

The Broken Heart Series
Book One

The

Lies

**That
Save Us**

JL *Redington*

The Lies That Save Us

Book One
Broken Heart Series

By
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I would like to thank my daughters, Nicole, Melody and Stephanie for their support and help with this manuscript. It wouldn't have happened without their belief in me. Thanks to my good friends Judy and Beth, who encouraged me in every step. I send a big hug to my Sister Carol, for her support, belief and constant supply of humor and love. I dedicate this book to these women in my life.

Forget your keys, forget your purse, but never
forget you.

Love. Life. Self Respect.

It's all we need

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Epilogue

Chapter One

It was raining again in Startup, Washington, the kind of rain that came down sideways, sounding like a million tiny hammers on the roof. It did that a lot during a Pacific Northwest spring. Alexa Menetti stood staring out the window, her dark hair hung loosely about her shoulders, deep blue eyes scanning the cloud filled sky. Being from sunny, dry Arizona it always surprised her how so much liquid could pour from the skies. She never tired of it, though, to her it felt cleansing.

Alexa lingered at the window, watching the weather. Her slender five foot seven inch frame silhouetted against the dark clouds and heavy rain.

This particular kind of weather also brought in customers anxious to find a dry seat on a cold,

wet day. The diner was just the spot, perfectly placed on the corner in the middle of town. Today was no different than any other sideways rainy day. While the rain poured outside, the customers poured through the door and the slow day became steadily busy.

The diner was a wonderfully warm place that Alexa had decorated with ideas from years of dining with her father. She'd adopted a fifty's theme with all the memorabilia she could find (and afford). There were bright red seats in each booth, swivel rotating bar stools at the long bar that encompassed nearly the whole length of the diner, reserving some space along the end of the counter for two more booths. There was a life sized cardboard cutout of Elvis at the end of the bar, rusty weathered gas station signs and photos of groups like The Platters and The Everly Brothers on any walls that weren't windows. Large picture window's opened to a quiet little town with quiet little streets, nestled right up against the Mt. Baker/Snoqualmie National Forest. The peace and quiet was absolute, and she loved it. She loved everything about it; her diner, the small town, the rain and the forests. She'd named the diner appropriately 'Alexa's', and she smiled with pride as she watched customers file through the doors.

She was happy to have the customers on these rainy days. She'd purchased the small diner a year ago when she'd come to Startup after reading

about it in an ad from a real estate brokerage. It sounded perfect for what she was looking for; a quiet little out of the way place with one stop light and nice people who enjoyed good old fashioned hometown cooking. A name like Startup, was also perfect for her new beginning. With Thomas and Billy trading off in the kitchen and Tahleah helping with the tables, she had what she needed with the lowest possible overhead.

Alexa paid for the diner with the last of her life insurance money from her father. Not a huge policy, but enough to allow her to become her own boss, and that was her number one priority. Her last boss had turned into her lover, then her fiancé, and then, two days before their wedding, he'd become her father's killer. She vowed never to take another lover, and never to have another boss.

Alexa had been depleted of all emotional strength with the death of her father. The trial and incarceration of her fiancé only served to cement that weakness into place, and she felt she'd never again be the independent woman she'd once been. Her father had taught her to be strong and she'd learned a lot of it just by watching him. Now, however, that was all tucked away somewhere inside her and despite her best efforts, she couldn't find it. Her determination to stay single, alone and free of 'upper management' was the only thing that kept her going.

The one hitch in her plan came into play when the diner purchase came down to talking money. She was twenty thousand dollars short. Twenty thousand dollars and it may as well have been a million, because it didn't matter how she scraped, what loan she applied for, who she talked to, she was still short twenty thousand dollars.

However, mysteriously, two hours after she figured the deal was off, the money showed up at the escrow office with no name on it, except hers. She had no idea who it was from or how it got to the Escrow office. Even the receptionist was unaware. She'd walked some paperwork to back the offices and when she returned to her desk there was an envelope lying there with "Deliver to Alexa Menetti" scribbled across it. The whole incident left her feeling a bit uncomfortable...well, a lot uncomfortable. However, the joy of having her own place and being her own boss completely superseded the discomfort.

