and her clothes were nicer than he’d ever seen her wear. Without a doubt, the changes made her appear younger and more confident. She no longer gave the air of house hold staff. Catherine looked like the lady of the manor.

When she finally raised her eyes, he saw a familiar gleam, one he remembered from years before. It was a look she had when she was working on Nathaniel’s vendetta. If she’d had it when she entered his office, he’d missed it; however, he recognized it now.

Tony deepened his tone, “Catherine, I’m sure you remember I don’t like to repeat myself.”

She pulled her shoulders back. “Well, you see, in your absence there have been some changes. You may remember that you named me executor of your estate.”

“I remember.”

“As such, I’ve modified and altered a few things.”

Tony looked toward the pictures and flowers. “I see.”

Moving to the edge of her chair, she explained, “Not just appearances, Anton,” Catherine went on to say how she hadn’t been sure if he’d return. Even if he were alive, she figured as long as he was suspected in Claire’s disappearance, he’d need to stay hidden; therefore, there were matters she decided to deal with herself. The first was Sophia.

Catherine’s eyes brightened. “Anton, you were right when you told me my daughter would need me! She’s so beautiful, and I’ve wasted too many years not knowing her. I should’ve listened to Nathaniel and to you.” Before breaking their gaze, she added, “It’s a shame you’ll never have this experience with your child.”

The pencil he’d been holding splintered in his grasp. The loud crack caused Catherine to jump back in her chair. He didn’t respond to her last comment; instead he confirmed, “So your guest is Sophia? She’s here and knows you’re her mother?”

Catherine shook her head. “She’s here. I haven’t told her of our relationship. The time hasn’t been right. In time, she’ll understand how much she needs me.”

Tony contemplated: if he pressed about additional guests, then she may become suspicious. “You don’t want her to know I’m here—in my house?”

“Anton, you can’t tell anyone you’re here. The FBI will arrest you.” Furrowing her brow, she asked, “Why are you here?”

“As I just stated, it’s my house.”

“Yes, of course it is. Do you plan on staying?”

“I plan on ending the Rawls—Nichols—Burke vendetta once and for all.”

Catherine’s serious expression morphed. Her whole guise brightened, from her gray eyes to her round cheeks, as her smile extended from ear to ear. Tony suddenly wondered how Nathaniel had loved her. The smile combined with the coldness behind her expression made the bile in his stomach rise, leaving a foul taste as he worked to swallow.

“I want that too. I want to be done!” She leaned closer. “And we can. Anton, we can! Our goals are in sight. The end is so close! We must hurry, before there are more. I know we don’t know where Claire and the child are, but we can find them. We can finish this once and for all!”

Claire and the child?! Tony sprang to his feet; the poor chair sailed helplessly backwards until it crashed against the cherry bookcase. “No, Catherine!” He towered over her. “No, I’m stopping it from going any farther. It’s over. Now!”

“Anton, we can’t stop, not now.” Her voice mellowed as she reached up and caressed his cheek. “You look so much like your grandfather. He had eyes —”

A cold chill ran down his spine as he recoiled and every muscle in his body tensed. It was as if her touch were from the devil himself. Tony seized

Catherine's hand, and by the pained look on her face, he was squeezing too tight. Tony didn't care. His words came slowly, through clenched teeth, "Do. Not. Touch. Me. Ever!"

It was then he noticed the white gold cross with the large pearl hanging from a fine chain around Catherine's neck: Claire's grandmother's necklace, Emily's grandmother's necklace! Releasing her hand, he grabbed the pearl and tugged the delicate chain. He'd broken the damn thing before, he could do it again. Once it was free, he shoved the necklace deep into the pocket of his slacks.

Catherine gasped and reflexively touched her neck. "How dare you! It isn't like Claire will ever see it again." Again, her features morphed. Standing defiantly, Catherine brushed invisible debris from her expensive clothes, and walked toward the open room. When she turned, her eyes displayed both hatred and vengeance. Tony remembered that look when she used to talk about his parents. As their proximity decreased the disdain in her voice increased. "Are you so love sick over the woman who played you for a fool that you want the necklace as a memento?" She'd never spoken to him in this tone. "That's fine. Who knows, they may even let you keep it in prison. If not..." She sneered. "...I could always send it to you. I hear they deliver boxes all the time."

All coherent thought forgot to register. The grand office was a hue of crimson. Though Tony didn't know what he was about to do, he knew without a doubt it was about to happen. He took two steps toward her, and Catherine's gaze didn't waver. He took one more step when suddenly the phone on the desk rang, breaking the deafening silence. They both turned and stared at the source of the ring, as if it were an alien life form infiltrating their private storm. Finally, their eyes met. The phone which was ringing was the estate's private number, known only by a few people. On the fourth ring, Catherine asked condescendingly, "Mr. Rawlings, would you like to answer that?"

Clenching his jaw, he took a step back and motioned toward the phone. Although seconds earlier they'd both been visibly upset, as she answered the call, her voice held no indication of unease. Tony stood and listened.

"Yes, this is Ms. London." "I see. When did this happen?" The menacing smile from earlier reappeared as she replied, "That is terrible." Walking around to the other side of his desk, Catherine sat and reached for a paper and pen. "Can you please give me that information one more time?" He couldn't see the words as she scribbled on the blank page. "Thank you, for the information. I'll pass it on to Mrs. Burke. Please, keep me informed. Goodbye." When she hung up, she leaned back against the soft leather and shook her head. "Tsk, tsk. It's such a shame."

Her words, combined with her expression, sent shivers down his spine; nonetheless, Anthony Rawlings had never backed away from a challenge.

Today wouldn't be an exception.

"I believe you're in my seat." Ice dripped from his words.

"I believe I am." She stood and motioned toward it. "Please, enjoy it while you can. I believe it would be better for you to hear this news while seated."

He didn't move forward; instead, he stood taller, towering over her with every bit of his six and a half foot build. "Why? What have you done?"

"Yes, it's always me, isn't it? Mr. Anthony Rawlings never got his hands dirty! We all know how important it was to appear innocent."

"Catherine?"

She lowered herself once again to his chair and explained, "As executor of your estate, I'm kept abreast of pertinent Rawlings Industries information."

He nodded.

"It seems as though one of Rawlings' private jets has gone down."

Tony's knees buckled as he fought to remain standing. "Down?"

"There was a distress call, and shortly after, the plane disappeared from radar. The FAA is investigating. It's assumed the plane has crashed. There's no information regarding survivors. None are expected."

"Why, Catherine? Who's on that plane?"

Before Catherine could answer, they heard a knock at the door. Turning toward the sound, they both stared in silence. The second knock echoed as they waited. Finally, deliberately, Catherine walked to the door and opened it. At first, only she could see the person on the other side.

Initially, Tony didn't recognize the voice. "I'm sorry, if I'm bothering you. I just finished the movie. If you're still busy, I was thinking I may go for a walk, your gardens are lovely, even this early in the spring."

Catherine opened the door wider and ushered Sophia into the office. "No, Sophia, you aren't bothering us." Leaning her head toward Tony, she said, "I'm sure you recognize Mr. Rawlings."

Surprised by Catherine's candid introduction, Tony worked to keep his external calm.

Sophia stopped and stared. "But I thought you were—"

Catherine interrupted, "We all did. It's a miracle. He just came back moments ago."

Tony stepped forward and offered his hand in greeting. "Mrs. Burke, I apologize for my abrupt departure a few months ago. I so wish we could've continued our conversation. I believe it would've been very enlightening."

Before Sophia could respond, Catherine interjected, "Sophia, my dear, please have a seat. I'm afraid I have some terrible news to share."

Tony's back straightened, the muscles of his neck twitched, and the hairs stood to attention. Suddenly, he knew exactly what Catherine was about to say.

"My dear..." Catherine sat on the sofa next to Sophia. Taking Sophia's hand in hers, she began, "We just received a call. I don't know any way to say this, except quickly."

Sophia eyed Catherine suspiciously. "What? Did something happen?"

"The Rawlings plane your husband was on was on its way back to Iowa and it went down."

Sophia stared in disbelief.

Catherine continued, "The FAA is investigating."

Shaking her head, Sophia found her voice, "Down? No! No, it isn't true. There's been some kind of mistake."

Tony watched in horror as Sophia's world crumbled around her. The display was both heartbreak and educational. Tony was too late to save Derek. As Sophia's tears fell, he also witnessed the previously unrecognized emotional toll of Nathaniel's vendetta. Obviously, Catherine's plans were in motion; suddenly, Tony's mind swirled with possibilities, ways to stop further tragedies. As the whirlwind of thoughts cascaded, he heard another familiar name. Instantaneously, Tony felt the pain he'd just witnessed.

"...others on board... Rawlings' employees... and... Brent Simmons."

Before he could register his movements, Tony was standing in front of both women and his tone was harsh, "Catherine, we need to speak in private —now!"

Sophia sobbed quietly while Catherine stood and faced Tony. "I'll get her settled, and then, I'll return." She straightened her shoulders. "Your concerns can wait. We both know accidents happen. A few more minutes won't change the past."

Tony stepped backward, displaying restraint, solely for Sophia's benefit. At this moment, he wanted to harm Catherine, more than he'd ever wanted to harm anyone. His reply came through clenched teeth, "Return quickly, this will end today."

With that, Catherine led Sophia out of the office. Tony heard her say, "My dear, let me get you something to calm your nerves..."

Her voice trailed away, leaving Tony alone to reel with the news. Pacing the length of the office, he contemplated his best friend, the man with whom he'd finally been honest, the man who had a wife and children. Nausea erupted in Tony's stomach as he thought about Courtney, Caleb, and Maryn. Did Courtney know? Had she received a similar call? His pocket vibrated.

The text was from Phil:

"LONDON'S TAKING BURKE TO SECOND FLOOR. VANDERSOLS ARE IN THE ROOM LABELED 'S.E. SUITE'."

Tony immediately texted back:

"CLAIRES OLD SUITE. ARE THEY OK?"

Response:

“NO SIGN OF DISTRESS”

Tony:

“KEEP THE MONITORS ON THEM. TELL ME IF ANY THING CHANGES.”

Phil:

“CAMERAS IN OFFICE WERE DISABLED—THEY’RE NOW ONLINE.”

Tony sat at the desk and accessed the computer. He didn’t know if he was more upset that Catherine hadn’t changed the passwords or that she knew his. Either way, he now knew exactly how his grandfather felt. Despite Tony’s best efforts, he too had trusted the wrong person. Accessing Catherine’s email, he found her correspondence with Emily. The Vandersols had come as a result of Catherine’s invitation. He wondered what exactly she had planned. Before he could give it more thought, he turned toward the opening door.

By the time she closed the door, he was halfway across the room. “You bitch! You arranged for that plane to go down, didn’t you?”

Sounding somewhat apologetic, she explained, “I never intended for Brent Simmons to be on board. He wasn’t on the original manifest.”

“So, you’re admitting it?”

“I’m saying that when Claire felt she had no one else, she needed me. I thought it would be the same when she came back, but it wasn’t. You let her walk all over you! You were too blind to see how she manipulated you! Now we know why. It was only for your money.”

With the mention of his wife’s name and each step toward her, the crimson hue of the room darkened.

Catherine continued, “Sophia doesn’t need money; you saw to that. But with her husband gone, she’ll be alone. Now she’ll need me.” Seemingly unaware of Tony’s rage, Catherine added, “Besides, her husband was a Burke.”

“Don’t you see how out of hand this has become?”

“Really,” Catherine explained, “Mrs. Simmons should consider it a gift.”

Tony stared in disbelief. “Sick! You’re not only crazy, you’re sick!”

“Mr. Rawlings, you’re dead wrong.” Smirking, she added, “I’ve waited a long time to say that.” Before he could respond, she continued, “You see, in your absence, your friend has been, well, forgetful.” Catherine stepped closer. “You probably don’t remember how your grandmother suffered.” She laughed. “Of course, everyone says that. They say it’s the patient that suffers, but in reality, it isn’t. Oh, don’t get me wrong. Sharron was a sweet, loving woman; however, the one who really suffered was Nathaniel. Every day, he sat with her, talked to her, held her, even when she couldn’t respond. It was tragic.” Catherine shook her head, lost in her own thoughts. “No one should ever have to deal with that. So you see, with Brent heading that direction,

because forgetfulness is how it starts, Courtney has received the gift of not having to witness her husband suffer.”

Tony listened in disbelief to Catherine justifying her actions. Had Brent been forgetful? Or was he just walking an invisible tight rope when with Catherine, keeping his knowledge hidden? Tony wanted her to stop. He wanted to release the crimson that wouldn’t go away. Without thinking, Tony slapped her cheek. “Shut up! There’s no justification for what you’ve done.”

The action was supposed to help him; however, instead of making him feel better, memories of slapping Claire came rushing back. The crimson continued to infiltrate. Turning toward the desk, he saw the vase of flowers. In one swift movement, he hurled it against the wall. Shards of crystal, water, and flowers littered the carpet as the vase shattered.

“You will never be the man your grandfather was!” Catherine screamed. “He never would’ve struck someone he loved.”

Tony turned maliciously, his eyes meeting hers. “If you’re referring to me, at this moment, neither did I! And as for my grandfather, he did. I saw him!”

“You’re lying.”

Tony’s face burned as he remembered the scene. “I watched from the doorway.” He pointed toward the doors. “He slapped my father.”

Catherine shrugged. “He probably deserved it.”

“So do you! You don’t get to decide who lives and who dies! Brent had a wife and kids!”

“I loved your grandfather, but even I realized that I couldn’t watch him take the same path as Sharron.”

Tony tried to process her words. Same path?

“With each visit to the prison, he became more and more forgetful. He’d ask me the same questions over and over. Some days, he’d talk about someone, and then tell me the same story again. Mostly, he’d talk about the past.”

Tony seized her shoulders. “My grandfather had a vitamin deficiency. That, combined with the anti-depressants the prison prescribed can create dementia-like side effects. I found documentation that the prison contacted my father about it. My father refused to allow them to take him off the medication. I assumed it was to help his case, giving him validation to void your marriage.”

Catherine’s eyes blazed. “No! He was losing it. I was there, not you. He trusted me. I had to take care of him.”

“Take care of him?”

“It was very simple. My mother believed in herbal cures. When I was a teenager, she thought she could cure my uncle’s drug use with herbs and plant extracts. She taught me about plants, those that heal and those that kill. It’s actually very ingenious. The natural extracts don’t register on normal

toxicology screens. Oh, it can be found, but only with specific tests.”

Tony collapsed onto the leather sofa and studied the woman he’d known most of his life. He could scarcely form the words to his question, “You poisoned my grandfather?”

Catherine stood taller and shook her head. “Don’t you dare make it sound bad! I did what I did to save him, from himself. You know, like how you planned to have Claire take the insanity plea, to save her from you.”

His volume rose with each word. Tony suddenly feared the reason the Vandersols hadn’t heard their argument or exited the suite. “Who else? Who else have you poisoned?”

She shrugged. “Well, after I knew it worked, I tried it with Sherman Nichols.”

Tony couldn’t believe his ears. “No! He died of natural causes, years before we started any plans.”

“Years before *you* started any plans. I was tired of waiting. His death sustained me until you were man enough to get involved.”

“But I paid for accidents.”

Smiling, she beamed. “And quite a bit too. It’s made a wonderful nest egg, thank you very much. The poisoning resembles a heart attack, as you probably remember from Nathaniel’s cause of death; therefore, the only difficulty is determining the perfect time of ingestion, for example, before someone gets into their car to drive, or goes on a dangerous hike. It works amazingly well and is rarely questioned. Besides, it doesn’t take a genius to administer it, just a little in a drink or on their food. Finding a willing executioner wasn’t difficult. It also wasn’t as expensive as accidents.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because I deserve recognition. Everyone thought you were so wonderful, and I was just the stupid housekeeper. None of what I’m saying can be proven. Months ago, I had the cameras in this office turned off, and after I took Sophia upstairs, I called the police. They should be here any minute. I told them that you just arrived and how afraid I was of what you might do. No one will believe your story. I’m just the quiet housekeeper. I wasn’t even in California when your parents died.” Her eyes lit up. “You know the best part?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “I poisoned you with the same plant extract. Oh, I debated about the amount. I knew our plan was for you to only go unconscious. At first, I planned to use sleeping pills, but the irony was too beautiful to pass up.”

Tony walked toward her. “This is done. Why are the Vandersols here?”

“H-How—” She stammered. “How do you know about them?”

“Why are they here?”

She smirked. “I couldn’t have planned it better myself. The police will think you hurt them after all they’ve done to ruin your name. Did you know

she was pregnant? Of course you did. That's why you came here, to stop another Nichols from entering this world."

His voice lowered as he walked closer. "Tell me if you've hurt them."

"It depends."

Tony glared.

"I don't know," she confessed.

"What the hell do you mean—you don't know?"

Catherine shrugged. "We could check the video. I don't know if they've decided to drink any of the water in the refrigerator. The room is quite warm and packing Claire's things can be thirsty work."

"Fuck'n sick! The police will take you away! You killed my grandfather for having a reaction to medication. He could've gotten out of jail and none of this would have ever happened. My father was right in not trusting you! He was wrong too. My grandfather wasn't crazy. You are!"

This time, Catherine attacked. Tony's face stung as her open palm assaulted his cheek. Before he could form words, she was gone. He rushed after her, seeing her disappear behind a door in the corridor of his and Claire's suite. Reaching for the handle, it didn't move. He pounded on the wooden barrier and screamed her name. Within seconds, members of the shocked staff began to surround him.

"Mr. Rawlings!"

"Mr. Rawlings?"

Their surprised and questioning voices filled his hearing. Tony hoped Eric or Phil heard Catherine's plan and were rescuing Emily and John. He continued screaming. Suddenly, smoke wafted from the opening below Catherine's door.

Tony yelled, "Get out of the house and call the fire department!" At first, the staff didn't move; finally, he yelled, "Now! Get out! Call for help!"

Everyone scattered.

His thoughts went from Catherine to Sophia to the Vandersols. He'd saved Catherine's life on more than one occasion, he wasn't doing it again. As smoke billowed from below the door filling the corridor, Tony raced toward the backstairs.

Running toward the S.E Corridor, he went directly to Claire's old suite. The lever wouldn't budge. Cupping his hands against the door, he yelled, "Emily? John? Are you in there?"

Despite the commotion below, he heard nothing through the door. His heart sank until he heard a faint pounding against the door. He'd forgotten the room was soundproofed. There was a time that had been necessary. Reaching for the electronic release, Tony prayed it still worked. What seemed like an eternity later, he heard the once familiar *beep*. Grasping the lever once again, he pushed the door open to find his brother and sister-in-law laying upon the

ground.

John looked up. "How? How are you here? Did you do this? You're sick!"

Tony shook his head. "We don't have time. No, I didn't!" He pointed to Emily with her face down. "Is she all right?"

John shook his head. "You're going to jail for this!"

"We'll argue later. Is she all right?"

"Yes, we're trying to avoid the smoke."

John was right; the smoke whirled in gray waves near the ceiling. Tony and John both helped Emily to her feet as water began to rain from the sprinkler system. Within seconds, they were all soaked. Leaving Claire's old suite, Tony looked both directions down the long corridor. As smoke and water limited their visibility, Emily clung to John's arm with her other hand protectively covering her mouth and nose.

"John, listen to me." Tony screamed above the *whoosh* of sprinklers. "Go right. In about thirty feet, you'll find the backstairs. When you reach the ground floor, go right again. There's a door that opens to the kitchen. From there, you'll be able to get out into the backyard."

John reached for Tony. "You're coming with us. You can't stay up here."

"Just go. There's another person I need to find."

"Oh God! Claire?"

Tony shook his head. "No, Claire's safe. She isn't here." He could tell John was debating their next move. "Go! Get Emily and your baby out of this smoke!"

John didn't argue. Tony stood, momentarily watching his brother and sister-in-law disappear into the gray haze. Wiping the water from his eyes, he headed the other direction toward the grand staircase. Each room he passed, he opened in hopes of finding Sophia.

As he neared the front stairs, he considered the southwest corridor when he stopped dead in his tracks. Straining his ears, Tony listened again. Suddenly, his world crashed in around him. With all his might and his shoes slipping on the wet marble, he ran toward the voices.

Only moments earlier...

THE FEELING OF foreboding that Claire had experienced ever since she learned they were coming back to Iowa, was too strong to deny. Phil had told her to trust her instincts and her instincts told her that they should've stayed in paradise. But her heart wouldn't allow Tony to travel to the U.S. without her. Now, she knew why.

When Courtney received the call about Brent, Claire knew she needed to get to Tony. He'd told her to stay away from the estate, but she couldn't. It wasn't that she wanted to save Catherine from his wrath. She wanted to save Tony from the consequences of his possible actions. She knew if he learned about the Rawlings plane while with Catherine, he'd blame her, possibly

rightfully so; nonetheless, Claire didn't want Tony to do something else that he'd regret. He didn't need another crime added to his list.

As Claire entered the gates of the estate, she glanced in the rearview mirror. Nichol was peacefully sleeping in the carseat. She should've left her with Courtney, but Courtney was too distraught to watch over their daughter. Besides, Claire's plan was simple: find Tony, Emily, and John and get them out of the house. She could've called, but then she'd have had to tell him about the plane crash. Claire didn't want to do that over the phone. As she parked the car in front of the house, she thought about Phil and Eric. Where were they?

Looking up at the stately home, she pushed away the onslaught of memories, and straightened her stance. This was their home—Nichol's home. And Claire wanted it back. Fury filled her chest as she thought about Catherine. The woman's plan had worked successfully to force both her and Tony into hiding. Suddenly, Claire was tired of running, tired of revenge, and tired of the fight. Lifting Nichol from the carseat, Claire declared, "Look, sweetie, this is your house. This is all yours, and your mommy will not let that mean woman have it a second longer."

Yes, she wanted to get Tony out, and she wanted to get Emily and John out, yet what Claire wanted more than anything, was to get Catherine out—out of the house and out of their lives. Damn it! I'm Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, and I've had enough. No one is taking this away from our daughter!

Her mind focused like never before, making each step toward the grand doors more determined.

To Claire's surprise, when she depressed the lever and pushed forward, the doors opened without hesitation. Looking around the empty foyer, she heard voices coming from the corridor of Tony's office. As she walked quietly down the hallway, the voices grew in volume. She wasn't ready to confront the entire staff, so when she heard footsteps coming her direction, she opened the door to Tony's office and slid inside. Immediately, the smell of smoke filled her senses. Even the room appeared to be dimming with a gray haze.

This wasn't right. This house was a fortress. She had difficulty comprehending that there could possibly be a fire, but the undeniable burning in her lungs confirmed her fear. Claire's mind spun between the need to get Nichol out and the desire to assure Tony's safety. "Oh, my God, where's your daddy?" she said aloud.

"Good afternoon, Claire."

The coolness of Catherine's voice rendered Claire motionless. She hadn't had time to see anything except the room where they stood, and hadn't realized Catherine was in the attached bathroom.

"Catherine, where's Tony? What's happening? Is there a fire?"

Claire's feet stayed planted to the lush carpet, as Catherine approached. Catherine's gray eyes darkened with intensity while the distance between them lessened. She was no longer looking at Claire. Her eyes were focused on the baby in her arms. Her hand reached out as she said, "So this is it? The Rawls—Nichols baby?"

Instinctively, Claire pulled Nichol away. "Don't you dare touch her!"

"Her?! You have a daughter. Anton has a daughter, and you've been together all this time." Catherine's gaze locked on Claire's. Haven't you? You two have been together!"

Claire's eyes blazed, displaying her lack of fear. Never had she felt such hatred. Yes, years ago she hated Tony. That was different, stemming from the anxiety of his actions. This was deep and visceral: a loathing for someone who'd been trusted and loved, to learn that person had lied—forever. Had anything she'd ever said been real?

Not only had Catherine lied, but she'd tried to harm both Claire and Tony. She'd sentenced them both to a life alone: a life without the love of the one person who completed their world. She'd sentenced them to her reality.

"Yes! Yes, we've been together. Our daughter is a Rawlings. We're a family. Something we would've, at one time, shared with you! Instead, you gave it all up, for some sick, old vendetta!"

Catherine laughed and turned away. The smoke continued to thicken. "Share with me! Oh, so that I could clean up after you and soothe your hurt feelings when Anton upset you. So that I could be ordered out of a room, by you!" As her volume increased, Nichol began to cry.

Claire tried to soothe her daughter as Catherine's tirade continued, "You don't belong here. I sent you away! You, a Nichols, don't get to have what I couldn't. I won't allow Nathaniel's home to be run by a Nichols! If my daughter didn't get to live within these walls, then neither will yours."

"How can you be so sick? She's an innocent child!" Claire's yelling spurred Nichol's cries to become louder.

"Innocent! No one is innocent. Your grandfather's actions killed the only man who ever loved—"

The door burst open and more smoke flooded the room. Tony's eyes met Claire's as his booming voice stopped Catherine's words. Claire heard and saw his terror, "My God, Claire! Why are you here? Get out, the house is on fire!"

Instead of fear, Claire felt relief. "Oh, you're safe. I was so afraid."

The commotion outside the office became louder with voices and footsteps. Nichol's cries resumed as cold water came raining down from the ceiling. When Claire turned back toward Catherine, she saw the gun. It wasn't big; nevertheless, it was pointed directly at her and Nichol. Tony saw it too.

They say time slows down during life threatening events. Supposedly,

your entire life flashes before your eyes. Claire wasn't seeing her entire life, only the part that mattered, only the part that included Tony and Nichol. Voices spoke and chaos erupted on all sides, but Claire didn't notice. Her attention was monopolized by the threat in Catherine's hand, as well as the growing fire crackling and smoldering around them, consuming their home.

Tony's voice rang above the chaos, penetrating the smoke and sprinkler induced rain. "Get out, get Nichol out!"

As Claire moved to obey, she saw Catherine's expression change before her eyes. Emerging from the woman who'd consoled her over the years was the sadistic smile from her nightmare. Yet, this time it was real, and she was repeating their daughter's name: "Nichol?" Turning the gun toward Tony, she asked incredulously, "Nichol? You named a Rawls *Nichol*?"

He didn't answer; instead, he hit the gun free of her hand. In the commotion, it fell near Claire's feet. She heard his command. "Claire, get the gun!"

Her wet hands searched for the weapon, and water blurred her vision. Bending down, she didn't see Catherine rush forward until she was right there. Claire expected a fight for the gun; instead, Catherine grabbed Nichol from her arms. The next few seconds melted together in a space and time haze. Tony fought for their daughter as Claire secured the gun in her grip.

Phil's voice yelled above the fray of Tony's loud accusations. Nichol cried and Catherine...

Claire didn't intend to pull the trigger. She was trying to hold the gun steady, but when Phil seized her shoulders, her finger depressed the small lever. The deafening bang drowned out the commotion, removing all other sounds. Through the smoke and water, Claire watched in horror as the three people before her fell to the ground.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth, but not a twin.

—Barbara Kingsolver

T

HE AUTUMN SUN warmed the days, and the darkness cooled the nights. Claire's knuckles blanched as the death-grip on her pen refused to subside. She knew Meredith would arrive soon with her evening meal, and they had plans to go out onto the grounds. Courtney was visiting again; nevertheless, Claire's present confidants and their support couldn't take away her past—no longer could the *consequences* of Claire's *truth* be denied.

Dr. Brown had told Claire to write, just write. No other directives had been given, nor restrictions. Once Claire was confident that her writings were safe from the eyes of others, the good and bad memories of her past came to life on each page. Painstakingly, she filled notebook after notebook. With her heartbeat echoing in her ears, Claire's hand seemed to take on a life of its own. This reflective therapy had been effective. She now knew why her mind had shut down. She understood why she had lost touch with reality. After enduring so much: so many highs, so many lows, she couldn't take anymore.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that Nichol was alive and well or the hope that one day she'd be allowed to hold, care for, and love her daughter. No matter the reason, Claire knew before all else, she needed to face the truth of her conviction... She continued to write—

The office filled with smoke. It'd been a haze, but after Tony opened the door, waves of dense gray saturated the air, filling every void and compartment. As it consumed our history, I worried about our future. I worried about Nichol. I knew I needed to get her out of the fire, yet the aroma of burning wood and

crackling of the flames also filled me with an unnatural comforting sense of déjà vu, one which momentarily replaced the feeling of loss. I know it sounds unreal, but instead of seeing the fire before me—the one that threatened the lives of those I held the dearest—I, for a split second, remembered other fires. I remembered the Iowa state prison incinerator and couldn't help wonder, if only I'd left the past in ashes, then would we all be safe today?

I remember hearing voices and chaos coming from all directions. I couldn't see them, and I really couldn't hear their words. My attention volleyed between the flames and Catherine's gun; however, other scenes filled my memories. Is this what happens when you face death? I've heard your entire life passes before your eyes. Maybe that was what was happening. I knew at that moment death was imminent.

Could that be the answer for the last two years? Was my break with reality—as the doctors call it—my self-imposed death? After what I did, it'd make sense. After all, I'd learned actions had consequences.

In those few seconds—that took a lifetime—I remembered scenes of surrender and desperation. All the memories I'd successfully compartmentalized away instantaneously proclaimed their presence, only to fade into the gray smoke. With Nichol still in my arms, I took a step back and rubbed my burning eyes. Still there were other scenes playing out before me. They weren't of oppression or vengeance. No, in those last seconds, I remembered true love and affection. I prayed those scenes would prevail; however, when I closed my eyes they too disappeared into the growing haze and mayhem.

I knew that I couldn't fall down and surrender to the fire or Catherine's gun. I'd surrendered too many times, yet I knew no matter what choice I made, our lives would never be the same. I just didn't realize the magnitude of that realization.

For once, with not only my life at stake, but those of my daughter and husband, I chose to face the reality. With soot covering my face and those around me, I stood tall and saw the horror in Tony's eyes. I couldn't surrender. I couldn't give into emotion, not yet. In my heart, I knew there were cards yet to see. The game wasn't over. I knew the rules and I wouldn't disappoint.

Claire wiped the tears from her eyes. She hadn't been aware that she was crying until the large droplets of moisture hit the ink on her paper, causing her words to bleed.

She looked at the clock. Meredith would be there in less than ten minutes. She should stop writing, yet the memories were too clear. Claire needed to

finish the story—

Nichol's cries cut through the cold water that fell from the ceiling. Tony was yelling: telling me to get her out of the house. If only I'd listened. Of all the times I'd obeyed him, ironically, this was when I chose to exert my independence.

I've asked myself why, and I've seen the answer in my nightmares. It was the look in Catherine's eyes as she was saying Nichol's name. That look haunts me to this day.

Everything happened so fast. Tony knocked the gun away from Catherine. He told me to pick it up, so I did. Catherine rushed toward me and, oh God. I can't keep writing. If I write it—it's real.

Closing the notebook, Claire placed it in a drawer, went to the bathroom, and washed her face. She didn't want Meredith to find her in this state. When she returned to her quiet room, Claire looked around at all the new items: the colorful throw pillows, the new bedspread, and the pictures on her dresser. It broke her heart to see Nichol's big brown eyes. They looked so much like her father's.

Slowly, she walked to the dresser and opened the drawer. The end of their story was quite simple. It could be summed up by writing only a few more sentences—

As I retrieved the gun from the floor, Catherine stole Nichol from my grasp. When she did, Tony was there! He fought for our daughter. I saw the panic in his eyes when he noticed that I had the gun. I don't think I meant to pull the trigger. I remember shaking. I don't know if it was the cold water or fear, but when I heard Phil's voice and felt pressure on my shoulders, I flinched, and I pulled the trigger.

Claire heard the sound of her door opening. Squaring her shoulders, she finished their story—

The sound was deafening. In that moment, I watched them all fall and knew, without a doubt, I'd shot the love of my life. I'd killed Anthony Rawlings.

Stoically, she placed the notebook back in the drawer. If Meredith noticed Claire's red eyes, she didn't acknowledge them. Instead, she did what she'd been doing since before Claire could remember, she chatted as Claire ate her dinner.

Later, when they stepped outside into the early evening, the air was still comfortably warm. Unfortunately, the nights were descending faster by a few minutes each passing day. The setting sun returned the cool crisp chill to the October breeze. Although this was only Courtney's third visit since Meredith had brought them together, Claire constantly feared raising questions if they stayed out too late. She hated that the twilight dictated the length of their visits. It wasn't like she wanted to lie to Emily or to anyone. She'd repeatedly asked Emily to allow more visitors. Emily always had a reason to deny her request. According to her sister the time was never right.

During Courtney's first visit, she and Claire mostly hugged and cried. The emotion was too raw and intense to discuss Claire's condition or the reason for her break with reality. On the second visit, they concentrated on Nichol. Courtney told stories, saying that she'd visited and been in contact with Claire's daughter ever since Emily started caring for her. She reminded Claire, "How could Aunt Courtney stay away from Nichol Courtney?"

It wasn't like Claire had forgotten Nichol's middle name or the person she and Tony wanted to honor. Well, maybe she had momentarily forgotten, but hearing Courtney's pride and seeing the adoration in her bright blue eyes, Claire knew that she and Tony were right to name Nichol after their good friend.

Claire believed this visit would be different. She knew what she wanted to discuss, what she needed to say aloud. It had taken some time and reflection, but the therapists were right. The journaling helped take her along her own safe, personal journey.

The walk to and from the clearing, as well as the impending nightfall, only allowed Claire and Courtney thirty to forty minutes of together time. It wasn't much, but it was something. To Claire, that was a lot!

Claire couldn't thank Meredith enough.

As they approached the small clearing, Claire fell into silent reflection. Her mind swirled; she worked desperately to control her thoughts, wanting to phrase them correctly, in a way her friends would understand. Perhaps Emily wasn't ready to believe Claire was better. Maybe the doctors and therapists weren't convinced she was beyond relapse, but Claire wanted her friends to

know she'd come to terms with her past and was ready to move on to her future.

Once their greetings were said and the three ladies sat on the blanket that Courtney brought, Claire began her story, "I want to thank you both for believing in me." Claire reached for Meredith's hand. "So many years ago, when we pledged sisterhood, I don't think either of us had any idea where it would take us. I know that I wouldn't be here without your help."

Meredith smiled.

Claire reached for Courtney. "I can't imagine anyone else standing by me like you've done. Who would've thought, when Tony took me to your house so many years ago, we'd end up here? You've had many opportunities to walk away from me and all the drama, but you never have, thank you!"

Claire sat straighter. "Courtney, I told Meredith I wanted to see you to learn what happened at the estate. Recently, I've been writing things down and working them out. I don't need you to tell me. I remember." Bravely, she fought the emotion and pushed it back down. "I know why there're rules about Tony, mentioning his name, or acknowledging that he existed. The thing is..." She inhaled and wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. "...I'm tired of people acting like I can't handle the truth. I remember shooting him. I know—I know that I killed him."

Courtney and Meredith looked at one another, their expressions ones of confusion and disbelief. When they started to speak, Claire spoke over them, "You don't have to pretend. I remember the gun, the deafening sound as I pulled the trigger..." Claire stammered, "...I-I remember him falling, Catherine falling, and Nichol... thank God she wasn't hurt. I don't think I could live with myself if I..." Her voice momentarily trailed away.

Regaining her composure, she said, "I was so happy to hear she was all right. I don't understand where I was for so long, or how I got there. Maybe I was crazy? Sometimes I wonder if it's craziness to deal with real life, day after day, or if it's crazy to want to live in the good times." She smiled through her tears. "I want the two of you to know that there were good times! The man I married, the second time..." She added. "...We had something I'll never forget. Emily and the doctors may think I should forget and move on, but I'll never forget. The thing is I'm ready to move on."

Meredith interjected, "Claire, oh my God, if I thought that was what you thought. I'm so sorry."

Courtney squeezed Claire's hand. "Honey, Tony isn't dead! You didn't shoot him. You shot Catherine!"

Happiness erupted throughout her entire being, only to be immediately replaced by a heaviness that filled Claire's chest. She fought the thoughts and memories. Suddenly, the numbers were back, counting dominated her thoughts: *three, four, five, six*. Pushing everything away, stopping the lineation

of numbers, she asked, “If he’s alive, why hasn’t he been here? Doesn’t he want to see me? Is it Emily or is it him?”

Courtney reached out and grasped Claire’s shoulders. “No! He wants to see you. Claire, he’s in prison. He can’t get here.” Giving her a reassuring hug, Courtney softened her voice and added, “I saw him recently. He wants to see you very much. I promise.”

Prison. Claire tried desperately to recall their conversations. She pushed forward, “Why? I thought the FBI was going to make him a deal. Is it because of Simon? Because Tony hired someone to sabotage his plane?”

This was all new territory for Meredith. She couldn’t answer Claire’s questions if she wanted; however, Courtney could. She knew what Claire needed to learn.

“No!” Courtney looked to Meredith. “I don’t know what to do. Can she handle this?”

Claire’s eyes sharpened, the days of treating her with kid gloves were over. She replied, “Hello, I’m right here. Yes, I can handle this. I need to know. I need to know what happened.”

Courtney shrugged. “Tony was upset that Simon approached you in Chicago.”

Claire nodded.

“He was so upset that he contacted someone to arrange for an airplane malfunction.”

None of this was news. “He told me. That’s illegal.”

“It is.” Courtney continued, “However, that wasn’t how Simon died. Tony’s connection, the man who was supposed to arrange the malfunction, took his money, but he didn’t complete Tony’s request.”

Claire tried to reason. “But Simon’s plane crashed...”

“Simon’s plane crashed because Simon fell asleep. His body was so badly burned they had very little evidence. It was your friend Harry. He was the one who put it all together. Ask yourself, who benefited from Simon’s death?”

Claire contemplated and finally answered, “I don’t know. All I can think of is Amber, but she—”

Courtney interrupted, “Yes! The way I understand it, she was upset. Things had been rocky in their relationship and Simon was obsessed with you. He’d gone to see you on multiple occasions. Apparently, Amber wasn’t happy. She knew he’d planned to leave a great deal of money to her, and she hoped she could convince the board of directors to follow through on Simon’s lead and allow her to run the company. He also left her the majority of the stock in SiJo, so she arranged for an overdose of antihistamines prior to his flight. Actually, the amount she arranged for him to ingest wasn’t too much for most people, but apparently, Simon had sensitivity to that kind of medication. It caused him to fall asleep while flying the plane.”

Claire tried to follow. "Amber? No, that can't be true."

"It is," Courtney replied. "When you contacted her from prison and told her your theories, she decided it was a great way to deflect any suspicion away from her. She told her brother, Harry, who happened to be Agent Harrison Baldwin, and the FBI became involved. There were lingering concerns about your grandfather's death and some other cases which led to Anton Rawls. When Amber talked to the FBI, they saw it as the perfect storm. By utilizing Harry, having him get to know you, they assumed they'd learn more about Tony."

Claire shut her eyes and tried to concentrate. Finally, she asked, "So, Tony didn't kill Simon? Amber did?"

"That's right, and last I heard she'd been convicted and is still in prison."

Meredith shook her head and mumbled, "This is unreal! You can't make this shit up!"

Courtney's blue eyes sent piercing stares toward Meredith. "Remember what I said!" Courtney's voice no longer held the reassuring tone she'd used with Claire.

Meredith responded with a simple nod of her head.

After a moment of deliberation, Claire said, "Oh, my God. Poor Harry. He had to build a case against his sister?"

"I don't know much about him. I think I heard he retired from the FBI, but honestly, I don't know."

Claire sat silently and contemplated; she couldn't even think about her grandfather. Her thoughts centered on her husband. Finally, she asked, "So why is Tony in prison?"

Courtney exhaled, "I hope to God I'm not telling you anything new. He confessed to everything."

Wide-eyed, Claire repeated, "Everything?"

"He admitted to hurting you, kidnapping you..." Courtney looked toward Meredith. "He admitted that everything in her book was true. He also admitted to having knowledge regarding other incidents: some people who went for a hike and never came back, and John's legal issues." Courtney squeezed Claire's hand, "He admitted publicly to everything. He didn't want it to be dragged out in a lengthy legal battle. He asked to do his time and pay for his sins."

Claire sat silently for a minute and tried to comprehend this new information. After a moment, she asked, "The FBI, they knew most of this before we returned to the States. They said Tony would receive preferential treatment for his help with Catherine. Did he get it?"

Courtney smiled. "His sentence has been served at a minimum-security prison, which gave him many more rights than you had during your incarceration, and his sentence was significantly reduced. As a matter of fact,

Brent thinks he'll be released during his first parole hearing.”

Claire's heart momentarily skipped a beat. She stared at her friend. Up until now, Claire hadn't been ready to discuss Brent. The last she'd heard he was on a plane that went down. “Brent?” Claire's eyes filled with new moisture as she searched the deep blueness of her friend's eyes. “Brent's okay?”

“Yes! He wasn't on that plane, the one he was supposed to have been on. He later said he wanted to get home to you and Tony, but there were extra legal documents requiring modification. He stayed a little longer in Chicago and decided at the last minute to catch a later commercial flight. It wasn't until he landed in Cedar Rapids that he knew anything about the crash.”

Claire shook her head. This was all so much. “Parole, when could that happen?”

“I don't know the date. Brent said soon.”

Claire smiled; she liked soon! Though the sky was darkening, she wasn't ready to leave this conversation. Her thoughts went back to the plane and Catherine. “What happened to Catherine?” Her voice quivered, “D-Did I kill her?” She looked down. “I wish I could remember more specifics. I remember something about an insanity plea. All I could think about was Tony telling me years ago that it was my best option. If I needed a plea, I must have killed her.”

Meredith chimed in, “You didn't. You shot her, but her wound wasn't life-threatening. She stood trial, a long and drawn-out one, but one that was kept very quiet from the media. She was convicted on multiple counts including multiple murders.”

Courtney added, “That day at the estate, Tony baited her into confessing to more crimes than he even knew existed. Eric arranged for the office to be wired, and Phillip Roach made sure it was all recorded. That information was essential in her conviction.”

Claire stared in disbelief. “So there was a reason for him to go to the estate.”

Meredith said, “Well that and your sister and brother-in-law. Apparently, they were trapped in an upstairs suite. Tony got them out before the fire or smoke reached them.”

Claire rubbed her temples. “There was a time that I trusted Catherine without question.”

Patting Claire's leg, Courtney added, “I know honey. I know you did. We all thought she was so kind and sweet. The saddest part was her daughter.”

Wheels turned, Claire stuttered, “H-her daughter? Oh, yes, I remember Sophie. No, Sophia.”

Courtney nodded. “She didn't make it out of the house. They said it was smoke inhalation.”

"Oh!" Claire's stomach wrenched. She'd never met the woman, but she knew Tony thought highly of her.

Courtney continued, "Her husband was on that airplane. Brent said he had great potential."

Claire contemplated the onslaught of information for a moment. She thought about her grandmother's beliefs and those of Madeline and Francis on the island. Slowly, she wiped the tears and felt her cheeks rise into a seemingly inappropriate smile. "So Catherine's goal was to keep Sophia and her husband apart?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I guess God had other plans. Her husband's name was Burke, wasn't it?" She went on, "I hope Sophia never knew her biological mother was Catherine."

Meredith and Courtney shrugged. Finally, Courtney answered, "I'm not sure what she knew. From the audio of Tony's office, I think we're right to assume she didn't. She died peacefully unaware."

In the days that followed, Claire replayed the conversation over and over in her head. The loss of any life was terrible. Catherine had been directly responsible for so many; however, what kept coming back to Claire was the idea that Sophia and Derek were still together. She had to believe they were. If their love could overcome death, Claire believed her and Tony's could overcome insanity and incarceration.

It was that belief that inspired her to confront her sister again, two weeks after her conversation with Courtney and Meredith. "Emily, seriously, I'm not a child. I'm much better. I want to see Nichol. I want out of here, and I'm ready to address the world."

Emily leaned forward and covered Claire's hand. "You know I love you?"

Claire nodded.

"We're all happy your hallucinations are gone."

"Memories," Claire corrected.

Emily pursed her lips before she continued, "Honey, I worry about delusional thoughts. Your doctors and I believe some of this has been occurring for a long time." She patted Claire's hand. "You have a history of irrational decisions. I don't want you making decisions now that will later come back to upset you or Nichol."

Claire continued to plead her case as Emily recited her concerns. It was a different version of their same discussion. Unexpectedly and without warning, the door to Claire's room opened behind her. She didn't need to turn; she didn't need to see. His presence overwhelmed her—filled her and the room with electricity that only seconds earlier didn't exist. According to the law of conservation, energy can neither be created nor destroyed, which meant the

electricity was already present; nevertheless, when the door opened, she felt unbridled power surging through her veins. There was only one person, one man, who held that kind of power. Seeing the astonished look on Emily's face, Claire knew she was right.

Without thought or concern, Claire stood. Closing her eyes, she turned toward the doorway confident of who she'd see when her eyes opened. This wasn't a hallucination or a memory. It was real. Although Emily's voice pleaded for Claire to listen, she didn't hear her sister's words. There was nothing and no one else at that moment other than her husband. The rest of the world ceased to exist, and she was powerless to do anything other than surrender to his gaze.

They were the eyes she'd dreamt about, the eyes she saw in pictures of their daughter. They were the black holes which years ago swallowed and consumed her heart and soul.

Did she move? Did he? There were noises, but the words being spoken weren't coming from either one of them. They didn't need words. Over the course of the years, there'd been too many words, words they remembered and ones they sought to forget. At this moment, none of them mattered.

In merely a split second, Claire took him in. Prison had changed him, to a degree. His black mane now held more hints of white, new lines appeared around his eyes, and the hardness in his expression was replaced by something stronger, yet more serene. No matter the differences, he was still her husband. He was still Anthony Rawlings.

Their bodies nearly touched when the scent of his cologne filled the air. She inhaled the intoxicating scent she'd imagined over the years and melted into his embrace. Her face rested against the lapel of his silk suit as her body molded to his. Closing her eyes again, she relished the sensation of his muscular chest and beating heart. They still hadn't spoken, yet the volume of the room around them had increased exponentially. His hand reached for her chin and brought their eyes together. It was the blending of brown and green, light to dark, and dark to light. It was their connection, and it surpassed all other obstacles.

"I've dreamt of those eyes." The sound of his deep baritone voice brought a smile to her face.

"As have I." Suddenly, Claire worried and looked away. Did he know about her break with reality? Did he know people thought she was crazy?

"Look at me." His commanding tone required obedience. Claire looked back up. "I've missed you so much. Why are you looking away?"

"Do you know? Do you know what they say about me?"

His eyes lightened and his cheeks rose. "I know, I love you."

"They think I'm crazy."

His hands, which held her tightly, caressed and soothed her back. "I think

we're all crazy. That doesn't mean that I'm leaving here today without you. My love, you're coming home."

She caught her breath and tried to comprehend. Slowly, the rest of the room came back into focus. Apparently, they weren't the only two people on earth. Her normally empty room overflowed with people. Emily stood to the side, with tears in her eyes and an anguished expression, as she spoke on her phone. Brent and Courtney were there, and Brent was talking to another man, showing him documents. Courtney was hugging herself, smiling, with tears running down her cheeks.

Finding her voice, Claire sought the reassurance of Tony's gaze. "I'm leaving here? How?"

Brent nodded at the other gentleman and stepped toward Tony and Claire. Claire reached out and squeezed Brent's hand. "I'm so thankful you're..."

Brent smiled and said, "Me too. If I weren't alive, I couldn't be the one to tell you..." He grinned toward Claire; his eyes sparkling with new vitality. "...I wouldn't be the one to help you."

Claire remembered him telling her one time, how he'd always wanted to help her, not hurt her. While holding tight to Tony's hand, she smiled at his clandestine reference.

Brent continued, "As long as Tony was incarcerated, Emily was your listed next of kin and held your power of attorney. I'm holding the judgment by Judge Wein; your husband is once again legally your next of kin. Until you're completely cleared medically, he has the power to make your medical decisions, including your release."

"I thought I was here because of an insanity plea?"

Brent shook his head. "Originally, that was true, but you were cleared of all charges by self-defense." He looked to Emily and back. "You've been kept here for your safety; however, I've obtained statements from your doctors substantiating your mental health. Soon, you should legally be able to make your own decisions. In the meantime, with Tony's signature, you can go home. There are some hoops we need to jump through: therapy you must agree to complete, but we're not leaving Everwood without you."

Turning toward Emily, Brent continued, "You can choose to fight, if you want. I'm sure John will be here soon; however, I can assure you, I've left no 'T' uncrossed or 'I' undotted."

The anguish in Emily's expression broke Claire's heart. Barely able to bring herself to let go of Tony's hand, Claire walked to her sister and wrapped her arms around her neck. "I know you've been doing what you thought was best, and, Emily, I love you for it, but now it's time for all of us to move forward."

After a moment of obvious internal turmoil, Emily said, "John is on his way, but we're not going to fight."

"Emily, there's one more thing," Brent said as he handed her another document. "This is from the family court. Anthony and Claire Rawlings have been granted full custody of their daughter, Nichol Rawlings. They will be assuming the roles of custodial parents—soon."

As they listened, Tony's arm tightened around Claire, and she smiled up at him. It was more than she'd ever hoped, more than she'd dared to dream. "We're going to be a family again." Her words were a mere whisper that only Tony could hear. Feeling the warm grasp of his large hand around hers was confirmation enough. The terrible ordeal was over.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Never have plans for the future as you never know how things will turn out.

—Nigella Lawson

C LAIRE CLUNG TO Tony's hand, listened to the voices, and responded appropriately. As long as she held on, as long as they touched, she knew he was real. The Everwood administration required them to meet with doctors and administrators before granting Claire's release. With Brent's legal documentation and Emily's concession, these meetings were Claire's last hurdle to freedom.

She watched in awe as the Tony from her memories argued for her release. There was nothing about the man in the Armani suit with the gelled back hair and perfect diction that hinted toward ex-con. Tony personified affluence and business success. He sounded like a CEO. Never once, despite what a doctor or therapist said, did Claire doubt Tony's ability to fulfill his promise: she'd be going home.

Once in a while, Brent would need to remind someone of Tony's legal rights as her husband. It warmed her heart to see the two of them working together on a common goal. Occasionally, someone would ask Claire a question: some were simple, the date or name of the president. Others were questions about her feelings or concerns. After each appropriate answer, she'd feel the squeeze of Tony's warm hand or see the reassurance of his smile. It didn't matter that behind the smile she also saw sadness. They had both endured too much. What mattered was that they were together and soon they'd have Nichol. Claire couldn't wait to leave the facility and have her family united. With each second, her anticipation grew. She knew, when they were again a family, the sadness would leave Tony's eyes, and she'd see the light chocolate brown they once had in paradise.

After they'd signed the last document and answered the last question, she whispered in his ear, "Let's go get Nichol."

She expected a smile and a nod: some sign of affirmation; instead, he directed the Everwood staff. “Gather all of Mrs. Rawlings’ things. I want everything sent to our home.”

Claire offered, “I don’t need everything. I can get the things I want.”

“No, you can go through it later. We’re getting you out of here. You aren’t spending another second in this place.”

She didn’t argue nor did she want to. Although she detested having the facility’s staff direct her movements, she loved Tony’s control. It was his way of protecting her. She knew that. Yes, he could be domineering, but she’d missed every part of him, his overprotectiveness included.

John was now waiting with Emily as Tony and Claire exited the administrator’s office. When Claire saw her family, her body tensed in anticipation of a confrontation. Before she could speak or devise a mental plan, John held out his hand.

“Anthony.”

With his hand extended, Tony replied, “Tony. Please, call me Tony. Thank you, John, for all you’ve done while I was away. Brent tells me you’ve been quite helpful at Rawlings.”

“It was for Nichol and Claire.”

Tony nodded. “And for that, for our family, I thank you.”

“I’ve been privy to many of your decisions. I want you to know, I respect them.”

“Then I hope my return won’t cause you to search for another job. Rawlings Industries and I can always use someone like you on our side.”

John nodded. “Emily and I need to talk, but I think I’d like that.”

Claire released Tony’s hand and encircled John’s neck. Her emotions were all over the place. One minute, she was excited and the next, she was unsure. As she hugged her brother-in-law, tears of joy fell from her eyes. “I had no idea you were working at Rawlings.”

Claire released John and immediately hugged her sister. “Thank you, Emily. Thank you for not fighting this.”

John explained, “Anth—I mean Tony’s right, and you’re right. We are a family. For our children we need to behave like adults.”

Claire stammered, “C-children. I can’t wait to see Nichol and meet Michael.”

Emily’s eyes filled with tears. “She’s so little. She won’t understand—”

John spoke over Emily, “Your daughter is beautiful and intelligent. She’s also young. As long as we do this together, she’ll make the transition just fine.”

Claire looked up at her husband. Although she wasn’t sure what she expected to see, the sadness mixed with gratitude took her by surprise. Taking one of his hands, she said, “We’ve missed so much. I can’t wait to hold her

again.”

Tony replied, “Thank you again, not just for Rawlings, but for taking care of Nichol. We’re anxious to come and see her, but first, I’d like to take Claire somewhere. It won’t take long, and then we’ll be over to your house. The child psychologist I consulted recommended a gradual transition before we bring her home to stay.”

“I thought...” Claire’s heart ached.

Emily’s moist eyes came to life as she nodded. “Yes, gradual. I think Tony’s right.” She feigned a smile toward Tony. “Thank you. This’ll give us time to talk with her, to try to explain things. Let’s make this as easy for Nichol as possible.”

When they all walked outside, Claire lifted her face toward the sky. Inhaling, she savored the fresh autumn breeze. Despite the gray sky, the changing leaves added color to an otherwise dark day. An overwhelming sense of freedom momentarily paralyzed her movements.

“What is it?” Tony asked.

“It’s beautiful. The trees are colorful and the season is changing. It feels so good to be free.”

Tony smiled and wrapped his arm around Claire’s shoulder. “I want to show you something.”

For most of the drive from Cedar Rapids to Iowa City, Claire watched the landscape through the window, and with her hand in Tony’s she contemplated their family. Of course, it would be hard on Nichol. Why hadn’t she thought of that? But Tony had. He’d even consulted a child psychologist. Claire rested her head against his shoulder. After everything they’d been through the world was right. Tony would make everything right.

When she recognized their location, she asked a question she hadn’t thought to consider. “We’re near the estate. What about the fire? Was there a lot of damage?”

His eyes twinkled. “That’s what I want to show you.”

Nervously, Claire watched as they drove toward the entrance. The front gates opened and they wound up the familiar drive. When the trees parted, Claire gasped. “What happened?”

“You don’t like it?”

She heard the disappointment in his voice, but she couldn’t lie. “I-I don’t know? Did the whole house burn?”

“No. There was a lot of smoke and water damage, but the fire was pretty much contained to the first level southwest corridor.”

As soon as Tony stopped the car, Claire opened her door. Silently, she stood trying to comprehend the grand white-brick structure. Mesmerized, she stared at the tall windows, long porches, black shutters, and lovely columns. The landscaping was perfect, with tall trees and beds of colorful mums. At

one end of the house, there appeared to be an enclosed porch. While at the other end, she saw a carport.

Finally, Tony asked, "Do you want to see the inside?"

Claire didn't move. It didn't seem real. Searching for answers, she asked, "What happened to our house?"

"I had it demolished. I built for the wrong reasons." He took her hand. "It was our house, but it was never a *home*. It contained too many memories."

"So you got rid of it? Tony, there were good memories there too."

"I built that house for Nathaniel." His brown eyes sparkled. "Claire, I had this home built for you." Standing in front of her, he tugged her hand. The uncertainty behind his eyes pulled her forward; she allowed him to lead her inside.

The entry was beautiful. Instead of marble, the flooring was a light polished oak. Immediately, Claire felt the warmth of a home. Yes, the estate had been their house, but there were times it felt more like a museum. As Tony took her from room to room, Claire saw the attention to detail: bookcases, cabinetry, custom ceilings, and intricate lighting. The back of the house was nothing but windows. In the living room, the windows extended two stories. When they entered the kitchen, her eyes shone. It wasn't the industrial kitchen of the old mansion. This room was designed with a family in mind. The granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, ornate tile work, stone floor, and back wall of glass all added to the casual yet luxurious feel.

"Oh, this looks like a kitchen where I'd love to cook."

Tony smiled. "You have a cook, but it's your kitchen. You can do whatever you'd like."

The lower level contained all the amenities of the old house: a theater room more modern than before, a fun family area, as well as an exercise room and lap pool. When they entered the pool, Tony squeezed Claire's shoulders. "I couldn't build you a house without your favorite room."

Speechless, she shook her head. Finally, she whispered, "It's beautiful, thank you."

Next, Tony took Claire upstairs to Nichol's room. It was a room fit for a princess. Shades of pink and purple dominated the senses as the canopy bed set center stage. Each door or drawer Claire opened was filled. The closets were stocked with clothes and shoes, while the shelves were full of books and dolls. Lastly, he led her to the master bedroom suite.

Compared to the rest of the house, Claire was surprised by the darkness of the room. Letting go of her hand, Tony walked to the far wall and lifted a switch. The draperies moved and the room filled with natural light: more ceiling to floor windows. Claire gasped. In the middle of the windows were two large French doors. He opened the doors, allowing the fresh air to fill their suite and motioned toward the balcony. They stepped through the glass

and Claire exclaimed, “Tony, everything is so open and bright.”

Reaching for her hands, he stared down into her emerald eyes. Suddenly, the cooling autumn air no longer registered. Claire knew she could stand in his gaze forever. Before the sadness behind the dark registered, his baritone voice replied, “This is your glass house, one that won’t shatter. I don’t want you to ever feel trapped again. I want you to be able to see the sky and sun, or moon and stars whenever you desire.”

She melted against his chest. “Thank you, I love it! But how—how did you do this? You were in prison.”

“I had a lot of help.”

Their balcony contained furniture perfect for enjoying the woods behind their home. Standing at the rail, Claire peered below and saw many other amenities: a pool, a basketball court, a play set—bigger than those in most local parks—and the gardens. Sitting on a gliding seat, looking over the treetops, Claire sighed and laid her head against her husband’s shoulder.

Tony spoke, “Of course, you still have your island. If you’d prefer, you can move back there. Although this view is beautiful, it’s difficult to compete with the view from your lanai. I just thought it might be easier on Nichol if you lived closer to John and Emily for a while.”

She looked up. “Why do you keep saying *you*? You mean *we*.”

Tony reached into his breast pocket, removed an envelope, and extended it toward her. “You and Nichol. Claire, this house, the entire estate, it’s yours.”

Her world stopped spinning. There weren’t enough masks ever created to hide her emotions. Whatever was in the envelope he offered she didn’t want. Never in the history of time had any documentation he handed her been good. Claire stood and backed away from his hand. “I don’t know what’s in that envelope, but whatever it is, I don’t want it.”

Soothingly, he said, “It’s for you.”

“I don’t care. I said no.”

“You just said you didn’t know what it was. How can you say no?”

Her volume decreased. Fighting the sobs, she whispered, “Tell me—tell me why you’re saying *you* instead of *we*?” When he hesitated, she straightened her shoulders and spoke louder, “Tell me!”

“Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. I deserve a straight answer.”

“If you’ll sit down, I’ll explain.”

Claire eyed him suspiciously and slowly retook the seat beside him. She steadied her voice, closed her eyes momentarily, and said, “I’m sitting. Talk.”

He looked out at the trees and exhaled. “I tried to contact you. I wanted to be with you, to be there for you. The scene at the estate was crazy. When you pulled the trigger, the police were already here and they immediately arrested both of us. Apparently, the Iowa City Police weren’t aware of our cooperation

with the FBI. Catherine had called them to say I was there, and that she was afraid. The police assumed that you and I were trying to kill Catherine.

“Eventually, Brent got me out on bail. Of course, that was after he returned from Chicago and learned he was supposed to be dead. He was the only legal counsel who knew about our cooperation with the FBI. By the time I was out, Emily had obtained a restraining order against me. You weren’t talking to anyone, and she assumed you were trying to kill me, to get away from me. Brent, Tom, my whole damn legal staff tried to lift her order. Meredith’s book was out. The whole world knew what I’d done to you.”

Claire heard the emotion in his voice.

Tony continued, “There were two theories as to your condition. One was traumatic brain injury. Emily argued I was the cause. Even though I was out on bail, the courts wouldn’t let me get near you or Nichol. The other theory for your condition was a psychotic break brought on by Catherine, Nichol, the fire—”

Closing her eyes and shaking her head, Claire pleaded, “Tony, stop! I know the past. I don’t want to hear it or talk about it. I want to move on. I want what we had in paradise—right here.”

He gripped her shoulders. “Don’t you understand? You can’t keep doing that.”

“What?”

“You can’t continually push every bad memory away to deal with later.”

“Why? I can, and besides, we dealt with our demons in paradise. I remember it all. You’re the one who always said: the past is the past, think about the present or the future.”

“I was wrong. You need to face it, and so do I. In all those discussions on the island, we never spoke about the things in Meredith’s book.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks. “Because we were both there. During our discussions in paradise, you told me things I had no way of knowing. I know what happened between us. I also know it was a long time ago, and it’s over. I don’t want to rehash it. I want the future.”

“That’s what I want, for you too. I want you to have a future, free from all of our past. That’s why I built you a new, memory-free house and, Claire, that’s why Brent is ready to file for our divorce.”

Claire couldn’t think or speak or move. She stared blankly as even her tears suspended their descent.

Finally, Tony asked, “Did you hear me? I won’t be the one to hurt you anymore, nor will Emily. You deserve fresh air and freedom. No one will ever be able to control you. Besides the money you still have invested overseas, I’m giving you the estate, a handsome settlement, and child support. With your wealth you can do anything you’ve ever dreamt of doing. You’ll be in control of your and Nichol’s future. I won’t fight you on anything.” He looked

down and implored sheepishly, “I do hope you’ll allow me to see our daughter, but I understand if you don’t.” Regaining his authoritative tone, he added, “I think we’ve thought of everything regarding this house, but if there’s something else you want or need it’s yours. You can have anything you want.”

Her voice cracked. “You don’t want *m-me*? ”

Reaching out, Tony lifted her hand and kissed the top. “Don’t ever think that. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“The reason the judge wouldn’t lift the restraining order and allow me to see you, was because when the judge asked me if the accounts in Meredith’s book were correct, I told him yes. I admitted to everything. He ruled that I was a danger to you and Nichol.”

“That’s ridiculous. You never would have, nor will you ever, hurt Nichol. Obviously we’re together now, so all that legal drama’s over.” Her voice cracked as she asked, “Why are you throwing me away now?”

Tony stood and faced the trees. His knuckles blanched as he clenched the railing. “I’m not throwing you away! I’m setting you free.”

Claire lowered her face to her chest. “It’s because people think I’m crazy. You don’t want a crazy wife.” Sobs resonated from her chest, separating each statement. “I know I broke your rules. I know appearances are important. I’m sorry, I disappointed you.”

Though her eyes were closed, she felt his gentle touch as he lifted her chin. When she opened her eyes, Tony was kneeling before her and the darkness mesmerized her. She couldn’t look away. Conversely, there was no darkness or disapproval in his voice. Instead, she heard remorse. “No, Claire. *I’m* the one who’s disappointed you, over and over.” He wiped her tears gently with his thumb. “While I was in prison, I learned you were finally getting better. I tried, but Emily still wouldn’t allow me to contact you. She wouldn’t allow hardly anyone to contact you. Courtney told me she only saw you through Meredith. She also said Emily wouldn’t even let you see Nichol.” The intensity of his eyes grew with each word. “I hated your sister! I was powerless to help you, and she was keeping you prisoner. I couldn’t even talk to you. Hell, I heard that even your time outside was monitored.”

He stood once again and paced the length of the balcony. Claire didn’t know what to say. Everything he said was true, but she knew that Emily did what she did with good intentions. Emily was afraid if Claire relapsed, it would be devastating to Nichol.

Once he’d calmed, Tony continued, “In order to receive my early release, I agreed to counseling. I didn’t want to do it, but if it got me out of there early, I figured what the hell.” He sat back down. “I spoke to this shrink three times a week. It started with me answering his questions. Over time, it became

easier to talk. When I told him how upset I was with Emily and what she was doing to you, he asked me why I was upset? I said it was because of what's she was doing. He told me to think about it more and figure out why I was so upset. I had two days before I saw him again. Throughout those days, I couldn't stop thinking about his question. It seemed obvious, until I realized..."

Claire's mind tried to process. "What? What did you realize?"

"I was so angry with Emily, because she was doing the same thing to you that I'd done. I didn't just hate Emily. I hated me!" He knelt before her and bowed his forehead to her knees. "I will not allow anyone to hurt you again—that includes me."

Claire's fingers wove through his hair. "Tony, you were at Everwood. You heard me. I forgave Emily, and many years ago I forgave you, too. I don't want to be free from you. I lived almost two years believing I'd killed you. I thought that was why no one mentioned your name. During that time, I fantasized about you and cried for you. Now you're here. I can touch you! I want my family back together."

When he didn't respond, she babbled on, "Besides, I'm still an outpatient. If you divorce me, they'll never allow me to have custody of Nichol. If you do this, you're not freeing me, you're abandoning me." The tears were freely flowing once again.

He stood and squared his shoulders. "You're right." His dry and businesslike tone fortified his stance. Nothing she said or could say would change his mind. He'd made his decision. "I don't want you to lose Nichol. We'll start with a separation. I rented an apartment near the office. I'll live there. You and Nichol can have the estate and all the staff you need. With a nanny to help, there shouldn't be any legal concerns."

For an eternity, she sat silently and stared at the man she'd dreamt about. Although their eyes met, there was no connection. No longer did his swirl with emotion. There was no rage or joy, even the sadness had subsided. She couldn't read his thoughts. It was as if he were staring at a document, a car, or anything else inconsequential.

The memory of seeing him the first night of her captivity rushed back. She remembered him standing near the fireplace in her suite. His dark glistening eyes frightened and paralyzed her. Suddenly, she longed for that emotion. It was better than nothing, and nothing was exactly what she saw.

Claire stood and straightened her shoulders. She knew from experience this conversation was over. She'd already begged. She wouldn't do it again. Without verbally replying to his last comment, Claire nodded and walked past him, back into the bedroom. In the attached bathroom, she found tissues and wiped her eyes. Her crying was done. Looking at her reflection, she saw the plain ugly Everwood clothes, very little make-up, and her hair pulled back

into a ponytail. Swallowing the emotions she refused to show, she walked back into the bedroom. Tony was still on the balcony as the autumn sky beyond him darkened. The earlier light had faded. She momentarily wondered if it would ever return.

His current stance reminded her of his rejection of her at the Iowa City jail. She recalled begging him to take her home, pleading for him to make her world right. She couldn't bear it again. If he didn't want her, then she'd move on. Claire was done begging. If someone were to truly make her world right it would be her.

When she said his name, he turned around. Keeping her voice neutral, she said, "I can't see Nichol looking like this. I'm going to take a shower and clean up. I presume my closets are full, like Nichol's?"

"They are."

"Where's the staff? I'd like something to eat."

"I gave them the night off. I'll go into town and get something. By the time I get back, you should be ready."

Claire nodded. Without another word, she turned and walked away from her future ex-husband.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Birds sing after a storm; why shouldn't people feel as free to delight in whatever sunlight remains to them?

—Rose Kennedy

WHEN TONY RETURNED with Claire's dinner, she was ready. She hadn't had more than basic cosmetics at Everwood; however, when presented with an excess of the best, she remembered how to use it. She also found a pair of well-fitting jeans and sweater in the well-stocked closet. Her hair was styled and her face painted. If Tony truly meant what he said about still wanting her, then Claire wanted to make his separation declaration as difficult as possible.

She was in the kitchen setting two places at the breakfast bar when he arrived. She didn't hear him enter, but she knew he was there. It was a feeling, a connection, alerting her to his presence. Looking up from the silverware, she saw him in the doorway. She wasn't sure how long he'd been there, but his eyes were as black as the country moonless night beyond the glass wall. Helplessly, she stood before him. Time momentarily stood still as his gaze devoured her. It wasn't just her appearance as he scanned her up and down: it was her soul. With each tick of the clock, it slipped further and further away. He already owned it. He'd taken it years ago. She waited to see if he planned to keep and treasure it, or discard it—like yesterday's news.

When he didn't speak, she walked toward him, drawn by an invisible pull. Her body ached for his touch. From the look on his face, she believed the feeling was mutual. When she was mere inches away, he said, "I got you a salad. I forgot to ask what you wanted."

Her heart sank. His voice didn't match his gaze. Dejectedly, she replied, "A salad is fine," and turned away.

Claire had thought the years of separation while in Everwood were unbearable. That was nothing compared to the pain of having him in front of

her, yet inaccessible.

During the drive to Emily's, they calmly, too calmly, discussed their separation. After some debate, they both agreed to keep it temporarily concealed. The Vandersols wouldn't understand, and the charade would be easier on Nichol. They planned to ease her into it, after she moved to the estate. Claire's hands began to tremble as they pulled up to the Vandersols' home. Surprisingly, Tony reached over and covered hers with his. It was the first contact since the balcony. His tone was kind and reassuring. "It'll be all right."

She didn't move or attempt reciprocation; instead, she enjoyed the sensation of his warm touch and replied honestly, "I'm scared. What if she doesn't want us?"

"She will."

Turning toward him, she asked, "I haven't even asked: have you seen her?"

He shook his head. "No, pictures are all. I was just released yesterday, and she was never brought to me. It was probably better. A little girl shouldn't be visiting her father in a federal prison camp."

Claire looked at him in surprise. "Yesterday? And you've accomplished all of this?"

"Like I said, I had help. I've been planning my release for some time."

She looked back down at his hand on her lap as her neck straightened. "And our divorce, how long have you been planning that?"

Pulling his hand away, he rebuked, "Claire, not now. Let's not go back there."

A new thought came to her mind. With it came fire that instantly dried her once moist eyes. She suddenly needed to know the answer to a burning question. "Is there someone else?"

"What?"

"Is. There. Someone. Else?!"

"No!" His volume rose. "I told you, I've never wanted anyone the way I want you."

"Well, you obviously don't want me! And you're *Anthony Rawlings*. You were in prison and your wife was crazy; nevertheless, you're still Anthony Rawlings. You would eventually get out of prison, but your wife would always be crazy. I bet there were letters of devotion, propositions, and proposals."

"Claire, our daughter is waiting."

Sudden rage boiled within her. While she'd been living in a fantasy world, was he communicating with another woman or women? The intensity of her stare grew as she asked again, "I've already asked this once, don't make me ask again. Is there someone else?"

“Claire, calm down.”

Her hand contacted his arrogant expression. Tony stared in disbelief as he seized her fingers. “What the hell was that?”

“You never answer my questions. Tell me, were there letters? Did women write to you promising anything you wanted, all for the chance to take my place?”

“You’re getting yourself all worked up. Calm down. Nichol is waiting.”

She glared as her voice lowered. “I deserve to know.”

“Yes.” His eyes glowed in the illumination of the dashboard. “Are you happy?” His growl deepened as he continued to painfully hold her seized hand. “There were letters. I didn’t respond. I don’t give a damn about anyone, anyone but you. Hell, I even—”

Claire’s heart raced. She waited for him to finish his sentence; instead, he released her hand and turned away. She prodded, “You even what?”

“We’ll finish this discussion another time.” It wasn’t debatable. He’d said more than he’d wanted, and he wasn’t saying any more. That conversation was done. “Now, do you plan to join me, or do you plan to sit in the car all evening?”

Rubbing the fingers of her right hand, she replied, “I plan to join you.”

When Emily met them at the door, they wore the masks of the perfect smiling couple. It was all right: Emily wore a mask too. “We told Nichol she had some special guests coming to see her.” Despite Emily’s show of strength, Claire heard the sorrow in her sister’s voice.

Walking into the living room, they both stopped when Nichol came into view. Without thinking, Claire grasped Tony’s hand. Once she realized her action, she quickly let go, thankful that he hadn’t pulled away.

The last time they saw their daughter, she had been less than three months old. The little girl before them was nearly three years old, and the most beautiful child Claire could ever recall seeing, even prettier than her pictures. Her wavy, brown hair, held back with barrettes, framed her beautiful face. Her thick dark lashes fluttered as big brown eyes peered upward. She’d been sitting on the floor playing with a dollhouse when she turned to see Aunt Em’s friends.

Claire knelt to the ground, afraid to get too close, afraid of scaring her daughter away. Mustering her confidence, she said, “Hello, Nichol.”

Their daughter stood and stared. Claire marveled at her perfect, petite body. Finally, John stepped forward, and Nichol reached for his hand. “Nichol,” John said. “Can you say hi to the friends we told you about?”

“Hi.”

Tony knelt beside Claire. Is it possible for a heart to melt and break at the same time? Claire reached out, and Nichol's small fingers shook Claire's hand. Their daughter asked, "Who are you?"

Tony laughed. "Direct, isn't she?"

With a snicker, Emily replied, "Very. I can't imagine where she gets it."

"Nichol, my name is Claire." She hesitated. "But you can call me Mom."

Nichol's eyes grew wide as she peered from Claire to Tony. Finally, she asked, "Are you my daddy?"

"I am."

They all waited. Dropping John's grasp, she stepped forward and touched a small hand to each of their cheeks. Claire closed her eyes and savored her daughter's touch. Instantly, Claire understood their daughter's actions. It was the same thing she did when Tony arrived at Everwood: touching him, verifying that he was real. Claire reached up and covered Nichol's hand with hers. "We're really here, honey, and we're so sorry we've been gone."

Nichol smiled, her big brown eyes lightening. "I knew one day you'd come. Aunt Em said you were sick, and when you got better, you'd be here. Are you better?"

Fighting back the tears, Claire answered, "Yes, I'm much better. Nichol, can we hug you?"

Lowering her little hands to their shoulders, she nodded. For a few seconds, their family was whole; then without warning, Nichol released her parents and rushed to her cousin. It was the first time Claire had noticed the little blond boy hugging Emily's legs. She was about to say something about Michael when Nichol announced, "Mikey, know what? I have a mommy and daddy too!" Looking up to Emily, Nichol asked, "Does that mean they're Mikey's aunt and uncle, like you and Uncle John?"

Emily and Claire's eyes met. Emily replied, "Yes, honey, it does. Michael, this is Mommy's sister, your Aunt Claire." She hesitated as Tony and Claire stood. "And—your Uncle Tony."

The children couldn't hear the anguish in Emily's voice. At least, Claire prayed they didn't, but she could. They all knew what a long road this had been. Claire put out her hand. "Hello, Michael, I'm so glad to meet you."

Michael took her hand and smiled bashfully. John's voice filled the otherwise quiet room. "Kids, if it wasn't for your Uncle Tony, we wouldn't be here."

The blood rushed from Claire's face as she looked to Tony and back to John. Suddenly, it was six years earlier, and Claire feared John's next words. It wasn't that she feared for herself or possible consequences. Claire was tired of conflict. She only wanted for her family to co-exist without confrontations. John continued, "Before you were born, Michael, Uncle Tony saved your mom and me from a fire. If he hadn't done that then you wouldn't be here,

either."

Nichol's eyes widened. "Really? You did that?" She added, "Daddy."

"Wow!" Michael gasped as he looked up at his new uncle.

It was a first step, a baby step, but progress nonetheless. Claire's eyes glistened as she mouthed *thank you* to John. She couldn't recall a more congenial gathering with her family, all of her family. The addition of children not only brought joy to their individual lives, it provided a new bond to hold them together. Pensively, she wished it had done the same for her and Tony.

The first morning that Claire woke in her new home, she lay staring at the ceiling. It had happened again. In a twenty-four hour period, her life had once again taken an abrupt turn. New cards and new decisions. She was free, from Everwood, from everyone. Tony made sure of that. He provided her with the means necessary to do anything she ever wanted. She had access to Nichol. It wasn't full access, but that would come with time. As Claire recalled their brief family hug, her heart ached.

From the time she learned that Tony was alive, she'd imagined the perfect reunion. For a couple of hours, it was her reality. The way Tony fought for her release from Everwood fit perfectly into her knight-in-shining-armor fantasy. She wished the few seconds in Emily's living room would have gone on forever. If they had, if their story ended right there, she could've had her *happily ever after*.

Tossing on the soft sheets, Claire looked out to the bright morning sky, through the giant wall of glass. She wondered what happened to those fairy tale couples after the last page. Was happily ever after even obtainable? Her new life wasn't terrible. She'd take the cards she'd been dealt and try to make the best out of it. After all, that's how she'd survived until now. As a young girl, she'd never dreamt of wealth, yet she had more money than she could ever spend. Fame? She never wanted it and detested having it. What had she wanted out of life? What requests had she made?

Her mind slipped back through the years to a cold, snowy day. Wrapped in Tony's arms, in his suite, in front of a warm blazing fire, she made requests: access to her own invitations, the ability to contact her sister, to leave the estate whenever she wanted, and for Tony to contact her directly. She had it all. Her new home came with a laptop and tablet. Emily wasn't just reachable: she'd be visiting her each night. In the garage Claire had two vehicles: a car and a SUV, safer for when she drove Nichol. She also had access to a driver whenever she desired. Lastly, the cell phone near her bed was available to anyone who wanted to call. Thinking about the new house, there weren't any requests Claire could recall that Tony hadn't delivered.

Even the tall windows and sunlight throughout the house were fulfillments of promises made. He'd provided everything she ever wanted—except him. On that cold, snowy day she didn't realize what she had. Perhaps no one ever does until it's gone.

Forcing herself to move, Claire got out of bed. She would move forward, one step at a time. She'd almost folded once. That wouldn't happen again.

As the days went by, Claire lived for her visits with Nichol. She anxiously anticipated her daughter's move onto the estate. In the meantime, Claire decided if she were to oversee a 6,000-acre estate, then she needed to know her staff. It was much easier than her first move to this property. This time, she was the mistress of the house, not some woman being held prisoner in the upstairs suite. The entire staff was new. The only original remaining member of Tony's staff was Eric, and he worked for Tony, not Claire. Since Tony always drove to see Nichol, Claire rarely saw Eric.

Each evening after dinner, Tony would pick Claire up at the estate and drive to the Vandersols. In the beginning, everyone was present. With time, John, Emily, and Michael made excuses to leave Tony, Claire, and Nichol alone. It was as the child psychologist predicted: day by day, Nichol's comfort level with her parents increased. After their visits, Tony would take Claire back to the estate and go to his apartment. There was no reason to discuss or argue. The decision was made, and the conversation was over.

After a week, the Vandersols brought Nichol to the estate. It didn't take long for her to find the treasure of toys and clothes awaiting her in her new room. The psychologist recommended one more week of visits before the final move. Nichol seemed to be adapting well.

Two staff positions remained open on the estate which Tony asked Claire to fill personally. The first was a nanny. Over the course of many days, Claire interviewed potential caregivers. Finally, she decided on a younger woman named Shannon. Granted, the grandmotherly types were experienced, but each one reminded her of Catherine in some way. She felt much better with Shannon.

The second position Claire needed to fill was the head of the estate's security. At first, Claire protested about the need. Tony reassured her there had always been a security team on the estate. Regardless of a decreased threat level, people in their position were always in need of security. Thinking about Nichol, Claire acquiesced. After the fourth interview, Claire realized who she wanted, and it wasn't one of the names listed on her paper. That night when Tony arrived to take her to Nichol, she told him, "I know who I want as head of my security. I just don't know how to contact him."

"You were supposed to get a list with numbers. Was one missing?"

"No, I don't want anyone from that list. I want Phillip Roach."

Tony's look of surprise quickly morphed into his new constant expression

of indifference. "He isn't the type of man to leave a forwarding address. I don't know if he can be reached. Besides, the people on that list have been prescreened. Any one of them will do nicely—"

Claire interrupted, "I don't want one of them."

"Why do you want Roach?"

"I know him, and I feel comfortable with him." Claire argued her point with conviction. "With all the new people working around me, I'd like some familiarity."

"Anyone can become familiar after time."

"Tony, you said I could have anything I want. I want him."

He didn't offer further protest. This time, Claire had closed the conversation. She wanted Phil, and Tony would find him.

During her days before Nichol's arrival, Claire learned her way around the responsibilities of her new home. She also enjoyed outings with Meredith, Courtney, or Sue. There were even times she'd get in her new car and drive. It wasn't that she wanted to go anyplace in particular. It was more the validation of knowing she could. Years ago, when she'd made her requests, they all came with the same stipulation: each freedom required authorization. Although she remembered hating that domination, the complete opposite didn't make her happy either. Each time she drove through the gates, she realized, no one knew or cared where she was going.

Her only obligation, other than evenings with Nichol and their sessions with the child psychologist, was her outpatient counseling sessions. Twice a week, she drove the thirty-plus minutes to Everwood. Although an essential rule of therapy was complete honesty, Claire never mentioned her and Tony's living arrangements. Only Meredith and Courtney knew the truth. Perhaps it was her reluctance to discuss it at length. Her friends heard her brief explanation and mercifully accepted it at face value. The counselor would want to know her feelings and thoughts. Claire didn't want to admit those to herself much less someone else.

She didn't want to admit that Tony's placid stare hurt not only her pride, but her ever-crumbling heart. From their first meeting at the Red Wing there'd been a hunger in his eyes. When he first brought her to the estate, that hunger frightened her and filled her with a sense of vulnerability and defenselessness. It was as if his eyes told of a need that only she could fill. To someone with no knowledge of what that need might include, it was a daunting assignment. With time, the hunger became comforting. No matter how much money or success Tony obtained, there was part of him that sought what only she could give. In a world of opulence, it made her feel needed and desired. That same

hunger pulled her back into his arms, bed, and life when their reconciliation was only a charade. While on the island, the ravenous hunger transformed. No longer were his attentions divided, yet at no time did she feel unwanted. Through the years, when she saw him across the room, she'd look into his eyes and know he was thinking of her. Just one look, one glance and her insides would tighten. Most of the time, she *knew* before she *saw*. His black eyed gaze could reach out and touch her, even without visual confirmation. Now, the look was gone. His eyes were neutral, void of emotion. Unless they were with Nichol, the color wasn't black and it wasn't light. With each glance into the tranquil pools of brown, another piece of her heart broke.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

It's the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen.

—Muhammad Ali

P

RIVATELY, TONY AND Claire spoke superficially discussing staff concerns and weather. Their only sincere talks involved Nichol.

That was until the night before Nichol's move. Claire decided she wanted to show Tony something. She didn't expect a consequence for her compliance; nevertheless, he'd told her there was something she needed to do —something she needed to face. Claire wanted him to know, she'd done it.

Following their nightly visit with Nichol, driving up the winding estate drive, Claire asked, "Do you need to leave right away?"

"I have some work back at the office."

"It's after 9:00 PM. Can't it wait until tomorrow? I have something I'd like to show you."

"I can't stay long."

It wasn't enthusiastic, but nonetheless, he'd acquiesced. Silently, they entered her home. Claire went from room to room, turning on lights. Tony trailed a few steps behind, looking around each open space. It was his first time inside the house since Nichol's visit. While she and the Vandersols were present, he did a stellar performance pretending it was his home too.

This house wasn't as large as the former dwelling; therefore, most of the members of the staff lived in another building on the estate. The only exception was Shannon who now had a room near Nichol's. Finding each room empty, Tony asked, "Why isn't someone from the staff here?"

"I gave Shannon the night off, since Nichol is moving in tomorrow, and the rest of the staff is done for the day."

Tony shook his head. "What do you mean done? They should be here so that you don't come home to an empty house."

"That's ridiculous. Phil's familiarizing himself with the security and obviously there was a guard at the gate. I'm a big girl."

He didn't argue; however, Tony's posture revealed his displeasure with the way she was overseeing the staff. Claire wanted to say: if you lived here you could do it differently, but since you don't, it's my decision. Although the sentence was on the tip of her tongue, she reminded herself of the reason for her invitation and swallowed the words. Baiting him into an argument wasn't her goal; nevertheless, she couldn't help the slight bit of sarcasm as she motioned toward the kitchen and said, "Since there's no one here to wait on you, help yourself to something to drink. The thing I want to show you is upstairs. I'll be back down in a minute."

Earlier in the week, her belongings had arrived from Everwood. She'd been through some of it, but she hadn't opened all the boxes. What she wanted to show Tony was still packed away. Honestly, she hadn't been sure she'd be brave enough to ask him to stay and see it, but on the drive home, she decided if she were to do it, it should happen before Nichol's move.

Hurriedly, Claire searched box after box. Aware of her internal time clock, she didn't want to make Tony wait too long. When she reached the bottom of the last box, Claire found what she'd sought. From the surface, they didn't appear to be anything special—your garden variety spiral notebooks; however, both she and Tony had learned years ago that things weren't always as they appeared. As she freed the notebooks from the other items, she felt Tony behind her.

He hadn't touched her, but her increased pulse told her he was there. For the first time since the day of his divorce declaration, every fiber of her body surged with electricity. Without turning, she said, "I'm sorry it took so long. I thought I knew where they were."

Trying to remain unaffected by the familiar, yet recently unaccustomed feeling, Claire stood. When their eyes met, she fought to breathe. Her lungs momentarily needing direction, inhaling took effort. Determined to stay strong, she looked directly into Tony's black eyes as unbridled hunger consumed her. The intensity of the gaze staring back at her instantly reminded Claire of her captor: not the one who took her body, the one who took her heart. Pretending to remain aloof, she pressed forward and presented her notebooks. "Here they are."



HE TRIED TO subdue the hunger boiling within him. As he watched her walk bravely toward him, he felt the intensity behind his eyes grow. Reaching for the notebooks, he asked, "What are these?"

“My compartments.”

Tony opened the top notebook. “Your compartments? What do you...?” His words trailed as he began to read—

I suppose I should start in the beginning—March 2010. No, that wasn't when I was born. It was when I began to live. Most people think I'm crazy, maybe I am. You see I began to live, the day my life was taken away. Funny, I don't remember how it happened. I do know now, it never could've been stopped. Anthony Rawlings wanted me. If I've learned one lesson in my life, and believe me I've learned many, Anthony Rawlings always got what he wanted.

I can't explain how it happened. I can't explain how I fell deeply and madly in love with a man who did what Anthony did—but I did! These feelings have been discounted by multiple people: family, doctors, and counselors to name a few. They've told me, my love wasn't and isn't real. They say I'm a victim of abuse, and as such, I don't understand the difference between love and applied behavior. How can that be true? If I don't know my own feelings, how can anyone else?

These people haven't lived my life. For the sake of my sanity, I need to know my feelings are and were real. I'll always and forever love and be in love with Anthony Rawlings!

It didn't start that way. There was a time I both hated and feared him. When I say he took my life, I'm not being dramatic. One day I was Claire Nichols, a twenty-six-year-old, out-of-work meteorologist, working as a bartender to make ends meet, and the next day, I was his. He owned me. He bought my body, a commodity I never intended to sell, and while, with time, he earned my heart and soul, the transaction began with no transition and no introduction—just a brutal initiation.

I'll never condone the things he did to me, nor will I deny them. They are a part of us, building blocks of our foundation. Some would argue that a foundation built on kidnapping, isolation, violence, and yes, even rape, would never stand. I must disagree. We lived through hell and came out the other side. Like the song says, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I can't imagine anyone having a stronger foundation than ours. It sustained us when the storms of life and vengeance threatened our very being. Not only did it make “us” stronger, it made each of us stronger. Most importantly, it made Nichol.

I've come to terms with the fact that Tony is gone. No one will say his name, much less discuss his tragic death, and I know why. It's because I killed him. It truly was an accident. An ironic term as you'll learn; however, as I ponder these thoughts, I can't help but find it strangely parallel: he took my

life, and I took his.

The people here want me to get better. I don't think I can do that without acknowledging how I got to this place, and how I killed the man I love.

I'm doing this, recalling the worst and best times of my life for one reason: Nichol.

For months, even years, I was content to live in a world that didn't exist. Truthfully, I wasn't cognizant of being anywhere. Day after day, night after night, I lived with memories of the strong, controlling, domineering, loving, tender, romantic man who made my life worth living, who validated my existence. It wasn't until recently that I even realized I'd gone away. Some days, I wish I could go back, but I can't. I now remember I have a daughter who needs me. I won't let her down. I must distance myself from fantasy and focus on reality.

The memories that will sustain me as I face a lonely life are of our few months together as a family. I'll learn to go on alone. Despite the opinions of others, I've faced equally greater challenges and lived to talk about them. I will survive this. While I do, I'll be comforted in knowing that no one else has ever loved as completely or has been as loved, as I have been by Anthony Rawlings.

Someday, I hope I can explain to our daughter the man her father became; however, until I admit the man he was, the man whose eyes burnt my soul, before those eyes found the light, I can't relish the man I lost.

So here I go. I've lived this story, and I've told this story. Now, I'm going to try to do both, because without reliving it, even in my mind, I can't possibly explain that I'm not crazy...

I met Anthony Rawlings March 15, 2010. That night I worked the 4:00 PM to close shift at the Red Wing in Atlanta. He came up to the bar and sat down. I remember thinking...

Tony peeled his eyes away from the page. This was so much different than reading her official typed statement. This contained Claire's raw emotions, in her handwriting. He wasn't reading, he was listening. Fluttering the pages of all four notebooks, he noticed every page of every book was filled with writing. Glancing up, he saw Claire leaning against the wall, her arms folded over her chest watching him. Her stoic expression failed to reveal her thoughts; however, in her eyes, her damn green eyes, he saw the fire he'd missed. The one he'd doused too many times, most recently with his talk of divorce.

He truly thought she'd pushed their past away, glorified him in some unhealthy, undeserving way, yet on these pages, she'd recounted everything,

and despite it all, she proclaimed unyielding love. Her words were correct, especially when she wrote, *Anthony Rawlings wanted me*. Tony didn't realize how much at the time, but he did. The shrink at the prison helped him see that the terrible things he did—and he did some awful things—were his way of keeping her away, keeping her at a distance. He never intended to become emotionally attached. Blame it on anything from his past. There was no excuse for his behaviors. Anthony Rawlings never anticipated being emotionally vested in anyone. The psychologist also said no one can come back from that kind of relationship. It can never be healthy. Is that what her therapist said too? Could they all be wrong? Could they be the one-in-a-million?

Staring into Claire's eyes, Tony fought the urge to touch her, comfort her, and apologize for ever thinking they should be apart. Once again, his desires overwhelmed him. The self-control he'd elicited for the last two weeks dissipated with each beat of his heart. If he'd truly wanted to maintain their distance, then he never should've walked up the stairs. He wanted her more than he wanted life. How did he ever think he could let her go?



CLAIRE WAITED. SHE wondered how he'd react, what he'd say. She hadn't read that notebook in a while, but she knew it was the first one, the one explaining why she wrote everything down. Tony told her she needed to face their past. She wanted him to see she had. She'd faced every minute. Although he hadn't said a word, his eyes pulled her in. She wouldn't look away. She couldn't. At the sight of the familiar black gleam, her insides tightened to a painful pitch.

The temperature surrounding them warmed as his unrelenting stare bore through her. Claire felt heat radiate from every molecule within the room. While maintaining their unbroken gaze, he laid the notebooks on the dresser. The only reason she wanted to show him the notebooks was to show him that she'd already obeyed his directive. Besides, she reasoned: she'd told him to stay downstairs. This overwhelming sensation of lust wasn't what she had planned. Her mind fought her body. He'd already rejected her. She couldn't bear to have him do it again, yet without thinking, her feet moved his direction.

Did he move forward too? She didn't know. Somehow, they were mere inches apart.

Willing herself to stop, Claire broke their gaze and looked down. Seconds later, she felt the warmth of his finger and thumb lifting her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his. Obstinate, she lifted her chin, but kept her eyes shut.

The rich baritone voice commanded, “Open your eyes. Look at me.”

Tipping her forehead against his broad chest, she inhaled. His cologne filled her senses as she mumbled, “I can’t.”

She felt his words rumble from his chest. “Look at me.” It wasn’t a request. “I want to see your damn eyes—now!”

“Please, please, Tony, don’t. I can’t take another rejection. Not from you.”

Lifting her face, his lips brushed hers just before his words softened and he asked, “Why did you show me that?”

He hadn’t released her chin when her eyes finally opened. Looking up, she knew, despite her claims to the contrary, not only did he control her chin, he controlled her heart. “So that you’d know... I have faced our past, multiple times. Even knowing that past, I wanted a future.”

His words dripped with heat, each one blowing a warm breeze against her cheeks, “Wanted? Past tense?”

She wanted to say, no, I want, but she’d been hurt too many times. Her indignation rose. “You don’t want me! You left me in the Iowa jail! You told me two weeks ago you wanted a divorce! I can’t live in a fantasy! You don’t want me or a future with me! With each phrase, her volume grew. “Let go of my chin and stop pretending!”



HE OBEYED HER demand and released her chin; however, relinquishing his hold wasn’t even feasible. Forcing her to keep her face tilted toward his, Tony slid his hand to the back of her neck, while his other hand wrapped around her petite frame. He didn’t think or reason as his lips captured hers.

For two weeks, he’d tried to let her go. He’d wanted to release her and give her the freedom she deserved, the freedom he’d taken away so many years ago. But each day, each hour, each minute, each second was agony. When Tony wasn’t near Claire, he thought about her. When he was near her, his energy was devoted to fighting his desire. It was exhausting. With his lips against hers, he no longer wanted to fight. His chest pushed against her, moving them, step by step, until they were flush with the wall. His needs intensified as he felt the sensation of her breasts against him. He told himself to stop. He was no good for her, but he didn’t listen. He couldn’t. Unapologetically, his tongue penetrated her lips, and his grasp pulled her hips against his.



MOMENTARILY, CLAIRE'S FISTS pushed in protest. Soon, she realized resistance was futile, mostly because she didn't want to fight. His actions had her on the verge of forgetting any reasonable arguments. All she wanted was the present, then Tony's voice rumbled like thunder, and his fist pounded the wall above her head, "I told you before, I've never pretended to love you! I do love you! That's present tense!"

While the wall vibrated, she watched the illuminations of darkness dance through his eyes. She'd wanted to see emotion and now she had it! Before she could respond, his body pinned her against the wall. The scent of cologne mixed with musk overpowered her olfactory senses. Her body liquefied at the sensation of his lips and hands. She heard the sound of her own heart beating as the rush of blood pulsated too quickly through her veins. Soon, their ragged breaths filled her ears, and she fought to regain the breath he'd taken. Her body was mindlessly responding to his touch as his desires became more pronounced and her moans echoed through their large suite.

Before long, he led her to the bed, and her world tilted as he followed her onto the mattress. Her body ached for everything he could offer, but her mind couldn't take another disappointment. While his hands found their way under her blouse, she found the strength to speak, "Stop." When he didn't respond, she repeated herself, louder, "I said, stop!"

She saw the pain in his expression as he pushed himself away.

Rolling out from under him, she exclaimed, "You need to go. I can't do this. I won't let you hurt me again."

"Claire, don't you understand?" The emotion in his voice stilled her movements, as well as her speech. "That's why I wanted a divorce. I don't want to hurt you and-and I can't take it again, either. You talk about me leaving you at the jail and this divorce." He stammered, "W-what about you?"

Claire stood and stared in disbelief as Tony paced beside the bed. His unbuttoned shirt allowed a clear view of his still muscular chest. "Me?" she asked. "What about me?"

"You left me. You drove away from me, twice! You don't think I don't remember that every damn time you drive away from this estate?" His hand ran through his salt and pepper hair as he fought his words. "The other day when you were gone for over three hours and driving around Bettendorf, of all places, I was scared to death that you're considering doing it again."

Claire's knees buckled as she sunk onto the bed and stared incredulously. Her words came slowly, "What do you mean... the other day? How did you know that I was in Bettendorf?"

"Claire, they say we're no good for one another, but your notebooks you said you still loved me after everything. Is that still true?"

Now standing, Claire stared up into her husband's face and moved closer. "Answer me. What do you know about my comings and goings?"

He closed his eyes and exhaled. “The reason I didn’t want Roach working for you, was...” He hesitated. “...he’d been working for me since the day you came home.”

Claire’s eyes filled with moisture. They weren’t angry tears, although perhaps they should’ve been. They were happy tears. Her voice was barely a whisper, “Why? Tell me why you’ve had Phil following me.”

He gripped her shoulders. “You have every right to be angry. That’s fine, but I’m not sorry. I worry. I’ll always worry. I don’t want anything to happen to you, ever again.” His words came fast. “I don’t really care that you go. I just need to know that you’re safe.”

Slowly, she turned away and found her seat on the edge of the bed. From somewhere deep, she tried to summon a mask—any mask—but they were all beyond her reach. Her emotions were real and her expression transparent.

Tony knelt beside her. “Please, tell me what you’re thinking.”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t know. There are so many things.” Her voice quivered as she searched for the right words. “I-I’ve been asked over and over, why I didn’t try to escape from you in 2010 when I had opportunities.” Tony’s eyes reflected the pain coming from her words. Claire went on, “When I tell the story about us, and talk about shopping or the symphony, they tell me I should have run or told someone. I didn’t...” She inhaled. “...because I was afraid. I was afraid that if I did, and failed, you’d punish me—hurt me.” Claire watched the torment grow in her husband’s expression. Framing his face in her hands, she continued, “That physical pain I feared was nothing—*nothing* compared to the pain of thinking you no longer cared. These last two weeks have been hell. They taught me that pain can be present, despite every physical need being met.”

Small pools of moisture teetered on Tony’s lower lids. “The divorce wasn’t meant to hurt you.”

She reached out and hugged his neck. Her lips brushed his. “Tony, maybe I should be upset that you’ve had me followed, but I’m not. Honestly, I’m relieved. I didn’t think you cared anymore.”

His eyes shimmered while the tips of his lips curved into his signature devilish grin. Pushing her back against the mattress, Tony covered her body with his and replied, “Mrs. Rawlings, I will always care and always love you. I promised you that almost six years ago.”

This time, she didn’t protest as his weight held her to the soft satin comforter. Removing his shirt from his broad shoulders, Tony added, “I’ve told you. I am and despite it all, I continue to be, a man of my word.”

Claire watched his chest expand and contract. Unconsciously, her fingers threaded through the soft chest hair, which, too, had lightened with the addition of intermingling gray. As her hands caressed his warm muscles, any thought of age slipped from her mind. Her only thought was of his skin

against hers. They were two pieces of a larger puzzle that fit perfectly together. Without their union, the puzzle would be forever incomplete.

The sensation of his lips trailing across her exposed collarbone as his fingers unbuttoned her blouse, incited goose bumps on her arms and her legs. Claire yearned to be closer, to have him inside of her and though every fiber of her body wanted what only he could give, she needed to know more. Finding her voice, she asked, “If we do this, if we reunite, can I trust you not to leave me again?”

“I wanted to protect you. The divorce was only to keep you from being hurt by me.”

“Don’t you see?” Her questioning stopped Tony’s seduction. “Not being with you hurt me. Every day hurt more than the one before.”

Tony nodded. “It was agony. When I was in prison and we were separated by distance, it sounded good in principle, but seeing you...” He lifted his head and looked down at her now nearly naked body. “...and touching you...” The tips of his fingers softly trailed the warm flesh from her collarbone down to the band of her lace panties. “...and not being allowed to taste you...” His lips seized a now exposed nipple and gently tugged while his tongue swirled the hardening nub, eliciting moans Claire didn’t know she’d articulated. “...was agony.”

Her breath quickened as the stubble of his beard prickled her skin. Unabashed, Claire wanted the kind of agony that only he could provide. Arching her back, she exposed her breasts for more of his delicious torture. While she still had the ability to speak, she murmured, “First—first, I have a request.”

His mischievous grin caused Claire’s muscles, the ones deep inside that had yet to be touched, to tighten. With a raised eyebrow, he quipped, “Yes? I think I might like this. Does it involve black satin?”

Fighting the carnal desire, she snickered. “No.” Trying to focus, she replied, “I want you to promise that you won’t leave me. No more talk of divorce—ever. I want my *happily ever after*. Despite everything, I trust you and your word. If you tell me you’ll never divorce me or discuss it, I’ll believe you.”

His baritone pitch resonated throughout their suite and deep into her soul as he spoke between kisses to her exposed skin. “You, my dear, are my drug. I’m so damn addicted. I can’t quit you. I know, because I’ve tried, not for me, but for you. I failed miserably. The more I have of you, the more I need. I can never get enough. If you’ll have me back, after all, this is your estate. If you’ll allow me to move back, I’ll try every day to give you exactly what you deserve. And I promise I will never mention divorce again.”

Claire pulled his face toward hers. Their kiss lingered as his fingers continued to roam, each move delving lower and lower. His promise returned

color to her world. She was his, and he was hers. Her nails bit into his shoulders as he teased and electrified her body with taunting caresses. Breaking the spell, he looked honestly into her eyes. “I want you so badly, but I need to be honest.”

Her mind whirled with the possibilities of his confession.

Tony continued, “I can’t promise you the *happy ever after*.” A lump formed in her throat, fearing his next words. “Not because you don’t deserve one, but because I know myself, and I’ll probably screw it up; however, I can promise I’ll spend the rest of my life trying. Is that enough for you?”

Tears of relief cascaded from the corners of her emerald eyes. She captured him with her expression of acceptance; however, it was her words that secured the lock. “Tony, it’s more than enough.” Kissing his neck, she offered, “I promise that I’ll never drive away to leave you again, and I’ll never listen to anyone else without learning the truth from you, but...” She paused to deliver more butterfly kisses. “...I will drive away, to multiple places.” Claire waited. When he didn’t argue, she continued with a smile, “And I’ll travel easier knowing Phil is there, when you can’t be.”

Tony’s approving smile lit her world. His touch kindled a smoldering passion on the brink of an out of control wildfire.

“I think we have a deal.”

With a playful smile, Claire added, “Now, if you don’t make love to me right this minute, I’ll have you thrown off my property.”

“My, Mrs. Rawlings, will my lodging payments continue to be so extreme?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I have the rest of our lives to come up with new ideas. You know, I’m very creative and let me warn you, the payments will be daunting. I hope you’re up for it.”

His dark chocolate eyes liquefied into molten pools of brown, glistening above his signature devilish grin, as he said, “I believe that you know that I am. And Mrs. Rawlings, I look forward to your challenges. Apparently, only you can decide whether I make the cut.”

Claire’s eyes fluttered as her body quaked in anticipation. Gripping his shoulders, she whispered, “Don’t disappoint me—there will be consequences.”

EPILOGUE

The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life.

—Richard Bach

THE AROMA OF sea filled the air as a gentle breeze brought the sound of the surf into the large living room. Madeline's smile reflected the mood of the occasion. It had been years since she'd had so many people on the island. By the glow in her big brown eyes, her heart was as full as the house. The little baby she'd helped bring into the world was a beautiful little girl with large brown eyes, soft as suede and filled with joy, just like her father's.

Claire held tightly to her sister's hand as they both watched Tony place their grandmother's pearl necklace around Nichol's neck.

"Look, Momma! Look, Aunt Em! Isn't it pretty?" Nichol exclaimed as she spun toward them, exposing her precious gift. Turning back, she wrapped her small arms around Tony's neck. "Thank you, Daddy!"

As Tony swung their daughter into his arms, Claire let go of Emily's hand and walked toward Nichol. Kissing her cheek, Claire replied, "It sure is, honey; this necklace means a lot to Mommy and Daddy." Claire's eyes shifted momentarily to Tony's as the emerald glistened with memories only the two of them shared. "So," she continued to Nichol. "It's only for special occasions. A long time ago, it belonged to Aunt Em and Mommy's grandmother, your great-grandmother."

"Is today a special occasion?" Nichol asked.

"It sure is!" Tony exclaimed. "It's your third birthday. I don't think anything is more special than that!"

Claire leaned closer as Tony wrapped one arm around his wife and held tight to their daughter. Their group hug had the attention of everyone in the room: John, Emily, Michael, Brent, Courtney, Maryn, Caleb, Julia, Meredith,

Jerry, their children, Madeline, and Francis. Undoubtedly, it was a *full house* and would be until after Christmas.

Tony and Claire couldn't think of a better way to thank all of the people who'd worked to keep their daughter safe and helped to make their world right. Truly, it was an unlikely assembly: one brought together against all odds. Some might say that, at one time, this assembly would've been considered improbable, maybe even impossible; however, as everyone rejoiced and wished Nichol a happy birthday, they were a family united with unbreakable bonds.

Their ties had gone through the fires of hell and come out stronger. Refined by the flames, not consumed; nevertheless, the safety of their family would never be taken for granted. That was why Eric and Phil were outside, patrolling the shores and watching the skies. Phil had updated the security, both at the estate and on the island. He and Tony both told Claire it was only a precaution. After all, Catherine was in the Iowa State Penitentiary and would be for a long time; however, even Claire realized there would always be threats. The Rawlings were wealthy people, and despite Claire's dislike for fame, their money would forever make them possible targets. There was no measure Tony or Claire wouldn't be willing to endure to insure the safety of their family—*all of them*.



PHIL LOOKED AT the text message and shook his head.

"Did something else arrive?" Eric asked.

"Yes, this one's also addressed to *Nichol Rawls*. This time, it came with a birthday gift."

"Has it been opened?"

"Not yet; it has to be scanned to be sure there aren't any explosives."

Eric stiffened his neck. "So far, the only clue we've had was that one of the envelopes was sealed with female DNA. The feds have ruled out Catherine London."

"That isn't enough. Maybe we'll get more on this one." Phil squared his shoulders and looked out toward the crystal blue sea. "I believe it goes without saying, I'd have no problem getting rid of this threat once she's identified, and I think we both know who the most likely candidate is."

Eric nodded. "After Mr. Rawlings had her fired, it was as if she dropped off the face of the earth."

"I still support his decision."

"As do I," Eric said with pride. "You'd think she'd be smarter than to rehash this shit."

"I'd go all-in that she's the sender of these little reminders."

Eric's lips formed a straight line. "Next to me, she worked the closest with Mr. Rawlings—for many years."

"Yeah, she'd certainly know their history. The thing is, I'm not sure if she's a real physical threat or if she's just trying to upset Claire." Phil squared his shoulders. "Either way, when her identity's confirmed, I promise she won't be around long enough to stand trial. No one will put them through that again. Besides, there isn't a person I can't find."

"Hmm," Eric murmured. There was no reason to confirm Phil's statement; their understanding transcended words. As unlikely as the assembly was up in the big house, so was their intimate family; nevertheless, that was what they were—a family, and Eric and Phil knew the truth. They would do anything within their power to keep their *full house* consequence free.

VOLUME FOUR

REVEALED

The Missing Years

Book #4 of the bestselling Consequences series

The tragic or the humorous is a matter of perspective.

—Arnold Beisser

By:

Aleatha Romig

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all of you who've made this incredible journey with me. Thank you for loving Tony, or hating Tony, for loving Claire, or hating Claire. It has been your emotion that has propelled me to continue this story. You will never know how much your messages have meant and continue to mean to me.

Thank you also to my wonderful team. I began the *Consequences* journey one night alone at my computer. Today I'm not only surrounded by a wonderfully supportive family, I also have some of the best betas, a fantastic editor, a wonderful formatter, and creative cover designer. Without these supportive people my final product would not be the same.

Thank you to all of my author friends, those I see and those I know in great online groups. I have learned so much from each and every one of you!

Thank you to the fantastic bloggers who have not only read, but loved my stories and felt passionate enough about them to tell others! I'm always so glad to meet and hug you in person. I truly believe that without you, only my mother and her friends would have read *Consequences*.

My sincerest thank you goes to my readers. This book is for you. I almost didn't finish it. I admit in many ways it was the most difficult and I believe, my most beloved. I hope you all enjoy the REVEALED missing years and the future.

As I have done since my second book, I must thank Claire Nichols and Anthony Rawlings. You two characters have taken permanent residence in my heart and soul. I never imagined the amazing roller coaster we would ride together, and though it has turned my life upside down, I wouldn't trade a moment. Tony and Claire, you will live forever in my heart and the hearts of thousands and thousands of the best readers that an author could hope to find.

I hope you'll take one more step after REVEALED and read BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES. More Tony and Claire and all their wonderful friends!

DISCLAIMER

The CONSEQUENCES series contains dark adult content. Although there is not excessive use of description and detail, the content contains innuendos of kidnapping, rape, and abuse—both physical and mental. If you’re unable to read this material, please do not purchase. If you are ready, welcome aboard and enjoy the ride! ~*Aleatha Romig*

NOTE FROM ALEATHA

Dear Readers,

When I began writing this book of the CONSEQUENCES SERIES, I planned to write a companion; however, my characters informed me otherwise. This fourth novel gives you the complete story of what was only mentioned in CONVICTED. It begins at the fateful gunshot and goes into the future. Since most of this book occurs while Claire is unable to tell the story, REVEALED: THE MISSING YEARS is told from the point of view of many of the male characters in her life.

Claire's voice is heard through excerpts from her book: My Life As it Didn't Appear.

REVEALED: THE MISSING YEARS has become book 4 of the CONSEQUENCES SERIES. Therefore, once you have completed CONSEQUENCES, TRUTH, AND CONVICTED, please join me for REVEALED.

Share the struggle as the dominoes begin to fall and the crashing consequences of the past threaten everyone's future. Watch as Anthony Rawlings fights for what is his. Join Harrison Baldwin as he discovers the truth that threatens his beliefs, and John Vandersol as he come to terms with his revelations. Witness as Phillip Roach decides with whom his loyalties lie, and Brent Simmons demonstrates the meaning of friendship—no matter the cost.