Yes, the small, out of the way diner was the perfect place for her to hide, to mend her emotional wounds. It was perfection, and as far as she was concerned, made just for her. It was here in this wonderful place she hoped to heal from the devastating death of her father who was also her best friend in the world. She tried not to put her father's killer into the loss equation, but sometimes she couldn't help it. Hidden from the world, it remained separate, painful and still raw. This loss

was filled with misplaced love, extreme anger and unbelievable hatred, making it all but impossible to move on. Still, it was her father's death she felt more keenly than any of the other losses.

Her father's name was Max, short for Maxwell and in Alexa's thinking it suited him perfectly. Tall, gray haired and lean, he was a handsome man, and she was very proud of that. Oh, she'd have loved him no differently if he'd been a potbellied, balding office worker, but he wasn't. He was an imposing personality, commanding respect every time he entered a room. She was proud of her dad, and she trusted him implicitly.

Alexa and her father did everything together; hiking, camping, fishing, movies, you name it. But their last outing, just before his death, was different. On this occasion they had chosen a nice rocky point to have a picnic and examine some interesting rocks they'd found on a previous hike. Before sitting down to their picnic, she'd wanted to get a picture of him in his hiking garb. They were having a great time, laughing, teasing, just the usual fun. Then, suddenly, it all stopped and he said they were done. He just quit. He quickly started putting things in bags and hurried her to the car.

It was so unlike her dad. It was a piece she'd never been able to figure out, why the sudden end to the day with no explanation, no warning. He absolutely would not talk about it. He just kept

telling her it was nothing; that he was just ready to head home, but for the first time in her life, she didn't believe him. If she hadn't known better, she would think her father was afraid, but he was afraid of nothing, so her perception was obviously wrong.

All of which brought Alexa back to the same spot every time; standing in her diner in Startup, Washington, waiting on customers and wondering why her father had shut down their fun all of a sudden and then never spoke of it again.

She also found herself wondering who her benefactor was that stepped up to close the deal on the diner. She knew no one with that kind of money, and even if she did, how would anyone have known she was buying this place? She had no friends she'd confided in about moving to the Northwest or her plans once she got here. She just packed up and left. So, who was it?

She continued her rounds of the tables and booths, taking orders from drippy customers, making small talk with the regulars. She brought their food out quickly and smiled as she placed it on their tables. Her favorite regular was Keith.

Keith was an elderly man who often couldn't pay for his meal. He was kindly, and so encouraging of her new business venture. It was hard for her to see him order the least expensive thing on the menu, never ordering dessert or extra helpings. Often the only thing he'd order was a cup of coffee. Always, with that cup of coffee she

would bring a plate of food, hot and steaming, fresh from the kitchen. He'd eat what he could and ask for a box, which she would fill herself. However, when she brought him his leftovers, there was always plenty more than what he'd left, including a 'day old' piece of pie or a take home bowl of chowder. She would 'forget' to give him a bill, or forget what he ordered, or how much it was. He never took advantage of her generosity, though. When he could pay, he insisted on paying and when he couldn't pay, he always repaid her kindness with some small repair she needed done at the diner.

Keith was in his late seventies, gray haired, with soft wrinkled skin. He had blue eyes that twinkled when he teased her and filled with concern when he worried over her. He was average height, maybe a bit heavy for his build, but that only served to make him seem more cheerful. He lived alone after the death of his wife a few years prior to Alexa moving to town. He was the first to befriend her when she was new in town and he reminded her of her dad in a lot of ways. Maybe that's why they'd formed the friendship they had. Today he was sitting in his usual spot, the booth far to the back where no one else liked to sit because it was by the kitchen.

"Hey Keith," she said as she approached his table with a big smile. "How're you liking the weather?"

“Oh, I like it just fine,” he said smiling back at her. “Now what’s a pretty little thing like you doing in a place like this?”

“Hey!” she teased back, “this happens to be *my* place, mister.”

They laughed at the old joke and she took his order. Spaghetti this time and she’d add a little extra meat sauce. He knew she would, but he’d act surprised every time she set the plate down.

She picked up the water pitcher and refilled his glass. She smiled at him and setting the filled glass in front of him said she’d be back with his order in a jiffy. Glancing at the window she caught a glimpse of a man staring back at her through the wet pane. She let out a gasp and covered her mouth with her hand, dropping the nearly empty pitcher. The noise of the shattering pitcher filled the room as all heads turned in her direction.

“What is it? Alexa?” Keith struggled to his feet as fast as he could. “What’s wrong?”

She turned her head to answer him and when she turned back to the window the man was gone. She quickly dropped to the floor and began picking up the larger pieces of broken glass. Her face was pale and strained.

“It...it was...it was my dad,” she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. “He was there for just a second, but it was him, I know it.”

She was picking up the glass as fast as she could, fighting back the tears. Keith knew the

history of her dad and fiancé. She'd told him the story one night when the diner had only just opened and there were no customers yet.

“You're working too hard, Alexa,” said Keith as he softly patted her shoulder, “You need to take some time off and get some rest. The mind can play tricks on you when you're as worn out as you are.”

With the excitement over, conversation in the room resumed after a few concerned looks in her direction.

Alexa smiled weakly up at Keith and stammered, “I...I'm okay...it just caught me off guard, that's all. It was probably someone that looked like him. Sorry to cause a panic. I'm fine. Thanks, Keith.”

Tahleah hurried out of the kitchen with broom and dustpan in hand to help sweep up the glass.

“Are you feeling okay?” she asked, searching Alexa's face, “you look like you've seen a ghost.”

Alexa smiled her best smile and stood with help from Keith.

“I'm fine. Just have slippery hands, I guess. Thanks for the help, Tahl.”

She composed herself and straightening her shirt, she walked to the front of the diner and around the end of the counter. There was a new customer at the counter and as she came around the

corner she asked him the same question she felt she'd asked a thousand times that day.

“What can I get you?”

She searched his face waiting for an answer. He perused the menu looking for what he might like to eat, not looking to the lowly waitress. When he finally did look up, his beautiful green eyes gazed at her from under wet and windblown sandy colored hair. Despite his boyishly handsome face, he looked tall. He was just a bit taller than she was, even sitting down...and he continued to stare, and stare and stare.

On any other day she would have seen his attention as flirting and she'd get angry, want to flip him off and end up keeping all that to herself. But today she was feeling a bit off balance and just wanted to take his order and get away from him. He continued to stare at her.

“Sir? Your order?” she said with no small amount of impatience. “Did you want to---“

“Oh...Oh, yeah...sorry,” he said obviously blushing and looking down at the menu. “Uh, yeah, I'll take the number three.”

And that was how this sandy haired stranger came to be called “Ham and Eggs.”

“Can I get you anything else?”

He finished his meal and was slowly and deliberately drinking his now nearly cold coffee.

“Well,” he said, his placid green eyes raising to meet hers, “You could tell me what time your shift is over and where you’d like to go when you’re free.”

This was the same thing he’d said *last* Friday, and the Friday before, and the Friday before that. Over and over again he’d asked her that same question. She could see ears on his head, but were they not working correctly? Was he incapable of hearing with those ears?

For a month now, since Ham and Eggs first appeared at the diner, it was the same exchange. Every Friday she wanted to give him the single digit salute and storm off. However, she had to think what that would look like to her other customers. At the same time, she wondered why this guy made her so angry. Maybe it was because he appeared to look forward to her reaction every time he made his little speech. Maybe it was because he thought so much of himself that he figured she’d just melt and give him whatever he wanted. Oh how that infuriated her. So, this time, instead of just turning and walking into the kitchen, she thought she’d mix it up a little for him.