Following the epilogue, I have included a complete glossary of characters and a timeline of significant events for the entire CONSEQUENCES Series.

Once you have completed REVEALED, I hope you'll join Tony and Claire for book #5 BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES.

The reading companions, BEHIND HIS EYES CONSEQUENCES and BEHIND HIS EYES TRUTH are full-length books, but were written as an adjunct to CONSEQUENCES and TRUTH. Once you have completed this journey, if you seek more, books 1.5 and 2.5 are already available through most online channels. They answer the burning question: "What was he

thinking?"

Once again, thank you for this incredible journey. Please note that I would never have completed this story had it not been for you!

Thank you again for your support!

~Aleatha Romig

PROLOGUE

January 2014

Tony

For the first time in his life he'd dared to believe in happily-ever-after. He learned at a young age it was unattainable. Therefore, he'd never even tried... until Claire.

—Aleatha Romig, Truth

TONY'S HEART MELTED as Nichol's soft mews filled their suite, a contrast to the whish-whish of waves lapping the shore. Together the sounds created the perfect melody for the middle of the night. He kissed Claire's forehead and watched the tired emerald disappear behind her closed eyes while their daughter's little body wiggled in his large hands. Stretching contently, she relaxed as he pulled her against his broad chest. Settling into the rocking chair in the nursery, Tony watched Nichol's long lashes flutter as she fought the sleepy lids that threatened to cover her dark chocolate eyes. After a few moments of monotonous rocking, her tiny nose nestled into his soft cotton t-shirt, and sleep won, as she lost her fight with one final sigh.

He could return her to her crib and climb back into bed with Claire, but, instead, Tony continued to rock. The silver rays of moonlight through the open doors to the lanai illuminated their bed, allowing him to watch his sleeping wife. Nichol's feeding schedule had yet to work itself out, and Claire was beyond exhausted. It seemed that their daughter had a ravenous hunger, one that perhaps surpassed her mother's before Nichol was born.

A grin materialized as Tony remembered Claire eating for two. With Nichol present, and demanding to eat every two to three hours, he understood why Claire had been so hungry. Loosening the pink blanket, Tony reached for Nichol's hand. Her little fingers grasped one of his and he gently caressed her

soft skin. As the scent of baby lotion filled his senses, Tony realized that in a little over two weeks, Nichol had infiltrated every part of their lives.

There were chairs that rocked and swayed. They called them swings, but to Tony they were more like mechanical seats that played lullabies or made white noise, depending upon the button pushed. He didn't care how many swings or cradles Nichol had: he'd rather hold her safely in his arms. Although Claire claimed he was spoiling their daughter, he'd caught her doing the same thing more than once.

Everyone on the island was smitten and held captive by the beautiful brunette in Tony's arms. Francis and Madeline were more like doting grandparents than employees. Though they never had children themselves, they were well-versed and experienced in anything baby. It was comforting to have the benefit of their knowledge when questions arose. Madeline had been the one to give Tony his first lesson in diapering. It was even before Claire met their daughter. Her encouraging words gave him the confidence to wrap the fabric around her tiny body. She seemed so small that Tony wasn't sure he could do it.

“Oui, Monsieur, that is right. She will not break. Oui, lift her legs...”

Never had Tony envisioned taking instructions from a member of his staff, yet with each word, Tony willingly accepted the role of student.

One evening, when nothing seemed to settle Nichol's cries, it was again Madeline who came to the rescue. At that moment, both Tony and Claire would have willingly allowed Madeline to do her magic, but that wasn't what she did. Or perhaps it was. Yet the magic wasn't performed on Nichol but instead on her parents—the magic to empower.

Although Francis and Madeline had retired to their home for the night, Tony wasn't surprised that Madeline had heard Nichol's protests through the still of the night. After all, Tony had spent hours walking her up and down the lanai, bouncing her gently as he'd been taught. Their daughter wasn't having any of it—nothing would satisfy. Even nursing didn't help. Nichol would begin to eat and then stop, crying and moving her face from side to side. With Claire's sleep deprivation, she too was on the verge of tears—past the verge. Though she'd tried to hide it, Tony saw the evidence on her cheeks.

With Claire in the living room and Tony walking the length of the lanai, he was startled at the touch to his shoulder. Quickly turning around, he found Madeline.

“Monsieur, she is hungry? No?”

“No, I mean, I don't know. Claire's tried to feed her, but after a few suckles, she started crying again.”

“Madame el? Or Nichol?”

Tony grinned. “Both.”

“Bring her inside. The breeze is too strong.”

Willingly, he followed Madeline to the living room.

“Madame el, let me get you something to eat.”

Claire shook her head as her red, puffy eyes looked up from her lap. “No, Madeline, I’m not hungry. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Oui, you do. What does she want?”

“I don’t know,” Claire confessed. “Her diaper is clean. I’ve tried to feed her. She doesn’t want that. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can,” Madeline replied matter-of-factly. “When did she last eat?”

“It was before dinner.” Claire looked down. “I feel like I’m about to explode.”

Tony stood helplessly as his daughter continued to cry and his wife declared her insecurities. Truth be told, he felt the same way. “Maybe you should—” Tony began as he started to hand Nichol to Madeline.

“Oh, no,” Madeline said, waving him off. “She doesn’t need me. She needs you—both of you.” With that, Madeline disappeared into the kitchen, and Tony sat down next to Claire.

Although Nichol was still crying, it was Claire whom Tony wanted to help. He pulled her closer.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t...”

“Shhh,” he whispered as he kissed the top of her head. He wanted to lift her chin and see her beautiful eyes. It didn’t matter to him that they were red. All that mattered was that they were before him. “Look at me. I don’t have enough hands to lift your chin.”

Claire shook her head against his chest. “No, I look awful, and I’m a terrible mother.”

Tony released his embrace and tenderly pulled Claire’s chin upward. “You are and always will be the most beautiful woman in the world. Well...” He grinned. “...you do have a little competition now, but in my eyes you’ll always win.” Gently using his thumb, he wiped the tears from her cheeks. “You’re an amazing mother. Remember we said we were going to learn this parenting thing together? Don’t you dare give up. My wife is not a quitter. You may remember that I have a rule about failure. We, my dear, won’t fail. We’re tired and our daughter has a stubborn streak.”

Claire’s weary eyes sparkled. “I wonder where she gets that.”

“Well, we could debate that all night, but I’d put my money on you.”

“Oh really, Mr. Rawlings. If you did, I believe I’d have even more of your fortune.”

“You can have whatever you want. It’s already yours.”

“Sleep...” Claire yawned. “...I want sleep.”

“All right, you can’t have that yet.” Tony glanced down to Nichol. Her cries were mere whimpers as she rooted against his chest.

Madeline entered the quieter living room with a sandwich and a glass of

juice. "Madame el, this is for you. Eat and drink and then you will be ready to give Nichol what she needs."

Claire nodded and took the glass as Madeline set the plate on the table beside her. After a long drink, she said, "Thank you, Madeline. I didn't even realize I was thirsty."

Tony slowly rocked Nichol while Claire ate. When she was done, Claire leaned back and unbuttoned her blouse. Handing their daughter to his wife, Tony's gaze went from Claire's eyes to her breast and back again.

Exhaling, Claire positioned Nichol and smiled a sly grin. "You're incorrigible. Do you know that?"

"What?" Tony tried for his most innocent look. "What did I do?"

Before she could answer, they all stopped and stared at their contented baby girl. Nichol's eyes closed as she eagerly nursed. The whole room held their breath, waiting for the next eruption of crying, but it didn't occur, even whilst Claire burped Nichol and switched sides. Nichol didn't complain. By the time she was satisfied, Madeline was gone. When Tony realized that they were alone, he moved closer and once again wrapped Claire's shoulders in his embrace. "Do you think Madeline sprinkled some kind of fairy dust to calm Nichol down?"

"No, I think she calmed us down, which in turn calmed Nichol."

"See, what did I say? You're a great mother."

Claire kissed his cheek. "And you're a great father. I guess we can do this."

"Together and one day at a time."

Neither one mentioned Tony's impending deal with the FBI. They didn't want anything to upset them or Nichol as she finally rested contently in her mother's arms.

Helping with the feedings, especially those in the middle of the night, was Tony's part of *together*. Through trial and error, they learned that allowing Claire to rest when she could, eased some of her stress, which made Nichol more relaxed. Tony had never been one who needed a lot of sleep, and without a doubt, he grew to love his alone time with their daughter. The fact that it helped both of his ladies to flourish was a mere bonus.

The doctor had been to the island the day before and acted very pleased with both Claire's recovery and Nichol's progress. Sometimes they forgot that she was born earlier than expected.

Nichol's little face scrunched and her lips formed a silent O before her contented expression returned. Did babies dream? What could they possibly dream about? Her entire life consisted of eating, sleeping, and soiling her diaper. None of that seemed like the material of dreams, in Tony's opinion. Closing his eyes and maintaining the chair's movement, he contemplated his dream.

He was living it, and it was grander than any dream he'd ever imagined.
His envelope was full.

CHAPTER ONE

March 2014(Convicted Chapters 47, 48, & 49)

Tony

It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.

—Aristotle Onassis

T HAS BEEN SAID that everyone gets to experience a moment: an instant when clouds part, fog clears, and the world makes sense. Whether that moment reveals the meaning of *all* life or merely the meaning to personal existence, during that second in time when heavenly beams of light reach down and illuminate the world, the one true matter of importance in one's life is revealed.

Perhaps it was God's way of opening one's eyes, or perhaps it was fate's way of twisting a knife. No matter the cause, for Anthony Rawlings that moment of clarity occurred in the midst of chaos. As icy water fell from the ceiling of his home office, as smoke billowed through the vents and down the corridors, and as voices of unseen faces clamored for attention, Tony's world became crystal clear. The only true meaning in his life was his family: Claire and Nichol.

He'd told his wife to stay away from the estate. It hadn't been debatable. He and Claire had discussed their shared need to keep Nichol safe—at any cost. However, admittedly during those discussions, Tony had yet to truly comprehend the depth of Catherine's depravity. It wasn't until he pushed his onetime confidant into a dissertation of confessions that Tony recognized her limitless boundaries and capacity for evil.

With that newfound knowledge of murders where Tony had thought fate intervened, and years of manipulation where he'd seen friendship, Tony knew that he never wanted his family near the woman he'd trusted for most of his life. For the first time since Nathaniel had uttered the words, *they will pay, their children will pay, and their children's children*, everything was crystal

clear. Tony finally understood his unwanted definition: he and Claire were both children of children. Nichol was doubly so. Later, he would reflect on how Claire had tried to explain it to him. Perhaps he hadn't been ready to understand. Now he was.

It wasn't until he saw the utter hatred in Catherine's gray eyes that he felt Nathaniel's words deep in his soul. How could he have trusted Catherine for so long? How could he have willingly placed Claire in her clutches? How didn't he see what Catherine had seen all along?

One thing was obvious. Tony needed to keep his family safe and away from Catherine Marie London.

Unfortunately, the clarity that revealed itself on that March afternoon didn't show Tony a safe and secure family. No, when his eyes were finally opened and he saw his lifelong friend as the monster she truly was—as a monster not only capable of killing his parents, but capable of killing his best friend—fate also showed him the two women in the entire world for whom he'd unquestionably, unequivocally, and unthinkingly lay down his life to save, and they needed him. Only moments earlier, he'd been searching the smoky hallways for Sophia Burke, until he heard Claire's voice. For an instant he prayed that it was his imagination, but then he heard her again. Tony didn't know why his wife was yelling; however, as he raced down the slippery marble floors toward his office, the why of her words wasn't as important as the why of her presence. *Why was she there?* She was supposed to be safe with Courtney. They'd agreed upon that.

Opening the door to his office, Tony's world clarified and collapsed. Terror like he'd never known filled his being when he realized that it wasn't only his wife in the presence of Catherine—no, Claire had Nichol in her arms. Tony would have done anything to reverse time, put them back in paradise, and keep his family from this horror. His deep threatening voice stilled whatever Catherine had been saying. "My God, Claire! Why are you here? Get out, the house is on fire!"

Her taut expression morphed to relief as their eyes met. "Oh, you're safe. I was so afraid."

The rush of the sprinkler system muted the sound of panicked voices in the distance, while intensifying Nichol's cries. From the safe harbor of her mother's arms, their daughter's pleas for attention grew above the commotion. Within seconds, Claire's relief changed once again. It was fear. Tony had witnessed fear in her emerald eyes before and without warning he saw it again. Following her line of vision, Tony saw the small handgun Catherine now wielded in her steady grasp. The open drawer indicated that it had come from his desk. In a moment of utter confusion, Tony wondered why or how there could be a gun in his desk. He didn't like guns, never had. That was why he hired security. There was no reason to own a gun unless you were

willing to use it. However, at that moment, Tony knew he was more than willing to use it. He'd rather kill Catherine with his bare hands, but for speed's sake, he'd gladly use the gun. He also knew that there was no way he'd allow Catherine to be the one to pull the trigger. He needed to get Claire and Nichol out of the house. "Get out; get Nichol out!" he screamed.

As Claire moved to obey, Catherine turned toward Tony with a malicious grin and asked, "*Nichol? Nichol?* You named a Rawls *Nichol*?"

Instead of answering, he used her distraction to knock the gun from her hand, sending it flying toward Claire and Nichol. When it landed near Claire's feet, Tony commanded, "Claire, get the gun!"

Did his words refocus Catherine's attention? He didn't know; however, in a microsecond Catherine was scurrying toward Claire and the gun. Without thinking, Tony dove forward. As he neared the women, he realized that Catherine wasn't going after the gun: she'd pulled a crying Nichol from Claire's arms. The earlier clarity glowed with new radiance. His daughter's safety was paramount to everything else. Momentarily forgetting the gun, Tony's strong hands steadied as he secured Nichol's small, wet, blanket-covered body and pulled her toward his chest. Though Catherine grappled for control, she was no match for Tony's strength and determination.

With their daughter once again safe in his arms, Tony looked to Claire with reassurance as Phil came into view. Tony hadn't seen him enter the office, yet Phil's intention was clear as he neared Claire, whose gaze was fixed on Catherine, completely unaware of Phil's presence. The gun in her grasp shook violently as she lifted the barrel toward Catherine who stood in front of Tony and Nichol. Phil's soothing tone was barely audible over the mayhem. Reaching for the gun, he said, "Claire, it's all right. Give me the gun."

Placing a hand on Claire's shoulder, Phil reached for the gun at the exact moment their world exploded with a flash and a bang. Tony instinctively twisted away in an effort to protect Nichol, as Catherine fell backward, toppling the three of them onto the wet carpet. The room filled with people, and footsteps rushed toward them.

"Claire! Claire!" Tony screamed as he assessed Nichol, made it to his knees, and fought to get to his wife. Easing himself and Nichol away from Catherine's body as she twisted and moaned, Tony's dark eyes searched through the smoke and artificial rain. He called out again, "Claire!"

Tony needed to get to Claire and let her know that he and Nichol were all right. He wanted to touch her and hold her, to hold both of his ladies and have them safe in his embrace. He saw her across the room, lying limp where only seconds earlier she'd been standing. Tony and Phil both rushed to her side. With Nichol still in his arms, Tony picked up the gun. Suddenly, the room filled with people.

"Help me! They tried to kill me!" Catherine's voice begged for attention. Tony ran his hand over Claire's cheek.

"I'm not sure what happened," Phil replied to Tony's unasked question. "She just collapsed. I don't know if she hit her head. I wasn't fast enough to catch her."

Unexpectedly, someone turned up the volume. What only seconds earlier had been a dull roar of activity grew to an explosion of voices. The sound of his name came into range. "Mr. Rawlings. Mr. Rawlings."

It was a member of the Iowa City Police Department. Tony recognized him, though he didn't know his name. *Was he one of the officers who'd searched the house after Claire disappeared?* Tony couldn't remember. He turned toward the officer and spoke, "Yes, my wife needs help."

The officer spoke calmly, "Mr. Rawlings, give me the gun."

It wasn't that he didn't know he'd been holding it: he did. It was that he didn't care. The only thing that mattered was Claire and Nichol. They were safe and the police were there. They'd take Catherine away and his family would be safe. Holding out the gun, Tony implored, "Here, take it. Someone help my wife."

Another officer took the gun away, while the man with the name Hastings stitched on a patch above his badge stepped between Tony and Claire and said, "Your wife? Who's your wife, Mr. Rawlings? Ms. Nichols is your ex-wife."

Thankfully, the sprinklers had stopped and the smoke had begun to dissipate. Tony stood. Hastings' words were ridiculous. Shaking his head, Tony freed droplets of water from his saturated hair, causing them to descend down his forehead and blur his vision. Continuing to hold Nichol tight, Tony said, "Get out of my way. I don't know what you're saying. Claire Rawlings is my wife." His voice rose in volume. "Get out of my way!"

Two individuals began to assess Claire as a female police officer came forward. "Mr. Rawlings, is that Ms. Nichols' daughter?"

"This is *our* daughter." He spoke as his attention went to a gurney being lowered on a scissor-like contraption with wheels next to Claire. Simultaneously another similar contraption was wheeled next to Catherine, as more people with dark blue coats surrounded her.

The female's voice empathized, "Please, Mr. Rawlings, let me take your daughter out of this chaos. Let me get her in the fresh air."

"No." Tony stood resolute. "No, I'll take her. But first she needs to see her mother. Claire needs to know we're all right."

"Ms. Nichols will be taken away to some place where we can assess her needs, and then she'll be held while we determine what happened here."

"Mrs. Rawlings! Her name is Claire Rawlings. Stop calling her Nichols!" As Tony's voice grew louder, Nichol's tiny face contorted, and her cries

resumed. “What do you mean *held*? Claire didn’t do anything wrong. We were acting in self-defense.” Tony stopped. “I’m not saying anymore until I have my attorneys.” He stood helplessly as an unconscious Claire was moved to the gurney. “Where are you taking her? Is she hurt? If she is, she needs medical attention.” Turning his attention away from the two police officers, Tony searched for Phil. “Roach? Roach?! Where are you?”

Officer Hastings spoke, “Mr. Rawlings, why would Ms. Nichols be hurt? Did you hurt her?”

Tony stared incredulously. “Of course I didn’t hurt her. Stop. Calling. Her. Nichols. Her. Name. Is. Rawlings.”

“Mr. Rawlings, I must insist that you hand the child over to Officer O’Brien.”

Ignoring Hastings’ command, Tony saw Phil heading out of the office with Claire’s gurney. “Roach! Roach?”

Hearing Tony’s call, Phil stopped and looked his way. Obviously torn between staying with Claire or returning to Tony, Phil hesitated for only a second before he walked back to Tony. Not waiting for a question, he explained, “They said they’re going to take her to the hospital first and assess her for injuries.”

Tony tried to make sense of it all, yet nothing made sense.

“Mr. Rawling—” Hastings began. Tony pulled his arm away from Hastings’ reach. “Mr. Rawlings, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Ms. London.”

“Mr. Rawlings,” Officer O’Brien pleaded, “please, allow me to take your daughter.”

“No! No, you’re not touching my daughter. She needs to see her mother.” Tony looked toward Phil. “You take Nichol to Claire. Keep her with Claire until Claire can care for her. I’ll get this settled in no time. I didn’t attempt to murder Ms. London. If I had, I would’ve succeeded.”

Before handing Nichol to Phil, Tony gently placed a kiss on her forehead and tugged her closer to his chest. Three months of memories swarmed his mind, from the first time Madeline laid his daughter in his arms to their nightly private rock and chat sessions. He imagined the sweet smell of her after a bath, the way her little legs kicked in the warm water, and the way her eyelids became heavy after she’d eaten. The thought of being separated from his daughter for even a minute hurt like no physical pain ever could.

Inhaling her sweet baby scent, Tony calmed his voice and whispered, “It will be all right, my princess. Momma will be with you soon, and Daddy will be back to you just as soon as he can.” Gazing into her big brown eyes, he continued, “Take care of your momma and don’t forget me.”

One more kiss to her forehead and Tony handed Nichol to Phil. Once Tony’s arms were free of Nichol, Officer O’Brien placed handcuffs on Tony’s

wrist.

"Mr. Rawlings," the first officer said, "you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say—"

"Roach," Tony interrupted. "Have Eric contact Rawlings Industries. I want my legal team to meet me at the police station."

Phil nodded as they led Anthony Rawlings away, continuing his Miranda rights.



THE FIRST FEW MINUTES were a blur. Once they got Tony to the police station, his litany of crimes would come to light. It was Claire's nightmare, the reason she hadn't wanted him to travel to the United States. Their one-year reprieve would be null and void. The FBI would never swoop in and save them. They wouldn't allow their family to return to paradise for the remaining nine months. Tony knew in the pit of his stomach that his time was up—at least for a while. He silently prayed that it wouldn't take too long. He had money. He'd spend every last dime to get back to Claire and Nichol as soon as possible.

Tony's normally quiet estate bustled with people and vehicles. Fire trucks ran long hoses through the corridors, creating an obstacle course as Officer Hastings led Tony toward the outside. His house staff stood huddled together on the bricked driveway, silently watching their runaway boss. He'd been missing for months and now he was being forced into the back of a police car—arrested. It didn't matter that he hadn't tried to kill Catherine: if it weren't for the damn videotapes, he'd confess to being the one who shot her, anything to save Claire. He couldn't bear the thought of his wife spending one day or even one hour in a prison cell. He'd done that to her once; he would move heaven and hell to stop it from happening again.

Just before settling into the back of the police car, Tony saw Emily rush toward Roach. Hatred seeped with reddening intensity as Tony took in his sister-in-law. This was all her fault. He and his family would be safe in paradise if she hadn't been so damned determined to learn Claire's secrets from Catherine. And now she was reaching for Nichol. Tony closed his eyes and prayed—silently demanded—for Claire to wake. She needed to be there for their daughter.

Tony stiffened his shoulders as he searched for answers. How could everything go so terribly wrong in such a short period of time? Despite the cool March Iowa air, perspiration beaded upon Tony's brow and a wave of nausea sucked the breath from his lungs.

Brent.

Brent Simmons. Was. Dead.

Claire would wake. Tony would undoubtedly have a price to pay, but Brent was dead. Tony couldn't buy back his friend's life. He couldn't alleviate the pain that Courtney must be enduring. It was all Catherine's doing!

What about Derek Burke? What about Sophia? Red grew. Questions multiplied and lurched forward in his mind. It was all happening too fast to register. Did they find Sophia asleep upstairs? Did anyone even go look? How was she dealing with the loss of her husband? It was too much! More questions than answers raced at untold speed. The vendetta continued to snowball out of control.

Crimson covered his world!

Claire. Nichol. Brent. Courtney. Sophia.

The mental toll needed an outlet: physical release took hold. He lunged forward and purged the red as vomit splattered the floor-mat to the right of Tony's feet.

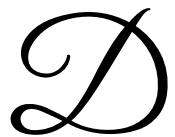
CHAPTER TWO

March 2014

Phil

The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky

 DESPITE THE WAY his training screamed at Phil to disappear into the chaos, he couldn't do it, especially not after Rawlings so trustingly placed Nichol in his arms. Phil didn't know anything about babies, but common sense told him that the little girl with her daddy's eyes and lungs was not happy. The saturated blanket wrapped around her tiny body had been her only protection from the icy water that had rained moments earlier from the sprinkler system as mayhem erupted all around her. Removing the wet blanket, Phil unzipped his jacket and pulled Nichol to his warm chest. Covering her again with the warm dry material, he pulled the zipper over her, all the while being cautious to avoid her fine dark hair. Almost instantly, her loud cries mellowed, her little fist found its way to her mouth, and her eyes contently closed.

Fleetingly, Phil wondered how he'd thought to hold her against his body. He was warm: she was cold. It made sense. Only a few times in his life had he been this close to a child, and every time was with Nichol. He wasn't the type of man to show affection. It wasn't in his DNA. Without a doubt, his comfort level was higher in setting his sights on a marked man than cradling a baby under his jacket. The other times that Phil had held Nichol were at Claire's insistence. Shielding Nichol from the stiff breeze, he made his way out of the estate as memories surfaced of the first time Claire had placed her daughter in his arms. Nichol was only a day old and Phil had done his best to avoid Claire, Rawlings, and Nichol; however, there were only so many places to hide on an island.

Overwhelmingly, Phil had been relieved by Claire's condition. When he risked his life to get the damn doctor to the island—if he'd been forced to admit the truth, it wasn't to save Nichol. Phil was worried out of his mind about Claire. Getting in that boat and braving the rough seas wasn't selfless. No, it was selfish. He couldn't stand to stay near Claire with no ability to ease her distress. After all, he'd agreed to protect her and her child, and while on the run, he'd succeeded. The idea that his efforts had been for naught, thwarted by a tragic medical accident outside of his control, was agonizing.

On the day after Nichol's birth, Claire was in the shade on the lanai when Phil came around the corner. He hadn't expected her to be up and out of her room. Though tired, she looked amazing. He stood and watched as she held Nichol, seemingly in a world by herself. Contentment resonated all around her. Perhaps it was curiosity: Phil had never seen such a young baby, or just maybe it was a desire to share in a miracle of this magnitude. The reason wasn't clear, but instead of going on to the kitchen for a bite to eat, Phil walked toward Claire and Nichol and made his presence known. He remembered her happy expression as he sat on the chaise longue near her outstretched legs.

"Thank you for getting the doctor yesterday," she said with her green eyes open wide.

"I wish you'd stop thanking me for doing my job."

"Risking your life is not your job."

"My job is to keep you safe. And now look at you."

Pink returned to Claire's cheeks. "Yes, thank you for that. Let me introduce our daughter..." she shifted the bundle in her arms. The tiny face and scrunched eyes were like nothing Phil had ever seen. In a way, she reminded him of a pale raisin. "...Nichol Courtney Rawlings."

He leaned closer. "You made quite an entrance, little lady. You should really take it easy on your mom. She had a rough night."

"She's been as good as gold since she last ate." Claire's eyes widened. "Would you like to hold her?"

Phil sat upward. "No."

Claire giggled. "You answered that pretty fast."

"Remember, I said that I don't do diapers."

Claire reached for some hand sanitizer and pushed it toward Phil. "No one's asking you to change diapers. Here, rub this on your hands and you can hold her." Maybe it was his blank stare, perhaps it was the flushing of his face as blood drained, but Claire continued, "You're supposed to protect me? Well, I need to get up for a minute and take care of something. Nichol is part

of me, so I need you to protect her until I return.”

Phil rubbed the alcohol-scented sanitizer on his hands as he asked, “A minute? What if she cries?”

Ignoring his concern, Claire shifted her legs from the longue and gently placed Nichol in his arms. “Just support her head. You won’t break her. Hold her closer... yes, like that.” Once she was satisfied, Claire kissed her daughter’s head and added, “Now, if you’ll excuse me for a minute, just a minute, I’ll be right back. Oh, stay in the shade.”

Claire wasn’t gone long, but in those few minutes—yes, more than one—Phil fell in love. Of all of the things he’d done in his life, never had he held such a precious, innocent being in his hands. He knew Claire was right: his assignment had just doubled. The little girl in his hands had her daddy’s eyes, but he saw Claire, too. No longer did he see a raisin. He saw Claire’s nose and lips...

Phil wondered how some poor kid would feel when Phil drove Nichol and him on their first date, because there was no way he was letting her go with that kid alone. Hell, he’d been a teenage boy once. No way!

When Phil was younger and on assignment with the military, his objective had been defined by others and incredibly simple: life or death. While observing Claire for Rawlings in California, Phil’s world changed. For the first time in his life, his target had been achieved, yet his mission wasn’t complete. Each day he found himself more and more enthralled with his assignment. Truth be told, it probably began in San Antonio when she outsmarted him; however, that was only the beginning. What impressed him beyond belief was her ability to manipulate the master manipulator. Phil saw how others responded to Anthony Rawlings. Claire’s actions truly earned Phil’s respect. Then, Claire was attacked while on his watch, and Phil was relieved of his duties.

Never without a connection, Phil moved on to other jobs: most were short and finite. He followed a husband and verified his involvement with another woman. He tracked down a runaway teenager and alerted her parents to her location. Not ready to give up his newfound obsession with Claire Nichols, he welcomed the directive from Ms. London. In his mind he was helping to create the perfect ruse for Claire to leave Rawlings. Phil firmly believed Ms. London’s story that in a moment of weakness following Chester’s attack, Claire agreed to go to Iowa. It was a decision she immediately regretted, but one that she was unable to reverse without assistance. Rawlings had already proven that he would track her down with relentless fortitude. As the seeds of *Rawls-Nichols* threats were being planted, Phil was planning her ultimate

escape. To that end, he willingly mailed the notes, cards, and packages.

It wasn't until he helped her escape the United States and they spoke again in Geneva that Phil learned he'd only been a pawn in Ms. London's strategically planned game of chess.

Back at the estate, the unusually cool spring air nipped Phil's face as he stepped from the warmth of the house onto the lawn. Police cars and fire trucks littered the drive. For all practical purposes, he should disappear. But how could he disappear with Nichol in tow? He'd surely be accused of kidnapping. Smirking, Phil knew that kidnapping charges would be the least of his worries. Feeding, changing, and bathing a three-month-old baby ranked much higher on his list of concerns.

The crowd of people became quiet as a policeman led Rawlings from the house with his hands secured in handcuffs. Just seconds ago, two ambulances left: one contained Claire, the other Ms. London. As Phil watched the scene unfold, Claire's sister approached.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Who are you? Do you work for *him*?"

Phil's stance straightened. The way Emily stressed the word *him* left no doubt as to her meaning. "I work for *her*—your sister." Maybe it was his change in demeanor, but as he spoke Nichol made her presence known.

Emily covered her mouth failing to stop the gasp. "Oh, my God, do you have her child?"

Phil nodded as he lowered the zipper on his coat. "Her blanket was wet. I'm trying to keep her warm."

"Her?" Emily repeated with wonder.

John Vandersol, Claire's brother-in-law, joined the conversation and immediately removed his jacket as Emily reached for Nichol. Phil wanted to protest and pull the little girl back to his chest, but he knew this was the right thing to do. Emily was her aunt. She would know better how to care for a baby until Claire was well and released. Besides, Phil wanted to go check on Claire at the hospital and tell her what had transpired with Nichol and Tony.

"There, there..." Emily cooed, as she wrapped her niece in John's coat. Looking up to Phil, she asked, "Do you know the last time she ate?"

Phil shook his head. "Claire just brought her here minutes before this all got out of hand. She's, umm..." his cheeks uncustomarily reddened, "...not fed with a bottle."

"Oh," Emily responded. "Then I guess we need to get her to Claire at the hospital." Again to Phil, "Do you know what happened inside?"

"I wasn't there for all of it. But I have a good idea—"

John interrupted. "It was Anthony, wasn't it? That's who Claire was trying to shoot?"

Emily nodded as her husband spoke.

"No." Phil answered definitively. "No, she wasn't trying to shoot anyone. She was trying to save Nichol from Ms. London."

Emily's head shook. "I don't believe you. Claire never said anything but good things about Catherine."

"You're defending the woman who had you locked in a suite, instead of the man who saved you?" Phil retorted.

John's brows cocked. "How do you know that? How do you know where we were? Maybe you're working for Anthony and he was the one—"

Phil glared. "I'll give my official statement to the police. I assure you, though, that you're mistaken." Despite being muffled by John's coat, Nichol's cries called out. "But before we argue this point, you need to get Nichol to Claire."

Emily's eyes widened. "Nichol? My niece is named Nichol Nichols?"

"Nichol Courtney Rawlings." Phil stated matter-of-factly.

Emily's green eyes glared. "What do you mean Rawlings? Did Claire agree to that?"

Phil's tone deepened. "Mrs. Vandersol, you'll need to speak with your sister. But I'll tell you that she and Mr. Rawlings remarried. They were married when Nichol was born. Just let your sister explain it to you."

John spoke as they made their way toward the cars. "You know he's a wanted man. Did you know where he was? How can we trust you?"

"You can't. However, things are different when it comes to Mrs. Rawlings. I wouldn't do anything to harm her or allow her to be harmed. She really is the one you should be talking to."

"So," Emily pushed, "she wanted you with her because she was afraid of him harming her again?"

"Mrs. Vandersol, you are misinterpreting—" Phil's explanation was cut short as an Iowa City policeman reached for his arm.

"Sir, we need to ask you a few questions. You were in the office at the time of the shooting..."

Phil replied to the officer as John and Emily carried Nichol away. Unexpectedly, John turned around and walked back. "Is there an infant car seat?"

The officer nodded as Phil took John to the car Claire had driven, the one belonging to Courtney Simmons. Phil wished with all his might that he could keep Claire's friend out of the turmoil that would come from helping Tony and Claire. He might have been able to, had Claire not driven Courtney's car. His mind spun. As soon as John walked away, the policeman asked, "Whose car is this?"

"It belongs to another of my employers. He allowed me to use it."

"You? You drove Miss Nichols here?"

"Her name is Rawlings. She and Mr. Rawlings were remarried, and I believe I should have an attorney present before I divulge any more information."

That became Phil's answer to each question. He'd already said more to the Vandersols than he should have. He wanted them to know, however, that despite Claire and Tony's past they were raising Nichol together. Undoubtedly, all of the hiding from the FBI would come back to haunt Rawlings, but Phil hoped Claire's family would understand. Both Rawlings and Claire would need their support.

Finally, the officer became bored with Phil's response, or lack of one. "Mr. Roach, what do you do and who do you work for?"

"I'm an independent contractor. I do many things and work for many people."

"Maybe we should take a drive downtown and check your résumé a little closer."

"Although that sounds like a fun afternoon, I'm rather busy. Do you believe that you have a reason to charge me with something? If you do, let's drive. If you don't, I have more work I need to do. The first thing is checking on Mrs. Rawlings."

"Mr. Roach, how do you know that she and Anthony Rawlings are remarried?"

"Officer, when I speak with my attorney, we'll let you know." Phil hesitated. When the officer didn't respond, he continued, "I will assume we're done for now?"

"For now. Do not leave the state—for *business* or personal reasons without contacting the ICPD first."

Phil shrugged. "Independent contractors are in constant demand all over the world. If you need me, you have my number." With that, he turned and walked toward Courtney's car. When he'd retrieved the car seat, Phil saw a purse on the floorboard. He hoped, for appearance sake, that the key was there. As soon as he sat in the car, his phone buzzed with a text from Eric.

"I'M STILL IN THE SECURITY CENTER. I'VE MADE BACKUPS OF EVERYTHING. WHERE DID THEY TAKE EVERYONE?"

Phil responded. **"LONDON AND CLAIRE TO THE HOSPITAL AND RAWLINGS TO THE POLICE STATION. HE SAID FOR YOU TO CALL RAWLINGS INDUSTRIES AND GET HIS LEGAL TEAM THERE ASAP. I WOULD HAVE COMMUNICATED EARLIER BUT THINGS ARE CRAZY."**

"NICHOL?"

"EMILY VANDERSOL. I'M OFF TO CHECK ON CLAIRE. YOU'LL GET RAWLINGS HELP?"

"YES." Eric replied.

Phil rifled through the purse and found a key fob. Within seconds he was headed away from the Rawlings estate toward Iowa City.



IT HADN'T OCCURED to him that there were multiple hospitals in Iowa City, and it would have been an issue, except when Phil handed John Vandersol the car seat, he placed an inconspicuous GPS tracker under the soft fabric. Rawlings had put Phil in charge of Nichol's care, and he had no intentions of losing track of her location. After a few swipes on his phone, the blinking light led him exactly to where he needed to be. Phil didn't consider contacting Courtney as he parked and locked her car. She was too busy with the news of her husband to be concerned about Claire, Nichol, or her car. Phil tried not to think about Brent. There were many people in Phil's life who'd come and gone; nevertheless, the lingering sadness at the thought of Brent Simmons' untimely death was another example of how Phil's life had radically changed since Brent contacted him a year ago. He was getting soft.

Slipping into the overcrowded emergency room, Phil nodded at the nurse sitting behind the desk and crossed the threshold to the draped examination rooms. In no time at all, Nichol announced their location. Before he could decide if he wanted to be seen, Emily emerged from a sliding glass door of a concealed room and their eyes met.

"I didn't get your name," she said matter-of-factly.

"Roach, Phillip Roach. How is Claire?"

Emily bristled. "My sister's information is private."

"I can assure you, Mrs. Vandersol, I'm privy to your sister's private information. It's my job; I need to know. Keeping her safe is what I'm supposed to do. I can't do that if I'm unable to be near her."

Nichol's cries grew in strength.

"As you can see, she has a police guard. I don't believe your services are needed."

"Why is she still crying?" Phil asked, moving his gaze toward Nichol.

"I'd assume she's hungry. I'm on my way to get formula from the pediatric unit."

"But...Claire won't be happy—"

"Thank you, Mr. Roach. Obviously, if your job was to assure my sister's safety, you've failed. She has her family now. We'll take care of her and Nichol. If you're owed any money, see *him*. I mean according to you, he's her husband. Please don't bother my sister again."

"Thank you, Mrs. Vandersol, I will gladly resign my position when my employer, your sister, relieves me of my duties, and not a minute before."

“My sister is in shock from whatever occurred. When she recovers, the police will question her. If you have any information you’d like to share, please contact me. They’ve already done some kind of test and know for a fact that she fired a gun. Luckily, I don’t believe Ms. London is gravely injured. I just wish my sister had had better aim and it was him who was shot.”

“You don’t have the necessary facts to make the assumptions—”

“I need to get Nichol fed. I have instructed the police guards as to who may or may not enter her room. Goodbye, Mr. Roach.”

Clenching his teeth, Phil nodded. Tony had said more than once that he disliked Claire’s sister. Phil concurred.

If he couldn’t see Claire in person, he’d hack into the hospital’s records and learn about her that way. Turning around, he walked toward Courtney’s car.

CHAPTER THREE

March 2014

Brent

Why should we look to the past in order to prepare for the future? Because there is nowhere else to look.

—James Burke

BRENT SIMMONS SIGHED as he settled against the leather airplane seat and enjoyed a minute of relaxation. It seemed that more recently his life was a whirlwind: as soon as he extinguished one fire, another went from smoldering to blazing. Was it his profession? That could be expected with law. Or was it the company he kept? During his tenure with Rawlings Industries, he either spent his time ascertaining whether protocol was followed or steering the offending policy back on an even keel. Brent was a rule follower. He didn't make waves. No, he was the one who calmed the passengers as the storms of life blew them about. That was probably why his and Tony's relationship had worked from the beginning. Tony created rules, and Brent followed them. That was until now.

Closing his eyes, he contemplated his current *illegal* status. He and Courtney were willingly harboring a fugitive. For the first time in his memory, Brent Simmons was knowingly breaking the law, the same law that he had taken an oath to uphold. He hadn't stumbled into his new world of law-breaking: he'd volunteered. When Roach informed him that Tony and Claire wanted to return, temporarily, to the United States, Brent suggested without hesitation, that they come to his home. Brent knew without a doubt that Courtney would agree. After all, it wasn't the first time he and Courtney had risked consequences to help Claire. What made this unique was that now they both also wanted to help Tony.

Although Brent and Tony had been friends for years, their relationship wouldn't have been considered equal—perhaps it never will be. But the last

time Brent saw Tony, before last night, they'd had words, words that evened their friendship in a way as never before. Actually, that night in Boston, Brent said things he never thought he'd ever say to his friend, and it felt good. Anthony Rawlings had a way about him, an arrogance. It worked for business, but not for his personal life. Being both a friend and an employee, Brent spent most of his life walking a damn tightrope. It had gone on for too long. He'd known about Tony and Claire's history since before their divorce. When presented with the FBI account of their past, Brent couldn't—no, he wouldn't—maintain his silence any longer. He had to lay it on the line.

Then Tony disappeared.

In the weeks and months that followed, Brent relived their argument a hundred times. His satisfaction at clearing the air wavered with the reality of never seeing Tony or Claire again. Brent and Courtney talked their way through a million scenarios. They hoped and prayed that both of their friends were safe. The part they weren't sure about, what neither one knew what to pray for, was if Tony and Claire should be together. Brent knew in his heart that Tony wasn't injured in an emergency plane landing. He knew that the man he'd worked beside and gotten to know as an esteemed businessman and his best friend was out searching for the woman he loved. Through endless hours of deliberation, he and Courtney debated about the missing piece of the puzzle. Why had Claire left?

Neither Brent nor Courtney wanted to believe the story Claire's sister and brother-in-law spun. They didn't want to believe that Claire was once again motivated by fear of Tony, yet, with the publication of Meredith Banks' book, that lingering concern loomed ever-present in both of their minds.

On a whim, Brent contacted Phil Roach. After all, Brent had been the one to hire him in the first place. Being a consummate professional, since Brent was not his client, Roach didn't divulge anything. And then the call came. Roach had discussed it with Tony, and the lines of communication were opened. Roach explained to Brent, and thus to Courtney, the intricacies of the Rawlingses' temporary departure. The Simmonses became privy to the real story of their disappearance and Catherine's role in it all.

Over the years, as situations deemed necessary, Brent mastered the skill of being less than forthcoming. Depending upon the circumstance, the level of difficulty varied. One of the hardest scenarios was Claire's pardon. To work every day beside Tony and know the answers to all of Tony's questions, yet remain detached, warranted Brent an Academy Award. There were even a few times when Courtney deserved, at the very least, a nomination for Best Supporting Actress in a drama series. Although the role was sometimes tedious, what fueled Brent's motivation were the words of Claire's testimony. He'd remember the frightened young woman who accompanied Tony on a business trip to New York, or the beautiful bride who lived a hidden life of

domination. It made Brent physically ill to think of the things that she'd endured at the hands of his *friend*, the things that occurred right before their eyes, while they'd done nothing to help.

Maybe it was Claire who deserved an Academy Award? After all, neither he nor Courtney knew what was happening behind the iron gates of the Rawlings estate.

Even more difficult than facing Tony day to day while he ranted and raved about Claire's pardon, had been the past few months of facing Catherine London. Knowing what Brent knew, each inquiry that Ms. London made into Rawlings' personal financial matters or Rawlings Industries, each time she used her position as executor of Tony's estate to influence something or the other, Brent's blood boiled. He had to force himself to return her calls. Sometimes he wouldn't do it for days, claiming an overwhelming workload or forgetfulness. Each interaction was loathsome. Normally a gentle man, Brent couldn't interact with her without wishing her physical pain. Her smug countenance grated on him as he contemplated her role in the upheaval of his friends' lives. After so much time, Brent had come to the conclusion that Tony and Claire were both people he'd grown to love.

The flight attendant refocused Brent's attention. If there hadn't been a glitch in the finalization of the proposal, he'd have been home already with Courtney and Claire. He would know what was happening with Roach and Tony at the estate. He might not be in need of more antacid!

The glitch wasn't big; nonetheless, by spending a few more minutes—that turned into an hour—with the appropriate people, Brent preempted the need to return to Chicago to rectify the potential contractual misinterpretation. He didn't mind. Taking a commercial flight gave Brent the opportunity to regroup and think about all that was happening. No doubt, if he'd flown back with Sharon Michaels and Derek Burke, they'd have spent the entire flight rehashing the proposal, crunching numbers, and verifying statutes. This alternative gave Brent a moment of uncustomary peace and anonymity.

Even though he wasn't initially scheduled to be involved with the negotiations, Brent believed the meeting in Chicago had gone exceptionally well. It was his first opportunity to personally witness Derek in action. In hindsight, Brent wondered about the promotion that brought the young man to corporate. It seemed strange that Ms. London had found the necessary requests on Tony's home computer, but regardless of the mode of hire, Derek Burke appeared to be an asset to Rawlings Industries. Brent wasn't sure when, or if, Tony would once again be personally involved in the day-to-day workings of Rawlings Industries, but he made a mental note to tell Tony about Burke. He was a natural: professional, eloquent, and a wonder to watch. The young man's negotiating skills were stellar. With his potential, Brent believed that he had a bright future with Rawlings Industries.

With time to allow his mind to wander, one thought led to another. Thinking about his own day's duties and telling Tony about Derek reminded Brent of Tony's plans for the day. More than once, fleeting thoughts manifested themselves as Brent wondered what was transpiring at the estate. He was concerned: could things—for once—go the way they were meant to go for Tony and Claire? It seemed that the deck had been stacked against them since before they knew one another. Truth be told, it was. Tony had confirmed it months ago, as had Claire to Courtney. As much as they both loathed their friends' history, seeing them last night with their beautiful daughter helped to confirm Brent and Courtney's wishes for their future. After all Tony and Claire had endured, they both deserved better. Brent hoped that their coming back to the United States and helping John and Emily wouldn't dampen their future. With Nichol in the game, the stakes were much higher.

After the captain announced their altitude and the little bell dinged, Brent leaned his chair back and opened the eBook app on his phone. He'd placed it on airplane mode much earlier than necessary. It helped with the relaxation. Despite the fact that Brent had been actively involved in the attempts to stop the publication of Meredith Banks' book *My Life as It Didn't Appear*, he still purchased the book out of morbid curiosity the day it came out. He wondered how Ms. Banks would sensationalize what Brent had read in a more clinical legal brief.

Brent wasn't blind or deaf. He heard whispers and murmurs. He knew that he wasn't the only member of the Rawlings Industries legal team to buy the book. Everyone was intrigued. However, as a close friend of both Tony and Claire, when asked, Brent maintained his stance, continually professing that he had no desire to add to Ms. Banks' rankings or bank account. Perhaps it was a misleading statement, but it was not an outright lie.

When Brent first downloaded the book, he was only able to read as far as the author's introduction that explained Meredith and Claire's relationship, setting the stage for the details to come. Brent had tried to read Claire's words, but couldn't. Knowing without doubt that what he was about to read was completely accurate made it too painful. Nevertheless, curiosity is a strange beast. Despite best intentions or convictions, it doesn't fall asleep and quietly fade away. No. If left unfed, curiosity becomes a hunger that grows in strength and voracity until it monopolizes unconscious thoughts and dreams.

Seeing his friends last night gave Brent the sustenance he needed to move past Meredith's introduction. Seeing firsthand that Tony and Claire's relationship had matured, and watching them with Nichol, gave him the necessary strength to continue reading. He was ready to read the words, knowing that through Meredith, Claire spoke of the past—a dark past, but nonetheless, a time that was gone, never to be repeated.

Brent also justified his reading as company research. If the world had a perception of Anthony Rawlings, as his personal attorney, Brent needed to understand it. Sitting in a commercial airplane at thirty thousand feet gave Brent that opportunity. It was undoubtedly a better place to read Meredith's story than on a Rawlings Industries plane.

My Life as It Didn't Appear: Chapter 1...

IMAGINE, IF YOU will, that you are suddenly keeping company with one of the country's most eligible bachelors. What would you expect? Perhaps flowers and romance? Maybe candlelight and soft music?

I'm Claire Nichols, formally Rawlings, and I wish I could say that was what I experienced. I wish I could tell you how Anthony Rawlings wooed me, seduced me, and romantically worked his way into my heart. Unfortunately, my reality was starkly different.

Although it now seems inconceivable, when I first met my ex-husband—before my life changed forever—I didn't know Anthony Rawlings nor did I know of him. I've read numerous accounts that paint me as nothing more than a calculating gold digger. I may never be able to convince the world otherwise, but the truth is that I never wanted wealth, or fame, or any of the things that entered my life on that fateful evening when I saw his dark eyes for the very first time. Before that night, my life was amazingly simple and yet complex. As an out-of-work meteorologist, I tried to make ends meet by tending bar at a local restaurant. I had friends, a family, and my life was content. I didn't realize how truly happy I was until my life was taken away.

Never has nor ever will money be my barometer of happiness. I can tell you with all certainty that money does not buy happiness.

There were many other truisms that I learned after March 15, 2010. The most important was about appearance: never doubt its power or importance. It was a lesson that I mastered to perfection. My outstanding dedication to that lesson helped to perpetuate the misconceptions regarding my relationship with Anthony Rawlings.

Am I writing this book for money? No. Am I writing it to exact revenge? No.

I'm telling my story for one reason and one reason only because I need to have a voice in my reputation. I'll no longer sit quietly and allow the world to be misinformed—or more accurately, disinforme—at my expense. You will soon learn that I was complacent for far too long. Some of the details from my story will be difficult for me to share as well as difficult for you to read. I

can't make you believe me. All I can do is tell my story to anyone willing to listen.

My reality began on March 15, 2010, in an establishment where I worked as a bartender. Anthony Rawlings appeared out of nowhere and sat down at my bar. Throughout the evening he was witty, charming, and debonair: all the qualities you'd expect. He asked to meet me for drinks after my shift. Although I had a firm rule against dating customers, Anthony Rawlings had a way of making you forget your rules and play by only his instead.

Brent swallowed back a bitter laugh. Damn—she was spot on. He continued reading.

Although I agreed to his invitation, as a safety net I refused to leave my place of employment. He willingly acquiesced and waited for me. When my shift was over, we sat, drank wine, and chatted effortlessly about nothing in particular. Sometime during our conversation, he asked about my aspirations and dreams. With a deep baritone voice that has graced both my nightmares and my dreams, he began, "Claire, surely you don't want to spend forever serving drinks to stooges like us."

Clearly, he was a successful man, and I was flattered by his genuine interest. I explained my wrinkle in employment, and he offered to help: he proposed that my dreams could be as simple as a signature away. With a rush of enthusiasm, he presented me with a napkin from the bar, and asked, "Would you be willing to give this all up for something bigger? What if this napkin were truly a contract and what if it said WEATHER CHANNEL at the top? Would you be willing to sign on the line for something like that?"

Perhaps it was the wine, but I'd say it was his magnetism. His words and tone enveloped the booth where we sat and filled me with a false sense of hope for a future and a career I'd lain awake nights dreaming of experiencing. For a brief moment in time, he made it seem obtainable. I bit—hook, line, and sinker—and, willingly accepting the pen he offered, signed my name.

What I thought was an imaginary agreement to my life's dream, was in actuality a literal agreement to a nightmare.

Though I didn't see Anthony at all the next day, he called the restaurant and asked me to dinner. I was so surprised that he remembered my name, much

less asked me out on a date, that I didn't realize that he knew my schedule. Not only did he know when I was working so that he could call, but he also knew the time I would finish work the following day.

Another rule I faithfully practiced during my dating years was to never ride with a man in his car on the first date. I always drove separately. It was my escape. That practice had proved useful on more than one occasion. However, once again, Anthony had his own plan, his own rule. Before I knew it, I'd agreed to a dinner date and to having him pick me up at my place of business. That date was March 17—the date I ceased to exist.

Perhaps if there were to be any hearts and flowers in our courtship, it was that night. He took me to a beautiful Italian restaurant, and once again, I missed warning signs. He ordered my meal, my drinks, everything. I'd never met a man like him before. He threw my world off-kilter. No matter what I thought or said, he seemed to be one step ahead of me and for some unknown reason, I liked it. After living independently with no one else to rely upon, an evening with a man in total control was a nice break in routine. I had no illusions about a long-term relationship with Anthony Rawlings. Our worlds were too different. But for a night I was treated like a princess and this dark-haired, dark-eyed gentleman was my prince.

When he offered to take me back to his hotel suite and I accepted, little did I realize that it was one of the last decisions I would make for nearly three years. Little did I realize that my fate was sealed and my prince was truly the beast of every fairytale I'd ever read. I now understand that my future was predetermined, and my pseudo-decisions—like agreeing to dinner and his hotel suite—were just that: a ruse for a bigger, darker plan.

Though my nightmare began later that night, I can't recall any of it until the next day when I woke in my prison—my cell for the next three years of my life. Of course, that wasn't what he called it. He called it my suite at his estate.

The captain announced their approach into Cedar Rapids as Brent turned off his app and closed his eyes. He'd heard rumors and whispers around the office. Hell, the Internet and television buzzed with the stories, but part of Brent wanted to believe that Claire hadn't truly disclosed their darkest secrets to the world. A cold chill brought goose bumps to his arms as he imagined Tony reading this account for the first time.

As the plane touched down in Cedar Rapids, Brent fumbled with his phone, turning off the airplane mode. An onslaught of buzzes and vibrations told him that his momentary reprieve from reality was done. He obviously had messages galore awaiting his reply. Then, just as quickly, the screen went

black.

"Damn," he whispered to himself. "That battery is shit."

As the plane taxied to the gate, Brent realized that he'd forgotten to text the office to have a car pick him up, and his car was at the Rawlings Industries private airport. With his phone dead, he couldn't even call Courtney, not that he wanted to disturb her. She and Claire were probably catching up. Fine, he'd take a cab. Although there was plenty of work at Rawlings, Brent wanted to go straight home. He hoped that when he arrived, he'd find Tony and Claire safe under his roof, with harrowing stories of outsmarting Catherine and saving Emily and John.

Rotating his head from side to side in an effort to relieve the tension, Brent wondered when he'd become an optimist. The tight muscles in his neck and shoulders warned him of the alternate possibilities of what he'd find at home. Perhaps even a police officer. If Tony were taken into custody, would Brent and Courtney's roles be discovered? Would they too be taken in for questioning?

Those questions and more rattled through his consciousness as Brent exited the causeway to the airport. He wasn't looking at the televisions sprinkled throughout the waiting area of the gate, but the headline caught his attention: **RAWLINGS INDUSTRIES PLANE DOWN: 5 BELIEVED DEAD.**

Perspiration dotted his brow as he fought to comprehend. Rawlings had more than one plane. Surely they didn't mean the plane he was supposed to be on? He stared at the silent screen. The closed caption finally registered. Brent Simmons. Derek Burke. Sharon Michaels. Andrew McCain. Tory Garrett.

Brent rushed to a pay phone and fumbled for change. He called his home—no answer. He called Courtney's cell phone—voicemail. "Courtney, I wasn't on that plane!" he yelled into the receiver. "I'm on my way home. Oh, my God! I'm coming home!"

The ride from Cedar Rapids to his home was nothing more than a blur. He wanted to call the office, to try other phones. He hadn't left a message on their home phone, but he couldn't do any of that. His phone was totally dead. Brent couldn't think straight.

As the cab turned in to his driveway and approached his house, the number of cars on the brick drive brought the tension in his neck fully to Brent's temples. Easing his way in the front door of his home, Brent listened to the din of hushed voices coming from his kitchen. Stopping dead in his tracks, he heard his son's voice. "Mom, we'll be there as soon as we can." Caleb was obviously on speakerphone. "Julia found a flight leaving in a couple of hours. We'll stay here as long as you need. Don't even try to argue. Nothing's more important right now than taking care of you."

"I-I need to do something. Anything." The sadness in Courtney's voice

pulled at Brent's heart.

He turned the corner, met his wife's puffy-eyed stare, and rushed to her side.

The entire room gasped in unison as Courtney flew from her seat and wrapped her arms tightly around Brent's neck, surrounding her husband in a frantic embrace. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God..." Her words became unrecognizable as she shuddered with sobs.

"How? How? It's a miracle," Courtney managed between sniffles.

"I didn't know anything about the accident until I landed. I tried to call..."

Courtney's unwavering embrace stilled his words. Finally, she asked, "Why weren't you on the Rawlings plane?"

Caleb's voice came through the speaker. "What's happening?"

Bev and Sue smiled as Bev picked up Courtney's phone, turned off the speaker, and said, "Caleb..." She couldn't keep the tears from falling. "...there's someone here to talk to you."

Prying his arm free from his wife, Brent took the phone. "Hi, son. Apparently, the reports of my death are a bit exaggerated."

Caleb and Julia could both be heard gasping. Brent smiled. "Let me put you back on speaker. I had a few papers that needed to be tweaked and at the last minute decided to grab a commercial flight. I didn't know anything about it until I landed. My battery was dead so I tried to call from a pay phone. I left your mom a message." His eyes twinkled toward his wife. "But you know how she is: she never checks her messages."

"We're still coming home, and I just got a text from Maryn. Her plane lands about the same time as ours. We'll all be home this evening."

It had been Christmas since he'd had both of his children and daughter-in-law together. "Thanks for taking care of your mom. I love you all and can't wait to see you," Brent said before he disconnected the line.

The joyous mood turned somber as Sue came forward and hugged Brent. "I wish the others had waited too."

Brent's eyes misted. "I've been thinking about them since I heard. I can't believe it. Do they have any idea what happened?"

Courtney's head moved slowly from side to side. "I'm so sorry. I feel guilty being happy. I know what Sophia is going through."

Brent made no attempt to conceal the tears as he scanned the room. Looking to Sue, with her arms wrapped around her growing midsection and her cheeks dampened by emotion, he asked, "Poor Tim. As if he doesn't have enough happening. I need to help him."

Sue nodded. "I just texted him. He should call in a few minutes. He'll be so happy to learn you weren't on that flight, but Brent, there's so much more."

Brent sat silently as Courtney and Sue tag-teamed the significant details of the past few hours. When Courtney received the news about the flight, Claire

panicked. She was upset, but also concerned about Tony's reaction if he learned about it while with Catherine. Claire was certain that Catherine was responsible. Once Sue was on her way to stay with Courtney, Claire took Nichol and headed over to the estate. No one really knows what happened there. They only know that Tony is currently in police custody, and Claire is at the hospital with pending charges of attempted murder as well as aiding and abetting a fugitive.

"Thank God, Emily's here. She has Nichol," Courtney added.

Brent tried to process as he fought the onset of emotion. His brow glistened with perspiration at the realization: he was supposed to be dead. Derek Burke, Sharon Michaels, the pilot, and copilot were all dead. That wasn't all: Tony had been arrested and Claire had charges pending. That wasn't how it was supposed to happen. The FBI promised that no charges would be filed against Claire.

"I need to get to them," Brent said.

"You two need some time alone, before the kids arrive," Bev suggested.

Brent thought about Claire's words in Meredith's book. She'd already lived through hell, and he'd done nothing to help. He wasn't dead—he was alive. Brent wouldn't sit back again and do nothing. He couldn't. "I'm fine. I'm not doing this because it's my job. I want to help them. I have knowledge and proof. I need to get the FBI involved. The Iowa police don't realize all that has been done and the deals that have been made. With Meredith's book out there, I'm guessing they won't be willing to listen to Tony. I have to go."

Courtney wiped her eyes and nodded. "Then I'm going with you. I'm not letting you out of my sight, and I need to be sure they're both all right—and that Nichol Courtney's safe and sound."

CHAPTER FOUR

March 2014

Tony

Friendship multiplies the good of life and divides the evil.

—Baltasar Gracian

THE CINDER-BLOCK WALLS matched those from his memory. Only now, it wasn't his grandfather who was led to and fro by a guard; it was Tony. This was different than when he'd been questioned by the FBI: at that time Tony had hope. He'd had hope of finding Claire, hope that the FBI would reveal something to him, and hope of being free. Sometime in the past year, his hope bloomed and blossomed. In paradise it was alive and well. During the last few hours, it wilted before his eyes and lay at his feet gasping for its final breath. Tony gathered the fortitude to fight the overwhelming cloud of doom that threatened everything he held dear.

He suddenly realized how simplistic his existence had been. Decision-making had been much easier without emotional attachment. Now, every thought process pointed in one direction—his family.

While in paradise, the arrogance Tony had possessed for most of his life transformed into something different, something deeper. Tony couldn't explain it because he didn't completely understand it. However, a year ago, Anthony Rawlings would've used every resource at his disposal to free himself from the Iowa City Police and clear his name. For what? The answer was simple and ingrained. He would have done it to maintain appearances. Never would he want to admit to the world or anyone else that he was capable of the heinous acts described in Meredith Banks' book, much less the litany of crimes yet to be revealed.

Now, waiting alone for Tom and others from Rawlings Industries' legal department to arrive, Tony wasn't thinking about his own freedom, or even

his own reputation. His thoughts were a blur with concerns about his wife and daughter as well as the mind-numbing blow of Catherine's confessions.

His grandfather.

Tony could barely stomach the reality: Catherine Marie London, the woman he'd trusted like a sister, confessed to willfully poisoning and ultimately killing Nathaniel. He tried to grasp that new reality. His grandfather's imprisonment and resulting death had been the catalyst for everything—every plan, every name on their list, and every consequence. Sherman Nichols and Jonathon Burke had collected evidence that led to Nathaniel's conviction, but they weren't responsible for his death, as Tony had believed for most of his life. It had all been a farce.

Tony recalled his dream...the envelope.

In his dream a year ago, Nathaniel had told Tony he'd failed. For the first time, Tony saw through the veil of crimson that had clouded his vision for so many years. Nathaniel never wished Anton a life of vengeance. Family, no matter how dysfunctional, had always been of utmost importance to him. He wished a full envelope for all of his loved ones. Never would he have wished harm to Anton, his wife, or his child, no matter who they were or to whom they were related. Even with Samuel's testimony, Nathaniel never condemned Samuel to pay. Family was exempt.

In the still of the interrogation room, Tony's memories screamed for attention as thoughts of his grandfather's medical records clamored for recognition. When Tony closed his eyes, he saw Nathaniel in a room similar to the one where Tony sat. He remembered his grandfather's voice, still strong and demanding, rambling about debts and children of children. Now, in the clarity provided by the new information, Tony wondered if any or all of those ramblings could have been brought on by the dementia-like side effects of the medication.

The person who ultimately deserved to pay for the crimes against so many was undoubtedly Catherine Marie. She took Nathaniel's wishes, vindicated them, and orchestrated a life-consuming scenario. A red hue seeped from the corners of the small room within the Iowa City jail as Tony assessed the damage. Everything began with hate and lack of forgiveness. That said, Catherine wasn't the only perpetrator. Samuel, Tony's father, was also responsible. His hatred of Catherine influenced his decision-making regarding Nathaniel's medication. That vengeance created the symptoms in Nathaniel that Catherine misconstrued as dementia.

Tony wanted to believe that Catherine's poisoning of Nathaniel was the selfless act of a concerned wife, not the homicidal act of a psychopath, but he was done seeing her through his grandfather's lens. Nathaniel had only been months away from release. Catherine Marie Rawls had had the proverbial world at her fingertips. She had a man who loved her, respected her, and

promised her a future. Maybe Nathaniel's wealth had dwindled, but at the very least, Nathaniel had the money overseas. If only she'd waited, taken him home, and allowed his medications to be re-evaluated.

Tony shook his head. *If only...*

Wasn't that the phrase of the day?

If only Nathaniel had lived. If only Brent hadn't gotten on that plane. If only Derek Burke hadn't found his way into Sophia's life. If only Tony and Catherine had never complied their list of names. If only his life had crossed paths with Claire's in another way...

Tony could go on for hours thinking about that list: Sherman Nichols. Tony remembered the first time he saw that name. It was during his investigation of Cole Mathews, Sherman's alias. He remembered the pride he felt as he supplied Nathaniel with that information. He'd done what he'd been asked to do, what Anton knew Nathaniel was incapable of doing. Tony's report didn't only contain Sherman's name, but the names of his family. It was more than his grandfather had requested, but that's what Anton did—more, above and beyond. That report contained the names of Sherman Nichols' wife, Elizabeth; son, Jordon; daughter-in-law, Shirley; and granddaughters, Emily and Claire.

Tony's empty stomach twisted. Every time he pointed his finger at Catherine, four pointed back toward him. He couldn't blame her for everything. Without his initial research, the entire Nichols family would've been spared. His face flushed. When Tony disclosed that list of names to his grandfather, Claire was six years old. A sickening feeling brought a bad taste to his mouth as he imagined what Nichol would be like at that age. What did Tony want for his daughter at that age? The answer was simple: security and innocence. Wasn't that the same thing Jordon and Shirley had wanted for Claire?

Catherine not only murdered Nathaniel, but Sherman, Jordon, and Shirley Nichols. During her confessions, she'd admitted to singlehandedly eliminating an entire branch of Claire's and ultimately Nichol's family tree. Remorse and guilt took a backseat to red-hot rage as Tony remembered the scene at the estate and envisioned the determination and hatred in Catherine's cold, gray eyes. She'd had the gun and had wanted to hurt *his* family. If she'd succeeded this afternoon, the entire Nichols line would be gone. The way she looked at Claire and Nichol. Hell, not only them: she had John and Emily locked in a suite with poisoned water. The bounds to her depravity knew no limits.

How had he been so wrong for so long? Had Samuel seen something in Catherine all those years ago that she'd somehow hidden from Nathaniel and Tony?

The door opened and Officer Hastings entered, bringing Tony's thoughts

back to the present. “Mr. Rawlings, we have a couple more questions for you.”

“Where are my attorneys?”

“They called and are on their way.”

Tony sat taller. “I believe I’ll wait. It’s in my best interest to postpone your questions until their arrival.”

“Mr. Rawlings, you aren’t calling the shots here. We want to know where you’ve been for the last six months?”

Tony’s jaw clenched in defiance as he silently stared at Officer Hastings.

“Perhaps you’d like to know about Ms. Nichols?” the officer baited.

“Mrs. Rawlings.” Tony glared. “Where is she?”

“Do you have proof of your marriage to Ms. Nichols?” Hastings clarified, “Your second marriage.”

Tony looked down at his left hand. Shit, he didn’t even have a wedding band, but Claire did. Their marriage was legal. After the ceremony on the beach, they’d gone to the city with Francis and completed the necessary legal documents. In an effort to remain hidden, they’d decided to not forward that information on to the United States government. That may make verifying their marriage more difficult; however, it didn’t nullify the legality of it. People married in different countries all the time.

Hastings taunted, “Without proof of your marriage, you have no claims or rights to information regarding Ms. Nichols.”

The thin veneer of control Tony had held on his decorum, splintered as his fist hit the metal table. The otherwise still room exploded with the echoing vibrations as his determined voice rose above the clatter. “Rawlings! Mrs. Claire Rawlings,” Tony said through gritted teeth. “Do not make me correct you again. And, no, I don’t have our marriage license in my damn pocket, but I can get proof. We remarried on October 27, 2013. Ask Claire.”

The doors once again opened and Tom Miller, the co-lead attorney at Rawlings Industries and Tony’s personal friend entered. Without a word, he stopped Tony’s rebuttal, silently warning him to say no more. Laying his briefcase on the table he turned to Hastings and politely asked, “Officer, I’m sure you’re not questioning my client after he’s asked for legal counsel, are you?”

“I’m not questioning him about the case. We need preliminary information.”

Tom leaned forward and slowed his speech. “His name is Anthony Rawlings. He is the CEO of Rawlings Industries. Unless you charge him with a crime, I will be taking him out of here today.” He lifted his brows. “What other preliminary information do you require, Officer?”

“Mr. Miller, at the very least, we need answers. Your client has been missing for the last six months. He needs to explain—”

"My client is a wealthy man," Tom interrupted. "As such, he took an opportunity to travel and relax. I'm sure many people would like that ability. However, my client also oversees a billion-dollar company and therefore was never completely inaccessible."

Tony spoke over the terse exchange, "Now that my counsel is here, I want to speak with him privately." Tony suddenly worried that Tom's speculations could further compromise his agreement with the FBI since he'd promised the feds he'd be completely inaccessible. After all, it was a very tangled web, one that would take days of explanations to unravel.

Biting back his rebuttal, Hastings glared toward Tony and replied, "This isn't done. I'll be back." With that, he stood, knocked on the door, and left.

Once they were alone, Tony's eyes widened. "Tom? Do you know about Brent?"

Tom nodded. "Yeah, this has been the day from hell. Bev went over to Courtney's. She's the one who told me that you and Claire were back, and then I got the call saying to come here. Where the hell have you been?"

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. "It's a long story. Let me just start out by saying that Claire and I remarried. We have a daughter, Nichol. I'm going crazy here. I need to know that Claire and Nichol are all right."

"I don't know anything about your daughter. I've sent Stephens to the hospital to serve as Claire's counsel. The last message I received before I turned over my phone was that she's still unconscious." Before Tony could reply, Tom asked, "What the hell happened?"

"I need to get to her, Tom. I don't want anyone to make assumptions and hold anyone else responsible for my actions. I've been in contact with the FBI. There's an agent—his name is Jackson—in Boston. If you contact him, he'll corroborate my story and hopefully talk to the Iowa City police." Unable to stay seated any longer, Tony stood and paced the length of the room and back. "Today was a train wreck. I came back, we came back," he corrected, "because we were worried about John and Emily. We learned that they'd be at the estate, and we didn't trust Catherine."

Tom shook his head. "What? Wait. John and Emily? As in your ex-brother and sister-in-law, the same people who've told anyone and everyone that you were on the run after possibly killing Claire?"

"Yes, only no longer ex. I know what they've been saying. I also knew that if we contacted them they would stop. It doesn't make sense, but I hoped that if they continued their allegations, it would keep them safe."

"Safe? From...?"

"From Catherine!" Tony's volume rose. "Tom, you need to pay attention. I said that before. Catherine London, she's crazy. The woman is a psychopath. She's responsible for so much." He spun in a circle, as if his pacing was no

longer sufficient. “Brent!” His movements stilled. “She’s responsible for Brent’s death.”

“Tony, calm down. You’re not making sense. You’re talking about the executor of your estate, the woman who’s worked for you for as long as I can remember, and one of the gentlest women I’ve ever known.”

The small room shrunk as the walls closed in, threatening to suffocate, to steal the very air from his lungs. Appearance—the lesson Tony had learned and the one he’d taught—was mocking his every move. He was perceived as the tyrannical businessman, and Catherine was the kindly housekeeper. Tony took a deep breath, sat back down, and steadied his voice. “Tom, I can’t explain everything right now. Just find out if they plan to charge me, and what those charges are. Then get me the hell out of here. I need to find out what’s happening with Claire and Nichol. I need to help Courtney, and I don’t want to spend another minute in this damn room, much less a jail cell.” His voice deepened with determination. “I don’t fuck’n care how much it costs. You’re my attorney. Get me the hell out of here.”

“You were gone for six months. I can’t promise that we can get a judge to agree to bail. They’ll consider you a flight risk.”

“I’ll surrender my passport.”

Tom lifted a brow. “Did you use *your* passport the last time you left the country?”

Tony squared his shoulders. “We’re in Iowa for Christ’s sake. Any damn judge better grant me bail, or that judge will never achieve a higher bench in his or her whole damn career. I don’t care if they want to make the bail excessive for appearances. I’ll pay it. Just make it happen.”

Tom nodded. “What about the FBI? Are you sure they’ll corroborate this story?”

“Agent Jackson, with the Boston field office,” Tony bristled, “or Agent Baldwin, with the San Francisco field office. They’ve been our contacts. Get a hold of one of them. They knew where, or approximately where Claire and I were residing. They know more than I’m willing to—or have time to—say right now. Just make it happen. I need to get to my wife and daughter.”

“Tony, I’ll do what I can. Wherever you were, did you hear that Meredith Banks’ book...” Tom didn’t need to finish the sentence. Tony understood what he was implying.

Exhaling, he closed his eyes and sighed. “Get me out of here. Then we’ll talk.”

“I can’t promise it will happen today. I need to make some calls...” Tom’s voice trailed away as they both turned toward the opening door.

Tony glared, expecting another interruption from Hastings or another of Iowa City’s finest.

“I heard you were here,” Brent said with a sad gleam in his eyes.

Both Tom and Tony stared: their conversation momentarily muted by the appearance of their friend. The hope that had been wilting at Tony's feet found new life as Tony and Tom simultaneously stood in amazement.

After a moment, Brent clipped, "Are either of you going to say anything?"

The three men collided as Tony and Tom slapped Brent's back and fought the battle of their raw emotions. "But...how?" Tom managed.

Suddenly, the dull, pale room filled with the brilliance of optimism. "The plane didn't go down?" Tony asked. "Everyone is all right? Derek Burke?"

Darkness overtook their reunion. "No," Brent replied. "I wasn't on the plane. It did go down." Raising his brows, he asked, "So, you really know Burke? You wanted him brought to corporate?"

Tony shook his head. "I did know him and his wife. It's a long story, one that seems to keep getting longer by the minute. However, I didn't want him at corporate."

"He deserved to be here, Tony. He was good." Tom interjected.

Brent concurred. "Yes, just today in Chicago..." His voice trailed away.

Tom refocused the conversation. "I'm sorry about Burke and Michaels, but," he slapped Brent's back again, "I'm thrilled you're here. We have a lot of work ahead of us. Tony was just telling me a little about his time away and a connection with the FBI."

Brent turned to Tony. "I just got off the phone with Agent Jackson." Tom shot Brent a look of disbelief as Brent continued, "Part of your agreement was to not return to the US. He said you nullified your agreement."

"What does that mean?" Tony demanded. "They're going to throw our whole agreement out the window? What about Claire? They promised that she wouldn't—"

Brent interrupted. "One step at a time. Let me see what I can do."

"Get me out of here. Get any and all charges removed from Claire and anyone else. I'll take responsibility for what I've done, but my list of crimes is minuscule in comparison to what I learned today at the estate. It's all recorded. The cameras in the office should have gotten it all. Make sure you get that evidence."

"This is so farfetched, yet obviously you both know more than I do," Tom said.

"Tom," Tony's dark eyes turned toward his friend. "It was a need-to-know basis. The FBI wouldn't allow—"

"No. Don't worry about that. I'm happy to know you're not losing it. I was beginning to wonder," Tom replied with a grin. "We'll get you out of here as soon as we can."

"Today. And get me information on my family."

Brent and Tom nodded.

"Tom," Tony said, "I want you to go to the hospital. Stephens is a good

man, but when Claire wakes, she needs someone she recognizes. I have a bad feeling about Emily and John.”

“The people you risked everything to save?” Tom interjected.

Nodding, Tony continued. “They don’t even know what you know, and that is so little of this story. Everyone keeps questioning our marriage.” Tony’s eyes widened as he turned toward Brent. “I will not implicate anyone else, but as my counsel, please contact the person who can help get the necessary documents to prove we’re married. He’s good, Brent. I’d bet he could obtain what you need in a matter of hours. It would take the State Department days or weeks.”

Tom listened and shrugged. “Need to know?”

“Yes, some things are better left unknown for right now. Just go to Claire. Let Brent get me out of here.”

Tom nodded. “I will.”

“So will I,” Brent replied, and added, “Don’t answer any questions. Don’t let them bait you into anything. Tony, this is not as simple as before. You need to listen to me.”

A slight grin came to Tony’s lips as he once again slapped Brent’s shoulder. “Who am I to refuse the man who just overcame death?”

“What about Courtney?” Tom asked.

“She’s waiting for me here.” Brent’s eyes held the first spark of hope that Tony hadn’t seen in hours. “She wants to go to Claire, but right now she seems to have an issue letting me out of her sight.”

“Thanks Brent. I mean that.” Tony said, with the most heartfelt gratitude he’d ever known. “You too, Tom. I have total faith in both of you. Now get me the hell out of here.”

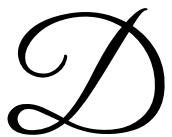
CHAPTER FIVE

March 2014

Tony

When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.

—Henry Ford

 DESPITE BRENT AND TOM'S best efforts, the booking of Mr. Anthony Rawlings did occur, as did the booking of Claire Nichols Rawlings. Her name was no longer in question: documentation had been produced verifying their marriage. It didn't matter who they were or what their last name was. The accusations were too blatant to not be addressed. The Iowa City Police Department had recorded the call from Ms. Catherine London. The transcripts were leaked to the press. She claimed that she feared for her life, said that Anthony Rawlings had returned from hiding and was talking irrationally about killing her and her guests. She wasn't only scared for herself but for the Vandersols. Why else would he have returned, but to stop their constant public accusations? When the police arrived, the evidence substantiated her claim. Ms. London had been shot. Simple ballistic tests found gun residue, proving that Claire Rawlings was the shooter. According to the Iowa City chief prosecutor, the case was sad, simple, and straightforward.

Due to the severity of the crime, the defendants were not granted stationhouse bail and were kept in custody until the complaint was filed and the first appearance before the judge was scheduled. Claire Rawlings was still in the hospital, and the debate had started about her future. In a bold move, the prosecutor had booked Claire in absentia.

The small Iowa City jail cell wasn't like anything Tony had ever experienced. Each minute inside of it lasted an eternity. He paced the confines for hours. Thankfully, Brent visited frequently. Of course, it was all in the

name of generating Tony's defense, but it was more than that: it was Tony's only reprieve, his saving grace. Each time Brent arrived at the jail, a guard would escort Tony from the claustrophobic cell.

"Tell me what's happening with Claire." Tony demanded, once they were again alone in the visitor's room.

"We don't know much. Roach is our main source of information, and Emily has banned him and anyone else from contact with Claire."

"I'm her husband. Roach got the documentation from Francis. How can she refuse me? I want to know what's happening with my wife and daughter. Besides, when Claire gets out of that hospital, she's not going to jail. I won't let that happen, not again. I don't know how she survived here the first time. She has the full legal staff at Rawlings ready for her defense. Emily can't possibly want to deny her own sister legal representation."

Brent shook his head. "She isn't denying her representation. John is representing her. He has his license back."

"In Iowa? He was never licensed for Iowa."

"No, he's acting as co-counsel with Jane."

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, closed his dark eyes, and released a long breath. "I'll pay them whatever they want. I don't like it, and I'd rather you were involved in her defense, but I think that John and Jane will have her best interests at heart."

Brent leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Roach is laying low. I told him to leave town, but he won't. I'm worried that he'll be charged with aiding and abetting or possibly accessory to commit a crime. He has a rather colorful history. It definitely could be used against him."

"He doesn't know a thing. No one does."

Brent's brows rose in question.

"That's my story—I'm sticking to it."

"You know," Brent continued, "all of your, Claire's, and Nichol's things were found in a hotel in Cedar Rapids. Apparently that was where you were staying once you came back to Iowa?"

"Roach is good. Don't expect him to take you up on that offer to leave town. I know he isn't sticking around for me, but damn, I'm glad he's sticking around. He probably has the hospital's network totally accessed and knows more about Claire than Emily does." Tony stood and walked toward the wall. "I've never liked her. She's never liked me." He spun around. "But I fuck'n saved them from that house and this is how the bitch thanks me? Keeping me totally out of the loop. She can't deny that we're married."

"Claire, according to Roach, is awake but unresponsive."

"What does that mean—unresponsive?"

"She isn't speaking to anyone, not even Emily or John."

"What about Nichol? Surely she'll respond to Nichol."

“We’re going totally by doctor’s notes only, but I don’t think she has.”

“Get me the hell out of here and let me see her. She’ll respond to me.”

“I’m working on it. Your first appearance before the judge is scheduled for early tomorrow morning.” Before Tony could blow at the prospect of spending another night in the jail, Brent continued, “Judge Jefferies will accommodate your proposal. It took a little longer to get on his docket, but the end result will be guaranteed bail. It was a trade-off: I thought it was the right move. If your bail request were denied at first appearance, it would be more difficult to have that decision reversed. You’re getting a lot of press on this as it is. I don’t want to add fuel to the fire.”

“Fine, one more night in this hell-hole and then I can sleep in my own bed. What about Claire? When is her first appearance?”

“I’m trying to learn. I’ve got a clerk at Evergreen’s office who will let me know as soon as the complaint is officially filed and the date is set. I’d assume today or tomorrow. They can use her medical condition as an excuse, but rarely does the first appearance go longer than seventy-two hours from the time the complaint is filed.”

“Whatever the amount is for her bail or mine, have it ready. Neither one of us will be in jail long. And what about Catherine? She needs to rot in this jail.”

“Tony, Eric showed me the footage from the office at the estate. Right now, you’re being charged with intimidation, accessory to commit murder, and eluding the FBI. If we show anyone that footage, I’m sure that your list of charges will increase. Are you sure you want all of that to get out there?”

Tony stared incredulously. “Are you kidding me? Hell yes! I’m willing to admit to anything to show the judge what that bitch is capable of doing.”

“Let’s get you out first. Then you can take the tapes to Evergreen.”

Tony’s head ached as he massaged his temples. “She sure as shit better not be anywhere near my house.”

“She’s still in the hospital. That’s why I believe we have time. She’s playing the victim card, and I don’t expect her to change her tune anytime soon.”

“Get me out of here.”

“Tomorrow morning, you’ll be out.”

“If Jefferies screws me, he’ll regret it.”

“He won’t,” Brent assured.



THE RAWLINGS ATTORNEYS made a little headway. Instead of being part of the normal parade of defendants, Anthony Rawlings was granted a private

first appearance in Judge Jefferies' courtroom. All members of the press and spectators were removed, leaving only Tony and Brent, as well as the prosecutor, stenographer, and judge.

The judge's tone resounded through the cavernous courtroom, speaking with the authority expected of one in such a position. He never faltered in his reiteration of the charges levied against the great Anthony Rawlings. Tony too, never wavered, as he stood before the judge dressed in his customary Armani tailored suit.

"Mr. Rawlings, you have been charged with intimidation, eluding federal agents, assault with the intent to commit bodily harm, two counts of false imprisonment, and accessory to attempted murder. While most of these charges are misdemeanors, accessory to commit murder and false imprisonment are felonies. Accessory to attempted murder can be punishable by up to five years in a federal penitentiary, while each charge of false imprisonment can reach a maximum penalty of twenty years. Do you understand these charges?"

Standing confidently, Tony's dark eyes shot toward Brent. He hadn't mentioned the false imprisonment charge. Turning back toward the judge, Tony replied, "I do, Your Honor."

"Do you also understand that you may not leave the country before or during these proceedings?"

"I do."

"Very well, it is the opinion of this court that bail will be set at—"

"Judge Jefferies," Marcus Evergreen interrupted. "While I want to believe Mr. Rawlings that he will not flee, he definitely has the means, and due to recent events, the ability to disappear. We recommend that Mr. Rawlings' request for bail be denied."

"Thank you for your recommendation, Counselor. This is my courtroom, and it is my opinion that Mr. Rawlings has ties to this community, as well as a family. I have decided to grant bail in the amount of \$10,000,000."

Tony's shoulders relaxed as he flashed a grin at Brent. It was one thing to have a promise of bail: it was quite another to have it said aloud in court.

Mr. Evergreen pleaded, "Judge, then we ask that Mr. Rawlings surrender his passport into the custody of the court until such time when all the proceedings have completed."

"Mr. Rawlings, will that be necessary?"

"No, judge, I will not leave the country. I intend to be near my family."

"I believe you have your answer, Mr. Evergreen. Now, Mr. Rawlings, you are aware that you have a right to counsel, and if you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you."

Brent replied, "Mr. Rawlings has counsel, Your Honor."

"Very well, we're done here. Next..." Judge Jefferies proclaimed with a

strike of his gavel, allowing Tony to walk as a free man out the doors of the courtroom. Suddenly, the stillness of the nearly empty room was replaced with a gallery of reporters shouting questions.

“Mr. Rawlings, tell us your side of this story.”

“Was your wife trying to kill you—again?”

“Where have you been?”

“Why did you remarry?”

Tony and Brent remained silent as they pushed through the crowd, exited the Johnson County District Courthouse, and slipped into a waiting car. Eric smiled into the rearview mirror as he sat behind the steering wheel. “It’s good to have you back, Mr. Rawlings.”

“Thank you, Eric, it’s good to be back. Take me to the hospital. I want to see my wife.” Tony turned to Brent. “What the hell was that false imprisonment charge?”

Brent looked up from his phone. “I just heard about it minutes before we went into the courtroom.”

“Who the hell did I restrain?”

“We can get that charge dropped once we produce the tapes. Don’t worry about it.”

Tony tried to concentrate, but concerns about Claire kept interrupting his thoughts. “Wait—what are you saying? Who am I charged with imprisoning? I didn’t imprison Catherine.”

“Tony, concentrate on Claire and Nichol. Let me worry about this.”

“Two counts at twenty years a piece seem worthy of my concern.” Tony sighed. “Fine. I still can’t believe it about Sophia. Did you do what I asked?”

“Yes, Derek’s parents were contacted and Rawlings Industries has offered to help in any way with the arrangements.”

“Good.” Tony’s mind went back to his wife. Roach’s reports had gone to Brent and ultimately to Tony throughout Tony’s seventy-two hours of incarceration. Roach had accessed the hospital’s network, as well as Emily and John’s phones. He was getting an array of medical notations from the hospital and personal comments from their text messages. The latest information was that Claire was awake, speaking, and exhibiting amnesia type symptoms: incoherent speech, lack of recognition of loved ones, and the inability to answer simple questions. Though Emily authorized tests and scans to try to learn the cause of her sudden psychosis, the results were inconclusive. Tony wondered if Claire could be faking it, trying to save herself from prison. He knew she didn’t mean to pull that trigger. It was an accident. Tony claimed it was self-defense. When he spoke with her, he planned to reassure her and explain that with her lawyers and all the resources that Rawlings’ legal could provide, she’d be cleared in no time.

The consequences of Tony’s decisions continued to harm his family. He

swores that Claire would never again be subjected to the inhumanity of a jail cell. Then he'd think about Nichol. It broke his heart to think of their daughter without her mother or father. It wasn't right.

From Roach's monitoring of the Vandersols' cell phones, Tony knew that Emily was caring for his daughter. That wouldn't last. Tony intended to bring her home with him immediately. He'd hire a nanny to help until Claire was better. First and foremost, Tony wanted to get to Claire.

As Eric weaved through traffic, Tony barked orders into his cell phone, telling Patricia to get recommendations for reputable nannies. He also touched base with Roach, happy to be able to contact him directly. Tony, too, told Roach that he should leave town. Of course he refused.

"I'm not done with my job. I don't leave unfinished work."

Tony grinned. "I know I'm not the appreciative type, but Claire is. So, for right now, I guess it's my job. Thanks for everything. She was definitely right about you."



ERIC PULLED THE CAR up to the front of the hospital.

"You don't need to babysit me," Tony said to Brent.

"Yes, I do. I know how you feel about the Vandersols and how they feel about you. You don't need any more charges filed against you."

Tony shrugged. Brent was probably right. They made their way up to Claire's room. As the elevator doors opened, a woman with short dark hair stepped forward. "Mr. Anthony Rawlings?"

"Yes."

She reached in her bag and pulled out a large envelope. Handing it to Tony, she said, "You have been served."

"What the hell?" Tony asked in disbelief as the woman entered the elevator, the doors closed, and Brent and Tony were left staring at the envelope.

"Let me see that," Brent said as he reached for the envelope and opened the flap.

Tony moved to Brent's shoulder so they could both read the words. It didn't take long for the meaning to be clear. Tony staggered. "A restraining order, for both Claire and Nichol? They can't be serious! I'm going to see my wife."

"No, Tony. You can't afford to break this order. It'll land you back in jail."

"I don't give a damn about some piece of paper. I haven't seen Claire since the shooting. No one is keeping me away from her or Nichol," he added.

Brent reached for Tony's arm.

"Don't do it, Brent. Don't try to stop me." Tony's dark eyes glared.

"I'm doing what needs to be done. I'm going to bet when we turn that corner, there are policemen outside of her room. Husband or not, Anthony Rawlings or not, you can't walk through a restraining order. The day is young. Let me find out the allegations and why this was granted. We'll get it overturned, hopefully today."

Through clenched teeth, Tony seethed. "Get me out of here before I add murder to my list of charges. So help me God, if I see my in-laws..."

CHAPTER SIX

March 2014

Brent

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

—Lord Acton

THE NIGHT BEFORE, Brent had ventured further into Meredith's book. It wasn't that he wanted to know the details, but with everything that was happening, he believed that he needed to know. The recent memories of the three of them, Claire, Nichol, and Tony in his kitchen and living room, gave Brent the strength to read with an open mind. It was a luxury not held by many. Other than Roach, Courtney, and himself, Brent wasn't sure of anyone else who knew how far the Rawlingses' relationship had progressed.

My Life as It Didn't Appear: Chapter 2...

I COULDN'T remember what happened, but I knew it had. I knew that somehow and for some reason, my life had changed. My body ached, each movement evidence of the atrocities I suffered, atrocities cloaked in veiled memories that my mind kept locked behind my conscious recollection. When I finally awoke, I didn't move or make a sound, fearful of what or whom my actions may alert. I lay still for the longest time, utilizing my other senses. I heard silence. It's true that it's audible: a buzzing that drones on and on. While the blankets against my exposed skin were soft and comforting, I fought to deny the aroma of the bed where I lay. Instead, I drifted in and out of sleep. With time, my mind cleared and the calmness of the room gave me the

strength to move.

Though the suite where I was kept was beautiful and lavish, I was too focused on survival and escape to notice the opulence. Despite my circumstances, I held onto false hopes that I could make both goals a reality. With each step on my tender legs or the sight of my marred reflection, the hope dimmed. The reality was suffocating: I'd been used, physically abused, and undeniably raped.

I remember thinking that things like this didn't happen to real people. This was the storyline for TV shows, movies, and books—not for real life. Yet, for some reason...it was now my life.

I had vague memories of fighting, none which ended well. As the recollections began to surface, I understood with painful clarity that I was no match physically for the man I'd recently met. Not only had he overpowered me, but my reception of his advances in Georgia had also opened the door to his mental domination. With an overwhelming sense of defeat, I recalled surrendering, not having the strength to continue the fight. As I cried under the hot spray of a much-needed shower, I found it difficult to blame anyone but myself. I'd lived my life independently and safely by following my rules. In a matter of days, Anthony Rawlings had broken my rules and shattered my world. No longer was I safe and independent. At twenty-six years of age, I was huddled in the corner of the cavernous shower, petrified of what the next hour would bring, and terrified of the suite door opening.

The ambiguity of my future was numbing. All I knew with some certainty was that I was trapped in a large suite with windows that looked out for miles and miles onto a dormant forest of gray, leafless trees. No longer was I in Atlanta... but where was I? How did I get here? And... could I handle the answers?

The fear of learning my location was equally as upsetting as the prospect of seeing the dark eyes that I knew in the pit of my stomach would return to that opulent cell. I was a prisoner at the mercy of my captor. At some moment in those first few hours of wakefulness, I convinced myself that there'd been a mistake—a terrible mistake. Perhaps it was a misunderstanding or maybe a mistaken identity. No matter the reason, survival instincts told me that it wasn't enough for me to believe there'd been a mistake: I needed to convince the man with the key to my freedom. Naively, I believed that was possible.

In what I later realized was a game of wits, I was informed of Mr. Rawlings' impending return. I was told that he would come to my suite at 7:00 PM, and that I was to be dressed and ready to dine. It was as if each minute were more absurd than the one before. My brain truly had difficulty keeping up.

Instead of being left alone to my own devices, which in hindsight would have more than likely resulted in another painful lesson, I was assisted with

dressing, fixing my hair, and makeup. The entire scenario was unreal and vulgar. I was being helped to make myself presentable for the man who'd kidnapped and abused me. As much as I planned to state—or even plead—my case of mistaken identity, in the pit of my stomach, I feared that with the help of the kind housekeeper, I was doing nothing more than preparing myself for more abuse.

The man who entered my suite that night was somewhere between the charismatic man at the bar and the monster I'd seen glimpses of during my abduction. Though intimidating, he was also debonair. It's an odd combination, one that left me reeling with uncertainties. To say I was scared to face him would have been an understatement; however, after an afternoon of attempting to escape, I knew my only mode of freedom was through him. Though I tried to hide my trepidation, the physical cues were obvious: my entire body trembled merely at the sight of his black eyes.

Anthony Rawlings had the darkest eyes I'd ever seen. With time I learned to read the emotions that swirled in their abyss. But on that night, all I witnessed behind his eyes was an impenetrable hunger that I didn't understand. How could I? I was figuratively walking the tightrope of my life.

We did dine—or should I say that he ate. My nerves were too stretched to even consider consuming food. I wanted to appear strong; however, I doubt that I did. He spoke casually about the meal, dining, and trivial things. Had my body not throbbed with the abuses from the night before and my muscles not been as taut as metal stretched to its brink, I could have pretended I was on a date with an eloquent gentleman. That mirage—or should I say charade—faded into the reality of my situation once he'd finished his meal.

He told me to stand and I did. It wasn't until he told me to remove my dress that I found my voice.

"I think we need to discuss this..." was what I remember saying. He didn't want to discuss it. Anthony Rawlings had other plans. A second later my dress lay shredded on the floor, torn from my body. Unfortunately, that night will live forever, burned into my memory.

Does one fight when one knows she can't win? Does one protest when she knows it falls on deaf ears? Does one pray for escape, even if death is the most viable alternative? I only know how I can personally answer those questions. I pray that those of you reading this will never need to learn your answers.

The chapter wasn't over, but Brent couldn't read anymore.



THOSE WORDS FROM Claire's memoirs rushed to the forefront of Brent's mind as he stared at his best friend in the hospital corridor. The look in Tony's eyes was darker than Brent had ever seen. Was that what Claire had been forced to face years ago?

Truly, Brent's bravado spoke volumes about the evolution of their friendship. The reality of Brent successfully removing Tony from that hospital hallway was something that years ago would probably not have even been attempted. Somehow, Claire's plight gave Brent strength. She moved mountains when it came to Tony—it was doable. The last thing Anthony Rawlings needed to do was to walk through a restraining order, and just because they both knew that, it didn't ease the tension as they rode back to Rawlings Industries in impenetrable silence.

The lack of conversation didn't bother Brent. He had a lot to do. Once he had Tony back to the office and safely tucked away, Brent planned to visit the judge who'd signed the restraining order. Maybe it was against protocol, but he'd learned to work the system. As they rode, he sent a message to his assistant telling her to set up the meeting.

From what little Brent had read, he believed that Meredith's book was the cause or at least the bias for the order. He didn't doubt the accuracy. Beginning with Claire's testimony from what seemed like a lifetime ago, to the book now sitting comfortably on the New York Times bestseller list, Claire's story had stayed consistent. There was no reason to doubt what the entire world now knew. However, as he'd counsel Tony, there was no reason for Anthony Rawlings to publicly confirm it, either.

While reviewing emails, Brent came to the one he received just prior to Tony's first court appearance—the one stating that two charges of false imprisonment had been added to his list of infractions. Brent was confident that the same two people who alleged they had been falsely imprisoned were the same ones who'd filed for the restraining order. He was immediately thankful he hadn't told Tony anything more about the charges. He was even happier that the Vandersols hadn't made their presence known at the hospital. Entering Claire's room could have been the match to ignite the explosion that none of them could survive.

They weren't far from the office when Brent asked, "Are you sure you want to go into Rawlings? You haven't been there in months."

Tony turned as if pulled from a trance. "Where the hell else would I go? Well, other than to my wife and daughter, but I can't. I have an order restricting me to stay at least one hundred yards away and to make no attempt to contact. My home is still being investigated as a crime scene, not to mention the fire, water, and smoke damage. Hell, I can't even go there."

"I've got a call into Judge Temple about the restraining order. Give me some time. And Courtney wants you to come and stay with us."

“I think a hotel would be better right now.”

“It’s your decision, but our home is less likely to draw reporters.”

Tony nodded. “Good point.”

They’d been through Tony’s rendition of the events a hundred times, but Brent wanted to hear it again. “Before we get to the office, tell me what happened from the moment you got to the estate with Eric and Phil.”

“I’ve told you, and you’ve watched the office tapes. What more do you want to know?”

“Specifically, I need to know about John and Emily. They weren’t on the office tapes.”

Tony’s brow furrowed. “No, they were locked in Claire’s suite. There are cameras in there,” he added somewhat sheepishly, “as you know.” His normal tone returned. “Those tapes should also be available. Have Eric or Roach find them. Roach and Eric should also be able to compile the entire chain of events leading to the Vandersols’ entrance to the suite. There’s even a way to electronically verify that the lock is set on the suite door. Hell, most of the damn house is under surveillance. That’s how I knew where to go to find them. Roach texted me their location...” He lifted his phone. “...check my phone records; it should be on there.” Tony’s voice trailed away as he added, “I didn’t know where Sophia was. I didn’t get her location...”

“No one’s blaming you for Sophia.”

Darkness once again prevailed. “What the hell are you saying? Is someone blaming me for John and Emi—are you telling me they’re the cause of the false imprisonment charges?” Tony’s thoughts and sentences overlapped each other as they came forward at untold speed. “I risked everything to help them, and they’re saying it was *me* who put them in there and locked the damn door? It wasn’t *me*: it was *her!*”

“I think you’re right about sharing the surveillance tapes. I wanted to wait and hopefully keep them suppressed, but I don’t think we can. I think we need them. I’ll call Evergreen’s office and set up a meeting.”

“Get this damn restraining order lifted first. I need to see Claire, and I want to see Nichol.”



IN ORDER TO get the restraining order dismissed, Brent needed to contest the order on Tony’s behalf and ask for a hearing before Judge Temple. Before he followed protocol, Brent wanted to hear the grounds that the good judge heard to get a better understanding of why the order had been granted. His request may be slightly out of order: in most cases forms were filed and time went unaccounted for; however, this was different—this was Anthony

Rawlings.

By the time they arrived at Rawlings Industries, Brent's assistant had his response. Esquire Simmons had been granted a 3:00 PM meeting with Judge Temple in his chambers. Once he arrived, the judge wasted little time.

"Good afternoon, Counselor. Make this quick. My docket's full." Judge Temple said, looking up from his desk. He was a stocky man with a thick neck. No doubt he was more comfortable as he currently appeared with his robe hanging around his shoulders, unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a loosened gray tie and wrinkled white shirt.

"Thank you," Brent began, "for granting me this meeting. I'm here about the restraining order—"

"Ah yes. You see, I thought perhaps you were here to apologize for shutting me out of Mr. Rawlings' first appearance. As a judge in district court who hears a wide array of cases on a regular basis, I've always been a supporter of your client. You can imagine how surprised I was to see his first appearance taken from my docket and put onto Jefferies'. Well, that's no matter. You got what you wanted. I heard Mr. Anthony Rawlings made bail."

Brent stood dumbfounded.

"Come, Counselor, time is money."

"Yes," Brent said, "my client was granted bail. I'm here today about the restraining order that you granted for Jane Allyson, representative of Emily Vandersol, who assumes that she is speaking for..." he emphasized, "...*Mr. Rawlings' wife*."

"The medical records submitted as evidence state that Mrs. Rawlings is currently incapable of making her own decisions or even voicing her opinion."

"Mrs. Rawlings is married, and as her husband, Anthony Rawlings is legally—"

"At the time of the complaint, Mr. Rawlings was being held in the Iowa City jail. As a prisoner, he was relieved of his rights."

"He's out."

"On bail."

"Yes," Brent conceded, "on bail. Innocent until proven guilty. He is her husband."

"Mr. Simmons, I assume you've heard of the book *My Life as It*—"

Brent felt his blood pressure rising. "Surely this court is not making decisions based on works of fiction?"

Judge Temple's neck and cheeks reddened as his voice lowered. "If you're suggesting that I look at anything other than the facts, Counselor, I will find you in contempt."

"Judge, Mrs. Rawlings remarried Mr. Rawlings. We have legal documentation of their union—or reunion. They have a daughter who needs

her parents. Since Mrs. Rawlings is incapacitated at this time, their daughter needs her father. There's no evidence to suggest that Mr. Rawlings is a threat to his wife or his dau—”

“Are you confident?” Judge Temple interrupted.

“I'm confident that he is no longer a threat. His family means the world to him, and he'd do—”

“Save it for court, Counselor, or maybe the *Lifetime* movie. In the meantime, there's protocol for this, and you're not following it. I don't care who your client is. I will *not* in good conscience allow a man who has obviously physically and mentally abused a woman and stolen her from her life—twice, I may add—access to do it again when that woman is suffering a mental break at his hands. The evidence appears to support the premise that Mrs. Rawlings was reaching out in desperation, as she did once before, in an attempt to free herself from your client's clutches. How many times does Ms. Nichols need to *attempt to murder* your client before she succeeds? Mr. Simmons, this restraining order can be seen as a benefit to both your client and Ms. Allyson's. Regardless of the validity of Ms. Banks' book, these two people do not belong together. As an officer of the court, I must look at what is best, not what is popular.

“Besides what is best for Ms. Allyson's client, I must also consider the best interests of the minor. Her safety is a top priority. At this time, both her mother and father have felony charges pending against them. I'm in full support of Ms. Allyson's contention that for the child's safety, she needs to be removed from this volatile environment. Currently, the Vandersols have been granted temporary custody. Child protective services have been involved. I suggest that you do your research before we meet in court.”

Before Brent could respond, Judge Temple concluded their meeting. “Consider that advice my support of your client, since I was deemed unable or untrustworthy enough to be the one to grant him bail.” Temple sat taller and squared his shoulders. “I guess we'll never know how that would have gone.” He shrugged. “That is all. I look forward to seeing Mr. Anthony Rawlings on my docket.”

Brent left the judge's chambers in a daze. Damn political hard-balling—that was all this was. Allyson found the judge who'd been denied the ability to decide bail and played to his ego—not like it was difficult to play to Temple's or any other judge's ego. As soon as he got back to Rawlings, Brent intended to subpoena Claire's medical records. Until they officially arrived, he knew how they could get a head start: Roach's information. It might not exactly hold up in court, but it would kick-start the medical legal team at Rawlings to get going on their research.

Brent called Roach. “This is Brent Simmons. Can you get me everything you can find on Claire's medical treatment, diagnosis, and prognosis? We'll

subpoena the official records soon enough, but this will help our research get started.”

“I’ll have everything I can find to you as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, we appreciate your help. You know, usually I wouldn’t ask—”

“Unusual circumstances warrant unusual procedures,” Phil replied.

“Yeah,” Brent said. “This definitely qualifies as unusual. Thanks again.”

He hung up.

While Brent put those wheels into motion, the next stop would be Evergreen’s office. He sure as hell hoped that would go better than his chat with Judge Temple. His goal was to get the false-imprisonment counts dropped before the additional accessories to murder and attempted murder charges went on.

The raise that Brent gave himself about six months ago wasn’t going to cut it. If Rawlings Industries didn’t fail entirely under this burden, Brent’s 2013 taxes would show a significant increase in income. Friend or not, with Brent’s head pounding, this shit deserved more money!

CHAPTER SEVEN

March 2014

John

There are times when the mind is dealt such a blow it hides itself in insanity. While this may not seem beneficial, it is. There are times when reality is nothing but pain, and to escape that pain the mind must leave reality behind.

—Patrick Rothfuss

SITTING IN THE quiet hospital room, John assessed his sister-in-law. Claire was married. She'd actually married that bastard again! Once the foreign documentation was delivered to Jane Allyson, John had stared at it until he'd nearly bored holes in the pages. The attorney in him wanted to prove the documentation was false or unlawful but he knew it wasn't. Perhaps it wasn't the lawyer in him; maybe it was the brother-in-law. There'd been a time when Emily, Claire, and he'd been close. John truly did consider, or used to consider Claire a sister. She still was like a sister, John reminded himself. After all, it wasn't unusual for families to have disagreements. Glancing toward the woman lying asleep on the bed, John wondered if the disagreements in this family could possibly be overcome.

Emily was at the hotel with Nichol, trying to rest. John was worried what the stress of this whole situation was doing to his wife and unborn child. Weren't pregnant women supposed to take it easy? Instead, Emily was dealing with not only her sister but also her niece and so much more. Memories of the fire at Rawlings' estate and being trapped in that room continued to haunt them both. Would the horrors of Anthony Rawlings ever end?

As John watched Claire sleep, his thoughts went back in time, to a time of innocence—when grades, sports, and girlfriends were the only concerns, when life was black and white. How do people not appreciate that age when it

occurs? Instead, everyone wishes for maturity. John sat in the vinyl chair with a sigh. Growing up wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. Their growth had started out well enough. Somehow, from early on, John knew that Emily was the girl for him. Truthfully, throughout everything they'd endured, he'd never doubted that. After all the recent darkness, it seemed as though life was finally looking up. He and Emily had a baby coming, John had a new job, and they were living the life in California. When he first started dating Emily, Claire was barely a teenager.

As John remembered her at that age, the tips of his lips rose slightly recalling the lanky adolescent with frizzy dark hair and an undeniable stubborn streak of independence. Though John found it endearing, it was something that often infuriated her older sister. He recalled many occasions when Claire chose her own path, despite her sister's advice. He blinked the moisture from his eyes as he mourned the woman Claire was never allowed to become. He also mourned the woman she had become. Either scenario was undeniably better than the one lying before him. Despite it all, or perhaps *because* of it all, his sister-in-law was a survivor. Whether it was the death of her parents, the loss of her job, or surviving her first marriage, Claire survived. Not only did she survive, each time she came back stronger. For that, John believed Jordon and Shirley would be proud. For that, he believed she would triumph once again. His sister-in-law was a phoenix. Whatever had occurred in her brain to make her the way she currently was would smolder and die. Claire would once again rise from the ashes.

John wanted to believe that. No, he *needed* to believe that, not just for him, but for Emily and Nichol.

Thinking about Nichol and the mess at hand, John remembered Claire's visit to California last summer. It had been the last time he or Emily had seen Claire—until now. During that visit, John had seen that same stubborn streak he'd known since she was a teenager. The only difference was that this time she directed it at them. Claire came to announce her engagement, claiming she was in love.

Really? In love with Anthony Rawlings?

Emily did her best to dissuade Claire and convince her to stay in California, reminding her of the things Anthony had done in the past. Truly, with their history, John and Emily were amazed that Rawlings had permitted Claire to travel to their home. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to persuade her to escape.

Claire assured them that it wasn't like it had been before—that this time was different. John remembered a conversation:

“Claire, look at you. You’re starting to show,” Emily said as she feigned excitement for her sister.

Claire’s hand fluttered over her midsection. “I know. It’s amazing. I’m starting to feel our baby move.” With each word, she glowed—not only her green eyes, which reminded John of his wife’s, but also her entire expression.

That glow faded as Emily retorted, “Really? Must you use the word our? You know this is 2013. There’s nothing wrong with raising this baby on your own. You made a mistake. It’s all right. Get away while you can. I mean, fine, if you want to take his money or child support or whatever, do it. But why, oh why, would you want to subject yourself and your child to a man like him?”

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” Claire replied matter-of-factly.

“Why?” Emily asked, “Because he’ll find out? That Clay-guy will tell him, won’t he?”

John didn’t try to hide his feelings regarding Anthony Rawlings. In his eyes, the man had ruined his career and sent him to prison. If it weren’t for Amber McCoy and SiJo, the life he and Emily lived wouldn’t be possible. Thankfully, the New York Bar Association had found new evidence and revisited the case. His license was in the process of reinstatement. Despite all of that, John was a litigator and as such tried to see both sides of the story, no matter how difficult. Therefore, when Claire stood and walked to the window of their Palo Alto home, John touched his wife’s hand, shook his head, and whispered, “Do you want to push her away?”

Knowing how much Claire meant to his wife and how much she had looked forward to her visit, Emily’s teary stare burned a hole in his heart. “Claire,” John said, “you know we love you. We always have. You have to understand where we’re coming from. He ruined your life. He ruined our lives. We’re just now making a recovery.”

Expecting to see sadness, Claire turned with a vengeance. “I’m not going to subject our child to this negativity regarding his or her father. Honestly John...and Emily,” she added, “I’m looking out on a pristine tree-lined street in one of the most affluent areas of the country. Emily, you say you’re taking a break from teaching. Why? I’ll tell you why. It’s because you can afford to do it. For the first time, you can afford it. You say Tony ruined your lives. I’m not saying he didn’t do things that are regrettable. I’m not downplaying the hell you or I went through. I’m saying we came out the other side and you know what? You don’t look too worse for wear. And I’m tired of hearing about Clay’s presence. Do you know why he’s here? Because both Tony and I knew that Tony wouldn’t be welcome. Clay isn’t spying on me: he’s protecting me. Did you all forget about Patrick Chester? My laptop still hasn’t been found. And, yes, Tony has money. That makes me a target for crazy people. I’d rather have Clay nearby than live in fear.”

“But if you weren’t with him, you wouldn’t be a target,” Emily tried.

“Our child would be. No matter what you say, or what you want me to do, this is my life, and I choose to live it with Anthony Rawlings. We’ve taken a long and unconventional road to get to where we are. But let me tell you: where we are is a good place. I want to have the two of you in our lives and the life of our child. That choice is yours. My child will not pay the price for the sins of his father, from you or from anyone else.”

Emily stood shell-shocked. “I’d hoped...” her words trailed away.

“What, Emily? You’d hoped I would come to California and decide to stay?”

Emily shook her head and then shrugged her shoulders. “I’d hoped that when John decided to take the job at SiJo we’d be together again, the three of us. Like it used to be.”

Though Emily’s cheeks were damp, Claire had yet to shed a tear as she spoke each word with conviction, “I’m not the little sister who needs you to tell me what to do. I’ll admit that I’ve lived through hell, but so has Tony. You don’t know the half of it, and frankly, it’s none of your business. But we’ve come out stronger. I’m stronger, and I want our child to have both parents. It’s more than that: even without our child, I want to marry Tony again.”

“It seemed like you and Harr—”

“Stop,” John interrupted. “Claire’s made her point. She didn’t come here to escape. She came to tell us about her engagement. We don’t have to like it, but I don’t believe Claire came to Palo Alto for our permission.”

Emily exhaled. “How can you take her side? We’ve discussed this. Think of everythin—”

John cupped his wife’s cheeks. “I’m not taking her side. I’ve always been on your side and I always will be. Don’t you see? So will Claire. She’ll always choose Anthony, just like I’ll always choose you. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to be? We can also be on Claire’s side and the side of our niece or nephew.” He turned to Claire. “That’s the best I can offer you right now. I admit that I have a lot of resentment. I’m not as ready to forgive as you. Maybe that makes you a better person. I’ve always thought you were pretty special.”

Tears teetered on Claire’s lids. “Thank you, John...Emily?”

Emily took a ragged breath and leaned into John with her head shaking from side to side.