“Listen... whoever you are... I work 24/7, I don’t eat, I don’t sleep and I don’t ‘go’ anywhere, especially with someone I don’t know. Now, is there anything *else* I can get you?”

The smile never left. His eyes playfully searched her face for what seemed like hours. She hated his confident air.

“No,” he said, finally looking down at the empty plate and cup of cold coffee in front of him, “It was delicious. Thanks.”

Trails of Tabasco Sauce circled the empty plate and, as usual, he’d eaten like he hadn’t seen food in weeks.

Alexa walked to the other end of the counter and began drying glasses. As she placed the first glass in the cart, she felt a sharp poke in her side.

“Ow!”

“What’s the matter with you?” The words came in a whispered hiss from Tahleah’s lips. The girl’s creamy ebony skin, almond shaped black eyes and thick lashes, combined with her mass of shiny black curls, all added up to stunning beauty. Not to mention the perfect body she carried around so gracefully.

“He’s gorgeous! Are you *blind*? And he’s totally into you. What does he need to do, get down on his knees and beg?”

“Even that wouldn’t work. I’m not interested.”

Alexa dropped the glass into the cart, picked up another one and started drying it, much more vigorously than the first.

“You are crazy, girl. If you’re not going for the gold, I’m gonna get me some.” Tahleah smiled

that smile she used when she was on the prowl. She started walking toward the other end of the bar, much like a lion stalking a gazelle. This time, a sandy haired, green-eyed, very well built gazelle.

“Go for it Tahl. I’m sure the two of you will make a darling couple.” Alexa muttered that last part under her breath.

It wasn’t that she abhorred affection. She longed to wrap herself up in the comfort of a man’s arms. She wanted to feel his breath on her face, to feel her blood pumping through her body. What was it like to feel arms around her, wanting her, loving her? Yes, she wanted to be in love, to feel loved. But it wouldn’t work for her, not now. Not ever.

She turned bitterly away as Tahleah finished her prize winning stalk and headed back toward Alexa.

“How’d that work for you?” asked Alexa with a forced smile.

“It didn’t. It’s you he wants and I say go for it. He’s even nicer up close.” Tahleah turned and walked into the kitchen.

Alexa looked down the counter to where Ham and Eggs had devoured his meal. She realized she didn’t even know his name. The fact she was even curious about his name infuriated her. He was the hottest thing she’d seen in her diner since opening. That little factoid also infuriated her. Still, after a month of his weekly invites, she

wondered on this evening how it might feel to actually go out with him.

She quickly pushed the idea from her mind and mentally kicked herself for even thinking of it. It must have shown on her face.

“Ah,” said Tahleah coming back out of the kitchen and pulling off her apron, “he’s finally getting to you, is he? You look completely frustrated and ready to pounce. On him, I assume.” Tahleah laughed lightly at her own joke and pushed against Alexa with her shoulder. “Come on, Alexa. You know you want to.”

“All I know is he’s driving me crazy, and not in the way you think. I don’t know who he is, where he came from or why he showed up here. I want him gone. I want him to stop bothering me. If I had money for a restraining order, I’d get one!”

She plopped the glass into the plastic holder and stopped.

“Hey, Tahl, could you watch the front for me for a minute before you go? I just need to use the bathroom.”

“Sure. But don’t be long...I’ve got a hot date, and I mean hot. Well, not as hot as Ham and Eggs down there, but hot all the same.”

“Thanks.”

Alexa shoved the bathroom door open and stepped quickly to the wash basin. She grabbed a paper towel and ran it under cold water from the tap. Wringing out the excess she dabbed her

forehead and cheeks with the cool water. Glancing in the mirror she stared back at the pathetic woman standing there.

“What’s the matter with you? Get a hold of yourself, Alexa. You’re bigger than this, better than this and smarter than this.”

Throwing the wet towel in the trash, she grabbed another paper towel, dried her face and started for the door. Inside her she knew she could handle this. She tucked the pain carefully back into its spot in the back of her head, reveled in the strength she felt return to her ever vigilant heart, and pulled the bathroom door open. She would survive this if it was the last thing she ever did.