“Emily, we’re all the family we’ve got. I want our child to know and love his aunt and uncle. I hope someday Tony and I can be the same for your children. Maybe someday you will want the same thing.”

Emily left John’s embrace and walked to her sister. “Baby steps. I’ll support you and your baby. I want to be Aunt Em,” she added with a sad grin.

The irony helped to coat John's cheeks in fresh tears. Emily was being Aunt Em, and he was Uncle John. Nichol was absolutely beautiful. After a few days of fussing at the formula, she was eating and sleeping like a champ. The first time Claire had awakened, John called Emily and told her to bring Nichol to the hospital.

Claire acted confused, but John felt confident that her daughter would snap her back to reality. She didn't. The first time they tried, Claire held Nichol and cried. The next time that Emily brought her in the room, Claire just turned away and stared out the window. It was the saddest thing he'd ever seen.

The doctors explained it as a psychotic break—like a reprieve for the mind. Being a healthy, young woman, the prognosis was good. Yet no promises for the length of the episode could be made. The doctors said to take it one day at a time.

What made that increasingly difficult were the criminal charges facing Claire.

The police had tried to question her. She wouldn't answer anyone's questions about anything. Even Jane Allyson had been in and out trying to work on Claire's defense. Increasingly, it seemed that self-defense and temporary insanity would be the best route.

Once again, focusing on his sister-in-law, John prayed that her condition was *temporary*. As hard as this was for Emily and him, he couldn't imagine what Claire was enduring. Trying to pass time, John paced the hospital room. He'd done it for more hours than he could count. He knew the number of tiles in the floor as well as the number of tiles in the ceiling. At some point he had a random thought about why that number wasn't the same. The answer was obvious: the size of the tiles. The ones on the floor were square, while the ones on the ceiling were rectangle. His interior monologues were a simple means of diversion: one he'd used successfully while incarcerated. Life seemed to have a repeat button.

Whenever his thoughts returned to incarceration, John's blood pressure rose and his hands clenched unconsciously into fists. The next logical step in his stream of consciousness was Anthony Rawlings. Maybe Claire did love him, and maybe he was the father of that beautiful baby girl back at the hotel; nevertheless, he still deserved to be the one rotting in a prison cell—not John and not Claire. The idea that his sister-in-law could be convicted for a crime and once again Rawlings would go free was absurd.

That was why he and Jane went to Catherine London's hospital room. They were in search of the truth—of answers. They asked her what exactly had happened at the estate. After that conversation, accusing Rawlings with false imprisonment seemed a foregone conclusion. There was no way they could let Claire face felony charges and Rawlings some misdemeanor charge.

Knowing his depth of influence, especially in Iowa, he'd probably get off with a light sentence or pay a fine, get a slap on the wrist, and walk away scot-free.

John remembered the pain in Catherine's eyes, her expression one of devastation as she spoke of the fateful events. The only reason John and Jane were granted access to Catherine's guarded room was because they were Claire's attorneys. Even still, Catherine's attorney was also present.

"Catherine, how are you feeling?" John asked with true concern in his voice.

"Mr. Vandersol, I-I..."

John stepped closer. "Catherine, we've been through this before. I'm nothing like that man. Please call me John." Motioning to his side, he said, "This is Jane Allyson. She's Claire's defense attorney. We're hoping you could tell us something, anything, that would help with Claire's defense and help nail Rawlings to the proverbial wall."

The gray behind her pained eyes showed a spark of interest. "That's why you're here?"

Jane tenderly replied, "Ms. London, I understand this is difficult for you. You've worked for him for so long. It's understandable how devastating it would be to have someone you've trusted most of your life turn on you."

A single tear descended Catherine's cheek. "There's so much. Did you know Sophia Burke died?" More tears cascaded as she closed her eyes and shook her head. "And you, Mr.—I mean—John, the police said that you were trapped in the suite during the fire? I don't know how that could have happened. How did Mr. Rawlings even know where you were? I hadn't seen him in months. I thought he and Claire were dead..." Her voice trailed away.

Jane touched Catherine's hand. "Can you please tell us why you called the police?"

Catherine adjusted the buttons on the hospital bed. As she sat straighter, her expression turned into a grimace.

"How are you doing?" John asked.

"I'll be all right. The bullet didn't do any lasting damage. Thankfully, they were able to remove it, and it missed my vital organs." She winced as she settled into a more comfortable position. "I'm pretty sore. I don't think I'll be running any marathons for a while."

"Ms. London, why did you call the police?" Jane asked again.

Her gray eyes clouded as she replayed the memory of the crucial afternoon. "I had just had lunch with..." she looked toward John. "...you, your wife, and Sophia. Then I went into the home office to check my emails. When I opened the door, imagine my shock. Mr. Rawlings was seated at the

desk. It didn't take long for him to start accusing me of vile things. I had no idea what he was even saying. It didn't make any sense. He spoke about his grandfather and his parents. The way he was ranting and raving..." She closed her eyes and another tear found its escape. When she opened them, her voice was meeker, "It was like how he used to be to her. I was frightened."

John's license to practice law didn't give him that ability in the state of Iowa; nevertheless, he couldn't stop the question that had burned in him since he'd first learned the truth about Claire and Anthony's beginning. "Catherine, why didn't you help Claire back then?"

"I did all I could do. I tried to make it better."

John nodded. He'd heard the stories of how Catherine had been Claire's saving grace, especially during the first months. "But surely you knew what he was doing. Why didn't you report him?"

"I wanted to." She looked down to her lap and her voice trailed away. "I should have. I'm sorry, I was so scared..." After a deep breath she straightened her shoulders and continued, "That's why I called the police. After being away from him for so long, I felt stronger than I had in years. I refused to go back to the way things were. I didn't want that for Claire or for me. Then when she arrived, she was so scared. I could tell she felt trapped."

Jane pushed forward. "Why would Claire, the person you'd helped, try to shoot you?"

Catherine's head tilted from side to side. "I don't know. Was she? I mean, I was trying to protect the baby—Nichol, right?—from Mr. Rawlings. Claire was yelling. I don't know if she was trying to shoot me. That wouldn't make sense. Perhaps she was trying to finally be free. I can certainly relate." She turned again to John. "Is it true what the press is saying? Is it true that Claire isn't communicating with anyone?"

This time, John was the one to nod. "Damn press. Yes, it's true."

"How long do the doctors think it'll be...I mean, before she can remember?"

"They don't know. We'd hoped that she'd snap out of it before now. She rarely wakes, but when she does, she doesn't speak and only stares. It's like we're not even there. I've never seen anything like it."

Catherine's brows peaked. "She's not saying anything?"

"She only speaks in her sleep. She calls out for him."

"John, please tell Emily that I'm sorry I didn't do more for her sister. I truly tried to help, the only way I knew how."

"I will. Perhaps she'll be by to visit?"

For the first time since their arrival, Catherine smiled. "That would be nice. I'd like that."

Catherine's attorney spoke, "My client has been through a lot. If you'd like to return, contact me first. If you have no further questions..."

After their visit, John and Jane spoke for hours contemplating Claire's defense. It appeared clear: Claire didn't try to shoot Catherine. She was trying to get away from Anthony Rawlings, again. Unfortunately, the Iowa City police weren't as easily satisfied. Although her previous record had been expunged, everyone knew that the current charge of attempted murder levied against Claire Nichols Rawlings, was not her first. The question for her new legal team was how would Claire respond? The longer she remained incoherent, the more likely it seemed that Jane would be forced to file a *not guilty by reason of insanity* plea. While often an attempt at a lesser sentence, or more accurately hospitalization versus incarceration, this plea would be Claire's true stance. If things stayed status quo, medical authentication wouldn't be a problem.

John's visit to Catherine, seeing the fear in her eyes as she talked about Anthony's temper, helped him decide to pursue the protective order. This woman had worked for Rawlings for the better part of her life, and yet she seemed terrified. There was no way that John could sit back and let Claire and Nichol go back to him. Many years ago, when Emily and Claire's parents died, he took on the role as man of the house. It wasn't an old-fashioned *do as I say* role. No, it was one of protector and provider. Never had he considered it cumbersome. On the contrary, after knowing Jordon and Shirley Nichols, John felt it an honor to watch over both of their precious daughters. The way he saw it, he'd failed Claire too many times. Later that night as he rocked his niece to sleep, John Vandersol swore he wouldn't allow it to happen again, not to Claire and not to Nichol.

The morning of Anthony Rawlings' first court appearance, Jane Allyson insisted that neither John nor Emily be present in Claire's hospital room. She had a sheriff's deputy strategically positioned, ready to serve Rawlings with the protective order. The Iowa City policemen outside of Claire's door didn't hurt. Of course, they were present because Claire was officially in police custody. Jane promised that she'd stay with Claire, and if need be, she'd speak with Mr. Rawlings.

Had it not been for the gleam in her eye as she discussed a possible confrontation, John may have refused. However, that sparkle was present. Jane assured them that she'd had more than one run-in with the infamous Anthony Rawlings, and she wasn't intimidated. Though Emily didn't want to leave, John agreed. It would be better to have Rawlings walk through a restraining order and be greeted by Iowa City's finest and Jane Allyson than by Emily and John. The volatile scene had the potential of becoming a full-out war. John was done being Mr. Nice Guy.



IT'D BEEN A LONG few days. As the memories of everything began to quiet and much-needed rest crept upon John's tired body, he did his best to find a comfortable position in the hospital recliner by Claire's bed. So far, Anthony hadn't attempted to break the restraining order, and the police were still present. After all, she'd recently been officially booked and charged with attempted murder. John's only disagreement with the charge was the victim. Claire would never try to kill Catherine.

Just as sleep was about to win, the hospital door opened and Emily entered carrying the car seat Roach had given them only a few days ago. John rushed forward, kissed Emily's cheek, and reached for the small seat. "You shouldn't be carrying this all over."

Emily scoffed. "I'm fine. I'm tired, but carrying Nichol isn't going to hurt our baby. She barely weighs a thing."

His brow scrunched as he lifted the pink blanket. "Hi, little girl, why don't you weigh more? Aren't you eating for your Aunt Em?"

Stifling a giggle, Emily answered. "Oh, no. She's finally eating—and, boy, is she eating. I think maybe we're finding a routine."

John lifted Nichol, removing her from the confines of the straps and blankets as her little legs kicked. "I think she likes getting free of that seat." He glanced toward the bed. Though the monitors hadn't changed their monotonous beeps, Claire's eyes were open. John walked toward the bed. "Claire, look who came to see you. Can you please sit up?" Instead of moving, her eyes shut as if not hearing or recognizing the commotion around her.

"Claire, why don't you sit up? I'll get you some water," Emily prompted. More out of obedience, as Emily pushed the buttons on the bed, Claire moved herself to a sitting position. Once she was upright, Emily handed her a Styrofoam cup with a straw. When Claire didn't reach for it, Emily placed it closer. Claire leaned forward, and sucked from the straw. Lowering the side rail, Emily scooted next to her sister. "Hi, sweetie, I know you're hearing me. I think Nichol needs her mommy. What do you think?"

Again, she didn't respond.

John came forward and placed Nichol across Claire's lap. Emily encouraged Claire's movements while her daughter kicked with glee, rooting toward her mother. Unfazed, Claire sat stoically, gazing not at her beautiful child, but toward the blind-covered window. When Nichol's cries broke the trance, hers weren't the only cheeks that were damp.

CHAPTER EIGHT

March 2014

Harry

I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.

—FBI oath of office

ASSOCIATED PRESS:
Iowa City, Iowa, USA

The Iowa City Police Department has finally confirmed that Anthony Rawlings, missing CEO of Rawlings Industries, has been located and arrested in regard to an alleged incident occurring at his estate outside of Iowa City, Iowa, USA. This alleged incident also included Claire Nichols Rawlings, who was reported missing on September 4, 2013, by Mr. Rawlings himself.

According to Iowa City police records, unbeknownst to family and friends, Anthony and Claire Rawlings remarried at an undisclosed location in October of 2013. It has not been confirmed, but it has been mentioned that the two wed outside of the United States. Mrs. Rawlings's family confirmed that while missing, the couple gave birth to a daughter. No more information regarding the child has been released.

In regard to the alleged incident, Mr. Anthony Rawlings has been charged

with intimidation, eluding federal agents, assault with the intent to commit bodily harm, two counts of false imprisonment, and accessory to commit murder. Mrs. Claire Rawlings has been charged with attempted murder. The alleged victim was identified as Ms. Catherine London, a longtime employee of Anthony Rawlings. She is still hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries, said to be the result of a single gunshot.

The motive for the return of this high-profile couple, as well as the motive for the alleged crime, has not been disclosed.

The door bounced off the wall as Agent Baldwin determinedly entered SAC William's office in the San Francisco FBI field office. Indignantly, Agent Williams looked up, disgust evident in his expression. "Baldwin, I assume your entry is in relation to your resignation."

"Sir," Harry managed through gritted teeth. "The Associated Press? I devote over a year of my life and career to a case, and I learn that Rawlings and Claire have been arrested in Iowa from the *Associated Press*?"

"It's no longer your concern."

"That's bullshit," Harry replied as he threw the printed press release on Agent Williams' desk. "I know I was no longer their contact, but you know I have a personal interest in this case."

Agent Williams pressed his lips together, deliberating his response. After a prolonged, uncomfortable silence he said, "Yes, Agent, I'm well aware of your *personal connection*, as are many others. That does not give you the right to barge into my office or to demand information. Do I need to remind you of your position within the FBI?"

"Sir, my reviews have been outstanding since leaving the Rawlings case. I just want to know what the FBI has done for the Rawlings."

"*You just... really, Agent?* Would you like me to perhaps log you into their private files?"

Harry shifted his footing. That *was* what he wanted. The last few times he'd tried to access anything, even from within the bureau, his access had been denied. There were ways to access cases through backdoors, but there was always the possibility that such digging could set off alarms and alert others to his activities. Harry cleared his throat and said, "I know I screwed it up—I screwed it *all* up—but that doesn't negate the fact that I know this case backward and forward. I know that Claire said she was running from Catherine London. She believed that the woman was a threat to her, her child, and even to Rawlings. Ms. London scared Claire enough to force her to disappear. Now Claire's been charged with attempting to murder the woman. Sir, surely you see that somehow this all came to a head. Right now,

everything I've read makes Ms. London out to be a saintly, kind woman who's been victimized by Claire and Rawlings. Before I left the case, I heard audio of Rawlings' confessions. Everything he confessed to doing was in conjunction with London. We can't sit back and let those local-yokels prosecute either of them without coming forward with our information."

SAC Williams shook his head. "Son, this case has moved past you and even me. What the FBI reveals is not up to either one of us." He leaned forward. "However, I will say, it's refreshing to have you speak about testifying for both of them. If nothing else, you've made personal growth. That may temper my response to the insubordinate way you entered my office." He motioned to a chair. "Have a seat. I have the feeling you know more than you've let on."

Harry exhaled and sat facing the SAC. He stretched his long jean-covered legs out before him. Being between assignments, Agent Baldwin was currently working daily at the San Francisco field office and living in Palo Alto. "I may have done some more research in my spare time."

"Perhaps the bureau isn't monopolizing enough of your time. We can always use more desk jockeys if research is your new forte."

Ignoring his comment, Harry continued, "It didn't and it still doesn't make sense. I'm not talking about Claire. I may still believe that her decision to go back to that ass—I mean man—was a bad and possibly dangerous move, but that isn't what's been eating at me and keeping me awake at night."

"Go on."

"I've listened to Rawlings' confessions over and over. The evidence doesn't match his statements."

"I'm listening."

"Sir, will this go any further? You said the case is beyond both of us. Will what I tell you make a difference?"

"Let me be the one to decide that. You obviously believe you know something. What is it?"

Harry looked down momentarily before bringing his bright blue eyes back to the SAC. "*If* you decide to take this beyond this office, and *if* it's possible, I'd like to be officially back on the case."

SAC Williams didn't verbally reply; instead, he nodded. It wasn't a promise but it wasn't a refusal. It was a spark that gave Harry the fuel to share his research and intuition. Harry began, describing in extensive detail Tony's confession: his claim to have paid someone to sabotage Simon's plane.

"Rawlings couldn't say how the transaction worked, other than that he initiated contact with someone who took his money and promised results. A few weeks later, Simon's plane crashed. To Rawlings the transaction was complete. It's rather narcissistic of Rawlings to believe he had that power, but I guess not surprising. What bothers me was the NTSB's final analysis of

Simon's plane."

Williams lifted his brows, wanting Baldwin to continue.

"The NTSB didn't find any evidence of tampering."

"Why was this not discussed earlier?"

"I didn't bring it up..." Harry confessed "...because I wanted to see his ass rot in prison for what he did. I didn't care if it made sense or not. The man paid to have my best friend's plane sabotaged. Simon Johnson wasn't only my friend: he was my sister's fiancé. He was a good man who didn't deserve to have a hit put out on him simply because he wanted to close part of his life before he moved on to the next. I also hated what Rawlings did to Claire. So, even though I knew the evidence didn't fit, I was happy with Rawlings' confession."

"What changed?"

"I've done some messed-up things in my life. My priorities have been skewed, but every time that happened, it was in favor of the bureau. I gave up the rights to my daughter. I told Ilona, and myself, that I did it to keep them safe. I've backed away from commitment with Liz and anyone else because I never know where my next assignment will lead or if I'll come home. Again, I've told her it's for her. I don't want to leave her hanging for months or years on end. While all of that is true, it isn't the full truth. Can I assume that you know what I mean?"

SAC Williams nodded. "Yes, son, the day we take that oath we're all married, and the FBI is a bitch of a wife. She demands all of your attention."

Harry's lips formed a straight line. His characteristic grin and blue-eyed smirk disappeared behind his solemn expression. "I agree. The FBI is my other half, and I can't ignore that the bureau stands for something other than revenge. I chose to give up my life to uphold the laws of this land. It's more than that. I believe in that oath that I took years ago. That doesn't mean I didn't screw it—figuratively and literally," he added with a slight upward turn of his lips, "but I can't sit back and watch a man take the blame for a crime he didn't commit. Don't get me wrong: Rawlings is guilty. He hired someone with the intent of ending Simon Johnson's life, which is conspiracy to commit murder. But in this case, it was just that—conspiracy. Simon's death did not result from a sabotaged plane. In my opinion, his crash was related to an overdose or perhaps a poisoning. I'm not sure."

SAC William's brows furrowed. "You're not sure. You construct this entire story and end with *I'm not sure?*"

"I don't know if it was accidental or if it was intentional. I don't believe Simon would've intentionally taken a medication to which he had a sensitivity. Perhaps it was an ingredient of another medication? I don't know."

"What are you saying?"

"Although Simon's body was badly burned, I was able to order an

analysis of his tissue remains.” When the SAC’s expression changed, Harry added, “I ordered the tests while I was on the case. It took a while for the results. Honestly, I was expecting to find *actaea pachypoda*. More than expecting—I *wanted* to find it. If I had, it would’ve confirmed Rawlings’ connection.”

“I should’ve been notified if *actaea pachypoda* was found.”

“You weren’t notified, because it wasn’t found,” Harry admitted.

“What did you find?”

“The only unusual marker was a normal-high level of diphenhydramine.”

“Normal-high? What does that mean?”

“Simon had 17.5 micrograms/liter of diphenhydramine in his tissues. A lethal dose isn’t obtained until over 19.5 mg/L. Simon’s dose was high, but not out of the normal range.”

“Why is this worth my time or the bureau’s?”

“Because, sir, according to Simon’s mother, he had an unusually high sensitivity to diphenhydramine.”

“Benadryl,” Williams said.

“Yes, Benadryl, which is available at every drugstore and convenience mart throughout the country. Mrs. Johnson said that it was nothing new. It’s something Simon dealt with since a small child. He knew how to avoid it. Just a little Benadryl would make him incredibly sleepy. Mrs. Johnson vehemently swore that Simon would never knowingly consume Benadryl or any medication containing Benadryl, like Tylenol PM, prior to flying. I’d have to agree. Simon was very conscientious. He had his whole life ahead of him. Unfortunately, I was away on assignment when he died, but I was around when he proposed. Amber was ecstatic and so was Simon. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Let me get this straight: you want to reopen this closed case because Mr. Johnson’s plane was *not* tampered with and he had an unusually high sensitivity to the only foreign substance found in his body. Do you believe that he was poisoned?”

Harry contemplated his answer. “Do I believe? I don’t have enough information to believe or disbelieve. I’ve been taught to look at information objectively. Objectively, I have more questions than answers. Another piece of the puzzle that doesn’t fit, in my opinion, was my attack and the threat against Jillian. I mean, Rawlings was with Claire. It wasn’t very much later that he confessed to conspiracy. Why would he have me attacked and threaten my daughter? How would he even know about her? That was the point of what I did when I chose the bureau over parenthood. I wanted to separate that part of my life and assure her safety. I know Rawlings has money, and initially that’s what I told myself. I said he paid to get all the information he could on me. I believed he saw me as a threat. Even I don’t believe that

anymore. I was no more a threat to him and his relationship with Claire than her bodyguard was, especially in his eyes. He's too egotistical to see anyone as a threat. People like him believe they own the other person. No one belonged with Claire but him—he didn't care enough about me to threaten my family. I believe someone wanted to stop my research. I just don't know who that someone could be."

"Are you insinuating a mole? Here in the bureau?"

Harry chewed his cheek for a second while his blue eyes looked down and then back up again. "How many people here at the bureau know about my daughter?"

Williams leaned back and contemplated the question. "Prior to your attack, only myself and the deputy director."

"I suppose it's your call, if you feel an internal investigation is needed—"

"Son, who outside of the bureau knows about your ex-wife and daughter?"

"No one knows. They're no longer part of who I am. I have no past."

"Everyone has a past."

Harry mulled the SAC's last comment over in his thoughts. "Sir, that's what I know. I also know that we had a deal with Rawlings. I knew about it, you knew about it, and the Boston field office was in on it. The FBI may be a demanding wife, but she doesn't go back on her word."

"That's very upstanding of you. Again, it isn't your call."

"May I travel to Iowa?"

"As an agent or a private citizen?"

All moisture disappeared from Harry's mouth; his tongue suddenly became thick. "Are you saying that if I go to Iowa, I'm no longer a part of the FBI?"

"No, unless you entered this office with the intention of resigning?"

"I didn't, sir."

"If you choose, as a friend of the Vandersols, to take a few days of leave and visit Iowa, I won't try to stop you. However, if you use your position in the FBI with the local authorities or anyone else while there, you will be subject to disciplinary action. The call is yours. This case almost cost you your badge. Consider your options and tread lightly."

"Hypothetically, if I go to Iowa, as a friend of the Vandersols, and I learn anything particularly useful, may I share it with you?"

"I don't see any violation in that."

"Thank you, sir."

"Agent, never enter my office with that attitude again. I don't care what bone you have to pick with me."

"Yes, sir, I apologize. Will you take my concerns to the deputy director?"

"Put in for your leave, son. We'll talk when you return."

“Yes, sir.”



THE SCRUMPTIOUS AROMA of garlic and the light rhythm of jazz overpowered Harry’s senses and loosened the tension as he entered his condominium in Palo Alto. Walking quietly toward the kitchen, he stopped and gazed toward the stove, more specifically toward the woman unaware of his presence. Her hot black skirt, long tanned legs, and bare feet could make him forget everything else that he’d endured throughout his day. Still unaware of his voyeurism, Liz stood near the stove swaying rhythmically to the music coming from her phone, her attention monopolized by the amazing Italian sauce in the pan. He watched as she’d stir, taste, and hum. Quietly, he stepped behind her, wrapped his arms gently around her waist, and planted a kiss at the base of her neck.

Jumping, she shrieked, “Hey!” Immediately, the stovetop was dotted in a rain of tomato sauce. Turning into his embrace, she chided, “Look what you made me do.”

“Hey, yourself,” Harry chuckled. “I know what I’d like you to do.” His finger swept across the stainless stovetop swiping sauce in its wake. Placing his red-coated finger between his lips, he tasted her delicious concoction. “Hmm, this is good.”

“Good?” Her lower lip pushed forward in a feigned pout.

“Hmm...” He nuzzled her neck. “...yes, good.”

“I’ve been cooking for hours and all I get is *good?*”

“Well,” Harry teased, “all things are relative. The sauce is good. This...” His lips once again found the soft skin above her collarbone, each kiss dipping lower and lower along the scooped neckline of her blouse. “...is delectable.”

“Oh?”

“Do you doubt me?” He asked as his bright, innocent eyes met hers and his thumb found the roundness of her breast. “I’m fairly confident that as delicious as your neck is, under this blouse...” He ran his hand over the firmness of her behind searching for a zipper on her skirt “...and under this skirt, it’s even better.”

The spoon which had commanded Liz’s attention now lay on the tomato-splattered stovetop as her head fell back, giving Harry better access to her exposed skin. As his hands wandered, she said breathily, “I think I may see where you’re going with this.”

Turning off the stove, Harry tugged on Liz’s hand and pulled her toward their bedroom. “I think I’m suddenly famished.”

Caressing the hardness in his jeans, Liz giggled. “Maybe I’m the one who’s hungry?”

“I like the way that sounds.”

“B-but,” she stuttered, putting on the breaks. “Amber and Keaton are coming to dinner tonight.”

Lowering her to their soft bed, Harry watched her golden hair fan behind her blushed cheeks. “Let’s cancel. I like the idea of our own private dinner.”

Liz looked over at the clock, her blouse now untucked and her bra exposed. “They’ll be here in a half an hour.”

“I’d rather take longer,” Harry said. “But I’m never against fast food.”

Liz playfully hit his shoulder. “You’re crude. I need to finish dinner.” Standing and adjusting her clothing, she added, “Besides, if I’m the dinner, I’d rather be a three-course meal. I’m not fast food.”

Harry lay alone on their bed, staring up at the ceiling. “Then let’s change places. I’m all right with being the meal, and I’m pretty sure I can do fast, if necessary.”

Liz laughed as she threw a pillow his direction. “Sorry, buddy. Besides, I love your being between assignments. We have plenty of time for all the dining you want.” Looking at his exaggerated pout, she said, “Just wait until after they leave.”

“Fine, I can wait, I suppose.”

“You don’t have a choice. I still need to set the table and make the salad.”

Propping himself up on his elbows, Harry said, “If I help with dinner, can I make reservations for later?”

Shaking her head, she walked back toward the kitchen.

The conversation flowed light and easy as Amber and Liz talked about SiJo, and Harry and Keaton discussed their predictions for the upcoming basketball tournament. It wasn’t until Amber kicked Harry under the table that he even listened to his sister’s question. “Why didn’t you tell her? I’ve been dying to say something all day. Liz, I can’t believe you haven’t seen the news.”

Harry searched from Amber to Liz. “Well, you see, sis, I just got home and, well, we had better things to do than talk about the latest news.” He took a bite of garlic bread and smiled a toothy grin. “We were kind of busy.”

Amber kicked him again.

“Ouch!”

“You’re gross. TMI!” Amber retorted.

“What are you talking about?” Liz asked.

“Fine, I’m spilling the beans. Keaton and I’ve been talking about it all day.” Amber’s eyes sparkled with untold secrets. “Both Anthony Rawlings and Claire have been arrested!”

“Arrested?!?” Liz said. “For Simon’s death? Claire had something to do

with Simon?"

"No," Amber replied. "Not for Simon. The article said that Claire shot someone."

"Oh, my God, she is nuts. And you had her living with you."

Harry's shoulders straightened. "I think there's more to it than that. And no one said she's nuts." His modest attempt at defending Claire earned him cold looks from the two women at the table. "The woman she's accused of shooting is the same one who was at the estate when Rawlings first took her."

"Didn't you go and talk to that lady?" Liz asked.

"I did."

"And Claire killed her?" Liz questioned.

"No," Harry replied.

When he offered no more information, Amber responded. "I called John. He said it's a mess. The lady's name is Catherine, and she was shot, but her wound isn't life-threatening. Of course, I was all concerned about Claire. He said that she's not doing well. She hasn't spoken to anyone since it happened."

"She isn't as dumb as she acts. I bet she's faking it to avoid jail time," Liz said.

Harry thought about her transition from prison the first time, the way she reacted to simple things like sky and sunlight. He didn't want her going through that again. It wasn't right. The FBI made her a deal. She had immunity.

Amber's laugh refocused him. He wasn't sure what he'd missed in the conversation, but Liz and Amber were clinking their glasses of red wine and grinning.

"I scored us four great tickets to the Lakers game this coming Saturday. They're in the Google suite: drinks and food on me," Keaton offered.

"On you or on Google?" Amber teased.

"I work for Google, so without me you wouldn't be there," he answered smugly. "I'd say it's on me."

Amber kissed his cheek. "Sounds great."

"Yeah, sounds fun," Liz replied. "What time?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said, interrupting their plans. "I need to be out of town for a few days. You have fun without me."

Liz's expression dropped. "What else didn't you have time to tell me? Do you have a new assignment?"

"Yeah, but it won't last long—just a couple of days."

"When are you leaving?" Amber asked.

"Tomorrow."

Pressing her lips together, Liz slumped in her chair and sighed.

"Well, this party just took a downturn," Keaton observed.

After a long drink of her wine, Liz refilled her glass and faked a smile. “Don’t be silly. I’m not that insecure. It isn’t like Harry’s running off to Iowa or something.”

Amber’s gaze cut to Harry.

“Would anyone else like some more wine?” he asked with a purposeful tone of innocence as he refilled his glass.

CHAPTER NINE

Late March 2014

John

One of the secrets of life is that all that is really worth doing is what we do for others.

—Lewis Carroll

MY LIFE AS IT Didn't Appear: Chapter 3...

IT'S DIFFICULT TO look back at a time of despair and isolate the most difficult moment. They all worked together to accomplish the same goal. In my education as a meteorologist, I learned how essential elements combined in just the right way to create the perfect storm. Finding the one element, the one piece of the puzzle that completed the devastation would be like choosing the single raindrop responsible for a ruinous flood or the upward draft that completed the destructive funnel cloud. Each drop of water or gust of wind played a role in the destruction. In my education as Mrs. Rawlings, I learned how each storm, no matter how small, played a role in creating the perfect companion.

As a town is never the same after a destructive storm, neither was I.

The isolation in my suite was my first storm. It should have been the kidnapping and the physical abuse: surely they contributed. They were rumblings of impending desperation, like the threatening winds before a hurricane. During those times that seemed unsurvivable, I erroneously believed I could make a difference. I held on to the hope that I could say or do something to change my destiny. While left alone—literally alone—for almost two weeks, the dams broke and I changed forever. I found myself almost

wishing for the threatening precursors.

After Anthony's proclamation of ownership, he left my suite. Though my cheek stung from the slap of his hand, it was the impenetrable silence that hung about me like a cloud. I'd already tried and failed to escape my cell: I was alone with no way out.

The windows wouldn't break with the pounding of the chair against the glass. First, I tried the tall French doors that led to a balcony. Of course, the doors were locked, but I hoped that I could break the glass to get outside and climb to freedom. That seemed safer than the windows. The small panes repelled the blows. After numerous failed attempts, and despite the distance from the other windows to the ground, I tried breaking the windows. Unfortunately, no number of strikes shattered the glass, only my hope.

The Weather Station had told me I was in Iowa. When I escaped, I didn't know where I would go or how long it would take me to get there. I just knew that freedom was beyond the sea of trees. From my view, they seemed to go on forever. I also feared that if the windows broke, an alarm of some kind would sound; however, with each passing day my desperation grew. Running through the trees was my recurring dream—and nightmare.

Often, I'd wake panting from the realness of my illusions with my heart pounding too quickly in my chest. During the day I imagined freedom, but with night, reality intruded: I couldn't get free. I'd be chased and caught. Though I wasn't sure what would happen after my recapture, I knew instinctively that it wouldn't be good.

Day after day, I saw only one person. The choice was extremely calculating, as the young man of Latin descent spoke little English. Three times a day, he'd enter my room and bring me my meals. Each time he'd avoid my eyes and say, "I bring Miss Claire her food." That was all. No other words were uttered.

Each day while I showered, my room was cleaned and clothes were taken, laundered, and returned. As the dreams of escape faded, they were replaced by desires of companionship. I had never truly been alone in all of my life. There had always been people. Even in Atlanta when I lived alone, I had friends, neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers. I never realized how much it meant to pass a stranger on the street with a nod and a smile. As the days turned to a week, I longed for a smile, a nod, anything.

Since my waiter didn't speak beyond his one sentence, I hoped to speak with one of the invisible people who cleaned my suite. Repeatedly, I tried to catch someone in the act—anyone—but I never did. They were too quick. One day, I was so distraught that I devised a plan. It was quite simple. Instead of showering, I would lie in wait and spring from the bathroom when someone entered the suite. The anticipation was overwhelming. I was so excited at the prospect of hearing my own voice and another responding. Such a simple

desire, yet it monopolized my thoughts and took away my appetite. Finally, I left the tray of food, went into the bathroom leaving the door slightly ajar, and waited.

No one came.

Lunchtime arrived and my breakfast tray remained.

The reality struck with a blow more painful than Anthony's hand. I was a grown woman hiding behind a door, praying for the companionship of anyone. Salty, pathetic tears fell from my eyes as sobs resonated from my chest. As the day progressed, my hope dimmed. At one point I even prayed for the young man—oh, to hear him say "Miss Claire." I knew it would give me strength. Hearing my name would validate my existence.

He didn't come.

Anthony had never left me without food, and though I wasn't hungry, I naively believed that my next meal would soon arrive. The silence and despair combined to create a time and space continuum. Did I sleep? Was this real? Every now and then I'd open the door a little wider to be sure that I hadn't fallen asleep and missed the invisible people. The sight of my room taunted me: my bed remained disheveled and my cold eggs had turned to rubber on the plate. I believed the people were coming and was so obsessed with seeing them that I refused to shower and even waited until I could wait no more to enter the lavatory.

Still no one.

I continued to wait as the storm raged in my shattered mind.

The Iowa sky became dark and the hard tile floor of the too-white bathroom became my chair and my bed. The plush purple towels served as my pillow as sleep intermittently took over. I dreamed of conversation—not food, shelter, or even freedom. I lay curled up on the bathroom floor fantasizing about speech. I remembered hours spent with friends. I recalled the sleepovers I'd had as a child and a smile would briefly grace my lips. There were nights when I'd talk with my friends, as little girls do, until we were too tired to finish a sentence. On that white marble tile I cried for the times I'd fallen asleep. Oh, to have that opportunity again. I swore I'd never again take it for granted.

During that night the winds changed direction. My consciousness was no longer blaming Anthony but myself. Of course, no one would enter my suite. I was pathetic—a grown woman behaving like a child. Who would want to come and talk with me? I'd hit bottom—or so I'd thought.

I'd later learn that bottom was much deeper than I ever suspected.

The next morning when I awoke on the hard, cold floor with my body aching, I knew the storm had passed. I hadn't hit bottom but a shelf on the floor of the ocean. It was lower than I'd ever been, but I refused to allow myself to sink further. Instead, I evaluated my elevation and concluded that I

would survive, and I would never be alone again.

That didn't mean that I wouldn't be without others: it meant I wouldn't let it destroy me. He may have believed he owned my body, but as long as I was in control of my mind, Anthony Rawlings, or anyone else, would not have the ability to isolate me. With my new resolve, I showered, dressed, and walked into my clean suite. The invisible people had returned. My cold eggs were gone, and I had a warm meal waiting on the table.

That storm taught me another lesson. If I followed the rules, I could expect favorable consequences. I'd already learned about unfavorable ones, and I had more to learn. Instead of feeling defeated, that day gave me strength. My actions had consequences: whether those were positive or negative was up to me. I was in control.

It never crossed my mind to wonder how Anthony knew I was hiding and lying in wait in that bathroom. I just knew that somehow he did. He knew I wasn't following my daily routine. My only hope at manipulating the circumstances of my incarceration was to appear compliant. I had another new goal.

My theory was soon to be tested. After thirteen days, I heard a knock on my door. The young man who brought my meals always knocked once before entering, but this knock was different. No one entered. I waited. It happened again. When I called out, I was miraculously answered.

"Miss Claire, may I enter?"

Her question was quite comical. I couldn't have bid her entrance if I'd wanted nor could I deny it. I was on the wrong side of the locked door. Nonetheless, I said, "Yes, Kate (name changed to protect the innocent), please come in."

The familiar beep preceded the opening of my door. I stood motionless as her gray eyes filled with compassion, silently confirming that I was no longer alone. "Miss Claire, I have a message for you." Kate's accent was unique and formal and her words were music to my heart. I didn't care what they said, only that they were spoken to me. I longed to hug or touch her in some way, craving contact, but that would have been too much—too much for my attention-starved psyche. Unable to verbally respond, I nodded, savoring the interaction and trying to make it last.

"Mr. Rawlings will be coming to see you tonight..."

I listened with a mixture of fear and anticipation. The storm had broken my defenses and revealed my greatest vulnerability: I would do anything to avoid being alone, even if it meant facing him.

The bile rose in John's throat as he closed the book and laid it on the bedside

stand. Little bits were all he could tolerate—it was too much. As he tried to settle for sleep, a line in Meredith's book came back to him: *as long as I was in control of my mind, Anthony Rawlings, or anyone else, would not have the ability to isolate me.*

He turned to Emily. "I didn't think it was possible to hate him more than I did, but I do."

With her head on the pillow, she opened her tired eyes. "I hate that book. I told you not to read it."

"I couldn't when she was missing, but now—"

Emily sat up and kissed her husband. "Now, I think, may even be worse. She's still missing."

John shook his head. "I just read something about her thinking she was in control—how she would never allow anyone to isolate her. I get it."

"What do you mean?"

"When I was in prison..."

Emily nodded.

"The loneliness was the most difficult part for me. I remember reliving so many conversations. It's like you have this continual movie playing in your head. Sometimes I'd remember something you said that was funny, and I'd hear myself laugh. It felt wrong, yet right. It helped me."

"John, I'm so sorry..."

"No, that isn't my point. My point is that in this book she talks about *remembering*. Em, why isn't she remembering now? How can we, or the doctors help her remember? I mean, she has a daughter!"

"Shh," Emily chided. "Let's not wake that daughter up."

John exhaled. "Do you ever think about what we were doing while she was going through that shit—before?"

Emily nodded and leaned against John's chest. "I do. I especially did while reading that damn book. I wish I could say I think Meredith sensationalized it, but it's a lot like what Claire told me. There are more details in the book..."

"Yeah, I could do without those."

"Me too, but as long as the rest of the world knows them, I felt like I should too. John?" Her green eyes looked up.

"Yeah?"

"I don't think I can go back to California."

He closed his eyes and nodded.

Emily continued, "I can't leave her here in that state facility alone. I'm afraid if I go before his trial, somehow he'll get out of it, and I need to keep her safe, keep him away from her and Nichol."

"I understand, but I have an obligation to SiJo and Amber."

"I know you feel indebted to them. Can we just take it a day or a week at a

time?"

John nodded. "Did I tell you that they called? I spoke with Amber and Harry. They're both concerned. Amber told me to take as much time as I need."

Emily yawned. "She's been great. What did Harry say?"

"He asked if he could visit."

Her attention was once again focused on her husband. "He wants to visit? Us or Claire?"

John shrugged. "Both, I think."

A smile fluttered across Emily's lips. "Well, all right."

John's eyes narrowed. "Why do you have that smirk?"

"Because I like the idea of keeping that bastard away and allowing Harry to visit. If I could, I'd take pictures!"

John hugged his wife's shoulders and pulled her down to his pillow. "I'm glad we're on the same team. You definitely have a wicked side."

"Don't you think he deserves it?"

It was John's turn to yawn. "After what I just read, he deserves more."



"IT'S SO NICE of you to visit," Emily said to Harry as she rocked Nichol.

"Yes, I'm sorry we're hidden away in this hotel suite," John said, "but I'm sure you understand. We're doing our best to keep Nichol out of the spotlight."

"I get it," Harry replied.

John sat back against the soft chair and watched as Emily lulled their niece to sleep. Although Harry wasn't making it uncomfortable, it seemed odd to have him here with Claire's baby. After all, there was a time when they'd all assumed he was the father. Looking at the tufts of dark hair making their way out of the soft blanket and back to the blue-eyed man with wavy blonde hair, there was no question: Harry was not Nichol's father. Her resemblance to Anthony Rawlings was as unnerving as it was undeniable. The first time John looked into his niece's big brown eyes, he shivered at the recognition. That was only the first time. From that point on, her eyes were *hers* and hers alone. The long lashes and round cheeks that turned crimson at the first sign of fussing were all Nichol—Claire's daughter and their niece. Never could John bring himself to blame her for her father's sins.

"Amber couldn't get away," Harry said. "But she sends her love and support. She said to let you know that she understands allegiance to family. Take as long as you need John. Your job is waiting for you in California."

John nodded. "I spoke with her the other day. I can't thank her enough for

all that she's done for us."

"Yes, after Claire left..." Emily began and stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry, Harry. I'm so sleep-deprived that I'm talking without thinking. I'm sure you don't want to talk about that."

"It's all right. There's nothing I haven't already heard or thought about. It was a little uncomfortable for a while, but John wasn't hired because he was Claire's brother-in-law. He was hired at SiJo because of his ability."

"But you left SiJo right after that. I hope I wasn't the cause. We miss you," John said.

"That wasn't it at all. I missed police work. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to go back with the California Bureau of Investigation."

"It's nice that you can still consult with SiJo. You obviously care a lot about your sister's company," John replied.

The three of them chatted as Nichol slept contently in her aunt's arms. It wasn't until the subject of Claire's current condition came up that the tension seemed to seep in from the corners of the room. It was one of the first times they'd discussed Claire outside of their legal team.

"After what I've heard, I'm a little nervous to see her. My visit won't upset her, will it?" Harry asked.

Emily shook her head. "I doubt it. She probably won't even realize you're there." Her voice turned stern. "Harry, we can trust you, can't we?"

"Of course you can."

"Very few people have been allowed to see my sister. It's been solely for her protection. She's not doing well. I know she wouldn't want the media learning the truth about her state of mind."

Harry sat straight. "I would never talk to the media."

John smiled. "We know that. It's just that we need to be sure. Please be careful about what you tell others too."

"Liz?" Harry asked.

Emily nodded. "She's nice enough around us—really she is. And I'm thrilled to see you happy, but I get the feeling she didn't like or maybe even still doesn't like Claire. I don't blame her either. Amber told me that you dated Liz and broke up with her right before Claire moved to Palo Alto. But my point is that I would hate for you to say something to her that she might repeat to someone else. You know how it goes."

"I won't. She doesn't know I'm here."

John glanced at Emily's wide eyes and back to Harry. "Why?"

"You're right. She isn't a fan of Claire's and I was worried. I hoped that you'd let me see her and tell me more about what happened, but Liz wouldn't understand my concern. She'd think I was somehow trying to rekindle..." Harry's voice faded.

"Oh, how I wish you were," Emily mused. "But Claire isn't ready for

anything like that. You'll see when you visit."

"So, when you return, please don't say anything about my visit," Harry said.

"No worries. I won't," John said. "And Emily doesn't know when she'll be back."

Emily smiled. "I can't leave Claire in the place where she is. I go there every day and so does John. In her condition, I worry about how she'd be treated if we weren't on them, twenty-four-seven. And then there's Nichol..."

Harry's blue eyes dulled. "A little girl..." His words trailed away not finishing his sentence.

"Would you like to hold her?" Emily asked as she stood.

"I'm not good with babies," Harry admitted. "I'd better not. I have the feeling her parents wouldn't approve."

Walking toward him, Emily lowered Nichol toward Harry's lap. "They're not here. We are and we approve. You're a good friend and it's sweet of you to travel all this way after what Claire did to you."

Hesitantly, Harry cradled his arms and accepted a sleeping Nichol. After a long gaze into the blankets, he looked up with his toothy grin. "She has her mommy's nose and lips."

"She does," Emily agreed, gleefully.

"Her eyes?" Harry asked.

John's lips pressed together before he replied, "Are dark brown."

Acceptingly, Harry nodded. "I assumed. I just wondered."

Walking from the room, Emily's voice was barely audible as she said, "I wish they were blue."

John tried to avoid Harry's gaze as Harry shrugged with a sad smile.



SINCE CLAIRE WAS technically under arrest and not fit to be in a jail cell, the court moved her to a state-funded institution for further tests and treatment. The state institution required an array of clearances prior to visiting a patient. John and Emily had already filed the necessary authorization for Harrison Baldwin. All that was needed on his part was to show his identification and sign the visitor's log.

Each step down the corridor filled John with dread. As much as he hated the old hospital room where Claire had been, he hated this new place more. There were noises and murmurings coming from the closed doors along the hall. Because Claire still had her pending charges, her room was beyond more locked doors. However, her room was empty. Hurriedly, John searched, finding her in a common area. She was sitting in a wheelchair, still dressed in

her hospital gown with her hair a tangled mess.

John's face burned as anger built behind his deceptively calm facade. He turned to the attendant. "Why the hell is she out here?"

"All patients get time out of their rooms."

Harry stood helpless as John took the lead and knelt before Claire. "Good morning, Claire."

She didn't look his way. Her eyes were fixed on the bar-covered window.

John continued, "I think it's a good thing your sister isn't here right now. I'm taking you back to your room." He looked back up at the attendant. "Has she eaten? How about a shower?"

"I just get them from their rooms. Don't ask me."

Before John could respond, Harry said, "Don't ask you? Then who the hell is he supposed to ask? Can't you see she needs help?"

The young man put up his hands. "Back off, dude, or I'll call security. You think they'd let me shower female patients?" He chuckled. "It'd sure make this job better." Then he shook his head and slowed his words, as if that made for better comprehension. "I just get them and bring them here. That's my job."

"Well, I'm taking her back to her room," John announced.

Harry followed as John pushed the wheelchair. Once they were with Claire behind her closed door, John fought the emotion. "Harry, I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to see her like this."

"What are you going to do?"

John reached for the brush. "Emily will be here later. In the meantime, I'll brush her hair."

Harry ran his hands through his blonde mop and looked out the small, rectangular window, five feet above the floor. "She can't even see out these windows." It was more an observation than the start of a conversation. "She loves sunshine."

John listened as he gently tugged against the tangles, smoothing his sister-in-law's sun-lightened hair. "I don't know exactly where they were, but when everything first happened, Claire was suntanned. It's starting to fade."

Harry nodded.

"Thanks for coming. This is really hard."

"Do you need help?"

John looked up and smiled. "Not with brushing her hair... all of it is hard. I hate leaving Emily here to deal with it alone."

"She won't be coming back to California, will she?"

John shrugged. "She said she wants to take it a day or week at a time, but I don't think she will. I don't think she'll leave Claire, not like this."

"Claire was the one who left you guys—twice," Harry reminded.

"She's family. No one knows you like your family. The past is..." He

looked back down at Claire. Her closed eyes appeared as though she were sleeping, but the slight twist of her neck that gave the right amount of resistance to work out the tangles told him she was awake. "...the past. We know it, but we can't let that stop the future. It's the right thing to do."

CHAPTER TEN

Early April 2014

Tony

You never find yourself until you face the truth.

—Pearl Bailey

"WE'RE MEETING WITH Judge Temple in his chambers, but there's something you should know." Brent said, as he and Tony rode to the courthouse. "He agreed to this meeting with a few stipulations."

"What kind of stipulations?" Tony asked.

"He demanded equal representation. He refused to meet with us without the claimants being present or at least their representation."

Tony's brows furrowed. "So?"

"Jane will be there."

"And John?"

"I don't know for certain. When I spoke with the judge, I tried to emphasize that John's presence wouldn't be beneficial to this situation."

"I don't give a damn who's there, as long as the end result is that I get to see my wife and daughter. It's not like John and I will get in a brawl."

"I'd hoped that wasn't an option but, nevertheless, I'd rather that this meeting not morph into a hostile environment. I don't want you saying anything that can be misconstrued. Recently, the momentum has shifted in your favor. Since showing the video from your home office to Evergreen and the ICPD, your defense has taken an upward swing. Even though your pending charges aren't relevant regarding this restraining order, I don't want anything that may potentially negate the progress we've accomplished."

Tony huffed under his breath. "I want to see my wife. Despite what Roach is saying about her medical prognosis, I think that I can reach her—snap her out of whatever has happened. I'll fuck'n do whatever I need to do to get me to her." He turned toward the window, not watching the scenes of the city

pass before him. His back straightened. “The damn state has her, Mrs. Anthony Rawlings, in a state-run mental hospital.” He turned back, the brown of his irises almost completely overwhelmed by black. “That’s absurd! I want her home where she can be cared for properly. She deserves the best doctors money can buy, not some state institution—”

“Home probably isn’t an option, yet.” Brent interrupted. “She’s been officially charged with attempted murder, but I agree: getting her moved to a private facility would be better. I think Emily may even agree with you on that.”

“Imagine that,” Tony replied sarcastically. “I think it may be the first time in the history of mankind that we’ve ever agreed—monumental day.”

Brent narrowed his eyes. “That type of remark is why I don’t want you and the Vandersols together in Judge Temple’s chambers.”

“Vandersols?” Tony emphasized the last letter. “As in Emily, too?”

“Remember...” Brent reminded him, “...they didn’t balk when the state dropped the false imprisonment charges against you and charged Catherine.”

Changing the subject, Tony said, “After this meeting, I plan to get Nichol. I’ve hired a nanny and have a nursery at my temporary apartment ready, as well as a room for the nanny.”

“Yes, I think that should show the court that you’re capable and willing.”

“Hell, yes, I’m willing and I’m more than capable. I can take care of her myself, but I thought with everything pending, the nanny would be a good idea.”

“Well, if things go the way we hope, she’ll come home with you today.” Looking away from his notes, Brent asked, “When will the repairs be done on your home? I haven’t seen it since they started.”

“A couple more weeks. The fire damage was mostly limited to the first floor of the southwest corridor. However, the water and smoke damage was more widespread. Everything has to be cleaned. That smell of smoke is difficult to remove.”

“I read the fire investigator’s report. The fire originated in Catherine’s suite. She’s not talking. Do you have any idea what she was trying to accomplish?”

“The woman’s crazy. According to the fire chief, there were remnants of melted electronics and plastic in her fireplace. Claire told me that the reason she left last fall and started running was because Catherine produced her laptop, the one taken before her attack by Chester. It pisses me off that I had everyone searching for that damn laptop and it was in my house the whole time. Catherine told Claire that it was my way of tricking her into returning to Iowa.”

Brent listened as the car moved in slow bursts, indicating they were nearing their destination.

“I hate that she believed her,” Tony admitted, “but I also understand. Claire was frightened for Nichol. Truthfully, I had no idea what had happened to it.” Tony sighed. “I think she successfully used that laptop against both of us. Showing it to Claire scared her. Not knowing its whereabouts had me on edge.”

“Do you think she was burning evidence? Do you think she knew everything was caving in around her?”

“I think she burnt the laptop. I have no idea what she was thinking. I’d say she knew I was no longer falling for her bullshit.”

“Why start the house on fire?”

Tony shrugged. “The investigators weren’t certain if it was intentional or if she forgot to open the flue. They said that electronics aren’t the most combustible material: she probably threw other things in the fireplace to get the fire going quickly. Based on some evidence, they’re presuming bed linens. It would make a lot of smoke. The fact that the fire spread may have been accidental—or not.”

“They’re waiting on more definitive evidence before they charge Catherine with Sophia’s death. It’ll most likely be manslaughter.”

Tony’s head slowly moved from side to side. “As much as I want to see her spend the rest of her life in prison, I can’t believe Catherine intended to kill her own daughter.”

“This whole thing gets more twisted every day,” Brent replied. Refocusing on the tablet in his hand, he returned them to their task at hand. “Judge Temple will ask you some questions. The purpose of this meeting is to talk with you, and assess the need for the order. The Vandersols claimed that due to your past history, you’re a threat to Claire and to Nichol.”

Tony’s lips made a straight line as he fought to remain silent. There’s no way he’d ever hurt Nichol: it wasn’t even plausible. He’d never hurt Claire again. But with that damn book out, he couldn’t deny the past.

Brent continued, “No matter what he says or what he asks, don’t get upset. Jane will also ask you questions. I guarantee she wants you to lose it.”

Tony turned his dark gaze on his friend. Anthony Rawlings didn’t need lessons on public appearances. He was the master. Before he could comment, Brent continued, “I’m saying that because if I were her, that’s what I’d want. I’d want to provoke you. I know that you know not to do it, but I also know that you have triggers. Expect those to be exploited.”

“I’ll watch it,” he conceded as he reflected on the past few weeks. With every passing second, he missed paradise—not the location but the bond. Lamenting the loss of what he, Claire, and Nichol shared on that tiny island wouldn’t bring it back. Besides, Anthony Rawlings wasn’t a watcher: he was a doer. He’d do whatever was necessary and swore that he’d never give up. If playing nice with the Vandersols, Judge Temple, or even the devil himself

was what Tony needed to do to get even a sliver of paradise back, he'd do it.

Returning to Iowa City had been both pure hell and a resemblance of normal. The hell part was obvious. The return to his previous *normal* came after the meeting with Evergreen. Everyone had rehearsed his part, even Eric. Tony didn't want anyone other than himself to be held responsible for the actions at the estate. He also didn't want anyone else charged with aiding and abetting; however, they all agreed that Eric's involvement wouldn't trigger red flags. At the time of the incident, he was employed by the *estate*. By virtue of Tony's will, Catherine assumed the role of executor of the estate so, in essence, she'd become Eric's employer.

Working with the estate's security had always been a component of Eric's job. As Tony's driver and pilot, his presence was for more than transportation. He was Tony's first line of protection. Once Tony became missing, Eric assumed that role for Ms. London. Reviewing the surveillance video was an acceptable component of his job. Who would be more likely to find the evidence that could potentially implicate Catherine as well as exonerate Tony?

Though the estate had turned everything over to the police, their forensic teams had a lot of footage to dissect. Eric claimed that it was his personal concern for everyone involved that prompted him to scan the videos. Despite the incriminating evidence against his new employer, he had an overwhelming sense of conscience to set the record straight.

With Evergreen and Chief Newburgh, the Iowa City police chief, present, Brent showed them the video. Once it was confirmed that the video hadn't been doctored, that it was the same as what had been confiscated by the police, it was logged into evidence. Of course, it was only a small step along the legal process. Catherine's attorneys had motioned to have the video evidence dismissed. Although no definitive decision had yet been made, Brent believed that it would stand. After all, Catherine ran the estate at that time. She'd lived there for many years and was well aware of the surveillance cameras. Eric even had video evidence of her accessing the feeds from multiple locations. Even though it was true, there was little to no chance that she'd be able to claim that she'd been video-recorded without her knowledge. Why would a judge or jury believe that she assumed the office was not recorded when she knew that the rest of the estate was under surveillance?

The footage that Eric presented also showed Catherine engaging the electronic lock on the suite where the Vanderos were held. The crime lab's analysis of the water bottles within the suite found that the water contained the deadly toxin *actaea pachypoda*. Once that particular poison was identified, the FBI joined the case and confirmed their previous knowledge. After a few turf wars and posturing, the two agencies seemed to have found a common ground.

They all knew more charges would come against Tony; they just hadn't happened yet. The video had made it clear that Tony had knowledge of other crimes but it also overwhelmingly showed Catherine's involvement. After she was charged, her bail was set at the same amount as Tony's—\$ 10,000,000. When she professed her right to the estate's assets, Tony vehemently denied the request, as well as forbidding the use of Rawlings Industries' resources. In order to secure counsel, she laid claim to overseas accounts. Imagine her surprise when the accounts no longer existed. It was a mystery. According to the bank's records, it was C. Marie Rawls who had made the final transaction. They promised to investigate. Currently, Catherine Marie London was resting comfortably—or uncomfortably, Tony didn't care—in the Iowa City jail awaiting her next court appearance with her new legal representation, a court-appointed attorney. The charges levied against her included two counts of false imprisonment with the threat of harm, thus felonies, as well as multiple counts of conspiracy to commit murder, murder by hire, and falsifying sworn statements. With the FBI and ICPD cooperation, there was the potential for more charges.

Even though it showed incriminating evidence against him, Tony didn't regret sharing the video footage to the authorities. Not only had it incriminated Catherine, it also helped to vindicate Claire. For that reason, Jane and John were not fighting the admittance of the footage into evidence. It showed Claire acting in self-defense. John even admitted that, in the video, it appeared as though Tony and Claire were working together.



JUDGE TEMPLE'S CHAMBERS couldn't comfortably hold the number of people in attendance; therefore, their meeting was relocated to a conference room down the hall. Brent and Tony followed a young woman to the new location. Brent audibly sighed as they entered, and Tony felt his chest tighten as he took in Jane Allyson, and John and Emily Vandersol. "Ladies and gentlemen," the young lady said, "now that everyone is present, Judge Temple will be with you shortly."

A murmur of courteous replies filled the tight air.

"John, Emily," Brent said, as he extended his hand.

John shook Brent's hand. "Mr. Simmons."

Turning to Jane, Brent said, "Ms. Allyson, the last we spoke you were planning on attending this meeting alone."

"Mr. Vandersol is my co-counsel, and as you know, Judge Temple wanted equal representation. Mrs. Vandersol is the plaintiff."

"Well," Brent said, using his most affable voice. "I'm pleased that we can

all be together. Hopefully, we can reach an amicable conclusion to this unfortunate situation.”

“That is our plan,” Ms. Allyson replied, stopping as the door once again opened and Judge Temple entered.

“Good afternoon,” he offered, as he pulled out the chair at the head of the shiny table and sat.

Again, murmurs of acknowledgements filled the room.

“I see we were all able to make this meeting. I’m all about disclosure. Nothing will be done in my courtroom behind closed doors.” He eyed Brent. “Is that clear, Mr. Simmons?”

Tony bristled at Temple’s tone. Could this guy be that out of sorts over losing his first appearance?

“Yes, Judge. It’s clear.”

“Very well, Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol are present, representing Mrs. Rawlings who, according to these documents...” he held a manila folder, “...is mentally incapable of making this complaint on her own.” He looked up at the Vandersols. “Is that correct?”

“Yes, Your Honor, it is. We also have been granted guardianship and temporary power of attorney over Ms. Nic—Mrs. Rawlings,” John replied.

“As Mrs. Rawlings’ husband,” Brent countered, “my client has issued an injunction of that power of attorney. It is common practice for the husband—”

“We are getting ahead of ourselves,” Judge Temple interrupted. “I assume that we’ve all read the affidavit?” When his question was met with resounding affirmative responses, he continued, “The affidavit was filed on behalf of Mrs. Rawlings immediately following the incident at the Rawlings estate; however, that particular matter is not being heard by me. It’s my place to decide if the petition has warrant.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Tony said, believing he sounded controlled.

“Mr. Rawlings, do you believe the affidavit has warrant? Do you believe your brother- and sister-in-law have reason to question your wife and daughter’s safety in your presence?”

Tony inhaled. That wasn’t the question he’d anticipated. “I love my wife and daughter unconditionally. There is no way I’d do anything to harm them. I believe Claire needs me during this difficult time.”

“That wasn’t the question,” Judge Temple replied. “I asked you if you believe Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol have grounds for questioning your volatile temper.”

“I object,” Brent replied.

“Mr. Simmons, we’re not in court. You do not need to object.”

“Judge, I believe that Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol are making assumptions.”

Jane replied, “Then I’d like to ask a few questions, if I may, Judge Temple?”

“Go ahead, Counselor.”

“Mr. Rawlings, have you ever lost control of your temper in the presence of your wife and daughter?”

“My wife *and* daughter? No.”

Brent interceded, “May I also ask a few questions, Judge?”

Judge Temple leaned back against the vinyl chair. “Please, I’m interested in the way this will play out.”

“Mr. or Mrs. Vandersol, have you personally witnessed any behavior by Mr. Rawlings that you deem violent?”

Emily’s chin rose indignantly. “Violent, no. Controlling and manipulative, yes.”

“Mr. Vandersol?” Brent continued.

“I’ve always had a gut feeling that something wasn’t right.”

Brent turned back to Judge Temple. “I don’t believe there’s a legal precedent for issuing orders on gut feelings, is there?”

“No, Counselor, but there is more at play here than a gut feeling. Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol claim that the incident at the Rawlings estate was evidence that Mrs. Rawlings was trying, once again, to free herself from Mr. Rawlings. Ms. Allyson, has that changed?”

“Yes, there has been new evidence regarding the incident. At the time of the filing, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Vandersol knew for sure that Claire and Mr. Rawlings were remarried. They also believed that Mrs. Rawlings was trying to free herself from him, as she’d done in the past.”

“Speculation,” Brent interjected. “As you so eloquently stated on a previous occasion, Ms. Allyson, Mrs. Rawlings did not plead guilty to attempted murder in 2012. She pled no contest. That wasn’t an admission of guilt. Mr. Rawlings filed for divorce from their first marriage. She did not *free herself* in the past, as you state. And the previous charges, as well as her plea, were expunged. They are not relevant.”

“Thank you, Mr. Simmons, for that clarification,” Jane replied. “As I was about to say, there has been new evidence. First, we now have reason to believe that Mr. Rawlings and Claire Nichols were legally married on October 27, 2013. We also have reason to believe that Mrs. Rawlings was not trying to harm Mr. Rawlings. That however, does not render this petition null and void. As court-appointed representatives of Mrs. Rawlings, necessitated by your client’s incarceration and based on their status as next-of-kin, the Vandersols still believe that Mr. Rawlings has been and continues to be a threat to their sister.”

“What evidence do you have? Other than sensationalized fiction?” Brent asked.

“Mr. Simmons, I warned you about insinuating that this court is taking anything other than the facts into consideration,” Judge Temple reprimanded.

"I apologize, Judge, but I've yet to hear anything except hearsay—" Jane produced documents. "I have evidence."

Tony took the papers that were passed. The first was a bound folder. He'd seen one very similar in the past. Of course, he hadn't read it then, and he didn't want to read it now. It was Claire's non-sworn testimony from 2012. It was her account of their first marriage.

"This testimony was not given under oath..." Brent began. As he spoke, Tony watched Emily's agitation rise. Her unusually quiet demeanor was no doubt at the prompting of her husband. She appeared as ready to spring as Tony felt.

Finally, she interrupted, obviously unable to contain her words any longer. "You almost killed her! Do you deny that?"

Brent's hand quickly went to Tony's arm, warning him to remain silent. Tony bit the inside of his cheek and pressed his lips together forming a slight grin as his unwavering stare remained fixed on his sister-in-law.

"Mrs. Vandersol, your attorneys will ask the questions," the judge reminded Emily.

"To that point, Judge, we also have recently obtained medical data," Jane said as she passed more documentation around the table. "This is a preliminary report regarding Mrs. Rawlings' mental state. It has been noted through various tests that Mrs. Rawlings suffered a concussion approximately three years ago."

Tony and Brent scanned the papers. Thanks to Phil Roach, they'd seen the report. It didn't take long before Brent replied, "This is not conclusive."

"No, Mrs. Rawlings has only been recently evaluated. These tests take time. However," Jane continued, "her current state is theorized to be a psychotic break—a break with reality." She turned toward the judge. "It was theorized to me, by the doctors, that such a break is brought on, in most cases, by one of two reasons. The first is traumatic brain injury. While we just received this report this morning, we haven't been able to thoroughly research, but the idea is that Mrs. Rawlings was so violently injured in 2010, that her brain formed scar tissue. This is a very painful process as the gray matter around the brain shrinks. It can sometimes cause debilitating headaches." Her eyes went to Tony.

He remembered Claire's headaches. She'd been suffering with them for as long as he could remember, but he couldn't recall if they'd occurred prior to her accident. Though she often tried to pretend that the headaches weren't happening, Tony also knew that there were times when nothing but sleep would relieve the pain he had witnessed in her emerald eyes.

Jane continued, "Mrs. Rawlings was also attacked by a perpetrator in 2013, once again sustaining trauma to her head, though, according to medical documentation, not as severely as in 2010. There is ongoing research that

verifies that, with time, the lingering results of the TBI (traumatic brain injury) can result in a psychotic break. Therefore, it's the belief of my clients that Mr. Rawlings is the cause of Mrs. Rawlings' current condition and is obviously a threat to her future wellbeing."

"Ms. Allyson, let's stick to the facts and dispense with the beliefs," Judge Temple said.

Brent looked at his notes, things he'd scribbled as Jane spoke, as well as information from the medical experts on Rawlings' legal team. "Ms. Allyson, you said there were *two* possible causes for a psychotic break. What is the second?"

"The evidence points to the TBI."

"Psychotic breaks can also be brought on by a traumatic life event." Brent handed documentation to Jane as well as Judge Temple. "I too have research. It cites many well-documented examples."

"Judge," Jane retorted, "I have seen some of this research. These people didn't have brain injuries."

Brent sat straighter. "Do you deny that the incident that occurred at the Rawlings estate could be defined as a *traumatic life event*?"

"I do not. However—"

"Sometimes the brain just cannot handle the stress. Mrs. Rawlings was undoubtedly undergoing excessive anxiety. According to witness testimony and the video surveillance, she'd just learned about the downed Rawlings Industries plane, she'd gone to the estate to assure her husband and family's safety from Ms. London. The home was on fire, and she'd just had a gun pointed at her. Can you honestly say that it wasn't this traumatic event that caused her psychotic break? Can you even say with one-hundred-percent certainty she has suffered a psychotic break? Come now, Ms. Allyson, do you have proof that a TBI caused her current condition?"

"It is too early to say definitively," John admitted, as his wife shot silent daggers in his direction.

Judge Temple interjected, "Let me get this straight: it's believed that Mrs. Rawlings' current mental state was caused by previous injury or possibly a very stressful situation?"

"Yes," Jane replied.

"Are both options viable?"

"Yes," she said again.

Turning toward Tony, the judge asked, "Mr. Rawlings, in the best interest of your family, though you are not under oath, I'm expecting a truthful answer. Do you know how Mrs. Rawlings received the initial and most severe injury to her brain that is evident on the medical scans?"

"Judge, my client does not need to answer that question," Brent interjected.

"Counselor, I need the facts to make my decision. Mr. Rawlings, I'm waiting."

The rush of blood to his face made Tony feel faint. Maintaining the eye contact he'd demanded of Claire in the past, Tony gazed only at the judge. "Yes, I do."

"There is a sensationalized bestselling book on the market right now that claims to have been narrated by your wife. Are you aware of this book?"

"Yes, I am."

"Have you read the book?"

Tony stoically replied, "No, I have not."

"Were you aware that you're mentioned in this book?"

"Judge, where is this going?" Brent asked.

"Counselor, I want to hear your client's answer. Mr. Rawlings, were you the cause of that brain injury? Did you harm your wife?"

Tony turned toward John and Emily. "I'm not proud of the things I've done in the past, and I would never do them again. I would do anything to have never behaved as I did. You need to know that this time things were different."

"Mr. Rawlings..." Judge Temple's voice deepened, "...while we're not in a courtroom, I will still hold you in contempt if you avoid another of my direct questions. Did you cause your wife grievous bodily harm in 2010?"

"Tony, don't answer this," Brent urged.

"Grievous?" Tony asked.

"Did you wound her with intent?"

"I didn't intend to harm her. It just..."

Tony's words faded, tears descended Emily's cheeks, as the small room buzzed with silence.

"Mr. Rawlings," Judge Temple continued, "are the things in Ms. Banks' book based on fact?"

"I haven't read her book."

"How did Mrs. Rawlings first come to live at your house, in 2010?"

Tony looked toward Brent and then remembering the judge's statement about contempt, he replied, "I'd rather not answer that question."

"Oh my God," Emily breathed under her breath, "you're a monster."

"I'd never hurt Nichol. I haven't hurt Claire since before our divorce. We've worked things—"

Judge Temple inhaled and sat taller. "Based on the best interest of this family and of the minor child, I believe I have enough information regarding the protective order. We will reconvene in court, and I'll announce my decision."

Tony's heart ached.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Late May 2014

Tony

I'd rather be hated for who I am, than loved for who I am not.

—Kurt Cobain (paraphrased from André Gide)

THE OFFICES AT RAWLINGS Industries corporate were quiet. Being after hours, most of the people had gone home to their families. Tony didn't have that luxury. He didn't want to go to his house—ever. The repairs were complete but the entire structure made him ill. The contractors said that the smell of smoke was gone, but when he entered the grand doors and walked the corridors, a putrid smell infiltrated his senses. No one else could smell it—but Tony could. It was the manifestation of years of hate and vengeance. It was the sickening loss of happiness that would never be his. It was the death of innocent people, and the death of innocence.

Was it only the structure in Iowa, or would he smell the same thing if he were to ever enter the house in New Jersey, the one where he was raised? After all, didn't it all begin there? Tony wasn't blaming anyone: he'd done enough of that. But the fact remained that he was raised in an opulent pit of evil. Like the red of his rage, it lurked in every corner and slithered through the halls. His grandfather's greed, grandmother's illness, father's passive-aggressive hatred, and his mother's submissive acceptance all mingled together to create the environment that spawned both Tony and Catherine. In no way was he forgiving her for any of her actions: nonetheless, she'd come to live under that roof at a mere twenty years of age. Would she have turned out differently had her parents accepted her and Sophia? Would he have turned out differently raised by someone else?

Tony pondered Sophia. She was a London, yet she was so different from her mother. Didn't the woman Sophia became speak volumes about nature

versus nurture? Every day he thought of the life lost too young.

Tony also mourned Derek. The man deserved better. He'd met every test and challenge with flying colors. Mr. Cunningham from Shedis-tics gave him glowing recommendations, as did Brent, from the short time they'd worked together. His death was another piece of the tragic puzzle.

The home Tony constructed was built as a testament to a man that Tony never really knew, a man who influenced events long after his death. Nathaniel fought hard, lived large, loved secretly, and fell from grace. He allowed his ambitions to overpower his better judgment.

As Tony swirled the amber liquid around his glass, he admitted, if only to himself, he was no better. If anything, he was worse. Nathaniel made mistakes out of greed and ambition. Tony's sins were based on misguided need. It was pitiful, he concluded, as he swallowed the contents of the glass and poured another two fingers of Johnny Walker. Relishing the slow burn as the whiskey dulled his senses, Tony mourned the loss of everything he knew to be true. His entire life was built on lies, retribution, and the need for validation. The money, the power, the prestige were all for one thing—to finally hear Nathaniel say, "well done, son."

He couldn't even dream that. In his dream, Nathaniel told him he'd failed.

Tony laid his jacket across a chair and stretched out on the long leather sofa in the far corner of his office. Hell, he'd sleep the night there; he'd been doing it quite frequently. It was better than going back to that house. He'd sell the damn thing if it weren't for Claire. His eyes closed as he fought the memories. Even the recollections weren't as bright as they'd been. Even they'd been dulled by the loss of color. There was some hot selling book that talked about shades of gray. Tony concluded that it was now his life. The color was gone. The vibrant greens of the island couldn't transcend the veil of despair in Tony's whiskey-numbed mind. There was a time when color was all around...

He'd invited Claire to Caleb Simmons' wedding. He didn't know if she'd come, but she did. The first evening, after they returned from Tim and Sue's house, Tony remembered standing on the brick drive beneath a blanket of Iowa stars. With a gentle June breeze blowing Claire's hair, she looked up at him and said, "I'm surprised how much I like being here. I was afraid the bad memories would overpower the good." The next day she guided him through his woods to her lake. Her beautiful emerald eyes sparkled as they tossed pebbles into the clear water and watched the sun reflect in prisms of light dancing on the waves.

That was why he couldn't sell the estate. It belonged to her. She was the only one to ever bring life and color to 6,000 acres. Before her, it was only a monument. After her, it was as dead as the man who it had been built to impress. It was only with her that the stone and brick structure was a home,

even when she didn't want to be there. Her presence infused life and spirit into the brick and mortar.

Roach's reports were discouraging. The damn doctors at the state facility where Claire was still being held were uncaring and inept. Their records were inconclusive. Most of the information he was able to glean was from the taps on the Vandersols' phones. Tony shrugged. Hell, they might as well add that to his list of charges—just pile it on!

Perhaps another drink was in order.

Tony refused to give up on Claire. Even if he couldn't see her, he would never stop watching her. He couldn't. She was part of him. The separation obviously added to his funk. Despite it all, he believed with all of his heart that she would get better. She just needed better doctors—the best money could buy. There was a reason for his success, other than Nathaniel. With Tony's money he could provide Claire and Nichol with the best the world had to offer, even if he were going to be spending the next three to fifteen years behind bars. The plea agreement was in place, the final decision for sentencing was up to the judge. Claire and Nichol deserved that and more.

Tomorrow, Tony had a meeting with the Rawlings Industries board of directors and then a web conference with the presidents of the subsidiaries. He prayed that his admission of guilt and quiet plea agreement would help to take the focus away from his company. It wasn't just for him, but for the thousands of people employed by him. Even that reminded him of Claire. That damn little company in Pennsylvania. She'd saved their jobs and now his past could take them all away.

No. He'd walk away from the company before he let that happen.

Tony looked at his watch; it was a little after 8:00 PM. Sitting back up, he knew it was too early to fall asleep. But it wasn't too early for Nichol to fall asleep. His arms ached with the desire to hold and rock their daughter. He turned on his phone to a picture taken only a few days ago. Her cheeks looked rounder than he remembered, and she was smiling. While it broke his heart, it also encouraged him. Tony hated Emily with everything in him, but he was thankful she was caring for Nichol. The picture came from Courtney. She'd finally convinced Emily to allow her to visit. A faint grin came to Tony's lips. Courtney had a way with everyone. Hopefully, she'd soon be allowed to visit Claire, too.

Thankfully, John and Jane had successfully worked out a plea agreement for Claire. The FBI came forward and agreed to drop the charge of aiding and abetting: that left only attempted murder. The video made it clear that Claire acted in self-defense. The prosecutor discussed aggravated assault; however, it was her mental condition that sealed the deal. Declared unfit to stand trial, Claire was exonerated of all charges.

Tony and Evergreen had come to a conclusion. It was Tony's conclusion,

but Evergreen agreed. Dropping the charges against Claire didn't make the prosecutor look bad. He'd caught a much bigger fish in Anthony Rawlings.

Before Tony could celebrate Claire's freedom with another drink, he heard the knock on his office door. Curiously, he asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Mr. Rawlings. May I come in?" Patricia's muffled voice came from behind the closed door.

Tony rose and opened the door. "Patricia, why are you still here? You should be home."

She lifted a plastic bag with what appeared to be Styrofoam containers and grinned. "You need to eat."

Shaking his head, Tony ran his hand through his unkempt hair and allowed her entry. "Thank you, but you didn't need to do that. I could have called—"

Patricia opened the bag and set the containers at the conference table. As she smiled, she said, "You could have, but you wouldn't have."

She was right. Tony had no intention of eating. He honestly hadn't even given it much thought. Noticing the way she was setting two places he asked, "Did you get something for yourself, too?"

"I did." She tilted her head toward the liquor cabinet. "I didn't think you should be drinking alone, either."

Since his return from paradise, Patricia had been instrumental in catching him up on all things Rawlings. He'd never be able to thank her for the long hours she'd spent running reports, filling him in on the numbers, and all around helping him re-acclimate to the world of CEO. It wasn't that Tim, Tom, and Brent hadn't been helpful—they were. But Tom and Brent were overwhelmed with legal issues, and Tim was still making the day-to-day decisions regarding operations. Tony didn't see the need for resuming the role just to lose it when his prison sentence began.

He lifted the bottle of Johnny Walker. "I'd offer you something else, but this seems to be all I have."

Patricia raised her eyebrows. "I'm not much of a drinker. Oh, but..." She hurried from the room. Seconds later she was back with a bottle of red wine and an opener. "...I've had this in my file cabinet for months. It was a Christmas present that I forgot to take home."

Tony grinned and reached for the bottle. He closed one eye, helping his focus, as he lined the little curly Q opener over the cork. When the cork popped, he said, "Well then, here's to your forgetfulness."

Patricia produced two new crystal tumblers from the cabinet. "Oh, my memory isn't that bad."

"No, no, it's not," Tony said as he pulled out her chair and sat. "Thank you for this kindness. I seem to be taking self-pity to a whole new level."

"Well," her voice came out an octave higher. "Mr. Rawlings, none of that

tonight. I'd say you've had enough for one day." As she lifted her tumbler, her brows knitted together. "Should you drink wine after liquor? What's that saying?"

Tony chuckled, lifting his glass and clinking hers. "I believe it has to do with beer, not wine. Beer before liquor, never been sicker. Liquor before beer, all in the clear."

Taking a sip, she laughed. "Then I guess you're safe."

Opening the container, the delectable aroma of garlic whiffed around the table, reminding Tony that he truly was hungry. After a few bites he remarked, "This is delicious, thank you again."

"Mr. Rawlings, you don't need to keep thanking me—"

"Patricia, how long have you worked for me?"

She feigned a pout. "You don't remember?"

"I do. You've been my assistant for eight years. As I recall, you were the one candidate I never expected to choose for the position."

Her eyes opened wide. "And why was that?"

"My assistant before you was extremely capable—"

"And you didn't think I would be?"

"No." He shook his head. "No, let me finish. She was capable, but she couldn't keep up with the growth and technology. I wanted someone who would do both."

"And, it wasn't me because..."

Tony shrugged. "You were energetic enough, and your résumé..." He thought reflectively. "Graduated top of your class from MIT, with your MBA from Stanford." He raised his glass again. "Impressive."

Patricia smiled and lifted her glass too. "Thank you, Mr. Rawlings."

"That's why I asked you how long you've worked for me. Please, after all you've done, you may call me Anthony, outside of work hours."

Crimson glowed from her cheeks. "Thank you, Anthony. I'm glad you took a chance on me, despite that dismal education."

"Your education was superb, as you know. I was concerned about your age."

"You do know that age isn't a legal reason for not hiring someone? I believe they call that discrimination."

He grunted. "Damn. Glad I hired you then. The last thing I need is another legal charge against me."

Patricia reached out and covered his hand. "Shh, stop. Remember, you're taking a break from that right now."

Tony nodded, removing his hand from hers. "Fine..." he lifted the bottle of wine. "...as long as I can refill your glass. I'm glad I hired you, too. You've proven your weight in gold around here. I just imagined you getting settled and then—damn, this *will* sound sexist—leaving to have a husband

and babies.”

Her eyes diverted to her food. “It did sound sexist. If I wanted that, I could do both.”

“If?” His alcohol-infused mind had no idea of the dangerous road he was maneuvering. Her shoulders squared, reminding Tony of Claire when she was about to tell him a piece of her mind. However, instead of stern, Patricia sounded sad.

“I mean, I’m not too old... but... you know what they say?”

Tony looked at her questioningly.

“All the good ones are taken.”

The food and wine helped lift a layer of grayness. He chuckled, “I thought you were going to say the good ones were gay.”

“No, I’m extremely confident that isn’t the case,” she murmured as she ate another bite of pasta.

As the last morsel of noodle was consumed, Tony’s phone buzzed. “Excuse me. With all that’s going down, I hate to miss any messages.”

Patricia nodded.

It was a text, from Brent.

“I JUST HEARD FROM EVERGREEN AND WANT TO REVIEW THIS PLEA AGREEMENT WITH YOU. WHERE ARE YOU? CAN ERIC DRIVE YOU?”

Tony wanted to take issue with his last comment, but truth be told, he shouldn’t drive. The pasta had helped to lower his blood-alcohol level, but not enough. He replied.

“I’M AT THE OFFICE. I SENT ERIC HOME FOR THE NIGHT. I CAN DRIVE, BUT PROBABLY SHOULDN’T. A DUI WOULDN’T BE GOOD FOR MY REPUTATION.”

See, he thought, I still have a sense of humor.

“I’LL BE THERE IN FIFTEEN MINUTES. DO YOU NEED FOOD?”

“NO. I JUST ATE—REALLY. JUST COME HERE.”

“SEE YOU IN FIFTEEN.”

Tony looked up to Patricia’s doe eyes.

“It’s none of my business,” she began, “but you were grinning. Was that good news?”

“Probably not. I’ll find out soon enough. Brent’s on his way here to discuss the plea agreement.”

“Oh,” she sounded sad. “I should go.”

Tony nodded. “Thanks again for the food and wine... can you drive?”

“I’ll be fine. Two glasses of wine with a meal, no big deal.”

He smiled again. “I don’t think that’s a real saying.”

Shrugging, Patricia gathered the containers and the wine. “I’ll leave this in my office, just in case you run out of whiskey.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, big meeting first thing.”

“I’ll be there Mr.—I mean, Anthony. You can count on me.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Brent walked through the open door. “So,” he motioned toward the couch. “Is this your new bed? I told you to come to my house. You would have saved me a drive, and Courtney’s one hell of a cook. She wouldn’t let you drink your dinner.”

“You’re getting damn pushy, and I didn’t drink my dinner. That was my hors d’oeuvres. Patricia brought me some pasta.”

“Good. I’d like you thinking straight while we discuss this. Once you agree, there’s no turning back.” Brent threw the envelope on the table. “Afterward, I’ll join you for a drink.”

“Is it that bad?”

Brent shrugged. “I’m not a fan of any of it. I still would rather that you plead not guilty. There’s enough circumstantial—”

“No. I’m not doing that. Then I’d be taking a chance on a jury and who knows how long it would all take. I want to do this and pay my debt. I want to come clean. For the first fuck’n time in my life, I want to do the right thing.”

“Tony, that’s not true. Don’t get me wrong: you’ve done some messed-up shit, but you’ve done good things too. Don’t be a martyr.”

“I’m hardly a martyr. I’m not doing this to save anyone but myself. I already confessed this shit to the FBI. I can’t live with the idea that one day, when I have my family back, there’ll be a knock on the door and my world will crash in around me. I’m laying my cards on the table and cashing in my chips. Tell me what kind of deal you and Evergreen came up with so that I can get out of prison sooner rather than later.”

As Brent sat and opened the envelope, his tired eyes swirled with emotion. “I sat in on Catherine’s arraignment this afternoon. She’s been charged with seven counts of murder. There isn’t enough evidence yet with the Rawlings’ plane to incriminate her.”

“She fuck’n admitted it to me in my office—it’s on tape.”

“She implied it. There wasn’t an explicit confession. Now she’s claiming total innocence.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you sure we should wait on that drink?”

Brent shrugged. “Do you have anything less strong than the Johnny Walker? I’d rather save that for later.”

Tony’s dark eyes widened. “As a matter of fact I do. Wine?”

“All these years and I never knew you were running a damn liquor store

in here.”

Tony left the office and returned with Patricia’s bottle of wine. “Might as well finish this off.” As he poured, Tony asked, “Seven? Did they list names?”

“Yes, Nathaniel Rawls, Samuel and Amanda Rawls, Sherman Nichols, Jordon and Shirley Nichols, and Allison Burke Bradley.”

Tony lowered his head to the table and wearily lifted it back up. “That’s the better part of Nichol’s family tree.”

Brent nodded.

“Those names go way back.”

“There’s no statute of limitation on murder.”

“She didn’t personally... I mean other than Nathaniel and my parents... right?”

“Murder for hire resulting in death carries the same penalty as murder.”

“Will they be able to prove it? That she was involved?”

“I’m not privy to all the information. From what I’ve gleaned, the FBI has extensive research connecting the cases with the poison that she used.” Brent took a drink. “There’s more.”

“More charges? Are we still talking about Catherine?”

“Yes, we’ll get to you later. They’re also charging her with attempted murder—four counts.”

Tony’s brows rose. “Maybe I’ve drunk too much. There’s John and Emily. Who else did she try to murder, but fail?”

“From the video, there’s evidence of her pointing the gun at Claire.”

“All right, that makes three...”

Brent leaned forward. “You, Tony. She poisoned you. She’s claiming you knew all about it, but Evergreen is fighting her on it. He didn’t like being played, with your accusations against Claire and then your public change of heart and recantation. It made him look bad. Charging her puts an end to that case forever. You had that same unique poison in your system. He’s running with it.”

Tony collapsed against the chair. “Will I need to testify?”

“Would you perjure yourself?”

“I don’t want to. But then again, I want her to rot.”

Brent swallowed the deep red liquid from his crystal tumbler. “I recommend that you stick to your original testimony. You didn’t know anything other than drinking the coffee and waking up.”

Tony nodded.

“The press is calling her a serial killer.”

“Who else was at the arraignment?”

“They barred the press, but people with a connection were given special dispensation.”

Tony peered over the rim of the tumbler before he drank, and said, “The Vandersols were there, weren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“What about Cindy? I haven’t spoken to her since she’s learned the truth.”

“She’s pretty broken up. We’re trying to work something out with her to avoid a civil case. I mean you’ve taken care of her for years.”

Tony looked down. “I thought we were, but she did work. It’s not like we just let her live at the estate.”

“She was paid, had a roof over her head, and her education was being paid for. So she served food and cleaned. It was a hell of a lot better than what would have happened to her had you not stepped in after the death of her parents.”

Tony shook his head. “Yes, which sounds great, with one exception: her parents died because of us.”

“Let’s talk about that.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

June 2014

Phil

Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her: but once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game.

—Voltaire

MY LIFE AS IT Didn't Appear: Chapter 4...

LIKE AN OBEDIENT child, I listened to the rules and there were many. The most important one was to do as I was told. Truly, that was all encompassing. There were rules regarding attire—no underwear. My boundaries were defined. I could roam the house as long as I didn't enter the corridor of Anthony's office or suite without his permission or summons. Those rooms held the means to contact the outside world, and I was forbidden to communicate with anyone but him and his staff. Most days I had to myself, unless otherwise informed by Anthony or Kate. I could wake when I wanted, work out in the gym and swim in the indoor pool, watch movies in the theater room, or read in the library. Each evening at 5:00 PM I was required to be in my suite and await the evening's instructions.

During the day my options were many and few. My cell had grown larger, but it was still a cell. Each glance outside my windows reminded me that I was trapped inside the walls of the mansion. Spring had arrived to Iowa, bringing longer days and life where only gray and dormancy had resided. The dead trees showed faint shades of color as buds formed and turned to lush green leaves. I longed for the freedom of walking outside, the ability to go to a

store or a restaurant. I had designer clothes and luxurious surroundings, yet I desired what others took for granted. I craved the mundane life I'd lost.

My job duties were defined broadly. For lack of a better word, I was forced to become Anthony Rawlings' whore. My existence and presence was for one purpose: to please him. If he didn't want or have time for me, I was left in my suite, like a doll left on the shelf. If he wanted me, I was required to accommodate. The word no had been removed from my vocabulary.

During the days I'd assure myself that I had choices. The evenings and nights convinced me otherwise. Failure was not an option. That was not only something that Anthony liked to say: it was the truth. Failure had consequences—some very painful and demeaning consequences.

My first punishment was when I was late returning to his office. I quickly learned that displeasing him was not something that I wanted to do. I believe that fear of seeing the darkness arise behind his eyes was the true key to my captivity. I'd thought I'd seen the depth of his rage—I hadn't yet—and I knew I didn't want to see it again. If I disobeyed, ran through the grand doors and made it into the trees, yet failed to find freedom, I knew that my punishment would be severe. That didn't need to be spelled out for me.

I'd been at his estate for nearly a month when I was awakened by a member of the staff and told that Mr. Rawlings was working from home, and I was to be in his office by 10:00 AM. It wasn't that I didn't usually wake by that time, but I'd developed a routine, and I wasn't always showered and dressed. Of course, I did as I was told, yet as I prepared for my day, each decision was monumental. Usually during the day I dressed casually. If I were to see Anthony at night, Kate informed me what he wanted me to wear.

My first, mid-week summons to his office was a new, daunting assignment. I debated everything. Finally, deciding upon a pair of slacks, silk blouse, and high heels—because other than workout shoes, that was my only option—I arrived at his office door with minutes to spare. I'd been in his office on the occasional Sunday afternoon for lunch, but other than my first time in the regal room, I'd never been called there and required to fulfill my new duties. With each step down the grand stairs and along the marble corridor, I knew this would be different. He had plans. I just didn't know what they were.

With my hand shaking, I knocked on the door to his office. I didn't know if it was locked, but he had a way to open it from his desk. The door opened and I entered. He was talking on the telephone and motioned for me to be quiet. Silently, I walked to his desk as the door closed by the pushing of a button. Though the temperature of the room was the same as the rest of the mansion, I felt a chill that sent shivers to my core. He was upset with the person on the other end of the line. I didn't know or care what he was discussing, but I had learned to read him well enough to know he wasn't happy.

For minutes upon minutes, I stood, unsure of what to do. Each second

hung in the air as his eyes grew darker and he wove some trinket around the fingers and knuckles of his other hand. It was the first time I saw this habit—one of his only nervous habits. I'd later consider it the rumble of thunder, warning of an impending storm.

My heartbeat quickened as he leaned back in his chair and told the person on the other end of the line that he had a personal matter, and he would put him or her on hold, momentarily. After hitting the button, his dark eyes found mine. "Claire, you have a job. Do it."

I was lost. I had no idea what I was supposed to do, and yet I feared not complying. Timidly, I asked, "What do you want me to do?"

The pent-up frustration from his business dealing burst forth as he sprang from his chair and rounded the desk toward me. Defensively, I stepped back. He grasped my arm pulling me toward him. His warm breath smelled of coffee as he growled, "Do not pull away from me. Do you understand?"

I understood. I understood that if Anthony Rawlings was having a bad day that I was having a bad day, probably worse. "Yes. I didn't mean to pull away."

My cheek burned with the slap of his hand. "Don't think that you can pacify me with lies. I want the truth from you. You meant to step back—it wasn't done on accident. Admit your mistakes and I won't need to punish you for them."

Tears threatened to stream as I faced his rage. Though every muscle in my body wanted to turn away and run, I knew that wasn't an option. I stood resolute as his anger spilled forth. My choice of clothing was inconsequential in the equation of the day. As I stood before him, with his business associate still on hold, he told me to undress.

I did.

Phil hated the damn book. He'd done enough research to know that Rawlings and Claire had an unusual relationship, especially in the beginning. However, he'd also spent a lot of time with the two of them and knew that what he was reading was not what he'd witnessed. Yet he also knew the book was based on truth. He'd been around each time Claire and Meredith met.

The topic also came up during a recent meeting with Mr. Rawlings and Brent Simmons at Rawlings' office. Once they were all seated, Rawlings was the first to speak.

"I've reached a plea agreement with the prosecutor."

Phil nodded.

Tony continued, "I know you probably have the opportunity for more exciting jobs than watching the Vandersols with Nichol and trying to learn

about Claire, but I called you here to ask you to keep working for me.”

Phil considered reminding him that he actually worked for Claire, but there was a tiredness about Rawlings’ demeanor that stilled his words. For the first time since he’d met him, Phil felt a pang of sadness at Tony’s weary expression. He wasn’t the domineering man who’d hired him to find and trail his ex-wife. No longer was he the man who had all the answers or made all of the decisions. He seemed older. Phil was glad he’d decided not to share the information about Harrison Baldwin’s visit. He wasn’t sure Rawlings could’ve taken it.

Trying to lighten the somber mood, Phil responded with a slight grin, “I wasn’t planning on stopping, even if you told me you wanted me to.”

Though his eyes didn’t join the party, Tony smiled back. “Thank you. It’ll be easier being away knowing that you’re watching over both of them.”

“Do you know how long you’ll be *away*?”

Brent answered, “The length of incarceration can change depending on circumstances in prison, but the current agreement is for four years, minus time served.”

Four years. Phil had enough criminal knowledge to know that something had changed. Even after Rawlings was cleared of helping Catherine with her poisoning deaths, there was still Simon Johnson’s murder. It was murder for hire, but he’d admitted to it. Phil doubted that even Anthony Rawlings could get a life sentence reduced to four years.

“I’ll be honest: I thought it would be longer,” Phil replied. “What happened?”

Brent responded, “The FBI dropped the murder charge for Simon Johnson. They said that the NTSB found no signs of tampering with Simon’s plane. Since Tony confessed to making the contact with the intent to murder, the murder charge was reduced to conspiracy, a second-degree felony. Tony also admitted to supplying Catherine with the money for one known hit—that was the second conspiracy charge. Due to his cooperation with prosecuting Catherine and turning state’s evidence, those two charges were negotiated to time served and a hefty fine.”

Phil looked puzzled. “Then what’s with the four years?”

“Kidnapping and sexual assault,” Tony said matter-of-factly.

Brent corrected, “Kidnapping is the only charge that’s standing.”

Phil sat straighter. “I know Claire isn’t pressing charges. It’s the book, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Tony replied. “The state of Iowa can’t stand the persecution it’s getting over the case. Besides the Vandersols, there are victims’ rights groups going nuts.”

Brent added, “Tony hasn’t read the book. His admission is not to all of the contents, publicly, only that he took Claire from Georgia and brought her to

Iowa without her consent. Crossing state lines makes it a federal offense.”

“The sexual assault charges?” Phil asked.

“There’s a statute that states the exception to the third degree class C felony is if the act is between persons who are at the time cohabitating as husband and wife. The book doesn’t claim anything nonconsensual happening until Claire was living in Tony’s house. I argued that they did become husband and wife—twice. Without physical evidence or Claire’s testimony, they let that charge drop, as long as he admitted to the kidnapping. The law has varying options for sentencing with kidnapping. Since Claire was an adult, not sold into human trafficking, and there’s record of Tony compensating her for her time with the paying of her debts, the court agreed to a lesser sentence. Tony’s lack of criminal record also helped in reducing the penalty. However, there’s also a hefty fine.”

Phil nodded. Looking at Tony, he said, “If I didn’t know you and witness the two of you in the South Pacific, I’d want to kill you right now. I still kind of do. I sure as hell hope that book has been sensationalized and it’s not an accurate account of what happened.”

Tony shrugged, his confident demeanor temporarily gone. “I haven’t read it, but apparently I’m the only one in the room who can say that.” His dark eyes glanced toward Brent.

“I have a job to do,” Brent said.

The hairs on the back of Phil’s neck stood to attention. The words from Claire’s book came rushing back. *You have a job to do. Do it!*

Brent went on, “I can’t defend you if I don’t know what I’m up against. And as much as I’m your friend...” he turned to Phil, “...I think I’d help you hide the body.”

Tony shook his head. “I told her not to talk to Meredith.” He looked toward Phil. “Remember?” His domineering voice returned with conviction. “This whole damn thing started in San Diego. I should have put an end to it then. I should have had you stop the meeting before I ever got there.”

Phil casually leaned back against the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. Tony was obviously on some unbalanced emotional roller coaster. “I believe this *whole damn thing* began in a bar in Georgia, or before, if I understood her laptop.”

Tony glared. “The information on the laptop about the Rawls family doesn’t need to be public. I’ve got enough shit out there.”

“You do have enough shit to spread far and wide,” Brent said. “But as far as keeping it private, I think you’d better focus on damage control. Catherine hasn’t been keeping her mouth shut. Tom’s been working his ass off on gag orders regarding her case. The whole world is going to know your family’s name.”

Tony shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “My family’s

name is *Rawlings*. Claire and Nichol Rawlings—they’re my family. I’m doing all of this so that I can get them back, so there won’t be any damn skeletons waiting around to shock their world. Do you really think I’d put myself through all of this if it weren’t for them?”

Nodding, Phil replied, “That’s why you’re not dead.” Turning to Brent, he asked, “Will Rawlings’ plea be done in a closed court?”

“Yes, however, the judge is allowing special dispensation.”

“I want to be there.”

Tony’s dark gaze returned Phil’s way. “What the hell for?”

With his arms on the table, Phil squared his shoulders. “Because I have a job to do and I’m going to do it. My job is to protect Claire. I’m the one who took you to her. I won’t stop doing my job. I want to see this for myself. Don’t get me wrong, I can hack the courthouse records and read it, but I want to hear it. I want to know I did the right thing getting you two back together. If I didn’t, I might have to reconsider my next assignment.”

Brent’s eyes opened wide and he looked at Tony. When Tony nodded, Brent replied, “Well, all right. I’ll see what I can do.”

Tony leaned across the table. “I know you have her best interest at heart. I’ve seen that. But don’t fuck’n threaten me again.”

Undeterred, Phil closed the gap. “I do have her best interest at heart, as well as Nichol’s. *No one* is going to hurt them: you don’t need to worry about that. And...” he paused, “...it wasn’t a threat.”

Tony inhaled and sat taller. “Brent will be your contact until you can talk with me. The prison is minimum-security. Once I’m settled, you can again report directly to me. Brent will be the one paying you and your expenses.”

“We have a deal.”



FOR A CLOSED HEARING, the courtroom had more than a few people watching from the galley. As Phil made his way to a seat, he heard Emily whisper to John, “What’s *he* doing here?”

“I don’t know, but as long as he’s on the list, he can be here,” John replied, sitting next to his wife in the galley. The current charges were being filed on behalf of the United States. Grinning smugly, Phil nodded and sat a few rows behind them. Obviously, nearing the end of her pregnancy, Emily was much larger than the last time Phil had seen her. It amazed him how fast pregnant women changed. The last few times he’d watched Nichol from afar, she was with a nanny. Although, that made it easier for Phil to go unnoticed, he worried about her safety. Most of his observation of the Vandersols was electronic. Smirking, Phil thought about their private text messages. He’d

learned many things: he knew they were having a boy and that Claire was being moved to a private facility in Cedar Rapids called Everwood.

He watched them from his vantage point. Although Emily's hair was shorter, seeing her, with her hand resting on her enlarged midsection, reminded Phil of Claire. The private facility where they'd gotten her admitted had outstanding ratings, a great reputation, and phenomenal security. Phil wholeheartedly approved. Of course, he'd also already infiltrated their data. They'd started some preliminary tests on Claire. Despite the inconclusive results, Phil planned on knowing what they did, when they did it.

Emily and Nichol had moved out of the hotel suite and rented a home outside of Cedar Rapids. John was commuting from California as often as he could. Since the charges had been dropped, John's legal acumen was no longer needed. He mostly visited on weekends, but Phil wasn't surprised when he learned that he'd be traveling to Iowa for this hearing. Jane Allyson was also present. She was sitting to John's right. Being as he and Jane weren't involved in the current legal proceedings, Phil was curious to see their reaction to Rawlings' negotiated sentence. There hadn't been any correspondence between the two of them indicating that they were in the know.

Ahead and on Phil's right was Courtney Simmons. Before he'd made his presence known, he saw Courtney speaking with Emily and assessed that it must be a difficult position for her. She obviously wanted to support her friend and her husband's boss, but if she were to maintain a relationship with Nichol, she also needed to stay in Emily's good graces. Since that was more than Phil had been able to do, he was glad she'd made some headway. There were others from Rawlings Industries with Courtney. Phil knew their names, but other than their job titles, he wasn't familiar with them. There was Tom Miller, legal, Tim Benson, acting CEO, and Patricia, Tony's personal assistant.

One of the last people to enter caught Phil by surprise. It was Harrison Baldwin, accompanied by an older gentleman. Harrison nodded in Phil's direction as they found two empty seats behind the Vandersols. Emily appeared pleased to see Harry. Well, wasn't this a fun group.

The small courtroom filled to capacity as the prosecution, Marcus Evergreen, and the US Attorney came from a closed door and made their way to one table, and the defense, Brent and Tony, followed behind and made their way to the other. Tony's gaze assessed the crowd, stopped momentarily on Baldwin, and then shifted to the front of the courtroom. In his customary thousand-dollar suit, Rawlings didn't look like a man about to head to prison. He looked more like the CEO he was known to be. The courtroom fell silent as the judge entered, followed by the clerk.

Shattering the palpable stillness, the clerk announced, "The honorable

Judge Jefferies presiding..."

Judge Jefferies didn't waste any time. After some directions to the attorneys, he said, "Mr. Rawlings, in the matter of the United States versus Anthony Rawlings, how do you plead?"

Standing, Tony glanced at Brent, turned toward the bench, and proclaimed, "Guilty, Your Honor."

Judge Jefferies asked, "Counsel, have you reached a settlement?"

The US Attorney replied, "Yes, Your Honor. The people have agreed to four years in a minimum-security federal prison camp, minus time served, \$75,000 in fines, and probation."

Emily gasped and turned to John and Jane. In a stage whisper she asked, "Tell me that isn't all that he's getting. Tell me there's more."

John reached for her hand and silently tried to soothe her.

Judge Jefferies continued, "Mr. Rawlings, do you know that by pleading guilty you lose the right to a jury trial?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Do you give up that right?"

Tony never wavered, "Yes, Your Honor."

"Do you understand what giving up that right means?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that you are waiving the right to cross-examine your accusers?"

Tony replied, "Yes."

Judge Jefferies continued his questions, "Do you know that you are waiving your privilege against self-incrimination?"

"Yes."

"Did anyone force you into accepting this settlement?"

"No. No one forced me."

"You are being charged with two counts of conspiracy to commit murder and one count of kidnapping. Are you pleading guilty because you in fact conspired to kill Allyson Burke Bradley and Simon Johnson?"

"Yes."

"Are you also pleading guilty because you in fact transported Claire Nichols across state lines without her knowledge or consent?"

"Yes."

"From where to where did you transport Ms. Nichols?"

"From Georgia to Iowa, Your Honor."

Emily's shoulders shuddered as the proceedings continued.

"Did you know that what you were doing was illegal?"

Tony's shoulders lifted and fell, but his chin remained high. "Yes, Your Honor."

Judge Jefferies concluded, "Mr. Rawlings, you are hereby sentenced to

four years in a minimum-security federal prison camp. I am also making the recommendation that while incarcerated you attend counseling with a state-appointed therapist. While not at the suggestion of the counsel, I believe it would be an excellent use of your time and helpful for your future. Upon completion of your sentence, you will serve two years' probation. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Do you have any questions before we adjourn?"

"No, Your Honor."

Judge Jefferies addressed the attorneys, "Any further questions or comments, Counselors?"

"No, Your Honor," came from both tables.

"Mr. Rawlings, as agreed upon, your sentence will begin immediately." Addressing the courtroom, "Ladies and gentlemen, you were permitted to attend this closed hearing. Be aware that it was closed for a reason. Any information regarding this hearing that is released to the press without the written approval of this court will be evidence to hold you in contempt." Hitting his gavel, Judge Jefferies proclaimed, "We are adjourned."

Phil watched as Tony shook Brent's hand, leaned across the bar and hugged Courtney, and was then led away by the waiting bailiff.

Once the judge and Tony were gone from the courtroom, the people from Rawlings murmured amongst themselves as Patricia dabbed her eyes.

Emily's voice rose above the whispers. "How could you?" she asked Marcus Evergreen. "With all of the charges against him, how could you agree to four years? What happened to sexual assault? What happened to murder? Allyson Bradley is dead! Simon Johnson is dead!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

June 2014

John

Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

"*A*ND YOU," EMILY growled toward Brent. "You claim to be Claire's friend. How could you in good conscience defend him?" She pulled her arm from John's grasp. "I'm not stopping. I want answers!"

"Not. Here," John implored.

Jane whispered, "Emily, this is a conversation to be conducted in private." Turning to Marcus, she asked, "Mr. Evergreen, could we possibly enter a private room and discuss what occurred?"

"I'll see what I can find," Marcus said as he closed his briefcase and stepped away.

Emily's moist green eyes peered up at her husband, but it wasn't sadness that he saw: it was full-out rage. Though they'd discussed Anthony's pending charges *ad nauseam*, they'd never come to a conclusion like the one they just witnessed. "It will be all right. At least he isn't free. Four years is a long time."

"Not long enough, not after what he's done to my family. I don't understand. How could this happen?"

"I found a room," Marcus announced.

"Brent and Courtney?" John asked. When they both looked his way, he said, "For Nichol's sake, would you join us? It won't change the outcome, but it may help us better understand."

Courtney looked to her husband and nodded. Brent replied, "Yes."

Courtney was the one who added, "Thank you for asking. Please know, we'd do anything for Nichol and for Claire."

Courtney squeezed Patricia's hand as she and the others filed from the room. Before leaving, Tim came up to John. "I know this isn't a good time, but I'd like to discuss something with you, when you can."

John looked questionably at Tim. "If it's about the things we've said about Anthony—"

Tim shook his head and interrupted, "Not directly, but I'd like to talk to you. I guess I could say it's indirectly about Claire."

At the mention of her sister's name, Emily looked their direction. She'd been shaking her head and twisting from side to side as she spoke quietly with Harry.

"This way," Jane announced. "We don't have the room for long."

Tim handed John his card. "Please call and hear me out..." His eyes widened. "...for Claire."

John took the card. "For Claire," he repeated as he placed the card in his jacket pocket. Taking Emily's hand, he gave it a squeeze and walked with her to the small conference room. As they neared, he whispered in her ear, "Please, hear them out."

Inhaling deeply, she pressed her lips together and nodded.

The table only had six chairs as Marcus, Brent, Courtney, Jane, John, and Emily made their way to seats. John began. "Thank you for discussing this with us. I hope you can understand my wife's outrage as well as our disbelief in what just happened. Mr. Evergreen, could you please explain to us the charges and how the plea agreement was reached."

"Many things were taken into consideration. This is part of the closed negotiations. I'm sure you're aware of the gag order."

"We are," John answered. "However, our special dispensation allows us —"

Brent interjected, "I believe everyone present is aware of the importance of confidentiality."

"Yes," Emily murmured. "We'd hate for the great Anthony Rawlings to have more bad press."

John silenced her with his stare. "Thank you, Brent. We want to understand what happened and how it happened."

Evergreen began, "Many of these crimes have been under investigation by the FBI for a long time. Although the use of *actaea pachypoda* is highly unusual, it's been documented in the death and poisoning of individuals who were initially thought to be related in some way to Anthony Rawlings. With his help, it was discovered that although he was connected, he wasn't the culprit. As you know, it was—"

"Catherine London," John answered.

"Yes, I can't go into specifics, but Mr. Rawlings was instrumental in helping them put the pieces of the case together. Prior to their return from the

South Pacific, Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings had worked out a deal with the FBI.”

Emily covered her mouth, stifling the sound of her gasp.

“There was no money trail for the FBI or the Iowa City police to follow that specifically connected Mr. Rawlings with Allyson Bradley’s death. The only information they had was his confession. The same can be said about Simon Johnson. And although they had his confession, it couldn’t be substantiated by physical evidence. Mr. Rawlings admitted to paying for a crime. He paid to have Simon Johnson’s plane sabotaged. The NTSB verified that the plane was in perfect flying condition. Mr. Rawlings’ hit man didn’t do his job.”

“Then why did Simon crash?” Emily asked.

“I don’t know. If the FBI knows, they aren’t saying.”

“Okay, so that’s why the murder charges were reduced to conspiracy. What about the sexual assault?” John asked.

Brent answered, “Again, there was lack of evidence. The court can’t use a book as evidence without physical evidence or Claire’s testimony.”

Jane replied, “There was testimony, during her 2012 defense. She told us all about it. I took it to you.” She nodded toward Marcus Evergreen.

“That testimony was not made in a court of law or under oath. It can’t hold up in court.”

“This is ridiculous,” Emily sighed.

“That isn’t all,” Brent added. “In Iowa, there’s a statute that nullifies the charge if the two individuals are living together as husband and wife. The book claims that the assault occurred while Claire was living with Tony, in his house. And they later became husband—”

Emily interjected, “*In his house*, where he’d kidnapped her and taken her against her will. Where he’d trapped her!”

Marcus spoke calmly, “Mrs. Vandersol, that leads us to the most serious charge that Mr. Rawlings faced: kidnapping and transporting across state lines. As you know it’s a federal offense...” He went on to explain how he fought to keep that charge above everything.

“But *four* years?” John asked. “As a federal offense it can be punishable by up to twenty years, in some cases, life.”

Marcus replied, “There are many different stipulations that go along with kidnapping. Ms. Nichols was not a minor. There’s a stiffer penalty with minors. She was not sold into human trafficking. That too has a stiffer penalty. By her own admission, she had opportunities to flee and didn’t.”

“Because she was scared.” Tears coated Emily’s cheeks in a visible display of her frustration. She turned to Courtney. “You were her friend during that time. You know she was scared, don’t you?”

Courtney sat forward. “Emily, I had a feeling—a gut feeling—that something wasn’t right. Please know that I did, and still do love your sister. I

asked her over and over if there was a problem. She never once told me there was.” She paused. “Well, not until later, after she was out of jail.”

“Jail!” John said. “What about filing a false report? Claire didn’t try to kill Anthony, yet she served fourteen months.”

Marcus cleared his throat. “The state of Iowa is responsible for that. I won’t admit to that publicly so don’t ask me to. But honestly, Mr. Rawlings woke in the hospital not knowing who poisoned him. The evidence, including video evidence, all supported that it was Mrs. Rawlings.”

Emily shook her head. “So that’s it. He pays \$75,000, which to him is like pocket change, and he gets a slap on the wrist.”

“He confessed. He pled guilty,” Brent reminded her. “If he hadn’t, he would be free right now and exercising his rights as a free man.”

Emily’s green eyes opened wide. “He’s not getting to my sister or my niece. Not now, and not in four years. I didn’t protect her in 2010. I will now.”

“Thank you. Thank you for explaining this all to us. We’re not happy, but at least we understand.” John’s words were the dismissal for the meeting. Slowly, everyone rose from their seats, murmured their goodbyes and silently made their way out of the courthouse into the hot, sunny Iowa afternoon and through the throng of reporters.

“Mrs. Vandersol, could you give us a statement?”

“Mr. Vandersol, how do you feel about Mr. Rawlings’ sentence?”

“Did he really plead guilty?”

“Mr. Simmons, tell us how your client feels...”

No one replied as they made their way to their cars.



NICHOL ROCKED BACK and forth on her knees as she giggled and inched forward toward the brightly colored toy in front of her. A little progress and she was back to her tummy, arms and legs flailing in glee. With single-minded determination, she made the distance and reached for the soft black and red rattle. Once it was hers, she took it straight to her lips, her little jaw moving up and down.

“I think she’s teething,” Emily said.

“I thought babies were fussy when they teethed,” replied John.

“Becca said she had trouble going down for her nap, but since she woke, she’s been great.”

John scooped her from the floor and brought her to his lap. Contently, she chewed on her prized possession, until it fell from her grasp. Kicking her legs she arched her body in protest. As her cheeks reddened, John asked, “Whom do you think she gets that strong will from?”

Sighing, Emily leaned back and massaged her enlarged midsection. “I’d say both of them. Did you know that they’d worked together on a deal with the FBI?”

“No. I knew they didn’t pursue the aiding and abetting charge, but I didn’t realize there was an FBI connection.”

“Do you think they were really happy...” Her voice trailed away and then regained strength. “...wherever they were in the South Pacific?”

John shrugged. “I don’t see how. I mean, the more I read—”

“I told you not to.”

“I know. I’m not rushing through it, although I should, to get it over with. But I read it while flying. I just read about the first time she was *allowed* to call us. It was your birthday. Do you remember that?”

Tears descended as she managed to say, “I do. I was so happy to hear from her. If only I’d known...”

John moved to pull Emily into his arms. “I know... I’m so sorry we didn’t know... Courtney was right. Claire never told anyone.”

Emily nodded. “I hate that he got off so easy.”

“I was incarcerated. Trust me: he isn’t getting off easy.”

“Unless someone beats him into unconsciousness, I think it’s too easy.”

John shrugged. “Well, if he pisses off the wrong people—”

Emily grinned. “You’re just trying to make me feel better!”

After dinner, John settled at his desk in the study and looked at Tim’s business card, the one he’d been given earlier today. It was lying innocently on the desk... pleading for attention. Truly, John was curious as to what Tim wanted to say. Though the card had only his business numbers, in pen, Tim had added his personal cell number. John punched the number into his phone.

Contemplating the conversation he’d just had, John made his way through the house and found Emily lying on their bed, hands over her enlarged midsection, with her eyes closed. She looked so peaceful that John hated to disturb her. As he was about to walk away, her eyes fluttered open. “I thought you were sleeping,” he said softly.

“No, I was just enjoying our little man’s tap dance.”

John’s smile broadened as he made his way to the bed and placed his hand next to Emily’s. “I felt him! Man, he’s really moving.”

Emily nodded. “He is.”

“Is Nichol asleep?”

“I think so. I just put her down a few minutes ago. She was pretty tired.” Emily glanced toward the baby monitor on the bedside stand. “I haven’t heard a peep out of her.”

“Are you ready for two babies?”

Emily shrugged with a tired grin. “I’m ready for Michael to make his appearance, and after the last three months, I couldn’t imagine not having Nichol. So I think the answer is yes.”

“I love her too, but you know, she does have parents.”

Emily brushed a tear from her eye. “These stupid hormones have me all emotional.”

“You don’t think maybe it was the day. I mean it’s been pretty stressful. I think you need to get some sleep.”

“With everything going on with Anthony’s hearing, I forgot to tell you about my visit with Claire yesterday.”

John scooted up to the headboard and pulled his wife closer.

With her head on his shoulder and both of their hands on her midsection, Emily continued, “I like her doctor: she’s not only compassionate but incredibly intelligent. They’re trying some different things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, they asked me a lot of questions: like what does she like to do in her spare time? It occurred to me that I didn’t know. I could tell them things she *used* to like to do, but I discovered the sad truth: I don’t know my sister anymore.” More tears blurred the room. “When we decided to move to California, before we knew about Nichol, I had such high hopes. I thought Claire and Harry seemed happy. I imagined all of us being a family one day.” She took a ragged breath. “It’s all *his* fault. Everything is his fault. Now, we’re not together as a family—even us. I miss having you around. But I can’t leave her...”

John held her shuddering shoulders as Emily’s tears dampened his shirt.

Smoothing his wife’s hair, John said, “Tim Bronson gave me his card today, just before he left the courtroom. He asked me to call him.”

“Why?”

“I was curious, too.”

Emily looked up. “You *were*? Does that mean you called him?”

“I did. I just got off the phone. That’s why I came to find you. I wanted to talk to you about his offer.”

“His offer? Does he want to bribe you to stop saying things about Anthony? I’ve been watching Rawlings Industries stock numbers. The company’s taken a hit.”

“Is that really what we want?”

Emily shook her head. “I don’t know. I want *him* to suffer.”

“You do realize that it’s not just *him*: there are the thousands and thousands of employees, and more importantly, there’s Claire and Nichol.”

“What are you saying?”

John continued, “Tim offered me a job.”

Emily's eyes opened wide as she studied her husband. "You're serious, aren't you? You said you'd never work for Anthony. You said you wouldn't even work for one of his subsidiaries, no matter how far down the food chain."

Shrugging, he continued, "I didn't say yes, but I didn't say no. The thing is that he approached it from the standpoint of helping Claire and Nichol. Rawlings Industries is Nichol's legacy. There's no doubt that I hate Anthony Rawlings, but you have to admit that when it comes to financial support of Claire, her medical bills, treatment, anything, he's offered unlimited funds. The same can be said about Nichol's care. I know the money for her is in a trust, but helping to rebuild Rawlings Industries would assure their financial future. Hell, I can't even get Claire to make eye contact with me. This is something I could do, and as a bonus, I'd live in Iowa with you, Michael, and Nichol. This traveling back and forth to Palo Alto is getting old."

"What about SiJo?"

"I feel bad about leaving Amber, but I suspect she'd understand. I started a new position at SiJo and got it up and running. She could definitely get someone else with more experience in gaming. Really, since everything went down here, my heart hasn't been in it."

Emily laid her head back and grinned. "Oh, did you feel that kick?"

John chuckled. "I'm thinking soccer or football player."

"I'm thinking *no*," she giggled. "What about Nichol?"

"What about Nichol? Are you kidding? She's got the world on a string."

"You know what I want for both of the children?" Emily asked.

"What?"

"I want them to be happy and normal. None of this vendetta crap. None of the hatred that's consumed too many lives. I just want them to be kids."

John sighed. "Maybe working for Rawlings is the first step."

"It sounds like you've already made up your mind."

"I really haven't. I'm going to meet with Tim and discuss it further."

"When?"

"We're going to meet for lunch tomorrow. I fly back to Palo Alto on Sunday," John added wearily.

"I'm taking Nichol to Everwood tomorrow," Emily said. "Doctor Brown believes that if we have Claire in a more home-like environment with Nichol, it could help to trigger some memories."

John nodded. "That makes sense."

"Yes, they're trying other things. Mostly, I like how they're getting her up, out of bed, and out of a chair. I hated that other place. They just put her in a wheelchair and moved her around. She's capable of walking. I remembered her stories about hiking and gardening here at his estate."

"It's hers, too." He reminded her.

"I told them she liked the outside," Emily continued. "So they've added that to her schedule."

John yawned. "I'll get over there before I head back to California. I already like the way they take care of her better at Everwood."

Emily cuddled against his side. "I think you should be open-minded about the job offer. Make sure it's sincere and not just a ploy to keep us from telling the world the truth."

"The court's limited us on what we can say about the legal proceedings, but I get what you're saying."

"I think it could be good too. I liked all of those people when we first met them."

"At Claire's first wedding," John said.

"I know I shouldn't blame them for not knowing what was happening any more than I can blame us."

John hugged Emily again as she closed her eyes and her breathing became steady. They weren't dressed for bed, but he couldn't bring himself to nudge her awake. He wanted this. He wanted to be able to cuddle and talk—not on the phone and from across the country. Could he look past the name on the letterhead? Could he work for Rawlings Industries—at corporate? Obviously, the company was successful and substantial, but was it legitimate? All the things Anthony has done personally: what if John got into the legalities of Rawlings Industries and found skeletons? Then again, what if he didn't?

What if he could come home every night to Emily and the kids? What if he could help assure Claire and Nichol's financial future? So many questions swirled as his eyes closed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Summer 2014

Tony

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.

—Charles Darwin

NOTHING COULD HAVE prepared Tony for incarceration in the federal prison camp in Yankton, South Dakota. Perhaps, to the experienced prisoner, or even from the outside, it was lovely, better than most. After all, it had only been a federal prison since 1988. From the outside, it still looked like the small, private, liberal arts college that it had once been. Most buildings were on the historical register and bore the names of alumni and benefactors. The grounds were beautiful with flowers, trees, and well-manicured grass. There wasn't even a fence around the perimeter. Nevertheless, it was a prison.

Tony's legal department had done their research: not only was Yankton relatively close to Iowa City, it was said to be one of the best all-male, minimum-security prisons in the United States. As most of the prisoners there were convicted of nonviolent crimes, it took some negotiation from the Rawlings' legal team to secure Tony a spot in the highly sought-after facility. A large subsection of inmates were middle-aged men who'd been convicted of *white-collar* crimes. Anthony Rawlings wasn't the only successful entrepreneur on the grounds. Brent and Tom had hoped that would help Tony's transition. It didn't.

Undergraduate school at NYU was the last time Tony had shared a room with another man apart from his travels through Europe while on the run from the FBI. During that time, he'd stayed in a few hostels with large shared-sleeping areas, but this was different. At Yankton, the inmates didn't have private or even semi-private rooms. Prisoners slept in dormitories that in

some ways reminded him of Blair Academy, only a million times worse. These rooms had beds, lockers, and desks. All the beds were bunked with an unspoken understanding that the eldest bunkmate received the prized lower bunk. Some of the dormitories held sixty men. Thankfully, Tony's only held twenty, which was still nineteen more than he wanted.

Over the years he'd heard how these minimum-security prisons were just country clubs for the wealthy criminals. Anyone who said that had never been behind the walls. Though he'd researched the prison camp before he arrived, he wasn't prepared. He remembered that most testimonials stated that the first few days were the most difficult. He hoped that was true. His first day was filled with interviews and screenings, but as Tony received his khaki shirt, khaki pants, cumbersome shoes, underwear, and bedding, the reality was overwhelming. There was no doubt that the next four years of his life would be drastically different from any of the first forty-nine. Not only did he yearn for the life he'd left behind, but his heart also ached for the time Claire had lost behind similar walls.

During the mental-health screening, Tony agreed to anger-management counseling. Before he was transported to Yankton, Brent told him that Judge Jefferies' recommendation had truly been a gift. Since it wasn't court-mandated, Tony's willingness to undergo therapy would look good on his record and help when his case came up for review. Though parole wasn't offered in federal penitentiaries, there was always hope of early release. After only hours as a number, not a full name, Tony knew he'd do whatever it took to make an early release a reality.

As if sleeping in a room with nineteen other men wasn't difficult enough, he soon learned about *counts*. Counts happened every day at 12:01 AM, 3:00 AM, 5:00 AM, 10:00 AM, 4:00 PM, and 10:00 PM. The last two were *standing counts*. During a standing count each man was required to stand unmoving by his bunk while the correctional officer counted inmates. With wake-up being every day at 5:50 AM, Tony wondered why they couldn't wait until then to do the count. Heaven knows that lights coming on and a correctional officer walking bunk to bunk three times in the middle of the night was not conducive to a good night's sleep.

The other men in his unit didn't care who he was outside any more than he cared who they were. Each man was cordial and respectful, yet not overly communicative. That was until evenings: most of the men thrived on television time. From 4:30 PM until midnight, the television was on. Never being much of a television watcher, the incessant noise—every night—wore on him as much as the stupid counts.

Sleeping wasn't the only activity that was communal. Showering, too, was done by unit. As the first week progressed, it seemed that each hour was worse than the one before. As his old life slipped further and further away, the

therapy seemed like a good idea.

Besides his thrice a week counseling sessions, Tony, like every other inmate, was required to hold a job. Not only was he responsible for cleaning his part of the dormitory, he had an actual *job*. Every day after breakfast, Anthony Rawlings, Number 01657-3452, reported to the warehouse, where he unpacked supplies from delivery trucks. That bit of manual labor earned him \$0.17 an hour. Hadn't this place heard of minimum wage?

The money he earned, plus money he had sent to him, allowed him to purchase non-issued supplies. That was everything from headphones and an MP3 player to drown out the incessant television, to shampoo and additional clothing. Though Tony could have unlimited money sent to his account, there was a \$320.00 per month spending limit. He almost choked when he read that. Hell, he'd spent more than that on a haircut.

In an effort to avoid the dormitory, Tony signed up for educational services. He'd always appreciated education, but as a man with an MBA, he wasn't interested in a GED. The subject he chose to study was horticulture. It reminded him of Claire. As he learned to care for the plants on Yankton's grounds, he'd remember her chatter about the flowers and plants on the estate. Just being outdoors, with his hands in the soil, made him feel closer to her. While learning about or tending to some plant, Tony would think about Claire and hope that she was doing well enough to be doing the same. He knew how much she loved the outdoors and believed that if she were outside, it would give her strength.

The schedule included time to exercise, and, during the allotted time, a quarter-mile track was frequented by the inmates. While many used the track as a time to talk with a little more privacy, Tony's playlist kept him occupied. Purchasing music was one of his bigger expenses. To occupy his mind, he had the Wall Street Journal, as well as other business publications delivered, and he was allowed a minimum amount of Internet time. The Internet as well as phone calls were monitored, but they were a connection to the outside world. As days turned to weeks and weeks to months, the routine became easier to handle.

Tony recalled Claire's description of prison, saying that it was very *routine*. He could add lonely, boring, and other adjectives, but routine was accurate. In the first few months of incarceration, Tony learned that not only could he make rules, he could follow them. He didn't like it, but each message from Courtney about Nichol, from Roach about Claire, from Patricia about Rawlings Industries, or Brent about his sentence gave him the substance and stamina to continue.

The best and worst days of the week were weekends and holidays. Those were the days when visitors could visit Yankton. Upon his arrival to the prison camp, Tony was required to compile a list of friends and family who

could visit. The list was then verified and approved by the prison. Tony knew that there were people on his list who would probably never visit, but he added them anyway. His list included Brent (although as his attorney he had additional license to visit), Courtney, Tim, Patricia, Roach, Claire, Nichol, John, and Emily.

He doubted that John and Emily would ever bring Nichol to see him, but he wanted the option available to them if they decided to come. Tony wasn't sure about Claire, but believed that she would get better. When she did, he prayed she'd come to see him. He even fantasized about her visiting, especially on days he had no visitors. When the weather was warm, there was outside seating for visits. Seeing the other inmates with their spouses and children was probably the worse punishment Tony endured.

Utilizing the Rawlings' jets, people could get to Tony in less than an hour. There was a small municipal airport not far from the prison. Driving would have been over five hours, and flying commercially meant another hour's drive from Sioux City, the closest international airport.

By law, inmates were allowed four hours a month of visitation. However, it was the belief of the prison that visitors were good for the inmates' morale. Therefore, contingent upon available space—every visitor and inmate were required to have a chair—visits were granted. They had to be planned ahead and approved. Brent and Courtney visited every three weeks, like clockwork. Roach came at least once a month, and Tim or Patricia alternated their visits. It was without a doubt the highlight to Tony's week.

Besides visiting, Courtney was the best about sending letters. They were usually just little notes about nothing. When one would arrive it was impossible to keep the smile from Tony's face.

Occasionally, something would occur that the visits didn't happen. Those were dark, colorless days.

Autumn came a little earlier in South Dakota than it did in Iowa. By early September the days as well as the nights had begun to chill. In Tony's horticulture class he learned about hardy, weather-resistant flowers. After Labor Day, they removed the summer's flowers and planted mums. He'd seen them before but never paid them any attention. Throughout the prison's campus yellow, orange, and deep red mums added color.

Tony's counseling had progressed beyond insignificant discussions about Tony's adaptation to Yankton. His therapist wasn't a doctor but a counselor named Jim. At first, Tony wasn't sure what to think about Jim other than he wasn't very talkative for a therapist. Tony had always imagined that therapy was where the therapist told the patient what his or her problems were and what to do about them. He knew his problems: he was stuck in a prison while his wife was in a mental facility and their daughter was living with his brother- and sister-in-law whom he hated. Of course, it took Tony weeks to

divulge even that much. He had a personal rule about sharing private information. Speaking to Jim about Tony's private life, outside of Yankton, seemed like a violation of his own rule.

Speaking about prison life, however, was acceptable. That was how they started each session. But they'd been at this now for months and the mundane was getting to be that and more.

"Anthony, how are things going?" Jim asked. Tony liked that Jim referred to him solely by his name. The correctional officers as well as any announcements or call outs always included the inmate's name and number. It didn't take long for Tony to tire of hearing *Rawlings, Number 01657-3452*.

He shrugged. "As well as can be expected, I suppose."

Jim waited. When Tony didn't offer any more he went on, "Why? What did you expect?"

"I don't know. I thought I could handle it better."

"What do you mean?"

"I hate it—every minute." He stood and paced to the window and back. It was the only place where he could freely get up and move while with a member of the prison staff. That realization struck him. "Like this! I can't even fuck'n do this."

"What?" Jim asked. "What are you doing that you can't do?"

"Just move, walk, pace, whatever. I've been trying these last few months, but I don't think I can make it another forty-four months. Damn, that sounds like forever." He collapsed into the chair before Jim's desk.

"Why?"

Color came to Tony's cheeks as red threatened his vision. "You know, that drives me crazy."

"What?"

"That! If you're going to ask me questions for three hours a week, be more specific."

"Give me an example," Jim said.

Did he need to tell the therapist how to do his own job? "Instead of *why* or *what*, ask why I don't think I can make it or what drives me crazy—use complete sentences."

"Is that something you always do?"

Tony thought for a minute. "I think I do. I know I used to. Hell, I don't even know what I do anymore."

"How does that make you feel?"

"I feel like after only three months, I'm losing who I am. Just Saturday, my assistant was here to fill me in on things happening back at my work. I am totally out of the loop."

"Have you always been in the loop?"

"Up until a year ago, yes."

Jim put down his pencil. "What happened a year ago?"

"Surely you have my records, Jim. Surely you know my history. I mean, haven't you done your homework?"

"If I did, what would I know?"

Tony stood again and walked toward the window. "I hate this. I'm not the person I'm forced to be in here. I can't stand it."

"You weren't saying this Friday. What changed?"

Tony remembered Patricia's visit. She wasn't allowed to bring papers or her phone or anything back for the visit, so everything she said, she had to remember. She was telling him about some recent fluctuations in the stocks, and about a few changes on the administrative level of a recently acquired subsidiary, but instead of listening and following what she was saying, as he would have in the past, he was watching the inmate at the table next to them with his wife and two kids.

"Do you think kids should be allowed to visit here?" Tony asked.

Jim leaned back and took a deep breath. "I think that children can be a motivating factor for people to want to better themselves. Therefore, seeing that child is a reminder of why a person is trying to follow the rules and be a better person."

Tony contemplated his answer. "But for the kids," he asked, "won't it mess them up to be visiting their father in a prison?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm asking you."

"Anthony, are you used to getting your questions answered when you ask them?"

"Yes. I accept no less."

"Does the Anthony who lives outside of this prison get what he expects?"

"I-I..." he was about to say *I do*, but the reality of his life since he returned from paradise came crashing down. "I used to."

"How does it make you feel to not get what you expect?"

"It disappoints me. I don't like to be disappointed."

"We always talk about Yankton. You brought up a year ago... were you disappointed a year ago?"

Tony remembered a year ago. It was last September when Claire left, when his world fell apart. "Yes," he replied quieter.

"Was it something or someone who disappointed you?"

"I think I'm going to request a change in job. I mean, there are jobs in the business office. I have a lot to offer in an office."

Jim didn't argue Tony's change of subject. "What would you do? Clerical work?"

"Hell, no. I could do much more than that. I already have seen how poorly the supplies are managed by working in the warehouse. I think I could help

them utilize..." Tony went on to describe his plan for supply logistics.

"Don't you think that any of the other inmates could do the same?"

"I'm sure they could, but they haven't."

"Why do you think that is?" Jim asked.

Tony thought about that. "I would assume that most people don't believe the prison truly wants to accentuate our abilities."

"Do you think that?"

"I don't know. I guess I want to find a reason to get up every day. I used to hate to sleep, like I was missing something. Now I would kill to get a good night's sleep."

Jim grinned. "As a rule of thumb, in a prison anger-management session, saying you'd kill isn't a good idea."

The tips of Tony's lips perked upward. "Yes, I didn't give that much thought. Perhaps it's my lack of sleep?"

"Between now and your next session, I have something I want you to do."

Jim had never asked Tony to do anything other than arrive on time. "What do you want?" he asked suspiciously.

"I want you to think about who or what disappointed you a year ago, and I want you to decide if you're going to trust me with that information. If you decide you're not going to trust me, I want to know why. Can you do that?"

He didn't want to do that. Tony didn't want to think about a year ago. He didn't want to remember how great he thought he and Claire had it at the estate, how she'd accepted his ring, how he thought she was safe. He didn't want to remember the crushing sadness at her disappearance or that it was Catherine who turned their world upside down. Not only did Tony not want to share that with Jim, he didn't want to share it with himself.

When he didn't answer, Jim asked again, "Anthony, can you do what I asked?"

Was failure an option? "I'll try."

EARLY FALL 2014

"MY LIFE AS IT Didn't Appear, Chapter 6...

ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES. It was a phrase I heard over and over. There were negative consequences and positive consequences. Everything I did or said was evaluated: by Anthony, and by me. I found myself walking on egg-shells at every turn. It began the moment I woke, and ended after I finally

fell asleep. I didn't want to fail: I couldn't fail. I learned very quickly that failure had consequences.

The physical punishments didn't continue with any kind of regularity after the first few weeks. They weren't necessary. Though I was being treated in many ways, like a small child, I wasn't. I was a college-educated adult who'd been placed in an extreme maze of operant conditioning. Something as simple as a look from Anthony's dark eyes could still my words. The slight grasp of his fingers, lifting my chin would bring me to submission. I didn't need or want to feel the slap of his hand. I learned the rules and strove to obey.

It was the fear of re-igniting his anger that continually weighed on me. There were days and weeks when his gaze remained light. Despite my circumstances, it was almost pleasurable living as I did during those times. I was still a prisoner, but one in a huge home with people to take care of my every need. And then, without the luxury of a warning rumble, the darkness would return."

"Stop there," Jim said.

Truly, Tony wanted to stop before he ever started. Working desperately to rein in the red, Tony placed the book on Jim's desk and walked toward the window. The damn view only reminded him that he was just like the other men he saw walking from place to place. He was wearing the same khaki clothes and living the same hell.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Jim implored.

"I'm thinking that I can't wait to wear another color."

"Really, after what you just read, that's what you're thinking?"

"Really," Tony answered stoically.

"Then think about what you just read."

Tony clenched his jaw, holding back the red that had just started to fade. "Are you trying to get me to explode? Is that your goal? Because I'm pretty sure you picked that fuck'n passage for a reason. Why don't you tell me what that was?"

"What made the *darkness* that Claire describes return?"

"I have no idea. She didn't give me a time frame. It said days or weeks. When the hell was that, exactly?"

"Well, we can assume it was early in her captivity. She said she was still a prisoner. She hasn't mentioned leaving the house. When did she do that?"

"Read the damn book. It will probably tell you."

"Anthony, how does this book make you feel?"

"You want to know? Fine, I'm so pissed I can hardly see straight. I'm pissed that it happened, and I'm pissed that she gave the fuck'n interview.

This is private information. No one else needs to know any of this shit. Besides, it was a long time ago. Things change.”

“When did they change?”

“Everything was different after she got out of prison. It was all different. The penalty was over. I could finally admit... Fuck!” Tony collapsed in the chair. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense.”

“During those times of light, how did you feel about Claire?”

“I didn’t. Not in the beginning. I didn’t feel anything for her... she just was there. She had a job to do.”

“Does that even make sense?”

Tony shrugged.

“Explain it to me,” Jim said.

“I can’t. It just is.”

“We need to work on this. Think about it, until our next meeting.”

“Think about what?”

“You watched your wife for years before you ever introduced yourself. You’re telling me that when you first risked everything by kidnapping and keeping her held hostage in your home, that she meant nothing to you?”

“No—yes. You’re messing up my words. She’s always meant something to me. I love her.”

“Did you then?”

“Now, I think I did. But then, I didn’t think so.”

“Would you do to her again what you did to her in 2010?” Jim asked.

Tony replied immediately, “No. I told you that. Everything was different.”

“Because?”

“Everything was different because I couldn’t do that to someone I love.”

“But you did.”

“I didn’t know that I loved her.”

Jim looked at the clock. “Our time is up. Think about this. Think about how you felt. Was that darkness she describes anger or control—or perhaps loss of control? Did you punish Claire when a business deal went south or was it because of something she did or said? Remember, you’ve told me how much you enjoyed her smart mouth during your second marriage. Yet during your first, you’ve admitted that you wouldn’t have tolerated it. Could the reason that you lashed out be that you didn’t want to admit your own feelings? Could it have been your way of keeping her as your possession and not becoming emotionally invested?”

Tony didn’t want to think about it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

October 2014

Harry

Facts do not speak for themselves. They speak for or against competing theories.

—Thomas Sowell

HE RISING SUN CAST a warm glow from behind the blinds as Harry slipped from the condominium. He needed time to think, and lying in bed next to Liz as soft breaths infiltrated the predawn silence wasn't the place. His mind swirled with answers to questions he didn't want to ask. Pieces of the puzzle lay blatantly before him, yet he struggled not to connect them. He couldn't. He needed more evidence, something concrete. Then again, he didn't want it.

The last five years had been some of the best and worst of his life. He'd made decisions, some good and some bad. Unfortunately, as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans and walked toward the cafés in Palo Alto, Harry couldn't decide which ones were good and which were bad.

Warm coffee had a way of clearing his mind. He thought about going to his sister's condominium each morning and sharing a cup. At first it may not have been *sharing*: it was his way of avoiding grocery shopping. Truly though, it was more than that. It was also a time to reconnect. He and Amber hadn't been overly close as children, yet when he moved to San Francisco after his divorce, they slowly worked their way into one another's lives. Warm memories intermingled with sad as Harry thought about Simon. Their friendship was instantaneous. He was probably the reason Harry and Amber had become close. There was something about Simon that pulled people in and made them feel comfortable. Whether it was sports, work, or recreation, they had hit it off.

Harry and Amber had a shared past, but siblings or not, forging a

friendship as adults was not always easy. That's especially true if one or the other harbors childhood feelings and insecurities. Harry needed to be sure that the feelings he had as a young boy—watching Amber receive the love and attention of two parents—weren't playing a role in his current conflict. In all actuality, he thought they'd made it past that. Besides, his vision was much clearer as an adult. He now saw that it wasn't her fault. She was just the lucky one to be born to two parents. The man who'd left Harry's mother was the culprit. Harry couldn't even blame his stepfather. No, those issues weren't even worth considering.

Amber was the lucky one. She always had been. Imagine at her age being the CEO of a growing Fortune 500 company. With the exception of losing Simon, everything has always worked in her favor. Now that she had Keaton in her life, she was no longer lonely. She truly had it all.

Moving into Amber's building after Simon's death was Harry's first unselfish brotherly act. Though he and Liz had to give up the little house they rented in San Mateo not far from the beach, it was worth it. Amber was devastated. She poured her heart and soul into SiJo. Having Harry and Liz right down the hall gave her a reason to come home. It was in those early weeks after Simon's death that Harry and Amber began their morning routine. It was during that time, as an adult, that Harry got to know—really know—his sister. They talked, listened, laughed, and even cried. They'd both lost someone dear. Though Harry mourned Simon, too, he knew his loss of friend wasn't the same as her loss of a life mate. Nevertheless, he could relate. Ilona and Jillian weren't dead, but he'd let them go. For all practical purposes, it was the same. Despite the fact that his had been voluntary, Harry understood loss—there was a time in his life that he'd thought that he and Ilona would be together forever. It was during those early mornings, over steaming cups of coffee, that brother and sister created a connection that surpassed blood ties.

Then Claire happened. Their routine changed participants, but didn't go away. Sometimes Amber would join them, but she often claimed work responsibilities. During those mornings in Amber's kitchen, Harry learned more about his assignment—Claire—than he ever could have as the occasionally visiting brother. He wondered sometimes if Amber wouldn't have developed a deeper kinship with Claire if she'd been with her more. Amber always privately blamed her attitude on the connection to Anthony Rawlings. After all, Claire claimed that Anthony could have known about Simon's death. While originally Amber wanted to know more about that, she never fully trusted Claire. Of course, she played the caring-friend role well.

Thoughts of Claire twisted his stomach. Emily took him to see her again when he went to Iowa for Rawlings' plea hearing. The facility where the Vandersols had moved her was a hell of a lot better than the one where Harry had first seen her. However, it was her condition that blew him away. When

he'd seen her in Geneva, she was so strong and determined. He remembered her telling him off and telling him to leave her suite. Though he had only heard her message before the case was given to Agent Jackson, even then she sounded strong. Harry couldn't fathom what had occurred to cause her current status. If it was, as Emily claimed, due to past traumatic brain injury, Harry believed he was also responsible. Yes, Rawlings beat her, but Harry had been the one to introduce her to Patrick Chester. Though the Vandersols never mentioned that, Harry felt responsible.

He wished there was anything he could do to relieve her suffering. Perhaps that was his motivation for pushing SAC Williams to step in, to go to the powers that be and persuade the FBI to come forward about both Claire and Anthony's agreement. Apparently, there was reluctance due to the Rawlings coming back to the United States before they were supposed to do so, violating the stipulation of the agreement. Agent Jackson contacted Agent Baldwin who explained that the reason the couple traveled was fear for the Vandersols' safety. Jackson wasn't impressed. In his words, if Rawlings had done as he was ordered and stayed out of contact with people from his past, he wouldn't have known about the threat to the Vandersols. Sometimes, Harry wished he could tell John and Emily the truth about his job and what he truly knows. Do they realize all that Claire and Anthony risked to save them?

The cafe began to fill, yet Harry's thoughts were still scattered when his phone buzzed.

"WHERE ARE YOU? I WOKE UP AND YOU WERE GONE. (sad face)"

"I'M AT THE OVEN ON WAVERLY. I DIDN'T WANT TO WAKE YOU."

"ARE YOU COMING HOME OR DO YOU WANT ME TO JOIN YOU?"

Harry shrugged, thinking that he was leaning more toward option number three.

"I THOUGHT YOU HAD PLANS TODAY WITH AMBER?"

"SHIT! I FORGOT. WE CAN CATCH UP FOR A LATE LUNCH?"

"SOUNDS GOOD."

He sighed as he laid the phone back on the table. Even though it was a Saturday, Harry knew he needed to work this out in his head. After Liz's comment last night, he couldn't ignore the facts any longer. They were discussing John's decision to move to Iowa and work at Rawlings Industries.

"I can't understand how he can work for that company after all the things he's said about Anthony Rawlings. I mean, it's like working for the enemy,"

Liz said.

“According to John, he had every reason to hate his brother-in-law, but things change. I think he’s doing it more for Claire.”

Liz huffed. “What is it with her? I mean people uproot their lives for her. I don’t get it.”

“Liz, she’s ill. She has a daughter and needs help.”

“Ill? Like what kind of ill?”

Harry inhaled, “I really don’t know. I just know John said that Emily wouldn’t leave her, and he didn’t want to be away from Emily and Michael. Apparently, Rawlings Industries offered him a tremendous deal to move to Iowa City and work with their legal division.”

“Yeah?” Her nose wrinkled. “I never thought of John as someone who’d sell out for money.”

“I think the money was an incentive, but he did it for... family.” Harry was about to say for Claire but he didn’t want to keep that conversation going.

“Well, Emily surprises me too. Did you see them while you were in Iowa?”

Harry tried to process: he hadn’t told her he was in Iowa to visit Claire.

Liz glanced at his expression. “I know you went there for the plea agreement. You didn’t have to hide it. Amber explained that it’s part of your job. SAC Williams went, too, didn’t he?”

Breathing easier, Harry replied, “I wish my sister would learn to keep her mouth shut. She wasn’t even supposed to know. And yes, I saw Emily and John. They were surprised to see me at the hearing. They still don’t know my true job.”

“Well, since the whole thing is over, why can’t you tell them?”

“Because that’s the job. Being undercover means... being undercover. I can’t go back to all the places and people I’ve met and be like, oh, I wasn’t really who you thought I was...”

Liz scoffed. “I get that, but how often are you you?”

Harry’s light blue eyes clouded. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, for most of your assignments don’t you have some kind of alias? I hope you do. I don’t want to go through something like we did—ever again.”

He remembered her terror after his attack. She handled it well at first, but there were nightmares and panic attacks that she tried to hide. Harry wrapped her in his strong arms. “Yes, you’re right. I’m not me on other assignments. All of my information is changed. There’s no way to get back to you, Jillian, Ilona, or Amber. You don’t need to worry.”

Liz laid her head against his chest and the scent of strawberries rose from her hair. “I don’t think about it that much.” Veiling her big blue eyes with lashes, she looked up at him. “I don’t. Forget that I mentioned it. My point was that John and Emily know you. They know us, and Amber. Don’t you

think they deserve to know—”

“What? Don’t they deserve to know that my relationship with their sister was a job? I don’t see the reason to hurt them like that. They’re good people.”

“Maybe you’re right. Besides, they’ve moved away. It’s not like you have to see them as regularly as you did when they lived here.”

“Harry?” she asked shyly. “Can I ask you something?”

He could tell by her voice that it was something he didn’t want to be asked. “Go ahead, but if it’s about the job, I can’t promise that I can answer.”

“I don’t know if it’s the job or not. It’s about us.” When Harry didn’t respond, she went on. “Is there something you’re not telling me about Claire? You said she’s ill. I thought she was probably in jail. I figured with all of Anthony’s money, they’re keeping it covered up. I know Amber was pissed that she couldn’t find where he was charged with Simon’s death. I thought you were working on that—” Harry started to speak, but Liz went on. “—wait, I want to say this. I don’t even care anymore about you proving anything about Simon. I miss him, but I think Amber just needs to move on. I want to know if you really have. That’s my question.”

His brows knitted together. “What’s your question?”

“Have you really moved on? Do you not want the Vandersols to know that Claire was your assignment, because in reality she was more? Remember, I saw that picture of you two holding hands in Venice. Did you visit her in Iowa?”

“I went to Iowa with SAC Williams. I saw the Vandersols and spoke with them as friends, but I was there on behalf of the FBI. There’s another case related to Rawlings coming up soon. I will probably go back there again. Claire’s been gone from here for over a year. I’m getting sick of having her constantly thrown in my face. You and Amber are the ones who keep bringing her up, not me.” Harry’s words flowed, but he’d said them before, or some version of them. His mind zeroed in on the picture. Liz had mentioned it a long time ago, but it had never registered like it did now.

“Methinks he doth protest too much!”

She stood to walk away when Harry grabbed her arm. “Tell me again who showed you that picture.”

Pulling her arm away, Liz replied, “Hey, I’m not some criminal under interrogation! I told you before—Amber showed it to me. She knows what it’s like to have your boyfriend obsessed with someone else. After what happened, she didn’t want me setting myself up for another disappointment.” Her blue eyes pierced. “Is that what I’ve done, Harry? Are you just playing me? Rawlings is in prison. Maybe now is the time to make your move!”

He saw her anger, the way her cheeks flushed, and the tone of her voice, but his reaction was off. He wasn’t Harry Baldwin, boyfriend. He was Harrison Baldwin, FBI agent. “You’re overreacting. I have no intentions of

making a move on Claire. She told me off the last time I spoke to her—and for the record that was in Venice. I told her I was FBI. She was pissed off.

Tears coated Liz's cheeks. "Y-you told her?"

"Yes, I told her the truth and she hates me."

"W-why didn't you ever tell me?"

Harry reached for her hand. After a moment of hesitation, she surrendered it to his tender grasp. "Because it is my job. I wasn't in Venice to pursue a relationship with her. You and I were back together. I don't want to fuck this up, again. I was there to protect her. I can't tell you any more, other than that she told me to get lost."

"So this is real. I don't have to be afraid that you'll go back to her? Wait..." She pulled back and looked into his eyes. "...why were you holding her hand?"

"It was a set-up. She didn't know about the FBI, yet. I needed that picture to show Rawlings. I really shouldn't be talking about this. Besides, it all blew up in my face."

Liz wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "But you spoke with the Vandersols. They've been living here. They really don't know the truth about you?"

Harry shook his head.

Liz continued, "I'm surprised. I mean, if I were going to move across the country to some remote place for my family, I'd expect that family to be honest with me. Why hasn't Claire told them about you? I mean, who knows you like your family?"

Harry had heard that before. He replied, "I think their family has had a lot going on. I'm confident that the Vandersols are still in the dark."

Sitting with his empty cup of coffee, Harry lifted his phone as Liz's question reverberated through his mind. *Who knows you like your family?*

He accessed his contacts and called the one man who may be able to put his mind at ease. SAC Williams answered on the second ring. "Yes, Agent? What can I help you with?"

"Sir, can I speak to you, in person?"

"Can this wait until Monday?"

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. SAC Williams couldn't see his anguish, but Harry knew it was evident. "I really need to speak to you today."

"All right, son, I can be at the office in an hour."

"Thank you. I'll see you then." Harry hung up the phone and stared at the empty cup. In the middle of the café filled with people, he prayed: *Please God, let me be wrong.*



THE FBI DIDN'T STOP for weekends, yet depending on the caseload and schedule, many agents had the luxury of the occasional weekend off. Therefore, the San Francisco field office wasn't as busy as it was during the week. Harry made his way to SAC Williams' office. One rap on the door and he heard Williams' voice.

"Come in."

As Agent Baldwin entered, he said, "Thank you, sir, for taking the time to see me."

Williams' forehead stretched. "What is it, son? You sound different."

"May I sit, sir?"

Williams stood and walked around his desk, motioned to one of the chairs, and seated himself in the one beside it. As Harry sat down, Williams said, "You're being way too formal. I'd think you were a new recruit if I didn't know better. What's happening?"

"It's about the Rawlings—"

Williams' expression of concern morphed to agitation. "How many ways do I need to tell you that it's over—"

"No, sir, I don't think it is."

"Agent—"

Harry interrupted again, "It isn't about him, per se. SAC, do you remember when I was attacked? When they took Liz and threatened Jillian?"

Williams relaxed against the chair. "Yes. Did you remember something new?"

Harry shook his head. "What happened to my phone?"

"I believe it was recovered but it was unusable. The perpetrators destroyed it."

"But you got all the pieces?"

"Yes, the lab was able to access all your data."

"This is very important." Harry moved to the edge of his chair. "Was the SD card found?"

"I don't remember, but now that you ask, I remember your being concerned about that. There was a picture, right?"

"Right," Harry agreed. "There was a picture that I took with the intention of showing it to Rawlings. I had a plan that obviously didn't work, but in the picture I was holding Claire Nichol's hand. SAC, did the bureau get that SD card? Does the FBI have that picture?"

Williams shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. After what happened before between you and Mrs. Rawlings, I'm sure that if it would have materialized, the deputy director would have brought it to my attention."

Harry closed his eyes and fell back against the chair. With a shaky voice, he asked, “What do you believe happened to my SD card—based on what I’ve told you and what the FBI found?”

Williams shrugged. “I could say that the FBI missed it at the scene, but honestly, I doubt that. The area was swept clean more than once. You’re one of us. We take the attack on you, as well as the threat to your daughter and ex-wife, very seriously. More than likely, I’d assume that the perpetrators took it. Who knows, maybe it was to be used as blackmail, but if you haven’t heard anything yet...”

The rush of blood caused his ears to ring. Harry could no longer hear his supervisor. There was no other explanation. The words kept repeating: *No one knows you like family—everyone has a past.* It all pointed to one person: *his sister.* Could she have been the one to have him and Liz attacked? How else could she have gotten that picture? Who else would have known about Jillian?

Oh God! Harry’s chest hurt.

Why? Why would Amber have done that to him?

Harry finally stilled the voices long enough to speak above their din. “Sir, I have a theory, one that I’d like the bureau to disprove.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

November 2014

John

If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.

—Maya Angelou

JOHN MADE HIS WAY toward the courthouse for the third day of Catherine London's grand jury trial. The grand jury was still hearing testimony and debating the evidence. It wasn't their job to determine guilt or innocence, only if there was enough evidence for Catherine to stand trial. Since all grand jury proceedings were done in private, this was the one phase that the Rawlings Industries' legal team didn't need to fight to keep away from the press. However, there were many other probable sources of bad exposure. To that end, the Rawlings' legal team, with the help of their newest member, had been successful in limiting the release of information during the preliminary phase. That didn't stop the crowds of people from lining the cold steps of the US District Courthouse in Cedar Rapids. Many of the onlookers were hoping to get a glimpse of Anthony Rawlings. Though it was only speculation, if he were to be subpoenaed, the reporters didn't want to miss his arrival.

Since the list of possible witnesses wasn't public, John wasn't sure if Anthony would be asked to testify or not. He did know that it was one thing to indirectly work for his brother-in-law, but John wasn't sure he was ready to see him and look him in the eye. The decision to take the job at Rawlings Industries had not been made lightly. John and Emily spent many hours and days discussing the pros and the cons. Without a doubt, Tim timed the offer perfectly. First, there was Emily's desire to stay close to Claire and the court's decision that kept her in Iowa. Then there was the salary. Tim's offer made

Anthony's proposal from four years ago look like minimum wage. And while those reasons were enticing, it was the possibility of helping Claire and Nichol, helping to secure their financial future and the future of Nichol's legacy that truly sold John. Well, that and Tim.

Tim Bronson, the acting CEO of Rawlings Industries, was one of the most upfront and honest CEO's that John had ever met. They'd met socially years ago, but time and responsibility had not only matured, but also added confidence and charisma to Tim's demeanor. Despite all of the problems that Rawlings Industries was having with Anthony's private life, Tim was steadfast and confident in the company and its future. Truly, John was impressed from the first lunch. Tim didn't beat around the bush or try to avoid the giant elephant in the room. No, Tim laid it on the line.

Standing and extending his hand as John approached him at the restaurant where they met, Tim said, "John, thank you for meeting with me. I know this isn't a good time. I also know that you'll be leaving town again soon, and I so wanted to discuss this offer with you in person before you did."

John shook Tim's hand and had a seat. Being one of the nicer restaurants in the area, the waiter was present immediately, assessing the needs of the two men. Once he walked away, John responded, "I'm curious, Mr. Bronson, not to mention very surprised."

"Please, call me Tim. We've known each other for years. I'm not much into titles. I'm into this company. Despite decisions that Tony has made in his private life, his work ethic and business sense has always been spot on and impeccable."

John listened.

"You have been very vocal about your feelings toward your brother-in-law. I respect that. From what I've seen, you're a family man, and you feel that your family has been wronged."

John nodded, "My family as well as me."

It was Tim's turn to nod. "Yes, Brent filled me in on some past history. I assure you, that the business side of Rawlings is and always has been separate from the personal side. I didn't know about..." he hesitated "...well, any of the personal dealings." He corrected. "I of course knew about Claire, that they were married. Sue and I were there. However, we didn't know about any of the other things. I can honestly tell you that I wouldn't have cared if he were my boss or not; I wouldn't have been able to sit idly by if I had any idea —"

John interrupted, "Please, Tim, I've heard all I want to hear about Claire and Anthony's first marriage. I've read the book, and I don't care to see the

movie. I've heard the same thing from everyone. They did a good job keeping it hidden. Obviously, neither Emily nor I were aware. We can't hold others accountable if we ourselves weren't to blame. No matter the reason he did it or she didn't tell, was their choice. I don't have to agree, but I think I've come to terms with it. They remarried, and from all accounts, it was a mutual decision based on feelings versus contracts. I can only hope that at some time my sister-in-law was happy."

What John didn't say—what he couldn't say—was the why of how he'd come to terms with it. Ironically, it was the same reason Emily couldn't. It was Claire. For a while the doctors questioned her ability to speak. Most of what she said was difficult to understand and jumbled. However, what she did say with some clarity was the name Tony. Over and over, especially while in a sleep-like state. It seemed like it was at those times, when she was absent in mind, that she was the most at peace. John couldn't explain it, and Emily didn't see it the same way, but there was something about seeing her during those times that touched John's heart.

"That's what I want to discuss—Claire and Nichol."

John leaned forward, his voice lower than usual. "Tim, I respect you and what you're doing for Rawlings Industries, but I will not discuss Claire's condition nor will I allow Nichol to be part of the media circus that seems to surround Anthony."

Tim shook his head. "No, John, that's not what I mean." A slight grin came to his lips. "But I do have to say, if you would include Claire and Nichol's company—their financial future—in that protective umbrella you have over them, I believe you'd be the perfect addition to Rawlings Industries."

Leaning back, John relaxed a little. "I'm listening."

"You and I aren't far apart in age. Brent Simmons has been an asset to Rawlings and to Tony. His allegiance is to his friend and his friend's company. No matter what happens to Rawlings Industries and the tens of thousands of employees, Anthony Rawlings will do fine when he is out of prison. I believe that Brent has been through some difficult times over the years. Through it all he's stayed steadfast with Tony. I can only imagine that when Tony decides to retire, so will Brent. Tom too has been wonderful. I want someone else heading up the legal department who can both learn from those two men, as well as stick around, hopefully with me, and take Rawlings Industries into the future."

"You mentioned Claire and Nichol," John reminded.

"I don't think that they will ever be destitute. Tony is too smart for that. However, with the publicity regarding Nichol's parents, the best way to make her future easier is to have the good outweigh the bad. I want to see Rawlings Industries not only continue as the powerhouse that it was, but to forge a path

for the future. I believe that with the right people we can not only bring back what we once had, but make it better..."

John listened as Tim laid out his goals and objectives. Wealth builds wealth, power builds power. Anthony Rawlings began Rawlings Industries with nothing. He and his friend had an idea and from there it mushroomed. It was an atomic bomb in the world of computers. Right time. Right place. Along the way there have been difficult decisions. Companies have been closed, but more have been opened. The economy is trying to rebound. It will take companies like Rawlings Industries, ones who are willing to reach down to the smallest of subsidiaries and lend the needed guidance, to keep people working.

Tim wasn't afraid to address the difficult subjects, yet he added the personal touch. "When Tony first re-introduced Claire into our fold, I'll admit that Sue and I were skeptical. After all, the last we'd heard, she was incarcerated for attempted murder."

John started to respond, but Tim went on.

"We forgot about the woman we knew and liked. I can say loved when it comes to Sue. Sue thought and still thinks the world of Claire. Their ages helped to make them fast friends. Then, after Claire returned, it only took being with her for a few hours to remember. We remembered the woman we knew, the one we never believed could have hurt Tony. John, she could have hated us all. She could, and maybe should have hated Tony, but she didn't. I'm not asking you how she's doing now. I'm telling you that she has one of the most forgiving hearts I've ever known. I hope that you can see that by working for Rawlings Industries, by forgiving the injustices that were done to you and to your family, and by concentrating on what Claire would want... building a better future for not only her and Nichol, but for thousands and thousands of employees who need their paychecks, that you will be helping so many."

"I have to ask where Anthony stands on this?"

Tim nodded. "I expected that question." He reached into his breast pocket and retrieved an envelope. "This is for you. If you'll excuse me while I make a call, I'll leave you alone for a moment. By the way, I have not read what's in there. All I know is that I proposed your hiring to Tony a few weeks ago. I was still technically in charge, but he was back. Anyway, he said he wanted to think about it and asked me to wait. Four days ago he gave me that envelope and told me to follow my gut. He already knew his sentence and said that he felt secure with Rawlings Industries in my hands. He said that I should do what I want to do: currently the decisions are mine. However, if I still wanted to pursue offering you a position, he made a few requests. The first was that I discuss it with Brent and Tom. If I found support, he asked that I bring it up to the board of directors. He said if I had the support of the company, I had his.

His last request was that I give you that envelope before you make a decision.” Tim grinned. “I hope he doesn’t screw up everything I’ve just said, but despite it all, I have faith in him, too.”

John tried to swallow the anticipation as he laid the envelope on the table. He wasn’t sure why his hand had begun to tremble. Looking up at Tim, John nodded. Smiling, Tim walked away to make his call. Once alone, John lifted the letter, broke the seal, and removed the page. The letter was hand written.

John,

I don’t know where to begin. If you’ve received this letter then you’re at least considering working for Rawlings Industries. You should know that I had nothing to do with this job offer. It is not like the last time. I have no excuse for what I did in the past, but I do have an explanation.

I saw you as a threat—which I hope you know is a compliment. I’d followed your career and knew all about you. From your modest roots to your Midwest education, I saw how you took what I honestly believed to be a mediocre beginning and turned it into success. Your record was impeccable. Before meeting you, I knew you were a force with which to be reckoned.

That said, I did what I do. I decided to capitalize on your ability and at the same time create a situation in which you would be indebted to me. At the time, I didn’t consider Claire’s feelings. When she found out that I’d offered you the job, she was apprehensively pleased. She spoke about us living closer and being a family. All I could think about was having you under my control.

It’s no secret that I wasn’t happy with you at our wedding rehearsal when you didn’t give Claire away. At that moment, when I saw the anguish in Claire’s eyes, I was determined to stifle your paternal, protective instincts. Claire was no longer your concern. She was MY wife and your actions caused her anguish.

I said she was apprehensively pleased. The apprehension came because Claire was concerned that you’d refuse the offer. She told me it was a possibility. I didn’t give her concern credence, until you refused. After all, I, via Tom, had offered you so much more than you had in Albany. I was certain the money alone would entice you. However, as you know, Claire was right, and once again, you demonstrated that you were indeed a formidable opponent.

As I stated, that wasn’t meant as an excuse or even a feeble attempt at an apology. I believe we are beyond that.

You currently have guardianship of two of the most precious and

important people in the world. The only reason that I have not fought harder to regain my rights regarding my wife and my daughter was that I knew I had a debt to pay. I've accepted that commitment and will pay what I owe. Once I am done, be forewarned I will fight for what is mine.

In the meantime, I have to believe that those protective instincts that I witnessed years ago, and loathed, have resurfaced. For peace of mind, I have to believe that the decisions you're making in your life and for your family have my family's best interest at heart. To that end, I want you to know that I welcome you at Rawlings Industries. My company is Claire's company. One day it will be Nichol's. I have the utmost faith in Tim. If he believes in you, I do too. I also want you to know that I will not interfere in his decisions regarding your employment. If you choose to work for him at Rawlings Industries, he will be whom you are working for.

I trust that you will take that arrogant, protective attitude that I hated and use it to better the lives of my wife and daughter, as well as the employees of Rawlings Industries. All of these people need what I will temporarily be unable to provide.

To that end, if you choose to do that in my absence, I thank you.

Anthony

Shaking his head, John placed the letter back into the envelope. He wasn't sure what to think about his brother-in-law's attempt to communicate. However, for the first time that John could remember, it didn't seem manipulative or calculating. It seemed like—in Anthony's own way—he was almost humbled. Before John could give it too much contemplation, Tim returned.

"Are you still considering my offer?" Tim asked with a grin.

Extending his hand, John said, "Yes, Tim, I'm considering it."

John didn't give Tim an answer the day they met or even the next week. He talked to Emily and to Amber. The prospect of practicing law again excited him more than he'd anticipated. Though he could accept the offer, he had his own legal hoops to jump through before he'd be licensed in Iowa. But that could be done, and when it came to SiJo, John believed he'd done all he could do. Since the incident, his heart hadn't been in it. He was truthful when he told Amber that he believed she could find someone new to take the position further.

Did Anthony's letter confess to being the person who set him up and took away his life? Not directly. Nevertheless, John chose not to share the letter

with Emily. He knew she'd see manipulation and deceit in every word; however, during their discussions he explained that though Anthony was still part of Rawlings Industries, Tim was the one who wanted to hire him. Tim would be the one to whom John would report. Both he and Emily liked the prospect of being together again as a family, especially with Michael on the way. After much debate, John accepted Tim's offer, resigned his position at SiJo, and moved to Iowa.

In the past five months, he and Emily added Michael to their family, purchased a home, and began a new life—again. It was true that every upheaval in their lives could be associated with Anthony Rawlings. Nevertheless, with time, it even surprised John that he could now say the word *Rawlings* without feeling the deep-seated hatred from before. He supposed that was because along the way, the meaning of the word had changed. *Rawlings* no longer solely represented the man: instead, it stood for the company, a part of Claire and Nichol.

Though it was undeniably Nichol and Claire's last name, Emily had done her best to remove it from anything associated with Claire. John knew his wife meant well. She'd explained her stance many times. In her mind, Anthony was inarguably responsible for everything negative in Claire's life. Not only was he responsible for the concussion she'd sustained while with him, but the injury she had in California. After all, she reasoned, Chester wouldn't have been after Claire, if it weren't for Anthony. Emily interpreted the doctors' findings to say that Claire was suffering a psychotic break brought on by the TBI. She believed that by creating a stress-free, anti-Anthony environment, Claire could heal and recover. She forbade anything that would in any way remind her sister of her life over the past almost five years. Though Emily couldn't legally have *Rawlings* removed from Claire's name, she made it clear to everyone at Everwood that her sister was to only be addressed as Claire Nichols. Since Emily was her court-appointed guardian and was the one who paid the medical expenses—with Anthony's money—her wishes were followed.

Arriving at the federal courthouse, John made his way to the grand jury chambers. John was glad that Catherine wasn't present during this phase. He hadn't spoken to her since the day in the hospital when she'd so brazenly lied to him and Jane. He shook his head at the mangled web of deceit. Could it be that she'd lied to Anthony, too?

Each day at Rawlings Industries tore a little of John's hatred away and built his respect for the businessman in Anthony Rawlings. In the months of his recent employment, with Tim's permission, John had scoured years and decades of records of acquisitions, employment, and dissolution of contracts. It was just as Tim had promised. The lies and sins of Anthony's personal life had not transcended into his company.

John waited outside the grand jury chambers and thought about the lengthiness of the judicial procedure. This was only the grand jury phase. If the sixteen to twenty-three people inside the room decided there was enough evidence for a trial, then Catherine would finally be indicted. It had already been eight months since John and Emily had been locked in that suite. Although they'd only been held for a few hours, as he read about Claire's days of seclusion, he could relate better than most.

He'd been subpoenaed to testify at 9:00 AM. Though the subpoena hadn't specified what questions he would be asked, he suspected it was about the day at the estate. As he thought back to that day and remembered the realization of the locked door, he recalled the terror as the room began to fill with smoke. He'd tried to break the windows. Not even the glass doors to the balcony would open. John was more afraid for Emily and their baby. Then, the door opened. It was Anthony. Before he could process any more memories, the chamber door opened and the woman said, "Mr. Vandersol, please come back."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

December 2014

Tony

Face reality as it is, not as it was or as you wish it to be.

—Jack Welch

“MY LIFE AS IT Didn’t Appear, Chapter 14...

I COULDN’T BELIEVE I was engaged and marrying Anthony Rawlings. When I woke the morning after his proposal, our engagement filled my every thought. At the time, I didn’t realize that my single-mindedness was exactly what he wanted. In merely eight months, I’d lost myself, learned my role, and played it without question. Rarely did I have independent notions. It wasn’t that I didn’t think and process, but every concept was skewed. Every moment of deliberation centered not on my own desire or aspiration but his. Each movement and action had one purpose—to please him and keep the darkness at bay.

The night before, as we discussed the wedding, my thoughts filled with illusions of fairytales. I believed that I’d lived through the worse, and I held tight to his promises for better. It wasn’t his money I desired: it was his name. I longed for validation in my new position. I craved to hold my head high without trepidation. From the very beginning, Tony required that physical poise. Yet, with my chin held high and my eyes glued to his, I felt like an imposter. He’d forced me into duties that I’d been raised to know were wrong. When we’d go into public, or even with his friends, I constantly feared that everyone knew the truth.

Then, in a magical, unexpected moment, everything changed. On that frost-filled night, with lights twinkling in the trees, we sat in a horse-drawn carriage, and his beautifully worded proposal took away my shame. He

offered me the option of saying no. I could have done that and walked away—but to where? Anthony Rawlings was my job, my life, and my world. If I walked away, what would I be? What would that make me? Would I forever have been nothing more than his whore? He'd taken away my past, and I despised my present. That left only my future. It was like the journey necklace he'd given me. The diamond representing the future was the biggest and brightest for a reason—it held hope for better. That night in Central Park, Anthony Rawlings offered me a future without disgrace. The sparkling engagement ring that he presented was more than a symbol, much more. It was my dignity. I wanted it back. Truly, there was very little deliberation: I would be his wife.

No longer would I feel as though I didn't belong. No longer would I feel like the world could see behind the veil of perfection. I would be Mrs. Anthony Rawlings. As husband and wife, our personal business would remain personal. Yet, no matter what it entailed, I could endure it with pride, knowing that now it was socially and morally acceptable.

I'd learned too well the importance of confidentiality. What happened in the past, present, or future, behind the iron gates of our estate, or the closed doors of one of our apartments, wouldn't be shared, yet, as his wife, somehow I could accept it with my head truly held high.

My past and my future worked together to create a new paradigm. I knew I had my new sense of self-worth, but I remember wondering what my new title would mean to him. Did he too understand the significance of being his fiancée?

That morning, after I woke and ate, I went to look for him. From behind the closed door of his home office, I heard his voice. I was now his fiancée, not his mistress, possession, or whatever I had been. I also knew my rules. As his acquisition, I was not allowed to enter without permission or advance summons. Now that I'd willingly accepted my new role, what did it mean? Could I now pass into his sacred domain without fear of punishment? Standing for minutes debating my entrance, an all too familiar fear swept over me. I wanted to believe that I could enter and show him the love and happiness that I was feeling, but at the same time, I was terrified that in doing so, my illusions would be shattered irreparably. Without knocking, I returned to our suite."

Tony leaned back and closed the book. Though his eyes were open and staring toward Jim, he was seeing the past. He saw his fiancée of four years ago. He remembered finding her in their suite. His thoughts had been filled with wedding plans and his conversation with Catherine. He had no idea that

Claire had been standing outside of his office door or that she was fighting an internal battle.

“Why did you stop reading?” Jim asked, bringing him back to present. Truly, Tony wasn’t sure which place was worse—his memories or his therapy sessions in prison.

“I can’t read any more right now.”

“Why *can’t* you?”

Tony inhaled deeply as he fought the urge to rebuke Jim’s question. This was his counselor’s way of making Tony weigh each word. Was it that he was incapable of continuing to read? Tony corrected, “I don’t *want* to read anymore right now.”

Jim nodded. “Very good. Why don’t you *want* to read any more? You’d said you wanted to read happier parts of this book. It sounds like she was happy about the wedding. Was she happy?”

Tony could control the red outside of therapy. Hell—he could control the red *in* therapy when they talked about anything, except Claire. But when the topic was his wife, the crimson seeped through his shields and filled his thoughts without warning. “Does it fuck’n sound like she was happy to you?” he asked. “Maybe you’re hearing something I’m not.”

“Then tell me what you’re hearing.”

The chair screeched across the linoleum floor as Tony stood to pace toward the window. The view of the prison’s campus was much better from Jim’s office window than from any of the windows in his dormitory. In the summer, it’d been beautiful, but now with the grayness of winter, it reminded Tony that the green was gone. He tried to remind himself it may be dormant, but it wasn’t forgotten. He worked to articulate his thoughts. “She said she wanted to come in my office and show me the *love and happiness* that she was feeling.” He turned toward Jim. “That sounded happy—right?”

“What do you think?”

“I think what I’ve thought before. I fuck’n hate having questions answered with questions.”

“Okay, tell me why you aren’t convinced she sounded happy.”

The soft soles of his shoes muffled his footsteps as he traveled from one side of the office to the other. “I’d just proposed. I was in the office making arrangements, and she was scared to walk in.” His dark eyes shot darts toward his therapist. “Didn’t you hear that? She was fuck’n petrified to knock on the damn door.”

“Would she have needed to knock?”

Tony’s eyes opened wide at the question. Well, yes, she would... but later, after their divorce, she wouldn’t have. Fuck! He’d never thought of it like that before.

“Anthony, would she have been *required* to knock?”

“Yes.”

“What would have happened if she knocked without being asked to your office, say... upon her arrival to your estate?”

Tony dropped back into the chair, his gaze once again transfixed beyond his counselor’s eyes as his jaws clenched pulsating the muscles in his neck. Finally, he replied, “We’ve been through that shit. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to fuck’n read anymore of the damn book. Let’s talk about something else.”

“No. I want to talk about this.”

Tony’s hands clenched in an attempt to rein in the red. Glaring with what Tony was sure was what Claire referred to as his *dark gaze*, he stared at Jim.

“How often do you hear that word?”

“I hear it too often.”

“Now you do. What about before? What about during the time of this book? Did anyone tell you no?”

“No,” Tony replied.

“How did you feel back then?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t have someone who stared at me three times a week asking me about my damn feelings. I just did. I just was. I didn’t think about it.”

“Did you think about what Claire was feeling?”

“I told you I want to talk about something else. I wrote the letter that you said I should.”

Jim’s words slowed dramatically. “Anthony, did you think about Claire’s feelings?”

“Sometimes.”

Jim’s brows rose questioningly.

“Like during the proposal. I wondered what she was thinking and feeling.”

“So now you have an idea. What do you think?”

“I don’t want to think about it. All right?” Tony replied. “I don’t want to think about how she felt like a *whore*. I hate even saying that word. She wasn’t!”

“Is that you talking now, or how you felt back then?”

“I *never* thought of her as a whore.”

“How did you think of her?”

The moisture burnt Tony’s eyes. He stood and walked back to the window. Snow had begun to fall. It was almost the fourth anniversary of his first wedding, almost Nichol’s first birthday, and almost Christmas, and he was stuck in a freak’n hellhole.

“Anthony?” Jim didn’t repeat the question.

“I thought of her as an *acquisition*. She’s used that word in the book

because I told her that—later.”

“What did you tell her in the beginning?”

The red threatened again. Tony had said this before. What was the damn point of repeating it?

Jim cleared his throat, as he stood and began walking around the desk. “I believe you told me that you didn’t like to repeat yourself.” Stepping next to Tony, looking out the window, he added, “Neither do I.”

“I told her that I owned her. She belonged to me. I made her repeat it.” Tony turned on his heels. “That didn’t mean she was a whore!”

“If you would’ve known the way she felt, what would you have done?”

He closed his eyes. “Today, I’d take her in my arms and convince her that she was wrong, that she deserved all the love and respect, and to keep her chin held high because she had nothing to ever be ashamed of. She was never a whore. She’s always been my queen. In our fuck’n wasted game of chess, the king can survive without the queen, but he doesn’t want to—he needs her.”

“That’s today. What would you have done and said on that morning after you proposed?”

Tony sighed. “How the fuck should I know? I don’t remember.”

“Anthony, we have few rules in this office. You’re allowed more liberties with your speech, demeanor, and even your movement than anywhere else. That’s because I want you to be comfortable enough to talk. But do not lie. If I ask you a question, I want the truth.”

“Even though I demanded that same thing of her back then, I don’t think she would have told me.”

“But if she had?”

Tony shook his head. “I’m not lying. I don’t know what I would have done. I probably would have told her she was wrong and chastised her for not behaving like a future Rawlings. A Rawlings would never be self-deprecating.”

Jim glanced at his watch. “One more thing before our time’s up: Claire said something else in that passage that I’d like you to think about between now and our next session.”

Tony didn’t want to think about any of it. “What?” he asked.

Jim smirked. “Is it just me, or is it Yankton that has taken away your predilection for using complete sentences?”

“What do you want me to think about?” he corrected.

“How long have you been here?”

“Twenty-six weeks and four days,” Tony answered matter-of-factly.

“So, about six and a half months. What did Claire say, in what you just read, that had happened to her in only eight months?”

Tony contemplated. “Something about not having her own thoughts and

conforming to what I wanted.”

“How would it feel to be forced to do that? Forced to conform your previous way of life to someone else’s rules and direction?”

It didn’t take a genius to know where Jim was going. “I don’t need to think about it,” Tony replied. “It sucks.”

“I’d like you to think about it. Think about the guards and the corrections officers. Think about their roles and yours. Then think about how Claire was feeling. When you come back, tell me exactly why she didn’t knock on that door. Then, without the aid of continuing your reading, I want you to tell me what happened when you went to the suite.”

“It sounds like you’ve read ahead. It sounds like you know.”

Jim shrugged. “We’ve found a few things in this book that you’ve contested as accurate. Let’s see how true the next scene is.”

“We talked about the wedding plans and made love. Then I surprised her with her sister and brother-in-law.”

“Next time.” Jim stepped back behind the desk and looked up, meeting Tony’s gaze. “Also, think about our definitions. Having sex and making love aren’t the same thing. Think about it.”

As Tony made his way back to his dormitory, he wondered what the fuck there was to think about, besides the fact that it was almost 4:00 PM, and he had to be back and present for the standing count. As he hurried from one building to the other, Jim’s words came back. What was Claire thinking?

Tony wanted to go back and ask him to clarify. He wanted to go get that damn book and throw it in the incinerator. He wanted to do many things, none of which included standing by his bunk and being counted. Was that how Claire felt?

April 2015

SPRING HAD FINALLY SPRUNG and the South Dakota air was warm enough for outside visitation. Tony liked sitting outside with his visitors much better than being cramped inside. For one thing, with the openness and fresh breeze, it seemed more private. That was an illusion: nothing at Yankton was private. Nonetheless, as Patricia sat across the small table from him and recited numbers and proposals, the illusion felt real. For a brief moment in time, he was living his old life.

The winter had been hard. Not only had the weather been exceptionally cold, the dormant landscape, as well as Roach’s reports about Claire, all worked to add to his funk. Jim even recommended medication. He said that it wasn’t unusual for prisoners to become depressed. Though he made it seem acceptable, Tony’s thoughts went back to his grandfather. The antidepressants

in conjunction with his other medication created symptoms of dementia. Tony didn't want that. He was having enough trouble remembering Claire and Nichol.

No. That wasn't true. He remembered everything about them, except now and then he'd think about the scent of baby powder and forget the fragrance. Or another wife would bring in a young child and Tony would wonder about Nichol. How big was she? What was she doing? Courtney sent pictures whenever she could. No one was allowed to bring cell phones near the prisoners. Visitors weren't even allowed to bring papers or pencils; however, she could mail them. As much as he appreciated it, each time he looked at the images of his sixteen-month-old daughter walking or laughing, another piece of his heart broke. If he was having trouble remembering how she felt in his arms, he had little doubt that she'd completely forgotten him. His stomach twisted at the thought. In her young mind, John was her father. No one had to say that to Tony—he knew.

As if that wasn't enough, Roach's reports were the same. He'd found a source inside of Everwood who was willing to divulge information—at least some. It seemed as though Claire was a mystery to most of the residents and staff. They saw her from afar. Yet, she never joined the other patients in group activities or even in the dining hall. According to Roach's source, Claire was treated with kid gloves and well cared for. Her needs were met in every way. The source said that Nichol hadn't been to visit in the last few months. Since Emily never entered Nichol's name on the registry, it was difficult for Roach to confirm or deny. Now that the weather was improving, he could report that the nanny had both children outside and to the park while Emily was at Everwood.

Tony's request to work in the business office had been granted. He'd endured it for most of the winter months, but it hadn't been what he'd expected. It was clerical. He was a damn secretary—not an assistant, like Patricia, not someone who had a thought or an opinion. No. For \$0.17 an hour he filed papers and filled out invoices. As soon as they began planting the flower seeds in the greenhouse in Tony's horticulture class, he put in for a transfer. Now, his job was landscaping. It was a great way to combine his new knowledge of plants with his job. Perhaps because he had acquired the knowledge through Yankton, the supervising staff actually asked for and accepted his suggestions. It was a joke that he could recommend a geranium versus an impatiens based on the amount of sun exposure and they'd listen, yet in the business office where he'd made a fortune outside of these walls, they weren't interested in what he had to say.

Patricia continued her information dump. "Mr. Bronson said to tell you that Bakers in Chicago accepted the first proposal. He'd been prepared to increase the bid, but they bit at the first offer."

Tony shook his head. "Maybe it was too high?"

"Oh, he didn't think so." She leaned forward. "It was all about timing. They had a balloon payment coming due..."

He listened as she gave more details.

"I almost forgot," Patricia said with a grin. "A remarkable offer came in the other week to purchase a small company... in Pennsylvania, I think. Darn, it's hard without notes. But it was almost too good to believe. The company's been doing all right but there's no reason to hold on to it."

She had his attention. "What's the name of the company?" Tony asked.

Pressing her lips together, she pondered. "Mar-tins? No Mar—"

"Marque?"

"Yes! In Pennsylvania." Her eyes lit up. "That's it. It only employs about a hundred people."

"A hundred and twenty-six, the last time I looked," Tony corrected. "No. The company can't be sold."

"But—"

"No." His baritone voice deepened. "Tell Tim I said absolutely not. I don't care if someone offers ten times its worth. I will *not* sell."

She reached across the table and gently touched his hand. "Anthony, Mr. Bronson's made some great decisions that have kept Rawlings Industries strong. He doesn't believe—"

Tony pulled his hand away. "Don't treat me like a child. I'm well aware of the chaos I've created. The answer regarding Marque is still no."

"Yes, Mr. Rawlings, I'll let him know."

When her brown eyes looked down into her lap, Tony realized the tone of voice he'd used. In many ways he liked it—it felt good. He hadn't used that tone in almost a year. However, the expression on his assistant's face washed away his momentary relish. Tony lightly touched her arm, and she glanced his way. "Patricia, I appreciate your traveling all this way to keep me up to date. I'm sorry I barked. Marque has special meaning to me, and I don't want it sold."

Her eyes softened as she smiled. "I really don't mind traveling. I'm glad to help. I hope you know, Anthony, that I'd do anything you need me to do. I'm happy to help you to not be so lonely."

The way her dark hair blew around her face in the gentle breeze reminded Tony of Claire. He pressed his lips together and grinned. "You've been great. Thank you. Just tell Tim I said no about Marque. If he wants to discuss it further, he can when he visits again."

"I will, and I can come here more often if you'd like. I mean, I don't need to always fly. It's only a five-hour drive. I could come up and stay overnight. I read that in the warmer months visitors can come on Saturday and Sunday."

Tony shook his head in refusal. "I would never ask that. You have a job, a

demanding boss, and a life. You don't need to waste an entire weekend in nowhere South Dakota.”

She reached out again. They'd both read the visiting rules. Touch was limited to the beginning and end of each visit. Rules were to be followed or the visitor would be banned and the prisoner punished. “Right now I'm still helping Mr. Vandersol get better acquainted with Rawlings Industries.”

“Brent said he's doing well.”

“You really don't mind having him work there?”

“I don't.” His voice deepened. “Don't let his past with me influence your opinion. You know a lot about the company, and he could use your help.”

Patricia shrugged. “If that's what you want. What about the stuff last year?”

Tony's brows rose.

“The packages you told me to watch out for, the ones addressed to Rawls-Nichols?”

“What about them?”

“Is that something Mr. Vandersol should know?”

“No,” Tony replied. “Why would you even ask?”

“Well, he asks a lot of questions. I wondered if it would help him understand what happened.”

Tony wasn't sure where this was all going. “What do you mean?”

“You were worried about the packages and said that you didn't want them scaring Mrs. Rawlings, then she left. I just figured—”

“Well, don't.”

Again her eyes fluttered to her lap.

“That's all over. John doesn't need to know about it, and you don't need to worry about it.”

Patricia closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. “I love the smell of springtime.”

Tony agreed.

When their time was up, Patricia touched his hand again. “I meant what I said. And I don't think my boss is too demanding. It's not demanding when I want to do it.”

“Thank you. I'm not demanding or asking. Don't worry about me.”

“But I do, Anthony. I do.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

July 2015

Brent

It's no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.

—Mark Twain

AFTER WHAT SEEMED like a lifetime, it was finally time for the opening statements of Catherine London's trial. Tony had already served over a year of his sentence for his crimes, and hers were finally making it to the light of court. It wasn't that there hadn't been pretrial motions—there had. Catherine's attorney had filed almost every one possible. They'd requested a change in venue, to no avail. They'd filed challenge after challenge to the evidence and the witnesses. There was a plethora of expert witnesses who were expected to testify for the prosecution. Catherine's attorneys had challenged every one of them. At one point they'd even attempted to have the charges dismissed. Since the grand jury had convened and found probable cause, the likelihood of a dismissal was low; nevertheless, they gave it a shot. It seemed like her attorneys were following a handbook on how to delay trial proceedings and checking each box as they went.

It wasn't only the defense that filed a pretrial motion. The prosecution filed a request for a gag order. It seemed as though Catherine had no issue with telling the world about her sordid history: however, her story wasn't hers alone. The gag order on her trial was part of Tony's plea agreement. He argued that by releasing the information of her trial, it would negatively affect thousands and thousands of workers. Though technically libel and slander were considered civil charges, being part of his plea in conjunction with his sworn testimony against Catherine the order was granted. As Brent, Courtney, Emily, and John all sat and prepared to listen to the government present their opening statement, Brent feared what they'd all learn. It was, after all, the government's job to prove burden of guilt. From what little Brent knew of the

case, they'd done their homework.

Originally, he assumed that Emily and John would be sequestered from the courtroom. However, during the negotiations, the US government decided to concentrate on the murder charges and dropped the attempted murder of John, Emily, and Claire. Their reasoning was that although John and Emily were locked in the room, the intent to harm was difficult to prove. There was no evidence verifying that Catherine had been the one who placed the poison-laced water bottles in the suite. While Catherine admitted to starting the fire in her own fireplace, the spread of the fire was deemed accidental. There was no longer a reason why either of the Vandersols would be called to testify. Therefore, sequestering was no longer a concern. John applied for special dispensation: after all, Catherine was accused of killing Emily's parents as well as her grandfather. It was granted and they were now able to attend each and every day of the trial.

Their conversation came to a halt as Catherine was led into the courtroom. Quickly assessing her, Brent saw that she'd lost weight in prison and allowed her hair to go gray. The end result was that she appeared older and frailer. She definitely appeared older than her true fifty-three years. Brent wondered about Tony's rule and how well Catherine had learned it. Appearances were of the utmost importance. From his eye, Catherine appeared to be more a frail grandmother, than a serial murderer. He hoped it wouldn't work.

When it came to evidence, Claire's computer had been destroyed in Catherine's fireplace. Nevertheless, she'd saved all the paper documents. All of her research connecting Tony to his past had been confiscated by the Iowa City police in 2013 after her disappearance, and labeled as evidence. As the Simmonses and Vandersols listened, the US Attorney used that information to spin a well-fabricated web for the jury. If Brent hadn't known it to be true, he would have questioned its veracity. For small-town America, it was a thriller! The story began with a young girl who'd been abandoned by her family. By the time the prosecution was done, he'd set the stage for the most fantastic game of vengeance and revenge that Brent had ever heard. Unfortunately, the story wasn't a novel, and it wasn't fiction. Innocent lives had been lost and others destroyed in the name of this twisted vendetta.

His statement had gone on for over two and a half hours. Throughout, Brent watched the jury. Not once did they seem bored or disinterested. As a rule of thumb, the opening statement should be short and concise. Brent glanced at John and raised his brows. It was an unspoken question, attorney to attorney. What did you think? John shrugged. Brent prayed that it was a hit out of the park. After everyone who'd suffered, he wanted the frail woman at the front table to die a lonely death in a lonely cell. It wasn't a nice wish, but it was the one he harbored.

Not far from the courthouse was a popular diner. As long as the judicial

system stayed in business, the restaurant was assured a good lunch crowd. It was frequented by judges, lawyers, staff, and the public. In essence, the entire room was filled with ears. Truthfully, it wasn't only the law and lay people who were listening. As the two couples made their way to lunch between the morning and afternoon sessions, they were witness to reporters. Even though it was only the first day in front of a jury, the reporters were hungry for news. It seemed as though the granting of a gag order did nothing more than whet their appetite.

Over the last year, especially with John's employment at Rawlings, the two couples had become closer. If Brent had to pinpoint one reason, he'd say it was because Courtney was determined that she was going to be part of Nichol's life. Thus far, access to Claire had been adamantly denied, but Courtney had been given the ground rules. "If you ever are to see her, you may not mention him—at all." Without a blink of her eye, Courtney agreed.

As much as the Vandersols and Simmonses wanted to discuss the morning's opening statement, they tried to keep the conversation away from the proceedings. There were ears at every turn. If any one of them was deemed responsible for leaking information, they'd be banned from the remaining trial. None of them wanted that: the morning had only been the beginning.

As they finished their lunch, John asked, "Would you two like to come over for dinner? I think Emily and I would both like to discuss some of this background information."

Emily nodded, adding under her breath, "Claire had mentioned some of this years ago, but it seems pretty farfetched. I hope they can make it believable."

Brent watched Courtney's eyes glow at the invitation.

"The prosecutor had me totally enthralled. I had no idea he'd been talking for so long," Courtney said.

Knowing that his wife was always willing to do whatever it took to get close to Nichol, Brent said, "That sounds good. Give us a little time to stop by home after they wrap up for the day, then we'll be over. Let us know what we can bring."

"Ridiculous! Farfetched! Fiction!" Catherine's attorney began, capitalizing on the US Attorney's earlier flair for the dramatic. "I hope you're all ready for a show, because that is exactly what the government wants to give you. Just look at my client. She's worked her entire life as a servant. Oh, the wealthy have other names... housekeeper, maid, whatever. How many of you have someone who picks up after you, manages your household, and assures that

your dinner is on the table? Catherine London has done that for three generations of the same family. She has worked and worked.” He lowered his voice. “She has witnessed things that no one should witness. But yet, she didn’t betray her employer. No—not until he did it first...”

Late August 2015

BRENT AND COURTNEY KNEW the routine at Yankton. Instead of surrendering their belongings, it was easier to carry only the authorized items into the visiting room. With just their keys and identifications, they arrived at the prison. Being too early for the prisoners, they migrated with the other visitors into the visiting room. As they found their way to seats, and sat quietly, they watched the other people. Some appeared confident, while others looked side to side, wondering what would happen next. Brent found it strange that only a year ago this had been a difficult and uncomfortable process. It wasn’t that they now enjoyed it, but the entire routine had become normal. The metal detector seemed less invasive. The guards and questions seemed less subjective. Brent equated it to the airport security system. Though it was a pain in the ass, it was no longer troublesome to step into the glass cubical, lift your arms, and allow the machine to scan your entire body. It just was. That was the process at Yankton—it just was.

Not long after 10:00 AM, he and Courtney watched as the inmates entered through the north door of the building, the opposite end from where they themselves had entered. They were all dressed in their khaki shirts and pants. Their black shoes with soft soles created a muffled thunder as the visitors stilled, waiting for their loved ones.

On the way, they’d discussed how nice it was to visit outside. Although it was summer and the morning temperature was conducive, it was evident that wasn’t happening. The threatening South Dakota sky and forecast of severe storms had them trapped indoors.

The inmates scanned the crowd from veiled lids, searching. Near the middle of the pack, Brent saw Tony, his height giving him away, and noticed how once Tony spotted his friends, his gait changed. No longer did he blend into the masses with his head slightly bowed and steps shuffled. In an instant, he was walking confidently with his familiar stride. Though the latter made Brent smile, his heart ached at seeing his friend as the former.

Tony extended his hand, but before Brent could shake it, Courtney was up out of her seat, and wrapping Tony in a quick, friendly hug. “How are you doing?” she asked in her cheeriest voice.

“I’m all right. How are you?”

Brent shook Tony’s hand just before he took his required seat. “We have

some news,” Brent offered.

Tony nodded. “I saw it already. There was an article in this morning’s Wall Street Journal.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s so nice of them to spell out the whole Wall Street connection between me and Nathaniel.”

Brent inhaled. “I’d hoped you hadn’t seen it yet. Keep in mind that it wasn’t negative against you. As a matter of fact, they made a big point out of how Rawlings Industries has been carefully scrutinized and come out clean as a whistle.”

“I’d rather avoid any publicity, especially any connected to Catherine.”

“They’re adding *Rawls* to her name, now. The reporters are, I mean,” Courtney added.

“Isn’t that great?” Tony asked. “She’s going to spend, what was it? Five life sentences in prison, but she finally gets my grandfather’s name back. Ha!” Tony forced the laugh. “Think of all the lives that could have been spared if only they’d given her that honor years ago.”

Courtney reached out and touched Tony’s hand. “It’s over. It’s all over.”

His dark eyes clouded. “Not for thirty-four more months.”

“I know I’m here today as a friend, not your lawyer,” Brent said, “but let me remind you, you’ll go up for review in less than a year and then every six months after. There’s always a chance that it could be less.”

“And I could go batshit crazy, and it could be more.”

“Don’t say that, Tony,” Courtney said. When Tony smiled in her direction, she cocked her head to the side and asked, “What?”

“It’s dumb I suppose, but no one here calls me that. I think I miss it.”

“Well, *Tony*,” she said, emphasizing his name, “what else do you miss? What can we do to make this better?”

Though his expression didn’t change, Brent saw a spark of something in Tony’s eyes: a recognition or connection like he hadn’t seen in some time. “What is it? What did you just think of?”

Tony shook his head. “Damn, am I that easy to read? I didn’t used to be.” He paused and looked at Courtney. “I can’t tell you how much your letters have meant to me, especially the pictures. Thank you.”

“Of course, I’m glad to do it. Nichol is beautiful. You should be proud.”

“Of her, I am.”

“You have a lot to be proud of,” Brent offered.

“Thank you.” His gaze fixed on Courtney. “I can’t imagine not having the visits or your letters. That’s just who you are and always will be. Thank you for taking the time. I was wondering if I should continue to write to you at your home or if I should send your letters to your P.O. box in Chicago?”

Brent turned to his wife and watched as the color drained from Courtney’s cheeks. “What P.O. box?” he asked. Turning back to Tony, he continued his questioning, “What are you talking about?”

Tony's tone was gentle, almost sad. "Thank you, Courtney. Thank you for being J. Findes."

Tears fell from her eyes as Courtney tried to remain composed.

"Someone tell me what's happening," Brent demanded in a hushed tone.

"Y-you're not mad?" Courtney asked.

Tony shook his head. "I probably would have been, but not now. Not only am I not mad, I'm happy. I failed her then. I didn't realize how awful this was... and this place is better than where she was. I'm so glad you helped her."

Courtney inhaled, trying to stifle her cries. "I never wanted to lie to you..." she turned to Brent "...either one of you. But I couldn't... I just couldn't..." her voice trailed away as she lowered her face.

The temperature of the room rose exponentially; Brent and Tony had come so far. It truly felt as though the two of them were friends, connected as never before. Was it right to leave deception between friends? Or would the truth separate what had finally been solidified?

"I'm not going to lie to you, Tony," Brent confessed. "I knew about that. I didn't know the name she used or where the address was, but I knew and I supported Courtney... and Claire.

Tony leaned back.

While Brent reached for Courtney's hand, he saw the question in his wife's moist blue eyes. Inhaling, Brent continued, "You've come clean with us. I guess it's time to come clean with you. Just promise me that you won't be upset with Claire."

Tony's brows knit together. "What are you talking about? Why would I be upset with Claire that you wrote to her in prison?" It was as if they watched the light bulb illuminate. The spark of understanding ignited a flame behind his eyes and Tony's voice brimmed with emotion. "It was you... Oh, my God. You're the ones who freed her." This time he was the one to look away.

"Tony?" Courtney implored. "It wasn't against you. It was for *her*."

At first Tony only shook his head; however, when he turned back, his eyes were red. "Thank you, for saving her. I understand. Two years ago, I might have been irate." He scoffed. "I would have been—hell, I was, but things are different. What you did, the petition, the money... by freeing Claire, you gave me back my life.

"I've spoken to Roach, and I just don't understand what's happened to her. But if you can... if it is ever a possibility to save her again... I don't care who you have to deceive... just please, for both of us, for Nichol... do it."

Courtney wasn't even trying to hide her tears. "I want to hug you so badly."

Tony swallowed. "I wish you could."

"Tony, she didn't know—at first. Once she did, the only reason she kept it

from you was for us.”

Tony reached out and covered Courtney’s hand with his own. His soft brown eyes were bordered in red. With his famous grin, he said, “We’re good. I’m not upset at all. I’m indebted to you.” He widened his grin. “About \$100,000, I guess.”

Courtney shook her head. “No—”

“No you’re not,” Brent said. “And you’re not paying us back. You already have.”

Tony’s eyes widened, questioning.

“I’ve had a few raises over the last couple years. I figured I deserved them.”

Tony’s grin morphed into a full smile. “You do, my man, you do.”

Brent leaned forward and spoke quieter. “I may have some news you don’t yet know.”

“What?”

“Amber McCoy has been charged in connection with the death of Simon Johnson.”

The clouds over Tony’s dark eyes showed his processing. “I don’t understand. I thought the NTSB found no signs of tampering.”

Brent shrugged. “They haven’t released any more information, only that there was sufficient evidence to press charges.”

“What’s happening to SiJo?” Tony asked.

“I really don’t know.”

“Tell Tim to look into it immediately. As you know, this kind of shit makes it vulnerable.”

“What? Do you want to buy it? It could go under the Shedis-tics umbrella
—”

“No,” Tony interrupted. “I want to help it. No matter how Amber and Harry lied to Claire, Claire cared about Simon and that company. Find out what they need.”

Courtney smiled.

“I’ll call Tim as soon as we leave,” Brent assured him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A few weeks earlier—Mid-August 2015

Harry

My family is my strength and my weakness.

—Aishwarya Rai Bachchan

HARRY WATCHED FROM behind the glass, unseen by his sister or the officer from the California Bureau of Investigation. It was the same division where Harry had gotten his start in law enforcement—the same bureau that fueled his desire for justice. It was the same bureau that was now questioning his very own sister in regard to the senseless death of Simon Johnson.

SAC Williams patted Harry on the back. “I’m sorry, son. I’m sorry it all came to this.”

Harry nodded. Words weren’t forming without emotion. He was a damn FBI agent; crying wasn’t part of the job.

“You did the right thing. I know it may not seem like it at this moment, but the truth, the law, is always right.”

Inhaling deeply, Harry managed to say, “You’re right. It sure doesn’t feel like it at this moment.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“No. I have about a thousand texts and voicemails from Liz. She’s out in the waiting room going crazy. She doesn’t know I’m here.” He turned his sad blue eyes to his supervisor. “SAC? I don’t know how to do this. Do I come clean and tell her that I’m the one who...” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Williams reached for his arm. In the midst of turmoil, the point of contact was comforting. The older man had been as much of a father to Harry as his stepfather, and more of a father than the man who helped to create him. “That’s your call. I know that you’ll know what to say, if you do let her know you’re in on it. But remember, you weren’t the one who followed the phone

trail. You didn't dig up the text records or question the witnesses. You can't take all the blame."

Harry sighed. "I'm the one who put her on your radar. Without me, she would never have been discovered."

"Think about your friend. Think about Mr. Johnson. Would that have been right for him? For his family?"

Harry had lain awake at night thinking about exactly that. "I can't imagine the Johnsons. I mean, they still think of Amber like a daughter. They're going to be devastated."

"One fire at a time, son."

Harry turned toward the window and wiped his eyes. He couldn't hear what they were saying because he'd turned off the sound but he could tell by his sister's expression that she was pleading her innocence. "She needs to shut up. I know we have the evidence, but she just needs to shut up!"

"Then go be a brother: a brother who's also an agent. Tell her what she can do to make it better."

Harry turned on his heels. "Nothing! She can't do a damn thing to make it better. She killed Simon Johnson..." He shook his head. "...and it goes back to Claire. How does every damn thing go back to Claire? Simon's obsession was what pissed Amber off so much. How could I be right here in San Francisco and hang out with them and not know?"

"Simon never mentioned Mrs. Rawlings?"

"He did, but not a lot. It was one of those things you say in passing. I'd get pissed at Liz about something and mention Ilona. He'd be pissed at Amber and mention Claire. She was his girlfriend in college—freshman year! That was forever ago. I remember thinking that it was weird that he'd gone so long without someone serious in his life. He chalked it up to devoting his energy to his work. That's why he and Amber were so perfect. They met at Shedis-tics and she followed him to help with SiJo. They were friends before they became an item. I'm not sure Simon even saw her as girlfriend potential... for a while." Harry shrugged. "I can't testify to any of that. It's what he said and she said. That was all before I moved back to California. Once I got here, they were definitely together. Other than a mention here and there of Claire to me, he seemed totally devoted to Amber."

"So you didn't know that he'd gone around the country to see her?"

Harry shook his head.

"Ms. Matherly knew."

"We never talked about it." Harry's eyes widened. "What else does Liz know?"

"If you're asking if we think she knew that your sister allegedly poisoned Mr. Johnson, we don't. There's no evidence—at this time—to suggest that. In an interview with the CBI, she mentioned that Mr. Johnson had an obsession

with a person from his past and that upset Ms. McCoy. She claimed that his preoccupation was the only source of contention she'd ever witnessed between the two of them."

Harry's head shook slightly from side to side, allowing his too-long blonde hair to fall across his eyes. Pushing the unruly curls away, he said, "They *all* need to shut up." He turned back to the window, just in time to see the officer exit the room, leaving Amber alone at the metal table.

Harry handed SAC Williams his phone. "Here, the damn thing's going to explode if I get another message from Liz. Can you hold it for me while I go in there?"

Williams' lips twitched into a slight smile. "You want me to hold your *exploding* phone?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, thanks."

When Harry opened the door, Amber's head popped upward, and her tear-filled eyes looked directly at him. Instantaneously, her expression morphed to need. "Oh, thank God, Harry. You need to help me. They're saying things that don't make sense. They're saying that I was involved in Simon's death and that attack on you. Please... please..." she reached out to him "...tell me that you know I wouldn't do that."

Walking toward his sister, she stood. Harry wrapped his arms around her, hugging her shuddering shoulders. He fought his own emotions as her tears dampened the cotton of his shirt. After a moment, he helped her to sit again and sat across from her. "Amber, they read you your Miranda rights, didn't they?"

"Yes, but why? Why would they even think that I would—"

Harry interrupted, "You need to get a lawyer. Stop talking to them or even to me... I'm an agent—"

"I know what you are! You can help me. Find out who's saying these vile things. Make this all stop. I loved Simon. I love you! I would never do anything to hurt..." her words faded into tears. Suddenly, her eyes opened wide. "I bet it's that bitch. Claire Nichols! She's the one saying these things about me! It's not enough for her to have her billionaire jailbird and *you*, but she wouldn't let Simon go either. She tried to kill Rawlings. I bet she found out that Simon and I were engaged and she tried to..." Her anger turned to sadness. "...no, she didn't try. She succeeded in killing him."

"She isn't telling anyone anything. You sound delusional."

"No!" She stood. "You don't know. You don't know what it's like to have someone who you love willing to travel all over the damn country to get one last chance with a woman he hadn't even talked to in years! Years!"

“Stop,” Harry said calmly.

“No! I’m not stopping. You need to know what she’s capable of doing. Hell, you know, don’t you? She has some kind of power over men. I don’t understand it. I mean it’s not her looks and definitely not her brains.” Her eyes widened. “Emily said she’s having issues. Well, she’s crazy if she thinks she can tell the world lies about me!”

“Amber, stop talking. Everything you say can be used against you—”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why, Harry? Are you going to tell them what I say?” She looked around, turning until she faced the window. “Or are they watching?” She walked to the darkened glass and turned back. “Are you in here as my *brother* or an *agent*? ”

“I’m both, but I’m in here right now as your brother. I’m telling you to stop talking and get a lawyer.”

“I have lawyers,” she said smugly. “I have lawyers, assistants, accountants. I have a whole damn company at my disposal. The stupid bureau will never get any of this to stick. I’m innocent. Sure, I was pissed when I found out that Simon was going all over the damn country trying to get his wimpy nerve up to talk to that bitch. Wouldn’t you be upset? I mean, who goes to multiple events and then doesn’t even talk to her? Ha! I loved reading that stupid book. I hope that after Simon talked to her, Rawlings beat the sh—”

Harry stood. “Stop it! Now! Shut the fuck up and listen to yourself. Are you really that stupid? You’re in a damn interrogation room. Shut up! I’m getting Liz and getting one of your many attorneys over here. And I’ll call Mom and Mrs. Johnson. You don’t want either one of them hearing about this from some news report. In the meantime, *shut up!* ”

Amber crossed her arms over her chest, pressed her lips together, and continued to glare as Harry walked from the room. Instead of heading out to Liz, Harry knocked on the door to the observation room. Williams opened it, and Harry entered, falling into one of the empty chairs. Williams sat next to him where they stayed—silent—for minutes upon minutes. Finally, Harry turned and said, “I need to get her that attorney.”

Williams nodded. “You gave her good advice, son. You can’t make her take it.” Williams handed Harry his vibrating phone.

Taking a deep breath he walked through the crowded hallways toward the waiting area, avoiding eye contact with everyone he passed. Once there, he stood and watched as Liz paced a small area near the corner of the room. She was holding her phone with one hand, willing it to ring, and had the other arm wrapped around her stomach. “Liz?” he asked.

Her anguish imploded as she ran towards Harry. Flinging herself against his hard chest, she sobbed. Finally, she asked, “What’s happening? I’m so glad you’re finally here.”

He wrapped her in his arms and whispered into her hair, “I’ve been here. I didn’t have my phone on me. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know.”

She looked up. “You’ve been here? Why? How long? What’s happening?”

“Amber needs an attorney—”

“No! That’s ridiculous.” Her indignation came forth with each word. “They can’t charge her with anything. She would never—”

“They already did,” Harry said, as Liz’s head shook back and forth. Taking her face in his hands, he closed the gap. “Liz, Amber needs you to be strong. Please, call SiJo. Get someone from legal over here right away. Call public relations and get them to run some kind of defensive maneuver. This won’t be good for SiJo.”

Liz lifted her phone, but looked back up. “SiJo? You’re worried about SiJo? What about Amber? You’re an FBI agent—do something to help her.”

“I am, and so are you. She needs legal representation before she says something that she can’t retract.”

Liz lifted one finger as she spoke into her phone. When she was done, she looked back at Harry. “They’re on their way. Can I see her? Have you seen her?”

“I’ve seen her, but you can’t.”

“You don’t want me to see her or I can’t?”

“Both. We can’t do any more here. Let’s go home.”

She planted her feet. “Home? I can’t leave her. She’s my best friend, and she’s my boss. I won’t just leave her.”

Harry forced a grin and placed a kiss on her forehead. “I love your stubborn streak, but now isn’t the time. Fine, we can wait until legal arrives, but then we’re leaving.”

“Harry, you know that Amber wouldn’t do what they’re saying...”

He placed his finger over her lips. “Stop talking about it. We’re in a police station. Both you and Amber need to just stop talking.”

As they sat in the plastic chairs and waited, exhaustion as Harry had never felt before filled his being. His temples throbbed at the thoughts going through his head. He needed to call his mother. He needed to call Simon’s mother. He needed to file a report about his non-interrogation. None of that, though, was what he wanted to do. Harry wanted to climb into his bed and not come out for days. He wanted to pretend that everything was all right. He wanted to go back in time to when Simon was alive... no, farther back than that, back to when Ilona told him she was pregnant.

Harry closed his eyes and squeezed Liz’s shoulder. She had her head resting against him. It would be so easy to lay his head on hers... and try to forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY

December 2015

Tony

Love is not a feeling of happiness. Love is a willingness to sacrifice.

—Michael Novak

"*I*HATE WINTER," Tony stated, as he stared out the large pane of glass in Jim's office.

"Have you always hated winter?"

Tony glared. It didn't seem to matter how many times he said that he hated the questions, that was all Jim seemed to know how to do. "No, I didn't hate it. I never noticed it."

"Didn't you live in Iowa?"

"I do live in Iowa. This," he said, gesturing with his arm, "isn't living."

Jim grinned. "All right, so you live in Iowa and never noticed winter?"

Tony turned back toward the snow-covered terrain. The colorful flowers he'd helped plant and the green grass he'd helped mow were now covered in a thick blanket of white. He noted how the sidewalks that he'd shoveled only a few hours ago held an inch or two of new accumulation. Damn, when he got out of this hellhole, he swore he'd never lift another snow shovel. Honestly, he'd probably never mow a blade of grass either, but if Claire wanted help in the gardens, he was more than willing to do that. The sound of Jim's exaggerated throat clearing reminded Tony about their conversation. Was it a conversation? It was therapy, but for the past eighteen months it was the closest thing that he'd had to conversation, other than when he had visitors.

"Iowa has winter," Tony replied. "There's snow and shit, but I was always so busy I never paid any attention. I spent most of my time working or traveling. The weather was irrelevant."

"So you didn't spend much time outside?"

Tony shrugged, walked to the chair, and sat. "Not until Claire." It was

easier talking about her than it used to be. As long as they stayed away from the shit in the damn book and concentrated on their second chance, Tony actually enjoyed the walks down memory lane. Sure, they made him sad, but life was sad and Yankton sucked. If he was going to be down anyway, it might as well be while thinking about Claire.

“Tell me what you and she would do outside.”

Tony closed his eyes as his cheeks rose. The grin felt nice. “She liked to walk in the woods. We have acres and acres of land covered with trees. I’d lived there for about fifteen years before she came to the estate—”

“Anthony,” Jim interrupted. “Honesty. Did Claire *come* to the estate?”

Tony sighed and began again. “I’d lived there for about fifteen years before I brought Claire to the estate.” He opened his eyes to see Jim nodding. “I’d never ventured out into the woods. I didn’t want to. I’d surveyed the land from a helicopter after I’d purchased it. That was my only real knowledge of what lay behind the trees. I knew she liked to be outside. One time, while I was out of town, she started going out into the woods, not for hours but for entire days.”

“How did you feel about her being gone all day?”

“I didn’t like it. At first, I was confused. I was overseas and when I’d check the surveillance feed from her suite, I couldn’t understand why she wasn’t there. I called and was told she was out walking. Later, I found where she left the yard every day. It was the same place, but I couldn’t see where she went. All I could do is fast forward until she returned.”

“How did that make you feel, to not know where she was?”

“Stop asking me that! I’m talking. I’m answering your damn question about being outside.”

“You’re an intelligent man. I believe you can multitask. Try answering both questions at the same time.”

Tony shifted in his seat and let out an exasperated sigh. “When I didn’t know where she was, I was upset, and I was worried...” Jim started to talk, but Tony spoke over him. “I was worried that she might try to leave. She was gone all day long. There’s a highway about another mile west of the lake. What if she kept walking and made it to the highway?” He looked again at Jim and shrugged. “But she didn’t. I didn’t even know she was at the lake until I got home and questioned her. And I was happy that she was honest with me,” he added with a feigned grin. “Later, after we were married, she took me there. The first time was during a snowstorm. We got there on cross-country skis. I felt cold.” This time his grin was real. “But not really. She was so excited, talking about the way everything looked in the summertime. She talked about flowers, trees, insects, and animals. I’d never realized all of that was just outside of my door. We went back in the summer, too.”

Tony stood again and walked to the window. “That’s why I’m not selling

the estate. She loves that lake and the grounds too much.”

“What about your house.”

“I told you, I’m having it demolished.”

“Anthony, we discussed this. You’re not in the right frame of mind to make that kind of decision.”

“Are you telling *me* that I can’t have my own house torn down?”

Jim stood, walked closer, and leaned against the wall. “No, I’m suggesting that you wait and think this through.”

“I guarantee I’ve thought it through. I have nothing else here to do here but think. I’ve thought about it until I don’t want to think anymore. Other than a few personal items... and a painting... it can all go.” He emphasized, “I want it gone.”

“And you get what you want.”

“I used to.”

“Anthony, you’re grasping at anything to give you a sense of control. Demolishing your home is a way for you to rid yourself of the past. It isn’t that easy. If it were, there would hardly be a home that stood for more than ten years. Hell, most wouldn’t stand that long.”

“I know the past won’t go away. I don’t want it *all* to go away—just some of it.”

“You’ve made progress, even if you don’t see it. I see it.”

Tony turned toward him. “Being complacent and putting up with the shit here doesn’t mean I’ve made progress. It means I don’t have a choice. I’m not going to be this person when I get out of here. I can’t.”

Jim nodded. “I agree with you. When you’re out of here, you won’t be the man you are in here: you also won’t be the man you were before.”

“I sure as hell plan on it.”

“How did prison change Claire?”

Tony couldn’t help the grin. “It made her bold and cheeky.”

“*It* did?” Jim asked.

“Yes. She was something else. I’ve never had anyone talk to me the w—”

“Is prison making you bolder?”

The spark left his dark eyes. “I’d say no, but I plan on being that way again after I’m out.”

“Why do you think prison made her bolder?”

Tony ran his hand through his hair. “Because it did. I told you. She was so much spunkier. Damn,” he said reminiscing, “I loved her retorts.”

“What was she like before you kidnapped her?”

Tony stared.

“Think about that Anthony: how many times has Claire been in prison? Which time changed her the most? Could the personality that you enjoyed so much be her true personality, not the one you experienced after you

kidnapped her?"

"I don't fuck'n know. She was different the first time she came—was brought to the estate. At the time it was what I thought I wanted." Tony sighed. "I liked the control." His eyes changed from dull to bright. "But not as much as I enjoyed her later. I guess I knew that she was behaving the way I wanted her to. Hell, she even said what I wanted."

"And if she didn't."

Tony shrugged. "It's like here. You do what you're supposed to do, what you need to do, or else."

"Else?"

"There are consequences."

"Anthony, I know that reading Meredith Banks' book was difficult for you, but can you see how similar your situations are?"

"I don't like to think about it."

"Tell me one benefit of being here, at Yankton."

Tony muffled a laugh. "There isn't one benefit to being here."

Jim shrugged. "Some people might disagree. I mean there are plenty of repeat felons. There must be something that's appealing."

"What? A roof over your head and three square meals a day? I have that at home in Iowa, where I live."

"You do, but that's a good start. How has your job stress been?"

"What fuck'n job stress? Tim and Patricia keep me updated, but I can't watch the stocks like I used to, I'm not involved with day-to-day decisions. Maybe you're talking about my job here?" He tilted his head toward the window. "I'm pretty pissed off about the new snow that's fallen. I just had that fuck'n sidewalk cleared."

"So, benefit number one, food and shelter. Benefit number two, less stress."

"If you're going there, be more specific," Tony corrected. "Less job stress. This place has plenty of other stress."

"All right, give me two of those stressors in this place."

Tony didn't need to think about his answer. "The damn counts. I hate that, and being told what to do and when to do it. Nothing, none of your so-called benefits outweighs that."

"So what would make you come back here?"

Tony squared his shoulders. "Nothing. Not one damn thing."

"Interesting." Jim moved back to his chair and leaned back. "So what if it changed? What if you could come back, still get the benefits, but the stressors were less?"

"Not interested."

"Really? Why?"

"The counts, the shit, it would always be here. I'd still remember it."

"I think our time is about up, and you have a count in less than ten minutes. Between this time and next time, think about this conversation. Oh, and don't do anything rash regarding your house."

Tony nodded. "I'll think about it, and I've already given the orders. The house is going."

Spring 2016

TONY'S JAW CLENCHED as he waited for Brent to answer his phone. Tony only had a small window of time to use the damn phone, and the next person to use it was standing a mere few feet away. How fuck'n hard was it to get some damn privacy?

"Yes, I'll accept the charges." Tony heard Brent say. "Tony, is everything all right? Why are you calling?"

"I want Patricia fired. I want you to meet her at the airport, let her get her things at Rawlings, and escort her off the property."

The shock in Brent's voice came through the line. "W-what the hell? Tony, are you thinking straight?"

"Yes, I'm thinking straight. I can't work with her anymore and I won't."

"Do you mind filling me in on what happened?"

"I'm a man. I'm not fuck'n dead, but I don't care what Roach says, I believe Claire's going to get better."

"Tony, what does that have to do with Patricia?"

"It's been happening for a while, but I didn't really notice, or I guess I wasn't paying attention. When I did, I thought if I just ignored her, it would stop. They have rules here. Shit, she almost got me in trouble."

"I'm still lost," Brent said.

"She fuck'n made a move on me. She's been saying things about wanting to help me, help me *not be so lonely*, come visit more often. Then she started talking about Nichol and how Claire was too sick to care for her. She said that she'd never do that. She'd never leave her husband and daughter. She said that she could care for Nichol like a mother, better than Claire. I about lost it. I was fuck'n wanting to get her away from me. She knew I was mad, but she started to say how she understands... I'm just lonely and frustrated. Well, she's got that right, but not for her! Years ago, before Claire and I were married, Patricia accompanied me to a few outings. It was usually last minute. She talked about that and how she wished I'd never met Claire—if I hadn't, we'd be together. Then, when the buzzer sounded for visiting time to end, she leaned over, gave me a way too good shot at her low-cut blouse, and kissed me!"

When Tony stopped talking, it wasn't Brent who replied but Courtney.

She gasped and said, "She did what?! Oh no, there's no way she's getting anywhere near Nichol. Don't you worry. Aunt Cort is on this."

"You're on speaker, Tony."

"Yes, I kind of figured. I have about thirty seconds left on this call. I'm so mad I can hardly see straight. She's flying back to Iowa on the Rawlings jet right now. I want you to meet her at the airport."

Brent replied, "Not a problem. I'm behind you one hundred percent."

"So am I," Courtney chimed in.

"I don't want this to be public knowledge, only a need-to-know basis. Her leaving will be for some other reason. Work it out. Pay her. I don't give a damn. Just be sure she signs a gag order. Claire's coming back to me. I'm coming back to her. There's no way in hell I would ever..."

"I'll take care of it," Brent said, just as the phone went dead.

Summer 2016

"DO YOU BELIEVE SHE'LL ever see it?" Jim asked about the new house Tony had been describing.

"Of course she'll see it. She'll live in it."

"Remember what we talked about. Remember the conclusion you've drawn."

Tony nodded. "I do. I get it. Claire coming back to me, remarrying me, even though I was different—or tried to be different—will always be a prison to her. I get that. That doesn't mean I can't make her life the best it can be."

"Anthony, whose decision is it, how Claire's life should be?"

"Hers." He stood and paced to the window, smiling for just a moment at the colorful view. "I know. It's hers. I'm giving her the estate—all the land and the new house. It'll all be hers. She can fuck'n sell it if she wants. My name won't be on it at all. I understand that our relationship can never be what I thought we had. I even get that maybe what we had in the South Pacific wasn't real: it was more of her conditioned response. I hate it, but I get it. It'd be like me going somewhere else with all the same people from here. The familiarity would make the same feelings come out. Without being here at Yankton, I don't think I would have gotten it, but I do." He ran his hands through his hair. "I can hear her pain and fear in that damn book. I won't do that to her again."

"Why do you think you hear that now, but you didn't six years ago?"

"We never talked about it. It happened, but we never discussed it. Besides, I didn't want to hear it then."

"Do you want to hear it now?"

"No. I hate it. I hate that I was the cause of it. I just thought we'd made it

past all of that..." Tony's words trailed away.

"Can you make it past this—here?" Jim asked, motioning around the room.

Tony's shoulders straightened as he stood taller. "I *will* make it past this."

"Will you forget your time here?"

"I can try."

Jim leaned forward. "But it will always be a part of who you are. Just like the kidnapping, imprisonment, and required subjugation will always be a part of Claire. The best that she can hope for is to try to forget and move on. Tell me if you can—well, I guess you *can* since you have the means—*would* you ever consider moving to Yankton? I mean, it's a great community."

"Hell no."

"Why?" Jim asked.

"Do you need to ask?"

"Will it be easier to put this prison camp behind you in Iowa than if you lived here?"

Red tried to infiltrate Tony's thoughts. "I get it. I get what you're saying. But not only am I talking about Claire, I'm talking about Nichol too. I can't imagine not knowing where they are. I don't know what I'd do."

"You'd do what most people do: you'd get joint custody. You'd live your life and let her live hers. You're building this grand new home with the help of your friends and yet, you're not considering that Claire, if she gets better, may never want to live there. She may finally realize that she wants as far away from Iowa as you want away from here."

"When she was released from prison, she moved to California," Tony admitted.

"How will you feel when she tells you that she wants to move back to California or back to the island or anywhere?"

"I'll feel like shit, but it's her decision."

Jim smiled. "Anthony, you've made great progress over the past two years. I'm proud of you."

As Tony walked back toward his dormitory, he contemplated the session. He didn't hate Jim the way he had in the beginning. Truthfully, it felt good to talk, better than Tony had ever imagined. That didn't mean he liked all that they discussed, but in his heart, Tony knew it was true. He'd been in control of Claire's life for longer than she knew him. That wasn't a way to live. Not for her, and not for him. She would get better. When she did, she deserved, for the first time in most of her adult life, to live her own life.

So what? He was building the house for her. If she didn't want to be there, he was truthful when he said she could sell it.

He'd made progress. Tony grinned, thinking of Jim's last comment. That was definitely something Tony planned to say to Nichol as much as possible.

How hard was that? *I'm proud of you.* Four words that felt better than closing the biggest deal. Yes, those would definitely be in his father vocabulary—if Claire allowed him to be with Nichol.