She hurried back to the counter. Ignoring Ham and Eggs pondering his coffee cup, she strode confidently to Tahleah.

“Thanks, Tahl. Have a nice evening, you horn dog.”

Tahleah laughed and nodded toward the gorgeous man still seated at the counter.

“Waste of a perfectly good opportunity, but you’re welcome. And you’re not kidding me for one minute. You didn’t go in the bathroom to pee. We both know that.” Tahleah smiled her sly, all knowing grin and grabbed her coat from the rack. Heading to the door she called out, “See you in the morning.”

That evening, it was Alexa’s turn to close the diner. Everyone had gone home and Ham and

Eggs, who usually came only for breakfast, was just finishing up his dinner. When he was finished, she took his plate, silverware and cup to the sink. He stayed put at the bar, seemingly content to watch her work.

Alexa swept the floor, wiped each table and began wiping down the counter at the opposite end from where he sat. She turned off the lights in the kitchen and then in the dining room, hoping Ham and Eggs would get the hint and leave.

Turning off the last of the dining room lights she looked up to see him coming around the end of the bar. In the dim glow cast from the street light, she could see his determination, his eyes smoldering. It made her want to cry for help, except she didn't exactly feel threatened. Angry was probably more like it. Why was he still here and what was he doing behind her counter?

She wanted to tell him to get out and never come back, to leave her alone, but her voice box rebelled and refused to utter even the smallest sound. Maybe it was the look on his face, the heat in those sexy eyes, the soft beautiful lips, the firm set of his jaw. Any one of those things would have kept her voice tucked silently in her throat, and certainly did.

With strong, confident strides he started toward her, never taking his eyes from her face. He took her wrist in his warm, gentle grip, pulling her

down the length of the counter and around the corner to the restroom hallway.

“Wh..what are you doing? Let go!”

She knew she could have demanded with more force and he would have released her, but the warmth of his touch was weakening her resolve with each step.

He stopped a few feet down the hallway. His eyes softly explored her face as he smiled a kind, inviting smile. He leaned her gently against the wall with her hands pinned over her head. His demeanor was casual, even flirty, but his eyes exposed the fire burning inside him. Alexa’s chest heaved in and out with short, uneven breathes. She tried her best to look angry as she studied his face.

“First of all,” he said as he stared intently into her eyes, “my name is Cayman, like the islands. Last name is Richards. Secondly, you’re beautiful and the most beautiful thing about you is you’re oblivious to the fact. And third...” He stopped talking and moved her head to one side with his own.

“You so very...” he began to softly kiss the contour of her neck.

“Stop it.” The words came in a hoarse whisper.

“...so very...badly...” his kisses traveled ever so slowly up her neck to the bottom of her chin. She slowly raised her head in response.

“I mean it, stop.” She could feel his body pressing against her; feel his heart racing in time with her own, sending her blood coursing through her veins.

“...so very badly...need...” The smooth, silky tone of his voice made her heart race.

“I...I said stop it. Stop,” she moaned, helpless in his grip.

He brushed her ear with his lips, his ragged breathing hot against her, revealing his own fight with restraint. With his face leaning against hers he whispered, “...need to be...kissed.”

Pulling slightly away from her, he faced her, just inches from her mouth.

She could feel her knees about to buckle and kept them locked through sheer will. Her mouth was dry with fear and longing. She attempted to regain her composure while trying to glare furiously.

“Let me go.”

“As you wish,” he spoke tenderly, releasing her hands and stepping back.

She lifted her arm to slap his face, but he caught it mid-air.

He smiled and leaned forward, kissing her on the forehead.

“You just let me know when you’re ready for that kiss.”

With that he turned and walked confidently from the hallway and out the door. He strode from the diner, not once looking back.