Tony looked at his cheap commissary watch. He had four minutes until standing count.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

June 2016

John

What you are willing to sacrifice is the measurement of how you love.

—Jada Pinkett Smith

"SHE CAME UP TO me at the park. At the park, John! Are you listening to me?" Emily asked.

"I'm listening to you. It sounds like you took care of it," John replied.

"I told her to stay away, from me, from Nichol, and from Claire." Emily turned circles in their master bedroom suite. "I was so upset. I mean, after that damn book, she has the audacity to come up to me! To me! And ask to talk to Claire... to do another story?!"

John reached for his wife's hand. "Come here." He tugged her toward the bed. "Sit, calm down. You said your piece, and you walked away. If she bothers you again, you can call the police. She's a reporter. She falls under the guidelines of the restraining order."

Emily sat next to her husband and sighed. "I'm just afraid..."

"Of what?"

"I said something. I told her that Claire couldn't answer her questions. I told her that Claire wasn't talking to anyone. I shouldn't have told her that much."

John's chest inflated with a deep breath. "Did you tell her it was off the record?"

Emily grinned. "I think I may have threatened her life if she repeated anything I said."

John nodded as he pulled Emily closer. "Well, I guess that could legally be interpreted as *off the record*."

"That's how I meant it." She lay back on the soft comforter and sighed. "This feels so good."

“Did you go to Everwood this morning?” John asked.

Emily nodded. “We went for a little walk. I keep hoping she’ll realize that she’s outside or something. Then I helped Claire with her lunch. I swear she isn’t eating when I’m not there. Not that she eats that well when I’m there.”

“Did she talk?”

“Not really.”

They both turned as their bedroom door opened and a rush of little feet came running in. Within seconds Nichol and Michael were up on their bed, giggling, and hugging John and Emily. Pulling Nichol into his arms, John turned and saw Becca, their nanny, standing in the doorway.

“I’m sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol. Nichol asked for you. The next thing I know—they’re both running at full speed,” Becca explained.

John reached around and tickled Michael’s tummy, sending the noise level of the room up a few decibels. “It’s all right, Becca. We needed a little positive energy in here.”

“I can take them back downstairs—”

“They’re fine,” Emily replied. “Besides, it’s about time for supper...”

A MONTH LATER–JULY 2016

JOHN SAT IN HIS home office, finishing his review of a proposal, when his phone buzzed. It was a text message from Harry.

“I’D LIKE TO SPEAK TO YOU AND EMILY, IN PERSON. I CAN BE IN IOWA TOMORROW OR THE NEXT DAY. PLEASE LET ME KNOW IF WE CAN SCHEDULE SOMETHING”.

John sighed. He’d meant to contact Harry since the news about Amber broke, but he didn’t know what to say. Truthfully, he’d had enough fires of his own, so he wasn’t anxious to step into another. John replied to the text:

“WE’LL WORK SOMETHING OUT. LET US KNOW WHEN YOU’RE IN TOWN.”

“GREAT, TOMORROW NIGHT, I’LL GET BACK WITH YOU.”

“SOUNDS GOOD.”

His thoughts filled with their friend as John searched room to room, looking for Emily. Poor Harry had to learn that his sister had murdered his friend. Well, John’s sister-in-law had been accused of attempted murder—twice—and she wasn’t guilty either time. Maybe Amber wasn’t either? John had read that she’d pleaded not guilty. The trial wasn’t scheduled to begin until early fall.

He turned the corner to Michael’s nursery and stopped at the vision of his wife and children. Emily’s attention was too centered on the book and

children for her to notice his presence. It was moments like this, watching the woman he loved, rocking back and forth with both Nichol and Michael in her lap, that he could forget how this all came to be. Nichol's little head drooped forward: despite her cousin's fidgeting, she was sound asleep. Emily's animated voice continued softly as she continued to read. With each page, Michael's lids grew heavier and heavier. Their son's earlier restlessness to try to stay awake gave way to the power of the story, jammies, and methodical rocking. His little head rested against his mommy and his limbs stilled. John waited as Emily continued reading.

Finally, making his presence known, he whispered, "Hey, I think they're both asleep."

Her bright green eyes peered upward from the rocking chair. "I know, but I wanted to find out what happened to Mr. Bunny. I would've lain awake all night worrying about his lost mitten," she said with a grin.

John walked closer and lifted Nichol from her arms. "I'm so glad you have one less thing to worry about." He kissed Emily. "I'll go put her in her room. How about you and I have a glass of wine and you can tell me about Mr. Bunny's mitten. I'm assuming he found it?"

"Oh, you have no idea what an ordeal it was."

After the children were both tucked in bed, John went to the kitchen to pour their wine. The stillness of the scene outside the window caught his attention. The Iowa summer sky twinkled with a blanket of stars. Silently, Emily wrapped her arms around his waist. "What are you looking at?"

"The stars. Let's go out on the deck."

"That sounds great."

A slight breeze blew Emily's hair as they made their way outside. Though the heat of the day had only lessened a bit with the setting of the sun, the fresh air was invigorating. Their home was away from neighbors and lights. Their silver illumination came from the glow of the moon and stars. Sitting on the loveseat, John wrapped one arm around Emily. "This is beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Did you ever imagine this, us living in Iowa?"

Emily giggled. "Not in a million years."

"You know, it isn't all bad. I'm surprised how much I enjoy working for Tim. Corporate law is challenging, and I like working with Brent, Tom, and, well, everyone."

Emily nodded. "All in all, things could be worse. If only..."

"Don't do that."

She took a sip of wine and peered innocently over the rim of her glass.

"She'll get better. Don't give up on her, and don't miss out on the blessings that we have by wishing..."

"I'm not. I love every minute we have with the kids. I think it was seeing

Meredith last month. I'm so afraid for Claire and Nichol. I don't want the world to know what Claire's going through. Then, there're those new tests that we've authorized. I'm not sure if we made the right decision. Claire was content. Now, I'm afraid of what they'll learn." John hugged her tighter. After a moment, she went on, "And ever since Brent mentioned that Anthony's going to petition for early release, I can't stop thinking about it."

"What did your grandma used to say about borrowing—"

Emily smiled. "There's no such thing as borrowed troubles. Once you take them, no one wants them back."

"So don't do it. Leave them out there."

Nodding, she laid her head against his shoulder. The sound of crickets and cicadas filled the night. "This is nice."

John chuckled.

"What?" Emily asked.

"I was just thinking about everything you just said. I'm so glad you got the Mr. Bunny thing worked out. I can see how that would be the straw..."

Emily giggled. "Oh, you don't know! He was searching everywhere for that mitten!"

"I love you. We just need to take it one day at a time."

"I love you too. Hey?" Emily's eyes grew wide. "I've been rambling on. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"How's work... without Patricia, I mean?"

John drank another sip of his wine and wished he could tell Emily why Patricia was fired. There was no doubt that he missed having her around the office. Her boundless knowledge regarding the company helped him considerably in the beginning. Nevertheless, John respected Anthony's decision. He wasn't sure how many other men would have reacted the same way. Despite the fact that Anthony had only served two years of his four-year sentence and his wife was living in a world that no one could understand or even tap into, when push came to shove, Anthony stood up for his marriage. He'd chosen Claire over the smart, pretty, and available woman who'd worked beside him for years. John hated to admit it, but the longer he worked at Rawlings, the more respect he had for his brother-in-law.

"We're doing fine," he said. "I'll admit I miss being able to just ask her questions, but I'm an attorney. I love research and paperwork. Now, I've got more things to research."

"I think it's strange that she just decided to leave?" Though the inflection of her tone turned her statement into a question, John chose to let it go.

"Oh," John said, "Before I forget, we're getting together with Harry Baldwin tomorrow night. He's going be in town and wants to talk to us."

"Harry's going to be in Iowa? Why?"

“He didn’t say.”

“I don’t know what to say to him... about Amber. I’m shocked.”

John agreed, as the two fell silent and listened to the peaceful sounds of the Iowa night. For a few minutes they could forget about Claire’s troubles, the fear over Nichol’s future, Anthony’s impending release, and even Mr. Bunny’s mitten. For a few moments, they could be husband and wife and enjoy each other’s company.



HOPING THAT IT WOULD make Harry more comfortable, Emily offered to have their get-together at their home. “I can make dinner. It’ll be like old times,” she suggested.

“Yes, old times—with two children running here and there,” John replied.

She shrugged. “All right, new times, but it’ll be more private.”

John gave her a kiss, as he readied for work. “I’ll let him know.”

That evening after John came home, Harry arrived to their house. They hadn’t seen him for almost two years, yet he’d aged beyond that. His carefree appearance was hidden behind a new mask of worry and concern. His blue eyes appeared clouded with angst. John knew the burdened feeling, too well. It hadn’t been that long ago that he carried the same look. Seeing Harry reminded John that despite it all, their lives had improved.

“Harry, we’re so sorry about Amber,” Emily offered, as she led him to the screened porch. The shaded room with the softly rotating ceiling fan offered them the beauty of the outdoors with a refreshing breeze. “We’re very familiar with false accusations. Hopefully, during the trial—”

Harry shook his head, and replied, “Thank you, time will tell; however, it doesn’t look promising.”

Emily offered a reassuring hug. “I’m sorry. I’m sure it was a shock.”

“It was. It’s actually made me rethink a lot of my choices, kind of a life inventory.”

Just then, the shrill ring of children’s laughter resonated from beyond the porch. “The kids are playing with their nanny in the side yard,” John explained with a grin.

Light returned to Harry’s blue eyes. “I bet they’re getting big. I’ve never met your son. Michael? Is that right?”

“It is. He’s almost two. It’s hard to believe,” John said.

“And Nichol?” Harry asked.

“She’ll be three in December, and she’s beautiful,” Emily offered with pride.

“I bet she is. She has a beautiful mother.” Harry’s words carried a wave of

sadness. “How is Claire doing?”

John looked at Emily, deferring to her. Even with the closest of friends she was apprehensive about sharing information.

“She hasn’t changed much since you saw her last,” Emily began. “I don’t share it with many people, but since you two were close, I will. As much as I want to be positive, most research suggests that if recovery doesn’t happen within the first twelve months, it’s unlikely.”

Harry nodded. “I’ve looked into traumatic brain injury, too.”

Taking Emily’s lead, John went on. “However, Claire’s doctor heard this professor from Princeton speak at some medical conference. He has research showing recovery as late as four years post psychotic break. The NFL and its problems with CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy) has really spawned a surge in research into TBI recovery.”

“Yes, I honestly think of Claire every time I see something about it on the news,” Harry said.

“Emily’s agreed to allow this doctor to review Claire’s information and run some more tests. Once he’s done with that, we’re supposed to meet with him and hear what he has to say.”

Harry’s forehead wrinkled. “So this is good information?”

Emily feigned a grin. “We hope so, but I don’t like to get my hopes up.”

“It’s the most encouraging news we’ve heard in a while. And now it’s great to see you.”

“Yes,” Emily said, “We need to catch up, and dinner is almost ready.”

After lighthearted dinner conversation, where Nichol and Michael entertained and the adults reminisced, the three friends enjoyed a glass of wine back on the porch. “Your home is beautiful. How do you like living in Iowa?”

“Better than we expected,” Emily said. “It’s not as exciting as living in California, and I’m okay with that. It actually reminds me a lot of Indiana.”

Harry nodded. “I remember Claire saying the same thing.”

“I get the feeling you wanted to tell us something, Harry? I mean, who just comes to Iowa?” John asked.

Harry leaned forward in his chair. “I actually have a lot I want to say, but I’m thinking I should just leave instead.”

Emily’s questioning expression met John’s, before she asked, “Is it something about Amber?”

Harry inhaled. “Please, listen to everything before you comment. Let me explain it all.”

John reached for Emily’s hand. “We’re listening,” he said.

“I’m moving to North Carolina. I’ll go back to California for Amber’s trial, but like I said, I’ve been doing some re-evaluation of things. I-I, damn, this is harder than I thought.”

Emily's voice softened. "Harry, I have no idea what you're going to say, but it's all right. We're your friends. You've been great to us and to Claire. You can tell us anything."

"See, that's the thing. I haven't been. Not really. Not to Claire and not to you. I haven't been honest. It wasn't that I wanted to be dishonest. It's that it was my job. And I say *was* because I've quit my job. They call it retiring, but I'm not exactly of retirement age."

"You quit your job with the CBI?" John asked.

"No," Harry went on, "with the FBI. I've been an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation for almost ten years."

"My grandfather was with the FBI," Emily said. Her brows knit together. "He did undercover work. Is that what you've been doing? Oh, my God, is your name really Harry? Is Amber really your sister?"

"My name is Harrison Baldwin and Amber is my half-sister; we share a mother. This was a very unusual case."

John's voice deepened. "*What* was an unusual case? Amber?"

Harry shook his head, "Amber was a byproduct. My assignment was Claire."

Emily gasped.

"Please, let me continue. I'm telling you all of this because we have become friends. I value your friendship and I wanted to apologize."

"For lying?" Emily asked.

"I was doing my job. I wasn't lying, but I feel responsible for Chester's attack on Claire. I was the one who took her to him. It was a lead I wanted to follow, and I thought if she were with me... I shouldn't have done it. I had no idea I was putting her in danger."

"He attacked her because of *him*, not you," Emily refuted.

"Chester would never have known about Claire if it weren't for me. There's more. I saw Claire in Europe before she and Rawlings went into hiding. I talked with her. She knows that I'm an agent, and she told me in no uncertain terms to leave." He grinned. "I wish she'd tell me off like that again." He refocused. "She was right, and she was determined about her decision to reunite with *him*. I know you have reasons to hate him, but I wanted you to know that her decision to remarry him was not coerced."

Before either of the Vandersols could respond, Harry went on. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone any of this, but since Claire can't, I thought you needed to know. They were both in contact with the bureau while they were away. It was a strange kind of limbo—more like a self-induced/bureau-accepted witness-protection situation. The bureau was investigating the deaths of many people, including one of our own—your grandfather—associated with the unusual poison actaea pachypoda. The connection that the bureau found was Anthony Rawlings. I was assigned to learn Claire's secrets in an

effort to confirm Rawlings' connection. As you know, it wasn't him, but Ms. London. While the case was being investigated, Rawlings negotiated a one-year reprieve with Claire and Nichol in the South Pacific."

"A year? They weren't gone a year," John said.

"No," Harry agreed. "They came back early, against the wishes of the bureau."

"But why? Why did they do that? If they had clearance to stay safe—"

"Rawlings had some contact—he would never say who, although we have our suspicions. Anyway, his contact informed him of your visit to the estate."

Emily inhaled as her eyes widened. "They left that island because of us?"

"According to Rawlings' statement, they were concerned about your safety. When it'd been confirmed that you were traveling here to Iowa, they traveled home. Rawlings hoped to get to Ms. London before you arrived."

John looked at his wife. "Remember, we got an earlier flight."

"Oh, I can't believe how this really fits," Emily said.

"This is all classified, or most of it. Even leaving the bureau doesn't allow me to share this information, but I keep thinking about Claire. I really did care for her. I can't say we were madly in love, but we did become good friends." His eyes twinkled with memories. "The research I saw about TBI was what you said earlier, if recovery doesn't happen in the first year... Well, if she can never tell you the truth, I still thought you deserved to know."

John nodded as his mind swirled with new and old information. He and Emily weren't supposed to arrive to the Rawlings estate until later. If only...

He tried to refocus on Harry. As much as he wanted to be upset, the emotion that seemed paramount was gratitude.

"Thank you, thanks for telling us the truth. We won't share it, if that's what you want," John said.

"As long as you don't do a press release," Harry said with a grin, "I see no harm in letting you know."

John smiled. "We're not much into sharing with the media." Changing the subject, he asked, "Why North Carolina? What are you going to do there?"

"I'm thinking about starting my own investigative firm. Law enforcement has always been my dream. Entering the FBI was the ultimate fulfillment, but lately I've realized that the adrenaline rush I used to get from the dangers has been replaced. You see, I was married a long time ago. She's remarried, but I've been talking with her. We have a daughter who's almost seven. I've missed so much of my child's life." His eyes brimmed with moisture. "I don't want to miss any more. That rush now comes when I think about moving closer and getting to know my daughter. Thankfully, my ex-wife is willing to re-introduce us. Hopefully, Jillian will allow me to be part of her life."

"That's a beautiful name," Emily said.

The tips of Harry's lips turned upward. "It's silly, but my name begins

with an *H*, my ex-wife's with an *I*, we used to joke about continuing the alphabet. Ilona and I were already separated when she gave birth, but I was thrilled when I heard her name.”

“What about Liz?” Emily asked.

“We're taking it slowly. She's pretty devastated about Amber, but she's willing to move to North Carolina with me. They've asked her to stay at SiJo and help the new CEO: she's joining me after I get settled, maybe after the trial. I'm not sure what happened with the company. I was afraid that it would be gobbled up in some frenzy after everything went public. Liz said there was some talk of that, but then everything quieted. The board of directors have asked Simon's mother to take a role, at least temporarily. I think it's more as a figurehead, but it was a nice gesture. The new CEO is someone with a lot of experience. For Simon's sake, I hope they can keep it going.”

John did know background on that, and though he appreciated Harry's candor, he couldn't reciprocate. It was Rawlings Industries, more specifically Roger Cunningham from Shedis-tics, who got the ball rolling on securing SiJo's future. It was done as discreetly as possible. Apparently, Anthony didn't want it to appear that Shedis-tics was priming the pump for a takeover. The instructions were painfully clear: it was strictly a rescue mission. SiJo would remain an independent company.

“We'll see what the future holds. Liz isn't sure how she feels about a seven-year-old daughter, and I get it. I'm hoping that once she gets to know Ilona and her husband, she'll feel more secure. I think she's worried about my being around my ex, but there's nothing to fear. We were kids when we married. I want a relationship with Jillian, and even though I'll be in North Carolina and Liz will be in California for right now, we hope to make it work. Our plan is to be together in North Carolina eventually. I'm thankful that Liz is supporting me.”

John listened as Emily asked more questions and Harry willingly answered. It was so much to process, too many pieces of the puzzle that seemed to forever remain unfinished. Despite the deception, there was something pure and sad in the man before them. He'd followed his dream career and figured out that nothing compared to his family. Harry talked about the sense of loss with Amber. Even his mother was upset that he didn't use his role with the FBI to help his sister. He felt completely disconnected, until Ilona reached out to him. Through their conversations, Harry realized that Jillian was his family—his anchor. He wasn't alone. He had roots, if only he was willing to step up and accept them. He'd chosen the FBI over his family once. He wouldn't do that again.

There was more than that in Harry's visit. There was the information about Rawlings. John couldn't comprehend that Anthony and Claire had given up their security for him and Emily. Then again, he and Emily had

given up their life in California for Claire and Nichol. Harry was giving up his dream career for Jillian.

Maybe it wasn't what you give up—maybe it was what you receive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

September 2016

John

Miracles come in moments. Be ready and willing.

—Wayne Dyer

"*W*HAT DID THEY SAY?" Emily asked for the tenth time.

"I've told you. They just said that there'd been a development with Claire and we needed to get to Everwood as soon as possible."

John watched the passing landmarks as he drove toward Cedar Rapids. To his right, Emily fidgeted with her fingernails as she rested her elbow against the lower edge of the window. No doubt, the early morning traffic was heavier than what she usually experienced on her later drives.

"Did they say *what* development?"

"Em, I've told you the entire conversation, verbatim."

"Why didn't you ask? What if something bad happened? We're supposed to have that meeting this morning, at 8:30 AM, with that aide who's been working so well with Claire. Do you think Claire took a turn for the worse? I mean, why wouldn't they just wait and tell us when we got there? It has to be bad. Otherwise, they would've just waited."

John reached over and touched Emily's arm. "Stop. Stop trying to second-guess. I'm nervous too, but it doesn't do any good to overanalyze. We don't have enough information—yet."

"I bet it has something to do with Dr. Fairfield's treatment. So help me... if it did something. Oh, John, you didn't see how distraught she's been. She paces. She's uncooperative. That's not my sister. I mean, she's made bad decisions and done things that I don't agree with, but she's always been cooperative. Even in that damn book, she talked about how cooperative she was. I never should have allowed him to change her medications and treatment regimen. If something bad happened, it's my fault."

"Dr. Fairfield explained that those were good signs, that it showed she was becoming more aware of the world around her, instead of living in some make-believe fantasy."

Emily huffed. "I don't care what he said. What if she got upset and they had to do something to her... Oh, I hated getting those reports when she needed to be restrained. If they'd just talk to her... that calms her down. She's what... a hundred and ten pounds. It's not like she's dangerous. I don't understand. So help me... if they had to restrain her again after how well she *was* doing, I promise I'll have some heads on a platter, and the first one will be Dr. Fairfield's."

John pulled into the gate and down the long tree-lined drive. Truly, the grounds of Everwood were beautiful. He remembered how, even as a child, Claire enjoyed the outdoors. When she was young, her dad used to take her camping. John believed it was good that part of Claire's daily routine was going outside.

The change in plans both worried and disappointed John. He'd been looking forward to speaking with Claire's aide, Ms. Russel. Her reports were the most encouraging news they'd received on Claire since her ordeal began. At first, they seemed too good to be true, but her supervisor, Mrs. Bali, confirmed them. The Vandersols had tried to meet with Ms. Russel on other occasions, but each time something caused her to cancel. When Emily's phone rang this morning, while she was in the shower, John half expected it to be Everwood, canceling yet again. He should have asked more questions, but the call was brief and his initial reaction was relief that the meeting wasn't cancelled. At least, he didn't think it was cancelled. Hopefully, after they worked out this *development*, the meeting could occur.

Dr. Fairfield's assistant was waiting for them within the doors of the main facility. John couldn't decide if her bright smile was sincere or if she was trying to hide something. It looked, different.

"Good morning Valerie. What's happening with my sister?" Emily asked, impatiently.

"Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol. Your sister is fine. Please, come with me."

When Valerie led them to the elevator and pushed the button for the office floor, Emily questioned, "Why are we going to the offices? After your call this morning, I want to see Claire. I need to be sure that she's all right." John wrapped his arm reassuringly around Emily's waist.

"Mrs. Vandersol, we're going to your sister."

"Why isn't she in her room?" Emily looked at her watch. "It's still early. She should be in her room, and someone should be there helping her—"

The elevator doors opened and Valerie stepped into the hallway. Emily glared up at John. With her lips pressed together, John knew she was

refraining from commenting about Valerie's departure during Emily's speech. Inhaling deeply, she followed, as did John.

"Let me show you, before you go in," Valerie said, as she opened a door with a plate beside the frame that read *Observation*.

"Show us?" Emily asked.

"There's no sound, but you can see." She flipped a switch and a large mirrored surface became a window. In the next room, they could see Claire sitting in a chair with Dr. Brown facing her and Dr. Fairfield standing near. Dr. Brown's lips moved and then so would Claire's!

Emily covered her mouth as large tears flowed down her cheeks. "Oh, my God! Is she talking?"

"Yes, Mrs. Vandersol, she is."

Had it not been for John's steady footing, Emily would have knocked them both to floor as she fell into his chest. Valerie flipped another switch that must have signaled Dr. Fairfield. He looked up and said something to Dr. Brown, who nodded. Within seconds, Dr. Fairfield was opening the door to their room. His normally stoic expression was replaced by the largest smile John had ever seen on the good doctor's face.

"Mr. and Mrs. Vandersol, we must continue to have a guarded prognosis, but this is good. This is very good."

Emily shook her head. "I can't believe it. I want to talk to her."

"And you will. I wanted to explain a few things first."

John watched through the window as Dr. Fairfield explained the happenings of the day. The staff had entered Claire's room to wake her: when they did, she was already showered and dressed. Then, she proceeded to tell them that she didn't want eggs for breakfast; she wanted fruit. The staff was so shocked that they called Dr. Brown, who called Dr. Fairfield. The entire facility was abuzz with the news.

"Is it permanent?" John asked.

"I can't answer that with one-hundred-percent accuracy. The human brain is an amazing organ. It makes a path when medically we don't see a possibility. Something was stopping your sister-in-law from facing reality. Her DTI images told us that she was living and experiencing sensations during her episodes. The change in medication and intensive therapy has worked to essentially bring her two worlds back to one. We all dream; we all have memories. The trick is to only visit those fantasies, not to live there. Ms. Nichols was stuck in that other world. I was hopeful during her recent bouts with agitation that we were on the right track. You see, no one wants to leave that other world, assuming it's a pleasant place to be. From Ms. Nichols' tests and behaviors, I believe that where she was, she enjoyed being. As the therapy began to work, her episodes decreased. The agitation was her frustration at losing what she enjoyed. My goal was for that frustration to

build to the point of action. I believe that's where we are. Ms. Nichols took action. She knows where she is. She knows her name and her daughter's name. We'll have to wait and see if her brain can handle the onslaught of information that she'll encounter with this new awakening. I recommend that her therapy be increased."

Emily's chest heaved with deep sobs. "Please, I need to see her."

Valerie handed her a tissue, as Dr. Fairfield warned, "She knows that you're on your way. She's expressed concern about you being upset with her."

"Oh God, no," Emily exclaimed. "I'm not upset. I want my sister."

"Please, calm yourself. Understand that this is very overwhelming for her."

Emily nodded. "I understand."

As John worked unsuccessfully to hold back the tears, he gratefully took a tissue offered by Dr. Fairfield's assistant. This development was more than they'd dared to hope. Taking a few deep breaths, John and Emily followed Dr. Fairfield out the door, down the hall, and into the next room. When the door opened, Claire kept her head bowed, and peered up at them through veiled lashes.

"Claire!" Emily cried, as she ran to her sister and wrapped her in her arms. The rest of the room stood by helplessly as both women hugged and cried. Eventually, John joined his family, wrapping them both in his arms.

Emily took Dr. Brown's chair and leaned forward, with her knees touching Claire's and their foreheads mere inches away, Emily held tightly to her sister's hands. "Tell us how you're doing."

"I'm... tired," Claire replied.

"Oh, Claire, thank God."

Claire's eyes widened. "You're... not mad?"

"No, no, I'm not mad. I'm thrilled. John's thrilled. We've missed you."

"I had to go," she said, her words running together.

Emily questioned, "You had to go? Where did you go?"

"Away... for N-Nichol."

"Honey, we know all about that. It's all right, you're back."

Claire sighed. "Yes."

Her sentences were short, but it was obvious that she was fully comprehending every question that anyone asked. Eventually, John knelt beside them and touched Claire's knee. When her piercing green eyes met his, John grinned. "Hey, lady, I've missed you."

Claire leaned forward and wrapped her arms around John's neck. "Thank you... thank you... for not being... upset."

"At you? Never."

Claire sniffled. "You were... I'm sorry."

"Hey, don't be sorry. Just stay with us, okay? No more going away."

She nodded. "I don't know... where... I'd go."

Everyone giggled. "That's good," Emily said, "you just stay right here with us."

"And... Nichol?" Claire asked.

Emily nodded as her gaze went to John and back to Claire. "Yes, eventually, of course, she needs you, but not yet. We need to get you better first."

A tear escaped Claire's lower lid and descended her cheek. "I understand... but... I've missed... too much."

Emily looked up to Dr. Brown. "Where's Ms. Russel? She should be here. Dr. Fairfield, I know it's been your regimen, but Ms. Russel has helped to get my sister to this point. I want to thank her."

"She should be at the meeting downstairs. I'll ask Valerie to bring her up," Dr. Fairfield offered.

John had never experienced a more emotional morning. He didn't know for sure how long they stayed in that room, but by the time they helped Claire back to her room and joined her for lunch, he knew he'd be no good to anyone at Rawlings for the rest of the day. He was spent. It was all too much: hearing his sister-in-law responding, seeing the comprehension in her eyes, and watching her feed herself, was truly a dream come true.

They never were able to thank Ms. Russel. Valerie said that she brought her up to the floor, and they'd watched through the window. She said that Ms. Russel didn't want to interrupt this important family reunion, and said that she was too emotional. She was afraid she'd upset Claire.

"Oh, I wanted so much to speak with her," Emily replied, though she and John completely understood. It'd been more emotional than either one of them had expected.

"Please... don't... stop... her from... coming," Claire said.

Emily grinned and patted Claire's knee. "Don't worry about that. Of course, we wouldn't stop her. Do you like her?"

Claire nodded. Between her posture and drooping eyelids, it was obvious she was getting tired.

"Why don't we let you rest?" John offered.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Emily said, "to see how you're doing. Will you be all right?"

"Yes... Tomorrow... will... you bring, Nichol?"

Emily pressed her lips tight and shook her head. "Honey, let's wait on that until we're sure you're all right. I showed you her picture. I'll bring some tomorrow for you to keep here in your room."

"She's so... big."

John replied, "She is, but she's still little. You'll have plenty of time with her. Right now, you concentrate on getting better. Listen to the doctors. I

know you'll be feeling like your old self in no time at all."

Walking from Everwood into the autumn air, Emily squeezed John's hand. Although he felt as though he'd been through an emotional roller coaster, he couldn't help but smile. His wife looked beautiful. With her makeup gone and her eyes red, Emily's smile was the brightest he'd seen in years. "You're lovely," he whispered.

"Ha. I'm sure I look stunning. My head is throbbing and I've never been happier. Honestly, I could use a nap. Then," she added, "let's get the kids and celebrate. This was a miracle."

"I think that sounds like a great plan," John replied.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Late September 2016

Brent

If love is without sacrifice, it is selfish.

-Sadhu Vaswani

BRENT STARED AT HIS wife. Finally he asked, “Are you seriously going to meet Meredith Banks, the woman who wrote that vile book, at this hour of the night? Tell me again why.”

Courtney reached for her purse. “Brent, I’ll be fine. I’m meeting her at Short’s Burgers in Iowa City.”

“You’re going to a bar—at 9:00 PM?”

“She said it was about Claire. She knew that Claire was getting better. I need to find out how she’s gotten her information. I know I should call Emily. I do, and maybe I will. But Meredith also knew that I hadn’t been allowed to see Claire. I mean, it was one thing when all Emily would say is that Claire’s *not well*. Now it’s different. Even though I can’t tell Emily, I know she’s getting better. Phil’s reports have tons of great information from her medical records. However, every time I ask Emily to put me on the visitation list, she has some reason why the time isn’t right.”

“I don’t like this,” Brent said. “I don’t like Meredith. Sometimes, I’m not thrilled with Emily, but I know that Emily thinks she’s doing what’s best for her sister.”

Courtney pressed her lips together before speaking. Finally, she said, “I think Emily won’t let me visit Claire because she knows that we still go see Tony every three weeks. She’s mentioned more than once that if I ever am allowed to visit Claire I’m forbidden—oh, yes, she used that word, *forbidden*—from mentioning Tony’s name in any form: Anthony, Tony, Rawlings, anything.”

Brent shook his head. “Okay, Emily is a bit excessive. That still doesn’t

answer my—”

“Meredith said that if I came alone, she might be able to help me see Claire. I don’t even know how she has that ability, but for Claire, I’m going to find out.”

“Let me come with you.”

“She said *alone*. I’m afraid if I bring you, it may scare her off. Brent, I’ll be fine. I’ll text you from Short’s and before I head home,” Courtney replied.

Brent pulled her close. “I just don’t like my beautiful wife going off to a bar at night.”

Courtney giggled. “You know me. You’ll probably need to send a cab.”

With that comment, and a quick kiss, Brent watched his wife disappear down the hall toward their garages. There was something about this whole thing that didn’t seem right. He considered calling John. He’d never call Emily; she would most definitely freak out, but if he called John, and John told Emily. No. Brent sighed and recalled Tony’s request last year at Yankton.

It was settled. Brent would trust Courtney’s intuition. She hadn’t steered him wrong in over thirty years. In the meantime, he’d work on Tony’s latest request and wait by his phone. Brent didn’t plan to file the papers to revoke Emily’s power of attorney or request full custody of Nichol until Tony’s release was assured. With that in mind, it could be in the next few weeks or it could be another year. Hell, if it were another year, Brent would undoubtedly do something else. The more he thought about Emily *forbidding* the mention of Tony’s name and restricting Courtney’s topics of conversation, the more it angered him. Claire was an adult. She’d been through hell, more than once, but he’d read Roach’s most recent reports; she’d made her way out of purgatory—again. As much as Claire was their friend, if Brent were to analyze his feelings, he thought of her more like a daughter. After all, she wasn’t much older than Caleb and Maryn. No matter what happened, he would do all he could to help her. Well, he had.

His phone buzzed.

“I JUST ARRIVED TO SHORT’S BURGER. MEREDITH ISN’T HERE YET. I THINK I COULD USE THAT DRINK! (Smiley face)”

He texted back:

“I DON’T BLAME YOU. LET ME KNOW IF YOU NEED THAT CAB.”

“THE NIGHT IS YOUNG.”

He smiled and lost himself once again to the motions at hand. It wasn’t until nearly midnight that his phone buzzed again.

“OMG! IF YOU’RE AWAKE, YOU’LL WANT TO HEAR ALL I HAVE TO TELL YOU!”

“I’M AWAKE.”

Courtney didn’t wait until she was home, as soon as she was in her car,

she called Brent. Instead of saying hello, he said, “Are you using your hands free?”

“No, I have two hands on the phone, and I’m driving with my knees. I was afraid I might drop it.”

Brent snickered. “You’re a smart-ass, but I love you.”

“You’re impossible, but I love you, too. Wait until you hear what Meredith has been doing...” Brent listened with bated breath as Courtney retold the story she’d just heard. It was unbelievable how Meredith had infiltrated Everwood. Truly, she and Roach should work out some kind of partnership. Between the two of them, there’d be no secrets left.

Courtney said that not only is Claire finally talking, she’s asking for visitors, and Emily still won’t let anyone in. It just wasn’t right. Meredith believed that if Claire didn’t get some positive reinforcement soon for her hard work, she’d decide that living in the real world wasn’t worth the effort. It wasn’t that Meredith was worried about Claire harming herself: she was worried about her mental stability. As it was, when Meredith left Claire’s room tonight, Claire was crying.

“It makes me so mad. I want to drive over to the Vandersols’ house and pound on their door until someone comes outside.”

Brent laughed at his wife’s vigor. That was one thing that could be said for Courtney: when she was in your corner, she was there forever, and most importantly, she was like a mother bear. “I don’t recommend that you do that. We’re still friends with Emily and John. I have to see John in the morning. I’d rather not start out the morning discussing news of how my wife was arrested on their front lawn.”

“I’m going,” Courtney announced.

Brent’s eyes widened. “To the Vandersols’ house? Please don’t.”

“No, to Everwood. I’m sneaking onto the grounds. Meredith has a place where I can park. I have to walk a bit, but that’s all right. Meredith’s responsible for taking Claire for her evening walk. She’s going to bring Claire to me.” Courtney’s words came in such a rush: it was almost difficult to decipher each one.

“When?”

“Is it supposed to rain tomorrow?” Courtney asked.

Brent hit the mouse on his desk. “Let me look. I’ve been working and didn’t hear the news.” After a few clicks he had the forecast. “No, it looks clear for the next few nights.”

“Then I’m going tomorrow night!”

“You know we’re going to Yankton on Saturday?”

“I know!” Courtney exclaimed. “I can’t wait to tell Tony.”

Brent’s smile widened. “I think it’s just the kind of news he needs.”



TONY'S DARK EYES widened. "You saw her?"

"I did!" Courtney exclaimed. "She's talking and... oh, Tony, she's better!" Brent reached for Courtney's hand.

"W-what did they do? What happened?" Tony asked.

Courtney shook her head. "I really don't know. All I know is that they started some new treatment regimen with new medications. Meredith explained that she thinks—"

"Meredith?" Tony questioned.

"Yes!" Courtney's blue eyes shone. "As in Meredith Banks."

Tony leaned forward, his baritone voice sounding more like a growl. "If she's writing another—"

Courtney reached out and briefly touched Tony's hand. "She's not. I know. I didn't want to trust her at first either, but she swears she isn't. She said that originally that was her plan, but it changed. Tony, I think we should be happy that Meredith got to Claire. I know that I am."

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not sure I can ever be happy about Meredith Banks. How the hell do Emily and John not know that she's there?"

"She's not using her real name. Believe me, if I thought it was all for another of her sensationalized books, I'd report her." Courtney leaned forward and lowered her voice. "I may have even threatened her a little."

Tony's laugh resonated throughout the visitor's room. "You? Well, good!"

Brent interjected, "Don't laugh. She's pretty damn threatening when she wants to be."

"It was so good to see her. I know Emily thinks that she's doing what's best by Claire, but not allowing her to see anyone isn't what's best. She can't even go outside by herself. That's what Meredith does: she takes her outside after her dinner."

"You know my thoughts on Emily. I hate that she's doing that to Claire. How can she think it's for the best?"

Courtney shook her head. "I don't know. I'm not giving up."

Tony exhaled. "I've read Roach's reports. Her prognosis sounds good. What do you think?"

"I've only seen her once, but I'm so encouraged. Oh, Tony, she's back! And now if you..." Her words trailed away. "I'm sorry. I just want you to come home."

Tony grinned. "I promise, I'm ready to come home." His eyes widened. "Speaking of which, I'm pleased with the pictures of the new house. What do you think?"

Both Brent and Courtney nodded approvingly. "It's very nice," Brent said.

"It's better than *nice*," Courtney said. "It's beautiful and so homey. I'm sure you're both going to love it. Oh, and Nichol's room is perfect. I want you all there so badly."

Tony nodded, but his eyes were sad. Brent knew why, although he didn't have the heart to tell Courtney, or Tony's approval to do so. He'd known for a while. He'd prepared the preliminary petition for Tony and Claire's divorce. It had all begun months ago when Tony asked him to visit alone. As Tony's lawyer, he could see his client any day of the week, with approval. Truthfully, when Brent arrived, he was caught off-guard.

Prisoners are allowed more privacy when speaking with their attorneys. Therefore, when Brent arrived on a non-visitation day, he was led to a small individual room. Within no time, Tony was brought to him.

"Thanks for coming," Tony offered.

"Not a problem, it's your plane."

Tony grinned, but Brent could see the sadness. It'd been building for some time. It seemed like with each visit, it was more and more difficult to elicit the smiles or even smirks that Tony had once had. "I need you to start working on something for me."

"Sure, what do you need?"

"I want you to begin the petition needed to dissolve my marriage."

For more than a minute, Brent didn't respond. He stared. He looked around the room. Was this some kind of joke? After everything these two had been through. Finally, Brent leaned forward, and said, "Tony, I know they have you in some kind of counseling here, but I don't think you're thinking clearly. I saw the two of you before all this shit went down. I listened to you on the phone with the whole Patricia thing. You love your wife. I'm not sure why you think this is an answer. Is it because of her medical condition?"

"No. Don't question me—do it."

It was a tone Brent recognized. One he submitted to over the years, but times had changed. "I am questioning you. I did this once before and you regretted it. I'm not doing it again without some kind of explanation."

Running his hand through his hair, Tony looked down at the metal table. Brent's heart ached for the man before him. "I'm not good for her," Tony said.

"And?"

"And nothing. You've read the damn book. Hell, you saw her testimony. You know the things I did."

Brent couldn't hide his surprise. "That isn't an answer."

Tony lowered his voice. “It’s all you’re going to get. Forget for a fuck’n minute that we’re friends and remember that you work for me. Remember that I’m the one who started the damn company, and I’m the one who ultimately decides who stays employed.”

“You’re threatening to fire me if I won’t start divorce proceedings?”

“I don’t make threats. Don’t start the proceedings. Don’t file it with the court yet. Just get everything ready.”

Brent stood. “Fine, fire me. I’m not doing it without more information. Did you decide to take Patricia up on her offer and now you’re feeling guilty?”

Tony’s fist pounded the metal table sending shockwaves throughout the small room. “Don’t even fuck’n suggest such a thing.”

Brent leaned closer and slowed his words. “Then tell me what’s going on. I’m not spending my time preparing a petition if you won’t tell me why.”

“Claire deserves better.”

Brent grinned. “All right, I’m agreeing with you.”

“That’s my answer. I’m no good for her, and she deserves better. I see that now. I see how much damage I did. I thought I could do what I did and then make up for it. I thought we could get past our...” he hesitated, “...start. Do you know the statistics for relationships when someone... when there’s a history of...” Tony looked down. “It can never work.”

“Well, excuse me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t it working? Those people who came to my house with their new baby? Those people were madly in love. Hell, I’m not some kind of romantic, but I felt it. I know what I saw. You tell me that you don’t love Claire. Tell me that you’ve fallen out of love. If you can do that, I’ll do as you ask.”

“You’ll do as I ask, because that’s your job. You want to hear my reason, fine. No, I haven’t fallen out of love. I love her more than I can possibly say. I’ve loved her forever, since before she knew me. The months before she left the second time, and those on the island were the best months of my entire life. I’m fifty-one fuck’n years old and I have—what?—one year that I can say was fantastic. That leaves fifty that were shit, and who do I have to blame for that? Me. I screwed it all up. Claire will get better medically. I will get out of here. I want her, Nichol, and I to be a family. I want that more than I want the fuck’n air I breathe, but I won’t do it to her. Claire deserves a hell of a lot better than me.”

Brent listened. Finally, he said, “Why don’t you let her decide?”

“Because don’t you understand? I fucked up her mind. She thinks she’s in love with me, because I made her think that. I did that. I took away her world. I didn’t just make her the center of mine: I made me the center of hers. She’s got this warped sense of who I am—who we are. It’s not real.” Tony leaned back. “Think about you and Courtney. You’ve been married for what, thirty

years?"

Brent nodded, "About."

"All right, if you knew it was better for her to be without you, what would you do?"

"It's not better for Claire to be without you."

"That's not what I asked. I asked, what would you do?"

"I'd do what was best for her," Brent admitted.

"I've been a selfish bastard most of my life. I'm not saying I want to leave Claire with nothing, like I did before. I want her to have everything she'll ever need or want. She can have the estate and enough money to keep everything going. Hell, I'll pay child support and alimony. I want her to have the new house and a place to raise Nichol. I won't fight her for custody or visitation. Remember what the judge said? He said I was a danger to them. I've done some awful things. They deserve better."

Brent shook his head. "I don't agree with you. I think she'll need you. She'll need your support. Tony, I hope to hell she gets better. But if she doesn't, you'd be a selfish son-of-a-bitch to divorce her while she's in Everwood."

Tony closed his eyes. "You're right. I want her out of there. I can't get her out as long as I'm in here or if I'm not her husband. Work it out that I can make her world as right as possible. If my application for early release goes well, and I get out, I want to get her out of that place. I'll pay for whatever care she needs at home. We'll get Nichol back to Claire, then..."

"I'll get the preliminary petition filled out, but I don't want to file for your divorce, again," Brent said.

"One in a million," Tony said.

"Fine, those odds suck," Brent admitted. "Tell me the odds of one man taking an idea he started with a friend and turning it into a successful company that employs people all over the world."

Tony shrugged.

"Tell me the odds of someone finding a woman who loves him enough to not only forgive him for the crazy shit he's done, but love him, and give him one of the most beautiful, intelligent, and funny little girls I've ever seen." Brent stared. "Unless you're fuck'n planning to go to Vegas, I don't give a damn about the odds. I care that Claire gets well. I care that you get out of here. And I care that the little girl with her daddy's brown eyes, can have her mom and her dad in the next room so that when she wakes up crying from a bad dream, you both go running in to comfort her." Tony looked away, but Brent kept going. "Yeah, I'd do what was best for Courtney, but it wouldn't be a unilateral decision. We'd talk about it. I'll start your damn paperwork. Just don't ask me to actually file it."

By the time Brent stepped from the room, he was sure that his blood

pressure was though the roof and that his best friend was making a terrible mistake. Well, it wasn't the first mistake his friend had made. It wasn't even the first time he'd made this particular mistake. Maybe, just maybe, Brent could convince him to never file.

The memory faded as Brent rejoined the conversation and listened as Courtney continued to describe the house. "Wait until you see Nichol's room! It is fit for a princess."

"I can't wait. I can't wait to get out of here and see anything," Tony said.

Brent nodded. "I'm hopeful that it will happen sooner rather than later. The only step is the final review. Your acceptance of the terms of the community service was the last hurdle. Now, we just need to wait. I got the impression they were encouraged, by your record here and your history of philanthropic support. You pled guilty. In prison you've had a job, taken classes, and gone to counseling. You've even agreed to further counseling once you're released. You're established in your community. It's very promising."

"Yes, look at me. I'm the model prisoner," Tony said sarcastically. "I'm not sure I want to put my hopes in the final unit review. I've been screwed before."

"Faith," Courtney said, "have faith. Think about Claire. Three weeks ago, she wasn't talking. Now, she's doing so well. I just know everything will work out."

"I hope you're right," Tony said.

"Have you ever known me to be wrong?" Courtney asked with a smirk.

Ten days later—October 2016

WHILE AT WORK, BRENT received the call. Tony's early release had been approved. In fifteen days, Tony would be able to walk out of Yankton, a free man. After calling Courtney, he began filing his petitions. The first was to revoke Emily's power of attorney. With doctors' statements regarding Claire's recent improvement, he didn't anticipate that being a problem. The next was Family Court. Whether Tony thought his family needed to be together or not, Brent surely did. He wouldn't stop until he got Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings full custody of their minor daughter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Late October 2016

Tony

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

—Lewis B. Smedes

AS THE PLANE ASCENDED, Tony sighed at the overwhelming sense of freedom. From his Armani suit and Italian loafers to the glass of Johnnie Walker in his hand, Anthony Rawlings felt his true self re-emerging. No longer was he subjugated to the people around him. He had power: power to move mountains. He also knew that he would never again step foot inside of a federal prison. He wasn't even sure he'd ever step foot in South Dakota again. It wasn't that he intended to forget his experience—Tony didn't know if that was even possible. He did intend to move beyond it.

It was this exhilarating sense of freedom that he wanted for Claire, too. “When can we get Claire?”

“We could go tonight, but it’ll be late. I recommend we go tomorrow morning. From what Meredith told Courtney—”

Tony shook his head. “That’s still the strangest turn of events I’ve ever heard. Who’d have thought that I’d ever feel indebted to Meredith Banks?”

“I know, right? Courtney was skeptical, until Meredith got her to Claire. Cort said that she could tell that Claire and Meredith had a mutual admiration. Meredith has risked a lot to continue this charade. Claire told Courtney that her first memories of coming out of her fog were hearing Meredith’s voice, hearing her talk about you.”

Tony took another drink of bourbon. “I can’t believe she thought she killed me. I can see how traumatic that would be. No wonder she tried to block that out. Hell, I don’t know what I’d do if I thought I’d killed her.”

Memories of a dark night in her suite came rushing back. “Actually, I do know. It’s something I never want to experience again.”

Changing the subject, Brent handed Tony a folder. “Here’s the report from the child psychologist I hired in Iowa City. She’s very reputable and having her involved helped the court’s decision regarding custody of Nichol.”

Tony took the file and scanned the first page. He saw the recommendation for weekly family-therapy sessions. Damn, he also had agreed to weekly anger-management sessions in order to facilitate his early release. “I thought I was going to get away from all this psychobabble bullshit.”

Brent smirked. “I don’t think that’ll happen for a very long time. Besides, I still don’t believe you’re thinking straight.”

Tony’s eyes darkened. “Don’t go there. I’m not reconsidering. Do you have the copy of the petition for divorce?”

Brent handed him an envelope. “I have the petition, but I’m not filing it.”

“I don’t want you to file it—not yet. Not until we get Claire home. I’m anxious to see her, but I think tomorrow is best. That’ll give me some time to get everything ready.”

“I agree tomorrow is better. I was going to say earlier that Meredith told Courtney that Emily visits in the morning. That’s why Meredith works the later shift, to avoid her.”

“I don’t want to avoid her,” Tony proclaimed.

Brent nodded as a smile filled his face. “That’s why I think tomorrow will be better. You won’t be sneaking in. You’ll be going in and setting the record straight. In my opinion, if she’s present, it’ll help with the aftershocks.”

“You’re damn right. I’m not *sneaking* in. Claire’s my wife, and I’m exercising my rights as a free man.”

Brent’s brows peaked in question.

“She is currently my wife.” He tapped the breast pocket of his jacket. “This will come in the future, but for now, she’s my wife.” Tony didn’t care for the look Brent was sending his way, but it wouldn’t change his plans. Claire deserved to be free. She’d been through too much in her life, and all of it could be traced back to him.

“The house is perfect,” Brent said. “Courtney’s spent more time over there recently than she has at home. Between the decorators and her touch, I think you’ll both love it.”

“Is Eric meeting us at the airport?”

Brent grinned. “Yes, just like old times, but the rest of the staff that Courtney hired for the estate are new. She interviewed every one of them.”

“Roach?”

“He’ll be at the estate. I thought you’d like to see him in person.”

Tony nodded and sipped more of the amber liquid. It’d been over two years since he’d had a drop of alcohol: the aroma alone was enough to tingle

his skin. The burning sensation as he swallowed rekindled the glorious feeling of weightlessness. Damn, he was glad to be back.

Eric was exactly as he'd always been. The only difference was his unusually large smile as Tony and Brent descended the plane's steps. Well, that and the vigorous handshake. Truly, Tony didn't mind. He'd retained Eric and Roach for the same reason. They weren't just part of his past: he wanted them in his future and in Claire's. They'd proven their loyalty over and over. Tony had proven his, too. No matter what the DA or US Attorney offered, Tony refused to name either of them as having knowledge of his activities. Of course, the prosecution had their suspicions, but without confirmation, that was all they had.

Tony didn't care if he were riding in a sedan or a limousine—it just felt great to be moving, going from place to place. When Eric drove the limousine through the iron gates of his estate, a feeling of anticipation, as well as one of dread, rushed over Tony. It had been a long time since he'd been on his property. After the repairs had been made on the house, Tony realized how much he hated it. That was why he'd spent so many nights sleeping on the couch in his office. Now, he wanted to like the new house. He wanted to give Claire a fresh start with new, happy memories, but until he saw the house with his own two eyes, he didn't know if that was possible.

The colorful fall trees parted and the dread disappeared. The house was so different, so new. His gaze transfixed on the grand white-brick home. That was what he saw: a home. Not a house. Not a monument. Tony didn't wait for Eric: he opened his door and stood before the home. Though in the last two and a half years, he'd only seen his daughter in pictures, he imagined her running the length of the porch and dancing around the large columns. He saw an enclosed porch and pictured Claire sitting there, reading and enjoying the fresh breeze. It was perfect.

Tony's main request during the construction was to make it open and airy. Never again would anyone keep Claire from the sun or the moon. Never again would she feel trapped. Jim had been right. Her future was her choice. She could sell this place if she wanted, but Tony had done everything in his power to make her not want to sell.

"Mr. Rawlings, would you like to enter your new home?" Eric asked, as he opened the front door. Tony had expected for it to be empty, not of furniture, but of people. Instead, he was greeted by his new staff. One by one, they introduced themselves. Courtney had thought of everything, from the estate manager, to a cook, and the cleaning staff. Even the head groundskeeper was present. When he introduced himself, Tony almost asked him about some flowers he'd seen in the front of the house, next to the mums. He'd never seen them before and worried that they wouldn't be hardy enough for the cooler nights. Then he stopped himself. Anthony Rawlings, Number

01657-3452, was a gardener, not Anthony Rawlings, CEO of Rawlings Industries. He had other, more pressing matters.

It was when they were in the kitchen that Tony heard Courtney's voice. Within seconds she was in the kitchen with her arms flung around Tony's neck. The sadness that had been threatening his tour disappeared in an instant. Her elation was contagious. From that moment on, she was his tour guide. It wasn't until she walked them into the master suite's dressing room that the sadness returned.

"Where are all of your things?" she asked, obviously perplexed. "They were here the other day. I had the closet stocked for both you and Claire."

Tony avoided Brent's darkening expression.

"I had them moved," Tony answered.

"To where? Another room? Why would you do that?" she questioned.

Tony swallowed. "No, not to another room."

"Shit, I told you I wouldn't rent you an apartment," Brent said.

Courtney's eyes clouded in confusion. "I don't understand. I've done everything I thought you'd like. Don't you like the house?"

"I love the house. It'll be the most perfect place for Claire to raise Nichol. It's everything I asked for and more."

Her jaw clenched as sparks of understanding came to her eyes. "*For Claire to raise Nichol. What are you saying?*"

He reached for Courtney's shoulders. "Please, don't worry about it. It'll work out."

"Yes, yes, Tony, it will. As long as you and Claire have Nichol and are a family, it will work. Why did you want Brent to rent you an apartment?"

Tony glared at Brent. "When Brent wouldn't do it, I contacted Eric. I now have an apartment not far from the office."

Tears spilled over Courtney's lids. "Why, Tony? Why would you do this to Claire?"

"I'm not doing it *to* Claire: I'm doing it *for* Claire. Surely, you can understand. She's been trapped at Everwood by Emily—"

"And you're freeing her! Tomorrow, you're bringing her home," Courtney exclaimed.

"I am," Tony replied. "Before Emily, it was me. She has truly been restrained since she was a child. I won't allow that anymore. She deserves to be free."



THOUGH COURTNEY'S WORDS were still clipped, she offered her support as she and Brent followed Tony's car toward Everwood. In Brent's possession

were all the documents signed, sealed, and ready. He even had the doctors' statements and the custody papers. All they needed was Claire.

The administrator of Everwood, Mr. Leason, met them at the door to the front lobby. After he and Tony shook hands, he led them to his office where Brent began explaining the documentation. As they spoke, Tony glanced around. From what little he'd seen, it was a very nice facility. He had to give that to Emily: she'd found a wonderful place. It wasn't until Tony heard his name that he focused on Brent's conversation.

"...Mr. Rawlings. Here's the document signed by Judge Wein, as Mrs. Rawlings' husband, until she's medically cleared to make her own decisions, he has medical power of attorney. With that authority, and with the support of your medical staff—I have Dr. Brown's statement—we are removing Claire Nichols Rawlings from Everwood today."

"Does Mrs. Vandersol know? Is she aware?"

"Mr. Vandersol has been informed," Brent said. Tony was shocked. John knew that he was coming and didn't have guards stationed at every door?

"Mr. Simmons, Mr. Vandersol is not Ms. Nichol's next of kin. It is *Mrs. Vandersol*."

"I can assure you that I have been as thorough as possible. We're removing *Mrs. Rawlings*," Brent emphasized her name, "today."

"If you'll excuse me for a moment," Mr. Leason said, "I'd like to place a call to Judge Wein."

Brent handed him another paper. "Here is her direct number. We'll be outside."

Once the three of them were outside of the administrator's office, Tony asked, "John knows, and he didn't tell Emily?"

"I don't know if he told Emily or not. I sent Emily a formal request from you for permission to visit Claire. I wanted documentation of her denial. They knew you were being released. They'd been with me to Family Court regarding your rights. John's not dumb. He came to me with Emily's formal denial. He hinted that if he were I, he'd remove Emily as a roadblock. I didn't let on that I'd already started the process, but I believe he'd already figured it out. He said that if that situation ever occurred, he wouldn't fight you. I know you two have a history, but he's a good man. I even think Emily believes she's done what was right. John and I didn't talk about his future employment, but Tim and I have. We both want him to stay. Hopefully he can."

Courtney had been uncharacteristically quiet, but when Brent finished, she said, "I agree. Nichol adores them and they do her. I believe in the innocence of children. They can create a bridge capable of spanning an otherwise insurmountable gap. I can't wait for you to see Nichol."

Tony tried to process: John wasn't going to fight him. "Tim's told me how good it's been to have John at Rawlings. I can't deny they've taken good care

of Nichol. I have to wonder if—”

Before he could finish his thought, Mr. Leason opened the door. “Excuse me, it seems as though you’re cleared. We can bring Ms. Nic—Mrs. Rawlings to the common room—”

“No, I want to go to her immediately,” Tony said.

“It’s against our policy to allow men into the residential—” Was it the look Tony was giving him or the tone of his original rebuttal? No matter the reason, Mr. Leason stopped and restated his response. “I believe we can make an exception. Let me show you the way.”

When they reached the door to her room, Tony said, “I know Emily’s in there. I’d rather go in alone.”

Courtney, Brent, and Mr. Leason nodded.

Inhaling deeply, Tony turned the knob. Two and a half years of separation ended in a split second. He saw Emily’s shocked expression, but that wasn’t what held his attention. It was the back of *her* head. She was right there: his wife, his life, and his envelope filled with hopes and dreams. Before he could speak, Claire stood and turned. No longer was Tony’s world bland—khaki and gray. The infusion of color was almost blinding. Green—emerald green—had been returned to the spectrum.

Unbridled desire surged through him. He momentarily forgot his talk of divorce. In that second, nothing mattered but Claire. Tony needed to touch his wife, to reassure himself that she was real. Not the woman in his dreams, but the living, breathing person who consumed his thoughts. The distance between them evaporated as the rest of the room disappeared. With an invisible bond, his Claire was once again in his arms. With her cheek against his chest he wrapped her in his arms. Though her body molded perfectly to his, he needed more. Like a man in the desert needs water, like a person needs air, Tony needed her eyes. Reaching for her chin he sought the green. Instantaneously, their gazes—their connection that surpassed all else—fused.

“I’ve dreamt of those eyes,” he whispered. Her smile washed over him with a warmth that even sunshine couldn’t provide.

“As have I.”

Her voice was the melody of his soul. Then it was gone. She had turned away. “Look at me,” he commanded. “I’ve missed you so much. Why are you looking away?”

Once again, peering upward, she asked, “Do you know? Do you know what they say about me?”

“I know. I love you.”

Her pained expression broke his heart.

“They think I’m crazy.”

Caressing her back, he tried to reassure her, “I think we’re all crazy. That doesn’t mean that I’m leaving here today without you. My love, you’re

coming home.”

“I’m leaving here? How?” she asked.

Brent stepped forward, penetrating their bubble. Before he could speak, Claire reached out and took his hand. “I’m so thankful you’re all right!”

“Me too,” Brent said. “If I weren’t alive, I couldn’t be the one to tell you...” He grinned. “...I wouldn’t be the one to help you. As long as Tony was incarcerated, Emily was your listed next of kin and held your power of attorney. I’m holding the judgment by Judge Wein: your husband is, once again, legally your next of kin. Until you’re completely cleared medically, he has the power to make your medical decisions, including your release...”

Tony stared at the woman with her hand in his. She was the vision of everything and anything he’d ever wanted. As she questioned Brent about her release, and as she walked to her sister and spoke, all Tony could think about was her. She obviously wasn’t crazy. There’d never been anyone to hold him captive as she could. Yes, he may have been the one who locked the door, but she was the one who held the key to his heart. As long as she was near, she’d forever have that power. He didn’t mind. It could never belong to anyone else.

As they exited Mr. Leason’s office for the last time, Tony saw John and Emily waiting. They stood as he and Claire approached. To Tony’s surprise, John held out his hand.

“Anthony.”

With his hand extended, Tony replied, “*Tony*. Please, call me Tony. Thank you, John, for all you’ve done while I was away. Brent tells me you’ve been quite helpful at Rawlings.”

“It was for Nichol and Claire.”

Tony nodded. “And for that, for *our* family, I thank you.”

John went on, “I’ve been privy to many of your decisions. I want you to know that I respect them.”

Tony hadn’t known how this would go, but in this moment, he was relieved. “Then I hope my return won’t cause you to search for another job. Rawlings Industries *and I* can always use someone like you on our side.”

“Emily and I need to talk, but I think I’d like that.”

Tony looked at his wife as she released his hand and wrapped her arms around John’s neck. He heard tears in her voice as she said, “I had no idea you were working at Rawlings.” Next, she hugged her sister. “Thank you, Emily. Thank you for not fighting this.”

John explained, “Anth—I mean, *Tony*’s right and you’re right. We *are* a family. For our children, we need to behave like adults.”

Claire stammered, “Ch-children... I can’t wait to see Nichol and meet Michael.”

It was Emily’s turn to cry. “She’s so little. She won’t understand—”

John spoke the voice of reason. “Your daughter is beautiful and

intelligent. She's also young. As long as we do this together, she'll make the transition just fine."

Claire peered upward. Placing her hand back into Tony's, she said, "We've missed so much. I can't wait to hold her again."

Could they make this work? Could the four of them, no, the six of them truly be a family? Tony spoke to his brother- and sister-in-law. "Thank you again, not just for Rawlings, but for taking care of Nichol. We're anxious to come and see her, but first I'd like to take Claire somewhere. It won't take long, and then we'll be over to your house. The child psychologist I consulted recommended a gradual transition before we bring her home to stay."

"I thought—" Claire started.

Emily interrupted, "Yes, gradual. I think Tony's right." Her pained smile turned toward Tony. "Thank you. This'll give us time to talk with her, to try to explain things. Let's make this as easy for Nichol as possible."

With Claire's hand once again secured, they walked through the doors. She looked up at the sky and said, "It feels so good to be free."

He knew the feeling, but she was wrong. She wasn't truly free, not yet. Despite the warmth of her hand, he knew what he needed to do. Never again would she be captive. When her beautiful green eyes met his, he said, "I want to show you something."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

October 2016

(Convicted Chapter 48)
Tony

We should regret our mistakes and learn from them, but never carry them forward into the future with us.

—Lucy Maud Montgomery

UNBEKNOWNST TO CLAIRE, during their drive to the estate, Tony waged an internal war of wills. On one side was his desire. With Claire's hand in his, her head on his shoulder, and her trusting gazes, that side was gaining strength by the second. He wanted her more than life. With her beside him, he was complete. Never had another person accepted him the way his Claire had done. Though she knew his sins and shortcomings, she never judged. She forgave. She forgave unforgivable acts. She forgave a man who had never before been forgiven. It was more than that: she'd given him a child and a life. Claire was the light to his dark and the right to his wrong. With her beside him, he wanted to forget everything he'd learned in prison, to forget why he was bad for her. He wanted his wife.

On the other side was his will. Throughout his life, Anthony Rawlings could boast few attributes; however, the one that had remained strong was his word. As storms raged, he remained steadfast, knowing that above all, he was a man of his word. He'd made the decision to set Claire free. He'd spoken that edict to Jim and to his friends. Despite the desire and want, Tony knew that he had to do what was right. For the first time in their lives, Tony had to put Claire first.

Her voice pulled him from his internal struggle as she looked out the windows. "We're near the estate. What about the fire? Was there a lot of

damage?"

"That's what I want to show you," he replied, anxious to see her reaction.

The iron gates opened and the trees parted. With her new home in view, Claire gasped. "What happened?"

It wasn't the reaction he'd expected. "You don't like it?"

"I-I don't know. Did the whole house burn?"

"No. There was a lot of smoke and water damage, but the fire was pretty much contained to the first level, southwest corridor."

Tony stopped the car. Before he could get to her side, she was out and standing before the large white-brick home. He watched her eyes as she took in the long porches, black shutters, and stately columns. When she didn't speak, Tony asked, "Do you want to see inside?"

"What happened to our house?"

"I had it demolished," he explained. "I built it for the wrong reasons. It was our house, but it was never a *home*. It contained too many memories."

"So you got rid of it? Tony, there were good memories there, too."

"I built that house for Nathaniel." His gaze begged for understanding. "Claire, I had this home built for you." Tugging her hand, he led her inside, watching her response as they progressed from room to room. With each step he prayed the allure of the home would fill her with the peace and security he'd intended. Her eyes widened as they entered the polished oak foyer. Her expression warmed as her eyes scanned each room and took in the windows covering the entire back of the house. In the living room, the glass extended two stories. In the kitchen he saw the spark of approval he'd longed to see.

"Oh, this looks like a kitchen where I'd love to cook," she said.

Tony smiled. "You have a cook, but it's your kitchen. You can do whatever you'd like."

He took her down to the lower level through a theater room, fun family area, and an exercise room. It was as he opened the doors to the inside lap pool that he squeezed Claire's shoulders and said, "I couldn't build you a house without your favorite room."

Standing in awe, she finally whispered, "It's beautiful, thank you."

Still holding her hand, he led her upstairs to the bedrooms: Nichol's first and then hers. When they entered the master suite, Tony walked to the far wall and opened the draperies. As they parted, the room filled with natural light and two large French doors were exposed. Opening the doors, he beckoned her to the balcony. Stepping outside, he watched his wife as she shook her head and said "Tony, everything is so open and bright."

Lifting her hands, he kissed the soft skin and stared into her emerald eyes. "This is your glass house, one that won't shatter. I don't want you to ever feel trapped again. I want you to be able to see the sky and sun or the moon and stars whenever you desire."

She stepped closer, melting against him. “Thank you, I love it! But how—how did you do this? You were in prison.”

“I had a lot of help.”

Stepping to the rail, Claire scanned the grounds below. From their view they could see a pool, a basketball court, a large play set, and the edge of the gardens. Tony couldn’t be happier with the finished home. He owed his gratitude to Courtney. Everything was there, and beyond it all were Claire’s woods and her lake. That was why he couldn’t sell. It was why he prayed she wouldn’t sell. Claire was right: despite the bad, Tony knew the estate contained good memories. He hoped those would prevail. Tony and Claire sat on a gliding seat, and he said, “Of course, you still have your island. If you’d prefer, you can move back there. Although this view is beautiful, it’s difficult to compete with the view from your lanai. I just thought it might be easier on Nichol if you lived closer to John and Emily for a while.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and asked, “Why do you keep saying *you*? You mean *we*.”

He couldn’t put it off any longer. If he did, Tony feared he wouldn’t be able to go through with his plans. Reaching into his breast pocket, he removed the envelope which Brent had given him less than twenty-four hours ago. “You and Nichol. Claire, this house, the entire estate, it’s yours.”

Her contented expression morphed. Tony watched as confusion became panic. With tears suddenly threatening, Claire replied, “I don’t know what’s in that envelope, but whatever it is, I don’t want it.”

Looking out over the trees, he tried to reassure her and to help her understand. Exhaling, he explained, “I tried to contact you. I wanted to be with you, to be there for you. The scene at the estate was crazy. When you pulled the trigger...”

He continued to talk, to fill in the gaps of what she knew and remembered. There was so much that had happened in the two years since that incident. How could he possibly sum it all up? How could he explain what he’d been through, what he’d done? Tony knew it hadn’t just been him. She’d been through hell, too. They both had. If only they could have walked through the flames together, but they didn’t. They’d both taken their own personal journey, ones that brought them back to here, back to the beginning.

He tried to express how badly he wanted to get to her, how hard he tried. He also wanted her to know that he’d taken responsibility for the things that he’d done. He confessed and accepted his fate. Tony would never burden her with how difficult it was at Yankton. After all, she’d never told him about her time in prison. They’d both suffered. The difference was that Tony was the only one responsible. He wouldn’t continue to hurt her. He couldn’t.

Claire shook her head and pleaded her case. She didn’t say anything that he hadn’t already thought. As he listened, he realized that she was doing what

he'd taught her to do, what at one time he'd required of her. She was pushing her memories and fears away to attend to him. He couldn't allow that, not anymore. Claire needed to face their past and recognize that they couldn't have a future—not together. It would never be healthy. He'd caused too much damage.

"I remember it all," she refuted. "You're the one who always said the past is the past, and to think about the present or the future."

"I was wrong. You need to face it, and so do I. In all those discussions on the island, we never spoke about the things in Meredith's book—"

Tears coated her cheeks, as Claire interrupted, "Because we were both there. During our discussions in paradise, you told me things I had no way of knowing. I know what happened between us. I also know it was a long time ago and it's over. I don't want to rehash it. I want the future."

He feigned a smile. He wanted a future too—for her. "That's what I want for you, too. I want *you* to have a future, free from all of our past. That's why I built you a new, memory-free house, and Claire, that's why Brent is ready to file for our divorce."

She didn't respond as her expression lost all understanding. He waited, wondering what she was thinking. Her eyes weren't telling him what he needed to know. He longed for the fire behind the green. Finally, Tony asked, "Did you hear me? I won't be the one to hurt you anymore, nor will Emily. You deserve fresh air and freedom. No one will ever be able to control you. Besides the money you still have invested overseas, I'm giving you the estate, a handsome settlement, and child support. With your wealth you can do anything you've ever dreamt of doing. You'll be in control of your and Nichol's future. I won't fight you on anything." Sheepishly, he added, "I do hope you'll allow me to see our daughter, but I understand if you don't." The judge had said he was an endangerment to Nichol. Did Claire feel the same? Tony tried to move on, "I think we've thought of everything regarding this house, but if there's something else you want or need, it's yours. You can have anything you want."

Her voice cracked. "You don't want *m-me*?"

Nothing could be further from the truth. He wanted her. This made so much more sense when he was back at Yankton, in Jim's office. Tony needed Claire to recognize that it wasn't her—it was him. He lifted her hand and kissed the top. "Don't ever think that. I've never wanted anyone the way I want you."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"The reason the judge wouldn't lift the restraining order and allow me to see you was because when the judge asked me if the accounts in Meredith's book were correct, I told him yes. I admitted to everything. He ruled that I was a danger to you and Nichol."

"That's ridiculous. You never would have, nor will you ever, hurt Nichol. Obviously, we're together now, so all that legal drama is over." Her voice cracked as she asked, "Why are you throwing me away now?"

Tony stood and faced the trees as he fought the impending red. Claire wasn't thinking straight, it was his conditioning speaking, not her true emotions. Inhaling deeply, he remembered Jim's words. It would take time, but eventually, she'd understand. Tony reiterated, "I'm not throwing you away! I'm setting you free."

The pain in her voice broke his heart. With each word, another piece crumbled. She was crying and telling him she was sorry. Sorry for being crazy. Sorry for not following his rules. Sorry for disappointing him. He couldn't let her feel that way. It was like that word she used in the book. She was never the one at fault, it was all him. He was the one who was sorry.

Tony knelt before the love of his life and gently reached for her chin. "No, Claire. *I'm* the one who's disappointed *you*, over and over." With the pad of his thumb, he tenderly wiped away her tears. "While I was in prison, I learned you were finally getting better. I tried, but Emily still wouldn't allow me to contact you. She wouldn't allow hardly anyone to contact you. Courtney told me she only saw you through Meredith. She also said Emily wouldn't even let you see Nichol." The intensity of his eyes grew with each word, "I hated your sister! I was powerless to help you, and she was keeping you prisoner. I couldn't even talk to you. Hell, I heard that even your time outside was monitored."

Tony stood and once again paced the length of the balcony trying to rein in the red. Why did it need to surface around her? Tony knew why; he'd learned why. The red wasn't just anger. It was emotion: emotion that threatened his better judgment and consumed his soul. Sometimes that emotion was anger, other times desire. Claire was the spark to his dry existence. In her presence the fire grew. There had been times he'd been unable to control the blaze, but now he'd learned to dampen the flames. Once he'd calmed, Tony continued, "While in prison, I agreed to counseling. I didn't want to do it, but if doing it could help get me out of there early, I figured *what the hell*." He sat back down. "I spoke to this shrink three times a week. It started with my answering his questions. Over time, it became easier to talk. When I told him how upset I was with Emily and what she was doing to you, he asked me why I was upset. I said it was because of what she was doing. He told me to think about it more and figure out *why* I was so upset. I had two days before I saw him again. Throughout those days, I couldn't stop thinking about his question. It seemed obvious, until I realized..." His voice trailed away. Why was it so difficult to admit what Claire already knew, what she should know better than anyone else?

"What?" Claire asked, "What did you realize?"

"I was so angry with Emily, because she was doing the same thing to you that I'd done. I didn't just hate Emily. I hated myself!" He knelt before her and bowed his forehead to her knees. "I will *not* allow anyone to hurt you again. That includes me."

Claire's fingers weaved through his hair. "Tony, you were at Everwood. You heard me. I forgave Emily. And many years ago, I forgave you, too. I don't want to be free from you. I lived almost two years believing I'd killed you. I thought that was why no one mentioned your name. During that time, I fantasized about you and cried for you. Now you're here. I can touch you! I want my family back together. Besides, I'm still an outpatient. If you divorce me, they'll never allow me to have custody of Nichol. If you do this, you're not freeing me; you're abandoning me." Her tears were freely flowing once again.

Tony stood and squared his shoulders. "You're right. I don't want you to lose Nichol. We'll start with a separation..." He explained how it would work. She and Nichol could live at the estate, and he'd stay at his apartment. He didn't want to stop her from getting custody of their daughter, and with the help of a nanny, there shouldn't be any legal concerns.

It took every ounce of restraint, but he did it. Tony dampened the flame and worked to set Claire free. Eventually, Claire stood, straightened her shoulders, and silently walked past him, back into the bedroom. He didn't know what to do. His heart told him to follow her, fall at her feet, and beg for forgiveness. The pain in her eyes had been almost too much to bear. But he'd made his decision, and given his word. This was what was best for her.

Hearing his name, he turned toward the suite. Claire was speaking, "I can't see Nichol looking like this," she said, her tone emotionless. "I'm going to take a shower and clean up. I presume my closets are full, like Nichol's?"

"They are," he replied.

"Where's the staff? I'd like something to eat."

There was no emotion in her voice or her eyes. Perhaps, she too could dampen her flames. No, he knew she could. He'd taught her to do it, *required* it of her, a long time ago. He replied, "I gave them the night off. I'll go into town and get something. By the time I get back, you should be ready."

Claire nodded, turned, and walked away.

As he walked toward the car, he reassured himself that this was for the best. It was for her, and for his Claire, he'd do anything, even give her up.

Driving toward the Vandersols', Tony maintained his eyes on the road before him. He couldn't look to his right. It wasn't that he didn't believe that Claire was the most beautiful woman in the world—he did. It was that when he returned to the estate with their food, she was stunning and took his breath away. Instead of speaking, he stood mute, watching her from the doorway and trying to remember that she deserved better. It took some time, but he did

what he was supposed to do. He reined in the red hunger of desire and dampened the flames. Nevertheless, with the intoxicating scent of her perfume, he didn't dare look her way. That hunger may have been subdued, but Tony knew too well that it was still present, white-hot coals merely covered with ash. The slightest infusion of fuel would set a raging fire ablaze. Maintaining his feigned indifference, he listened as she spoke.

"I don't want to tell Emily and John, not yet. I don't think they'll understand."

Tony nodded. "It might be better if we ease Nichol into the idea that her parents live in two separate homes."

Claire agreed.

When they pulled onto the Vandersols' drive, Tony noticed Claire's hands trembling. Without thinking, he reached over and covered them with his. "It'll be all right," he encouraged.

"I'm scared. What if she doesn't want us?"

"She will," he encouraged, maintaining his forward gaze.

"I haven't even asked: have you seen her?"

"No, pictures are all that I've seen." He thought of all the pictures Courtney had sent. "I was just released yesterday, and she was never brought to me. It was probably better. A little girl shouldn't be visiting her father at a federal prison camp."

"Yesterday?" Claire's eyes widened in wonder. "And you've accomplished all of this?"

"Like I said, I had help. I've been planning for my release for some time."

With his hand still on hers, he felt her stiffen as she asked, "And our divorce? How long have you been planning that?"

Tony pulled his hand away and glared in her direction. Damn, he thought this was done. "Claire, not now. Let's not go back there."

"Is there someone else?"

"What?" He could scarcely believe that she'd even ask such a thing. He'd told her that there had never been anyone but her. That was true. It didn't mean that there weren't women with whom he'd had physical relationships. There were, but all before her. Never had anyone else owned his heart. No one but his Claire.

"Is—there—someone—else?!" She repeated louder than the first time.

This was ridiculous. "I told you that I've never wanted anyone the way I want you."

"Well, you obviously don't want me! And you're *Anthony Rawlings*. You were in prison and your wife was crazy..."

Her argument was beyond comprehension. Sure, he'd received mail. The world was full of desperate women seeking what they comprehend to be available. He'd never responded. Hell, he'd stopped opening them. He didn't

want to continue this conversation. Calming his tone, in hopes of subduing hers, he said, “Claire, our daughter is waiting.”

“I’ve already asked this once, don’t make me ask again. Is there someone else?”

He slowed his words. “Claire, calm down.”

Without warning, her petite hand slapped his cheek. The pain was minimal compared to the shock. Flashbacks of the reverse bombarded his mind. Seizing her fingers, he asked, “What the hell was that?”

“You never answer my questions. Tell me, were there letters? Did women write to you promising anything you wanted, all for the chance to take my place?”

Without releasing her fingers he said, “You’re getting yourself all worked up. Calm down; Nichol is waiting.”

“I deserve to know.”

“Yes. Are you happy? There were letters. I didn’t respond. I don’t give a damn about anyone, anyone but you.” Thinking not of the letters, but of Patricia, he added, “Hell, I even—”

No. He wasn’t going to get into it. He wasn’t going to tell her how he’d fired one of the best assistants he’d ever had because she offered him more than he’d ever want from anyone but the woman before him.

She prodded, “You even what?”

“We’ll finish this discussion another time.” Or not. He released her fingers. “Now, do you plan to join me, or do you plan to sit in the car all evening?”

“I plan to join you,” she stoically replied.

Tony didn’t notice the niceness of the Vandersols’ home as they made their way up the sidewalk. His mind was too busy reining the red from their confrontation and contemplating the little girl behind the door. They last saw her two and a half years ago. To him and Claire that was a long time, but that was nothing compared to Nichol: for her it was a lifetime. She was only a baby and now...

Emily greeted them at the door and led them to the living room. “We told Nichol she had some special guests coming to see her.”

As soon as Nichol came into view, Claire reached for Tony’s hand. Sitting on the floor by a dollhouse was their daughter. Time stood still as Tony took in the beautiful little girl, once again in three-dimension. The pictures he’d received paled in comparison to the vibrant child before them. She was a vision—their creation. She was the place where Claire’s light met his darkness. She was everything that was good in Claire and maybe in him. Her big brown eyes were light with wonder. She was Claire—before him, before he’d hurt her and destroyed her life. Nichol was the promise of innocence. In that instant, as in the moment Madeline laid her in his arms, Tony knew that

he'd willingly sacrifice his life before he allowed anyone to take that away from her.

Claire let go of Tony's hand and knelt on the floor. "Hello, Nichol," she said, feigning strength where Tony knew there was insecurity.

Their daughter stood and stared. Finally, John stepped forward, and Nichol reached for his hand. "Nichol," John said. "Can you say *hi* to the friends we told you about?"

"Hi."

Tony knelt beside Claire who reached out her hand. Nichol's small fingers shook Claire's hand as she asked, "Who are you?"

Tony laughed. "Direct, isn't she?"

With a snicker, Emily replied, "Very. I can't imagine where she gets it."

"Nichol, my name is Claire, but you can call me Mom."

Nichol's eyes grew wide as she peered from Claire to Tony. Finally, she asked, "Are you my daddy?"

His heart swelled. Never had Tony been prouder to answer, "I am."

Dropping John's grasp, she stepped forward and touched a small hand to each of their cheeks. Tony waited for her to speak. Finally, Claire said, "We're really here, honey, and we're so sorry we've been gone."

Nichol smiled, her eyes lightening to a milk chocolate. "I knew one day you'd come. Aunt Em said you were sick, and when you got better, you'd be here. Are you better?"

Claire answered, "Yes, I'm much better. Nichol, can we hug you?"

Lowering her little hands to their shoulders, she nodded. For a few seconds, Tony's envelope filled to overflowing. It was everything they had in paradise and more. He remembered their bubble during the night when Nichol would wake. Now that she was older, he saw his directness and her mother's tenderness. For an instant it was only the three of them and then without warning, Nichol released her hug and rushed to her cousin. "Mikey, know what? I have a mommy and daddy, too!" Looking up to Emily, Nichol asked, "Does that mean they're Mikey's aunt and uncle, like you and Uncle John?"

Emily looked their way and replied, "Yes, honey, it does." Reaching for her son, she said, "Michael, this is Mommy's sister, your Aunt Claire." She hesitated as Tony and Claire stood. "And—your Uncle Tony."

Claire once again put out her hand. "Hello, Michael, I'm so glad to meet you."

Michael took her hand and smiled bashfully. John's voice filled the otherwise quiet room. "Kids, if it wasn't for Uncle Tony, we wouldn't be here."

Tony's eyes went to John. So much time, so many mistakes: was he going to lay it out here? Preparing to accept what he deserved, Tony waited. However, when John spoke, it was not what Tony had expected. "Before you

were born, Michael, Uncle Tony saved your mom and me from a fire. If he hadn't done that, then you wouldn't be here, either."

Was that it? Could that be John's unspoken acceptance? He'd told Brent he wouldn't fight the reuniting of Tony's family. And what had he said at Everwood? He'd said that he respected some of Tony's decisions. Could they truly put the past behind them? Tony's attention went to his daughter. Her eyes were wide with wonder as she said, "Really? You did that, Daddy?"

"Wow!" Michael gasped.

Choking back the emotion, Tony said, "I did. I'm so glad I did."

"Thank you," Emily said. "We've learned that the fire wasn't our only danger. We know what you two gave up—for us. This isn't easy for me, but thank you."

Claire hugged her sister, as they both cried.

"Why are you sad, Aunt Em?" Nichol asked.

Wiping her eyes, Emily hugged Nichol and said, "I'm not sad, sweetie. I'm happy. I'm so happy that you have your mommy and daddy again. They love you very much."

Nichol looked in their direction and smiled. "I'm happy, too."

Tony didn't intend to glance at Claire, but he did. His chest ached with pride and love, sadness and regret. It was the promise of a future swirling in a whirlwind of remorse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

October 2016

(Convicted Chapter 51 and beyond)
Tony

I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.—Mother Teresa

EVERYONE WAS ADAPTING to his or her new role. Claire had stepped into the role of lady of the house: not only was she managing the staff that had already been hired, but she'd also hired a few more. Specifically, Tony wanted her to choose the head of her security, and Nichol's nanny. At first, Claire balked at the need for security, but Tony convinced her that it had always been present. It didn't matter if there was no immediate threat: the Rawlingses were people of means and as such, were potential targets. When Tony talked about Nichol, Claire agreed. She interviewed a few of the names Tony recommended, but one night she told Tony she wanted Phillip Roach. Claire argued that she was familiar with Phil, and with all the new members of the staff, she wanted the familiarity. It wasn't that Tony didn't want to grant her request. It was that Phil had been providing her security all along, just unbeknownst to her.

Tony hadn't done that because he wanted to monitor Claire's movements or distrusted her choices: it was solely about her safety. He was sure that Jim wouldn't approve. Perhaps, if he brought it up to his new therapist, he too would disapprove. That didn't matter. When it came to the safety of his family, Tony wouldn't compromise. Truth be told, Roach had been watching over Nichol and Claire for the past two years. At first, Tony wasn't sure about Phil fulfilling the position as head of security; however, Tony had told his wife that she could have whatever she wanted. She wanted Phil. Now Phil had the position. There was no doubt in Tony's mind that no one else was as devoted to his family as Philip Roach, except perhaps Eric. When it came to

devotion, Eric's too was undeniable. Tony believed that with the two of them, his family was safe.

The child psychologist recommended that Claire have a nanny in place by the time Nichol moved to the estate. She said it would help with the transition if Nichol got to know her before she moved. After many interviews, Claire found a young woman with whom she felt comfortable. Her name was Shannon, and she and Nichol hit it off immediately. The child psychologist also recommended that the transition to the estate last a minimum of two weeks. During that time, Tony and Claire began the family-counseling sessions, as well as spent every evening with Nichol. After a week, the Vandersols brought Nichol to the estate. Everyone was trying to make the move as easy as possible. The two-week window was closing and everything seemed to be falling into place.

The last night before Nichol's move, Claire and Tony were encouraged when they left the Vandersols' home. As they kissed their daughter goodnight, she said, "I can't wait to go to my room tomorrow night! I can't wait to be with both of you." Her little arms hugged their faces as she added, "My momma and daddy."

On the way home, Claire did little to hide her excitement. "It's all happening so fast," she said. "I can't believe how much things have changed in just two weeks."

As he listened to Claire's chatter, Tony worked to remain stoic, to keep the red—the emotion—away. It was much more difficult than he'd anticipated. Emotion wasn't black and white or even gray as it had been in prison. In the real world, it was a rainbow of color. There was the red of desire and anger, but there was also the yellow of happiness, and dark hues of disappointment. While with Nichol, Tony allowed the color to shine. How could he not? However, when he and Claire were alone, he fought to keep it at bay. The entire process was exhausting. His plan was fine when he was at Yankton. There it had made sense, but now it was different. Instead of speaking of his wife in the abstract, she was real and so close. He longed for what they had while with Nichol—a family. Above all, he yearned for Claire.

Because it was so difficult, Tony did his best to avoid being alone with his wife. However, the night before Nichol's move, Claire asked Tony to come into the house. She said there was something she wanted to show him. Perhaps it was her excitement at Nichol's parting remark. Whatever the reason, Tony didn't want to deny her request. He liked seeing her happy. He'd caused her too much sadness.

When they entered the house, Tony questioned Claire's recently praised management skills. The staff was gone. She said she'd released them for the night. He had no idea that she'd been coming home to an empty house. As he waited for her to return from upstairs, with whatever she wanted to show him,

Tony wandered from room to room. Though he planned to discuss the situation with Roach in the morning, he found it to be totally unacceptable. Slowly, unknowingly, color returned. If her managing the staff was to work, she needed to know better.

With each step up the stairs, Tony thought about his stance. It was simple. Until she retired for the evening, someone should be with her. What if she needed something? What if something happened? This wasn't debatable. As he turned the corner to enter the master suite, Tony stopped. His Claire was there, on the floor rummaging through boxes. What was packed? Was she leaving? Anything she needed was here when she moved in. As the room seeped with crimson, Tony learned that red was also the color of worry. Why would she have boxes?

Then he remembered: her things from Everwood. He'd told the staff to send everything to the estate. That had to be what it was. She wasn't leaving —was she?

From the disappointment at the lack of staff, to the worry over the boxes, the emotion he had worked for two weeks to subdue, consumed his being. As he watched his wife, Tony knew he should turn around and go back downstairs. The floodgate had opened. Emotions didn't surge singularly. Disappointment and worry were only the front-runners. Desire and need were quickly approaching. He no longer had the energy to hold it back. Though he should have stayed downstairs, he didn't turn around. Hunger colored his vision as his desire for his wife intensified.

Without turning in his direction, Claire said, "I'm sorry it took so long. I thought I knew where they were."

When she stood and their eyes met, he knew without a doubt that she could sense the change. He saw it too in her eyes. The spark he'd doused now burnt his soul. Damn, she could probably hear his heart. It was beating out of his chest as he tried to appear aloof. In a few steps, she was before him, handing him what she'd found. Tony reached for the notebooks and asked, "What are these?"

"They're my compartments," she replied.

Confused, Tony opened the top notebook, and asked, "Your compartments? What do you...?" His words trailed as he began to read:

I suppose I should start in the beginning—March 2010. No, that wasn't when I was born. It was when I began to live. Most people think I'm crazy—maybe I am. You see I began to live the day my life was taken away. Funny, I don't remember how it happened. I do know now, it never could've been stopped.

Anthony Rawlings wanted me. If I've learned one lesson in my life—and

believe me, I've learned many—Anthony Rawlings always got what he wanted.

Tony didn't know if he could do this. He'd read the damn book. Why did she want him to see this? He continued:

I can't explain how it happened. I can't explain how I fell deeply and madly in love with a man who did the things that Anthony did—but I did! These feelings have been discounted by multiple people: family members, doctors, and counselors to name a few. They've told me my love wasn't and isn't real. They say I'm a victim of abuse, and as such, I don't understand the difference between love and applied behavior. How can that be true? If I don't know my own feelings, how can anyone else?

It was different than her testimony. It was different than Meredith's book. This was real and in Claire's handwriting. It was raw and vulnerable. Her therapists and doctors had told her the same thing that Jim had said—that they were wrong together. Yet, despite it all, she claimed to still love him, to never have stopped loving him, even when she thought he was dead, that she'd killed him. He continued to read:

So here I go. I've lived this story, and I've told this story. Now, I'm going to try to do both, because without reliving it, even in my mind, I can't possibly explain that I'm not crazy...

I met Anthony Rawlings on March 15, 2010. That night I worked the 4:00PM to close shift at the Red Wing in Atlanta. He came up to the bar and sat down. I remember thinking...

Tony closed his eyes. He'd lived it and he'd read it. While with Jim, he'd relived parts: parts he wanted to forget and parts he'd remember forever. Fluttering the pages of all four notebooks, he noticed every page of every book was filled with writing. Glancing up, he saw Claire leaning against the wall, her arms folded over her chest watching him. Her blank expression failed to reveal her thoughts; however, in her eyes—her damn emerald green eyes—he saw the fire he'd missed. The one he'd doused too many times,

most recently with his talk of divorce.

Staring, Tony fought the urge to touch her, comfort her, and apologize for ever thinking they should be apart. Gone was his control: his desires overwhelmed him. He wanted her more than he wanted life. *How did he ever think he could let her go?*

The temperature of the suite warmed exponentially as he laid the notebooks on the dresser yet maintained their gaze, their connection. Surrendering to his need, he moved forward. Instantaneously, mere inches separated them. Then, Claire looked away, breaking their connection.

He lifted her chin and searched for the fire. Though she didn't fight his grip, she obstinately shut her eyes. It was too late to stop. Tony knew what he wanted. "Open your eyes. Look at me," he commanded.

Instead of obeying, Claire tipped her forehead against his chest, and said, "I can't."

She could probably hear the racing of his heart as he demanded her compliance. "Look at me. I want to see your damn eyes—now!"

"Please, please, Tony," she pleaded. "Don't. I can't take another rejection, not from you."

Rejection? He could never reject her. That was the furthest thing from his mind. He lifted her chin, and this time, brushed her lips with his. With a softer tone, he asked, "Why did you show me that?"

Her lids fluttered open. "So that you'd know... I *have* faced our past—multiple times. Even knowing that past, I wanted a future."

Analyzing each word, the erratic beat of his heart stopped, perhaps all together because if what she said were true, there would no longer be a reason for his heart to continue to beat. "Wanted? Past tense?" he asked.

Though he still held her chin, the beautiful woman in his grasp morphed into the bold woman he'd grown to love. Her volume rose with each phrase. "You don't want me! You left me in the Iowa jail! You told me two weeks ago you wanted a divorce! I can't live in a fantasy! You don't want me... or a future with me! Let go of my chin and stop pretending!"

He obeyed her demand and released her chin; however, relinquishing his hold wasn't even feasible. Tony's actions weren't planned: they were visceral and carnal. He slid his hand to the back of her neck and intertwined his fingers through her hair, forcing her to keep her face tilted toward his. With his other hand, he pulled her petite body against him as his lips seized hers.

For two weeks, Tony had tried to let Claire go. He'd wanted to give her the freedom she deserved, the freedom he'd taken away. However, each day, each hour, each minute, and each second had been agony. With his lips against hers, he no longer wanted to fight his desire. He couldn't. Step by step, he pushed her backward until they were flush with the wall. Her initial resistance faded as his need intensified. Unapologetically, he tasted her

sweetness as his tongue parted her lips. As he pulled her hips against his, everything came at him, more emotion than he'd allowed in years. Colorful fireworks exploded in his mind as his fist pounded the wall above her head. With his voice resonating throughout the suite sounding more like a growl, he said, "I told you before. I've *never* pretended to love you! I do love you! That's *present tense*!"

She didn't respond verbally, yet their kiss deepened, and their ragged breaths filled the large room. With each caress, her body responded to his touch. His want became more apparent and difficult to deny. When her sensual moans echoed in his ears, he could no longer resist. Tony led his wife to the bed and without hesitation, followed her onto the mattress. Her fanned hair behind her flushed face and slightly swollen lips was the most beautiful and erotic sight Tony had seen in years. Pushing her blouse upward, he searched to touch the softness of her skin.

The pulsating of the blood rushing through his veins deafened him to the outside world. He barely heard her voice the first time she told him to stop. The command didn't even compute. Then he heard her speak louder.

"I said, stop!"

His mind was a blur. What had happened? She was willing just seconds ago. The pain of his need ached as he lifted his body from hers, and she rolled out from under him.

Claire's voice was strong and determined. "You need to go. I can't do this. I won't let you hurt me again."

Damn, she was right. He was no good for her. "Claire," Tony pleaded as he stood and began to pace. "Don't you understand? That's why I wanted a divorce. I don't want to hurt you and—and I can't take it again, either. You talk about my leaving you at the jail, and this divorce." He stammered, "W-what about you?"

Claire stood and stared incredulously. "Me? What about me?"

Running his hand through his hair, he explained the obvious. "You left me. You drove away from *me*—twice! You think I don't remember that every damn time you drive away from this estate? The other day when you were gone for over three hours and driving around Bettendorf, of all places, I was scared to death that you're considering doing it again."

Claire's eyes widened as she asked, "What do you mean... the other day? How did you know that I was in Bettendorf?"

He didn't want to tell her that he'd had her followed; just like Jim, she wouldn't understand. "Claire, *they* say we're no good for one another, but in your notebooks you said you still loved me after everything. Is that still true?"

She moved closer. "Answer me. What do you know about my comings and goings?"

Tony closed his eyes and exhaled. "The reason I didn't want Roach

working for you was..." Damn, he owed her honesty, even if it would upset her. "...he'd been working for me. He's been watching you since the day you came home."

Claire's eyes filled with tears, yet her voice wasn't angry. In barely a whisper, she asked, "Why? Tell me why you've had Phil following me."

He gripped her shoulders. "You have every right to be angry. That's fine, but I'm not sorry. I worry. I'll always worry. I don't want anything to happen to you ever again." His words came fast. "I don't really care *that* you go. I just need to know that you're safe."

She sank back to the bed, and he knelt before her.

"Please," he begged. "Please, tell me what you're thinking."

Her words were painful and beautiful. "I don't know. There are so many things." She shook her head. "I-I've been asked over and over, why I didn't try to escape from you in 2010 when I had opportunities. When I tell the story about us, and talk about shopping or the symphony they tell me I *should have* run or told someone."

God, he hated that she had those memories—that they both did.

Inhaling, she continued, "I didn't, because I was afraid. I was afraid that if I did, and failed, you'd punish me, hurt me."

She'd been right: he needed to leave. They'd never get beyond this. Just as he was about to stand, Claire's hands framed his cheeks and pulled his gaze back to hers. With a softer tone, she explained, "That physical pain I feared was nothing—nothing—compared to the pain of thinking you no longer cared. These last two weeks have been hell. They taught me that pain can be present, despite every physical need being met."

Unable to stop the moisture that threatened his eyes, Tony reiterated, "The divorce wasn't meant to *hurt* you."

Unexpectedly, she wrapped her arms around his neck and brushed his lips with a kiss. "Tony, maybe I should be upset that you've had me followed, but I'm not." Was it happiness he heard? "Honestly, I'm relieved. I didn't think you cared anymore."

The tears faded as the tips of his lips moved upward. When she returned his grin, he pushed her back onto the bed and covered her body with his. "Mrs. Rawlings, I will *always* care and *always* love you. I promised you that almost six years ago."

He had. The realization hit him. He had promised that. If he didn't follow through on the divorce, it wasn't because he wasn't a man of his word—it was because he was. Tony had vowed to love her and care for her forever—twice. Claire didn't protest as his weight held her to the soft satin comforter. Removing his shirt, he added, "I've told you that I am, and despite it all, I continue to be, a man of my word."

Instead of replying, her soft hands caressed his chest as his lips trailed

across her exposed collarbone and he unbuttoned her blouse. With each button he trailed a kiss lower and lower until her blouse was open and he reached the top of her slacks. Easing them down her legs he continued to worship the woman beneath him. When his lips weren't caressing her skin, they were speaking, telling her how much he'd missed her, how much he wanted her, and how much he loved her.

She reached for his face and lifted his eyes to hers, as she asked, "If we do this, if we reunite—can I trust you not to leave me, again?"

There was no way he could leave her. "I wanted to protect you. The divorce was only to keep you from getting hurt—by me."

"Don't you see? Not being with you hurt me. Every day hurt more than the one before."

Tony agreed. "It was agony. When I was in prison and we were separated by distance, it sounded good in principle, but seeing you." He lifted his head and looked down at her now nearly naked body. "And touching you." The tips of his fingers softly trailed the warm flesh from her neck to the band of her lace panties. "And not being allowed to taste you." His lips seized a now exposed nipple and gently tugged while his tongue swirled the hardening nub, eliciting moans that he loved to hear. "Was agony."

Before he could continue his seduction, Claire said, "First—first, I have a request."

A memory of a request in paradise, one made more than once, entered his mind and he grinned. Raising his brow he mused, "Yes? I think I might like this. Does it involve black satin?"

Claire snickered. "No. I want you to promise that you won't leave me, no more talk of divorce—ever. I want my *happily ever after*. Despite everything, I trust you *and* your word. If you tell me you'll never divorce me or discuss it, I'll believe you."

His heart soared. The woman beneath him was everything he wanted and more than he deserved. He wanted what she wanted, though he'd never imagined it had been within his reach. Between kisses he said, "You, my dear, are my drug. I'm so damn addicted that I can't quit you. I know, because I've tried—not for me, but for you. I failed miserably. The more I have of you, the more I need. I can never get enough. If you'll have me back—*after all, this is your estate*—if you'll allow me to move back, I'll try every day to give you exactly what you deserve. And I promise I will *never* mention divorce again."

They kissed with a passion like no one had ever experienced. It was the culmination of years of separation. It was the release of their past pain. They'd both caused it and both suffered. It was the promise of a future: one filled with endless possibilities. It was filled with a hunger that only the other could calm. She was his, and he was hers. While her nails bit into his shoulders, his fingers teased and taunted.

Breaking the spell, Tony looked into her gorgeous eyes. “I want you so badly, but I need to be honest. I can’t promise you the *happy ever after*. Not because you don’t deserve one, but because I know myself, and I’ll probably screw it up; however, I can promise that I’ll spend the rest of my life trying. Is that enough for you?”

Tony awaited her response as tears cascaded from the corners of her emerald eyes. He could stare into her gaze forever: only her answer would tell him if that were possible.

“Tony, it’s more than enough. I promise that I’ll never drive away to leave you again, and I’ll never listen to anyone else without learning the truth from you, but...” She paused to deliver a wonderful assault of kisses to his neck, one of the places that drove him crazy and elicited growls he couldn’t control. “I *will* drive away, to multiple places.”

He wouldn’t argue. Bold and cheeky was still his favorite.

Claire continued with a smile, “And I’ll travel easier knowing Phil is there when you can’t be.”

His smile broadened—everything and more. “I think we have a deal.”

With a playful smile, Claire teased, “Now, if you don’t make love to me right this minute, I’ll have you thrown off my property.”

That was exactly what Tony wanted to do—to *make love*. Jim had been right about some things. He didn’t just want to have sex: Tony wanted to show his wife exactly how much he loved her. “My, Mrs. Rawlings, will my lodging payments continue to be so extreme?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I have the rest of our lives to come up with new ideas. You know, I’m very creative and let me warn you, the payments will be daunting. I hope you’re up for it.”

His *up-ness* was extremely evident as the red of passion colored his world. For the first time in years, Tony welcomed it. The flames of desire weren’t meant to be dampened. They were meant to be fueled, and nothing fed his desire more than the sparks in the emerald eyes of the bold and cheeky woman in his arms. “I believe that you know that I am, and Mrs. Rawlings, I look forward to your challenges. Apparently, only you can decide whether I make the cut.”

“Don’t disappoint me. There *will* be consequences.”

“Mighty fine,” he whispered.

EPILOGUE

Tony: (Epilogue—Convicted and beyond)

December 2016

I am confident that, in the end, common sense and justice will prevail. I'm an optimist, brought up on the belief that if you wait to the end of the story, you get to see the good people live happily ever after.

—Cat Stevens

ERIC'S SENTENCE STALLED with the sound of the opening door. All at once Tony and Claire's home office was filled with the sound of running feet and giggles. Nichol ran around Eric and Phil to the other side of the desk and launched herself into Tony's lap.

"Daddy, guess what? We're going over to Aunt Em's!"

Tony laughed and smiled up to Eric and Phil, before looking back to his beautiful daughter. "We are?"

"No! Silly. Just Mommy, Shannon, and I are going." Nichol turned her attention to the other side of the desk and asked, "Are you going too, Mr. Phil?"

Just then, Claire walked in, smiling and shaking her head. "Nichol, your daddy has work to do with Mr. Eric and Mr. Phil. You shouldn't interrupt him."

Her little pig tails swung from side to side as she peered up at Tony. He marveled at the vision of his own eyes coming from Claire's questioning expression. Bashfully, she asked, "I'm not *in-ter-upping* you, am I?"

He hugged her tight. "You could never interrupt me, princess. You can come tell me your exciting news any time you want."

"You may regret that statement," Claire teased.

"Claire," Phil suggested, "perhaps I could drive you. The roads are very snowy."

"No, thank you. I'll take the SUV. We're just going to Emily's, and then

we'll be home." She walked over to Tony and gave him a kiss on the cheek: Nichol followed her mommy's lead. "We'll be back before dinner."

"Yep!" Nichol concurred.

"Well, all right," Tony said as he lifted Nichol from his lap to the floor. "Nichol, where's Shannon?"

"She's waiting for Mommy and me."

"Can you go tell her that your mommy will be right there?"

"I can," she said with bright eyes, as she took off running toward the hallway.

Claire's questioning gaze turned back to her husband and then to Eric and Phil, as Eric closed the office door and resumed his spot beside Phil. "What's happening?" Claire asked. "By the look on your faces, I'd say we received another message."

Tony reached for her hand. They'd promised one another to be honest, in everything. It wasn't always easy, and Tony worried sometimes about how much Claire could handle. But each day she reminded him why he'd fallen in love with her. Her actions and responses reminded him that she was the strongest and bravest person he'd ever known. Even when he told her about Patricia, she handled it with grace. Perhaps if his actions had been different, she would have responded differently, but instead she was pleased. Honesty helped to make their world brighter. It cleared away the biggest threat they faced—the threat of the unknown.

"I would have told you later tonight, but since you're here, I thought you could hear it directly from Eric and Phil. Phil was just telling me about the DNA test results on the last package," he explained as he looked to Phil, imploring him to continue.

"It was definitely sealed with female saliva. Apparently, the woman's not in the federal database of known offenders, which automatically rules out Ms. London."

Claire's brow furrowed. "A woman? Who do you think would do this? Who besides Catherine would know about the Rawls-Nichols link?"

"My family connection to Nathaniel was exposed to the media during Catherine's trial," Tony said. "Still, the vendetta was kept under wraps. I suppose anyone in the courtroom could be considered a possibility."

"I'll check into the list of names," Phil offered.

"And Ma'am," Eric added, "another note arrived today. It was addressed to you: Claire Nichols-Rawls."

"Did you open it?" she asked.

"Not yet," Phil answered. "The police recommend that we bag any suspicious mailings and take them in for analysis. After the whole anthrax scare, not even letters are to be considered safe until we know for sure. Ricin is another poison that's been used in known cases. We're not taking any

chances.”

Claire looked from Phil to Tony. “None of the packages or letters that we’ve received have tested positive, have they?”

“No,” Tony reassured, as he squeezed her hand. “Eric and Phil are just being overly cautious.” Turning back to Phil, Tony said, “Why don’t you go ahead and drive Claire and Nichol. I need to go into the office, and Eric can take me. I like the idea of being *overly cautious* until we know more.”

Claire rolled her eyes and straightened her lips. Finally, she said, “All right. Phil, I’m sure you’ll be enthralled while Emily and I discuss attire to take to the island next week.”

He grinned. “I’ll take my iPad. You won’t even know I’m there.”

“Oh, no. If you’re coming, you have to give us your opinion. It’s a requirement.”

Tony shook his head and grinned at Phil. “Hey man, better you than me.”

Nudging Eric, Phil asked, “Do you want to trade?”

Eric shook his head. “Not in a million years.”

Claire was almost to the door, when she looked back and said, “Excuse me, I heard that.”

Just then, the door flew open and they all heard Nichol’s excited voice as she said, “Momma, hurry up! Come on, Momma.” She tugged on Claire’s hand.

Tony watched the green of his wife’s eyes shimmer as they made contact with his own. He knew what she was thinking and did his best to appear innocent.

“So demanding,” Claire muttered under her breath. “Just like someone else I know.”

This time it was Tony’s turn. After a feigned cough, he murmured, “Umm, I heard that.”

Phil waited until Claire was gone before he said, “I’ve been searching for Patricia.”

Tony’s stomach knotted. “Is there evidence or is this intuition?”

Phil shrugged. “I just want to rule her out. Eric and I were brainstorming about women in-the-know with a grudge.” With a smirk, he added, “The list isn’t as long as you’d expect.”

Eric said, “We talked about past house staff, but everyone’s been cleared. It’s just Patricia who’s MIA.”

“I won’t be satisfied until I’ve found her,” Phil confirmed.

“Keep us posted,” Tony said.

“Yes, sir.”

OCTOBER 2017: HARRY

IT WAS HIS FIRST PARENT-teacher conference. Jillian had just recently begun third grade, and Harry was thrilled with his new more involved role. Ron and Ilona had been wonderful. Jillian was even spending the night at Harry's house every other weekend.

He'd learned so much in the past year. It wasn't only about his new investigative agency and his new surroundings, but Harry also learned the names of all the Disney princesses, to only months later be informed by his daughter that she was too old for princesses. The new craze included dolls that looked like Zombie Barbies. Harry truly hoped that craze would pass soon. To avoid the DVD's she brought over and watched, Harry had introduced her to Nancy Drew. He didn't think she was too young to get some tough-girl detective work. After all, someday she could take over his new company. Regardless what they did, Harry enjoyed spending time with his favorite girl.

When Harry had gone back to California for Amber's trial, he told Liz the truth. He let her know, in confidence, that he'd been the one to first suspect Amber in connection with Simon's death. He told her that it was the picture that she'd mentioned. There was no other way that his sister would have gotten that picture than from the perpetrators of his kidnapping and ambush.

Liz didn't take the news well. Not only was she upset at Harry for telling the FBI, she was upset that she'd added fuel to his firestorm of suspicions. She claimed that she couldn't move to North Carolina due to SiJo. Liz said that they needed her experience and knowledge, but Harry suspected that wasn't the full truth. Somehow, after months of trying to make their long-distance relationship work, Harry didn't care. He'd told himself that Jillian would be his number-one concern, and he'd meant that. All in all, he was content.

Harry pulled up to Jillian's school at 6:45 PM. Their conference was scheduled for 7:00 PM. As soon as he opened the door to the school, Harry saw Ron, Ilona, and Jillian. When his daughter saw him, she ran and grabbed his hand and pulled him toward her parents.

Ron extended his hand. "Hi, Harry, are you ready for this?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I am. I'm kind of excited about it."

Ilona, who was straightening Jillian's blonde ponytail, looked up. "Well, Jillian is quite the little genius, just like her mother, so I don't expect any surprises." She looked into their daughter's eyes. "Should I?"

"No, Mom," Jillian replied, as they all laughed.

Harry had no idea what to expect. To him it was all a surprise.

At exactly 6:58 PM, the school bell buzzed and they heard the

announcement:

***The 6:40 PM session of parent-teacher conferences is now complete.
Please exit the classrooms for the 7:00 PM session. Thank you.***

With the anticipation building, Harry accepted Jillian's hand as she led him to her class. The walls were covered in posters, colorful letters, and math equations. Harry's gaze scanned the room, taking in the colorful posters and tiny desks. His light blue eyes stopped on the large desk at the front of the room. Behind the desk, smiling and extending her hand to Ilona, was one of the most beautiful brunettes he'd ever seen. When her green eyes met his, he momentarily forgot his own name. It was Jillian who came to his rescue.

"Miss Oliver, this is my other dad, Harry."

Harry extended his hand. "Hello, Miss Oliver..."

FEBRUARY 2018: PHIL

PHIL PUSHED HIS WAY through the lobby of the hospital. He couldn't believe he was going through this again. Well, it wasn't him; it was her. After the first time, he'd never wanted to experience this kind of anxiety again. It was more than anxiety: it was the helplessness. Phil told himself he never could have stopped it. But why would Claire willingly put herself in this danger again.

The first time, she'd almost died.

Over the years, he'd unapologetically done what he needed to do to keep Claire and Nichol safe. It had been a long time since they'd received a threatening package or letter. Rawlings and Claire hypothesized that the mysterious sender became bored and moved on. Eric knew the truth. Patricia was the one to take herself off the radar. Having her disappear permanently went unnoticed. Phil maintained his position. No one would threaten or harm his family. That was until now—the overwhelming sense of helplessness grew.

Perspiration moistened his brow as his shoes pounded the tile floor of the nearly empty corridor. Determined, Phil made his way toward her room. It was nearly midnight and visiting hours were over: he didn't care. As he rounded the corner, he was surprised by the number of people he saw. Scanning the sea of familiar faces, Phil's eyes met Courtney Simmons. Immediately, she stood and walked toward him. Her reassuring smile did little to quiet his frantic nerves.

Taking his hands in hers, she said, "Phil, don't look so worried. Women give birth all the time. Claire will be fine. She has the best doctors that money can buy."

Peering over her head, he saw Brent Simmons as well as John and Emily Vandersol. Turning back to Courtney he asked, “I thought you and Emily were going to be with her, well until...”

Courtney giggled. “Well, it’s *that* time. We were in there, but things started moving fast,” she squeezed his hand, “not *too* fast, just moving. We left Claire and Tony alone with the doctors to experience this together. From what I hear, this will be Claire’s first conscious delivery.”

Phil nodded. The memories of that day and night, four years ago, were what haunted him as he drove frantically to get back to the hospital. He would’ve been here sooner if he hadn’t been taking Nichol and Shannon back to the estate after their visit. Phil didn’t think things would progress so fast: last time she’d been in labor for almost twenty-four hours. “I hope this time isn’t anything like that time,” he said.

“There’s no reason to suspect it will be. She was doing great when Emily and I left the room...” Courtney looked at her watch. “...about twenty-five minutes ago.” She tugged at his hand. “Come, sit down with all of us.”

Phil accepted her invitation and tried to get lost in their conversations. He didn’t want to think about what Claire could be going through.

“...I was worried, but she reassured me that once all the medication was out of her system, she had her doctor’s okay to become pregnant,” Emily said.

John squeezed his wife’s knee. “I think after we found out that Beth was on her way, Claire had baby fever.”

“Oh, Nichol is so excited about Beth,” Courtney said. “Every time I see her, she tells me about her little cousin. I think she’s holding out hope she’s going to have a little sister.”

Emily sighed. “I know. I’m afraid she’s going to be disappointed. We’ve all told her that the doctors said she’s getting a brother.”

“At least Michael’s happy,” John said. “He didn’t want to be the only boy.”

“Has anyone gotten them to spill the name?” Brent asked. “I’ve tried and tried, and Tony wouldn’t tell.”

All of them shook their heads.

Phil continued to listen as the minutes ticked to hours. He was teetering between sleep and mental breakdown when Rawlings came into the room wearing a paper gown and the biggest smile Phil had ever seen. “Claire and baby Rawlings are both doing great,” he said. “The nurse said that you can come in, one at a time.”

Emily and Courtney jumped up, as Courtney offered, “After you, but hurry.”

When his turn finally arrived, Phil opened the door. Despite the late—or rather early—hour, Claire’s emerald eyes shone and her smile beamed.

“I’m not holding him until he gets bigger, so don’t ask,” Phil offered

jokingly.

“He’ll be bigger tomorrow,” Claire replied.

“I think he already is,” Tony said, sitting on the edge of Claire’s bed, gazing at his green-eyed son in her arms.

“I think you’ll need a pay increase if we keep adding charges to your watch,” Claire joked.

“No one will tell his name?”

Claire smiled at Tony and said, “We kind of want to explain it, so everyone understands.”

Tony offered, “We put a lot of time and thought into his name. We knew we wanted to find the right one, one we both wanted and felt good about—”

“Like Nichol,” Claire interrupted. “Phil, may we introduce you to our son, Nathaniel Sherman Rawlings.”

Phil’s eyes widened.

“It may seem strange,” Claire continued, “but the way we look at it, the truth is that even though people make mistakes, it doesn’t stop the reason you loved them in the first place. Tony and I both loved and respected our grandfathers. More importantly, had it not been for them, we wouldn’t be here today.” She looked at the sleeping bundle in her arms. “And neither would Nate.”

Tony smiled, kissed Claire’s cheek, and turned his shining brown gaze to Phil. “Put on your running shoes, my man. Between Nichol and Nate, I’m pretty sure there will be consequences.”

VOLUME FIVE

BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES

Book #5 of the bestselling Consequences series
By:
ALEATHA ROMIG

Beyond The Consequences

We love life, not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

By:
Aleatha Romig

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A BEGINNING NOTE FROM ALEATHA

Dear Readers,

As always, this is for you. BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES began as a novella (A Peek Beyond the Consequences), which appeared in a limited-release anthology. After numerous requests, I decided to expand the novella and release it on its own. I was hoping to double it from its original 17 K word length. As I wrote, Tony, Claire, and Phil all decided they had more to say. I now introduce you to a 66 K+ word story. By definition this is no longer a novella, but a full-length novel. Welcome to the new and expanded BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES, book five of the Consequences series.

Note that this story occurs after most events in CONVICTED and REVEALED take place. It's meant as a fun glimpse into the future of a family that had a very dark and unusual beginning.

As you know, Anthony Rawlings and Claire Nichols have taken the long road to get to this point in their lives and their relationship. I think they deserve some fun; there was enough angst in the beginning to last them both a lifetime.

Oh, who am I kidding? I enjoy giving you and them a little angst too.

Thank you for rejoining Tony and Claire for a look into their future. Please sit back and enjoy BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES.

Sincerely,
~Aleatha

DISCLAIMER

The CONSEQUENCES series contains dark adult content. Although excessive description and detail are not used, the content contains innuendos of kidnapping, rape, and abuse—physical and mental. If you’re unable to read this material, please do not purchase. If you can enter this world of fiction, welcome aboard and enjoy the ride!

CHAPTER ONE

Late December 2016

Claire

Safety is something that happens between your ears, not something you hold in your hands.

—Jeff Cooper

CLAIRE GENTLY SMOOTHED back Nichol's fine dark hair, unable to break the connection with her daughter. The little girl was sound asleep with her head upon her mother's lap as the drone of the engines filled the cabin of their airplane. Claire sighed contentedly, taking in the unusually full cabin. Never could she remember their private plane being occupied by this many people. There was a time when this would never—could never—have happened. However, that was long ago, a distant memory. Now things were different, and their family and friends were together.

Though the trip back to Iowa from their South Pacific island was not complete, they'd been flying for what seemed like days. Sometime during the still of night, with Claire's patience and soothing, Nichol lost her valiant fight against sleep. Succumbing to the heavy lids, Nichol's dark brown eyes—those that matched her father's—disappeared behind thick lashes. Claire glanced toward her husband, seeing that his eyes too were uncharacteristically closed, and his chin bobbed near his chest. After all the turmoil that the Rawlings family had endured over the last few years, the serenity of the plane ride nearly brought Claire to tears.

Tony, Claire, and Nichol were sharing the flight home with their only family: Claire's sister, Emily, brother-in-law, John, and nephew, Michael. Michael's little body laid contentedly near Nichol's, their heads resting at each end of the long sofa-like seat, on each of their mother's laps. During

their battle with sleep, the two children vied for their own space, often behaving more like siblings than cousins. Now, with the battle behind them, they rested peacefully, with the other near. Their closeness was to be expected after the way they'd grown up.

Sometimes, memories such as those would make Claire sad. The years lost were gone, never to be recaptured. However, she'd come to realize that she could spend her time mourning their loss or concentrate on the future. Seeing the children, hearing their excited squeals as they played together on the white sand in paradise, or watching their uncensored interaction, Claire decided the future was the best place to devote her energy: too much time had been lost in the past. She wasn't willing to grant it any more.

Before she could give it much more thought, her husband was beside her, his large hand covering hers as they both gently caressed their daughter's head. With her thoughts in paradise and its tropical beauty, and on the children, coupled with the distracting murmur of the engines, Claire hadn't noticed Tony awaken or move from his earlier reclined seat.

"She finally gave in? It was about time," he whispered, his deep baritone voice was low as to not awaken the others.

Despite her fatigue, Claire smiled as Tony's long legs knelt beside them bringing his eyes to hers. Also, keeping her voice low, she replied, "Well, she does seem to have a stubborn streak."

The dark brown of Tony's eyes glistened knowingly.

"But," Claire continued, "she did finally give in. She's been asleep for a few hours, just like someone else I know."

"Why don't you let me take your place, and you go lay a chair back and get some sleep?"

Claire shook her head. "I don't want to let her go, not even for a few hours."

Small lines appeared near the corner of Tony's eyes as his cheeks rose. "I think we know where she gets that stubborn streak. Don't worry, Nichol's not going anywhere and neither are you, except to get some much needed rest. This holiday in paradise has been great, but soon we'll all be home. You need rest too."

"Oh, Tony," Claire's whisper rose in volume. "It was wonderful having everyone together. I'm glad we were all there to celebrate Nichol's birthday as well as Christmas. It was everything I'd hoped and more." Tears teetered on her lids, threatening to coat her cheeks. "I can't believe our daughter's really three! I just wish—"

As she lowered her eyes, Tony lifted her chin. Kissing her lips, he interrupted her words. "I think we've learned that we can't wish away the past. Instead, we need to enjoy each moment we have."

Looking around the cabin, Claire confirmed their cloak of privacy. It was

one created not by solitude, but by the sleeping state of the other passengers. Behind Emily, who was separated from Claire by the children, were John, Courtney, and Brent. The Simmonses's children, Caleb, Julia, and Maryn, had all taken a different plane, as had Meredith, Jerry, and their children. Nodding, Claire continued her thought. "I wasn't going to wish away our past. I know there are more than a few people who think I should. I was going to wish for more times like we just had. The time on the island surrounded by family and friends was amazing. I've always loved the security of the island. There's something about being there that gives me peace."

"Could that something be Madeline and Francis?"

Claire thought about his question. The caretakers of the island were definitely unique, comforting people. From the first time she'd met them, she was lulled into their loving aura. "I don't know. I think it's more our memories there. Those months we shared on our island were some of the best of my life. Those were the memories I relived over and over after I..."

It wasn't Tony who interrupted her thoughts: it was Claire herself. She reached up and stroked Tony's scratchy, stubbly cheek. Momentarily, she imagined the abrasiveness on more sensitive skin. With a glint in her green eyes, she continued, "It was there that we learned to truly trust one another."

"Do you want to stay there? Did you not want to go home?"

"No!" Claire resumed her whisper. "I do want to go home. For the first time since I can remember, I want to be in Iowa in the winter. I want to build snowmen and make snow angels. I want to teach Nichol to love all the seasons: the warm and cold, the good and bad. They're all important. Ones we enjoy less make us appreciate the ones we adore more. I want to be there as she experiences each and every moment. Like when she saw the island and we explained that it was where she was born... and when she met Madeline and Francis. I'm excited to hold her mitten-covered hand as we see the lake covered with ice. Emily said that she's never ice skated. I've already ordered all of us skates."

The sides of Tony's lips moved upward. "All? Ha." He shook his head playfully from side to side.

Claire's brows rose in question.

Tony explained. "Though I recently lost my appreciation for winter, your excitement may help me learn to embrace the cold as well, but ice skate? I think you have more faith in my abilities than I do. I've never in my life ice skated."

"Then, Mr. Rawlings, I'd say it's time you learned."

Looking from his wife to his daughter and back, Tony shrugged. "I suppose it is."

Leaning closer, Claire's lips grazed his. "I like that."

Tony pressed forward and deepened their kiss. "I like that too," he said

with a devilish grin.

“Not *that*... although, I’m not complaining.”

“What then? What do you like?”

“The Anthony Rawlings who’s willing to learn new things and see new perspectives.” The emerald in Claire’s eyes shone through the dimmed cabin.

“Oh, Mrs. Rawlings, it’s true that I much prefer being the teacher, but I’ve learned many things since I brought you into my life. I’m up for learning more.”

Claire snickered as she eyed their friends and family. “Now is not a good time to be *up*.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s not. Now is a good time for you to get some rest. Let me sit with Nichol and you go lie back in one of the chairs.”

Though Claire was about to protest, she realized that not only was Tony concerned about her well-being, he wanted to spend time with their daughter too. No longer were his dark eyes focused on her, but on Nichol, as the tips of his fingers lightly caressed her exposed pink sun-kissed cheek. When he once again looked up, Claire saw in his eyes the sadness she’d been feeling, the sense of time lost with no way to retrieve it. The look only lasted for a millisecond and then it was gone, replaced with a conscious expression of authority. He’d told her that he wanted her to switch places, to get some sleep. At first, it may have been phrased like a question, but that was only for her benefit. At one time, Tony’s change in tenor and expression would have filled her with dread; that time, too, was long gone. Some memories were better left sleeping.

Claire concentrated on the micro-expression of sadness, the one she knew Tony wanted to hide. Not because he didn’t want to be honest or share, but because he didn’t want to feel the pain or add fuel to Claire’s sense of loss; nevertheless, she took it in. The expression didn’t make her pain worse. On the contrary, it eased it. They both had lost too much time. It was another one of their common bonds and shared goals. Together they’d work to fill the future with enough hope and love to overcome the past.

Summoning her smile, Claire nodded and acquiesced. “All right.”

Lightly kissing Tony’s lips, she lifted Nichol’s head and they simultaneously moved, as they’d done so many times, instinctively knowing the other’s action. This time they worked in unison not to disturb their sleeping daughter. Within moments, Tony was sitting with Nichol serenely snuggled into his lap. “She’ll be fine,” Tony whispered. “Now go—rest.”

“I know she will.” Stroking Tony’s arm, Claire whispered, “There’s nowhere that I feel safer than in your arms. She’ll know that feeling too. The way she just sighed, I’m pretty sure she already does.”

Tony’s dark eyes shone, taking in both of his ladies. “I wish we were home in our big bed so I could hold both of you.”

"Me too," Claire admitted. "But I'll settle for watching the two of you from over there, until I fall asleep."

Before Claire could walk away, Tony reached for her hand. "Mrs. Rawlings, we can go back to paradise anytime you need that feeling of security. You just say the word, and we'll be in the air."

"Thank you. I may take you up on that. But if I do, it's because I love the island, and I love Madeline and Francis, not because I need to be there to feel that way. Honestly, with you and Nichol, Eric and Phil, I know I'm safe. I know Nichol is safe. Besides," she added with a snicker, "it's difficult to make snowmen in the South Pacific."

Tony grinned. "Hmmm, I think sand angels sound more appealing than snow ones."

She squeezed his hand before making her way back to an empty seat beside John. As she buckled her seatbelt, Claire glanced back to see Tony's eyes close. No longer did she see sadness or even the need to control. She saw peace: a quiet, accepting peace, as his fingers brushed Nichol's fine hair. Contentedly, she followed suit and drifted off to sleep with visions of sand angels dancing through her dreams.



HOURS LATER WITH snow falling and coating the Iowa ground in a blanket of white, the tired friends bid each other goodbye as their luggage was loaded into various cars at the Rawlings Industries private airstrip. While Eric and Phil warmed the car, Claire helped Nichol secure her winter coat, hat, and gloves.

"Momma?" Nichol asked. "Do you like warm or cold better?"

Claire giggled. "Oh, honey, I like warm." Remembering her wish, she added, "But that doesn't mean I don't like cold." She lifted her face to the sky. "Look how beautiful these snowflakes are. See how they shine and glisten?"

"Yes, but I like bathing suits instead of winter coats."

"Look at your pretty pink coat. Don't you like it?"

"I guess." Nichol looked at her mother's coat and her small voice rose. "You need a pink coat too. Then we can be twins."

Just then, Emily came up behind Nichol. "A pink coat is definitely what you need, Claire."

"Only if all three of us can match?"

Looking down at her growing midsection, Emily laughed. "Oh, I'd be a sight in pink."

"Are you feeling all right? The travel wasn't too much for you, was it?"

"I'm fine. I'm just tired," Emily said. "I don't think that it's the pregnancy

as much as the time difference. Thank you, sis, for this amazing getaway. We've had a fabulous time. The island was everything you said and more. I can't believe you left that paradise for John and me..." Her voice trailed away until she straightened her shoulders and went on, "I'm sorry. These stupid hormones are making me sentimental."

Reaching for her sister, Claire embraced Emily. Swallowing the growing lump in her throat, she replied, "We're both so happy you could be there with us. The children had so much fun."

Emily nodded. "I know we owe you both—"

"Stop that. We can never repay what you've done for us and for Nichol."

"Well, thanks anyway. The getaway was great, and for such a long trip, traveling on your plane sure beats the heck out of flying commercially."

"Having everyone together made Nichol's birthday even that much more special."

Emily bent down and hugged her niece. "I love you, sweetheart. Be good for your mommy and daddy."

Nichol grinned. "I'm oways good."

Emily's brow rose as she peered up toward Claire.

"Mostly," Claire corrected.

Nichol blew kisses at Emily. "Bye-bye, Aunt Em. See you later. Momma, I'm cold," Nichol whined as she rushed toward Phil and the warm, waiting car.

"How about you?" Emily asked as the two women approached the cars. "Are you all right, being home? I know you don't like winter much."

Taking in the accumulating snow, Claire watched as white flakes melted upon the heads of Tony, Brent, and John as the three men shook hands and bid each other goodbye. Although the time away had been good for all of them, Claire was ready to be back to her intimate family. Two weeks in the presence of everyone had been a long time. Contemplating her sister's question, Claire replied, "I am. We've enjoyed being with everyone; however, I'm happy to be home with Tony and Nichol."

Emily smiled. "I understand. I'm ready for a little quiet time myself."

Just then, Michael ran toward his mom, sliding his tiny feet upon the snow-covered runway. "Wheeee!" he yelled, as he held on to Emily's leg for dear life.

Laughing, Claire said, "Good luck with that quiet time. You better enjoy it now. Once my little niece arrives, you'll be pulled in every direction."

"Two children aren't that difficult," Emily replied wistfully, peering toward Nichol. "I miss having two."

The lump in Claire's throat made its presence known once again. Unsure how to respond, Claire was saved by the sound of Phil's voice.

"Claire, the car's ready."

Looking in his direction, she saw Tony sitting in the backseat, already talking on his phone, and Nichol beside him, her little booted feet swinging as she tended to the needs of her new doll. With full concentration she worked to wrap her prized possession in a blanket, protecting it from the frigid temperatures. Earlier, Nichol proclaimed that the doll was her favorite Christmas gift. Obviously she was concerned about its well-being. Claire had ordered the doll specially: the tiny replica looked identical to Nichol.

Turning back toward Emily, Claire gave her sister a parting hug, and, changing the subject, she said, "See, we've barely touched down and Tony's already back to work. I think I'll have plenty of that quiet time."

"I'm sure John's doing the same thing. His phone started vibrating the second he took it out of airplane mode."

"Thank you, Emily. I hope we can do more things together."

Emily nodded. "Me too."

"Mommy, we go home!" Michael proclaimed, as he tugged at Emily's hand. "Bye-bye, Aunt Care."

They said their goodbyes and moments later, Claire settled in the warmth of the waiting car and snuggled close to her daughter. "Are you cold, sweetie? Do you wish you were back on the island?"

Looking up to Tony and back to Claire, Nichol shook her head. "Uh-uh. The island doesn't have pretty snowflakes, and I wanna be with you and Daddy."

The car eased forward with Eric driving and Phil riding shotgun. Claire glanced toward Tony, expecting to see his concentration on the phone call at hand. Instead, at their daughter's comment, their eyes met and he winked. Smiling, Claire helped Nichol with her doll's blanket and replied, "We like that too, sweetheart."

CHAPTER TWO

Late December 2016

Claire

Nothing can bring a real sense of security into the home except true love.

—Billy Graham

THOUGH THE HOUSE on the island always seemed large and remote, it was nowhere near as big as their new home on the Rawlings estate. The fact that the island retreat had been occupied by four families with a total of seventeen people for the last two weeks helped to make the estate feel that much more secluded and private. Well, quiet, except for Nichol's happy glees at being reunited with her nanny, Shannon. It wasn't that Shannon hadn't been invited to the island: she had. Nichol's nanny had chosen to spend the Christmas holiday with her family. Claire completely understood; besides, Claire enjoyed spending more one-on-one time with her daughter.

After Shannon had retired to her suite, Nichol had been tucked into bed, and the rest of the staff had left the main house to go to their own apartments, Claire settled into the nice, large bed Tony had mentioned earlier on the plane. As she rested on the soft sheets, every muscle in her body began to unwind and relax. The quiet bliss of their suite filled her with peace while outside a growing blanket of white snow frosted the panes of glass that covered one wall of their bedroom suite.

Even in the nocturnal darkness, the freshly fallen snow reflected the sheen of the moonlight's brilliance, brightening the world beyond their bubble. The bare, leafless trees were a far cry from the palm trees of their paradise; nonetheless, as Claire stared toward the windows, she didn't miss the white sand and multicolored flowers that covered the lanai. No, as she stared outside and saw the flakes that continued to cascade from the sky, Claire relished her home and her family.

The radiating glow from the fireplace added to Claire's delight. Embers and remnants of fire, set earlier by the staff, filled the master bedroom suite with warmth while the sweet aroma of burning timbers permeated her senses. With the cold outside the windows, the roaring fire had been inviting and welcoming upon their arrival. As she relaxed against the soft pillows, Claire marveled at her reality. She was home. Suddenly, a childhood story—a favorite of generations—came to mind while simultaneously an unconscious smile came to her lips. Dorothy had definitely been right: there was no place like home.

Other than a break for dinner with his family, since their homecoming, Tony had been occupied with all things Rawlings Industries. Though the island was no longer hidden from the authorities, Internet service was less than stellar. Even with all of Phil's knowledge and connections—those that only money could buy—attempts at communication, in any manner other than email, were painfully slow. While they were away, Tony had been kept abreast of the happenings at Rawlings, but until this afternoon, his input had been limited. After dinner he was back in his home office.

Their home office was much different than it had been in the old estate. The new one lacked the dark cherry paneling and regal mahogany desk. Instead it was homier and lighter, containing two equally sized desks. Truly it was *their* home office. As lady of the house, Claire had the responsibility of the household staff and the daily operations of the estate. When Tony had the new house built, he could have easily had two offices constructed; however, he purposely chose to share the space that at one time had been declared his and his alone. Though Claire had complete access, on their first day and evening home, she chose not to spend her time catching up on her responsibilities. There would be plenty of time for that. Instead, she worked to help unpack and acclimate Nichol back to Iowa. Now, as she neared sleep, Claire pondered the length of the day. With crossing the international dateline, and in essence, going back in time, the day seemed to have lasted forever.

Though the heat of the flames lulled Claire toward the blissfulness of sleep, her mind spun with countless possibilities for fun, snow-filled activities. She knew that if she were excited about the snow and cold, Nichol would be also. Then, without warning, her consciousness filled not with the aroma of the burning wood, but the unmistakable scent of cologne. Without visual confirmation, every fiber in Claire's body let her know that she was no longer alone. Though she hadn't heard her husband enter their suite, the intensity of her suddenly rapid pulse confirmed that he was there.

Still not opening her eyes, Claire's lips moved to a slight grin as she listened and heard Tony moving quietly around the darkened suite. It wasn't until he settled into the big bed that she scooted closer and molded herself to his side. Immediately, his arm wrapped about her petite frame and his deep

voice filled the suite, which moments earlier had contained only the crackling of the simmering fire.

"I thought you were asleep. Aren't you exhausted?"

"I am," she admitted, "but I'm also enjoying the peace and quiet."

"Next time we go to the island, it would be all right with me if we had fewer guests."

Claire nodded against his chest.

"Speaking of guests," Tony continued, "what were you and Emily talking about at the airport?"

She lifted her head. "What were you, John, and Brent talking about?"

"I believe I asked first."

Propping her chin on her fist, Claire replied, "She was thanking me for a wonderful getaway and saying how much they enjoyed it."

"Hmmm. That's pretty much what Brent and John were saying too."

"Tony?"

"What?" he answered, as he pulled her back to his chest.

"Did you hate it? I mean, you didn't seem like you did. Yet I know you didn't used to like to be around so many people."

"I didn't hate it. There were times I wanted to be alone with you and Nichol, but I didn't hate it." He sighed. "We've both been alone, and I know how much you enjoy having other people around. If that's what you want, I want it too."

Claire smiled against his warm skin, enjoying the tickling sensation of his soft chest hair against her cheek. "I do. I'm happy to be with people and with friends. I know the Meredith thing was strange at first, but no one knows how much she helped me. I love seeing her with Jerry and the kids. The risks she took for me... well, I can never thank her enough."

"I think you have. Just like you enjoy seeing her happy with her family, I think she feels the same way. Once in a while, I'd notice her watching you with a hopeful smile. I may have been skeptical when I first heard about her connection, but not anymore. I'm glad she and Jerry took us up on our offer and came with us."

"I also love this," Claire added.

"This?"

"Being alone, just the two of us, or three of us."

"Or six, if you include Eric, Phil, and Shannon," Tony corrected.

Claire sat up quickly, pulling the blanket dramatically around her nightgown-clad body, and mocked, "What? Eric, Phil, and Shannon are in *here*?"

With only the embers of the dying fire illuminating his devilish grin, Tony reached for his wife and pulled her close. Laughingly, he said, "Mrs. Rawlings, what have I said about that smart mouth of yours?"

Raining a trail of kisses from his chest toward his lips, Claire replied, “As I recall, you said you like it.”

Suddenly, her world was reversed. No longer was she above him: now, with her head on her pillow, Tony hovered mere inches above her face. The weight of his chest pressed against her suddenly sensitive breasts.

Claire’s insides tightened as she watched in amazement and wonder at the emotions swirling through her husband’s chocolate-colored eyes. The suede of exhaustion mixed with the shimmer of amusement both faded into the darkened abyss of desire. How had there ever been a time when she couldn’t read his every thought? His current thought—his current intention—was not only visible, but becoming more prominent by the moment. “Versatility?” she baited.

“Hmm, yes,” Tony cooed, as he teased the slender strap of her nightgown. “Those amazing lips can not only spew smart comments and retorts, but I believe they’re also capable of untold marvels.” Kisses to her exposed shoulder interrupted his words. “I don’t *believe*. I know.”

With his continued encouragement, Claire’s previous thoughts of sleep quickly morphed into a smoldering heat: one that possibly exceeded that of the one burning in the grate. As the tension within her continued to build, the seclusion of their private suite lifted any inhibitions they may have maintained during their crowded retreat. “You seem quite confident, Mr. Rawlings.”

Easing her nightgown over Claire’s head, Tony tossed it to the floor, creating a puddle of silk near their bed while his lips moved from her collarbone to her breasts. With deliberate precision and painstaking leisureliness, he moistened each nipple causing them to harden as his abrasive cheeks brushed the sensitive skin. Arching her back toward him, Claire’s playfulness turned sultry. No longer did she want to offer bold retorts. The only thing on her mind was the man skillfully teasing and caressing her exposed body. Despite the warmth of the crackling fire, goose bumps formed on her arms and legs. Each move of his mouth, inch by inch downward, over her stomach, nearing the place she needed him most, helped to build the frenzy within her.

When his advances met the only remaining obstacle, Claire lifted her hips to help him remove her panties. Tony’s deep voice pulled her from her endorphin-induced trance. “There were definite advantages to my previous rules.”

At that moment, she couldn’t have agreed more. Grinning, Claire began to ease the lace panties from her hips.

“Wait,” Tony commanded. Sitting upward on their large bed, Tony reached for Claire’s hand. “You’re so damn beautiful. I want to watch you take those off. I want to see you... all of you... as you give yourself to me.”

Blood rushed to her cheeks as she tried to hide her gaze. Tony cupped her chin and pulled her green eyes towards him. “Don’t look away. I love you. We’re finally alone. I want to see all of you, including your beautiful eyes.”

Watching the man before her, Claire smiled, accepted his hand, and stood. With the soles of her feet upon the soft satin puddle, Claire waited. It wasn’t the warmth of the fire that filled her with the confidence to do as he’d asked. No, it was the sultry heat she witnessed in his dark eyes. The fire within him wasn’t a reflection of the one burning across the room. It was the culmination of weeks surrounded by too many people, the need to connect to one another, and the desire that stems from a connection that surpasses all boundaries.

With the glowing embers inside and the reflection of snow outside illuminating their world, Tony led his wife to the rug in front of the giant fireplace, moved to the sofa, and sat before her. “Now, Mrs. Rawlings, let me see. Show me what’s mine and mine alone.”

Latching her thumbs beneath the lace, Claire slowly pulled her panties down her thighs. Letting go of the material, she allowed them to fall to the floor and stepped out of them. Resuming her stance, she again waited for her husband as invisible bonds from his gaze held her in place. Rising from the sofa, Tony moved gracefully toward her, each step predatory as he circled her form, his eyes glued on only her. From her round, soft globes and hard, taut nipples to her neatly trimmed sex, his eyes devoured as his erection tented the gym shorts he’d worn to bed.

“You are so damn beautiful,” Tony growled as he stopped behind her. “I want you so much.” Purposely keeping his erection away, he leaned near her neck and breathily asked, “Do you have any idea how fuck’n sexy you are right now?”

Tipping her head to the side and closing her eyes, Claire gave him full access. Inhaling his intoxicating scent of cologne and musk of desire, she replied, “I know how sexy you make me feel.”

With his lips upon her skin, he continued to tease. “These last two weeks, I wanted to see you like this, so badly. I wanted you totally naked... in the pool, on the beach, in our suite with the doors open to the damn world, just like we used to do.” He nipped her skin playfully, causing a gasp to resonate from her throat. “I wanted my wife to be available to just me, but...” He twisted a nipple then tenderly caressed it, creating the perfect combination of pain and pleasure. “...I couldn’t have what I wanted. No, I had to share. I had

___”

“You just said you didn’t—” Claire began.

“Shhh,” he whispered, putting his finger to her lips. “I’m not done.”

With each word, each breath, her tension grew. Claire didn’t want him to continue taunting; she wanted him. His demanding tone and suddenly possessive demeanor had her ready and on the verge of explosion. With

nothing but words, he could twist her to the brink. This was the man who'd taken not only her body, but also her heart and fulfilled her every desire. "Tony, please," she begged.

Wrapping her in his arms, he pulled her back tightly against his chest. Claire wasn't sure when he'd taken off his gym shorts, but by the sensation of his hardness against her lower back, they were definitely gone. "Ohhh..." she mewed.

"What, Claire? Please, *what*? What do you want so badly you'll ask for it even after I tell you to shush?"

Melting against his chest, Claire replied, "You. I want you. I've wanted more of you than I've gotten in the last two weeks. We're home. I want to see you too."

"My dear, I'm right here." His hips moved slightly against her as his embrace pulled her closer. Resuming his CEO tone, Tony continued, "And I promise, you're going to see me; however, as I recall, I asked you to let me finish. Didn't I?"

Unsure if he wanted a verbal response, Claire nodded.

"That's a good girl," he replied, as he loosened his embrace and brushed the sides of her arms with the tips of his fingers.

Her lips parted, allowing the slightest sound to escape. Claire couldn't have stopped the whimper if she tried. Tony's gentle touch was almost painful. Claire wanted his arms around her, strong and sturdy. She needed to know he was there. The lightness of his touch had her body begging for more. She was ready to begin verbally pleading when Tony reached for her fingertips and led her to the sofa. Kneeling before her, gently spreading her legs, his darkened gaze continued to devour, as his lips moved up each thigh in preparation to do the same. Between taunting kisses, he said, "As I was saying, I had to share." With a devilish grin, he peered up her body until their eyes met. "I don't know if you've ever realized, but I'm not good at sharing."

With a gleam in her green ones, Claire nodded, still unsure if she should speak.

"Now, that doesn't mean I can't do it. For you, my dear, I'll do anything. However now... now that I have you all to myself, I plan on taking full advantage of you." He leaned back, taking in every exposed inch of his wife. "Full advantage. I don't only want to see you. I want to feel you, hear you, and taste you." Just before he reached his destination, his warm breath teased her sensitive skin as he said, "Now I'm done talking. I think this conversation has gone on long enough. There are much better things for both of our mouths to do. Do you agree, Mrs. Rawlings?"

Leaning back against the soft leather, Claire breathily replied, "Oh, God, yes, I agree."

Though more words did come forth, moans and sounds dominated their

suite as they reconnected. No longer did the length of their day or the concerns of others fill their thoughts. Only the desires of pleasing and being pleased, filling and being filled, loving and being loved permeated their consciousness. It wasn't until later, after untold heights, that they made it back to the soft sheets and king-sized bed. Even then, sleep had to wait.

Finally, after they both were satiated, Claire nestled against her husband's chest, inhaled his intoxicating scent and drifted off to sleep.

There was no place like home.

CHAPTER THREE

Late December 2016

Claire

Surround yourself with good people: people who are going to be honest with you and look out for your best interests.

—Derek Jeter

THE STACK OF mail on Claire's desk looked daunting; nevertheless, she dove into it with renewed vigor. In all the previous years of their marriage and before, she hadn't been involved in the day-to-day operations of the estate. Now that it was hers, she wanted to do all she could and truly be hands on. In all honesty, she enjoyed the quiet time spent in their home office doing something productive. Although she was no longer forecasting life-threatening hurricanes—meteorology was more than likely gone from her future—Claire was doing more than she'd ever done before. Her work kept the estate running, which was a far cry from the idle hours she'd spent in the past. Besides, the name on the deed to the estate was hers: Claire Nichols Rawlings. She had every right to make the decisions, and it was one less thing for Tony to worry about.

Since last fall, her husband had been busy becoming re-acclimated to Rawlings Industries. His two-year absence from the daily operations of his multiple corporations and financial endeavors required quite a bit of catching up. Even so, whenever possible, Tony chose to work from home. His devotion and commitment to plunge back into his life was not limited to Rawlings Industries. Tony wanted to spend as much time as possible at home with his wife and daughter. That was why, when faced with a full return to Rawlings Industries, he decided to share the CEO position with Tim Bronson. Tim had handled things exceptionally well in Tony's absence; it only seemed right to keep him involved.

With Nichol and Shannon playing upstairs, Claire settled into her plush

desk chair and took on the two weeks' accumulation of mail. Before she could make a dent, there was a knock on the door. Giggling to herself, Claire thought, it wasn't Nichol: she didn't knock. It was just another of her many father-like traits. "Come in," she called, expecting Shannon.

"Claire..." Phil's voice caused Claire to look up. "...I wanted to catch you before you went through the mail. I was just told that today's delivery was brought in here before I could go through it."

Phil wasn't only Claire's bodyguard and head of the estate's security: he was also her friend. With their long history, Claire recognized something in his tone that filled her with a sense of foreboding.

"Why?" she asked. "We haven't received any more threatening letters or packages since before the trip. Have we?"

Phil pressed his lips together. Golden flecks glistened in the hazel eyes that peered knowingly at her through squinted lids. With a furrowed brow, he replied, "I would've thought you knew. Haven't you spoken to Rawlings? He said he was going to tell you."

Claire thought back to their time alone since coming home. It had only been one day, and honestly, last night there was very little talking. She worked to keep the blush from her cheeks as she remembered just how little talking they'd done the night before. Prior to that, they'd both been too busy doing other things or with Nichol. Discussions about the threatening mailings they'd received didn't exactly seem like good family-dinner conversation. "I've spoken with him, but I guess we didn't get a chance to talk about it, and he was gone this morning before I woke."

Phil took a deep breath and motioned toward one of the chairs opposite Claire's desk. "Do you mind?"

Straightening her shoulders, Claire shook her head. "I don't mind your taking a seat. I'm a little nervous that you think this conversation requires that." She feigned a smile. "Or maybe you just want to catch up? Tell me that's all it is. I'll have some coffee brought in and we can chat."

Phil shook his head. "Catching up sounds nice, but I have a lot to do right now. First thing after our *chat*, I need to go through that stack of mail—"

Claire leaned forward on her desk, and interrupted, "Fine, tell me. Tell me why you are concerned, and don't tell me you aren't. I hear it in your voice."

"Claire, I'm sure Rawlings wanted to be the one to tell you. I'll just take a quick look at that stack and leave you alone."

Claire eyed the large pile of letters. Most were regular sized; a few were larger. There were a couple of thicker envelopes. Squaring her shoulders she turned back. "Phil, the packages that we've received in the past have been addressed to me, or to *Claire Nichols-Rawls*, so I deserve to know what else has been delivered. I deserve to know what progress has been made. Just because Tony hasn't mentioned it—yet—doesn't negate my right to know.

Besides,” she added with a grin, “I thought you worked for me.”

His shoulders relaxed as he exhaled. “You know I do.”

Her emerald eyes sparkled, knowing she’d won. “Then tell me.”

Claire watched the deliberation he wasn’t voicing as Phil shifted slightly in his seat. Each second of silence added to her concern. Finally, he spoke. “You see, we’ve talked about it. I just don’t want to upset you, not after everything you’ve been—”

“Stop,” she said softly. “I’m not going to break. I’ll admit, I came close, but it won’t happen. Truly, Phil, I’m good. Not knowing scares me more than knowing. I honestly don’t think that Tony intended to keep whatever this was from me. By the time we had a chance for some privacy last night, well, we were both exhausted. I mean, we all were and still are. We’ve only been home a little over twenty-four hours.”

She pushed her chair back and stood, motioning toward the mail. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll go get some coffee. You knock yourself out with the mail, but first, tell me about the last threatening mailing we received and what you know.”

Phil nodded. “It came here, to the estate, while we were all in the South Pacific. Eric and I knew about it right away. We didn’t say anything until after the FBI finished their tests. It was clean: no explosives, no chemicals.”

Claire pondered. “While we were gone? When did you tell Tony?”

“After we had the results.”

“Phil, *when* did you tell Tony?” She emphasized the word.

It was one thing for Tony not to mention it if he’d only learned about it yesterday. It was quite another thing if he’d known about it longer—a lot longer.

“It was right before Christmas.” He hastened to add, “Everything was fine. There was no threat and no reason to worry you when you had so much going on. God, Claire, it was Christmas. Not exactly the time you want to hear about any of this.”

“I don’t care if it’s my birthday—I deserve to know.”

She walked to the front of the desk, stood before Phil and took a deep breath. This was definitely a matter she and Tony would be discussing. Softening her tone, she continued. “We—you and I—have been through a lot. I can’t thank you enough for your devotion to me, Tony, and Nichol.”

At the mention of her daughter’s name, she saw Phil’s expression momentarily change. It was almost too fast to discern. A second later it was gone. Claire’s stomach turned. “Wait. Something was different about the last mailing, wasn’t it? Oh, my God.”

The temperature of the room fell; the hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention. “Tell me it wasn’t addressed to Nichol.”

Phil shook his head. “I can’t.”

The trembling came from nowhere. Suddenly, the cozy home office was a bleak frozen tundra.

His tone was more her friend than security. "This is why Rawlings wanted to be the one to tell you."

Claire nodded and sunk into the chair beside Phil. She had gotten used to being targeted by some psycho. She'd been to hell and back more than once. She could take it, but this was different. This was Nichol. As fast as the trembling came, it subsided, and Claire's protectiveness surged forward. In a voice stronger than she truly felt, Claire said, "Find this person. You said the DNA points to a woman, right?"

"Yes."

"She's not in the database of known offenders?"

"Correct."

Leaning forward, Claire reiterated, "If some bitch wants to come after me, fine. I'll take her on. But threaten my daughter, in any way? Hell no! I want her gone." Her eyes narrowed. "I don't care what you have to do. You have my total support. Whatever resources you need, no holds barred." Claire reached for Phil's arm. "Please, assure that she's no longer a threat to Nichol."

Phil's back straightened. "You don't need to ask. I'd rather you didn't. The less you know, the better."

Claire nodded and stood again. "I'm going to get some coffee. Help yourself to the mail, but if you find something, tell me."

Phil grinned.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well, Mrs. Alexander..."

Claire smiled at the reference from their past.

Phil continued, "...I believe that once again I've seriously underestimated you. Maybe someday I'll learn that you're tougher than I think."

"One more thing, Phil, what was in the mailing to Nichol?"

"There were two. The first was a card addressed to *Nichol Rawls*. The second was a gift, a birthday gift addressed to *Nichol Rawlings*."

Her brow wrinkled. "Why were they different and what kind of birthday gift?"

"We don't know. The gift was a doll. I didn't think much of it until I saw the one you gave her for Christmas. It looked very similar, very much like Nichol herself."

"I had that one made by a private company."

Phil nodded. "We've traced this one. It's a cheaper version, made by a company that takes online and mail orders. They advertise in magazines all over the world. The person who placed the order used your name and address. The credit card was a refillable card purchased in New York with cash."

Claire had researched some of the less expensive doll-makers. Even they

required a picture. Through the years, Emily and John, and more recently, Tony and Claire, had done their best to keep Nichol's picture out of the public eye. "That still means they know what Nichol looks like, that they have her picture." Phil's words continued to process in her mind. "New York?" Claire asked. "Where in New York?"

"New York City."

"We're planning on taking Nichol there next month. We have tickets to see *The Lion King*."

"New York City is huge and filled with millions of people. Between Eric, me, and the rest of the security detail, no one will come near you or Nichol. Don't even concern yourself."

Standing taller, Claire assessed the situation. "Thank you."

"I haven't done anything."

Her green eyes shimmered. "You know that isn't true. You've done a lot, and I believe you're not done. I told Tony that I loved the feeling of security on the island. That's true. But in reality, it isn't just the island. It's him, it's you, it's Eric, and it's everyone. We're truly blessed to have so many people who sincerely care about our well-being. Whatever you need, ever, it's yours."

Phil nodded. "I need to look at your mail."

As Claire was about to leave the office, she asked, "Would you like some coffee? I was sincere when I said that we need to catch up. Things have been wild with the trip to the island."

"Maybe another time," Phil said. "I want to go through the mail, get out of your way, and go have a few words with the person who delivered today's mail to you before letting me see it. I think it would be better if I get to him before Rawlings."

Her smile broadened. "See, that's another reason why I trust you. You're always a step ahead."



LATER THAT NIGHT, Claire glared at her husband as they made their way into their private suite.

"You know, you're not nearly as good at hiding your anger as you used to be," Tony said with a devilish grin.

"Well, maybe it's because I'm not trying to hide it."

"I've been home for hours. We've had dinner with Nichol and had a snowball fight in the backyard. I have no idea what you're upset about." He cocked his head to the side. "It's that you lost the snowball fight, isn't it?"

Claire put her hands on her hips. "No. It isn't about the snowball fight.

Besides, I didn't lose. It isn't even what you've done. It's what you didn't do." She stood taller. "We promised to be honest. You haven't been honest."

Tony's brows knit together. "I believe I'm at a disadvantage in this conversation. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Think, Tony. Did something happen while we were in paradise that you forgot to mention?"

It didn't take Tony long until he muttered under his breath, "Damn Roach."

"No, don't blame him. It's you who dropped the ball. Phil thought I already knew. He said that you said you'd tell me." Her volume rose. "Nichol is my daughter too. Tell me, Tony. Tell me why I didn't know about her birthday card and gift from the psycho person?"

He collapsed onto the soft leather sofa in front of the fireplace. The newfound tension in their suite was a completely different atmosphere than the one only the night before. "I was going to tell you, but the time was never right."

She paced the open space. "I agree. There's never a good time to say, 'Oh, by the way, the psycho lunatic who's sending you cards and packages is now addressing them to our daughter.' Nevertheless, just say it."

Tony reached for Claire's hand and tugged her toward him. "It was her birthday, Christmas, and as you may recall, we were almost constantly surrounded by people—lots of people." He pulled his wife down onto his lap.

"No, Tony." She stiffened as he held her near. "I'm mad at you. I don't want you to change the subject. I want you to be totally open with me. If you're not... Well, I don't know."

His arms wrapped around her as she yielded her position and settled against his chest. The rhythmic breathing and steady heartbeat against her back served as a constant drumming that relaxed her nerves and calmed her anxiety. His lips brushed her neck. "I'm being honest. I was going to say something. The time just wasn't right. We need more time like this, more time alone."

Claire turned in his embrace. She wanted to see his emotions: she needed to know he took this as seriously as she. "The doll, it was one of those twin ones. Tony, before I ordered Nichol's, I looked at all the different companies. They all require pictures. This person had a picture of Nichol. If she didn't, she couldn't have had the doll made."

With each word his eyes darkened.

Claire continued, "I know it can't be proven as a threat, but I think it was meant that way. This woman is telling us that she knows what Nichol looks like. She knows her birthday."

"I know all of that. Roach, Eric, and I've talked about it. Roach has been in contact with the FBI. They know all of this. We're doing all we can do."

You aren't going anywhere without me or Roach; neither is Nichol."

"What about New York?" Claire asked.

"Roach told me that the credit card was purchased there," Tony replied as he looked deeply into her eyes. "If you don't want to go next month, we won't."

"We already have tickets—"

"I don't give a damn about a few tickets. Hell, we'll go back to paradise if that's what you want."

Exhaling, Claire lost her battle, allowing her anger to fade away and melting into her husband's embrace. Sighing, she said, "No. If we do that, this woman wins. That's not happening."

"I've been thinking about something, ever since that gift. I've talked a little to Roach about it, but I wanted to talk to you."

Claire turned back around to face her husband. She tried to read his expression and saw apprehension. "What?" she asked.

"I'm thinking about adding another member to our intimate security."

She shook her head. "No."

"You haven't even heard my idea."

"Tony, I want family time. I want it to be just us. I'm comfortable with Phil and Eric. We also have Shannon. I don't want anyone else."

"I was thinking about a woman. Roach has identified some incredibly qualified female ex-military and ex-field agents who could be with you when he can't."

Claire shrugged. "When Phil can't, you can. I don't know if you remember, but I spent over a month alone with Phil. There aren't a lot of secrets."

Tony bristled. "I'm aware, and I'll be forever grateful that he kept you safe during that time. My thoughts were that this woman wouldn't replace him: she'd assist him."

"You've already made up your mind, haven't you?" Claire fell back onto her husband's chest in defeat. This openness was all for show. Anthony Rawlings was the same man he'd always been. His decision was the only one that mattered.

"No," Tony whispered. "I haven't. I've only discussed it with Roach. If you don't want this, we won't do it. I just thought there might be times when you and I and Nichol may all need to go in different directions. This woman could help with that too." His lips brushed her hair as the scent of his cologne wafted through the air. "I love you. I love Nichol. I worry about both of you. Your safety and security are my primary concerns."

The tension eased from her muscles as her body liquefied against him. "Really? You haven't already started hiring someone. You truly want my input?"

"Really," he whispered, as he nuzzled her collarbone. "I mentioned it to Roach. He's found a few viable candidates. No one has been contacted. I wanted your input first."

Allowing her husband more access, Claire tilted her head and closed her eyes. His prickly cheeks abraded her soft skin. The sensation was like a spark to dry kindling, warming her and infusing her with the fire of desire she'd purposely tried to subdue. "Can I think about it?" she asked.

He nodded, striking the match with each movement of his head. His intention grew as her internal flames intensified. "If that's what you want to do..." His words came breathily against her exposed skin. "...then by all means, my dear, think."

Thinking, however was not what she wanted to do at the moment.

CHAPTER FOUR

January 2017

Claire

Memories are the key not to the past, but to the future.

—Corrie Ten Boom

“So what do you think of her?” Emily whispered as she and Claire stood on the shore of the frozen lake watching the mayhem of activity.

“I think she seems nice,” Claire replied, glancing at Taylor, the new addition to their security detail.

Emily shrugged. “Nice doesn’t seem like the best description of a bodyguard. That is her job description, isn’t it? I mean, she looks awfully petite for a badass. Shouldn’t she be like that knight lady on that TV show? You know the one who’s about seven feet tall.”

Claire laughed and shook her head. Taylor definitely wasn’t seven feet tall. She was probably only a little taller than Claire, about five-foot-five or – six and physically fit. Her long, dark hair was usually wrapped in a low bun, and her clothes were professional. She’d only been working with the Rawlings family for a week, but she seemed to fit in well. The most important thing to Claire was that she got along well with Nichol. “I don’t know what she *should* be. She had the best references. Tony and I like her, and Phil was impressed with her resume. I guess that makes her worth a try.”

“Well, I don’t know how you deal with having all these other people around all the time.”

It was Claire’s turn to shrug. “They aren’t *always* around and sometimes when they are, you don’t even realize it. That’s their job.” She thought about how Phil had been watching and protecting Nichol without Emily or John’s knowledge for years. That little secret brought a smile to Claire’s face.

“I guess if you’re all right with it.” Emily leaned closer. “Did you even

have a choice? Did you get any input in the matter? Or was it all decided for you?"

Claire turned indignantly. "Yes, Em, I had input. It was Tony's idea, and at first, I wasn't on board. But then I kept thinking about Nichol. I'll take a little less privacy to assure her safety any day of the week."

"But... like now... why are they here? We're on your property..." Emily looked around at the frozen lake, snow-covered ground, and bare trees. "...in the middle of nowhere."

Claire and Tony had agreed with law enforcement to keep all the information about the threatening mailings private. No one outside of their security and staff knew anything about them. The FBI explained that the fewer people in the know, the better chance they had of finding the culprit or culprits. Though they hadn't received any *Rawls-Nichols* mailings since Nichol's birthday, there had been some letters addressed to *Claire Rawlings*. After analysis, these new mailings were found to have male DNA. The writing was inconsistent, but the message was the same on each of these mailings: '*I will save you.*' Neither Claire nor Tony knew what that meant.

"Part of it is for Nichol," Claire explained. "The more she's used to them being around, the more comfortable she'll be if she ever needs their help or protection."

Emily shuffled her boot-clad feet. "Claire, I didn't know that she needed that kind of protection." Her voice softened. "I'm sorry. We did our best to keep her safe."

Claire reached for her sister's arm. "Stop that! You did great. You kept her out of the public eye. Look at her. She's perfect and she is safe. Things are just different now that Tony and I are with her. Tony's businesses and position puts him more into the limelight. You know we don't like that. We never have. And, well, with Meredith's book, there are still people who think they know us. Eric, Phil, and Taylor are our first line of defense. The more we include them in our activities, the more natural it is for Nichol."

"I get it," Emily admitted as the shrill expressions of glee came from the ice.

"Look, Momma!" Nichol yelled, as she and Michael performed their ice-skating wonders accompanied by their nannies and their fathers.

"I see, sweetie. You're doing great!" Claire replied.

"Claire, you should go back out there with them. I don't mind. I just don't think in my condition I should be on thin blades of metal."

"Of course you shouldn't." Claire looked down at her own skate-encased feet. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Emily leaned closer. "Sure. What?"

"I was so excited about this, about skating, but now that we've done it a few times, I'm totally over it. I want to spend my time here swimming, not

skating.”

Emily snickered. “Well, I think it’s too late. I mean, look at our husbands! I can’t believe you got them both out there on skates.”

“I can’t take all the credit. Nichol and Michael were pretty persuasive. The thing is... Tony’s doing better at this than I am. I mean, seriously, I don’t think there’s anything he can’t do. It makes me sick.”

“That’s because you’re sitting here with me. Go on out there. Show them how it’s really done.”

When Claire looked back to the ice, she saw Tony’s eyes looking directly at her. Turning back to Emily, she said, “If you’re sure you’re all right?”

Giving her sister a playful push, Emily replied, “I’m fine. Go!”

With each clumsy step on the snow with ice skates, Claire lost any pretense at grace. Honestly, walking in five-inch Jimmy Choo heels was easier than skates. However, once she reached the cleared ice, Claire easily glided toward her family.

“There’s my beautiful wife,” Tony declared as he reached for her hand. “I thought perhaps this was some grand scheme: get me out here on skates and then slip away.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Claire quipped. “I feel bad for Emily, not being able to participate.”

“Don’t,” John said. “She’s enjoying watching Michael—and seeing me make a fool out of myself.”

Claire nodded.

“Aunt Care, wook at us,” Michael shouted as he and Nichol held hands and tried to skate in a circle. Within seconds they were a giggling pile of snowsuit-covered arms and legs.

“I think we need to work on that,” Shannon said as she helped the two children stand.

“The winter Olympics is probably not in their future,” Tony whispered with a grin.

By the time they all made it back to the house, it was almost dark. After only a short distance, both children convinced their fathers they couldn’t walk another step and needed to be carried. Claire was pretty sure that Nichol had even napped a little during the hike.

“Would you like to come in for something to eat?” Claire asked John and Emily.

“No, thanks. We need to get this little guy home,” John replied. Then glancing toward his wife, he added, “I think we should’ve made Michael walk. He’ll have more energy than either one of us.”

After they’d all laughed and said their goodbyes, the Rawlingses made their way into the house. Shannon took Nichol to a warm bath as Taylor and Phil disappeared. In mere seconds, Tony and Claire were standing in the

middle of the foyer all alone.

"Hmm, I like this," Tony cooed, as he kissed Claire's lips.

"This?"

"This... quiet."

Claire nodded. "Yes, me too. Emily was asking me how I liked having so many people around all the time."

Tony's back straightened. "It's really none of her business."

Claire feigned a grin. She knew that for her sake and the sake of their families, her husband and sister were trying to get along. Most of the time, they succeeded; however, once in a while...

Tony's tone hardened. "We're not getting rid—"

"No, we're not," Claire interrupted. "I told her that often we don't even realize they're there. I mean, like now. It isn't like they hover." She touched his arm. "I'm truly all right with it. Eric and Phil are part of our family. I'm sure that one day Taylor will be like that, too." She smiled reassuringly. "I'm fine."

"Are you still comfortable with going to New York?" Tony asked.

Nodding, Claire answered, "I am. This will be Nichol's first time in the city. I think that while you're working, we'll go to the museums. She'll like the Museum of Natural History, and she's already excited about the play."

"As long as you have Phil and Taylor with you, go wherever you want."

"Right now I want to go take a warm bath." With a sly grin, Claire asked, "Should I ask Phil or Taylor to join me?"

Tony's finger touched her lips. "Oh, Mrs. Rawlings, it's been what, two or three hours since I've heard that beautiful smart mouth of yours?"

"Well, you're the one who keeps emphasizing their presence. I just thought—"

His lips silenced hers as the temperature of the entry hall rose exponentially, and he swallowed her in his embrace. After a lingering kiss, Tony whispered, "Perhaps we could take this discussion upstairs? You, my dear, are excessively overdressed for a bath."

"You are so right. Let me go get Phil—"

Taking her hand, Tony led her to the stairs. "We don't need him." He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "I think I've got this."

"If you're up for the job, I guess you'll do," Claire said jokingly.

With a devilish grin, he replied, "Not yet, but I'm sure that can be arranged."



LATER THAT NIGHT, while in their suite, Claire settled into bed and reached for

her Kindle. Not finding it, she realized she'd left her reader in their home office. Donning a robe, she slipped down the dimmed, quiet hallway. Unable to pass their daughter's door, Claire reached for the door handle.

With the opening of the door, the light from the hall spilled onto the carpet of Nichol's lavender room. The golden rays illuminated allowing Claire to peer beyond the light and see her daughter sleeping soundly on the large canopy bed with her doll on the pillow beside her. Tiptoeing to her daughter's side, Claire's smile grew, just being near her filled Claire's world with peace. It was obvious the ice skating had worn their daughter out. With her lips parted and eyes shut, she was lost in a dream world and oblivious to her mother's presence. Since they were leaving early in the morning for New York, Claire was glad that Nichol was already asleep. After a gentle kiss to Nichol's head, Claire made her way back toward the hallway, quietly closed Nichol's door, and eased down the back staircase toward their office. As she neared, she heard Tony's booming voice.

"...I don't care where they go, one of you needs to be with them at all times."

"Yes, Mr. Rawlings. They won't be alone."

Though she couldn't see, Claire recognized Taylor's voice as the person who'd responded.

"The last two mailings have had a connection to New York. If Claire weren't so damned determined not to allow this person to interrupt our lives, I'd insist that they stay home," Tony continued.

"With two of us," Phil began, "we'll keep them safe. One of us will be right with them and the other will stay back, watching the crowds. I'll keep Eric constantly updated. You'll know where they are at all times."

Claire stepped into the office, clad in her nightgown and bathrobe. "Don't mind me," she interrupted. "I feel like the president, overhearing his Secret Service agents. I wish you wouldn't all make such a big fuss out of this." She looked at Tony. "And you. I'll be honest. Your tone..." She pursed her lips. "...is a little intimidating. Give poor Taylor a break. You know they'll do their best."

Claire smiled in Taylor and Phil's direction.

Tony's eyes darkened. "Claire, my assistant bought the tickets for the play over a month ago. I didn't think about it at the time, but that's a red flag. We might as well have taken out a sign on Times Square and announced our arrival."

Finding her Kindle, Claire picked it up and walked toward Tony. Trying to lighten the conversation, she replied, "Wouldn't Nichol think that was special? Her name in lights on Times Square!"

"Claire," Phil warned, his gaze mimicking Tony's. "This is serious. Think about Patrick Chester—"

"I don't want to think about him," she snapped. "I don't want to think about the possibility that someone could be targeting Nichol or me. However, I will *not* let that someone hold my daughter captive inside of her own house. It's not happening." Her eyes met Tony's. Though she saw the darkness in his, Claire felt the fire in her own. Lifting her brow, she added, "She will *never* feel trapped in her own home. It's not debatable."

Her husband's lips formed a tight line as he forcibly retained his response. "Mrs. Rawlings?" Taylor asked, breaking the couple's unspoken standoff. They both turned toward Taylor's voice. "Yes?" Claire replied.

"May I suggest changing your tickets?"

Claire shook her head. "No. Absolutely not. Nichol's too excited about *The Lion King*."

"Not changing the show," Taylor continued, "just changing the performance. Your plans include being in the city for three nights. Could you go one of the other nights?"

Claire looked at her husband and tilted her head in question. "Can you change the tickets at this late of a date?"

His cheeks rose. "Hell yes. That's a great idea. Taylor, thank you."

"We'll get it all arranged and have the tickets put in another name," Phil interjected.

"There," Claire said. "It's settled. Now let's all get some sleep. Someone I know likes to wake up way too early for these business trips."

As Claire followed Phil and Taylor toward the door, Tony's voice rang through the office. "No, Mrs. Rawlings, I don't believe this conversation is finished."

Turning back, she took in Tony's demeanor. His tone and the piercing darkness of his gaze used to signal internal alarms. Not tonight. Tonight what caught her attention was the devilish grin he tried unsuccessfully to conceal.

When she turned back, Phil's questioning eyes asked what his lips couldn't. With a smile and a nod, Claire let Phil know that she was and would be fine. His shoulders relaxed as she said good night and closed the door. Looking again toward the dark eyes that filled her dreams, Claire walked back toward her husband.

"What do you possibly want to discuss that can't be discussed upstairs?"

Tony reached for the tie of her soft robe and tugged it open, exposing her satin nightgown. "Do you really think that this is appropriate staff-interaction clothing?" His hands caressed her hips, taking in the slippery material.

"I wasn't planning on seeing anyone but you," she replied. "I just came down for my Kindle." As she spoke, he stood. With each passing second, Tony's proximity gravitated closer until he hovered above her, and Claire's back arched over the desk. With a smirk to her voice, Claire continued, "You're the one having a big powwow in here. At this late hour, I thought

you'd be alone."

"Now I'm alone." His tone morphed from business to sultry as the darkness too changed: his earlier visible concern swirled with desire. "What did you plan to do with me... alone?"

Warm bourbon-scented breath bathed her cheeks and mixed with the aroma of cologne as heat radiated from his chest. Parts of her body—ones which moments ago had been ready to sleep—were now suddenly awake and begging for attention.

With a giggle, she replied, "Nothing. I just wanted my Kindle."

Lifting her to his desk, Tony eased himself forward, spreading her legs and pulling her waist toward him. "Nothing?" he asked, as he eased her robe from her shoulder.

"Tony, we have a nice bed upstairs."

"You know," he spoke in bursts, kissing her neck as his fingers traced her collarbone. "I hate it when you make references... references to the past... I hope you know... how sorry I am... that you have those memories."

"It happened. I won't deny it."

"Hell no..." His volume increased and he stood straighter. Claire wondered how much bourbon he'd drunk. Tony continued his tone deeper. "It wouldn't do any good to deny it now. The whole damn world knows it."

While the world's knowledge was her fault, Claire refused to apologize. *My Life as It Didn't Appear* was a bestseller. Though she'd tried to stop its publication, she failed. Therefore, it just was. While Claire contemplated her response, Tony's fingers entwined with her loose hair. Tugging, he tipped her lips upward. With his mouth a mere whisper from hers, he said, "I hate it, but at the same time, your reference brought back memories." His head cocked to the side, and his brown eyes opened wide. "Those memories aren't all bad... for me at least."

Claire smiled. "No, Tony, they aren't all bad for me, either. If they were, we wouldn't be here right now."

"So..." Sultriness filled his tone as he continued to caress. "...it's been a while since we've had *that* kind of fun in the office." Peaking a brow, he added, "I seem to remember a few things."

Unable to shake her head, with his grip on her hair, Claire pursed her lips. "You, Mr. Rawlings, are incorrigible. Didn't you just help me with that bath before dinner?"

Again, his lips found her neck, sending goose bumps up and down her arms and legs. "That was me. However, as I recall, I wasn't your first choice."

When his grip upon her hair loosened she reached for his, running her fingers through his salt and pepper mane. "You, sir, are always my first choice." Kissing his neck and hearing the familiar growl, Claire knew her plans to read would never transpire. Within seconds, her husband seized her

lips, swallowing the moans she didn't realize she was producing as their tongues intertwined. Finally, pulling back, she said, "But... I didn't lock that door."

Easing her legs farther apart, Tony lifted Claire's nightgown and pulled her hips toward his. "My dear, everyone else has gone to bed."

Claire couldn't think of any other arguments. She wasn't trying. Honestly, she couldn't think of anything besides her husband and what he was doing, how he was twisting her body and mind merely with his words and tone. Though this hadn't been her plan, she consented. It had been a long time since they'd allowed themselves to do anything outside of the security of their bedroom. Being home did have its advantages. As Tony's large fingers roamed, Claire cared less and less about anyone else in the house. "Tony?" she managed, though forming words was becoming increasingly difficult.

"Hmm?" he asked, easing her panties down her legs with his gaze lingering on what he was unveiling.

Seeing him unbuckle his belt, her question no longer seemed important. "Let me help you," she offered. Not waiting for permission, she reached for his shirt and began to unfasten the buttons. His grin was enough reassurance as she continued to remove his shirt while he freed himself from the confines of his slacks.

Still sitting on his desk, with her nightgown bunched around her waist, and her robe forgotten, Claire ran her fingers through the softness of his chest hair. Leaning back, she unconsciously bit her bottom lip as she admired her view. Scanning her husband from head to toe, she took in his toned abs, which, even with age were still defined. As she peered lower, her eyes followed a trail of dark hair that led the way to his impressive erection. Rarely was she the one clothed, and he not. Moving her gaze back upward, their eyes met, and her cheeks flushed.

"Are you enjoying the view, Mrs. Rawlings?"

Freeing her lip, she grinned. "I am. Thank you for asking."

Stroking himself, he asked, "Perhaps you'd rather go upstairs?"

She shook her head. Watching his hands, she suddenly thought about how much she wanted to be doing what he was doing. "No, this feels a little scandalous... I think I like it."

"Oh, scandalous is the way I like you."

Kneeling before the desk, Tony reached for her legs and placed one on each of his shoulders. Planting a kiss on the inside of her leg, he slowly moved upward. His dark eyes peered up. "I like my view too."

Moments later, Claire's moans filled the office as his tongue and fingers consumed her thoughts. Lying back on the desk and closing her eyes, memories of similar scenarios filled Claire's mind. In time, their bodies became one, the good memories overpowered the bad, and for the second

time in one day, she accepted all her husband had to offer and more. In the aftermath, as they walked hand in hand toward their suite, Claire squeezed his and whispered, “Those memories... they’re not all bad, not at all.”

His light chocolate eyes said more than words could ever convey.

CHAPTER FIVE

Late January 2017

Taylor

Responsibility is the price of freedom

—Elbert Hubbard

“*J*T DOESN’T MAKE sense. How could anyone know?” Taylor whispered to Phil.

He shook his head. “How did they know about the restaurant? I bagged these cards, just like the other one. The FBI will have them analyzed. All that matters is that the private viewing box is now clean. You stay with them in there, and I’ll stay outside the door.”

Taylor nodded. As the Rawlings family approached, she looked once again toward Phil. His headshake was almost indecipherable, but she saw it. With his unspoken statement, Taylor knew that telling Mr. or Mrs. Rawlings about the cards that had been left in Nichol and Claire’s seat should and would wait until after the play.

Claire

NICHOL’S EXCITEMENT WAS contagious as she bounced beside her mother. Her little patent-leather shoes danced with anticipation, as her eyes widened and took in all the grandeur of the Broadway theater. “Look, Momma, look, Daddy, I see the music intruments!”

Claire smiled at Tony and back at Nichol. “In-stru-ments. Yes, honey, that’s the orchestra. See the man with the wand in his hand?”

Nichol turned in amazement. “Like a magic one?”

“No, princess.” Tony’s words came through booming laughter.

“He’s the conductor,” Claire explained. “He’ll tell the orchestra when to

play the music. And when he does, he'll move the wand."

"I want to hear them." She turned toward Tony. "Daddy, make them start now."

Apparently Nichol believed there was no limit to her father's abilities.

"I could, princess." Tony replied.

Claire shook her head. Maybe Tony wasn't aware of his boundaries either.

Tony continued, "But see all the people who aren't in their seats yet? If I had the orchestra start playing, they'd miss the opening act."

Nichol pressed her lips together and wrinkled her forehead. "Then they should have gotten here sooner, like us."

"Yes, my princess, they should have."

Trying to distract their daughter, Claire said, "Honey, why don't you tell your daddy about our trip to the museum yesterday?"

Her brown eyes opened wide. "I lost Sophie!"

Tony reached for her doll and handed it to his daughter. "No, you didn't. Here she is."

"No, Daddy, I did lose her at the museum. She was gone! Mr. Phil found her on a bench. I didn't mean to get her lost."

Claire put her arm around Nichol. "It's all right. You have her back, and yes, Mr. Phil was quite the hero. Just like the time we accidentally left her at that ice cream shop in Iowa City a few weeks ago."

Their daughter's dark eyes narrowed. "I didn't lose her at the ice cream shop. She was hiding."

Claire rubbed Nichol's shoulder. "It's all right. We found her there, and Mr. Phil found her yesterday."

Nichol smiled back at Taylor. "And Miss Taylor too."

"I'm glad you had all that help," Tony replied. "Sophie sure has a pretty dress. It looks just like yours!"

"Mommy did that. We have matching shoes, too. See." Nichol lifted her shoes near the doll's feet.

"I don't think I've asked you: how did you come up with that pretty name?"

"I named her for the lady who painted the pretty picture of Momma, the one of Momma in her beautiful princess dress."

"You did?" Claire asked.

"Yep," Nichol said. "I like her name, and she painted good. You look pretty in that picture."

Claire's eyes met Tony's, seeing a hint of sadness swirl below the surface. "You're right, princess," he said. "She did do a good job, and your mommy looked even prettier in real life than she does in that painting."

The theater darkened and the music began. It wasn't until Tony had had the chance to speak with Phil during intermission that Claire noticed his

change in demeanor. When he looked her way, she silently questioned him. He only shook his head and mouthed, “Later.”

Once they were back in the limousine after the show, the pieces of the puzzle began to slide into place. As Nichol snuggled against Claire’s side and watched the lights through the window, Tony said, “We’re going home tomorrow morning.”

Lowering her voice, Claire replied, “Why? What happened?”

Shaking his head, he looked down at Nichol.

“But something happened, didn’t it?” she whispered.

Tony pulled out his phone and opened up the camera application. Silently, he handed it to his wife. Adjusting her eyes to the small screen, Claire looked down at the image. The picture was of a plastic bag with an envelope with the name *Nichol Rawlings* printed on the outside. Claire’s forehead furrowed.

“Swipe the screen,” Tony commanded. Claire did. The next was a picture of a similar bag containing a similar envelope with the name *Claire Rawlings* on the outside.

“Where were these?” Claire asked, keeping her tone low.

“On our seats in the private box.”

“On our seats?” she questioned, trying unsuccessfully to speak quietly. “But we just made these reservations.”

“Roach is running leads. The reservations weren’t in our name.”

Claire looked closer at the screen and enlarged the image. “They’re different, more like the recent *I’ll save you* messages. The names are handwritten and it says Rawlings, not Rawls.”

Tony nodded. “Roach contacted the FBI. They’ve taken the envelopes and will call as soon as they know anything. The fact that they’re different worries me more than if they were the same.”

Claire glanced at Nichol who appeared unfazed as she stared out the window, her little eyelids growing heavy as she struggled to watch all the sights just beyond her reach. “How could anyone know where we were?” With the light from the street and line of lights within, Claire saw Tony’s jaw clench and unclench.

“I don’t know,” her husband replied. “That isn’t all. There was another one, addressed to you, waiting at the restaurant.”

Claire’s stomach fell. “The restaurant? Where we just ate? It was waiting for *me*?”

Tony reached for her hand. “I’m not trying to scare you, but this is serious.”

“I agree. What did they say?”

“We don’t know. The FBI told us not to open anything. Once they do, we’ll know more.”

“Tony...” Claire peered down at Nichol, who, despite the chaos around

her, had fallen asleep with her forehead against the window. "...I'm scared."

He scooted near and pulled her closer. "I'd feel better if we were home. I have a few early meetings, but then we're heading back to Iowa."

Claire nodded. "I promised Nichol one more trip to *FAO Schwarz* and *American Girl*. We'll do that first thing in the morning and then we'll be ready to go when you're done." Noticing his expression, she added, "Don't worry. We'll have Phil and Taylor with us the entire time."

When they arrived back to their building, Phil went up ahead to the apartment. Tony carried Nichol, Claire carried Sophie, and Taylor led the procession with Eric following closely behind. Once their apartment was declared safe, the Rawlingses were cleared to enter.

Dropping Sophie on the sofa, Claire sighed. "I know she won't remember all of this, but this wasn't how I envisioned Nichol's first trip to New York."

Tony laid their daughter on the sofa and undid her coat. "Look at her. She's blissfully unaware."

Claire smoothed Nichol's hair away from her face. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened—" Tears threatened her painted lids.

"Stop," Tony interrupted, as his strong arms surrounded Claire. "Nothing will happen. We'll be home tomorrow."

Claire nodded against his Armani suit jacket and gained strength with each beat of his heart.

"Let's get Nichol into her bed. It's been a long day."

"All right," Claire replied. Her eyes widened as Tony picked up Nichol. "When do you expect to hear from the FBI?"

"Hopefully tomorrow." He started walking toward the front stairs.

"Oh, don't forget Sophie!" Claire said, as she picked up the doll. "You have no idea how traumatic it was when she went missing. We don't want Nichol waking in the middle of the night and not being able to find her."



EARLY THE NEXT morning, Claire and Tony woke to the thunder of running feet as their daughter launched herself onto their bed. "Momma, Daddy, I want to go to the doll store!"

Claire looked toward the red numbers on the bedside stand. "Honey, it's not even 6:00 AM. Look out the windows. It's still dark. Maybe you should go back—"

Her little forehead wrinkled. "Why? You said in the morning. It's morning."

"Honey, the store doesn't open—"

Not waiting for her mother to finish, Nichol asked, "When does it open?"

Claire was about to complete her suggestion that Nichol go back to sleep when Tony pulled himself up to a sitting position and tucked Nichol under his arm. "Come here, princess, let's look at what time the store opens."

As Tony turned on his phone, Claire shook her head. "I think that could wait until after—"

"Nichol? Where's Sophie?" Tony asked, interrupting Claire.

"Right here," she said, as she produced the doll from the foot of the bed.

"Oh, my. She's still wearing her dress from last night!" Tony said.

Nichol's eyes widened. "She is!"

"Doesn't she have a nightgown?"

"She does." Nichol climbed down from the big bed. "I'll go get her jammies."

Claire's brow furrowed. "Since when are you concerned about her doll's clothing?"

Instead of answering, Tony handed Claire his phone. It was open to a text message:

"MR. RAWLINGS. ALL THREE ENVELOPES AND CARDS TESTED CLEAR. THE MESSAGES WERE AS FOLLOWS: THE CARD FROM THE RESTAURANT, ADDRESSED TO MRS. RAWLINGS: 'THIS IS THE PERFECT OPPORTUNITY FOR ME TO SAVE YOU. SO MANY PEOPLE IN THE CITY. SOON I WILL BE ABLE TO HELP YOU.'"

"CARD FROM THEATER, ADDRESSED TO MRS. RAWLINGS: 'I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU CAN'T RESPOND, BUT TOMORROW. YOU WILL BE FREE TOMORROW.'"

"CARD FROM THEATER, ADDRESSED TO NICHOL RAWLINGS: 'SOON YOU TOO WILL BE FREE.'"

Claire read the text a second time. "What is it supposed to mean? I don't understand."

"I'll cancel my meetings. We'll leave right away."

Claire shook her head. "If we do that, this person wins. I almost felt better about the *Rawls-Nichols* mailings. At least they were consistent."

Nichol came rushing back, Sophie in tow. "I didn't put on her jammies. She's too excited about the doll store. She wanted to get dressed."

"She's excited?" Claire asked.

Nichol nodded. "Yep. Daddy, when does it open?"

Tony brushed the screen. "Just a minute. Oh, here it is. *American Girl* opens at 9:00 AM. Look at that, you silly: we have over three hours."

"I can't wait free hours." Her shoulders slumped. "That's forever! I want to go now."

Claire gave Nichol a big hug. "It's not quite forever, honey, but I understand. I'd like to go now too. However, we have to wait. I know, we can eat a big breakfast so we won't be hungry looking at all the toys. I bet Sophie

would like some scrambled eggs.”

“Nope,” Nichol answered matter-of-factly. “She wants pancakes with lots of siwup.”

“Of course she does,” Tony laughed.

When 9:00 AM arrived, Claire, Tony, Nichol, Phil, and Taylor were all anxiously awaiting the opening of the *American Girl* store on Fifth Avenue. After a discussion with Eric, Phil, and Taylor, Tony decided to cancel his meetings and stay close to Claire and Nichol. Still blissfully unaware, Nichol bounced in her seat, excited to have her whole family see the store.

Phil watched the entrance for suspicious patrons while Taylor stayed by Nichol’s side. Claire had arranged for a personal shopper to help guide Nichol to the areas of the store that interested her most, and the nice woman was waiting for their arrival. As she ushered Nichol about, Tony and Claire followed closely behind.

With each new section of the giant store, Claire began to relax. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Just before they were to leave, Nichol tugged on her mother’s hand and whispered that she needed to use the restroom. They handed Sophie to Taylor who followed them into the restroom. As soon as Nichol and Claire entered a stall, the commotion began. It happened so fast that it was difficult to keep up.

The tile walls and floors only amplified the sounds as rants and crashes echoed throughout the bathroom. Nichol’s brown eyes grew to the size of saucers when she looked to her mother and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Shush, honey,” Claire whispered, hugging Nichol close to her thundering heart.

Saying a silent prayer, Claire moved her and her daughter to the back of the stall. Fighting the urge to close her eyes, she stared at the latch, held Nichol tighter, and listened as the commotion waxed and waned. Claire didn’t know what or who had started the racket, but soon she heard not only Taylor’s voice but also Phil’s. Almost immediately, the chaos brought others. Though multiple people shouted, it wasn’t until Claire heard the deep baritone voice that her world was made right and she even considered opening the stall door.

“Claire,” Tony called. “Are you all right? Come out.”

With trembling fingers, Claire opened the latch. Her heart found its steady beat as her gaze blended into the dark eyes. Walking to her husband, she turned just in time to see the back of a man being led away by store security, his wrists cuffed.

“...you don’t understand,” the man protested. “She needs me. I love her, and she loves me. I need to save her from him...” His words trailed away as Claire melted against Tony, who held Nichol tight.

“What happened?” Nichol’s usually strong tone shook with uncertainty.

With a smile on his face and concern in his eyes, Phil joined the group.

"Everything is fine, Nichol. Remember, Taylor and I are here to keep you safe?"

Nichol nodded.

"Well, Taylor has something of yours."

They all turned toward Taylor as she presented Sophie back to Nichol. "That man wanted to make a lot of noise. It's a good thing I was here, because he didn't get a chance to get near Sophie. But I think she needs you, don't you?"

Pursing her lips together, Nichol nodded and said, "Thank you, Miss Taylor." Reaching for Sophie, she held her tight, still safe within her parents' embrace.

Once they were back in the limousine and on their way to the apartment, Phil began to share the information they'd learned. Apparently, a man in his mid-thirties had been waiting in one of the stalls. He opened the door, as soon as Claire and Nichol entered another stall. Of course, Taylor saw him immediately and was on top of him. "The man's name is Rudolf. He has a history of delusional behavior. From his mutterings, it seems that he read Ms. Bank's book, *My Life As it Didn't Appear*, and has since devoted his time to an effort to save and free you, Claire."

Claire shook her head. "Save me? Free me from what... the book?"

Taylor shook her head. "As Phil said, Rudolf is delusional. He's been arrested before for celebrity stalking. They'll do more detailed psychological tests, but it seems that he believed the circumstances of the book are current, not past. He believed that you're currently in danger."

Through clenched teeth, Tony proclaimed, "I hate that damn book."

"What else did this Rudolf say?" Claire asked.

"He was very forthcoming," Phil replied. "He's been following you for a while. However, we still aren't sure how he knew your schedule. I know your phones and computers are clean. I check them daily."

"He had an earpiece in his ear." Taylor volunteered. "You know, like a Bluetooth." Her mind processed. "Phil, how long did he say he has he been following Mrs. Rawlings?"

"He said that he's been *with you...*" Phil looked to Claire. "...for weeks."

"I've never seen him before in my life."

Tony squeezed her hand.

"I still don't know how he knew where we'd be. And what did he mean, *with me?*"

Contemplating the earpiece, Phil asked, "Nichol, may I see Sophie?"

Shaking her head, Nichol hugged her doll tighter. "No, she's scared. That bad man scared her."

Taylor and Phil exchanged glances. "Honey," Taylor began, "you know that Mr. Phil and I are here to keep you safe, right?"

Nichol nodded.

"We also want to keep Sophie safe, just as I did in the bathroom. Can I please see her for a minute?"

Apprehensively, Nichol's dark eyes turned to her mom. Claire nodded, unsure of Phil and Taylor's new fascination with the doll. Nichol slowly held Sophie out to Taylor. "Mr. Phil, Sophie wants to go to Miss Taylor."

Phil smiled. "That's just fine, Nichol. Miss Taylor can make sure Sophie's safe."

"I'm going to look very closely at Sophie when we get back to your apartment. Is that okay, Nichol?"

"Don't let her get hurt again."

"Again?" Taylor asked.

"Yes, she got an ouchy on her back."

"I won't let anything happen to her," Taylor reassured.

Claire squeezed her daughter's hand and watched as Taylor's soft blue eyes gave Nichol the comfort she needed.

"I've called ahead; our things should be packed for us to head home," Tony declared.

No one disagreed.



A FEW DAYS later back in Iowa, Claire and Tony sat in their office as Phil and Taylor explained their findings. "There was a microphone, GPS, and transmitter hidden inside of Sophie. That's how Rudolf knew where you were or where you were going."

"Did it happen at the company?" Tony asked.

"We're confident that it was placed post-manufacturing," Taylor replied. "However, upon further inspection, a smaller, more sophisticated tracker was found in the doll sent for Nichol's birthday. The FBI didn't find it at first because it's made of a new polymer that is radiolucent. So it didn't show up in their initial tests and x-rays."

Phil interjected, "We suspect that the tracking software was placed when Nichol left Sophie at the ice cream shop in Iowa City. I remember thinking at the time that I hadn't seen the doll when we left the shop. If they still have their security footage we could confirm our suspicions, but I think Rudolf was there and stole the doll when Nichol and we weren't looking. I didn't recognize him at first, but now I'm beginning to think he seemed familiar. We believe he inserted the transmitter, GPS, and microphone and then left Sophie for us to find. When we retrieved her, we never thought to look."

"Yes, that ouchy that Nichol mentioned was a small incision sealed with

clear glue,” Taylor added. “I asked her when it happened and she said after Sophie got lost at the ice cream shop.”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t know if Nichol mentioned Sophie’s injury before or not. I don’t remember. I’d bet that if she did, I didn’t think anything of it.”

“The FBI confirmed that the DNA on the electronics in both dolls matched Rudolf’s.” Phil forced a reassuring smile. “There’s no reason to think he was acting in conjunction with anyone else. His history is of lone stalking. The FBI is also confident that he isn’t related to or involved with the sender of the *Rawls-Nichols* gifts. He never in any of his attempts at contact used the names *Rawls* or *Nichols*, always Rawlings.”

“Great, so one psycho down and another to go,” Claire said with a sigh.

“The most important thing is that you and Nichol are safe,” Tony reiterated.

“And you,” Phil added, looking directly toward Tony. “In Rudolf’s delusions, he foresaw *saving* Claire and Nichol, and setting them *free*—by keeping them with him and assuring that you were permanently out of the picture.”

Claire gasped. “Permanently? Does he have a history of violence?”

“No,” Taylor answered. “However, it’s well documented that criminals tend to escalate in their behavior. He was bolder with you than he’d been in his previously known cases. Taking Nichol’s doll was quite the risk. His success undoubtedly fueled his confidence. Through the software he placed in Sophie, he had up to the minute updates of personal family matters. His intimate knowledge helped to perpetuate his delusion.”

“Wouldn’t that intimate knowledge have helped to refute his need to save Claire and Nichol?” Tony asked. “After all, he heard us interact. There was never anything that he would’ve heard to make him believe that either Claire or Nichol were in danger.”

Phil cleared his throat. “As we’ve said, the man was delusional. Anything he heard, without visual confirmation, could be misconstrued in his mind. We know that the only real threat was from him, but he didn’t see himself that way.”

“I don’t think I want to know any more about him, other than he’s out of our lives,” Claire said. “Tell me that there’s no chance of him getting free and coming after us.”

“It should be open and shut. After all, he was caught in the act,” Tony added.

“It wasn’t just what he did at the store; the FBI confirmed Rudolf had an unlicensed gun in his possession.”

Claire shivered. “Thank God you two were there.”

“With his history, at a minimum he’s looking at being institutionalized.

With the illegal audio surveillance and the firearms charge he's facing much stiffer penalties. Mr. Simmons has already petitioned for a restraining order. Don't worry. He's not coming near any of you," Phil replied.

"Confirm the timeline. When did Rudolf start his quest?" Tony asked.

"It seems as though it was near Nichol's birthday," Phil confirmed.

"That means that Nichol's birthday gift, the doll, was from him?"

Phil nodded toward Claire. "Yes. The doll was addressed to *Nichol Rawlings*. The card, no. It was addressed to *Nichol Rawls* and had the female DNA."

Tony wrapped his arm around Claire. "As you said, one down and one to go."

"Mrs. Rawlings," Taylor began, "it's an ongoing investigation. The FBI has been working with Phil closely. As a matter-of-fact..."

Phil's gaze shot toward Taylor.

"...we're hoping for more information anytime now," she continued.

"Is there anything else?" Tony asked, his gaze darkening as he looked from Phil to Taylor.

Phil and Taylor exchanged glances. "No, that about covers it," Phil responded, as the two of them stood to leave the office.

"I know I keep saying it. Somehow it seems insufficient, but thank you for everything," Claire said with a strained smile.

Taylor and Phil nodded as they both disappeared behind the door.

Once they were alone, Claire raised her brow and asked Tony, "Did you see that?"

"What? That they have something they're not saying?"

"No. The way they looked back and forth at one another, and the way Phil said we."

"Yes, I guess." Tony wrinkled his brow. "Why? I have no idea what you're asking."

"I think Phil's getting used to having someone else around. I mean, he's pretty much been in control of all things security, and although he was instrumental with our hiring Taylor, I got the feeling he felt like she was invading his turf. It just seems like after this, well, she was able to be in the bathroom with us when he couldn't. If she hadn't been there, and he'd been outside, who knows what would have happened."

"I don't even want to think about it."

Claire grinned. "I like it. It's good for him. I think he spends too much time alone."

Tony shrugged. "He's got Eric."

"I don't think it's the same thing," she said with a smirk.

Shaking his head, Tony pressed his lips together. "Mrs. Rawlings, don't play matchmaker. I want Phil and Taylor's attention on you and Nichol, not

on one another.”

“No one said they can’t do both.”

CHAPTER SIX

Late January 2017

Phil

Decision is the courageous facing of issues, knowing that if they are not faced, problems will remain forever unanswered.

—Wilfred A. Peterson

O NCE WITHIN THE hallway, Phil and Taylor moved silently away from the Rawlingses' office toward the security hub for the estate. As they approached their destination, Phil's gaze narrowed toward his new associate. Finally he voiced the question he'd been burning to ask, "What the hell did you almost say in there?"

Taylor's neck straightened. "I was going to mention the possible location of Mr. Rawlings' past assistant, Patricia Miles. She's the prime suspect, and in their last report the FBI said that she was recently suspected to reside in a small town in Minnesota under an alias."

"I didn't share that information with you. How do you know that?"

Taylor's hands found her hips as her voice dropped an octave. "I'm part of this team." She motioned down the corridor toward the closed office doors. "Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings have accepted me. Eric has accepted my role. Maybe it's time you eased up on your one-man crusade and accept that I'm here to help."

"I never said you weren't here to help. Helping doesn't include scaring Claire or upsetting Rawlings with unsubstantiated information."

"What's unsubstantiated? I read the report. Patricia Miles is believed to be living as Melissa Garrison and working for a small law practice in Olivia, Minnesota. More definitive results are due back in a matter of weeks."

Phil bristled. "There are some things that are better left unsaid."

"Team, Mr. Roach, that's how this works. Teams talk; they share."

Phil reached out to grab Taylor's elbow. "You want to talk about it? Fine,

talk to me. Talk to Eric. Do not take this to either Rawlings or Claire until we have definitive answers. Even then, talk to me first. Security for this family is *my detail.*"

Taylor pulled her elbow free. "Excuse me, who was there when Rudolf came out of the stall? Who figured out the connection with Sophie?"

"I'm not saying that your assistance hasn't been valued. What you did in New York was, well, it was more than I could've done, but you don't understand all that they've been through, especially her."

"Her? Your employer? Mr. Rawlings's wife?"

Phil took a step back, assessing the meaning of Taylor's question. "Yes, her. Her last few years have been difficult. She doesn't need additional stress."

As Taylor began to speak, Phil's mind flashed with memories—snapshots in time—beginning when he received the call from Brent Simmons: the first time he'd heard the name *Claire Nichols*. At the time, it seemed simple enough. Phil had done investigative work for Simmons in the past. This time he was asked if he could locate a lost woman and work temporary surveillance. That was almost four years ago. Four years. Phil hadn't spent four consecutive years with anyone since he left his parents' home and joined the military. Four years was a lifetime: more than Nichol's lifetime.

Not hearing Taylor's response, Phil went on, "She's all of those things. I've been with this family longer than anyone here, besides Eric. You don't understand all that's transpired."

"Really?" she asked, snapping her neck so that her blue eyes blazed toward Phil. "Do you think that poorly of my investigative skills that I'd walk into a job with a family like the Rawlingses with no information about them? Why the hell did you support my hiring if you'd assume such ignorance?"

Phil briefly closed his eyes. He had no desire to get into this with anyone, especially his new associate. "Did I ever say that I supported your hiring?"

"Mrs. Rawlings said that you did. Perhaps I shouldn't believe my employer?"

Damn. Claire always did talk too much, to everyone. "You had an impressive resume. I was particularly interested in your independent work since leaving the bureau."

Yes, Phil had done his research too. He would never allow someone open access to *his* family without it. Taylor Walters had all the right schooling, a double major in psychology and criminology. She worked local law enforcement for seven years before joining the FBI. Six years at the bureau had her working hostage negotiation. There's no doubt she had a way with diplomacy. Taylor excelled in her chosen field until she was shot in the line of duty. After rehab she was reassigned to a desk job: cybercrime. It only took a year of sitting behind the scenes until she left the FBI and pursued

independent jobs, many not unlike some that Phil himself had done.

Taylor's eyes widened. "I don't recall that information being on my resume."

"Now whose turn is it to be offended? Do you think I'd support, as Claire informed you, a hire that I hadn't fully investigated? And if you think you learned all there is to know about this family by reading a book, you're sadly mistaken."

"I never said what research I did. Yes, the book was part of it; however, a very small part. I'm aware of more than you know. Since I've been here, I've also made it a point to know all I can about my coworkers."

Phil shook his head. "I'm not trying to have a pissing contest with you. You're here. I'm fine with that. Just don't give either of them information on this particular subject without first running it by me. And I can tell you right now, I'm not going to approve sharing."

"The FBI is already involved. They're zeroing in on Ms. Miles. If you think you're going to go in and remove the subject under their noses, you're mistaken."

"Am I now?"

Taylor leaned closer. "You want to keep the Rawlingses safe? Then don't do something stupid so that you're in prison and not here."

"I appreciate the warning, Ms. Walters."

Phil turned, leaving Taylor in the grand hall as he made his way toward the security office in the lower level. He half expected her to follow and equally as much didn't. He didn't really care. Women had always been unpredictable, even women as well trained as Taylor Walters. She'd proven herself under pressure, yet she couldn't hide the fact she was missing a damn Y chromosome. He knew he should think of her like a partner, yet when they'd be sitting side by side going through footage or researching theories, he'd notice the sweet scent of perfume. It was different than Claire's, lighter. Yet even as he entered the security office, he sensed it lingering in the air, accentuating her absence.

Sighing, Phil sat at his desk. He'd never meant to think of Taylor in a personal way. Doing so was an insult to her professionalism. She was qualified to be part of this detail. Phil closed his eyes and massaged his temples. He needed to get his head on straight. Why had Taylor questioned his protectiveness of Claire? It was his job. Obviously, he was nothing more to her than an employee. That wasn't true. He and Claire were also friends.

Phil recalled the first time he saw Claire, his assignment, through the window in the Palo Alto condominium. A slight grin came to his lips as he remembered her smug expression in San Antonio when she knew she'd duped him. He still felt the heaviness in his chest as he ran toward her Palo Alto condominium, knowing that her life was in danger. Phil's fascination and

sense of duty involving Claire Nichols should have ended then and there. After all, Rawlings fired him. Whenever Phil remembered that terrible day, the firing was the least of his concerns. It was his failure to protect. If he'd done his job, he would've known about Patrick Chester. Instead he'd been lulled into a sense of the mundane, and it was Claire who'd paid the price.

When Catherine London called and asked Phil to help Claire disappear, he could've said no; however, he'd thought of it as his opportunity to atone for his error in judgment. Ms. London explained that Claire wanted to get away from Rawlings. It made sense. Phil had witnessed Rawlings' intensity. Phil had failed to protect her from Chester; he wouldn't fail to protect her from her ex-husband. Though once again, things weren't as he'd been led to believe. Nothing with Claire ever was.

Phil remembered their time in Europe, running from Ms. London and outwitting the FBI. Scenes with historic backdrops replayed in the recesses of his mind. The woman who had been broken and mending in California was stronger than he'd ever imagined in Europe. No longer oppressed, as he'd later read about in her memoirs, *Mrs. Alexander* was determined to make a life for herself and her baby. Though it took many favors and promises, Phil secured the island for her. Nothing was too much to make her dream come true. However, it didn't take long for Phil to realize that Ms. London had lied about Claire's goal. She didn't want to be separated from Rawlings. Without coming out and saying it, Phil knew she wanted the opposite. He couldn't stand to see her sad—not in paradise. Therefore, instead of protecting her from Rawlings, Phil did what he needed to do to make Claire happy: he brought Rawlings to her.

That temporary surveillance job became something Phil had never known, ever. It became his life, his family. Though keeping Claire safe and happy was still his top priority, his sense of responsibility grew the evening he felt Nichol move within her mother. Nichol was an extension of Claire. Part of him wanted to hate the beautiful, brown-eyed girl for what she'd done to her mother upon her arrival. Never in all of his years of service had he felt so impotent. But once again, Claire's strength showed through, and Phil adored the child as much as he did her mother. How could he not? Nichol was the only baby he'd ever held.

The sense of family somehow over time even transferred to Rawlings himself. The egotistical, narcissistic, hothead who'd originally hired him had morphed into a kindred spirit. Despite the Rawlingses' past history, Phil and Rawlings had a shared interest in keeping this family safe. On the tragic day at the estate, when faced with the inevitable, Rawlings looked into Phil's eyes and placed his infant daughter in his arms. Trust. After failing them in Palo Alto, Phil had earned it back.

Phil remembered holding Nichol inside of his jacket to keep her warm and

protect her from the cold water of the sprinklers and the bitter Iowa spring temperature. However, after receiving the greatest gift he could imagine from Rawlings, Phil once again failed to protect Claire and all of their lives spiraled out of control.

During the next two years he could've walked away. No one would've blamed him. Hell, Brent Simmons told him to leave, for his own good. Phil didn't care about *his* own good. He never had. One doesn't do what he'd done throughout his life while being concerned about his own well-being. There had always been another reason.

Did his infatuation start that day in March of 2013 when he saw Claire through the fourth-floor window, or perhaps in San Antonio? Phil couldn't say. He'd foolishly shown his cards in San Diego when he sent Claire the note with her room service. No matter the time it began, Phil's sense of duty was too ingrained. The Rawlingses were his responsibility. He'd failed them before and he wouldn't do it now.

No matter how mixed up Phil's feelings were about Taylor, she'd saved Claire and Nichol from Rudolf. He should welcome her knowledge and assistance. However, that one act didn't give her the ability to share unsubstantiated information. Phil was still the go-to man on this *team*, as she called it. And he would do anything to keep Claire away from the dark place where she was unreachable, the place she'd been for two long years. It wasn't as simple as keeping her physically safe. It was keeping her mentally stable. The way he saw it, a sense of unwavering security was a strong component of that mental health.

Keeping his employers uninformed didn't only apply to Claire. From Phil's perspective, Rawlings didn't need the responsibility. Phil had plans for the sender of those gifts and cards. If things didn't go as he intended, the Rawlingses could honestly claim ignorance. Neither one of them needed a public and lengthy legal battle. They'd both had their share.

EARLY FEBRUARY: CLAIRE

CLAIRE SIPPED HER warm coffee as Courtney's excitement bubbled forth with each word. "I'm not supposed to say anything, but I feel like I might burst! Brent and I are so excited about Caleb's call. Can you believe it? Can you honestly believe it?" She raised her chin and turned her profile to the left. "Come on, tell me the truth. Do I look like a grandmother?"

Claire giggled as she shook her head. "No, but if you stop going to those every-three-week salon appointments, you might."

"Nonsense. I don't need to be a white-haired, frail little thing to be a

grandmother. I'm going to be the hottest grandma this side of the Mississippi."

Claire's laugh filled the restaurant. "Yes, Cort, you are! How's Julia feeling?"

"She's having morning sickness, or as Caleb said, morning, noon, and night sickness."

Claire scrunched her nose. "Poor thing. I remember that with Nichol. Mine didn't last too long, but even one bout is too many."

"I told her that it doesn't usually last past the first trimester. I mean, look at Emily. She's feeling well. Isn't she?"

Claire nodded, swallowing a bite of her salad. "She is. She's just starting the dreaded third trimester. You know, when you're ready to be done. I remember sleeping a lot. Em can't do that, not with Michael. I guess she can with Becca helping her, but it's still hard. She seems tired most of the time."

As Courtney continued to talk about Julia's pregnancy, Claire basked in the memories of her own. She tried to think of the good times, those of her and Tony on the island. A faint pinkness came to her cheeks as she recalled the difficulty and inventiveness of being together during those last few months. It would seem that in that enlarged state, sex would be the last thing she'd have wanted; however, Claire remembered it being the exact opposite. It wasn't a subject she wanted to ask Emily about or bring up to Courtney. Heaven knows, with Courtney's filter—or lack thereof—she might just say something to Julia, and Claire didn't want to be the source of that uncomfortable daughter- and mother-in-law conversation.

The noontime crowd had thinned by the time the two ladies finished their lunch and last cup of coffee. They'd had too much to talk about to rush. "It's been great to get some time to catch up," Courtney said as she squeezed Claire's hand.

With Claire's response on the tip of her tongue, she saw Phil looking her direction from a table away. "It has," she confirmed. "Are you ready for Phil to get the car?"

They both looked toward the large windows of the restaurant. More snow had fallen while they'd lunched. "I wish he'd have joined us for lunch. I always feel bad when he's by himself."

Claire shook her head. "I asked him to join us. He said he didn't want to intrude. Besides..." A gleam came to Claire's emerald eyes. "...he isn't always alone. I'm kind of enjoying watching him and Taylor."

"Hmmm?"

"Well, I just get this feeling there's some unresolved tension." She raised her brows. "And I don't mean the bad kind either. They're both professional. However, the atmosphere is different when Taylor's working with Eric than it is when she's working with Phil. I doubt he even realizes how obvious it is."

Courtney laughed. "Probably not. After all, he's a man."

Both women giggled as Phil approached the table.

"Are you ladies ready for me to get the car? I can warm it up. Mother Nature isn't being too kind to us today."

"That'd be great, thank you. Unless..." Claire's expression sparkled. "... we could convince you to join us for one more cup of coffee?"

Phil shook his head. "Oh, no. I've been hearing your chatter from across the way. I think I'll stay out of all this girl talk. I don't have much to add to the conversation."

Both ladies laughed into their mugs as Phil walked away and secured his jacket and gloves. Once he was gone, Claire said, "I'm sorry we haven't done this more often. Since we returned from the South Pacific, things have been busy."

"Speaking of busy, I'm sorry your trip to New York was ruined. How's Nichol doing with all of it?"

"She's doing fine," Claire replied. "She really isn't having any problems. I wasn't sure how much to talk to her about it. I didn't want her repressing it and having issues with it later, and I didn't want to scare her by dwelling on it too much."

Courtney's lips pressed into a tight smile. "You can tell that you talk to your therapists a lot."

Claire's forehead rose. "Ha! Yes, I guess I'm starting to sound like them. Well, I do talk to them a lot. Between *my* twice weekly sessions at Everwood and *our* once a week family session with the child psychiatrist, I feel like there's very little that ever goes unsaid."

"I hope it doesn't make you uncomfortable by my asking, but do you think it helps?"

"I guess," Claire commented. "It's been our norm for the last few months. I just want to be done with it—and not have to schedule my weeks around therapy. I know everyone's worried, but I feel good."

"Good?" Courtney asked.

"Yes, good," Claire confirmed.

"Claire, I've been your friend for over seven years. I love you, and I know how you're fond of superlatives. Things are usually *the greatest, fantastic, etcetera*. I could go on. *Good* is never good. What's going on?"

Claire's eyes dropped to the table. "I haven't said anything to the therapists, but it's all the medicine they have me on. I know it helped me get to where I am. I just want to be totally me again."

"Have you talked to anyone about it?"

Her green eyes met Courtney's blue. "Do you mean Tony?"

Courtney nodded.

"No. I don't want to worry him. He's continually asking me how I am,

how I feel, and if I'm all right." Tears threatened to fall. "I want to be all right. I want to be me. Instead of talking to therapists, I want to do this." She gestured to herself and then Courtney and her voice quieted. "I know it's stupid. The therapy and medications helped me confront my past. I've done that—over and over. Now I want my future."

"That doesn't sound stupid at all. Perhaps you should talk to your doctors. Tell them how you feel."

Claire stood and wrapped her arms around her friend. Stepping back, she smiled. "Thank you. Thank you for not telling me it's too soon, or that I don't know what's best for me. Thank you for listening."

Tilting her head, Courtney whispered, "Emily?"

"Yes," Claire admitted. "I started to broach the subject with her the other day and she was all over me." Reaching for Courtney's arm, Claire hurriedly continued, "I know how you all feel about her, but don't. She's trying. She just has this obsession with mothering me."

"Well, honey, after her little girl is born, she'll be too busy with Michael and the baby to worry about mothering you."

Claire sighed as they left the table. "It feels great to talk to someone who knows me, knows the real me and everyone around me. I can't say these things to my therapists or doctors. They don't get it. They'd want me to explore my feelings or my motivations. I just want to say, 'hey, I love my sister, but today she's driving me nuts' without delving into the psychology of why I feel that way."

Making their way through the tables, Courtney grinned knowingly and whispered, "You know I'm here anytime. My guess is that your husband isn't the best sounding board for your complaints about your sister."

Claire feigned a laugh. "That goes without saying. However, he's trying too. They both are. Very trying." She added with a giggle as her eyes lit up. "And I'm very happy that John decided to stay at Rawlings Industries. Even though it's still strained with Emily, when Tony talks about John, I sense a genuine admiration."

"I know that Brent thinks the world of John. If you're ever looking for reasons or positive outcomes that resulted from all that you've been through, John coming to Rawlings could be one. According to Brent, he's a wonderful asset to the company. They're all glad he's there."

Claire smirked. "Not a *good* asset?"

"No, a *fantastic* asset."

"Who's the one who's over the top—who's keen on superlatives?" Claire asked as they stepped into the Iowa winter wonderland and cold air bit their cheeks.

Courtney laughed as she settled into the backseat of the waiting SUV next to Claire. "So, maybe I'll be a hot, over-the-top grandma?"

“I have no doubt!” Claire replied.

“So are we still on for next Saturday night?” Courtney asked.

“Yes! I want Tony to have the best birthday celebration he’s had in years.”

“I don’t think that’ll be too difficult. And with our plan, I’m sure we’ll succeed. I heard from Eli and Marianne, and they’re flying in on Friday night.”

Claire watched the flakes of snow swirl in funnels near the street. Neither she nor Tony had had much to celebrate in the last few years. She thought about Tony being alone in prison on his last two birthdays. Though Tony didn’t talk about his prison experience much, Claire knew. She knew what it was like to be alone. She didn’t want that for either one of them, ever again.

“Oh! Tony will be so excited to see them.”

Courtney went on, “So that’ll be Eli and Marianne, John and Emily, Tim and Sue, Jerry and Meredith, Caleb and Julia, and the four of us. Can you think of anyone else I should invite?”

“No, that sounds good.”

“Good?”

Claire shrugged. It surprised her when memories would hit. For some reason, the thought of Derek Burke popped into her head. She’d only met him once and she’d never met Sophia, but nevertheless, Claire had a momentary flash of how nice it would be to have them among their circle of friends. Pretending the thought hadn’t occurred, Claire replied, “I just realized I’ll be seeing Julia and I can’t say anything about her pregnancy. That’ll be so hard.”

“Tell me about it! I’d have one of those giant yard signs announcing my grandchild to all of our guests if Caleb and Julia would let me. They just want to wait until she’s further along to tell people.”

“I understand, besides...” Claire leaned closer. “...they might be afraid you may be a little over the top?”

“Me? Not at all!” Courtney laughed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

February 2017

Claire

Where there is love there is life

—Mahatma Gandhi

TONY'S BIRTHDAY BASH was a huge success. Though he wasn't surprised to have a party, having Eli and Marianne there made it extra special. The next morning, Tony, Claire, Nichol, and Eric, Phil, Taylor, and Shannon, traveled to Phoenix. Tony had business there for a few days and since his actual birthday would fall during his trip, he wanted his family near. Claire couldn't have been happier. Not only was she thrilled to get a reprieve from the Iowa winter, she was happy to do her best to make his fifty-second birthday one he'd never forget.

It seemed that traveling with only the three of them was no longer a viable option. Having Eric, Phil, Taylor and Shannon with them was becoming a natural extension. Claire didn't long for the days of solo travel, with just her and Tony on their plane. She'd willingly come to terms with their new normal. Though Rudolf was no longer a threat, he proved to both Tony and Claire that they could never take their safety or Nichol's for granted.

Over the past few weeks, they'd also learned a little more about Rudolf. Everything they'd been told before proved to be true. He was indeed working alone—a quiet, strange man fixated on someone he perceived as being in need. It was a similar modus operandi to his previous arrests. According to the police reports, Rudolf truly believed it was his mission to save Claire Nichols Rawlings from the clutches of Anthony Rawlings. The psychological evaluations were still incomplete, but without a doubt, the man was a few cards short of a full deck. With the restraining order in place, the law stipulated that if released, Rudolf could never come within one hundred yards of Anthony, Claire, or Nichol Rawlings. According to Phil, he'd never come

within ten times that close. Thankfully, Rudolf was currently residing in a state facility under lock and key. Being his third such arrest coupled with the additional charges, his chances at an early release were slim to none.

Now that the Rawlingses were back home in Iowa, they were once again facing another celebration. Truthfully, it wasn't Claire or Tony who was excited about the impending holiday: it was Nichol. She was absolutely beside herself at the idea of celebrating Valentine's Day with her parents, and of course, it didn't take a lot of convincing to have Claire totally on board. Thinking back over Valentine's Days spent together, Claire was certain this would be a Valentine's Day unlike any her husband had celebrated. The curiosity of seeing his reaction propelled her through the painstaking task of cutting out paper hearts and frosting cupcakes.

Late on the afternoon of the fourteenth, Nichol paced the lavish kitchen, scanning the paper hearts and flowers dangling from the ceiling and littering the floor. Her dark eyes searched desperately, double- and triple-checking all of their hard work. "Momma, I want it perfect." She peered up through her long lashes. "Do you think Daddy will like it?"

Claire stifled a giggle as she shook her head. Their daughter couldn't be more like her father if she tried. "Honey, I think he'll love it."

"Are you sure?"

Claire wrapped Nichol in a warm hug. "I'm sure, sweetie."

"But..." Nichol scrunched her eyebrows together. "...what if he doesn't like paper hearts?"

"I'm sure he'll love paper hearts, especially when they're made by his two favorite girls."

Nichol clapped her hands as the sound of voices traveled from the foyer. "Oh, Momma, he's home!"

Before Claire could respond, Nichol was gone, her small feet running hurriedly toward the front door. Claire took one last look around the kitchen dining area. Pink, red, and white construction paper lay everywhere. She shook her head, confident that Anthony Rawlings had never celebrated Valentine's Day with paper hearts and homemade cupcakes; nevertheless, that was Nichol's idea, and Claire was not about to discourage their daughter's creativity.

"Don't look, Daddy."

Claire turned to see their daughter leading Tony by the hand, his eyes squinted shut. By the way his lips turned upward in that mischievous grin, Claire was confident that he could see the colorful explosion all around him. Moments later, his wink confirmed her suspicions.

"May I open my eyes yet?" he asked.

Claire was sure she'd never tire of hearing him banter and play with their beautiful daughter.

"Not yet," Nichol responded. "Momma and I have something for you." She led Tony to a waiting chair. "Sit down here."

Yes, thought Claire. Demanding just like her daddy, too.

"You do?" Tony asked as he sat. "What does your momma have for me?"

Claire's insides tightened as she brushed his cheek with a fleeting kiss and whispered, "Later."

Placing a paper crown on his thick salt and pepper mane, Nichol clapped her hands and shouted, "Open your eyes! Happy Valentine's Day, Daddy!"

Tony laughed as he pulled Nichol to his lap and kissed the top of her head. "Is this all for me?"

Her little pigtails swung back and forth as she nodded. "It's 'cause we love you! We made cupcakes too!"

"We did," Claire added as she grinned at Tony's paper crown. "However, I think we should eat dinner before cupcakes."

"No, Momma." Nichol pouted and looked pleadingly from Claire to Tony. "It's a special day." Her little fingers fumbled with the neckline of her top. "See, I even got to wear my great-grandma's necklace. That means it's very special. So we can eat cupcakes before dinner."

Tony shrugged and smiled at Claire. "My dear, your negotiating skills have been passed on to the next generation. I don't know how we could possibly argue with that reasoning."

Claire sighed. "All right, you two, but we have a wonderful dinner waiting, so after the cupcakes..."

"We'll eat dinner," Nichol and Tony said in unison.



AFTER DINNER AND a bedtime story, Tony and Claire tucked Nichol into bed and closed her door. Melting against her husband's side, Claire enjoyed his strong embrace as she let out an exaggerated breath.

"Are you tired of celebrating, my dear?"

"I think I am. You have no idea how long it took to cut out all of those hearts."

Leading her toward their suite, Tony opened the door to a candlelit surprise. Their private table was set with white linen, a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses, and covered dishes.

"Tony? What did you do?"

"Well, I may have been tipped off about the paper and confection celebration."

Claire raised a brow. "Who told you? It was supposed to be a surprise."

"Shannon may have said something—but don't be upset with her. When I

told her that I wanted her to watch Nichol tonight while I took you out to celebrate, she explained the secret plan. She didn't want me to ruin Nichol's surprise."

Claire turned slowly, noticing the rose petals strewn across their turned-down sheets. "What is all of this?" she asked as she motioned toward the table. "We already ate."

With a devilish grin, he lifted one lid to reveal strawberries.

"Hmmm," she replied. "I think I could be persuaded—"

Before she could finish he lifted the second lid revealing chocolate sauce and whipped cream. Her eyes opened wide. "Tony?"

He gracefully moved toward her, his eyes darkening with each step, twisting her insides to a painful pitch. As Tony held her close, pressing her breasts against his strong chest, and seized her lips, tired was no longer part of Claire's thinking. Moments later, his skilled fingers began to unbutton her blouse.

Less of a protest than a question, Claire repeated, "Tony?"

His warm breath tickled her exposed shoulder as he whispered, "We don't want to get chocolate sauce or whipped cream on this beautiful blouse." Cocking a brow, he added, "Or your slacks, or any colorful lace you have underneath."

Holding his shoulders for support as her slacks joined her blouse in the puddle of silk on the floor, she replied, "We don't?"

"No, because, my dear, it's time for our own confection celebration, and if you think our kitchen was messy..." He grinned as his dark eyes sparkled in the candlelight. "...you haven't seen anything yet."

"Hmmm," she managed, words forming with some difficulty as Tony's lips followed a path from her ear to her shoulder. Before speech was totally out of reach, she asked, "W-What about you?"

"What about me?"

Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt. "I wouldn't want chocolate on this nice shirt either."

When she undid the last button, he seized her hand. "My dear, you and Nichol planned your surprise. This is *my* Valentine's surprise for you. Do you trust me?"

Claire nodded, allowing Tony to back her toward the bed, buckling her knees. Wearing only her pink lace bra and panties, Tony's dark admiring gaze scanned her from head to toe. Each second filled her with both vulnerability and anticipation. Finally, she answered, "I trust you."

A lust-filled grin radiated from ear to ear as he heatedly said, "Good. I have something I'd like you to wear. Remember... you said you trust me."

Claire's eyes widened, her breaths becoming shallow as she sucked her lower lip. "W-What do you want—"

Before she could finish, Tony opened the drawer of her bedside stand and removed her satin sleep mask. Claire's cheeks rose approvingly as she reached for the mask.

"No," he said, as he lifted her dark hair and kissed her neck. "Let me." Tenderly, he placed the mask over her emerald eyes and secured the elastic band behind her head. "Can you see?"

"No." She giggled.

Her amusement soon morphed to unbridled desire as his sensual caresses traced an invisible line from her cheek to her breasts, teasing the round globes from their lace enclosure. Each time she began to speak, his finger gently touched her lips. When his mouth retraced the path, Claire fell back upon their soft comforter, giving him access to her newly exposed breasts and enjoying the sensation of his warm breath on her sensitive skin.

Soft moans came from somewhere deep in Claire's throat as he moved slowly—painfully slowly—down her stomach, touching, caressing, and igniting the flames of her desire. Just before reaching the trim of her panties, Tony stopped. Gasping, Claire reached for him—finding only air in the darkness.

Before she could sit, she heard her husband. "God, you're so beautiful."

Blood flushed her cheeks as she listened to his sultry tone. Suddenly, she felt his presence on the bed behind her. Within moments, his strong embrace tenderly pulled her back, situating her in front of him. When she leaned back against his bare chest, Claire smiled, her green eyes gleaming under the mask. From what she could tell, they were now dressed—or more accurately, undressed—to match.

"Open your mouth," his deep baritone voice dripped with seduction.

Obediently, she did as he said. Her compliance was rewarded with the rich taste of warm chocolate. Immediately, Claire opened her mouth wider allowing him to place the strawberry upon her tongue. Quickly, she closed her lips, purposely licking the chocolate from his fingers. His chest vibrated with his resonating growl as she sucked each finger clean. All the while, her insides quivered at the sound. Sweet strawberry juice mingled with the decadent chocolate as Claire swallowed.

"Again," he commanded.

This time, cool whipped cream covered the berry and her lips. As she swallowed, Tony captured her chin, turning her toward him and tasted the cream from her lips. The loss of sight had her senses on high alert, making each move unexpected and erotic. Next, Tony gathered her hair and secured it on top of her head with a clip. Before Claire could decipher his intent, the alternating sensation of warm chocolate and cool whipped cream dribbled over her chest. She gasped as he laid her back, moved in front of her, and began to savor the contrasting culinary delights.

"Oh, Tony," Claire panted, as the alternating sensations found new and creative locations.

It wasn't until Claire's breathing became erratic and they were both a sticky mess that Tony removed the mask and they came together as one. No longer blinded, Claire's emerald eyes stared deep into the only chocolate she would ever crave. They moved as one until both of their worlds shattered in blissful ecstasy.

As they later stepped into the warm spray of the multiple showerheads, Tony kissed his wife and said, "Happy Valentine's Day, Mrs. Rawlings."

With a smile glistening with sparks of emerald, Claire replied, "Mr. Rawlings, not so fast—now it's my turn." Her husband's devilish grin was all the encouragement she needed.

When they finally settled into their bed for the night, Tony pulled Claire close and whispered, "To many more celebrations with Nichol..." He pulled her tighter against his side. "...and more with just the two of us."

"To many more..." Claire's words slipped away as the beat of Tony's heart lulled her to sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

March 2017

Claire

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

—Winston Churchill

R. CARLY BROWN leaned back in her chair and studied Claire Rawlings. “What makes you think you’re ready for that?”

Claire sat taller. She’d been adjusting well to the decrease in medications. Coming off of them was the next logical step. “Don’t you think that I am?”

“You seem to be avoiding my question. What makes you think you’re ready to stop taking your medications?”

“Well, first, I don’t think I need them anymore. I haven’t had any problems since I was here at Everwood or issues since the dosage has been decreased. I’m going to all of my sessions, both with you and the family counseling that Tony and I go to each week.” She shrugged and a smile graced her lips. “Things are good—better than good. I want to do it on my own, not with the medicine.”

Dr. Brown nodded. “There’s nothing wrong with needing medication. Millions of people—”

“Yes, millions of people take anti-psychotic medications. The thing is I understand now what happened to me. I know that my mind couldn’t handle the reality that I’d lost my family forever, so I went away. But I didn’t lose them. I didn’t lose Nichol or Tony. I have them and I’m happy, really happy.”

“We’re doing tests, monitoring the levels. We’ve made a significant reduction. These are not medications that you can just stop. It’s a process.”

Claire nodded. “Can we cut the dosage again?”

“It appears you’re in a hurry. Is that true?”

Claire fidgeted with the cuff of her blouse's sleeve. "No, I'm not."

"All right, you're not. Tell me what's been going on. What have you been doing?"

"So much!" Her emerald eyes glistened. "I've learned one thing, well, I've learned a lot of things, but one thing is that every day is a gift. Nichol's a gift. We missed so much time with her. I was afraid that it would never seem like we were truly a family, but it does." She looked away from Dr. Brown's knowing gaze. "I see the way Emily and John look at her sometimes. I know I shouldn't feel jealous, but I do. They shared a part of her life that Tony and I'll never have."

"How does that make you feel to say you're jealous?"

"Like I'm a terrible person. They helped Nichol and us. I should be grateful, not jealous, and now they're having another baby."

"When is your sister's baby due?" Dr. Brown asked.

"In another month. We went shopping for clothes the other day."

"And Emily is having a...?"

"A girl," Claire confirmed. "They're having a little girl, and they're naming her after our grandmother Elizabeth."

"How do you feel about Emily and John having a girl?"

"I'm happy. They're excited and I'm excited for them. I can't help but think that in some way she's replacing Nichol. I don't mean that in a bad way. But for over two years they had two children. Soon they will again."

"Is Nichol replaceable?"

Claire's eyes widened. "No! That's not what I mean." She stood and walked about the office, trying to collect her thoughts. "They were a family of four and now they will be again."

"And that makes you feel..?"

Claire spun toward the doctor. "Happy for them, and maybe a little sad for me."

"Help me understand."

A tear teetered on Claire's lid. "They're getting their family back, the one they had with Nichol. Tony and I will never get that time back." She dejectedly sat and let out a sigh. "That's why I think we should cut my medications—not just cut but stop them."

"Help me out. How does your sister's baby relate to your medicines?" Dr. Brown leaned forward. "Before we continue to decrease and maybe even eliminate some of your medications—"

"*Maybe* eliminate?" Claire tried to clarify.

"Listen to me. I'd like you to be honest with yourself and with me. Why do you really want to be off the medication?"

Tears momentarily blurred Claire's vision. "I know why."

Dr. Brown didn't speak; instead, she nodded.

"I want to be me. The medications keep me in the middle. Does that make sense?"

"Explain, Claire. Help me understand."

Claire sat taller. "I feel happy and sad. I become aroused. But it's all in moderation. I want the highs and lows I used to have. I don't want to feel detached. It's gotten a little better since you've made some adjustments. I want it to get all the way better."

"Hmm. Those are valid requests. I know that from what you've told me you and your husband have had an intense past. Do you not feel like it's the same?"

Claire shrugged. "It is and it isn't. We've both been through a lot. We've changed. Our everyday life is everything I'd ever dreamt of. And yes, we're physically compatible."

"Well, *physically compatible*... that sounds sexually pleasing."

Claire stood again, walked toward the side of the room, and pretended to look at the pictures she'd seen a million times.

"What is it, Claire?"

"I think the medicine makes it more difficult for me to..."

"To become aroused?" Dr. Brown suggested.

Claire nodded. "I think there's something wrong with me. When we're alone together, and Tony's all sweet and loving, I'm not as into it as I am when he's more possessive and demanding." Claire turned toward Dr. Brown. "He's not mean. I don't mean that. I just like it when... jeez, I can't believe I'm saying this."

"What you're feeling isn't wrong. The medications you've been prescribed can affect arousal and sexual functioning; however, for you it appears more than that. Go on."

"I like when we're equal partners outside of the bedroom, but in it, I like when he's in charge. I don't want to need him to be that way. I want to be able to like the other times too."

"Tell me about the other times."

Claire sighed and closed her eyes. Sitting back down, thoughts of her husband came to her mind. "He can be romantic and giving. After all of this time he can take a normal night and make it feel like a date, as if it doesn't matter that he spent his day making multi-million dollar decisions, as if now I'm the only other person in the world." Her heart fluttered. "Honestly, that's the man I fell in love with: the one who would listen to me and talk with me. I didn't have anyone else: he was my world. I knew that he had other people, and I guess I felt special because he chose to spend his time with me." Claire met Dr. Brown's eyes. "Now, we both have other people and he can still do that, still make me feel like it's only the two of us."

Dr. Brown didn't speak.

"Those times make me love him more than ever, and I want to reciprocate his love and gestures. I just feel like sometimes there's a fog, a barrier that I have to push through. And when I hear a more demanding tone or feel a more possessive touch that block goes away." Claire shook her head. "Before the medication I didn't feel like this."

"What happened early on in your relationship when you heard that tone or felt that touch?"

Claire swallowed the lump forming in her throat. "I responded."

"You responded. What if you weren't in the mood?"

"It didn't matter." Tears streamed from the corner of Claire's eyes as she closed her lids. Finally she asked, "Are you saying that that's what's happening? I'm responding now, like a conditioned response?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I love my husband and I want to be with him. I miss experiencing the sweet times and the more erotic times. I want it all."

They sat in silence as more tears formed in Claire's eyes. Her thoughts swirled. This wasn't where she planned on this session going. She loved Tony with all her heart and soul. She adored the man who made her feel as though the sun rose and set because of her, and she craved the man who craved her. As she contemplated the two Tonys, thoughts of Emily's baby infiltrated. Claire knew it wasn't right for her to be jealous of her sister, not after all she'd done for her. However, Emily had experienced all the baby firsts, twice. She'd had them with both Michael and Nichol. Though it was selfish, Claire realized what she truly wanted. It wasn't only to feel everything, no matter how intense. No, she wanted more than that.

Wiping her eyes with a tissue, Claire faced Dr. Brown. "I want another baby. I want to experience the time we missed with Nichol. I don't want to replace her. That's not what I mean. But we missed so much. She was a baby —a tiny baby, three months old. We missed her crawling, walking, talking. When we got her back she was a little person with a mind of her own." Claire wiped the tear from her cheek. "She's the most beautiful, amazing child, but I want what I missed."

Claire's chest suddenly felt lighter with the verbalization of her realization. It was cathartic. Subconsciously, she'd been thinking about another baby for months now. Every time she talked with Emily about Beth, Courtney about Julia, or saw Sue with her two children. But up until this moment, Claire hadn't admitted the truth to anyone, not even herself. Getting off the medication was more than about the way it made her feel. It was about wanting another baby.

"Have you spoken to your husband about any of this?"

Claire shook her head.

"Why?"

“Because, the sex stuff... I don’t want him to feel like he needs to behave one way or another for me. I want his true emotions and that’s what I want to give him.”

“That’s fair. What about a baby? Having another baby isn’t a unilateral decision.”

“I know that, and honestly, I think I just fully realized my desire right here, right now.”

Dr. Brown leaned back against her chair. “How do you feel about wanting a baby?”

A smile crept onto Claire’s face. “Excited and relieved. It’s something that’s been lurking for a while, and now, I know that’s what I want.” Claire didn’t want to need these sessions, but maybe she did, maybe the talking did help. “Doctor, I also know my husband. He’ll be worried about me. He’s already concerned about the decrease in medications. He’ll be overly concerned about my getting off of them altogether. And when it comes to a baby, he’ll be worried because... because Nichol’s delivery was rather difficult.”

“Yes, I saw your medical records. The doctor who delivered her sent me his notes.”

“But this time... this time will be different. We aren’t on some tropical island. I’ll be here in Iowa. Things will be better.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

Claire shrugged. “I’d be lying if I said the idea of giving birth again didn’t make me nervous. Tony told me about Nichol’s delivery. I don’t remember any of it.”

Dr. Brown’s eyes widened.

“I was unconscious. It’s not a matter of selective memory, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I have a statement from your husband, one I’ve had since you were first admitted. I seem to recall the doctor asking him to make a choice.”

Claire sat, nodded again, as the lump re-formed in her throat. “He told me. He said that he told the doctor there was no choice. He had to save us both.” A smirk came to her lips. “Anthony Rawlings has a history of getting what he wants.”

Dr. Brown’s expression hardened. “What if he doesn’t want another baby?”

Claire’s heartbeat quickened. “He will,” she said confidently.

“You know my thoughts. First we need to take our time decreasing the medications, but as we do that, I recommend that you and your husband discuss the expansion of your family. I understand your desire to get off the medicine; however, that isn’t the only step to becoming pregnant.”

“I know,” Claire admitted. “I’m well aware of how it works.”

Dr. Brown looked at the clock in the corner of her computer screen. "My only concern is that you thoroughly consider the positive and negative consequences of this train of thought."

"Oh, Dr. Brown, let me assure you, I'm thoroughly aware of consequences."



LATER THAT NIGHT, Claire stood at the window in their master bedroom suite and gazed out over the darkened backyard.

Seven years.

She wasn't sure why the thought hadn't occurred to her until now, late at night on March 19th, but it hadn't. Claire was glad she'd been busy talking to Dr. Brown about her medications, sex, and a baby. The thoughts that she was currently having were not ones she wanted to analyze. Heaven knows they'd been analyzed enough, by her, her doctors, therapists, family, Tony, his therapists, even the whole damn world. Maybe it was that *Rawls-Nichols* card that arrived today. Did the sender remember this date before Claire?

If she did, it didn't narrow the list of suspected senders. The date, March 19, 2010, was well documented in both Meredith's book and in court records.

As Claire looked out to the moonlit trees and beyond she couldn't help but remember the same night seven years ago. The view before her wasn't the same as the one she saw that night from her suite. Reaching for the handle to the glass door leading to their balcony, Claire fought the urge to open it, to assure that it *would* open. Slowly, she pulled her hand away. The door would open, just as the front door did or any other. Hell, she'd been to Cedar Rapids just today. Everything was different than it had been. The whole damn house was different, and yet it was the same. So many things had changed. Claire wished that some of her memories would be forgotten and gone forever.

The man she was currently married to was nothing like the man of seven years ago. She was different too. They'd both been through so much, too much. However, as Claire stared at the woods she knew that there would forever be triggers. She shook her head. Courtney was right. She even processed her own thoughts like her therapists. Dr. Brown called them that—triggers. They couldn't be predicted. Although one would think the date would be a predictable annual trigger.

While she, Tony, and Nichol celebrated St. Patrick's Day with green-frosted cookies and giggled about the way the frosting turned their tongues and teeth green, she had a fleeting thought of a St. Patrick's Day seven years ago. That was it—just a thought.

Now, staring out onto the silver barren trees and feeling the cool glass, the

memories were stronger. Maybe it was the fear she harbored about discontinuing her medications. Maybe it was the thought of having another child. Maybe it was her reality. The past would never fully go away.

Lost in those thoughts, Claire momentarily tensed as warm breath skirted her neck. Just as quickly, she relaxed against the solid chest behind her. “Penny for your thoughts,” his deep voice murmured near her ear.

Shaking her head, Claire swallowed. For a small sliver of time her thoughts had been dark: of dark eyes that threatened and demanded. It was a rabbit hole she refused to explore. Turning, she bravely looked up into those same eyes; however, the eyes before her were no longer hungry. They were dark with love and compassion, understanding and kinship. They were her drug of choice, the force that kept her grounded while allowing her to fly. Shaking her head, she replied, “I was just thinking. That’s all.” Her answer was neither a lie nor the truth.

Tony gently reached for her chin. “You’ve been quiet all night. How did your session with Dr. Brown go today?”

Lifting herself on the tips of her toes, Claire kissed Tony’s lips. The connection as they touched was the electricity she needed to jolt her back to her senses. The warmth traveled from her lips to her core confirming that the man who held her close was her other half, what she needed and wanted every day of her life. The two years they’d been apart had been hell. She wouldn’t allow that to ever happen again—she couldn’t.

Reaching for her shoulders, Tony eased Claire away and stared deep into her eyes. As much as she now loved his dark, penetrating gaze, it also scared her. Not that she feared him. She feared his knowledge of her, his ability to see deep into her soul like no one else. Quickly she diverted her eyes and leaned into his chest.

“We talked about my further decreasing my medications. Dr. Brown said the process needs to be monitored with blood work, but she said that if I think I’m ready, she’ll support me.”

His arms wrapped around her petite frame. “There’s no rush. Making sure you’re all right is most important. Maybe you should wait a while.”

Claire looked back up. “It’s what I want. I’m tired of the way they make me feel. I want to be me—totally me.”

“You are you,” Tony encouraged. “Listen to your doctor.”

“I am.” Claire’s neck stiffened and her tone dripped with her pent-up angst. “Talk to her if you want. She said it could be done. We just need to monitor everything. I’m not crazy,” she added defensively.

His warm embrace pulled her closer. “I didn’t say that. No one said that. Well...” He chuckled. “I suppose there are quite a few who’ve thought we’re both crazy for being back together, but for the most part, those people don’t really know us. If you have to be crazy to let me back into your life...” He

gently kissed her lips. "...then, Mrs. Rawlings, I'm glad you are."

Pulling her hand, Tony led her away from the window toward the sofa. "How about if I start a fire, or are you ready for bed?"

Claire tilted her head to the side. "A fire would be nice. I'd like to talk for a little bit."

"Or," he said with more than a hint of his devilish grin, "we could do something else?"

It was the tone that stirred her, the one she craved. Yet right now she needed to face her fears. Dr. Brown was right. Having a baby wasn't a unilateral decision. Claire needed to be honest with her husband. Feigning a smile, Claire replied, "Let's talk first. You can start the fire, and I'll get ready for bed."

Tony nodded as he turned toward the large fireplace. Though it wasn't as massive as the one in their old estate, it had the similarity that always caused Claire to pause: her portrait hung directly above the mantle. Nichol called it Claire's princess picture. Perhaps she wasn't truly a princess; however, she'd felt like one on that day. Their first wedding was like a fairytale, fast and make-believe. What they shared at that time wasn't like the love they had today. Their paths had taken them on some dark journeys and somehow they found their way back together. Their love today was deeper and more intense than it had been. It had been tested by fire—like the one Tony was building—and came back stronger.

"Claire?"

Her attention shifted to her husband. "Yes?"

"You haven't moved. Didn't you say you were going to get ready for bed?"

She looked down at herself. "Yes, I guess I'm thinking about too much. I'll be right back."

Moments later, she came from their large attached bath, clad in a nightgown and robe. With her face washed and teeth brushed, she gave Tony's cheek a mint-flavored kiss and tugged his hand to move him toward the sofa. Once he sat, she settled in front of him, her back against his chest. Reaching for his large hand, she wrapped herself in his arms.

His voice murmured near her ear. "Now, my dear, what has you so lost in thought? What do you want to talk about?"

With a sigh, Claire relaxed against his chest. "I want to talk about the medication thing. I want you to be honest with me."

"I'm always honest with you. Are you saying that you're not?"

"No. I don't think I was dishonest... not on purpose. But today while I was talking to Dr. Brown I realized something."

Tony let out a long breath. "I'm sorry. I don't know how many ways or how many times I need to say it, but I am."

Claire peered over her shoulder. His dark eyes swirled with remorse. Momentarily, with her concentration on the prospect of having another baby, she'd forgotten the memories she'd been confronting at the window. Suddenly, the sadness in his gaze and tone brought them all back. Reaching up to his cheek, Claire gently palmed the five o'clock shadow. "Tony, that's not what I want to talk about. We've talked it to death. It's funny. I didn't even make the association with the date until a few minutes ago. I think that's a good thing."

"So that wasn't what you and Dr. Brown discussed today?"

"No, believe it or not, it wasn't. Like I said, I hadn't even thought about it until a little while ago."

"Well, I've been thinking about it all day. I've been watching you, waiting for you to bring it up. I thought you were just trying to spare me by not mentioning it."

"Tony..." her voice held more of a plea than she wanted to admit "...I'll talk about it if you want. I'm also fine with not making a big deal about it. Hell, we have anniversaries of many things all the time. Seven years ago..." She felt him tense behind her. "...I woke up on this estate. Today it's our home, one we share with our daughter."

"The thing is," Tony began, "I know it was wrong. The world knows it was wrong. Hell, I spent two years paying the price for it being wrong." His voice softened. "And you've paid more than that, but right now, with the two of us here and Nichol down the hall, I can't say I regret bringing you here. I should, but I don't."

Claire closed her eyes and swallowed. "Maybe we *are* both crazy?"

Tony's arms tightened around her. "What does that mean? You regret it?"

"No, I don't. I regret many things. Being with you right here, right now, isn't one of them."

"I regret the way I treated you, the things that happened... but bringing you into my life..." His lips touched her neck sending chills down her body. "...I'll never regret."

Claire craned her neck allowing her husband better access. As his caresses deepened, she remembered her mission. "I want to talk about the future." He continued kissing. "Please, this is important."

Taking a deep breath, Tony sat straighter. Though his lips were obeying, in the small of Claire's back she could feel another part of him that had other plans. "What, my dear? What about our future? I must say, I like that topic better than our past."

The tips of her fingers traced an imaginary path over the arm that was wrapped about her midsection. "Tony, I realized today while I was talking to Dr. Brown that I have multiple reasons why I want to get off my medications
—"

"Wait!" His voice boomed through their suite. "Off? You said *decrease*, not *off*."

Claire turned to face him. "Well, it has to start as a decrease and then it'll eventually be tapered off completely."

"No, not until I hear from the doctor that you can do that. I'm not losing you again."

"Tony," she tried to hide the hurt from her voice. "I'm not going anywhere. Dr. Brown and I discussed it. I went wherever I went—in my head—because I thought you and Nichol were gone. I thought I killed you! I know you're here. I know Nichol's here. This, the real world, is where I want to be. I don't need medicine to keep me here."

Though his dark eyes reflected his unspoken argument, he stopped the words from coming. Finally, he replied, "Next week, I'm going with you to your appointment. I'll have my schedule cleared. I want to hear this from her."

This wasn't going the way she wanted it, but Claire knew if Tony planned to talk to Dr. Brown, she wanted to be the one to mention her desires for a baby. She didn't want it coming up in a group-therapy session. "That's fine. If it'll make you feel better, I don't care, come to my appointment. Before you do, I need to tell you what I realized."

"Shit, that wasn't it? It wasn't about stopping your medicine?"

"No, it wasn't, well not really." Claire eyed him suspiciously. "Forget it. This doesn't feel like the right time."

Tony cupped her chin. "I'm sorry if my concern for your well-being is spoiling your right time. However, I'm not sorry for being concerned. Tell me what you realized."

She took a deep breath. "Once I'm off the medicine and the doctors clear me physically... I want to be off *all* my medicine." She waited for him to understand. The dark eyes before her confirmed he didn't. "Tony, I want to quit my birth control too." Before he could speak or the shock in his gaze registered, she plowed ahead. "I want another baby."

Perhaps the sofa caught on fire. Had a spark jumped from the stone enclosure to their location? There was no other plausible explanation for the speed at which Tony stood, leaving Claire suddenly alone and chilled from the loss of his embrace.

Running his hand through his mane, Tony declared, "No."

Refusing to submit to the tears that stood at the ready, Claire chose instead to fuel her indignation. Her volume rose with each statement. "No? Excuse me. You can't just say no. If you want to talk about it, fine. If you want a doctor's confirmation, fine. But a blanket CEO-tone *no* is unacceptable."

His gaze continued to be one of disbelief. It was as if he were looking at her trying to distinguish which of her three heads was speaking. Finally, he

spoke, “That’s too bad, because that’s all you’re getting. I’m in shock that you’d even consider such a thing. What is it? Is it because of Emily? Is it all her baby talk that has you thinking this way? Maybe you should spend your time elsewhere?”

What the hell?

Claire stood. “I’ll spend my time wherever I want. And yes, the talk of Baby Beth is part of it. More than that, it’s Nichol. Perhaps I shouldn’t spend my time with her either?” The last part of Claire’s statement dripped with ire and sarcasm.

“You’re being ridiculous. Nichol doesn’t have you worked up. It’s Emily. She—”

“She’s my sister and she’s having a baby. But it *is* Nichol. I keep thinking about how much we missed with her. Didn’t you want to experience all those milestones?”

Tony’s chest expanded and contracted with each breath. “I did.” His eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t the one who kept those milestones away from me.”

Claire slapped her hands against her sides. “This isn’t about Emily.”

Spinning first in place, Tony then paced to the windows and back. “How the fuck did this happen? Ten minutes ago I wanted to make love to my wife. Now we’re screaming at one another. There. Is. Nothing. To. Fight. About! We. Are. Not. Having. Another. Baby.”

“You’re right, Tony, about fighting, but you’re not right about a baby. It’s my body. If I want to have another baby, I’ll have one. I was ready to do it without you the first time. I can do it without you now.”

He seized her shoulders. “Stop it. You’re not doing anything without me. Don’t you get it? Do you have any idea how close to death you were when Nichol was born? I lived through two days of hell on earth thinking you wouldn’t survive her birth. There would’ve been no escape from the pain if you had died. Do you know who would’ve been responsible for that? Me!” His back stiffened. “I’ve been in that position more than once. I won’t do it again.”

Claire saw the man she loved with all of her heart and soul. She saw the pain and anguish and heard the same emotions in his words. Her voice calmed. “Tony, we’re not on a deserted island. We’re here, in Iowa, in the United States. I’ll have the best medical care that money can buy. I’ll be all right.”

His lips pressed together in a rigid line.

She lifted herself on her tiptoes and gently kissed his scowl. “It can’t happen right away, but I want to begin the process. Please...” She kissed him again. “...don’t say no and end this discussion. Say you’ll think about it. Say you’ll talk with the doctors. Say you’ll support the idea.”

“I so want to end this discussion.”

"Think about all we missed. Think about Nichol learning to crawl and walk. Think about her first word. Don't close your mind to having another baby. Please don't say no, say you'll—"

Tony stopped her words with a kiss. "I'll think about it, but know your safety is number one. Will you at least agree with that?"

Claire smiled. "I agree. I also think that since we know it can't happen yet, we should practice. We got lucky with Nichol, but who knows... this baby may take a lot of trying."

Closing his eyes, Tony shook his head. "Yes, Mrs. Rawlings, always the master negotiator."

"Well, you know what they say about practice?"

Tony backed Claire toward the bed. Once her knees buckled, she gazed up at him. "My dear, I'll practice as much as you desire, but I've told you before that I will not survive without you." He ran his fingers through her long, dark hair, fanning it around her face. "You are my everything. All of these plans must meet the doctor's approval. If they don't, the answer is unequivocally no."

Claire tilted her head and reached for his hand. "So you'd cut me off?"

His devilish grin returned as the fire from across the room reflected in his sultry gaze. "I've made our fortune with negotiations. I hope you don't think I'm that easy to manipulate."

Leaning back, Claire untied her robe and allowed it to fall from her shoulders. Scooting back on the bed, she looked up at him through her lashes and pushed out her lower lip. "That's all right. If you don't want to practice..."

Within seconds, Tony was crawling toward her, covering her body with his. "I didn't say that. By all means, Mrs. Rawlings, let's work on our technique."

CHAPTER NINE

April 2017

Tony

Part of the healing process is sharing with other people who care.

—Jerry Cantrell

TONY SAT ACROSS the desk from Dr. Brown with Claire's hand in his. It wasn't the first time they'd been in her office together; however, it was the first time they'd jointly had such a personal conversation with the good doctor. Fortunately or unfortunately, Tony had become quite adept at speaking with therapists and doctors. He knew how each one of his words as well as the inflection of his voice was dissected and scrutinized. Maybe scrutinized held too negative of a connotation; perhaps analyzed was a better description.

Nevertheless, as they sat across from the attractive blonde psychiatrist, Tony couldn't help but do the same. He analyzed each word she said as well as her nonverbal responses. This ability didn't begin with his induction into the world of psychoanalysis: it was what he'd done his entire life, how he'd made Rawlings Industries into an international conglomerate. Even with technology and the modernization of video and web conferences, Anthony Rawlings would watch and listen to his associates as well as his business adversaries. Many times it wasn't what was said that was vital to negotiations, it was what wasn't said.

"I understand your concern, Anthony. Over the past few months we've completely eliminated the anti-psychotic medications, and it appears to be without incident. As you're aware, Claire's still on a less potent anti-anxiety medication... two medications," Dr. Brown corrected as she glanced at the computer screen only she was privy to see.

"Without incident?" Tony asked. "What were you expecting?"

"We don't know what to expect. Each patient is unique." Turning her gaze

to Claire, she asked, "Claire, we discussed this the other day, but please tell me if anything has changed. Are you noticing any side effects from the medication changes?"

"I'm noticing good side effects. I'm beginning to feel more like myself. I don't feel as stuck in the middle."

"What about your sleeping problems?" Tony asked. "Do you think that can be attributed to the medication changes?"

Dr. Brown looked from Tony to Claire. "What sleeping problems? You didn't mention anything about that."

Claire's green eyes, boring holes through her husband, returned to Dr. Brown. "I'm not having sleeping problems. I wake up sometimes. That's all."

Tony knew Claire didn't approve of his sharing; however, this was her health they were discussing and he wouldn't compromise, not even for her. Steeling his shoulders, he continued, "And she has trouble going back to sleep. Sometimes at night she talks in her sleep. I can't understand it, but whatever it is seems to be upsetting her."

The doctor leaned forward. "Claire, this can't work if you're not honest with me. Are you having nightmares?"

Claire sat taller. "I honestly don't know. I've had a few dreams I remember, but most of the time I don't. I wake knowing that there was something going on, but I can't remember particulars."

"Whatever it is, it's enough to have her awake for hours."

"Tony! Stop," Claire demanded. "I'm fine. Everyone dreams."

Pressing his lips together he looked back across the desk to Dr. Brown.

"Yes, Claire," the doctor began. "Everyone dreams. And to be totally forthright, dreaming is a positive outlet, if you will. Differentiating a dream from reality is the crucial distinction. I don't like that the dreams agitate you. That makes me leery to make any further adjustments on your remaining medications." Before Claire could refute her statement, Dr. Brown went on, "You need to be honest with yourself."

Claire blinked her eyes. "I am being honest. I don't know exactly what the dreams are about. I do know they aren't the exact same. But I'll reiterate: I'm ready to get off all the medicine. I think I'll sleep better without it."

"You never had nightmares before you were on these meds, ever?" the doctor asked.

Tony looked to his right. He knew she did. He remembered the nightmares she had after the Patrick Chester incident, the long nights sitting outside on the patio, looking up at the stars and wishing he could take it all away. He remembered the helplessness as she'd succumb to her tears and melt against his chest. It took months before those fears finally came to rest. His overwhelming desire to help her ease out of this conversation squelched his reasoning to continue it.

"Doctor, can't some of this be normal?" Tony hated using that word. He squeezed Claire's hand, hopeful that she wouldn't assume he was insinuating anything about her was abnormal.

"It is. Dreams are our subconscious way of dealing with stress."

"Isn't it a good thing that Claire's dealing with it?"

Dr. Brown looked back to Claire. "Do you know what the stressor is? Do you know the trigger?"

Claire looked at Tony. He saw the answer in her eyes. The FBI didn't want them mentioning the mailings, yet if he truly thought about it, there seemed to be a correlation. The nightmares would come for a day or two following a new *Rawls-Nichols* mailing.

"The two of you must be straightforward. Is there a problem that I'm unaware exists? Could this be about another child?"

They both turned back to Dr. Brown. "No," Claire answered matter-of-factly. "We've discussed it. As long as you and my other doctors are on board, we're both happy about the prospect of another baby."

Dr. Brown turned her gaze to Tony.

"I've made no secret out of the fact that I'm concerned about my wife; however, the more she and I discuss it, the more I realize I'd love to have another child." He smirked to himself. Damn, that wasn't a sentence he could've predicted uttering five years ago. "But," he added, "Claire's health is the most important. If she can't handle it, then it won't happen. Or..." He looked to Claire. "...we could adopt."

"We could?" Her emerald eyes glistened toward his. It wasn't a subject they'd ever broached. "You're truly on board with this. You want another child that much?"

Seeing the sparkle behind her gaze told him that this was what she wanted. "I am and I do."

Dr. Brown cleared her throat. "I'm glad to hear you've made this decision together. It's not my job to crush my patient's dreams, but I think you should consider your pasts, both of you. Adoption, legal adoption, requires extensive background screenings. I'm not saying that you wouldn't pass. I'm saying that even with the financial means, there's no guarantee."

Claire didn't seem to be hearing Dr. Brown; instead, her eyes were still fixed on Tony's. Finally, she turned to the woman across the desk. "I know what my nightmares were about. I know what triggers them. It isn't anything between Tony and I, not really. We're just not at liberty to discuss it fully."

Before anyone could speak, Claire added, "But in all honesty, I don't think that was the only stimulus. I've been worried that Tony didn't want another child as much as I did. I realize I'm asking a lot." She continued on as if he weren't sitting right next to her, their knees and hands touching. "Tony and I have discussed many different issues that may arise with another child.

One obvious issue..." She turned and grinned. "...is age. Sorry." She shrugged her shoulders. "It's not just him. I'm no spring chicken either. I'm thirty-three, but Tony is fifty-two. I've been afraid that if this medication doesn't get out of my system soon, it will be too late."

Claire looked at Dr. Brown as a renegade tear made its way down her cheek. "I'm not saying it's caused me nightmares, but I wake up thinking about it and have difficulty falling back to sleep. I've felt pressured that things must move fast or they never will."

"And now?" Dr. Brown asked.

"Now, I know it doesn't matter. He *is* behind me on this."

"Anthony?"

"Yes, Dr. Brown, I'm supportive of another child. Whether it's our biological child or we're fortunate enough to adopt, I want Claire to be happy and," he added with emphasis, "I would like another child. I never imagined being a father, never even entertained the idea. Claire's changed my life in ways I'll never be able to articulate. Being a husband and a father has brought me more joy than any business deal or personal quest. Nichol is our world. It seems as though Claire's done well with the medication changes thus far. Whatever you and her other doctors recommend, we'll do."

"Claire, we've determined that some of your dreams make you agitated. Does anything else upset you?"

Claire exhaled. "Yes. Things upset me and things excite me. None of it becomes obsessive or overbearing. It's life. Life has ups and downs. I like them. I like being happy and sad. I like when a book makes me cry or Nichol makes me laugh. I like when my husband's gaze and gentle kiss give me goose bumps with anticipation. Those are all coming back to me and I want it one hundred percent."

Dr. Brown nodded. "I'll authorize it." Her gaze went to Claire. "Thank you for your answer. For all of this to work, I need your continued honesty. You also need to see your gynecologist before ending your birth control. This is the beginning of April. It takes a month, perhaps two, to have all of the anxiety medications out of your system. I recommend alternative forms of birth control in the meantime."

Tony wondered when in his life it had become commonplace for him to have so many people who had a vote in his personal dealings. At one time, he'd never have sat and listened as someone else told him what he was to do and not do. And then, as quickly as that thought occurred, Claire's eyes met his. In her gaze he heard her unspoken soliloquy. It told him everything he needed to hear. His wife was happy, excited, and encouraged.

Though Tony wished he could've been with her in her time of need, here in this very facility, he was relieved he hadn't been. Oh, he would have spent every day with her in hopes of bringing her back to reality sooner; however,

the reports Roach had shown him broke his heart. He couldn't imagine seeing those emerald eyes lifeless or without spark. From the first time he'd seen Claire, up close and in person, he was drawn to the life in her beautiful eyes.

Now, the next step was guaranteeing the best doctor in the fuck'n world to assure that if Claire did become pregnant, her delivery would be nothing like what they'd endured in paradise. Obviously they were both entering into this prospect of parenthood with more forethought than they did with Nichol.

CLAIRE

LATER THAT NIGHT, Claire slipped between the soft sheets of their large bed, unable to keep the smile from her face. All she could think about was the fact that Tony really and truly said he'd wanted another child. He didn't say it just in front of her, but in front of Dr. Brown. Claire was more excited than she'd been about anything in a long time. Oh, each day they spent with Nichol was a gift, and their family had become content and stable over the last six months, but excitement and building anticipation had not been part of Claire's day-to-day repertoire for a very long time.

Its presence was like a tiny bud of hope taking root in her being. It was as if she could feel it within her, giving her a promise of more. Its tentacles wrapped around her heart, embraced, and warmed her soul in a way she'd forgotten. The whole world seemed brighter. It wasn't only spring in Iowa, but also in her. The world was being reborn. Small specks of green had formed on the trees outside of her windows. Hues of red sprinkled the landscape as redbud trees came back from their winter dormancy. Even the grass was growing and filled their many yards with color.

For the first time in many springs, Claire was part of it. She was there with Nichol's hand in hers as they walked the paths through the gardens and talked about the flowers peeking up through the earth and ones that together they'd plant. She was with Tony on their balcony or patio in the evenings as the scent of cut grass and sound of maturing insects filled their senses. Most importantly, she was alive, aware, and budding with excitement about their future.

The bed shifted, and Claire turned toward her handsome husband.

"My dear." He kissed her cheek. "Pray tell, what has that beautiful smile on those lips and faraway look in your magnificent eyes?"

His mischievous grin, the scent of his cologne, and his intuitive question all brought Claire back to the present. Her body responded, the way she'd been wanting. Scooting closer, she leaned into his embrace, both of them sitting against the massive headboard with his arm over her shoulder. She

loved the way she fit perfectly against him. Suddenly she wished he'd taken off his t-shirt before joining her. Her fingers longed to feel the softness of his chest hair; instead, she settled for nuzzling closer to his warmth.

"I'm happy." Her simplistic answer held so many truths. Some couples may need more: an expansion upon the statement, perhaps clarification: Why was she happy? Did one thing happen to make her happy? Had she been unhappy?

Neither Tony nor Claire needed that confirmation. It was the blessing and the curse of a history and an openness that surpassed all obstacles. His embrace tightened as their lips engaged. With each touch, the desire within her grew. Her nightgown-covered skin sought the sensation of his warmth. Her nipples hardened as her breasts ached for his touch. Words weren't needed as they melted into one another and her petite hands worked their way under his shirt, finding the soft hair covering his broad chest.

Tony slowly reached for the hem of her nightgown, and with his devilish grin, whispered, "Well, perhaps we should do some of that practicing you mentioned, before we have to heed the doctor's alternative recommendations."

Claire nodded, wanting their bodies to become one without barriers. "I like practicing," she murmured as she moved closer to where his intentions were becoming clearer.

"Momma," Nichol said sleepily, as the door to their suite opened.

Both Tony and Claire turned to see their daughter rubbing her eyes and moving toward them.

Stifling their smiles, Claire adjusted her nightgown as Tony groaned and straightened his shirt.

"What is it, honey?" Claire asked as Nichol climbed up onto their bed. Before their daughter answered, she crawled between them and slid under the covers. Once settled, Claire put her arm around her, and Nichol snuggled closer.

"I missed-ed you. I woke up and got scared."

Letting out a deep sigh, Tony wrapped the two of them in his embrace. "Scared? Princess, what were you scared about?"

Nichol shrugged.

"You know that with your momma, me, Shannon, Mr. Phil, Mr. Eric, and Miss Taylor, you're the safest little princess in the whole world, don't you?"

Nichol nodded. "You're not there."

"Where, honey? Where aren't we?"

"In my room. I'm all by myself. I heard somefing..." Her brown eyes widened. "...under my bed." She leaned into Tony's chest. "I think I should sleeps wif you."

Claire grinned above Nichol's head, her gaze meeting Tony's. "Honey,"

Claire began, “we’ve talked about this. You have your own bed. This is Momma and Daddy’s bed.”

“I don’t like my bed. I like yours.”

“We like ours too, princess. But it isn’t big enough for all of us.”

Nichol’s dark hair swung over her eyes as her head moved dramatically from side to side. “It is. See, I fits right here.”

Though Claire wanted Nichol to feel safe, their child psychologist had been very clear on her opinion of children sleeping in their parents’ bed. Giving in, even one time, she’d warned, and a pattern would be set. “How about Daddy and I take you back to your room. Daddy will check under your bed and make sure there isn’t anything there making noise. Then we can snuggle with you and read one more story? Will that make you feel better?”

Nichol shrugged again. “Why can’t I stay here? I promise I won’t wiggle.”

Tony laughed as he playfully tickled their daughter. Her pouting lips sprang into a smile as her legs and arms began to flail. “You won’t wiggle? You won’t wiggle?” he asked jokingly. “You’re doing a lot of wiggling right now.”

“Stop, Daddy!” Nichol managed through her roars of laughter.

“Tony, she’s never going to go back to sleep—”

His grin and wink came as his hands stopped tickling and Nichol’s pleas turned to a sigh. “Miss Rawlings,” Tony said as he eased back the covers, stood, and offered Nichol his hand. “It seems as though you have in fact wiggled. That means it’s time for your momma and me to escort you back to your own room.”

Though she worked hard to pout, her big dark eyes sparkled with adoration. “You’ll look under my bed?”

“Yes, I promise.”

With that, Nichol stood on the bed and flung herself into Tony’s arms. “You have to read me one more story too.”

“I do? I thought that was Momma’s job.”

“Nope,” Nichol replied as Claire donned her robe and the three of them made their way out the door. Stepping into the corridor, she continued, “Momma’s gonna listen, just like me.”

Low lights led the way from the master bedroom suite to Nichol’s room, only one door down and across the hall. Turning on the light on her bedside stand, Tony handed Nichol to Claire before bending down and searching beneath the skirt of the canopy bed. Nichol buried her head in the crook of Claire’s neck as Tony announced, “Oh my.”

“What?” Claire asked with genuine curiosity.

With a huge grin, Tony moved to stand and extended his hand. Within his grasp was a remote control puppy, obviously low on batteries. Every few

seconds, one of its legs moved, creating a faint grinding noise.

“Your puppy!” Claire exclaimed. Nichol’s head popped up, and she reached for the mechanical dog.

“Bad puppy!” she said with a smile.

“He’s not bad,” Tony explained. “He just wanted your attention. If he’d have been quiet under there you may have forgotten about him.”

Claire set Nichol on her bed and took the puppy. “Let me turn him off. In the morning, we’ll find some more batteries so he can play with you.”

“Okay,” Nichol replied, stifling a yawn and climbing under the covers. “I fought it was a monster.”

“A monster? Not in our house. Didn’t you know?” Tony asked.

Nichol looked up with wide eyes. “What?”

“No monsters are allowed past the gates. It’s a rule,” Tony assured.

Lying down next to Nichol, Claire grinned up at Tony. “If you’re done with your rules, we’re waiting for our story.”

Reaching for a book from their daughter’s bookshelf, Tony’s dark eyes gleamed. “Yes, I’ll give you both a story, and then...” His brows rose with his unspoken meaning.

“And then you’ll remember to lock the door?” Claire whispered with a smirk, her comment going unnoticed by the beautiful little girl snuggling into her side. Already Nichol’s eyes were half closed as she rubbed her cheek against Claire’s soft cashmere robe. Looking up to her husband, Claire said, “You’d better hurry, if she’s going to hear any of—”

“*Goodnight Moon...*” Tony began his voice low and strong. “In the great green room...”

Closing her eyes, Claire absorbed her daughter’s radiating warmth as the baritone words filled the lavender suite. With each page, Nichol’s breathing steadied until the rhythmic cadence told them that she was once again sound asleep. Undaunted, Tony continued.

Claire imagined having two children vying for their attention, and with all her heart, she knew that as full of love as she felt at that moment, there would always be room for more. Just like John and Emily accepted Nichol into their family and how they were not so patiently awaiting the arrival of their daughter. Just as she and Tony adored Nichol, they would have another child and that child too would know this sense of love. Unknowingly, the smile returned to her lips. There was no other cause than the truth: she was truly happy.

CHAPTER TEN

Late April 2017

Taylor

If you have to do it, then you're doing the right thing.

—Kathy Valentine

OANY OF THE small towns and counties in Minnesota suffered the same nationwide crisis. Promising young minds weren't content to stay; they wanted the glamor of the bigger cities. In Minnesota, that would be Minneapolis or St. Paul. The small town of Olivia, Minnesota, was no different. Located at the junction of Highway 71 and Highway 212, Olivia's claim to fame was its title: Corn Capital of the World. In reality the friendly people of Olivia were determined to survive despite the odds, and in doing so, they openly welcomed new residents. With a strong sense of camaraderie and a median household income of a little over thirty-five thousand, Olivia was not only a good place to live, but it was also a great place for a person with a large severance package to disappear.

Taylor had never met Patricia, but she'd done her research. She knew all that Phil had told her, and because going above and beyond was the way she worked, she knew a little bit more. The Rawlings security team had questions, wanted answers, and wasn't willing to wait on the FBI to provide them. Was Patricia merely a jaded employee who'd had higher expectations for her relationship with her boss, or was her motive more sinister? Taylor's goal was to learn more about the motivation behind Patricia's mailings by integrating herself into Olivia and essentially Patricia's new life.

Looking for the perfect opportunity, it was decided that Taylor would play the role of the granddaughter of an older couple who resided just outside Olivia. They were relatively new to the area and spent their winters in the warmth of Arizona. Currently, they were still living south of Phoenix. Mr. Townsend, the gentleman whom Taylor claimed was her grandfather, had

been dealing with various health issues while away. Since most of the people in town knew the Townsends' background, when Taylor entered the local law firm to discuss the deed to her grandparents' home, no one was suspicious.

Wearing her long brown hair down and wavy with her normal suit replaced by jeans and a t-shirt, Taylor looked at least five years younger, and actually resembled the Townsends' granddaughter. There was a time in small-town America when such a deception wouldn't be feasible. However, even with the sense of community, in today's self-absorbed world, people were willing to accept things at face value. Besides, between Taylor's research and Phil's resources, she was well versed on everything the Townsends' granddaughter should know and had the credentials to prove it.

Since moving to Olivia, Patricia had assumed the alias of Melissa Garrison. Melissa worked in the small law practice of Jefferson Diamond, located in a nondescript storefront on Main Street. Most of Olivia was on Main Street or within a block or two in each direction. Upon entering Diamond's storefront, Taylor deduced that Mr. Diamond's office consisted of a reception area with a large wraparound desk and individual office spaces all accessible through doors off the center room. The paneled walls and vinyl chairs were a flashback to the 1970s and a far cry from Patricia's office at Rawlings corporate headquarters in Iowa City.

After only a few minutes of speaking with the office manager, who'd introduced herself as Ami, Taylor caught her first glance of Patricia. Their suspect barely noticed Taylor as she carried a box of files from one room to the other. Though Patricia didn't look exactly like her photographs, Taylor recognized her immediately. Her body shape and features were the same, but she'd changed her hair. No longer was it long and brown. Now she sported a short, spiky deep-red style.

Not long into her conversation with Ami, the two struck up a kind of friendship. It wasn't until Taylor was about to leave and she mentioned staying alone at her grandparents' home that Ami said, "Oh, you can't be all by yourself way out there all night. Why don't you stay in town and have dinner with us?"

Taylor hid her excitement. It was the perfect opportunity to learn more about Patricia. "Well, I'm not sure..."

"Nonsense, we all hang out on Friday nights at the pub on Main. It has pool tables and darts. There's a dance floor..." Ami scrunched her nose and forehead. "...but no one around here dances. If you want clubs like that you need to drive to Minneapolis."

"Are you sure I won't be intruding?" Taylor asked. "I don't want to get in the way of office talk."

"Mel?" Ami called toward the back room. "Do we talk shop at the bar?"

Patricia shook her head as she emerged from the doorway, wiping her

hands on her black slacks. "Nope. It's our time to unwind."

"Do you *all* go? How many of you work here?"

Patricia replied, "There's three of us, four if Jefferson goes, but I don't think Janice thinks too much of that. He's only gone twice since I've been working here."

"Jefferson? Oh, Mr. Diamond," Taylor said, playing her part. Speaking of her boss by his first name and mentioning his wife, Taylor wondered if Patricia had set her sights on her new boss as she had her old. If she had, by the look of the law firm, it was a considerable downgrade from Anthony Rawlings. "Well," Taylor continued, "I need to do a few more things for my grandparents. Can I meet you?"

"Sure," Ami replied. "We usually go home and change into jeans and meet there about 6:30. We'll save you a seat."

Ami's perkiness was contagious. If Taylor truly had been the granddaughter of the Townsends', she would enjoy visiting and spending time with her. As it was, Ami's excessive talking was confirmation of information Taylor already knew—that the law firm closed at 5:00 PM. Since it was nearly 3:00 PM now, Phil had two hours to set up surveillance in Patricia's rented home.

Stepping out onto the quaint street, Taylor looked at the bars on her phone in disgust as she tried to call Phil. It wasn't until she was in her car and driving toward Patricia's rented home that she had enough signal to complete the call. *How could these people stand it?* Taylor wondered. Then remembering the old-fashioned bulky phone she'd seen on Ami's desk, she decided that maybe they didn't use cell phones exclusively—like most of the civilized world.

"It's her," Taylor said as Phil answered.

"We knew it was."

"We assumed it, but I'm one hundred percent certain. You have two hours before she gets off work."

Phil laughed. "I'm done. The equipment is set, both in her house and her car. I'll go back to the law office later and set some up there."

"Did you find anything informative in her house?"

"Nothing I want to discuss."

Taylor didn't like his answer, but time had taught her that Phil would share information when he was ready and not a moment sooner. Trying to ease her own concern, she volunteered, "Ami was kind enough to ask me to join them *all* for dinner."

"You didn't have to invite yourself?"

"No, it couldn't have happened more naturally. I also confirmed that all of the women in the firm go out together on Friday nights to unwind. From what *Melissa...*" She emphasized the alias name. "...said, Jefferson Diamond

doesn't usually join them. I'll try to learn his location while at dinner and text you."

"There's a front and back entrance to the law office. Since I'm done setting up the surveillance, you watch the back door and I'll watch the front. Hopefully we'll see everyone leave and I can slip in."

Slowing her car, Taylor steered into a driveway and turned around. "All right, boss."

"Taylor?"

"Hmm?"

"Stay hidden."

"Did you feel the need to say that? I told them I was heading out to my grandparents'. Being seen sitting outside their office would give me away. Don't you think?"

"I just have a feeling about this. I have since the first mailing. There was something at her house..." He paused. "...I think there's more to it, and I don't want to blow this opportunity to learn what that is."

Taylor nodded to no one. "What? What's at her house?"

"We'll discuss it later."

Though she knew she wouldn't get anything more at this time, she at least knew her gut feeling had been confirmed. "All right. You tell me when you're ready. I'm heading back."

The line disconnected.

The concern in Phil's voice unnerved her. She knew how he felt about the Rawlingses, and honestly, in the past few months she'd come to feel the same, especially about Nichol. The little girl was both spoiled and adorable—not what Taylor had imagined. Nichol was gracious and polite. Even though she had the world by a string, she was still excited by the simplest of things. For lack of a better assessment, Nichol didn't act entitled. Taylor attributed her behavior more to the Vandersols and Mrs. Rawlings than to Mr. Rawlings. When it came to her father, Taylor doubted there was much of anything that Nichol couldn't get and time would tell how that would play out.

Nichol's interaction with the security team was also a source of enjoyment. From what Taylor had heard and been told, neither Phil nor Eric were used to the presence of children. Mrs. Rawlings joked about the learning curve of the men in Nichol's life. Though Phil would never admit it, when Nichol took his hand and looked up at him with her big brown eyes, Taylor saw that he was putty in her little hands.

Taylor had worked temporary security with other wealthy families. The environment with the Rawlings was refreshingly familial and caring. The lack of pretentiousness, especially from Mrs. Rawlings, endeared Taylor to this family. Claire wanted Nichol to feel as if she was surrounded by family, not employees. Not every household could do that. More than once, Phil slipped

and referred to them as his family. With Phil having been with them for years, Taylor understood how he could feel that way.

Taylor made her way to the back alley near the law firm, found a safe, inconspicuous parking space, and waited. Upon her arrival, there were three cars parked near the rear entrance. By 5:15 PM, it was down to one. She sent Phil a text message:

"ONLY THE BLACK CRV REMAINS. PATRICIA AND HEATHER LEFT AT 5:00 PM."

Her phone vibrated less than a minute later.

"AMI AND JEFFERSON LEFT THROUGH THE FRONT. HE LOCKED THE DOOR AS HE LEFT."

Taylor replied.

"WHO OWNS THE CRV? I THOUGHT IT WAS AMI'S."

Phil.

"IT IS. SHE WALKED TO THE STORE. GIVE HER A FEW MORE MINUTES."

It wasn't long until Ami came through the rear entrance carrying two brown bags of groceries. Taylor started to type her text, when her phone rang.

"Get out to the Townsends' farmhouse right away."

"Why?" Taylor asked as she started her car.

"From the bug in Patricia's car, I heard her talking to Ami on the phone. Ami went to the grocery store to get you a few things and she's taking them to you right now."

"Shit! She just got in her car. If I leave now, she'll follow me the whole way."

"I'll delay her," Phil assured. "Just get out there. I've disabled the alarm system. Your key will work fine. Turn on some lights. She won't be too far behind you."

Keeping her head low, Taylor eased her car from the parking spot. Her only choice was to drive behind Ami's CRV. Luckily, Ami was still talking on her phone and didn't seem to notice. Just as Taylor made it to the cross street at the end of the block, she saw Phil, in her rearview mirror, approaching Ami's SUV. Taylor didn't know what he was going to do, but whatever it was, she hoped it gave her more than a minute's head start.

Ten minutes later, Taylor turned the key and opened the back door of the Townsends' farmhouse. Linoleum floor, Formica-topped table with padded vinyl chairs, and more Formica on the counters confirmed that she'd entered their kitchen. Momentarily, she wondered if the interior decorating in Olivia was horribly behind the times or had the whole town had gone retro? Hurriedly, Taylor turned on lights. She tried to turn on the TV; however, it seemed that the cable was off; instead of sound, there was only blue screen. On the kitchen counter, nestled between turquoise blue canisters and an

electric can opener, was an old clock radio with numbers that flipped instead of a digital readout. *How long had it been since they made those?* Trying for the homey effect, Taylor flipped a switch and country music filled the air. Just as Taylor settled onto a vinyl chair at the kitchen table, she heard the sound of a car coming up the gravel driveway.

Moments later the knock at the door confirmed her visitor. Taylor grinned at how Ami had come to the same door she'd just entered. It seemed real people in rural towns rarely used the front door. They also didn't have staff to welcome their guests. Taking a deep breath, Taylor peered behind the lacy curtain and through the glass. Feigning surprise, she opened the door. "Ami! What are you doing here?"

With a large smile, the blonde office manager handed Taylor one brown paper sack. "You said you were leaving in the morning. Since your grandparents have been out of town for months, I figured there wasn't much here. I thought you might like some coffee. I got a small creamer too."

"Thank you," Taylor replied. "Um, do you want to come in?"

"Just for a second," Ami said, walking into the kitchen. "I wanted to ask you something before we all got together tonight." Her lips momentarily pressed together. "Well, two somethings."

"Okay," Taylor replied as she took the creamer from the bag and placed it in the refrigerator. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized no light came on within the large appliance. Undoubtedly it'd been turned off for the season. She moved quickly, hoping that Ami wouldn't notice. When she turned back around, Ami was busy looking at the collection of plates hanging on the wall. "What did you want to ask?"

"The first one is selfish, but..." She hesitated. "...I'm just going to ask. Since you're looking into the deed, are your grandparents planning to sell?"

Shit! "Ami, with the way Grandpa's been feeling, they really don't know. They just want to cover their bases."

"Will you remember me, if they do?"

Taylor tilted her head to the side. "Remember you? What do you mean?"

Ami reached in her purse and handed Taylor a card. "I recently got my realtor's license and well, you'll meet Heather. She works with us too. She's been doing realty for a while. So to ask you in front of her..." Taylor tried to listen as Ami shared more information about herself in a period of ten minutes than most people do who've known each other for years. When she got to the part about her little boy, Taylor's listening skills went into hyperdrive.

"...we live with my parents. Working for Jefferson will never get me my own house. I really want that for Brian and I'm tired of living under my parents' roof. I didn't realize how much I wanted a place of my own until Mel moved here."

"Mel? Why? Does she make you feel bad about living with your parents?"

Ami shrugged. “Not intentionally, but with the situation with her daughter, she talks about how much better off she’d be living with her. And it made me think about having my own place with Brian.” Ami shook her head. “Mel doesn’t like hearing me talk about Brian, unless she’s talking about how she’s going to win back custody and bring Nicole here to live.” Ami’s eyes got big. “Oh, that’s the other thing I wanted to ask you. Do you have kids? If you do, don’t mention them tonight. Mel gets very uncomfortable.”

“Um, I don’t. I’m not married.” Taylor spied a rack of wine bottles. She really hoped they weren’t being saved for a special occasion. Ami had just opened a treasure box of information, and if the wine would help retrieve more, Taylor was willing to sacrifice. “Would you like some wine before we go to dinner?”

Ami hung her purse on the back of one of the chairs and unzipped her jacket. “You probably think I’m crazy talking about all of this. But the way I see it, you’re practically a neighbor. I don’t know your grandparents that well, but they’re nice people. Sometimes it’s easier talking to people you don’t know. This town’s so small. You can’t say anything that the whole town doesn’t find out.”

It took two tries, but Taylor finally found the glasses. They weren’t wine glasses, but they’d do. The next search was for the corkscrew. She found that in the third drawer she tried. Pouring the wine, Taylor pried, “What happened to Mel? Why’s she so sensitive?”

Taking a drink—bigger than a sip—Ami began, “Well, it took me awhile to get the information. Apparently her ex is a piece of work. She won’t tell any of us his name. Some court-ordered silence thing. I get the feeling he was abusive.”

“And *he* has Mel’s daughter? How?”

“Money.”

“He’s rich?”

Ami nodded. “She hasn’t come out and said it. I only learned Nicole’s name one time when Mel was drunk. She kept talking about how pretty her daughter is and how much she misses her.” Ami leaned forward. “Now that she opened up to me, she talks privately about it from time to time. I’m pretty sure that the prick ex is remarried. Mel’s said, more than once, something about getting Nicole away from the bitch playing mommy.”

If Taylor’s training hadn’t kicked into gear, her jaw would have been on the floor. As it was, she was sure her pulse rate was off the charts. “What is she going to do? Is Mr. Diamond going to represent her to win back her daughter?”

Ami emptied her glass and poured another. “You’d think that, wouldn’t you? Like if you need to fight a court order and you work for a lawyer...” She shook her head. “I keep expecting Jefferson to tell me to counter something or

do something. I want him to. I want to know this dickhead's name, but so far, nothing."

Taylor sipped her wine, using the term loosely. Whatever it was in her glass was too sweet to be considered wine. Not to mention, the insulting aftertaste. Swallowing the liquid, she asked, "So do you all try to keep the conversation away from kids?"

"Yes. Not always. I mean, Jefferson handles a lot of divorces and custody battles. At work we mention them. It's when we're out and she's drinking. Usually she just turns off and leaves. It's only been a few times when it's just been the two of us that she's confided in me. I promised not to say anything." Ami shrugged. "I'm not very good at keeping a secret."

Undoubtedly, a great quality for someone who works for the town's attorney. No wonder small towns get the reputation of gossip mills. "Do you need to go home to Brian before dinner?"

Ami looked at her phone. "Shit, I do. I'd better go. My mom knows I go out on Fridays, but I usually go home and see him first." She continued talking as she put her jacket back on. "My folks bowl on a league on Fridays. Since I go out with the girls, they take Brian with them to the bowling alley. I better hurry before they're gone."

"Okay, thank you for the coffee."

Ami smiled. "Thanks for the wine. I know I sound like a bitch telling secrets, but the thing is, I like Mel." She suddenly looked sad. "Not that she feels the same. I mean, we're friends. I'd like it to be more than that, but I think she's still hung up on that dick of an ex."

Taylor's eyes widened. This was much more information than she'd dreamt of retrieving.

"So the thing is," Ami continued, "I don't want her to get all pissy and leave the bar. I was hoping you'd help me out."

"Sure thing." Taylor pressed her lips together and pretended to twist a key. "Not a word from me. I won't mention kids or dick exes."

Ami laughed. "I don't mind the dick ex conversation. I'm dying to know his name." She reached for her glass and finished off what little remained in there. "This was great wine!"

Taylor nodded, trying to keep a straight face.

"I'll see you in a little bit. Don't forget. Nothing about the realty either, and..." Ami smiled. "...remember me."

"Oh, I will. Thanks, Ami."

Taylor waited until Ami's car backed down the drive to call Phil. As she meticulously put the Townsends' farmhouse back in the order she'd found it, wiped down anything with fingerprints, and headed back to town for dinner, she shared her newfound knowledge.

EARLY MAY...: PHIL

IT HAD BEEN a long time since Phillip Roach had sat fully on the wrong side of the law. Perhaps all he'd done to help Claire escape the clutches of Catherine London as well as stay off the FBI's radar wasn't legal, but it wasn't this. This was the Phillip Roach of years ago: the one who knew his objective and accomplished it at any cost. This was the man he thought he'd always be but had somehow put to rest. The stark difference between years ago and today was with the issue of the order. In special ops and even in private hire, he received an order and he carried it out.

Today, there was no order.

If there had been, in Phil's current state of employment, it would have come from Claire or Rawlings. Phil refused to allow either of them to be involved. They didn't know his plans or what Taylor had learned from Ami Beech, and they never would.

Somehow, despite the elevated stress the packages and letters instilled, the Rawlingses had come to terms with them. Phil's family had a sense of peace with their security. He had too, until there was too much—too much evidence that moved his calm, experienced mind into a cyclone of terrorizing thoughts. One seemingly innocuous clue was the color of Patricia's hair. Red. People who wanted to stay hidden changed their hair to a neutral color, one that blended into the masses. Patricia's color screamed for attention, or more accurately of arrogance.

Another finding that shouted for recognition was what he saw in her new home. When Phil entered her house to hide the tiny cameras and he walked into a small bedroom, the pink paint and white twin-sized bed made him nauseous. Learning of Patricia's discussion with Ami of *her* daughter turned that feeling into a full-blown sickness. A bead of sweat materialized on Phil's brow at the mere thought. The woman was either delusional or genius. Unfortunately, Phil feared the latter. Patricia was establishing herself in this small community and constructing a believable backstory. If her plans came to fruition, she would arrive back to her house and job with her daughter, the one she claimed was taken by her ex. The members of her inner circle would never question this child and Nichol's life would be forever, irrevocably changed.

With each minute, Phil's blood pressure rose. The thick fluid coursed through his veins, thundered in his ears, until his vision clouded with the red pooling behind his eyes. Patricia's plans would not happen. Phil knew that with all of his heart and soul. He also knew that the Rawlingses would never, could never, know why the mailings stopped. If Phil could have done it without anyone's knowledge, he would have. Unfortunately, he'd already let

Eric and Taylor into too much of the operation.

As Phil waited for Patricia's arrival in her living room, Eric waited nearby with the car. Over the years the two men had developed a trust that only comes with time and experience. Eric was a stand-up man who devoted his life to Rawlings, even initially at the sacrifice of Claire. Though Rawlings claimed Eric had nothing to do with Claire's kidnapping, Roach knew in his gut that Eric helped. Rawlings couldn't have gotten her back to Iowa alone. The flip side to their partnership was that Phil himself felt the same way. If push came to shove, and it had come close, Phil would always choose Claire. Knowing that their two main goals were combined gave Eric and Phil the common objective. And with Nichol, there was no doubt: both men would lay down their lives.

Taylor's help had proven invaluable. The pink room was a subtle warning, but Ami's declarations were a full-blown alarm. No one expected the office manager of the Diamond Law Office to be so forthcoming. It was doubtful Eric or Phil would have reaped the same results as easily. Nevertheless, at this juncture, as Phil awaited Patricia's arrival, Taylor was in Iowa with Claire and Nichol: the fewer people who knew the truth about this day, the better. The timing was perfect: with Rawlings out of town, Eric and Phil's absence would appear as though they'd accompanied Rawlings to Chicago.

The sound of a key turning in the lock of the side door brought Phil back to present. Again his heart rate increased, as he heard not only her footsteps on the kitchen floor but the sound of her voice. His surveillance equipment had yielded very little, but it had revealed Patricia's routine. Each night she returned from work, entered through the kitchen, locked the side door, and hung her keys on a nearby hook. Her next stop would be her coffee maker, where she'd set it for her evening cup. On most nights she didn't go out of the house until morning. Never in the time he'd been watching had anyone been with her.

Phil held his breath and listened to Patricia speak and waited for the other voice. The revving of the Keurig echoed, but no other voice came. He sighed with the audible confirmation: Patricia was talking on the phone.

Stepping silently into the shadows of her living room, Phil waited, knowing that her next stop would be her bedroom, where she'd change her clothes. Once her conversation was complete, Phil planned to make his presence known. There was no need to be coy. Patricia would recognize him the moment she saw him. They'd had more than a few conversations in the past.

As she made her way to her bedroom still talking, he remembered hearing about the reason for her firing. A smile graced his lips as he recalled Brent filling him in on the details. Brent was the one to authorize the larger than normal severance package. After all, Patricia Miles had been the assistant to

the CEO of a billion-dollar conglomerate. Half a million dollars should have been sufficient to secure her silence and allow her to slip away. Changing her identity was never part of the deal. Brent offered glowing recommendations for Patricia Miles. She could have easily moved to any Fortune 500 company and done well. The situation she now faced was her own doing.

Phil tugged on the fingers of his leather gloves and continued to listen. Patricia was still in her bedroom when she finally said goodbye. It wasn't until she walked down the hallway toward her waiting cup of coffee that he made his presence known. Stepping from the living room, Phil silently moved toward the brightly lit kitchen.

"Ms. Miles," he stated in a cold, even tone.

Patricia's shoulders stiffened as he heard her gasp. Slowly she turned his direction. Confusion and fear swirled in her eyes as anger and determination vied for dominance. Prying her tense lips apart, she finally asked, "Mr. Roach? What are you doing in my home?"

Moving his head slowly back and forth, he said, "Come now. I'm sure you can come up with a better question than that. I have one: what's an MIT and Stanford graduate doing in Olivia, Minnesota, working as a paralegal? Especially someone who received a handsome settlement with the promise of glowing recommendations? Ms. Miles, you could be living the high life in New York or better yet, someplace abroad, perhaps London."

Her ashen pallor intensified as Patricia's gaze slowly moved around her kitchen. "I-I want you to leave."

The spring sky through the window had begun to darken. He couldn't have orchestrated a better cover. Along with removing herself from the radar, Patricia had also chosen an isolated home, at least a half mile from the nearest neighbor. A low chuckle rumbled from somewhere deep within Phil's throat. One that even he thought sounded sinister. "Really, Ms. Miles, your time for making demands has expired. I have demands now."

Her frightened eyes moved to his.

"Ms. Miles, my demands are basic and straightforward. You were given the opportunity to make yourself scarce and go on with your life. Instead you chose to seek revenge. The Rawlingses have had more than enough of that—enough to last a lifetime. I want you gone and out of their lives. I don't want you to attempt to contact them in any way—ever again."

"Who said that I—"

"Don't play dumb. Your intelligence is what's gotten you this far. Try capitalizing on it. It could save your life. Tell me you'll leave them alone."

"Save my life?" she asked. "What does that mean?"

"I gave you the answer. Say it."

"I'll leave them alone."

Phil heard the lie roll off her tongue with ease.

"I don't know what you planned to accomplish with your mailings, but whatever it was, it's over."

"Tell me what you mean, over?" The panic showed in her eyes. "What are you going to do? Does Mr.... Tony know you're here?"

Phil reached into his pocket. "No. No one knows, which is not to your advantage. I'm here to warn you."

"Warn me?"

"Give up your quest, whatever it is. By using the U.S. Postal Service to send your threatening mailings you've committed a federal crime, one that's punishable by up to twenty years in prison."

Her back again straightened defiantly. "I never threatened anyone. And as I recall, you're not in law enforcement."

"I'm not—another disadvantage for you. And you *did* threaten. You also attempted to manipulate and harass, all punishable by law."

"Fine," Patricia said, shuffling her feet to move away from Phil. "No one can prove it was me."

"Wrong again, Ms. Miles. The FBI has your DNA. I guarantee that if they catch you, you'll be spending time behind bars. Perhaps we can arrange a shared cell with Catherine, since you're using her idea."

The color returned to her cheeks. "It was *my* idea to remind them, to remind *her*! No one's taking me into custody. It's her. She's going back to the asylum where she belongs. You don't understand." She shook her head as her hands waved about her sides. "He needs me. I've been there for him. I *was* there for him. She's crazy! She doesn't deserve him..."

Patricia continued to protest as the textured handle of the cool pistol in Phil's jacket pocket fit perfectly into the palm of his hand. The old Phil longed to end her ridiculous reasoning; however, the new Phil recalled Taylor's warning. Never had Phil worried about the consequences of his actions; then again, never before had he had the concerns and relationships he currently enjoyed. The bonds he felt with the Rawlingses were double-edged. While he'd come to enjoy the affiliation and rapport, at this moment he felt that same connection limiting his capabilities. It wasn't that he couldn't kill Patricia. He'd killed before, and doing so again would guarantee her future silence. It was that for the first time that he could recall, Phil didn't want to risk losing the life he lived. He didn't want to disappear. Leaving his current life wasn't an option.

"Enough!" he proclaimed.

The outline of a pistol was easily defined through the fabric of Phil's jacket. Patricia's eyes locked on his pocket. "Are you going to kill me?"

Phil narrowed his gaze. There were no detectable signs of emotion in his expression or tone as he stepped forward. "Give me answers, truthful answers, and we'll discuss it."

Perspiration glistened on her brow. “I-I have a life here,” she reasoned. Her body visibly trembled as she stepped back once, then again, inching farther and farther away. Each minuscule movement tried in vain to create an impenetrable gap, as if one more step would be enough to assure her safety. In reality, she could run the length of the house and the bullets in Phil’s gun would never miss their target. The two individuals continued to stare as only the sound of their breathing interrupted the looming silence. Finally the squeak of a chair against the worn linoleum announced the end of Patricia’s retreat. In an act of desperation, she lifted her chin and quipped, “You can’t just expect my death to go unnoticed.”

He smirked. “You’re living a life that doesn’t exist. There’s no Melissa Garrison. Once you’re gone, and *if* anyone cares enough to investigate, they’ll learn the truth: you were a lie. You never existed.”

“B-But you said that the FBI is on to me. They’ll know.”

“They’ll know that you willingly disappeared once and you did it again. That’s what happens to psychopaths like you. Perhaps you figured out that the bureau was on to you. Once you did, you panicked and moved on.”

Though Phil had yet to show her what he held within his pocket, her shoulders slumped in defeat at his reasoning. “What questions do you have?” she asked.

“I want the truth. If you’re honest with me, we might be able to work out a deal. If you’re not... let’s just say that I don’t make deals with people I can’t trust.” His training had kicked into gear. No longer was this emotional—he wouldn’t allow it. The outcome was up to her.

Swallowing hard, Patricia looked up. “What do you want to know?”

“What were your plans for Nichol?”

Patricia blinked repeatedly, keeping her gaze toward his ice-cold stare. “I-I didn’t have plans—”

Phil released the safety on the pistol. The faint click echoed through the otherwise still kitchen. “Try again.”

She took a deep breath. “I didn’t have it all worked out, but I’ve been laying groundwork...” Tears came to her eyes. “She doesn’t deserve everything. She took it all from me.”

With his free hand he grasped her arm. “What the fuck are you saying? She’s a little girl.”

“No! Not *her*,” Patricia retorted. “Claire! She doesn’t deserve to have him as a husband. I’d put years into him.” Shaking off Phil’s grip, she stared rebelliously. “He used to take me places. Did you know that? Does she? I doubt it. I went with him to business dinners and to meet with associates.” She cocked her head to the side. “And it wasn’t all business either. We traveled. It all ended when she came around, and I was supposed to plan their wedding? Really? Why would she expect me to do that?”

Phil wanted to shake this woman. When *she* came around? How could Patricia possibly blame Claire for being kidnapped and held prisoner? He also doubted it was Claire who wanted Patricia to plan her wedding.

Patricia went on, "Fine, you're going to kill me anyway. Tell her... tell her that I would've gotten him back too, if she hadn't trapped him by getting pregnant! What a slut! I just figured if I was the one..."

Phil released the gun as he roughly covered her mouth and neck. "My patience is running thin. I asked you about Nichol, *not Claire*."

Her eyes bulged as she gasped for air. When he removed his hand, she answered, "She, Claire, doesn't deserve to have his child. I do. I don't know what I planned to do with her, but I planned to take her."

It was all Phil needed to hear. Taking a step back he nodded. "I asked for honesty. Now we're leaving."

"No!" she yelled, reaching for the edge of the table. "I'm not going anywhere. I was honest. That's the truth."

One swipe of his phone and Phil called Eric. "Plan A. Get us now."

Patricia's eyes filled with tears. "What does that mean?"

"It means we're leaving here. Say goodbye to Melissa Garrison."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mid-May 2017

Claire

Honesty is more than not lying. It is truth telling, truth speaking, truth living, and truth loving.

—James E. Faust

CLAIRE INHALED THE sweet scents of lotion and powder as she held Baby Beth in her arms. Staring down at her niece, she gently ran the tips of her fingers over the fine blonde hair. “Oh, Em, couldn’t you just sit and hold her for hours?”

With emerald eyes that sparkled with both love and exhaustion, Emily replied, “I could. I really could, but I don’t believe Michael would approve.”

Claire grinned. The thought in her mind shouldn’t be voiced, yet Claire couldn’t stop herself. “You did this with two, when Michael was born...” She kept her eyes on the beautiful baby, avoiding her sister’s tired gaze. “I’m sorry you had to, but you’re experienced with two children.”

Emily shook her head. “No, Claire, don’t be sorry. We love Nichol. You know, I thought I was experienced. I thought this would be like it was when Michael was born, but it’s not. It’s a whole new world. Nichol was seven months old when Michael came into our lives. It wasn’t easy having two babies. That’s when we hired Becca.” She sighed. “Thank God we hired Becca. Like I said, it wasn’t easy, but Nichol wasn’t walking or talking or demanding attention... other than what babies do. It wasn’t like this. Michael wants to play and go. Nichol was content to be home with Michael and me.”

Claire looked up to see her sister’s eyes close. “Em, why don’t you take a nap? Shannon and Becca have Nichol and Michael outside. I’ll take care of Beth for an hour or so. You need your rest.”

Emily’s eyes opened wide. “No. I can’t do that.”

“Why not? You just fed her. Look, her little eyes are fighting sleep. She’ll

be fine.”

“I... I just... what if something happens?”

“Don’t be silly,” Claire scoffed. “Taylor’s here. Everything’s fine. You should take advantage of the opportunity and get some rest when you can.”

Stifling a yawn, Emily stood. “Really, Claire, thank you. I just can’t. I’ll nap when John gets home. Let me have her, and I’ll put her down in her crib. You and I can have some coffee and watch the kids play. We haven’t talked in a while, not without the kids or men around.” Reaching for her daughter, Emily asked, “Fill me in on what’s happening with you?”

Claire felt a cold chill as Beth’s tiny warm body was lifted from her lap. Suddenly, sadness filled her chest. She’d wanted a range of emotion and as she contemplated the sudden emptiness, she had it. Fighting the realization of what just went unspoken, Claire feigned a smile. Her sister didn’t trust her with her child. Trying to hide her hurt, Claire said, “I’m good, Emily. I’ll go make some coffee while you put Beth down. Then I’ll meet you on the back patio. It’s getting warmer and the children are playing in the backyard.”

“That sounds great,” Emily replied, heading toward the nursery.

With each step, Claire thought about the disappointment eddying through her. Yes, she’d had mental issues, but never in her life would she have imagined that her own sister wouldn’t trust her with her baby. Didn’t Emily know how much Claire loved children? With each step she tried to suppress her distress. As she did a new thought occurred to her. Wasn’t this a good sign? She wanted the range of emotion that was real life. By decreasing her medications, she asked to once again experience the ups and downs. Claire had just forgotten how painful the downs could be.

As she made the coffee Claire tried to concentrate on the positive. She thought how Beth reminded her of Nichol at that age. Suddenly, her mind went to Madeline. The kind woman’s gentle touch, caring words, and wealth of knowledge were Claire’s light and encouragement during those first few months of motherhood. Madeline not only taught Claire and Tony about babies, she empowered them to be parents. Thinking about the prospect of another baby, Claire knew what she wanted. She decided that when she and Tony were alone, she’d talk to him about inviting Madeline and Francis to Iowa.

Those thoughts and plans pulled Claire from her feeling of rejection as she settled at the Vandersols’ outdoor table and watched the children running furiously about the yard, laughing and kicking. In the past few weeks, Nichol had become obsessed with soccer. Thankfully both children were wearing little shin guards. Heaven knows what type of tragedy could occur without them. Claire shook her head. Although her daughter knew very little about the real game, Claire heard Nichol’s voice above the giggles, constantly reminding her cousin of the rules, or more accurately *her* rules. It was at times

like this that Claire saw more Tony in their child.

She felt she had a strong argument for nature over nurture. Even without the presence of her father for the first three years of her life, Nichol's words, actions, and even gestures were all miniature copies of her father's. Yet as these thoughts streamed through her mind, Michael fell to the ground, holding his leg. Before Claire could stand, Nichol was on her knees at his side. The injury timeout was short-lived. Soon they were both up and the game was once again in full swing. Claire smiled. Nichol may have Tony's determination, but she also possessed her mother's gentleness and compassion.

"What are you thinking?" Emily asked as she sat and placed the small monitor on the table. The warm afternoon breeze gently blew through their hair.

"I was thinking about how much I enjoy watching Nichol and Michael together." Claire didn't want to address what had happened inside with Beth.

"I do too. They have so much fun together."

Claire nodded as she took a sip of her coffee.

"I especially like how they wear each other out," Emily said. "I hope they welcome Beth into their world."

"I like the wearing out part too, and don't worry, they will," Claire reassured. "Nichol's elated that the girls now outnumber the boys."

"I worry that they'll think of her as a nuisance, being younger than them."

"Did you think I was a nuisance?" Claire asked with a smirk.

Emily grinned over the rim of her coffee mug. "Hmmm. Maybe I shouldn't answer that."

"Well, maybe Beth needs someone closer to her own age?" Claire hadn't broached the baby subject with Emily in a few months. Her sister had no idea of the work she and Tony had been doing to get Claire ready to be pregnant.

Emily narrowed her gaze toward Claire. "If you're talking about me, I think I'm done for a while."

Claire laughed. "Well, since Beth's barely a month old, I'd be shocked if you wanted to jump on that again."

"Then I hope you're suggesting a play group. Claire, you can't be thinking of—"

Claire sat straighter. "Em, don't do that. Don't make everything an argument. You're my sister. You're supposed to be my friend, not my mother."

Emily rubbed her forehead. "I'm sorry, Claire. I'm tired and my filter is sleeping."

"No," Claire replied. "When it comes to me you don't have a filter. Tony and I are planning to try for another child."

Though her head moved back and forth, Emily remained silent.

"We're not jumping into anything," Claire continued. "We've been working with my doctors. I'm off all my medicines." She noticed Emily's eyes widen. "I have been for over a month. We're supposed to wait a little longer, but the doctors are all on board and so is Tony."

"Does that include Dr. Brown?"

"Yes, she was the first one I discussed it with. I still meet with her twice weekly and Tony's been to a few of my sessions with her. We're being careful. I'm doing fine. I feel good, and I mean that in the best of ways. I get happy and sad. It's the way it's supposed to be."

Emily reached out and covered Claire's hand. "I'm not your mother, but I'm your older sister. I can worry."

"No, Em, you can't. You have enough to concern yourself with John, Michael, and Beth. Worrying about me is not a priority. I have a fantastic family and life with Tony and Nichol. We're ready to try to expand it. Tony even said that if the doctors decide I shouldn't get pregnant, we could adopt."

"Really?" Emily's tired eyes opened wide. "Anthony Rawlings is willing to raise someone else's child?"

It was Claire's turn to narrow her gaze. "What does that mean?"

"Hmm, nothing. I'm just surprised; that's all."

"Don't you think it's possible to love a child even if you weren't the one to give birth to it?"

"You know I know it's possible," Emily replied.

"Then what's the issue?"

Emily momentarily closed her eyes. "Claire, there's no issue. If you're truly doing this with the support of your medical team, I'm happy. I see how excited Nichol is with Beth. She'll be thrilled to be a big sister."

Absorbed in their conversation, neither Claire nor Emily saw the children approaching. "I'm gonna be a sister?" Nichol asked, her cheeks pink from sun and exercise and her eyes wide with questioning.

Claire reached out and rubbed Nichol's back. "You're all hot. Do you want some water?"

"Shannon's getting some. Can we have a baby too?"

"Maybe someday, sweetie," Claire answered. "Maybe someday. Right now you're a big cousin. How do you like that?"

"I like it, a lot!"

Michael ran towards the table as the light on the small monitor flashed and the springtime air filled with the sounds of baby whimpers. "Mommy, baby Bef's cry'n again!" Turning toward Claire he said, "Baby Bef cries a lot."

"Oh, she does?"

Covering his ears, he said, "It's bad. It hurts my ears."

Nichol turned toward her cousin. "No, Michael, Baby Beff's not bad. She

wants Aunt Em's tension." She looked back at Claire. "Right, Momma? Just like my puppy. He wasn't *bad*. He just wanted new batteries."

Claire hugged Nichol and winked at Emily. "That's right, sweetie, and listen, Michael. Beth's sleeping again. Sometimes we all make cranky noises and say things we don't mean when we're sleepy."

Emily shook her head. "Okay, Claire. I get it. Let's talk about this later, after I've had a good night's sleep. I know my opinion doesn't matter. I'm sorry."

"Your opinion matters. I just want your support."

"You have it. I'll be more excited after that good night's sleep."

Picking up her coffee, Claire commented, "So in about a year or so?"

"Yes," Emily replied wearily. "Think about that before you do anything rash."

Claire raised her brow.

"Are you willing to give up sleep?"

Nodding, Claire replied, "In a heartbeat to hold a little one again—my little one."

The warm breeze continued to blow as the children ran back to their waiting soccer ball.

Late May Phil

PHIL LOOKED OVER the FBI report. In a nutshell, it corroborated what he knew: the bureau confirmed that Patricia Miles had been living in a small rented house under an alias, Melissa Garrison, in Olivia, Minnesota. According to the report, she'd been working as a paralegal for Jefferson Diamond, a small-town attorney, doing research for the firm. Mr. Diamond claimed that one day she was at work and the next day she wasn't. Few of her coworkers claimed a private relationship with her. Most people interviewed in town knew her from her job. They all claimed that she was quiet and kept mostly to herself. Ami Beech, Jefferson Diamond's office manager, claimed that Ms. Garrison's skills were impressive in the field of research and admitted to not completing the necessary background check prior to her hiring.

The small home Ms. Garrison rented contained physical evidence to link her to the *Rawls-Nichols* mailings. There were even pre-addressed cards. From her personal items, they were able to test her DNA. It too confirmed that Ms. Garrison, aka Patricia Miles, was the female who sealed the envelopes. For unknown reasons, Ms. Garrison had moved on. The FBI will continue their pursuit. At the end of the report, the bureau asked for continued

assistance from all members of the Rawlings security team. They asked to be notified if anything unusual came up or another similar mailing arrived.

Phil handed the report to Eric, leaned back in his chair, and waited for a response.

After a few minutes, Eric's eyes met Phil's and he asked, "Gone. Sounds like no signs of foul play."

"No, apparently not, at least not any mentioned in this report."

Phil wondered if the FBI chose to be unforthcoming with the evidence of foul intentions toward Nichol or if they truly didn't know the information that he and his team had learned. Either way, the report confirmed that the FBI's suspect was missing and the bureau appeared to have no suspects or theories as to her disappearance.

Taylor sat back and waited. "I'd like to read that once you're finished, Eric."

He nodded as he continued to read.

Turning to Phil, she asked, "Do they have any theories as to why she'd disappear after trying to make a life?"

"No," Phil replied. "Not officially. However, I spoke with my contact and the unspoken innuendo I picked up was that they believe Ms. Miles may've become suspicious that the FBI was getting close and decided to move on."

"Is that what you think?"

Phil didn't respond as his mind flashed back to that night in Olivia.

Taylor's voice returned him to present. "Do either of you plan on telling me what happened?"

Eric shrugged. "I don't know what you want to hear. It sounds like she's moved on. I guess we just keep an eye out for her or new mailings. At least we now know for sure who we're looking for."

Taylor crossed her arms over her chest and wrinkled her brow. "I went to Olivia. I haven't said a word to Mr. or Mrs. Rawlings and this is the way I'm treated. If you think I'm naive enough to believe this report at face value, you've seriously underestimated me."

Eric stood and handed her the pages. "Read it, and see if you find something we missed."

As she reached for the report, Eric's gaze met hers and he whispered something Phil couldn't hear. A cold chill filled the room as Taylor turned and met Phil's frigid stare. A moment later the door to the security office closed and Phil and Taylor were alone. Taking the pages, Taylor silently went to the sofa and settled against the soft leather. Her blue eyes scanned each page. Occasionally she'd stop and reread a sentence or a paragraph. Phil wasn't sure. He hadn't heard exactly what Eric had said, but by the way she looked at them, he knew it was about Patricia.

What would she say or think if she knew what went on in Olivia? It

wasn't like her record was without blemish. The more Phil got to know Taylor, the more he knew that they were in many ways cut from the same cloth. Maybe that's what bothered him the most. Eric accepted everything as part of his job, part of his responsibility. He rarely questioned. Phil knew that Taylor would want to know more. If the roles were reversed, he'd want more. After three weeks of wondering if he'd made the right decision, Phil still didn't know. That contrary was something new. Never in the past had he second-guessed himself.

Phil turned his chair away from Taylor and watched the monitors. They were on a random feed from all around the estate. Since he'd taken over security, the cameras were more advanced than they had been. The new house also had fewer cameras within the rooms. The first floor was fully accessible to surveillance, even the Rawlingses' office. That had been a point of contention with Rawlings when Phil first took over security, but Phil reminded him that the recorded conversation in his old office was the key to his innocence. They compromised. The office feed was only accessible with the proper dual code. Only Claire and Rawlings had access-to-one half of the code. Therefore, the office would only be reviewed if one of the Rawlingses and a member of the security team were both in agreement. The lawns, gardens, pool, playground, and all of the outside grounds were constantly monitored. The capability was present for the front gate to be either physically or remotely manned. No one could access the estate without being admitted and recorded.

Phil closed his eyes and remembered.

Patricia's eyes filled with tears. "What does that mean?"

"It means we're leaving here. Say goodbye to Melissa Garrison."

Phil pulled the gun from his pocket. Pointing it toward Patricia, he said, "You have two minutes." In her left hand, she held tightly to her cell phone. He nodded toward it. "Place that on the table. Go. Get whatever you'd grab to leave. If you have cash hidden, I recommend you take it now. You're not coming back."

"I-I don't have—"

"You do," he said, "in the cupboard in the bathroom. Go now."

She moved slowly, deliberating each word he'd said. Placing the phone down, she turned. "How do you know about the money?"

"Ms. Miles, I know much more than you'd think. I'll explain it more once we're gone."

Suddenly, she walked briskly toward her bedroom. When Phil heard the door shut, he shook his head and followed. Though it was locked, the small

key-like object rested predictably above the jamb. Entering the room, he found Patricia trying unsuccessfully to open the window. “It’s an old house,” he said calmly. “The windows have been painted too many times. Don’t be stupid. I’m not alone. Get the cash, some shoes, and a jacket.” He looked at his watch. “You now have one minute.”

“I’m not getting my money. If you’re going to kill me anyway, I’m not giving you my cash.”

“Fifty seconds, and I assure you, I don’t want or need your money. You will. Get it now.”

With ten seconds to spare, they stepped from the side door into the night air. “Lock the house,” Phil demanded.

She looked at him with the unspoken questions.

“It needs to look as if you’ve disappeared of your own volition. Locking the door is something you always do.”

Nodding, she placed the key in the lock; however, as she started to move toward the carport, Phil reached for her elbow and redirected her toward the driveway. “No, Ms. Miles, we have a ride.”

Taylor’s hand rested upon Phil’s shoulder pulling him from his thoughts and causing him to jump. As he turned he expected to see anger in her blue eyes; instead, it was sadness.

“Tell me. You need to talk.”

“Ms. Walters, I assure you—”

Taylor leaned back against the desk. “Don’t. I’m not asking you because I feel left out. I’m asking you because I see the anguish. I see you rubbing your neck and rolling your head from side to side. I’ve seen the way you watch the cameras and front gate. I know you come in here in the middle of the night and review footage.”

Phil started to protest. She had no right to spy on him. Yet before he could articulate the proper response, she continued talking.

“I know you take this job and this family personally.” Leaning forward, she said, “I get it. I know about your family.”

Phil’s shoulders snapped back. “I don’t have a family.”

“You’ve called the Rawlingses your family more than once. I know about your blood family.”

“Don’t!” His volume rose as he sprung from his chair. “Forget whatever you think you know. My private life isn’t open for discussion.”

Taylor stood taller. “We all get into this line of work for different reasons. I understand that you weren’t there for them.” She reached out and touched his chest. The warmth of her fingers radiated through the material, scorching

his skin below. When Phil stepped back, Taylor went on, “You were thousands of miles away on a godforsaken tour.”

“Korea,” he said, swallowing any emotion. “I was stationed in South Korea. The eighties were a turbulent time. Kim Jong II was in power in North Korea; the tension was building between North Korea and the rest of the world. There were problems with Gorbachev...”

“You were a kid, in your twenties.”

Phil nodded. “I was supposed to go home. My father had this gun shop... But I got an offer to re-up. I never went home.”

Taylor nodded. “I know, and they died while you were away.”

“They didn’t die. They were murdered in their sleep by a kid who wanted to rob the store. The asshole had tried to rob it once before and only spent one night in jail. He used my father’s own gun to shoot them.” He shook his head. “My parents lived in an apartment above the shop.”

Why had he just said all of that? He hadn’t thought about that, not consciously, in years—decades. Taylor reached for his hand. He looked down at the foreign connection, thinking how warm and soft her skin felt against his.

“You weren’t there.” Her voice was soft yet strong. “But you are here. Whatever happened in Olivia, you’re here. That’s what matters. The Rawlingses don’t live above a gun shop. No one’s getting near them. You’ve done everything to protect them.”

He pulled his hand away. The pain in his chest was unbearable. This was shit. He’d done better as the assassin. It was business. This feeling shit was painful. “No! I didn’t. I could’ve done everything, but I didn’t.”

“What? What do you mean?”

Phil stepped away, pacing about the small office. “I could have. Eric would’ve supported my decision either way. Don’t you get it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“She was honest. I asked her about Nichol and she was honest. She could’ve lied. If she had...” He pinched the brow of his nose. “...that’s what I told myself, if she lied...”

Taylor moved to her desk and sat. “Help me, Phil. I can’t follow what you’re saying.”

He stopped pacing and turned. “I asked her what her plans were for Nichol. She admitted that she planned to take her.”

Taylor’s chest moved up and down with deep breaths. “You were doing your job.”

“Stop!” He couldn’t remember ever feeling so out of control. “I didn’t. If I had I wouldn’t be watching the damn monitors all night long. But... she was honest. That was the deal.”

“Phil?”

The golden flecks in his hazel eyes shimmered with moisture.

“Please tell me.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled. “Patricia’s out of the country. She has been for over two weeks. I haven’t heard from her and obviously, neither has the FBI. I gave her another chance.”

Taylor’s lips formed a straight line. “So you didn’t...”

“I should have.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He shrugged. “I’d planned to, but she wasn’t delusional. She wasn’t crazy. She was just hell-bent on revenge. I sound so fucking soft.” He fell down onto the sofa. “If anyone in this crazy world deserved revenge, it would be Claire. Yet she’s never tried to get it. Hell, she forgave Rawlings. I just thought if Claire talked to Patricia—which I don’t want her to do—she’d see that Patricia didn’t really want Nichol. She wanted Claire to hurt for hurting her.

“This whole thing is so fucked up. Claire didn’t hurt her. Patricia had her sights set on something that would never be. Instead of dwelling on it, and giving up her life and her freedom, I convinced her to leave. I told her to get away before the FBI figured it out. This was her last chance to have a life. We gave her an additional installment on her severance package and provided her with new identification. We explained that she was on her own.

We also warned her. We’d found her once. If she ever came near them or even so much as sent another card, I promised that I’d hunt her down.”

Finally, he made himself meet Taylor’s blue gaze. She feigned a smile. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked. “Admitting that I’ve gone soft and if something happens to anyone in this family it’s my fault?”

She shook her head as her smile became real. *Why was she smiling?* “No,” she replied. “For showing that you care and that you want to do what’s right. From all that I’ve learned, this family seems to have been consumed with vengeance. You had the chance to continue that, and you didn’t.”

“She didn’t have a plan. If she had... if she’d lied... but she didn’t.”

“We’ll help. You know that, don’t you? Eric and I want the same thing you do. I didn’t take this job for the money or even the glamorous hours.” Her cheeks rose as she found amusement in her own statement.

Despite his mood, Phil grinned too, because though the pay wasn’t bad, the hours definitely sucked. “I took this job,” she continued, “because I wanted to find a place to make a life. I saw the devotion both you and Eric had. I wanted that. I wanted to feel strongly, and I do. I don’t think that making the decision *not* to kill someone is a bad one. It makes me all the more proud to be on your team.”

Phil closed his eyes and sighed. He’d always been the one to carry the load. Whether it was the death of his parents or the lives he’d taken, it had

always been on him and him alone. He'd never considered sharing. The couch shifted as Taylor sat beside him. He looked her direction. "I'm not sure what made me tell you all of that. I haven't told anyone the stuff about my family. I haven't spoken of it in over twenty years."

Taylor tilted her head. "Sometimes it's healthy to talk. I hope you know that whatever you tell me is safe with me."

Before he could respond, Taylor leaned toward him. Suddenly, his decision seemed right. Phil could live with it, because he wasn't alone. The scent of Taylor's light perfume filled his senses with hope for a future, for not only the Rawlingses, but for everyone. Maybe he was getting soft, but as her lips neared his, it wasn't his decision that consumed his thoughts. It was his desire to feel her softness: her lips, a mere whisper away, her hands, how they warmed his skin. And then it happened. Had he moved forward or was it all her? It didn't matter. Phil's chest filled with sensations he'd kept buried for too long. He wanted nothing more than to be lost in the sweetness of her kiss.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Late June 2017

Claire

A man travels the world over in search of what he needs, and returns home to find it.

—George A. Moore

C LAIRE WALKED QUIETLY through the darkened hallways and down the staircase. With Nichol tucked into bed sound asleep, Shannon out for the evening, and Tony not yet back from a business trip, the house was still and peaceful. The serenity gave her strength as she made her way through the living room and outside onto the back patio. Claire smiled as she looked up to the Iowa sky. The black velvet blanket high above glistened with millions of stars shining down like diamonds. As she inhaled the moist, sultry air and listened to the songs of the cicadas, Claire momentarily wondered if Tony could see the same stars from his plane. Did he even notice as he flew home to his family or was he lost in his work?

Despite the late hour, perspiration formed on her skin as she walked toward the pool. Growing up in Indiana, the diversity of Iowa's weather never surprised Claire, but on days such as this, with the temperature high and humidity oppressive, she reminded herself of the barren landscape of winter. Thoughts of the snow that covered their estate six months earlier helped her welcome and accept the heat. Nearing the beckoning cool water, Claire found herself lost in thoughts and memories. She knew it was her hormones wreaking havoc: her ups and downs were more dramatic. One moment she would laugh and the next she felt like crying. Though Tony worried, Dr. Brown assured them it was all normal.

Tony and her doctors were the only ones who knew about her pregnancy. Other than the dramatic mood swings, it seemed to be going well. So far she hadn't experienced the bouts of morning sickness that she'd had with Nichol.

However, she was only six weeks along and there was still time. With Nichol, she hadn't even realized that she was pregnant until this time in the pregnancy. With this little one, she knew as soon as she missed her period. Her and Tony's plans to expand their family were a month ahead of schedule. The doctors had told them to wait until this month to try, and they had—well, except for the one night. A smile came to her lips and her cheeks rose. It certainly seemed that when it came to making babies she and Tony didn't require months of practice. The fact that she never became pregnant during their first marriage or before was a testament to the insert she'd had implanted.

Leaving her robe on the lounge chair and her sandals beside it, Claire stepped carefully down the pool's stairs and immersed herself in the tepid water. The goose bumps didn't register as she remembered that night:

She and Tony were in New York alone. They weren't really alone. That rarely occurred. Eric had gone with them while Taylor and Phil stayed in Iowa. It was the first time they'd spent a few nights away from Nichol since they'd been reunited as a family, and as much as Claire had looked forward to the time away, she missed their daughter.

Nevertheless, she managed to busy herself with things she used to enjoy: a trip to the spa and time on 5th Avenue. Being the middle of May, the weather was perfect as she walked up and down the New York City streets. It'd been a long time since she'd been to the city, and she enjoyed the contagious energy of its people. The exhilarating vitality rippled through the air, energizing the residents and tourists alike. When thoughts of Rudolf tried to infiltrate her thoughts, Claire would remember that he was still incarcerated and she was safe. Once in a while she'd wonder about the Rawls-Nichols mailings. They hadn't received any in over a month. Tony told her he didn't know why they'd stopped, but he was glad they had. Claire wasn't sure if they'd really stopped or merely taken a break. Either way, the comforting sense of safety added to her euphoria.

Claire had forgotten the invigorating rush of Times Square and the serenity of Central Park. As hours passed, she found herself lost in her own therapeutic and rejuvenating world. Now that she was a mother and their lives involved numerous people and responsibilities, being alone in a crowd seemed like a distant memory. For the life of her, Claire couldn't remember the last time she'd willingly spent the day by herself. Yet with the sun shining down and a gentle breeze, while walking the streets amidst the throngs of people or sitting on the edge of a fountain in Central Park and listening to the street performers, Claire felt revitalized.

Dr. Brown often asked her to evaluate her feelings, to delve deeper into them. Sitting on that concrete ledge with music in the air, Claire came to an important conclusion. She no longer feared being alone. That didn't mean that she wanted to be like that all of the time, but she didn't fear it. There was a time she had. Her life at Everwood and early years with Tony had been a solitary hell. Though it hadn't been a conscious decision, since leaving Everwood and reuniting with Tony and Nichol, Claire had purposely kept herself occupied with everyone else. Whether it was her immediate family, extended family, friends, or employees, she stayed connected. It was no secret that being alone used to bother her. Hell, it was the weapon that Catherine secretly wielded when she encouraged Claire's disappearance. The money Catherine offered was all a ploy to isolate Claire yet again. However, years later, surrounded by strangers, she realized she enjoyed being alone. Perhaps she always had. There was nothing to fear in alone time, as long as she also had her loved ones.

Claire recalled the memories of days spent at her lake. Recently she'd gone there with Tony and Nichol. While they'd had a wonderful afternoon, it wasn't as relaxing and rejuvenating as it used to be. Her lake, the woods, those private times had helped her survive. She realized that it was as necessary in her everyday life as the connections she'd forged. The secret was balance.

During that afternoon, she also realized that if a trip around Manhattan could enlighten her, she didn't need to spend as much time with Dr. Brown. If life were a balancing act and alone time was part of it, then something needed to give. There were only so many hours in a day, week, or year, and Claire had no intentions of decreasing her time with Tony or Nichol. She also didn't want to lose time with Emily, Courtney, Meredith, or Sue.

Claire was ready to take on life again. With the effects of the medications gone, she was ready to experience every day to its fullest. That didn't mean she'd stop all of her counseling. The family court had mandated a minimum of a year as one of the stipulations of Tony and Claire's regained custody. Everwood had also asked for a year. It wasn't mandated, but just like the medication, a gradual decrease seemed reasonable.

As Claire walked the paths of the park on her way toward the streets, she recalled the night Tony proposed. A smile materialized as she thought about his words. Though she couldn't remember them verbatim, she did remember her shock at his declaration. As much as her life changed the day he took her, it also changed the evening he asked her to be his wife. That night opened the floodgate for feelings and emotions she'd been fighting. Though they'd had many ups and downs since that night nearly six and a half years ago, Claire knew the love she felt that night was only a seedling to what she felt today.

Lost in her thoughts, it was after 6:30 by the time Claire made it back to

their apartment. With the spring sun, longer days, and constant buzz of people, time had been difficult to decipher. When she reached the foyer of their apartment, Claire had a fleeting vision of the man from her past. A bygone aura reverberated through the entry as dark eyes peered down from the top of the stairs and the deep voice demanded answers. “Where have you been?”

Though the scene may have resembled another time, it varied significantly in Claire’s response. She didn’t fear his question or the consequences of her carelessness. Honestly, she hadn’t thought about his reaction at all until she saw him. Rarely was she late; however, when she was, she usually did her best to keep everyone informed. The day and afternoon hadn’t been about everyone. It’d been about her: rediscovering herself, by herself.

“I’ve been all around the city,” she replied with a smile as she began to ascend the steps.

He met her near the middle. “I’ve called your phone a hundred times.”

Claire kissed his cheek. “I guess I didn’t hear it. I didn’t realize the time until I was in the taxi on the way home.”

“And you couldn’t call?”

“Tony, I was on my way.” Ignoring his darkened gaze, she asked, “Do we have plans?”

Seizing her elbow with his jaws clenched, Tony briskly led her to their suite. Before she could think or register his actions, the door closed and his lips were on hers. This wasn’t the sweet and gentle husband who once again instigated a stir deep inside of her.

No, this was a man on a mission. Roughly, his fingers grasped her hair, pulling her head back and exposing her already claimed mouth. His unspoken hunger unleashed in a frenzy as his tongue demanded entrance and her lips willingly parted. The scent of cologne and the taste of whiskey combined to create an intoxicating cocktail as her lips bruised and her insides melted.

As his body thrust against hers, Claire’s petite hands found his chest and pushed. She had to know he’d stop if that were what she wanted. She didn’t want it, but nevertheless, she needed that grasp at control when he seemed suddenly without any. The temperature of their suite rose and the air stilled as he pulled away and dark eyes bore deep into the emerald green.

“Tony? What’s wrong?”

“I couldn’t reach you.” He gripped her chin. “Do you have any idea what I’d do if I lost you?”

“You’re not losing me. Every time I’m out late doesn’t mean anything has happened.”

He towered above her as each statement came forth louder than the one before. “Taylor or Roach weren’t with you. You didn’t have Eric. You were all by yourself. Jan didn’t know when you’d be back. I’ve been here since 4:00. I

even called the spa. They said you'd left hours ago. I was fuck'n losing it."

Claire reached for her husband's cheek. "I'm here. You're here. So..." She gazed at him from behind veiled lashes, "...now that you've got me, what do you want to do with me?"

The blackness of his penetrating gaze swirled with suede, a soft light infiltrating the darkness as the heat of his angst morphed into the fire of unrestrained desire.

With another tug of her hair, her head once again went back and Claire closed her eyes as warm whiskey-scented breath bathed her cheeks and neck. Though her swollen lips ached for his, his were busy tormenting her soft skin with kisses that began behind her ear and descended to her neck and below. As he teased and taunted the sensitive skin of her collarbone, her fingers wove through his thick mane. Moans and pleas filled the room as with each touch Claire was reminded of the man who claimed her body and soul—the man who at one time starred in her nightmares and now starred in her life. He wasn't her star, but her sun. Just like the real celestial object that controlled the solar system, Tony was the gravitational pull whom she willingly allowed to dictate her orbit and warm her heart.

If they'd had plans for that night, they didn't attend to them. There was no dinner out on the town, no Broadway show nor walk through Time Square, but neither one seemed to mind. Instead, their night was filled with one another. Each one gave and took. Together they reunited as a couple and soul mates. They made love and talked about their uncertainties and discoveries. Claire shared her revelation about being alone, and Tony recognized his distress of being without her. Even after so many years, they shared and laughed, talked and cried, and when they were done, they made love some more, until sleep overtook them.

It wasn't until the next morning that either one of them remembered the doctor's recommendation for alternative protection. They reasoned that it was only one night, and the doctors had warned that with Tony's age it might not happen the natural way. So what were the chances?

The water lapped over Claire's body as she floated below the Iowa stars, lost in the memories of that night. It wasn't only their journey that they continued that night; they'd also created the tiny being inside of her. With Claire's eyes closed to the twinkling stars, she imagined her husband's touch and the aroma of chlorine gave way to the intoxicating scent of cologne.

Her body electrified, as it only did in his presence. It was a connection they'd had for as long as she could remember. Words or touch weren't necessary. When they were near one another, the molecules in the air stirred

and energy transferred. The scientific result of thermodynamics was heat. Their result was no different. Despite the tepid water, Claire's skin suddenly warmed. She opened her eyes to the sight of her husband: his jacket slung over his shoulder and linen shirt glowing with the colors of the pool's lights. It wasn't his Armani slacks or his shiny black loafers that caught her attention. It was the grin that tightened her stomach as his chocolate eyes sparkled.

"Good evening, Claire." His baritone voice resonated through the country night.

Tony

TIME STOOD STILL as Tony watched his wife, first from the shadows and then from the deck of the pool. Although he had plenty to say, he hadn't spoken a word; instead, he stood and observed as Claire floated near the surface of the colorful water. It was the whole picture that had him mesmerized: the warm, starry night, the way her hair floated around her beautiful face, her peaceful expression, and even the smile that graced her lips—on and off—as if she were remembering something that made her happy. She looked too beautiful to disturb. As the minutes passed and the water ebbed and flowed over her midsection, Tony began to think about their new baby.

He remembered the night, a few weeks ago, when he came home from work and discovered Claire in their suite:

It wasn't like her to be away from Nichol, yet she was, all alone and lost in her thoughts as she stood at the railing of their balcony. His gaze went the direction of her stare, out toward their backyard, where he saw Nichol with Shannon on the play set. It wasn't until he fully stepped beyond the glass doors that Claire turned. When she did, he saw her tearstained cheeks and his heart crumbled.

"Claire." His voice quivered with uncertainty as he reached for her shoulders. "What's the matter?"

She shook her head and melted against his chest. Tony's mind swirled with possibilities, each one worse than the one before.

After a moment, he lifted her chin and stared deeply into her moist eyes. Even with the tears, he knew he could get lost in her emerald gaze. "Whatever it is," he offered reassuringly, "we'll fix it."

Her body tensed. "Tony, you can't fix it. I don't want you to fix it."

"What do you want? What happened?"

She took a deep breath. “Remember we promised the doctors that we wouldn’t try to get pregnant until this month?”

He nodded, wondering if maybe she’d changed her mind. If she had, he understood. He’d meant what he’d said about adopting. Hell, maybe they could hire a surrogate? He’d never thought of that before, but now that he had, he liked the idea. It was better than risking Claire’s health. Tony thought he’d read somewhere where they can use Claire’s egg and his sperm. Yes, that would be best. As the smile came to his lips, with his new idea, Claire’s ramblings began to register.

“...I know we didn’t mean to. I’m not positive it was that night in New York. I mean condoms aren’t one hundred percent effective. I just don’t know what they’ll say.”

The words weren’t making sense. “What who will say? It’s all right if you don’t want to try this month. Maybe it would be better if we waited—”

She took a step back as her eyes grew wide. “Tony, you’re not listening to me.”

“I’m trying. You said something about New York and condoms.” A devilish grin crept onto his lips. “I don’t believe we remembered to use...”

It wasn’t the same as when she told him she was pregnant with Nichol. That was sheer disbelief. For seconds—that seemed like days—he couldn’t wrap his mind around her words. This was different: the signals were mixed. He remembered that night in New York, their preoccupation with one another. Using protection was the furthest thing from their mind. They’d discussed another child at length. If she were pregnant, wouldn’t she be happy? Why was she crying?

Tony didn’t respond appropriately the last time she informed him of her pregnancy. He had no intentions of screwing up the moment again. Summoning his biggest smile and wrapping Claire in his arms, he lifted her off the ground. “Really?” he asked, his dark eyes glistening with excitement. “Already? You’re pregnant?”

The sadness or fear he’d seen when their eyes first met dissipated as she gazed upward and her cheeks lifted. “You’re not upset?”

Tony put her down, reached for her hand, and led her to the balcony sofa. Though concerns and questions flooded his mind, once he and Claire were seated, Tony reached out and covered her midsection. “You’re sure? We have a baby in there?”

Claire nodded and smiled as a tear trickled down her cheek. “We do. I mean the home pregnancy test said we do. I haven’t called the doctor. I wanted to tell you first.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I wanted to tell you in person. I think I was afraid that you’d be upset.”

“Upset?” he asked.

“Yes.” She looked down at his hand still resting on her tummy and covered it with her own. “We were supposed to wait.”

He reached gently for her chin. “Well, I don’t think I could be upset. I mean, if this happened that night in New York, we’re equally responsible.” He sat taller. “And the way I see it, Mrs. Rawlings, we have a new little Rawlings who wants to enter this world. There’s nothing in that sentence that could make me upset.”

As their lips touched and her petite body moved closer, Tony tasted her salty tears and the rest of the world disappeared. The gleeful noises from the play yard no longer registered, nor did the gentle summer breeze or streaming evening sunshine. Tony’s world was only her: his wife, happy and content in his arms when moments earlier she’d been upset. When their connection finally broke, he heard the words that washed over him, filling him like nothing else.

“I love you so much. I imagined your reaction many ways, but this was better than anything I ever envisioned.”

“Tomorrow we’re going to your doctor. Let me know the time, and I’ll be there.”

Claire giggled as she wiped her cheek. “It doesn’t work that way. I have to call for an appointment. They probably won’t be able to get me in for a few days.”

He bowed his head until their foreheads touched. “Tomorrow. I want you seen tomorrow.” Tony was sure his tone left no room for debate. He’d be happy to use it on some unsuspecting receptionist if necessary. “Do you want me to call?”

Her eyes closed and head moved from side to side. “Oh, no. I don’t want that. I’ll call.”

“And tomorrow...”

“Yes, Tony, tomorrow. I’ll call you after I talk to the office and you can meet me there.”

“I’ll meet both of you there.”

Her neck straightened. “I’m capable of driving.”

As she spoke, his grin returned. “I wasn’t speaking of Roach or Taylor, though you know I prefer that.” His hand returned to her midsection. “I meant you and our little one.”

The colorful water continued to ebb and flow as Tony imagined the baby growing within his wife. In time it would change her as Nichol had done. He remembered how radiant she looked—well, up until the end of Nichol’s pregnancy. Then Claire looked miserable. Since that evening when he learned

of their impending arrival, Tony's mood had fluctuated from joy to despair, everything in between, and back to joy. Hell, with as mixed up as he felt, some days he felt as though it could be he who was pregnant. There was no question: if he could, he would. Tony refused—absolutely refused—to allow anything to harm Claire, including their child. Then he'd remember that the doctors had given their clearance. They'd proclaimed Claire healthy enough to have a child. The OB/GYN had even addressed the issue of Nichol's birth. She didn't expect there to be anything like that this time, but if it occurred, they had a state-of-the art hospital and a C-section would be done right away.

When he wasn't thinking about the possible consequences of their decision, Tony concentrated on the new life, the new Rawlings. For a man who'd never expected to have children or be a father, his heart felt like it could literally burst. Never had he imagined the joy of children—the joy of a family. What he and Claire shared was nothing like what he'd known as a child, and at times it was overwhelming. Truthfully, the overabundance of love Tony felt for the tiny being that at this point was only evidenced by a blue plus sign on a white stick and the doctor's confirmation even surprised him.

Tony now understood that he'd wasted too much of his life trying to make the Rawls in him and his past proud, trying to achieve acceptance from a ghost. *Then again, was that true?* If he hadn't had the obsession, if he hadn't spent his first forty-plus years righting unexplained wrongs, then he wouldn't have waited for the woman before him, the one floating with a suddenly mischievous smile. His cheeks rose as he wondered what she was thinking. No, he'd never again regret the years he lost. If he did, he'd regret the life he now had, and that wasn't possible.

Removing his jacket, Tony flung it over his shoulder and moved closer to the pool's edge. With each step, he wondered how to get Claire's attention. With her ears submersed, she probably wouldn't hear him. Should he splash her? The idea of removing his clothes and diving into the water was appealing, but times had changed. For one thing, there was Nichol. As much as Tony doubted that she'd awaken and make her way down to the pool, he didn't want to take the chance. The other difference was the woman who dominated his thoughts and currently his vision. His wife deserved better than to be seen on estate security in a compromising position.

Just as Tony was about to lean down and splash, the most gorgeous emerald eyes in the entire world opened and an even bigger smile blossomed on her face.

“Good evening, Claire.”

He walked toward the pool's steps as Claire swam his direction. Soon she was standing and their lips were reunited. Without a word they said so many things. It had been two days since he'd been home. He hated traveling without

Claire and Nichol, but he understood. He understood that Claire didn't want Nichol's childhood spent in apartments and airplanes when she had the beauty of an Iowa summer and all the amenities of a five-star resort outside her backdoor. That didn't mean they never traveled, but sometimes separation was necessary. Thankfully with Tim's increased role, it wasn't too often.

"Good evening, Tony. I've missed you," she said with a grin as pool water dripped from her body and puddled near his shoes. "I think you're overdressed for this pool party."

He'd missed her too, every minute. "Party?" he asked, intrigued. Whatever she'd been thinking about had left her in a spirited mood. "I don't believe I was invited."

Pulling his shirt toward the water, she teased, "You're the only expected guest. Didn't you get the invitation?"

Grinning, he stopped her progress toward the water and lifted her chin. "While I like the way that sounds, first tell me how you're feeling."

Her bottom lip playfully protruded as she released his shirt and walked past him to get her robe. Cameras be damned, Tony wanted to touch what was in front of him in the white tankini. He couldn't resist as his hand playfully swatted her wet behind. Though the contact was minimal, the moisture caused the sound to echo as Claire jumped and smiled in his direction.

"Hey, you can't do that!"

"Oh, I can't?" His devilish grin glowed in the darkness. "I thought I made the rules. I asked you a question."

With her lips pressed defiantly together, she donned her robe. As he watched her bathing suit-clad body disappear, Tony wondered how long it would be before her breasts began to grow. As he recalled, that was one of the first things he noticed when he learned she was pregnant with Nichol. Perhaps they had. Maybe he should undo the robe and take a closer look. As those thoughts came and multiplied, Claire reached for his hand and led him toward the chairs.

"If you're not going to swim, sit with me." She patted the cushion beside her.

"You're going to get me wet."

"That's my plan."

Shaking his head, he sat. He didn't give a damn about his clothes as he wrapped his arm around his wife and pulled her close. "Now, answer me. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling great!" Her eyes opened wide and sparkled. "I really am. I keep expecting the morning sickness to hit me, and it still may, but so far, I feel good."

"Is that normal?" he asked, obviously concerned. "Aren't you supposed to be sick?"

Claire shrugged. "I don't think there's any right or wrong answer. I was with Nichol, for a while. Some people are sick a lot more than I was. Poor Julia, she's still sick—she's into her second trimester, and she still can't keep food down."

"Yes, Brent told me. He said she's even been to the hospital a couple of times."

Claire scrunched her nose. "I feel awful for her, but I don't want that. The only thing I notice is that I'm more emotional. I was reading a new book to Nichol about a bunny that lost his mitten. Even though I'd just bought it, she told me how much she liked the story. She said it was a story Aunt Em used to read. I started crying. I don't think she knew, but after I left her room I cried for about five minutes for no reason. It's the hormones."

Tony gently rubbed a circle on Claire's back as she leaned into him. The scent of chlorine emanated from her hair, as the cool wetness penetrated his shirt. "Hush, don't cry now. It's probably good that she can talk about it as if it's not a big deal."

Claire nodded.

He wasn't always the most perceptive, but it didn't take long for him to realize she was crying. Hugging her tightly, he lifted her chin again and wiped her tears with his thumb. "You didn't think the pool water was enough for my shirt—you thought it needed tears too?"

Claire grinned and shook her head.

"I love you, Mrs. Rawlings. I love that you're so emotionally bound to a bunny with no mittens that it makes you cry."

"Mr. Bunny had mittens," she corrected. "He'd just lost one."

Tony watched as the gleam returned to her gaze. "How about we take this pool party upstairs to our suite?"

"We don't have a pool upstairs."

Tony stood and reached for her hand. "No, my dear, but we have a shower and a large tub. The advantage of those is the no-bathing-suit rule."

"Oh?"

"Haven't I ever mentioned that?"

Her lips quirked into a knowing grin. "No, Mr. Rawlings. I've heard many of your rules, and I don't recall that one."

"Have you ever worn a bathing suit in the tub?"

Claire shook her head.

"Have you ever worn a bathing suit in the shower?" he asked as they began to walk toward the house.

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Then it sounds as though you've been doing a good job following my rule."

Claire reached up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I know a few other

things I'm good at doing.”

He threaded his fingers through hers. “I think I may have an idea, but we'd better get upstairs and check out each one.”

“Oh, we will. There's no stopping mid-list. That's *my* new rule,” Claire added with a grin.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

December 2017

Phil

Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing, and forgiving. It is loyalty through good and bad times. It settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weakness.

—Ann Landers

*J*N MANY WAYS the Rawlings estate was like a small town: the people were close and not much went unnoticed. Though none of the staff except Shannon was required to live on the grounds, Phil had no desire to live anywhere else. His sentiments were shared by most of the other employees. At the old estate, each person had housing in the main house, now each person had his or her own apartment and all of the apartments were located in the same building. Needless to say, with the closeness of their working and living, private lives weren't very private.

The clock read after eleven when Phil heard the knock on his apartment door. With a grin, he threw on a pair of sweat pants and went to answer it. As he reached for the handle, he fully expected to find Taylor on the other side. Though they didn't always spend the night at each other's place, it did happen. In a modest attempt to keep their relationship under the radar, they would often wait until later at night to visit one another.

Phil and Taylor's relationship had been building since she first started working for the Rawlings family. At first Phil wondered if he was the only one who had feelings beyond that of security professional and coworker. He fought those thoughts as long as he could. Then as time passed, things became more personal. The first sign wasn't truly sexual: it was a kinship. Phil could talk to Taylor, really talk about things that he'd never uttered to anyone else. It started the day he told her about his family and continued to grow. The

night he confessed his failure to protect Claire from Patrick Chester was the night he knew that Taylor was more than a friend.

Their conversations weren't one-sided. Although he thought he'd learned all there was to know about Taylor Walters before he authorized her hiring, he hadn't. Her backstory was as messed up as his. Getting shot was a pivotal point in her life. The rehab was hell and she hated working behind the scenes. Neither one of them had been married or even in a relationship in recent history. Neither one believed another person could be trusted enough to be let in, especially let in on secrets. In some way, it was when Phil realized that he fully accepted and trusted Taylor to protect the Rawlingses that he could also trust her with his own story.

Perhaps that's how it was meant to be, just like the saying goes: *birds of a feather*.

Romantically, Taylor had been the first one to make a move. Truthfully, if it had been left up to Phil, they'd probably never have made it out of the friend/coworker stage. Thinking about last night, the blood returned to his cheeks and a smile floated across his lips. They'd definitely moved beyond.

Reaching for the handle, Phil opened the door. His smile quickly disappeared at the sight of Eric. His friend's somber expression spoke volumes of unuttered concerns. Finally Phil broke the silence. "Hey man, what's happening?"

Eric's worried eyes met Phil's. "Can I come in?" He paused. "I mean, you're alone, aren't you?"

"Yes," Phil said, stepping backward, and opening the door farther. "Come in. What's happening? You look like someone just killed your dog, and I know for a fact you don't have one."

Eric closed the door behind him. "I just pulled up your surveillance on Patricia."

Phil had a program that continually monitored her virtual presence in her new identity. From her work presence, to her personal interaction, any time Patricia Miles logged into the world of cyberspace, it was duly recorded and catalogued. Though the program ran continually, Phil didn't check it every day. He'd had his eyes on it more frequently at first, but lately it had been about once a week.

"You did. Why?"

Eric shrugged. "I know you check it regularly. I guess, with Nichol's birthday and the anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings' first marriage all coming up, I had a feeling."

"A feeling?" Phil didn't like the vibe he was sensing. "What did you find?"

"Nothing."

Phil waited for more as he contemplated Eric's answer. Finally, reaching

for his tablet, he said, “Fuck. What do you mean *nothing*? ”

“I mean nothing. There’s no record of her doing anything for the last four days.”

Since Phil’s last check had been less than a week ago, four days would make sense. Bringing the program to life, Phil asked, “Have you mentioned this to anyone else?”

“No. I found it earlier today. I ran some tests to see if maybe it was the program. When I couldn’t get anything definitive, I waited until you were alone to see if you could learn more. I’m hoping it’s some kind of glitch or malfunction with the surveillance.”

“Have you mentioned anything about Patricia—at all—to Rawlings?”

“No. With the new baby coming, he’d lose it. And I sure as hell wouldn’t say something to Mrs. Rawlings without telling him first. It’s just us. I wanted to run this by you. I wasn’t even sure how you felt about Taylor knowing.”

The two men sat across the table from one another as Phil searched his tablet, typing furiously. “Stupid bitch.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “She couldn’t let it go.”

Eric nodded toward the tablet. “Can you verify her location?”

After a moment, Phil nodded. “The last time I checked, her virtual presence was still in London. Her login information was active from her place of employment and her home.” He continued to type. “I see here where she applied for a new credit card.” The blood drained from his face as his heartbeat intensified. “Shit. You’re right. She hasn’t logged in from work in the four days. The new credit card isn’t under the same name we gave her, but it’s here. She was dumb enough to use her work computer to complete the application.” The two men sat in silence as Phil read his screen. “Shit. Here’s an airplane ticket. She probably thought that if she bought it at the airport using the new credit card we wouldn’t know.”

Eric’s head moved slowly from side to side as he watched Phil.

When Phil looked up, his hazel eyes narrowed. “She’s fuck’n stupid. By tracing the card I can even see the hotel where she’s staying.”

Eric leaned forward. “In the States?”

“In Cedar Rapids.”

The air in the room dissipated as the sound of their breathing echoed. Finally, Eric asked, “Can you tell the room number?”

Phil swallowed as their eyes met. “Yes.”

“We gave her a chance—two really.”

Ignoring the exorbitant pressure, Phil clenched his teeth harder. “That was two too many. Don’t say a word to anyone—anyone. I’ll be back by morning.”

“I’m going with you,” Eric declared.

“No, you’re not. You’re staying here.” Phil didn’t wait for Eric’s response.

He was in order mode. “Watch the gate, watch the monitors. There’s no guarantee she’s sitting in that hotel room. Fuck!” Phil’s voice rose. “She’s been here for three days. What if she’d—?”

“Like you said, she’s stupid. She doesn’t know we’re on to her.”

“She’s arrogant. She thought by using a new name on the airline and hotel reservations we wouldn’t be able to find her.” Phil leaned over his tablet and typed again. Only the sound of the clicking keys filled the air until he stood and said, “She has two tickets for her return flight to London, the day after tomorrow.”

“Two?”

“Yes, the second ticket is for a child.”

Eric nodded. “I’ll go to the security office right now and watch. If you need me, call. I’ll be there.”

“If anything happens, you don’t know a damned thing about this.”

“Are you kidding me? Nothing’s going to happen. I’ve done my homework too. You’ve got this.”

“I do,” Phil confirmed.



THE SKY WAS still dark as Phil drove back to the estate. Though perhaps he should feel remorse, he didn’t. Patricia planned to take Nichol back to Europe. He saw the evidence in her hotel room: the drugs to subdue her and the hair bleach to change her appearance. When it came down to his family or Patricia, the subject wasn’t open for discussion. This time he didn’t give her a chance to explain.

As soon as Phil found the airplane reservations he knew Patricia’s plans. Not only had she used a new alias for her trip, she also had an alias for Nichol. He found their fake passports when he cleaned out the hotel room. In his opinion, Patricia’s plan was confirmation of her ingenuity as well as her stupidity. The identification she had would lead the police to no one because *Charlotte Peterson* didn’t exist. Besides, it was winter in Iowa. The fields were frozen and covered with snow. Digging even a shallow grave was like digging through rock, but Phil did it. Unless her body was eaten by animals, which was a possibility, the insects would begin to feast in the spring. Soon after, the farmers would be out tilling their fields. Spring and autumn were the times of year when bodies were often discovered in rural America: planting and harvest season. After all, long desolate stretches of highway with nothing more than corn and soybean fields for miles and miles made the perfect dumping grounds. It happened all the time. In an attempt to further thwart police efforts at identification, Phil was kind enough to leave her

identification—or her false ID. Without it, DNA tests would be done. Phil's plan was that with the identification, evidence would be taken at face value: a woman named Charlotte Peterson was robbed, killed, and dumped. With a number of similar cases happening all the time, it was unlikely any further research would be performed. The case would be closed and another unclaimed body would be disposed of by the state.

At a little after 5:00 AM Phil quietly made his way to his apartment. The cooks would be up and moving about soon, and he hoped to avoid their prying eyes. It wasn't until he closed his apartment door and turned around that he saw Taylor. She was sitting up from where she'd fallen asleep on his sofa.

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

Her blue eyes scanned him up and down, obviously taking in the caked mud on his boots and jeans. When she didn't answer, he silently walked past her into his bedroom. Looking in the mirror he tried to imagine what she saw. Not only were his jeans and boots dirty, so was his jacket. Taking it off, he looked at his shirt beneath. The wrinkled cotton stuck to his skin, wet with perspiration. Thankfully there wasn't any blood. Pulling his shirt over his head, he threw it toward a pile of laundry. As he did, he saw Taylor leaning against the doorjamb.

"I never thought of you as the four-wheeling type."

"Taylor—"

She shook her head. "Please don't."

Sighing, he sat on the end of his bed and began unlacing his boots. He didn't want her to know what he'd done. It wasn't because of some false sense of pride. Phil wasn't worried about what she'd think of him. He'd told her things he'd done in his past and she'd shared things she'd done.

No, he didn't want her to know because he wanted to protect her. Protect her, the Rawlingses, everyone. The fewer people who knew what happened, the better. Phil hadn't seen her move, but now the bed shifted and she was sitting beside him with her hand on his back.

"I don't want you to lie to me," she said.

"I don't want to, but you have to understand..." He continued to look down at his now loosened boots.

Taylor reached for his face and turned it toward hers. "I do." She gently kissed him. "I'm taking Mrs. Rawlings and Nichol to the Simmonses' house today for her baby shower. Shannon's coming with us. Eric will take Mr. Rawlings to the office. I don't think he'll be there all day, but either way, Eric will take care of it. Get some sleep..."

"No, I can't sleep." He still couldn't look her in the eye.

She rubbed his bare shoulders. "You can. The adrenaline will ebb and you'll crash." She kissed his cheek. "I've been there."

Phil nodded. "I can't tell you."

She continued to rub his shoulders. "I'm not asking. Someday if you're ready, I'm here."

He turned to meet her light blue gaze. Phil didn't know what he expected to see: condemnation, suspicion, or maybe judgment. Whatever he expected was not what he saw; instead, it was understanding and acceptance. Kissing her gently, he nodded. "Why were you here? How did you—"

"I was on my way over to see you when I saw Eric. He didn't see me but I waited for him to leave. He did, but you left at the same time. When you didn't return, I went back to the main house to the security office and found him."

"Did he...?" Phil stopped, afraid of the answer he'd receive.

"No. I didn't pry. I could tell he was agitated. I don't know what went down." She glanced at Phil's muddy boots and jeans. "And I don't need to know, but I think you should try to sleep."

Phil's arms suddenly became heavy and his shoulders ached. Stretching his fingers in and out he groaned. He wasn't accustomed to manual labor and the shovel work had been incredibly difficult with the frozen ground. Phil nodded. "I think a hot shower first."

Taylor kissed him again. "I'd join you, but I'm guessing you're not in the mood."

One corner of his mouth rose as he scanned her from head to toe. Though most of her long hair was secured behind her neck in a loose ponytail, sleeping had caused a few renegade strands to dangle near her pretty face. Her soft pants were tight in all the right places, and her big t-shirt was wide at the neck and exposed one of her bare shoulders. Her deep red, shiny toenails peeked out from the wide cuffs of her pants. Phil liked that no one but he ever saw those polished toes. Reaching out he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. As he looked into her blue eyes and loving smile he mused how much he liked Taylor's relaxed side. The softness was a stark difference from her professional demeanor.

Tipping his forehead toward hers, he said, "I know I'm an idiot for turning that down, but you're right. I think I'm coming down, and I should try to get some sleep."

"Don't worry," she whispered as she palmed his cheeks and kissed his lips. "Eric and I have today covered."

Phil nodded.

"Besides, I'm guessing our threat level has decreased."

Phil closed his eyes. Damn, even his eyelids were heavy. "Taylor..."

She stood and looked at the clock on Phil's bedside stand. "Shit, half the staff will be up and moving about, and here I go: the walk of shame."

He reached for her hand. "Sorry."

“I’m not. I’m glad you’re back, and I trust this won’t come back to anyone here?”

“I did my best to assure that.”

“Nothing more we can do.”

She bent down and kissed him again. “I’ll tell Eric you’re back.”

“I called him, but thanks.”

With a faint smile, Taylor stepped back into the living room. As Phil took off his boots, he heard, “Walk of shame, here I come.” Carrying the mud-covered boots to the bathroom, he decided they needed to be thoroughly cleaned and his clothes would go in the washer before he put his tired body in that shower.

Hours later the incessant ringing of his cell phone brought Phil back to life. His entire body ached as he rolled toward the sound. *What time was it?* He wrestled with his orientation as the name on his screen came into view: *Rawlings*.

“Hello?” Phil managed, trying not to sound like he was asleep in the early afternoon.

“Roach, we need to talk.”

Phil’s mind suddenly cleared. *Had someone tipped off Rawlings?* He sat up in bed, convincing himself that neither Eric nor Taylor would do that. *Could Patricia’s body have been found?* So many thoughts flew through his head as Phil replied, “Now?”

“Yes, now. Come to the house. I’m in the office.”

Phil closed his eyes as the line went dead.

Claire

“THIS PARTY’S FOR my baby brover. My party’s gonna be bigger!” Nichol exclaimed.

Claire shook her head. “Well, I’m not sure about bigger, but it will be for you.”

“Yep,” Nichol reached out and spoke to Claire’s enlarged midsection. “Today’s for you, baby. Maybe you could decide to be a sister?”

“Honey, we’ve talked about that. The doctors can see your brother with a special camera and they know he’s a boy.”

“How do they know?”

Claire looked from Nichol to Shannon who was shaking her head with a grin. “Oh my goodness, I’m not ready to have that talk with my three-year-old daughter.”

The other ladies at the shower all laughed.

Nichol’s forehead wrinkled. “I’m four.”

"Well, not quite yet," Emily corrected.

"Aunt Em, did the doctors see Beff and know she's a girl?"

"They did."

"Momma, did you know about me too?"

"We didn't. Remember, Daddy and I were on the island when you were born. When we tried to find out, you didn't want to tell—you were teasing us."

"Maybe my sister's teasing you, too." She leaned her mouth toward Claire's stomach. "Are you teasing in there?"

"Mrs. Rawlings, I'd be happy to take Nichol to the other room. I brought some books and games," Shannon offered.

"Nichol, why don't you go with Shannon and when we open your brother's presents you can come help me."

Nichol got down from her chair. "Okay." She took Shannon's hand and Claire mouthed "Thank you" to her nanny.

"Wow, Claire, I can't wait to see you with two," Meredith said with a smile.

Claire leaned back and stretched her back. "I'm ready."

"I know that feeling," Emily and Julia said in unison and laughed.

"Now, Claire," Sue began. "I think it's time to spill the beans. This shower's the perfect opportunity to share with all of us, your closest friends, the name you and Tony have chosen for your son."

Claire pressed her lips together and smiled. "We've talked a lot about his name, and we think we have the perfect one. I mean, it's not easy to be Anthony Rawlings' son. His name has to be special, like Nichol's is for us. When he joins us, we'll let you all know."

Whispers of understanding filled the room. Finally, Courtney asked, "Would anyone like anything else to eat or more coffee or tea?"

As everyone chatted, Claire looked around Courtney's living room and sighed contently. She was surrounded by her family and friends. There was something about having everyone's support that made this pregnancy easier than her first.

Just as they were about to open presents, Courtney stood. "Before we begin, I promised Tony I'd help him with his gift. You all know how persuasive he thinks he is. Well..." She smiled at Claire. "First, I convinced him that he wouldn't enjoy the shower, but that didn't stop his plan. He wanted to get Claire a gift she wouldn't forget."

The whole room inhaled with anticipation as Claire contemplated what Tony would consider an unforgettable gift. They had the nursery complete. It was much larger than Nichol's had been on the island, but like Nichol's it was attached to their suite. Claire remembered listening to Tony rock and talk to their daughter in the middle of the night. After she'd feed Nichol, she'd lay

awake and listen as he promised her the moon and stars and his unending love. As the contractors drew up plans for the nursery, Claire knew she wanted that again.

“A diamond-studded car seat?” Emily suggested.

“Maybe a golden cradle?” Sue replied.

“I think you could guess all day and you wouldn’t come up with the right answer,” Courtney said. “Personally, I think I’ve kept your gift hidden for too long. And you know how hard secrets are for me.” She shrugged and with a grin, added “Although... Brent and I have enjoyed having these gifts here with us for the last two days.”

“Two days?” Claire said as she turned toward the archway. She could hardly believe her eyes as she saw Francis and Madeline and a lump formed in her throat. “Oh!” she exclaimed as Courtney helped her from her chair; she rushed to the couple and was swallowed in their embrace.

When the tears and hugs finally calmed, Madeline said, “Madame el, the next time you have a bébé, could it be when the weather is warmer? This is the first time we’ve seen snow. It is very cold.”

The room erupted in laughter.

“Oh, Madeline and Francis, I don’t know if there’ll be a next time.” She pulled them by their hands to sit beside her. “How long can you stay?”

“How long do you want us?” Madeline asked.

“We will stay that long,” Francis added with his large, loving smile.

“We are so pleased to be here, but...” Madeline’s big dark eyes narrowed. “...this bébé, I not deliver him.”

“No, Madeline. This little guy will be born at the hospital.”

Claire made all the introductions or re-introductions. Many of the ladies had met Francis and Madeline a year ago when they all visited the island. Her heart swelled with love as she took in the kind couple and their genuine smiles. When she’d called and asked them to come to Iowa, they acted apprehensive about leaving the island. Though she was disappointed, Claire understood. It was a long trip and neither of them had ever been to the United States.

As the room erupted in chatter, Brent entered. “Francis, now that Claire knows you’re here, would you like to go downstairs with me? There’s a lot of estrogen in this room.”

Francis nodded. “I’m not sure of estro-gen, but if there be less laughing ladies, I say yes.” He reached for Claire’s hand. “Madame el, we are so happy to be here. Thank you.”

Claire squeezed his large hand. “Thank you. I feel better having you two here.”

It wasn’t until near the end of the baby shower that Courtney’s doorbell rang. Claire didn’t need to look: she knew who couldn’t stay away. When she

did glance toward the door, despite the crowded room, her eyes met his and her heart melted. She saw the satisfaction in his devilish grin—he'd successfully surprised her.

Tony wasn't alone. Phil, who looked tired, was with him. After a moment, Phil excused himself to join the men downstairs, and Tony walked toward Claire. The floor and table around her were cluttered with gifts. "Well, my dear, it looks like our little man made out like a bandit. Are you pleased with all your gifts?"

"They're not for Momma. They're for my brover," Nichol corrected.

With her eyes still on her husband, Claire replied, "I love *all* my gifts, and I can't believe you surprised me like this. How could they be here for two days and you not tell me?"

Tony chuckled. "It was difficult. I didn't even let Roach know until this afternoon. I wasn't sure he'd be able to keep it from you. As soon as I told him, he insisted that he come over here with me to see them." Tony turned toward Madeline. Bowing slightly at the waist, he said, "Hello, Madeline. Welcome."

"Monsieur."

"Claire," Courtney asked, "do you remember yesterday when you wanted to come over and help me get ready for the shower?"

Claire nodded.

"Now do you understand why I said you couldn't? Madeline and I were cooking."

Claire reached for Madeline's hand. "Oh, cooking with you! I love cooking with you."

"You still cook?" Emily asked jokingly.

"Well, not really, but I did on the island. Madeline taught me some of the most amazing dishes."

"Oui, Madame el, we may cook." Madeline looked out the window. "I think the seafood here may not be as fresh."

"You make a list, Madeline," Tony said. "For your fantastic meals, I'll get you whatever you need and as fresh as possible."

Her cheeks lifted as her eyes went to her lap. "Monsieur, you're always too kind."



THAT EVENING CLAIRE, Tony, Shannon, Phil, Taylor, Madeline, and Francis all sat around the living room of the Rawlings estate and chatted. Each time Madeline would try to do something for Claire, Claire would remind her that she was a guest in their home.

“No. We come to help you, not to be waited upon.”

“You’ve already helped me. I know everything will go well now that you two are here.”

Francis’s smile lit up the room. “We have been praying for you and this little boy since Monsieur called. Everything will be well with you and with him; we know that.”

Claire wasn’t sure how a proclamation like that could ease her anxiety, but it did. A peace settled over them like a blanket that warmed and comforted not only the room or the estate but also her. At first Claire thought it was only she who felt it, but as the weeks progressed she knew that it affected everyone. Nichol was head over heels in love with Francis and Madeline, and the feeling was mutual. They doted over her like grandparents. Nichol would sit for hours and listen to Francis’ stories of the island and paradise, just as Claire remembered doing when she lived with them.

Whether it was Shannon or the cooks, no one seemed to mind having Madeline’s assistance. She was everyone’s friend. It wasn’t until after the first of the year that Madeline told Claire the secret that apparently only she hadn’t fully recognized.

“Madame el, you have a blessed house.” She and Claire were folding small blue and green sleepers and other tiny clothes.

“Thank you, Madeline. I agree.”

Suddenly a large dark hand covered hers. “We prayed for love and guidance in your lives. You have so many people who care.”

“I do. Thank you for reminding me.”

“And Monsieur Phil, it makes Francis and me happy to see him with someone who truly loves him, too.”

Claire’s eyes opened wide. “Monsieur Phil? We all love him. I don’t know what we’d do without him.”

“Oui, but not that kind of love: the kind like exists between you and Monsieur Rawlings—it’s written all over their faces.”

“Do you mean Taylor?” Claire asked as she stopped what she was doing and tried to remember. Had she been so caught up in everything to do with herself that she hadn’t seen it? Perhaps she had. She mentioned it once to Tony, but that was a long time ago. Claire contemplated Madeline’s information. She knew better than to question Madeline. The sweet woman undoubtedly had a sixth sense about everything and everyone. “I don’t think I realized.” Her emerald eyes sparkled. “I’m happy for them... but they haven’t mentioned it, so we’d better pretend like we don’t know.”

Madeline continued to fold and put clothes into the cherry dresser. “Words are not the only way we communicate. You can give your blessing through your actions. I believe he’s afraid to tell you.”

“Why? Did he tell you that?”

“No, Madame el. He did not need to.”

Claire didn’t reply as Madeline’s words registered. She and Phil were friends. He’d protected her and Nichol when they needed it most. He’d stayed true to her family when the world was in chaos. She wanted him happy, and if Taylor did that, she wouldn’t be the one to spoil it. After all, he’d been the one to support her and Tony. Had he not traveled back to Europe and brought Tony to the island, Claire’s life, as well as Nichol’s would be totally different.

A few days later, Claire asked Phil to her office alone. As they sat and talked, their years of friendship were evident. As with many of the relationships in Claire’s life, it had begun rather unconventionally—Phil was sent to California to spy on her—yet with time things change. When he stood to leave, Claire reached up and hugged him. “You know I only want what’s best for you.”

Phil nodded. “The feeling’s mutual.”

“I like Taylor. She’s been around for a year and feels like one of the family.”

His cheeks rose and the flakes of gold sparkled in his eyes. “We weren’t hiding. We’re trying to be professional.”

Claire rubbed his shoulder. “As long as you know that we know, we’re good. I don’t want to ever make you feel uncomfortable. Honesty has always been our strong suit.”

“All of you are our responsibility,” Phil said. “Neither Taylor nor I nor Eric would allow anything to happen. I don’t want you to think our loyalty is divided.”

“It better be,” Claire proclaimed.

Phil took a step back. “What do you mean?”

“When you first started working for me, it was just me. Then you brought Tony back, and then Nichol came. Now our little man is on his way.” Claire smiled. “I’ve never felt less protected because you had more than me to babysit.”

Phil’s smile broadened at the term. “Babysit...” He said shaking his head.

“Taylor can be on that list too. I know you, and I know you won’t let any of us down.”

“Thank you. Just so you know,” Phil said as he opened the door, “there’s only one Mrs. Alexander.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Early February 2018

Tony

Until we have seen someone's darkness, we don't really know who that person is. Until we have forgiven someone's darkness, we don't really know what love is.

—Marianne Williamson

TONY WOKE WITH a start from the sensation of falling—from where he didn’t know—down to an unknown chasm. The downward sensation could either end in a crash, the ramifications undetermined, or by sheer will. That wasn’t even a conceivable choice. Anthony Rawlings couldn’t plummet into the unidentified abyss; he chose will. The subconscious decision was evidenced by his increased heart rate as well as elevated temperature. Tony’s brow glistened in the moonlit room. Taking a deep breath, he reached for his anchor, his rock, his life, but the bed beside him was empty. The more he groped toward Claire’s side of the bed, the more he found only cooled, lonely sheets. Looking to the clock near the side of the bed, he saw that it was a little after 2:00.

Sighing, he threw back the covers, sat, and allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness. “Claire?” he called, quietly, so as to not wake her if she were asleep somewhere else. Evenings past, he’d found her that way, sleeping on the sofa before the large fireplace. Her back had been giving her bouts of pain, and Tony knew that some nights she was having increasing difficulty staying comfortable and asleep. Not finding her on the sofa, he smirked. The best chance of her location was behind the door to their private bathroom. Nichol had done the same thing to her, especially late in the pregnancy. Two or three trips in one night were not uncommon.

Opening the door, he stepped onto the cool tile floor. The room was empty. As he returned to the suite, he heard her voice coming from the

darkened nursery. "Tony, why are you awake?"

The smile that came to his lips did little to hide his relief. He knew his anxiety at ever losing her again was both unfounded and obsessive. It was his most discussed topic with his therapist. Over time he'd come to realize that of the few people who'd occupied a place in his heart, Claire was the only one who remained. The others had either died or disappointed him beyond repair. Her steadfastness gave him something he'd never before had, and there was a part of him that feared losing it. That wasn't Claire's issue; it was his.

If asked, Tony would tell the world he didn't need the psychobabble shit. He'd tell them he was done and it was all a farce. However, he knew that answer wouldn't be the truth. Like Jim at Yankton, his current therapist expected honesty, and somewhere in the last three years, Tony had found an acceptable outlet in the weekly sessions. Claire didn't need to be bothered with his irrational thoughts; truly, she'd dealt with enough of them from both him and herself. Tony would never speak to Brent or Tim of anything so personal. Perhaps that was the difference between most women and men. Claire had cut back her therapy to once a week, claiming that speaking to her friends, especially Courtney and Meredith, was as helpful as speaking to Dr. Brown.

Tony's personal relationships with his friends had changed over the years, since Claire. Everything in his life could be divided into BC or AC: Before Claire or After Claire. It was hard not to think that way: the difference was too extreme. From his cold detached way of conducting business, to his peripheral personal relationships, and his private life, what Tony lived now in the AC was almost a dream in comparison to the way he had lived.

Long ago he'd stopped wondering how someone so lovely and loving could love him. He had to. The obsession almost cost him everything. At Yankton he'd come to the conclusion that it wasn't truly possible. Claire's love couldn't be real, not for someone like him. Subsequently, the reality he finally reached was that he couldn't accept her love and forgiveness until he loved and forgave himself. It was a breakthrough realization. No one in his life had ever forgiven his indiscretions. No one in his life forgave; instead, they sought justice and vengeance. It was all he'd ever known, until her: the one woman who had every right to hate and seek revenge didn't. The one person he'd wronged more than any other, and instead of cementing his tomb of hatred, she shattered it into a million pieces, giving him light where there had only been dark.

That realization changed everything. Tony no longer conducted his business affairs as he had, and yet he was still successful. He no longer treated his friends as he had, and they were closer for it. The difficult side of this new way of living was the dependence he now felt toward Claire. Before Claire, he was an island. Tony needed no one, nor did he depend on anyone.

At the time, the isolation was comforting. If no one knew the real him, he would never be hurt. If he looked at spreadsheets and saw only numbers, not lives or livelihoods, decisions were easier. The world of black and white may be a solitary place to live, but it's an easier one to navigate. The colorful explosion that occurred AC was blinding and exhilarating. Everything in every aspect of his life was now different.

Anthony Rawlings knelt beside the woman who'd changed him in more ways than he ever thought he wanted to change her. As he did, he knew he wouldn't go back to black and white, to BC. He didn't want to. She was one of his anchors, keeping him from slipping back into that abyss. In a short time he'd have another—another child, another anchor. Tony's life was about more than himself. It was about Claire, Nichol, and soon Nathaniel. Tony looked up into the color that changed it all, the one shade that began the cascade of pigments that transformed his world forever. Tony gazed into the depth of emerald green.

Claire's chair moved back and forth as he placed his hands on her midsection and asked, "Is it your back?"

She nodded. "It was, but now I'm just thinking."

He waited for more. When none was given, he asked, "About?"

Her petite hands framed his scruffy cheeks. "Tony, will you promise me something?"

Feeling the movement within her, he knew there was nothing within his power he wouldn't do. She truly didn't need to ask. "Anything."

"*If*, and I'm not saying it will happen, but *if* you're faced with the same question you were when Nichol was born, and *both* isn't an option..." She took a deep breath. "...choose Nate."

Tony sat back on his heels and stared. "No."

Tears descended her cheeks and her nostrils flared, yet her voice held no sign of emotion. "I've been thinking about it. I know the chances are slim. All the doctors have been satisfied with the way this pregnancy has progressed. Even Madeline keeps reassuring me. But Tony..." She reached for his hand. "...you always get your way."

"That's not always true, but if it were, my way is you."

"No, listen," Claire implored. "You always get your way. If you demand they save Nate, they will. And..." she began before Tony could speak. "...I want you to know, I'm all right with that decision. I never want you to question yourself. I've lived the most amazing life. I've known every emotion, experienced the lowest lows and the highest highs. I know both love and hatred. I've seen places in this world that I never as a little girl even knew existed. Though I've lived through nightmares, you've fulfilled every dream. Tony, that's more than most people experience in a lifetime."

He couldn't stop the emotion building in his chest. "Claire, this

conversation isn't necessary."

She nodded. "I hope you're right. I want more. I want to hold Nate in my arms and shower him with kisses. I want to look into Nichol's beautiful brown eyes and tell her I love her as she goes to college or walks down the aisle. I want to sit beside you and watch our grandchildren play." Her quiet tears turned to sobs. "But if I don't, if all that I've done is all that I do, being loved by you and giving life to two amazing children are the greatest accomplishments I could ask for." She gasped for breath. "Please, Tony, please promise me that you'll choose Nate."

He couldn't go another second without the woman before him in his arms. Tony stood and gently tugged Claire from the chair. When she stood, he wrapped her in his arms, and they stood in the stillness of the nursery. As her shoulders shuddered and she buried her face against his chest, tears coated his cheeks. Facing their previously unspoken fears allowed a peace to settle. Finally, Tony leaned away and wiped her tears with his thumb. "My dear, there is nothing I will ever deny you and you know that. As soon as Nathaniel Sherman Rawlings is ready to enter this world he will, and when that happens, he'll be laid in your waiting arms, awaiting the shower of kisses. That is not debatable."

Claire

SHE NEEDED TO hear her husband's words and tone. Her anxiety had been building stronger with each day as Nathaniel's due date approached. Claire didn't want to leave her family, but she unselfishly loved them more than herself. Though Madeline's reassurances had helped, hearing Tony's proclamation made it better. The tone he used as he uttered the words: *That is not debatable*, was a melody to her ears and a shot of reassurance to her heart.

Claire nodded. "I love you so much."

Tony took her hand and walked them back into the suite and toward their bed. "Mrs. Rawlings, I've said it before and I'll repeat it until the day I die. I love you. You're my life, my drug, my anchor. You've made me into a man who deserves to have you in his life."

Claire shook her head and put her finger to his lips. "No, Tony. I didn't make you into anyone. You've always been this man. People don't change: they hide. The man you were was a shell hiding the man you are today. The woman I was, when you first took me, was a shell hiding the woman I was afraid to be. I didn't make you. You didn't change me. And I thank God that once our shells were broken that the two people we really were fit together so well."

"Oh, and we do," he reassured with a grin. "I think we fit together very

well.”

Claire sighed. “I don’t fit very well right now.”

Lying down, Tony pulled her close against his side. It was true that as their son grew, they fit together differently than they had a day or week before. With Claire’s belly resting against Tony’s side, Nathaniel made his presence known.

Feeling their son move, she asked, “Did you feel that?”

“I did,” Tony replied with a lighter tone. He reached for her midsection, his large palm covering their son. “I love this. I’m sorry your back is hurting, but I love the sensation of him moving within you. I remember sitting for hours on the island’s lanai and feeling Nichol. It’s truly an amazing thing.”

Claire swallowed. “I love it too, and I’m ready to be done.”

“I know now isn’t the time to ask, but do you think you’d ever be ready to have another?”

Claire awkwardly moved to a sitting position. “I know you’re smarter than that,” she said with a smirk. “I mean, if you’re asking if I want to have sex, I’m game. If you’re asking if at almost forty weeks of pregnancy I’m ready to try again, well, my answer is not right now.”

Tony gently pushed her shoulders against the pillow and towered over her, his dark eyes penetrating into her soul. In mere seconds, she found herself lost in the sparkling gleam in front of her. “Oh?” he asked, “You’re game? After that emotional outburst in the nursery, you’re game?”

Giggling, Claire nodded. “It’s the hormones. I’m all over the map.”

“I think you said the other night that you read that sex can induce labor. Should I feel used?”

“Hmm, Mr. Rawlings, forgive me if you feel used. I just want to be with my husband before we can’t.”

He kissed her lips. “Damn, how could I forget about the *can’t* part? Then by all means...” His lips teased her neck while his skillful fingers removed the straps of her nightgown. “...I’m all yours. Use me to your heart’s content.”

“That’s a pretty big order. As you may have noticed, food isn’t the only thing I crave while pregnant.”

“Why do you think I’m asking about number three?”

Claire smiled. “Ulterior motives. No wonder you’re so successful at business. I didn’t see that one coming.”

“No rush. I’m all for waiting a month or two until after Nate’s born.”

Claire reached for his cheeks and brought his lips to hers. “New rule: no talking about future pregnancies while I’m pregnant. For now, let’s concentrate on the task at hand.”

“At hand?” His brows quirked upward. Sliding her satin gown over her head, Tony’s lips found her sensitive breasts as his fingers wandered lower.

“Yes, Mr. Rawlings, *at hand* is a good place to start.”



A FEW DAYS later, Claire walked about the kitchen retrieving the ingredients Madeline requested for their dinner. “Madame el... Claire,” she corrected, bringing a smile to Claire’s face. “I can do this alone or with your cook’s help. She’s very nice to allow me access to her kitchen. You should be resting.”

Claire shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t know what it is. I feel great, like I could hike to the lake and back. Well, if it weren’t snow covered and frozen.”

Madeline grinned. “I’d love to see this lake, when warmth returns to your home.”

“Oh, Madeline, I’d love for you to stay long enough to see spring. I know this all looks desolate right now, but once the green returns... it’s not as lush as our island, but it’s a renewal, a time of new birth. I’ve always loved the springtime.”

“Time will tell of our departure. Now we’re happy to be here with you and Monsieur and of course your bébés.”

Claire rubbed her belly. “Babies! Soon.” Her bright eyes looked up to find Madeline’s caring gaze. “Can you believe it? I can’t believe he’s almost here.”

“Why do you not tell his name?”

Claire made her way to a tall stool and sat. “I guess we’re afraid people will try to talk us out of it.”

“Come now, do you believe that anyone could talk you or Monsieur out of something? I do not.”

Claire smiled. “I guess we don’t want them to try.”

“Though I don’t understand, I’m glad this time you have a name. Last time...” She looked up and shook her head. “...my heart nearly stop when Monsieur say he wait to name your daughter.”

“Well, we don’t have those traditions here, and I guess it doesn’t matter. We know his name.” Claire and Tony had chosen Nathaniel’s name after hours, days, and weeks of deliberating. They both knew their reasons and were happy with their decision. Though they’d kept the name between just the two of them, there was something about Madeline that made Claire want to share. She took a deep breath and peered around the kitchen. “I’m dying to tell. If I tell you—”

Madeline’s hand went into the air. “Madame el, I do not keep secrets from Francis.”

Claire didn’t care. Honestly, if Francis were with them now, she’d still feel confident in their combined confidentiality. “Not Francis, but everyone

else, not until he's born."

Madeline nodded. "Very well, I'd love to know."

"Our son's name is Nathaniel Sherman Rawlings."

"A handsome name. Why do you not want to tell?"

Claire took a deep breath. "It's a long story, one that you and I've never discussed."

"If you speak of that book, we do not read it." Madeline looked up from the vegetables she was cutting. "This world is full with people who make things big, sensationalize. I will say, when your friend Meredith come to the island, we are surprised. She has the same name—"

Claire nodded. "She has the same name as the author of the book because she is. And yes, her publishers sensationalized some of it—I've read it. However, most of it is true."

Madeline's cutting stopped mid-slice. "No, Madame el. I know things. From the moment Monsieur Rawlings arrive on the island, I feel nothing but love. Those things that people said—"

"I can't explain all of it. However, you're right. We love one another—now and then. It's almost as if the people in Meredith's book were two different people than who we became. In some ways they were. The thing is that in this long, complicated story, our paths would never have crossed, we'd never have the love and the family we do now if it weren't for our grandfathers. They met one another when I was about Nichol's age: Tony's grandfather, Nathaniel, and my grandfather, Sherman. Had it not been for them, we wouldn't be here. I loved my grandfather very much."

She sighed. "I didn't know the professional man whom Tony met as a young man. I knew the kind, loving grandpa who told me stories, took me fishing, and listened to everything I had to say. I knew he had an important job, but that never mattered. He always made me feel special." Her green eyes brimmed with tears. "I lost my grandparents and parents too young, but in the short time they were in my life, they gave me unconditional love and I'll always be thankful for that."

"And Monsieur's grandfather?"

"I never knew him, but I feel as though I did." Claire recalled the Anthony Rawlings of her past and the pictures and stories she'd heard of Nathaniel. "You see, I've seen pictures, and Tony looks a lot like him. The man Tony respected and loved was hard, yet like my husband, I believe it was a facade that he showed the world. Nathaniel made mistakes in his life and poor decisions, but that doesn't take away from the fact that he was the man my husband loved as a child. Tony chose to end the history of revenge when he named our daughter. She carries my surname: Nichols. We choose to further that mend and unite our two families with our son's name. Nathaniel Sherman will carry both names of our grandfathers. Someday I want him to know that

even though there are forces in the world that want to destroy what we hold dear, love and acceptance can overcome. If it didn't, our Nate wouldn't be coming into this world."

"That is beautiful," Madeline said with her hand to her chest. "Your Nathaniel will be blessed with the strength and love of both of his families."

Claire smiled past the tears teetering on her lids. "Oh," she said as her midsection painfully hardened.

"Madame Claire, are you all right?"

"I-I think." The hardness persisted. "I've been having the Braxton Hicks contractions for some time." She inhaled again. "This seems different."

"Where is your phone?"

"No, Madeline, let me just rest. I don't want to alarm anyone."

"No." Her voice was uncharacteristically hard. "I listen to you last time. Not today. Tell me how to reach Monsieur Rawlings, and we will have Monsieur Phil to take you to the hospital right now."

The tightness only intensified. "All right." Claire pointed toward the counter. "There's my phone. Tony and Phil's numbers are in there. Can you please call?" Claire eased herself from the stool and squatted near the floor. "Please, this isn't letting up."



DESPITE THE ERUPTING chaos around her, Claire tried to maintain her calm. Phil was almost as nervous as an expectant father as he drove toward the university hospital. "Did you call your doctor? Does she know we're coming?"

"Yes," Claire reassured. The tightening had subsided. Though her back was still hurting, she wondered if this was all a false alarm. "Maybe we should go back home. I'm not feeling it anymore."

"Claire, we're on the way. Rawlings is meeting us. Let's just let them check you out."

She began to puff her cheeks and blow in short bursts as the tightness returned. "Phil, Eric's with Tony, isn't he?" Claire knew her husband would think nothing of risking his own life to get to her. She didn't want him driving on the snow-covered roads.

"Yes, Eric's got him. Madeline, Francis, and Shannon are with Nichol. Everything's fine. You worry about you."

"I wish Taylor were there."

"She's due back tomorrow. You're a few days early. Besides the estate is secure. Everyone there is safe."

Claire nodded. She knew he was right. There hadn't been any mailings for

a long time. When Taylor had asked for the time off to go to a wedding, Claire didn't hesitate. Her staff deserved personal time as much as she and Tony. Although, if Claire said she wasn't relieved when Phil said he wasn't going with Taylor, she'd be lying. Even though Claire tried to assure Phil it would be all right, he refused to go. Now watching his leather gloves stretch as he gripped the steering wheel, she knew she was glad he'd stayed.

The tightness subsided as they pulled up to the emergency room. Perhaps that wasn't the only thing that gave Claire the strength to move from the SUV to the waiting wheel chair: it was the dark eyes that immediately met hers.

The next few hours ebbed and flowed in tempo. Some sped by in a blur, while others moved at a snail's pace. People came and went. Phil brought Shannon and Nichol to the hospital to assure Nichol that her momma was all right. Nichol wanted to stay to meet her baby brother, but as evening came, Tony and Claire promised her she could return in the morning. Emily and Courtney stayed in the delivery room as things progressed. There were others waiting outside of her room. John and Brent came in from time to time to squeeze her hand and give their support. The epidural dulled the pain, but more importantly, it didn't reduce her understanding. Unlike with Nichol, Claire was conscious of everything around her. It wasn't until the doctor announced that it was time to have only two people in the room that Claire sighed with relief. For the first time in her life, she was about to experience the joy of childbirth.

"Honey," Emily said as she hugged her sister, "Courtney and I have talked about this. We're both leaving."

Claire's eyes widened. "One of you can stay."

Emily shook her head. "We love you and we're right outside." She looked past Claire to Tony. "This is something the two of you should share. Just please, let us know as soon as you can."

Tony nodded to Emily and hugged Courtney. "I will," he said. "I'll be out as soon as I can."

As Tony moved to his place by Claire's shoulder and held tightly to her hand, she watched the mirror near the end of the bed. Each time the nurse told her to push, she did. Each time the doctor said to breathe, she did. Following instructions had never been a problem, especially when the payoff was on the horizon.

How long did labor last? Claire couldn't recall. Later she'd remember pressure and some commotion. She'd recall reassuring touches from the dark-eyed man at her side and words from her doctor. She'd also remember that Tony was never asked to decide who would survive. There was never a need. Early in the morning on February seventh, Nathaniel Sherman Rawlings officially entered their lives.

Claire didn't know if Nichol had entered with as loud of a cry, but the one

she heard from her son warmed her heart and soul.

"Yes, Claire and Anthony, your son is announcing his presence," the doctor proclaimed, lifting their son in the air.

As Claire looked up at her husband, she saw the moisture on his cheeks that she felt in her own eyes. He leaned down and whispered, "I love you."

She couldn't form words until the nurse laid Nathaniel on her chest and covered them both with a blanket. "Hi, Nathaniel," she cooed. "I'm your momma."

Tony stroked the small head covered in dark hair. "Hello, son, I'm your daddy."

It was then their son's eyes opened and Claire and Tony were lost in the sea of emerald. Warmth enveloped their bubble as Tony embraced his family. "He has your eyes."

They stayed like that for a while, not ready to share the moment with those outside the door. It was one of those rare occasions that can be looked back upon as lasting both a second and forever, a life-changing eternity that cemented the past with the future.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mid-February 2018

Claire

To the world you may be just one person, but to the one person you may be the world.

—Mother Theresa

CLOSING HER EYES Claire listened to the sound of her husband's voice. The cadence reminded her of a lullaby, yet his words were not that of a song or a fairytale. His words were those of a father talking to his son: words of love and encouragement, as well as promises that only time could substantiate. Just as it had been when Nichol was a baby, the middle of the night feeding was among Claire's most cherished time of day. Tony would wake to their son's cries and change Nate's diaper, bringing a fresh, sweetly scented baby to Claire's arms. For a two-week-old baby, Nate was a fervent eater. Undoubtedly eating was his favorite activity. Once he started, he'd use all of his energy to devour everything that Claire had to offer. When he was satisfied, his little eyes would blink until the emerald disappeared and long lashes rested peacefully upon his growing cheeks.

It was then that Tony would take him into the nursery, sit with him, and rock him. Claire didn't always know how long they spent together. Most nights she'd fall back asleep listening to the deep baritone voice waft through the quiet night air. This was Tony and Nate's special time, and she didn't want to interrupt. When she and Tony talked about another child, Tony confessed that those hours spent with Nichol in paradise, in the middle of the night, were instrumental in keeping his sanity while at Yankton. He said that he'd lie in his bunk, night after night, and relive those hours in his head. The softness of her tiny hands and the scent of baby powder would tease his senses until he fell asleep. He knew it wasn't real, but the illusion was better than what his real life offered at the time. He couldn't stop his mind from going to that

small nursery when his eyes closed.

The difference between their bubble on the island and the one they now enjoyed was the addition of the sleeping child beside Claire. Despite the child psychologist's recommendations, after the birth of her brother, Nichol found her way into Tony and Claire's bed. It didn't happen every night, but it did happen. Surprisingly, the peace and security their daughter found snuggled between her parents allowed her to sleep peacefully even through Nate's waking and feeding.

It was Madeline who attested that Nichol's behavior was acceptable. After all, Nate's room was attached to Tony and Claire's; how could Nichol not feel left out across the hall in her separate bedroom? Madeline also reassured Claire that in time their daughter would once again be content in her own space. For now, Nichol needed to know that she was a part of what her brother shared. When Claire confessed Nichol's new sleeping arrangement to others, she was shocked and surprised to learn that they too had similar stories. Michael spent much of Beth's first few months in John and Emily's bed, as had Caleb, many years ago, when his sister Maryn was born. Even Meredith had similar tales with her two children. Though Claire was confident in their decision to allow Nichol this luxury, hearing that others had done the same helped reassure her.

Snuggling close to Nichol, Claire sighed. She could no longer differentiate Tony's words, but the rhythm comforted her as she drifted between wake and sleep. It wasn't until she heard her son's whimpers that Claire realized morning had arrived. Looking to the other side of the bed she saw only Nichol. By the numbers on the clock and the sound of water from the attached bathroom, Claire knew Tony was awake and getting ready for work.

A cloud of steam welcomed Claire as she opened the bathroom door. Once inside it was the magnificent sight of her husband stepping from the shower that fully woke her senses. As he reached for his towel, their eyes met. Droplets of water sparkled on his warmed skin as they descended from his broad shoulders down to his toned legs. Claire made no secret of her scan as she took in the nude man before her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Rawlings," he said with a grin as he wrapped the towel around his waist.

Closing the gap between them, her emerald eyes sparkled. "Good morning. Were you up a long time with Nate last night?"

"No, not too long. Is he awake?"

Rubbing her petite hands over his shoulders, Claire replied, "Yes, I just came in here first so I could feed him again."

Reaching for her hand, Tony kissed her fingers. "Again? I think our son has an insatiable appetite."

Claire's breasts ached as she thought not about Nate's appetite, but the one of the man before her. Closing her eyes, she imagined Tony's lips not on her fingers, but on other parts of her body. Though the doctors had told them to wait six weeks before resuming relations, Claire knew that she didn't want to wait. Nate's birth had been much kinder to her body than Nichol's. Reaching with her other hand to Tony's shoulder for support, she felt his muscles tense as she moved her fingers down his arm. Inch by inch, Claire's own appetite began to grow.

Remembering Tony's comment about Nate, Claire finally replied, "Hmmm. Yes, he does."

As Tony continued his gentle kisses of her fingers, she felt the release. Looking down, she saw the evidence on the bodice of her nightgown. "Tony..."

His dark eyes followed hers, and his devilish grin made her smile. "I'm glad to know that Nate isn't the only man who can do that to you."

Playfully she pulled her hand away and swatted his bare shoulder. "You're awful."

"I am?" he asked with his most innocent tone. "I thought I was pretty good. I mean if I were awful why would you..."

Claire shook her head as she disappeared behind the next door. Minutes later, she was in the nursery with Nate: his little lips latched and lower jaw began moving with vigor. The relief was instantaneous as he suckled and her body relaxed. Once she'd moved Nate to the other side, Tony stepped into the nursery. Though he was now fully dressed, Claire still enjoyed the view. His customary Armani suit and shiny black loafers reminded her that he wasn't only a daddy who would rock his child in the middle of the night, but also a businessman who spent his days making decisions that affected multitudes of people. Though the silk spoke of importance, the way the jacket stretched over his broad shoulders and tapered to his waist, reminded her of the man she'd watched step from the shower. Though her mind was there, Tony had obviously moved on.

Leaning down, he kissed her cheek and said, "Nichol's still sound asleep. Do you want me to wake her?"

"No, let her sleep. I'm sure Shannon's awake, but Nichol's been fighting naps. The longer she sleeps in the morning, the better it is for all of us this evening."

Tony laughed. "Then, by all means, let her sleep." His brows peaked. "I'm on my way to the kitchen for breakfast. Would you like me to have something sent up?"

Claire looked down at Nate, his suckling now slowed. "No. If you're going to eat here, I can come down in a few minutes."

Tony glanced down at her nightgown and lifted his brows.

"Yes, I'll be sure to change or wear a robe. I know I'm comparatively underdressed."

He teased the strap of her nightgown. "I like the way you're dressed."

Claire shook her head. Maybe he hadn't moved on.

"I'll be sure they have your tea ready."

"Ugh," Claire replied. "I'd give anything for a nice cup of caffeinated coffee."

Tony smirked. "Sacrifices, my dear."

"Sure, that's easy for you to say."

He reached for Nate's head. As he stroked the fine hair, the tips of his fingers purposely caressed Claire's breast. "I believe I'm sacrificing too."

"Yes, but your sacrifice is a sacrifice for me, too."

He lowered his lips near her neck, purposely bathing her sensitive skin in his warm breath. "Would I be *awful*," he emphasized the word, "if I were glad to hear that?"

Inhaling deeply, Claire sighed. "No. No more awful than you already are."

As she did the mental math, Tony turned to leave. Just before entering back into their suite, he muttered, "Three and a half more weeks."

A smile came to her lips and her cheeks rose. That was exactly what she'd been thinking.



THE SOUND OF Madeline's deep laugh echoed through the foyer as Claire approached the dining room. Turning the corner her heart leapt. Madeline and Francis truly were like family as they sat conversing with Tony over their breakfast. On the island, they used to eat their midday meals together, all four of them. In Iowa, Tony was rarely home for lunch and dinner was an off and on occasion for them all to be together. Though Claire always asked the older couple, Madeline insisted that the evening meal was an important time for the family.

Family was what Claire saw as she stood in the doorway and watched the three casually discussing daily events. Madeline and Francis were as close to parents as Tony or Claire would ever have. Their knowledge and wisdom affected both Tony and Claire in different ways. Claire welcomed Madeline's advice to the point of seeking it on many occasions. Tony was less forward, yet Francis had found a way to interject his beliefs and wisdom into Tony's life. Perhaps they were continuing their parent lessons without either Tony or Claire realizing what was happening.

"Oh, Madame Claire, let me hold Nate while you eat," Madeline said when she turned to see Claire.

As Claire placed Nate in Madeline's arms, she smiled at the way he nuzzled against the large woman. "I think we're spoiling him. He could be in his chair."

Madeline's dark eyes beamed. "Oh, no. Loving a bébé is not spoiling them. It is making him feel safe so that one day he can be in his chair and know he is still loved."

Sitting next to Tony, Claire smiled. "Well, he's definitely loved."

"And Nichol?" Francis asked.

"She's loved too," Claire answered quickly.

"No, Madame el, Nichol? Where is she?"

"Oh," Claire giggled. "She's still asleep." Before they asked, she volunteered, "She slept in our bed again last night."

"Was she upset?" Madeline asked.

"No," Tony answered. "When we started to tuck her in, she ran to our room and said she wanted to be close to her brother." With a scoff, he added, "That sounds all well and good, but so far she's yet to be any help with the middle of the night feeding."

"Oui," Madeline laughed. "She's a smart one, your daughter. She is very good at reasoning."

Claire nodded as she sipped her warm, decaffeinated tea. "Too good, but the night before, she slept fine in her bed. I hope..."

Madeline's knowing eyes peered toward Claire. "Do not worry. She will sleep in her own bed before she goes to university."

Tony's cough and laugh filled the dining room. "Well, let's hope it's way before that."

The four continued to chat until they heard the sound of little feet coming through the foyer. They all turned as Nichol made her way into the dining room and walked toward Claire.

"I woked up," she said sleepily.

"Yes, you did. Did you sleep okay in our big bed?"

Nichol nodded, and then with a grin she said, "Eccept Daddy snores."

The room erupted with everyone's laughter, followed by a dark-eyed stare coming from the head of the table. Playfully, Tony replied, "Well then, I guess you'll need to sleep in your own room from now on."

Nichol giggled. "I like your snoring, Daddy. It sounds funny." She looked up at Claire. "Doesn't it, Momma?"

Stifling her laughter, Claire's eyes met Tony's. Truthfully, she'd never noticed. Well, maybe when they first began to sleep together, but Claire always considered it rhythmic breathing more than snoring. Then after they had been separated, once they were reunited, she welcomed the sound of her husband sleeping beside her. "I think it sounds nice. That's how I know your daddy's there."

"Good answer," Tony declared. "You may have been sharing a bed with Nichol, in her room."

Claire's emerald eyes sparkled. "I don't think I need to be too concerned."

Tony stood, leaned down and gave Claire a kiss and Nichol a peck on her hair. "That's it. I'm leaving before you start discussing any more of my bad habits."

"We can save that for another time," Claire offered. Peering toward Madeline and Francis, she joked, "I'm sure you don't want to spend all morning sitting here. The list is rather lengthy."

Tony shook his head with a grin as he whispered near Claire's ear, "There's that smart mouth I love."

When he turned to leave, Claire asked, "Nichol, are you ready for some breakfast?"

As she spoke, the cook came from the kitchen with a tray, and Nichol climbed onto the chair beside her mother. "I do fthink it sounds funny," she whispered as she watched her breakfast being served.

EARLY MAY 2018: PHIL

THE TIRES OF the rental car bounced as Phil turned onto the private lane. Was the loose gravel the cause of his trembling hands or was it something else? As the silence within the car loomed, Phil's grip upon the helpless steering wheel tightened, blanching his knuckles and straining his wrists. Outside the windows large trees lined the lane while manicured lawns filled the landscape. The large, strategically placed trees created a canopy over the lane, allowing minimal illumination from the evening sun. The resulting strobe of the sunshine reminded Phil of the lane on the Rawlings estate, except these trees weren't oak. These trees were cypress and draped with beautiful Spanish moss that veiled the full beauty of the resort. As the trees parted, the main lodge came into view. Above the plantation-style mansion, the sky filled with a kaleidoscope of color. Reds swirled with pinks as shadows took on a purple hue.

"This is beautiful." Taylor's statement shattered the silence, relieving a fraction of the tension from Phil's grip.

He turned to his right. "It is. Have you ever stayed here before?"

"No," Taylor answered. "Not here. I mean, I grew up about fifty miles away, near Sebring. I'd heard of this place, but..." She shrugged. "...I guess I thought I was done with this area of the country."

Phil slowed the car as he eased in front of the main building. Putting the gear in park, he reached for Taylor's hand. "We don't have to do this, you

know. We can drive back to the airport right now. The Rawlings Industries plane is there and the pilot is on standby. You say the word and we can fly back to Iowa.”

Inhaling deeply, Taylor shook her head and turned her gaze toward the side window. “No, Phil, I have to do this. If I don’t, I’ll always wonder if...”

Phil waited as Taylor collected her thoughts and silence once again filled the car. There was so much he wanted to know: so many questions. Only knowing bits and pieces about someone’s past was the penance for not meeting one another until later in life. Those lives and stories, the ones that created a foundation of the present and future, remain hidden, until access was granted. He understood the need to keep the past from crashing with the present. Hell, his walls were tall enough to keep a fuck’n ninja from scaling them, and for that reason, he didn’t pry. That’s not to say he hadn’t done his research before Taylor was hired; however, that was business. This no longer was.

It wasn’t until they landed in Fort Lauderdale and began the drive away from the crystal blue ocean that Phil got a rare glimpse of the private woman beside him. Through the past two years he’d seen many sides of her—sides he enjoyed—but this was different. There was a cyclone of emotion he’d never witnessed. He didn’t know the particulars of what was happening behind her beautiful blue eyes, yet he knew enough to know it was causing her pain. That alone was more than enough reason to make him want to turn the car around and take them both back to the cooler world of Iowa.

As the warm Florida air stirred, the clouds above the columned mansion continued to swirl, brightening and darkening the landscape as shadows collided with light. Everything around him was happening in slow motion. Only Phil’s thoughts were occurring at a normal speed. He felt his blood pump and echo in his ears. Each beat of his heart intensified the silence. He was a man of action, a person who fixed things. He made them right. Sitting and watching the woman in his life, the woman who was usually a rock, crumble in the seat beside him was pure, unadulterated torture.

If he could, he’d take away her memories as well as her thoughts. If he could, he’d eliminate the current cause. He’d eliminated threats before. But alas, this was beyond his realm of expertise. Only current dangers could be eradicated. Purging the past was not something he could do. It was up to her. For that reason and possibility at liberation, Phil supported her.

After what seemed like hours, but according to the dashboard had only been a few minutes, Phil rubbed Taylor’s shoulder. The quaking beneath his fingertips told him what she’d been trying to hide. Throughout the two years they’d known one another, never before had he seen her cry. She wasn’t like Claire: that woman could cry at the drop of a hat. No, Taylor’s emotions were usually concealed, the perfect attribute of a bodyguard or an agent: slow to

anger and quick to react, conscious of everything at all times. Yet, the emotions Phil now witnessed were not a quick reaction. No, they'd been building over time: long before he knew Taylor Walters.

"I'll go get us checked in, and we can get some rest before your appointment with the attorney tomorrow."

Taylor nodded as she continued to look away.

A few minutes later, Phil apprehensively returned to the car. He could handle a confrontation with an adversary, chest to chest and guns blazing; however, confronting emotions that bubbled like a tar pit—thick, dense, and capable of suffocation—was out of Phil's element. With each step he contemplated his next move. Opening the door, he sighed with relief. Staring up toward him was one of the most beautiful smiles he'd ever seen. Somewhere in the time since he'd left and returned, Taylor had taken hold of her grief and returned it to the place that not only concealed it from the world, but from her heart. Though her eyes glistened with the remnants of tears, her gaze was clear and precise. Seeing the obvious change, Phil couldn't stop the relief suddenly surging through him as the smile returned to his lips.

"We have a private cottage near the back of the estate. I thought you might like the privacy."

Her brows rose in question.

Phil's smile quirked to the side. "That's not what I meant."

Taylor's hand covered his as he started the car. "I know. Thank you."

He didn't respond as he turned toward her. There was nothing he could think to say. Taylor shouldn't thank him. It was her. He should be the one to thank her for applying for the job with the Rawlings family, for bringing a part of him back to life. Hell, not back to life, but to life. She'd shown him that he could do his job, protect those he cared about and still have more.

"Taylor, don't thank me. I'm totally inept when it comes to what to do here."

She shook her head. "No, you're not. You're giving me exactly what I need. Sometimes more can be said with silent understanding than all the words in the world. If it weren't for you, I'd be facing this alone." She leaned near and kissed his cheek. "When it all happened, I never imagined ever again having someone I trusted enough to be there for me."

He squeezed her hand and put the car into reverse. "Let's go see this cottage. They promised me it was the best one on the property."

In no time, Phil was swiping the plastic card against the reader on the door of the quaint Florida styled cottage. The manager at the desk had been right about its isolation. After passing many smaller dwellings, the road narrowed and disappeared into the jungle of cypress. The manicured lawns disappeared as only underbrush could survive the denseness of the vegetation. Then, like lifting of a blanket, the trees parted and a cottage the size of many homes

came into view. By the description and map that Phil had been shown, he knew that there was a rear screened-in patio that looked out to a small pond. There were also trails that could take them around the grounds, and back near the main mansion was a stable with horses available for the guests. Not knowing how tomorrow would go, Phil had gone ahead and booked the cottage for multiple nights.

"Oh, my!" Taylor gasped as she stepped into the living room. "This isn't a cottage; it's a house."

Setting down her purse, she roamed from door to door. Everything was open and bright with white tile floors, yellow walls, and colorful cushions gracing the furniture. Each room had large windows offering natural light in the heat of the day. In the kitchen, with a counter that arched toward the living room, Taylor spun completely around. "Look at this kitchen! I wish we were staying longer. I'd love to cook." She turned her smiling gaze toward Phil. "See what you do to me. That's not something I ever thought I'd say."

He wrapped her in his arms and pulled her toward him. "There's a restaurant at the main mansion that also delivers." He shrugged. "I also saw a small grocery store about ten minutes from the resort." Phil scrunched his nose. "Do you know how to cook?"

She slapped his shoulder. "Yes! Just because I haven't done it in a while doesn't mean I've forgotten how to do it."

Taking a step and then two, he backed Taylor against the refrigerator pressing his body against hers. "Hmmm, speaking from experience, lack of recent activity has been no indicator of your level of expertise." He ran his palms down her arms until their fingers intertwined. "As a matter of fact, I think I like being the one who's fortunate enough to experience your return to previous activities."

"Oh, you do?" she murmured, as she leaned closer, lifted her chin, and kissed his lips.

Phil nodded as their lips lingered. His chest pressing against her breasts, as the connection of their kiss remained unbroken. The thin material separating their skin did little to conceal the hardening of her nipples. Though the air conditioner roared, the temperature of their cottage rose with each passing moment. Her need filled his senses while her hands released his and began to pull his shirt from his jeans.

He reciprocated and when his touch found the soft skin of her waist, Phil asked, "Shall we find the master bedroom?"

Taylor didn't speak; instead she reached for his hand and led him through the archway toward the adjoining room with the large king-sized bed. Beyond the unblocked windows, the small lake glistened with the last rays of the evening sun. The earlier redness had bled from the sky, pooled behind the large trees and left lingering purple wisps floating above the horizon as dusk

offered the dimmed illumination of only the moon and stars.

Phil didn't need Taylor's words to recognize her hunger. The appetite he witnessed wasn't for food, but for connection. The path before her was more daunting than she wanted to admit. It would take strength and support. As their bodies became one and the world beyond the window darkened, Phil wanted to give her everything she needed. His desire wasn't purely carnal, though that element's presence was unquestioned. He wanted to be the one she could lean upon, to applaud her inner strength, and also to catch her if she fell. The woman below him wasn't a damsel in distress. She was every bit as fierce as he, yet even he craved the knowledge of not being alone. Until Taylor, Phil had never known how badly he desired that connection.

Her beautiful eyes stared into his as her body clenched and her moans subsided. He loved how she didn't close her eyes, but watched him constantly as they united. Perhaps that too was a sign of her strength. Never did it feel as if she surrendered herself to him. On the contrary, she gave, a gift that only he was blessed to receive.

Collapsing next to her, Phil pulled Taylor near. "Shall we get dressed and head up to the mansion for dinner?"

The sweet aroma of Taylor's shampoo wafted through the air as she shook her head against his shoulder. "No, I meant what I said about cooking. I saw a grill outside, past the screened porch. Let's drive to that little grocery." She lifted her head and filled his hazel eyes with crystal blue. "I want to cook that dinner for you."

"You don't have—"

Her kiss stopped his words. "I know. I want to. Let me spend tonight thinking about other things, like salad, and steak, and maybe some wine."

Flipping their world, Taylor's hair fanned out on the pillow and her smile grew. "Well," Phil replied, "if keeping your mind occupied is my main mission, I'll do my best not to fail."

Taylor's back arched, confirming their connection. Unlike before, they were skin to skin. "You've already done a great job. But don't get too comfortable. I think it could be a long night."

Sighing contently, Phil replied, "You know me, always a workaholic. I strive for perfection."

Finding himself lost in her aura, Phil realized what he'd just said—you know me—and the tips of his lips moved upward. Such a simple statement, truer than anything else he could utter, and more powerful in meaning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

August 2018

Claire

The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

“How do you like having two children?” Julia Simmons asked Claire, as they walked with their sons back to the screened porch from the nursery.

“Now that this little guy is sleeping through the night, I like it a lot more.” Julia smiled. “Yes, Christopher started doing that around five months. At first, I’d wake up to make sure he was all right. Caleb had to convince me not to wake him.”

Claire laughed. “I know the feeling.”

“And Nate sure isn’t little,” Julia assessed. “Goodness, he’s grown.”

“Yes,” Claire replied as she juggled her son on her hip. Making her way to the sofa, wisps of her hair blew in the breeze of the ceiling fan as it circulated the warm summer air about the porch. As she sat, she heard squeals of delight coming from the backyard and pool. “He’s over doubled in size since he was born. The doctor said that he’s over the one hundredth percentile in height.”

“Well, look at Tony, Claire,” Courtney chimed in. “Of course Nate will be tall.”

“But look at Nichol,” Claire replied. “She’s not nearly as tall. I mean, they say to double your height at age two. By age three she was only thirty-two inches.”

Emily shrugged. “She’s petite, like her momma.”

“But a fireball like her father,” Courtney added.

Claire grinned. It was true: someday despite her petite size Nichol Courtney Rawlings would be a force to be reckoned with, just like her father.

Even now, Claire heard her daughter's voice above the glees and splashing coming from the pool.

"Look at them," Emily said. "It's like a daycare center here."

Claire scanned their backyard. For only a second she remembered the serenity and stillness of the estate when she was first brought here, maybe not serene but lonely. Now the pool and deck were filled with people she loved. Not only were Tony and Nichol in the pool, but so were John, Michael, Tim and his two sons, Shaun and Steven, as well as Brent and Caleb sitting on the deck. The sight was heartwarming as the children and fathers played and laughed.

Shaking her head, Claire agreed. "Like a *daddy* daycare."

"Well, that's fine with me. The boys love having time with Tim," Sue said.

Emily smiled, watching her daughter walk from lady to lady, petting the babies. "I think she thinks she's hot stuff."

"Well, she should," Claire confirmed. "She can walk. Nate and Christopher are still content to watch the world. Although, Nate is rolling all over the place. It's so funny. The first time I laid him down on the carpet and a few seconds later he was missing, I was shocked—he'd rolled himself under the coffee table."

"Well," Julia continued, "Christopher isn't that content. He'd rather be crawling all over the place."

"You can put him down. He can't get off the porch."

The bright sunshine warmed the air throughout the afternoon as the shrill laughter turned to pangs of hunger. Eventually, all made their way into the house for dinner. Shannon took Nate as Claire helped Nichol change out of her bathing suit. Once they were in her room, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Claire called as she worked to convince Nichol that her shorts and top were better dinner clothes than her Disney princess costume.

"But, Momma, it's dinner. I want to dress up."

"Honey, these are very nice shorts. You'll look beautiful."

Her lips pouted and dark eyes narrowed. "Not as butiful as I do in my princess dress."

Emily entered.

"You can wear the dress after dinner. You don't want to get it dirty with food, do you?" Claire asked.

With a sigh, Nichol agreed.

"What's up?" Claire asked turning to see her sister.

"I wanted to tell you something in private," Emily replied.

Claire's green eyes widened. "Okay."

The three chatted as Claire combed Nichol's wet hair. Once she was presentable, Claire said, "Honey, why don't you go find the other children?

I'm pretty sure that Shannon and Becca have a special table set up for you, Michael, Shaun, and Stephen."

Her shoulders fell. "Why do I have to sit with all boys?"

"Because you're the princess and they're your court," Emily volunteered.

Nichol's eyes brightened. "Oh, yeah."

Moments later, Nichol was gone, happily ready to find her court.

"What do you want to speak to me about?" Claire asked.

"It's not that big of a deal. I just wanted to tell you John and I spoke with Harry the other day."

Claire took a step back. She hadn't thought of Harrison Baldwin in quite a long time. Well, she had when she'd been told about Amber. The whole story made her sad. But honestly, she'd been too preoccupied with her own family to give him much thought. After all, it had been over five years since she'd left California.

"Wow, that's out of left field."

Emily shrugged. "Not really. John and I have stayed in contact with him. We got to know him and Amber while we were living in Palo Alto."

"Really, Em, this doesn't need to be in private. Tony couldn't care less about Harry, and to be honest, I think I'm still upset that he lied to me."

"He's been through a lot. Besides, were you totally honest with him?"

"Excuse me?" Claire's volume rose. "What does that mean?"

Emily shook her head. "Nothing, never mind. I just mean that when you were out there, you weren't over Anthony."

"Emily, that was a long time ago, and I don't want to rehash it. Say what you wanted to say."

"I wanted to tell you that he's doing well."

"Good."

"He told us that he's seeing someone and he's happy."

"Well, I'm happy for him. I always wondered if he and Liz got back together."

Emily smiled. "See, you have thought about him."

"Not recently, but I wondered that." Claire thought back. When had she wondered that? Too many things had happened.

"They did," Emily replied, "for a while. But a few years back, when he left the FBI, he moved to North Carolina to be close to his ex-wife and daughter. Liz stayed in California."

Claire gasped as her eyes widened. "What did you just say?"

Emily reached for her arm. "Oh jeez, Claire, I thought you knew that."

Her head moved from side to side. "H-How would I know *that*?" She paused and sat on Nichol's bed. "He has a daughter and an ex-wife? Is that new?"

"No. I think his daughter is about eight or nine years old."

"Well, isn't that interesting." Claire's eyes narrowed. "No matter what my feelings for Tony were while I was in Palo Alto, I told Harry I had an ex-husband. Harry never mentioned an ex-wife or a daughter!"

"I didn't tell you this to upset you," Emily explained. "I told you, well, because I thought you'd be happy for him. I mean, you're happy. At least you seem to be. Don't you think he should be too?"

Claire nodded. She was happy and of course she wanted Harry to be happy too, but this was a lot to digest. Not only had he misled her with his job and initial intentions for their friendship, he never told her he was married. Emily's words interrupted her thoughts.

"Claire, I don't think I ever told you, but Harry came to see John and me, while you were... sick. He wanted us to know the truth about his job and about you. He's the one who told us that you and Anthony left your island to save us from Catherine. I'm not sure I would've believed it coming from anyone else. What he did helped to open our eyes."

Claire stared at her sister as words failed to form. Memories rushed forth too rapidly to decipher. She suddenly remembered the Harrison Baldwin who took her to buy a cell phone and a used car. She hated that those memories were tainted by his undercover work. At the same time she recalled how happy she'd been. Those small things meant the world to her. Now to know that he'd gone out of his way to explain things to her family, she did want him happy. Then she remembered Amber.

"Em, I do want him to be happy. I can't imagine what he went through with Amber and the revelation about Simon. I still have trouble comprehending all of that. I'm glad he's found someone. Is he remarried? Does he see his daughter?"

A smile graced Emily's lips. "It sounds like he has a great relationship with his ex-wife, and because of that he's gotten very close with his daughter. I forget the woman's name, but they're not that serious. I guess she was Jillian's—that's his daughter—teacher. So at first they kept it quiet. Now that a new school year is coming and Jillian has a new teacher, they've made their dating status public."

Nichol's door opened and dark questioning eyes peered around the frame. "There you two are. Dinner's ready."

Claire smiled toward her husband. "We'll be right there."

He opened the door wider. "The natives are restless. Thankfully Shannon and Becca have the little ones eating."

Claire reached for Emily's hand. "Thanks for telling me. I *am* happy."

She saw the question in her husband's eyes and knew without a doubt this was a conversation she'd be retelling once they were alone.

"Where's Phil, Taylor, or Eric?" Emily asked as they made their way back downstairs.

Claire shrugged. "They're here. It's like I told you before, even though they're here, they don't hover."

"I miss Madeline and Francis."

"I do too," Claire admitted. "I understood their desire to get back to their home, but I know Nichol misses them too. We'll definitely need to plan a trip to visit them in the future."



LATER THAT NIGHT, the conversation Claire had anticipated came up for discussion as she and Tony readied for bed. She'd just settled onto the soft sheets with a sigh when Tony asked, "What was the big secretive meeting with Emily all about?"

Claire had contemplated this conversation every which way since Tony entered Nichol's room. However, she didn't expect him to be so forward. Well, fine. She'd be just as forward.

"She wanted to tell me something about Harry." When Tony didn't respond, Claire clarified, "Harrison Baldwin."

"Yes, I'm well aware of who you meant."

"All right, that's it," Claire said, as she laid her head on the pillow. "I'm exhausted."

"I'm thinking not."

She rolled to face her husband. "You're thinking I'm not tired?"

His chest expanded and contracted. "I'm thinking that's not *it*." He emphasized the word. "What did she want to tell you about Mr. Baldwin?"

She worked to suppress a smile. "You know you're cute when you're jealous."

"I'm not jealous." His dark eyes widened in a ploy of innocence. "I'm merely curious."

Sitting back up, Claire scooted closer, close enough to feel his radiating warmth. She reached out to touch his chest. "You're warm. I think you got a lot of sun today with the kids."

Tony grasped her hand and looked her in the eye. "Curiosity, Mrs. Rawlings. Could you please help me out?"

"You know what they say about curiosity, don't you, Mr. Rawlings?"

"You're playing with me right now, and I'm not in favor of it."

Claire giggled. "Would I do that? Maybe I should get you something for the burn. You should've worn sunscreen..."

Before she could finish, Tony's lips were on hers and she was back on her pillow. When he broke their kiss, his nose lingered millimeters from hers. "Thank you for your concern. Perhaps you could be as considerate of my

mental health.”

“Emily told me that Harry’s in a relationship and he’s happy.” She lifted her lips to his. “See? No big deal.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why does she think you need to know that?”

Claire pulled away from the weight of his chest and sat back up. “Honestly, I don’t know. I guess she wanted me to know that he’s doing well.”

Tony shook his head. “Well, fine. He’s living in North Carolina near his daughter and in a relationship. I know I’ll sleep better tonight.”

Claire tilted her head to the side. “Wait a minute. How did you know about his daughter?”

“You knew too. Didn’t you tell me?”

“Noooo.” She elongated the word. “I didn’t know anything about him being married or having a child until this afternoon.”

Tony shrugged. “I’m not sure then.” He feigned a smile. “He’s happy, you’re happy, I’m happy—we’re all happy.” He lifted a brow. “Now, where were we? Oh, yes, you wanted to get me lotion.”

Claire’s neck straightened. “Don’t do that. You asked me a question and I answered it. Now I want to know how you knew about Harry. I was shocked when Emily told me that he’d been married. Obviously, you’ve known it for a while but never felt the need to tell me.”

“Why would I tell you that? What possible reason do I have to bring up your ex-boyfriend?”

“It was a long time ago. You know how upset I was when I learned he was FBI.”

“Roach told me.”

Claire contemplated his response. “Phil told you I was upset? Because yes, he was with me when I found out. Or... Phil told you about Harry and has kept you up to date on him.”

“Claire, you’re making this into more than it is. Emily shouldn’t have—”

“Don’t you dare turn this around on her. Answer my question. If you don’t, I’ll ask Phil tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Tony admitted. “Roach has kept me up to date on Mr. Baldwin as well as Ms. McCoy. She’s still in prison, by the way.”

Claire crossed her arms over her chest. “Is there anyone else you two are investigating? Any other secrets you’d suddenly like to share?”

“Yes,” his tone mellowed. “I have a burning secret I’d like to share.” As he spoke, he inched closer. “Are you ready?” When Claire didn’t answer, he lowered his lips to her neck. After a few butterfly kisses, he breathed heavily with each word. “Here’s. My. Secret.”

Goose bumps materialized as Claire waited for his revelation.

"I love you more than life itself." His kisses moved from behind her ear to her collarbone. "I didn't investigate Mr. Baldwin for any other reason than curiosity." His lips continued to roam. "I'm insanely jealous of the time you two spent together, but..." He brought his head up and looked directly into her eyes showing her the chocolate swirls of desire and regret. "...I don't blame anyone for the pain you were in when the two of you met, other than me."

This was more than Claire wanted to hear. She looked away, knowing she too was guilty.

"Look at me."

Slowly, she turned.

"Tony, stop. I'm not innocent."

"Nor am I. We've moved beyond all of this. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I didn't want to have this conversation, for no other reason than when it comes to that man my feelings are irrational."

Giving up her pretense of anger, Claire reached for his cheeks. The warmth of his face as well as the abrasiveness of his five o'clock shadow electrified her hands, sending shockwaves through her body. "I'm sorry. I admit that I thought it was cute that you were jealous. I shouldn't have baited you. I haven't thought about Harry in years. That may make me a terrible person, but I haven't. I'm too happy and satisfied with everything that I have right here to spend my time thinking about the past." her eyes filled with tears. "I've lost too much time in the past. I want the now."

TONY

As TONY CARESSED Claire's cheek her eyes closed causing a tear to fall. Shit, this wasn't what he wanted. When would he learn to keep his mouth shut? Without thinking, Tony leaned nearer and kissed away the salty moisture.

"We both have. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing. I should've answered you. I knew you'd want to know."

Tony looked down into the sea of emerald green. "How? How did you know?"

A slight grin materialized on his wife's face. "I saw it when you opened the door."

"Am I that easy to read?"

Her hands on his cheeks pulled his lips toward hers. "You are to me," she answered. "You have been for as long as I can remember."

As their lips united, their bodies molded together. They were like pieces of a puzzle: one made especially to fit the other. They moved in sync, their caressing hands sending warmth and energy from one to the other. Their tongues danced, creating a waltz of give and take. Within minutes Claire's nightgown was gone, lost to the abyss of the carpet below only to quickly be accompanied by Tony's shorts. Tucked safely behind the security of their locked door, it was only the two of them moving as one.

Claire's back arched as they united, inviting him not only to enter her warmth but also to tease her taut nipples. Each time he sucked or taunted her hard nubs, moans of desire filled the suite. Their rhythm increased as the room around them disappeared.

She had been right. Too much time had been lost in the past. Their eyes were rightfully set on the present, and as they settled into one another's arms and the night air stilled, Tony's mind was not in their history, but filled with what he had in the here and now: his family, his wife in his arms as well as his children sleeping soundly in their rooms.

Though many may question the choices they'd made, as Tony and Claire neared sleep they both knew that every second of their past had been worth it. They wouldn't spend their lives rehashing it, but they also wouldn't regret it. For without their past, they wouldn't have their present, including the two young Rawlingses who would change the legacy of the Nichols-Rawls families forever, because tomorrow held the possibility for only the best of consequences.

A PARTING NOTE FROM ALEATHA

Theirs was a long, complicated story with a monster and a knight. What made their story unique was that these two players were the same person.

ALEATHA ROMIG

Dear Reader,

Your love and appreciation for Tony and Claire's story made this book possible, as well as each one post-Consequences. I've tried too many times to say that I'm done writing about this family. I won't say that again.

What does that mean? I make no promises. Someday I may explore the lives of Nichol and Nate. How did they grow up? What did they become? How did their parents influence them? What was it truly like to grow up Rawlings? Perhaps Phil will want a story of his own or maybe Harry?

However, for now, I'm content in knowing that Claire and Tony overcame their impossible beginning and love prevailed through impossible odds. I hope you'll not only allow me that reprieve, but perhaps also join me if the story ever decides to continue in my mind. For if that happens, for my own sanity, I must share it with you. For more of Tony's thoughts in the beginning of their relationship the Consequences series companions: BEHIND HIS EYES: CONSEQUENCES and BEHIND HIS EYES: TRUTH are currently available.

Thank you for spending your valuable time reading BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES. If you've enjoyed this peek into the future, please tell your friends, leave a review, and shout it from the rooftops!

If you'd like to take a different dark journey with a little more heat, I recommend my new TALES FROM THE DARK SIDE series. Each book in the series is a stand-alone. INSIDIOUS, my first smart, sexy thriller, is now available.

I ask you to take a look at my romantic saga, with a hint of dark, series INFIDELITY. It isn't what you think. The series consists of: BETRAYAL, CUNNING, DECEPTION, ENTRAPMENT, and FIDELITY and was released by early 2017.

Another addition to the world of Aleatha Romig is my thriller/suspense

series THE LIGHT. It is my first traditionally published books coming from Thomas and Mercer. INTO THE LIGHT was released June of 2016 and AWAY FROM THE DARK was released in October of 2016.

Coming in the fall of 2018, WEB OF SIN, if you loved/hated Tony, it's time to meet Sterling! This three book dark romance will begin with SECRETS, go on to LIES, and complete with PROMISES.

I also have ventured into lighter romances with the standalone "lighter ONES:" PLUS ONE, ONE NIGHT, A SECRET ONE, and ANOTHER ONE. If you're looking for a palate cleanser between your dark reads, these are for you!

Continue on for the Consequences glossary and timeline.

Thank you again.

Sincerely,
~*Aleatha*

FOR MORE TONY AND CLAIRE

These companions are for the fan who after reading the Consequences series still wants to know more...more of what Tony was thinking in Consequences and in Truth. These are companions and not standalone books.

NEXT IN THE CONSEQUENCES SERIES

For more Tony:

The Consequences series companions:

BEHIND HIS EYES CONSEQUENCES

BEHIND HIS EYES TRUTH

RIPPLES: A STANDALONE CONSEQUENCES NOVEL

Natalie's story

GLOSSARY OF CONSEQUENCE SERIES CHARACTERS

-PRIMARY CHARACTERS-

Anthony (Tony) Rawlings: *billionaire, entrepreneur, founder of Rawlings Industries*

Anton Rawls (*birth name*): *son of Samuel, grandson of Nathaniel (*birth name*)*

Claire Nichols Rawlings: *meteorologist, bartender, woman whose life changed forever, wife and ex-wife of Anthony Rawlings*

Aliases: *Lauren Michaels, Isabelle Alexander, C. Marie Rawls*

Nathaniel (Nate) Sherman Rawlings: son of Claire and Anthony Rawlings

Nichol Courtney Rawlings: daughter of Claire and Anthony Rawlings

Brent Simmons: *Rawlings attorney, Tony's best friend*

Catherine Marie London (Rawls): *housekeeper, friend of Anthony Rawlings, 2nd wife of Nathaniel Rawls, Anton Rawls' step-grandmother*

Courtney Simmons: *Brent Simmons' wife*

Emily (Nichols) Vandersol: *Claire's older sister*

Harrison Baldwin: *half-brother of Amber McCoy, president of security at SiJo Gaming*

John Vandersol: *Emily's husband, Claire's brother-in-law, attorney*

Liz Matherly: *personal assistant to Amber McCoy, love interest of Harrison Baldwin*

Meredith Banks Russel: *reporter, sorority sister of Claire Nichols*

Phillip Roach: *private investigator hired by Anthony Rawlings*

-SECONDARY CHARACTERS-

Amber McCoy: *Simon Johnson's fiancée, CEO of SiJo Gaming*

Derek Burke: *husband of Sophia Rossi, great-grandnephew of Jonathon Burke*

Eric Hensley: *Tony's driver and assistant*

Nathaniel Rawls: *grandfather of Anton Rawls, father of Samuel Rawls, owner-founder of Rawls Corporation*

Patricia Miles: *personal assistant to Anthony Rawlings, corporate Rawlings Industries*

Aliases: *Melissa Garrison, Charlotte Peterson*

Sophia Rossi Burke: *adopted daughter of Carlo and Silvia Rossi, wife of Derek Burke, biological daughter of Marie London, and owner of an art studio in Provincetown, MA*

-TERTIARY CHARACTERS-

Abbey: *nurse*

Allison Burke: *daughter of Jonathon Burke*

Amanda Rawls: *Samuel Rawls' wife, Anton's mother*

Ami Beech: *office manager of the Diamond law firm in Olivia, Minnesota*

Andrew McCain: *pilot for Rawlings Industries*

Anne Robinson: *Vanity Fair reporter*

Becca: *Vandersols' nanny*

Bev Miller: *designer, wife of Tom Miller*

Bonnie: *wife of Chance*

Brad Clark: *wedding consultant*

Caleb Simmons: *son of Brent and Courtney Simmons*

Cameron Andrews: *private investigator hired by Anthony Rawlings*

Carlo Rossi: *married to Silvia Rossi, adoptive father of Sophia Rossi Burke*

Carlos: *house staff at the Rawlings' estate*

Dr. Carly Brown: *Claire's primary doctor at Everwood*

Cassie: *Sophia's assistant at her art studio on the Cape*

Chance: *associate of Elijah Summer*

Charles: *housekeeper, Anthony's Chicago apartment*

Christopher Simmons: *son of Caleb and Julia Simmons, grandson to Brent and Courtney Simmons*

Cindy: *maid at the Rawlings estate, adopted daughter of Allison Burke*

and her husband

Clay Winters: *bodyguard hired by Anthony Rawlings*

Connie: *Nathaniel Rawls' secretary*

Danielle (Danni): *personal assistant to Derek Burke*

David Field: *Rawlings negotiator*

Elijah (Eli) Summer: *entertainment entrepreneur, friend of Tony's*

Elizabeth Nichols: *wife of Sherman Nichols, Claire and Emily's grandmother*

Elizabeth (Beth) Vandersol: *daughter of John and Emily Vandersol*

Dr. Fairfield: *research doctor at Everwood*

Agent Ferguson: *FBI agent*

Francis: *groundskeeper in paradise, married to Madeline*

Mr. George: *curator of an art studio in Palo Alto, California*

Agent Hart: *FBI agent*

Officer Hastings: *police officer in Iowa City*

Heather: *co-worker at Diamond Law Firm in Olivia, Minnesota*

Hillary Cunningham: *wife of Roger Cunningham*

Ilona (Baldwin) George: *ex-wife of Harrison Baldwin, mother of Jillian*

Agent Jackson: *FBI agent, Boston field office*

Jan: *housekeeper, Anthony's New York apartment*

Jane Allyson: *court-appointed counsel*

Jared Clawson: *CFO Rawls Corporation*

Jerry Russel: *husband of Meredith Banks Russel*

Jillian (Baldwin) George: *daughter of Harrison Baldwin and Ilona (Baldwin) George*

Judge Jefferies: *court judge, Iowa City*

Jim: *therapist at Yankton Federal Prison Camp*

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson: *Simon Johnson's parents*

Jonas Smithers: *Anthony Rawlings' first business partner in Company Smithers Rawlings (CSR)*

Jonathon Burke: *securities officer whose testimony helped to incriminate Nathaniel Rawls*

Jordon Nichols: *father of Claire and Emily Nichols, married to Shirley, son of Sherman*

Julia: *Caleb Simmons' wife*

Kayla: *nurse*

Keaton: *love interest of Amber McCoy*

Kelli: *secretary, Rawlings Industries, New York office*

Kirstin: *Marcus Evergreen's secretary*

Mr. Leason: *administrator of Everwood*

Dr. Leonard: *physician*

Dr. Logan: *physician*

Madeline: *housekeeper in paradise, married to Francis*
Marcus: *driver for SiJo Gaming*
Marcus Evergreen: *Iowa City prosecutor*
Mary Ann Combs: *longtime companion of Elijah Summer, Tony's friend*
Maryn Simmons: *daughter of Courtney and Brent Simmons*
Michael Vandersol: *son of Emily and John Vandersol*
Sergeant Miles: *police officer, St. Louis*
Monica Thompson: *wedding planner*
Naiade: *housekeeper in Fiji*
Chief Newburgh: *chief of police, Iowa City Police Department*
Officer O'Brien: *police officer, Iowa City Police Department*
Miss Oliver: *Jillian (Baldwin) George's teacher*
Patrick Chester: *neighbor of Samuel and Amanda Rawls*
Paul Task: *court-appointed counsel*
Quinn: *personal assistant of Jane Allyson, Esquire*
Judge Reynolds: *court judge, Iowa City*
Richard Bosley: *governor of Iowa*
Richard Bosley II: *son of Richard Bosley, banker in Michigan*
Roger Cunningham: *president of Shedis-tics*
Ronald George: *second husband of Ilona (Baldwin) George*
Ryan Bosley: *son of Richard II and Sarah Bosley*
Samuel Rawls: *son of Nathaniel and Sharron Rawls, husband of Amanda Rawls, father of Anton Rawls*
Sarah Bosley: *wife of Richard Bosley II*
Shannon: *Nichol Rawlings' nanny*
Sharon Michaels: *attorney for Rawlings Industries*
Sharron Rawls: *wife of Nathaniel Rawls*
Shaun Stivert: *photographer for Vanity Fair*
Sheldon Preston: *governor of Iowa*
Shelly: *Anthony Rawlings' publicist*
Sherman Nichols: *grandfather of Claire Nichols, FBI agent who helped to incriminate Nathaniel Rawls. FBI alias: Cole Mathews*
Sherry: *assistant to Dr. Carly Brown*
Shirley Nichols: *wife of Jordon Nichols, mother of Claire and Emily*
Silvia Rossi: *married to Carlo Rossi, adopted mother of Sophia Rossi Burke*
Simon Johnson: *first love and classmate of Claire Nichols, gaming entrepreneur*
Dr. Sizemore: *obstetrician and gynecologist*
Sue Bronson: *Tim Bronson's wife*
Taylor Walters: *member of Rawlings' estate security*
Judge Temple: *court judge, Iowa City*

Terri: *nurse*
Tim Bronson: *vice president, corporate Rawlings Industries*
Tom Miller: *Rawlings attorney, friend of Tony's*
Tory Garrett: *pilot for Rawlings Industries*
Valerie: *assistant to Dr. Fairfield*
Dr. Warner: *psychologist at female federal penitentiary*
Judge Wein: *court judge, Iowa City*
SAC Williams: *Special Agent in Charge of the San Francisco FBI field office*

THE CONSEQUENCES SERIES TIMELINE

-1921-

Nathaniel Rawls—born

-1943-

Nathaniel Rawls—home from WWII
Nathaniel Rawls marries Sharron Parkinson
Nathaniel begins working for BNG Textiles

-1944-

Samuel Rawls—born to Nathaniel and Sharron

-1953-

BNG Textiles becomes Rawls Textiles

-1956-

Rawls Textiles becomes Rawls Corporation

-1962-

Catherine Marie London—born

-1963-

Samuel Rawls marries Amanda

-1965-

FEBRUARY 12
Anton Rawls—born to Samuel and Amanda

-1975-

Rawls Corporation goes public

-1980-

JULY 19

Sophia Rossi (London)—born/adopted by Carlo and Silvia Rossi

AUGUST 31

Emily Nichols—born to Jordon and Shirley Nichols

-1983-

Sharron Rawls exhibits symptoms of Alzheimer's disease

Marie London starts to work for Sharron Rawls

Anton Rawls graduates from Blair Academy High School

OCTOBER 17

Claire Nichols—born to Jordon and Shirley Nichols

-1985-

: Nathaniel Rawls begins affair with Marie London

Marie London loses baby

Sharron Rawls dies

-1986-

Rawls Corporation falls

-1987-

Anton Rawls graduates from NYU

Nathaniel Rawls found guilty of multiple counts of insider trading,
misappropriation of funds, price fixing, and securities fraud

-1988-

: Nathaniel Rawls marries Catherine Marie London

Anton Rawls graduates with Master's degree

-1989-

Nathaniel Rawls—dies

Samuel and Amanda Rawls—die

-1990-

: Anton Rawls changes his name to Anthony Rawlings
Anthony Rawlings begins CSR-Company Smithers Rawlings with Jonas
Smithers

-1994-

Anthony Rawlings buys out Jonas Smithers and CSR becomes Rawlings
Industries

-1996-

Rawlings Industries begins to diversify

-1997-

Sherman Nichols—dies

-2002-

Claire Nichols—graduates high school
Claire Nichols—attends Valparaiso University

-2003-

Simon Johnson begins internship at Shedis-tics in California

-2004-

Jordon and Shirley Nichols—die

-2005-

Emily Nichols—marries John Vandersol

-2007-

Claire Nichols—graduates from Valparaiso, degree in meteorology
Claire Nichols—moves from Indiana to New York for internship

-2008-

: Claire Nichols—moves to Atlanta, Georgia, for job at WKPZ
Simon Johnson begins SiJo Gaming Corporation

-2009-

WKPZ—purchased by large corporation resulting in lay-offs
Jillian Baldwin is born

-2010-

MARCH

Anthony Rawlings—enters the Red Wing in Atlanta, Georgia

Anthony Rawlings—takes Claire Nichols on a date

Claire Nichols—wakes at Anthony's estate

MAY

Claire Nichols—liberties begin to increase

Anthony Rawlings—takes Claire Nichols to symphony and introduces

"Tony"

SEPTEMBER

Meredith Banks' article appears—Claire Nichols' accident

DECEMBER 18

Anthony Rawlings—marries Claire Nichols

-2011-

APRIL

Vanity Fair article appears

SEPTEMBER

Anthony and Claire Rawlings attend a symposium in Chicago where Claire sees Simon Johnson, her college boyfriend

NOVEMBER

Simon Johnson—dies in airplane accident

-2012-

JANUARY

Claire Rawlings drives away from the Rawlings estate

Anthony Rawlings—poisoned

Claire Rawlings—arrested for attempted murder

MARCH

Anthony Rawlings divorces Claire Nichols
APRIL

Claire Nichols pleads no contest to attempted murder charges
OCTOBER

Claire Nichols receives box of information while in prison

-2013-

MARCH

Petition for pardon is filed with Governor Bosley on behalf of Claire Nichols
Petition for pardon is granted; Claire Nichols is released from prison and
moves to Palo Alto, California

Tony learns of Claire's release, hires Phillip Roach, and contacts Claire
APRIL

Claire and Courtney vacation in Texas

Tony travels to California. He and Claire have dinner and reconnect
MAY

Claire meets with Meredith Banks in San Diego
Claire and Harry connect

Claire and Harry visit Patrick Chester

Claire attends the National Center for Learning Disabilities annual gala where
Tony is the keynote speaker

Claire takes a home pregnancy test
JUNE

Caleb Simmons weds his fiancée, Julia. Tony asks Claire to accompany him
to the wedding

Claire is attacked by Patrick Chester
Claire moves back to Iowa

JULY

First mailing arrives to Iowa addressed to *Claire Nichols-Rawls*
SEPTEMBER

Tony leaves for a ten-day business trip to Europe
Claire leaves Iowa

OCTOBER

Claire moves to paradise
Phil Roach takes Tony to paradise

OCTOBER 27

Anthony Rawlings and Claire Nichols remarry
DECEMBER

DECEMBER 19

Nichol Courtney Rawlings born

-2014-

MARCH

Tony and Claire Rawlings return to the United States

Incident at Rawlings estate

Claire Rawlings suffers a psychotic break

Tony and Claire are arrested

Anthony Rawlings is booked for crimes against the state of Iowa and the
United States

Claire Rawlings is booked for attempted murder

Catherine Marie London is booked for crimes against the state of Iowa and
the United States

A protective order is filed against Anthony Rawlings

JUNE

Anthony Rawlings pleads guilty to kidnapping and is sentenced to four years
at Yankton, Federal Prison Camp, Yankton, South Dakota

JULY

Michael Vandersol is born to Emily and John Vandersol

NOVEMBER

Catherine Marie London's case goes before a grand jury

-2015-

JULY

Catherine Marie London is convicted of crimes against the state of Iowa and
the United States

AUGUST

Amber McCoy is arrested for crimes against the state of California and the
United States

-2016-

SPRING

Anthony Rawlings fires his assistant, Patricia

Tony begins construction on new home

JUNE

Meredith Banks approaches Emily Vandersol in park

Meredith Banks goes undercover at Everwood to learn about Claire Rawlings

JULY

Harrison Baldwin retires from FBI and moves to North Carolina

SEPTEMBER

Claire Rawlings begins to speak

Tony starts petition to terminate the marriage of Anthony and Claire Rawlings

Courtney Simmons meets with Meredith Banks and sees Claire

OCTOBER

Anthony Rawlings' early release from Yankton Federal Prison Camp is approved

FIFTEEN DAYS LATER

Anthony Rawlings is released from Yankton Federal Prison Camp

Tony signs Claire out of Everwood

Tony gives Claire the Rawlings estate and asks her for a divorce

Tony and Claire go to see Nichol for the first time in 2 ½ years

Tony and Claire reunite

DECEMBER

Nichol Rawlings' third birthday is celebrated in paradise with family and friends

-2017-

JANUARY

Taylor Walters is hired by the Rawlings family

APRIL

Elizabeth (Beth) Vandersol is born to John and Emily Vandersol

OCTOBER

Harrison Baldwin meets Miss Oliver

Christopher Simmons is born to Caleb and Julia Simmons

-2018-

FEBRUARY 7

Nathaniel (Nate) Sherman Rawlings is born to Tony and Claire Rawlings

WHAT TO DO NOW

LEND IT: Did you enjoy *THE CONSEQUENCES COMPLETE BOX SET*? Do you have a friend who'd enjoy *THE CONSEQUENCES COMPLETE BOX SET*? *THE CONSEQUENCES COMPLETE BOX SET* may be lent one time. Sharing is caring!

RECOMMEND IT: Do you have more than one friend who'd enjoy *THE CONSEQUENCES COMPLETE BOX SET*? Tell them about it! Call, text, post, tweet...your recommendation is the nicest gift you can give to an author!

REVIEW IT: Tell the world. Please go to the retailer where you purchased this, as well as Goodreads, and write a review. Please share your thoughts about *THE CONSEQUENCES COMPLETE BOX SET* on:

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*Barnes & Noble, *THE CONSEQUENCES COMPLETE BOX SET*, Customer Reviews

*iBooks, *THE CONSEQUENCES COMPLETE BOX SET*, Customer Reviews

*Goodreads.com/Aleatha Romig

BOOKS BY NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR ALEATHA ROMIG

**Now that you've been Aleatha'd
Here are More Books by New York Times bestselling author Aleatha
Romig:**

WEB OF SIN:

SECRETS

Book #1

(October 2018)

LIES

Book #2

(December 2018)

Promises

Book #3

(January 2019)

ALEATHA'S LIGHTER ONES:

PLUS ONE

Stand-alone fun, sexy romance

Released May 2017

A SECRET ONE

Fun, sexy novella

Released April 2018

ANOTHER ONE

Stand-alone fun, sexy romance

Releasing May 2018

ONE NIGHT

Stand-alone, sexy contemporary romance
September 2017

THE INFIDELITY SERIES:

BETRAYAL

Book #1

Released October 2015

CUNNING

Book #2

Released January 2016

DECEPTION

Book #3

Released May 2016

ENTRAPMENT

Book #4

Released September 2016

FIDELITY

Book #5

Released January 2017

RESPECT

A stand-alone Infidelity novel

Released January 2018

THE CONSEQUENCES SERIES:

CONSEQUENCES

(Book #1)

Released August 2011

TRUTH

(Book #2)

Released October 2012

CONVICTED

(Book #3)

Released October 2013

REVEALED

(Book #4)

Previously titled: Behind His Eyes Convicted: The Missing Years

Re-released June 2014

BEYOND THE CONSEQUENCES

(Book #5)
Released January 2015
RIPPLES
Released Oct 2017

CONSEQUENCES COMPANION READS:

BEHIND HIS EYES-CONSEQUENCES

Released January 2014

BEHIND HIS EYES-TRUTH

Released March 2014

THE LIGHT DUET:

Published through Thomas and Mercer Amazon exclusive

INTO THE LIGHT

Released 2016

AWAY FROM THE DARK

Released 2016

TALES FROM THE DARK SIDE SERIES:

INSIDIOUS

(All books in this series are stand-alone erotic thrillers)

Released October 2014

DUPLICITY

(Completely unrelated to book #1)

Release TBA

THE VAULT:

UNEXPECTED

Released August 28, 2018

UNCONVENTIONAL

Released individually

January 1, 2018

STAY CONNECTED WITH ALEATHA

Do you love Aleatha's writing? Do you want to know the latest about Infidelity? Consequences? Tales From the Dark Side? and Aleatha's new series coming in 2016 from Thomas and Mercer?

Do you like EXCLUSIVE content (never released scenes, never released excerpts, and more)? Would you like the monthly chance to win prizes (signed books and gift cards)? Then sign up today for Aleatha's monthly newsletter and stay informed on all thing Aleatha Romig.

Sign up for Aleatha's NEWSLETTER: (recipients receive exclusive material and offers)

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You can also find Aleatha@

Check out her blog: <http://www.aleatharomig.com>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aleatha Romig

Aleatha Romig is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author who lives in Indiana. She grew up in Mishawaka, graduated from Indiana University, and is currently living south of Indianapolis. Aleatha has raised three children with her high school sweetheart and husband of nearly thirty years. Before she became a full-time author, she worked days as a dental hygienist and spent her nights writing. Now, when she's not imagining mind-blowing twists and turns, she likes to spend her time with her family and friends. Her other pastimes include reading and creating heroes/anti-heroes who haunt your dreams!

Aleatha released her first novel, CONSEQUENCES, in August of 2011. CONSEQUENCES became a bestselling series with five novels and two companions released from 2011 through 2015. The compelling and epic story of Anthony and Claire Rawlings has graced more than half a million e-readers. Aleatha released the first of her series TALES FROM THE DARK SIDE, INSIDIOUS, in the fall of 2014. These stand-alone thrillers continue Aleatha's twisted style with an increase in heat. In the fall of 2015, Aleatha will move headfirst into the world of dark romance with the release of BETRAYAL, the first of her five-novel INFIDELITY series. More titles are available. Aleatha has entered the traditional world of publishing with Thomas and Mercer with her THE LIGHT series. The first of that series, INTO THE LIGHT, was be published in 2016.

Aleatha is a "Published Author's Network" member of the Romance Writers of America and represented by Danielle Egan-Miller of Browne & Miller Literary Associates.