She stood for a brief moment watching him go, hating his arrogance, loving his confidence, confused by both. Swallowing hard, trying to force moisture into her mouth, she slowly slid down the wall collapsing in a pile on the floor. The sobs came from her in great gasps, uncontrolled as she lay curled up in with her legs to her chest. She was unable to stop the rush of emotion and could feel her heart breaking all over again. Breaking for the loss of her father, the loss of her love, the loss of the lock she'd placed on it. She couldn't stop the tears or stem the tide of passion that swept through her, hidden for so long.

“No...no. I said no. Not ever again. I...said...no.”

Chapter Two

She woke the next morning in her flat over the diner, her head pounding from the cheap vodka she'd used the night before to drown her pain. She moved her head slowly and...what was that wonderful smell? They had to be trying a new recipe in the kitchen, and it must be amazing to make it all the way into her bedroom.

She heard a pot clang in the kitchen, her kitchen, in her flat. She sat straight up in bed and immediately moaned grabbing her head to keep it from exploding right off her shoulders. Once the room stopped spinning, she stood and made her way to her closet. Pulling her robe off the hanger she quickly shoved her arms through the sleeves. Wrapping the front around her and tying the sash,

she moved slowly toward the door, one hand holding her throbbing head.

She was pretty sure whoever it was in her kitchen wasn't there to hurt her, unless modern thieves and cutthroats cooked you breakfast before they robbed you blind. She slowly and quietly pulled her trusty bat from beneath her bed just in case. Peeking around the corner and finding no one in the hallway, Alexa walked slowly into the kitchen. She gasped in surprise.

Standing in her kitchen, wearing her apron and completely enjoying himself, was Ham and...er...Cayman. *Cayman?*

"What are you doing in my kitchen? In my *house*? How did you get in here?" She could feel her anger rising faster than it should.

"Good morning, sunshine!" he said, way too cheerfully. "Your friend Tahleah..."

"I should have known," she muttered. "I can't wait to get my hands on her."

"...let me in and I even brought all my own groceries." He smiled proudly.

"Get out." She said firmly, her head pounding.

"You don't look like you feel so good," he said, "you need some coffee. Sit down and I'll get you some."

"I SAID GET OUT," she yelled as loudly as her head would allow. Even at the lower decibels it

was enough to make her drop the bat and cradle her head in pain.

Cayman was instantly at her side, holding her up.

“You better sit dow- whoa! What have you been drinking?” he said, waving his hand in front of his face.

Suddenly she realized what she must look like and that only served to feed the fire raging in her head. She was angry, but clearly needed his help to the small kitchen table.

He set her gingerly in the chair and sat down across from her, looking worried.

“Are you okay?” he got up and poured her a cup of hot steaming heaven. At least that’s what it smelled like when he placed it in front of her. She could have sat there all day just smelling it.

“Who *are* you?” she looked up from the coffee and into those now familiar green eyes.

“And where did you learn to cook food that smells like that?”

“Shall we see if it tastes as good as it smells, M’lady?” he said standing and heading to the stove.

Alexa’s eyes honed in on his backside as he sauntered into the kitchen. Nice jeans, nice gluts, nice... “No, I really mean it. Who are you?” She still cradled her head in her hands, trying to keep it from falling off her neck.

He finished dishing up breakfast and walked back to the table with a plate for both of them.

Setting them down, he slid into his seat. Leaning forward with elbows on the table, he looked at her for a moment.

“I’m a friend, Alexa. I was passing through Startup and stopped for some breakfast and there you were. Hadn’t planned on returning to your diner, but then I saw you and I was hooked. You really dress up this town, you piqued my interest. So, here I am.”

His eyes were penetrating hers, clear to the back of her head. He made her want to forget every promise she’d ever made to herself. She wanted him to pick her up and carry her into the bedroom--. She shook her head, forcing her thoughts back to the present.

“I don’t need friends, Cayman. I have my diner and my friends there, and I don’t need anything else.” She tried very hard to sound convincing.

“You’re wrong, Alexa. I’m sticking around for a while, so you may as well deal with it. I’m going to keep asking you out until you accept. Maybe after one date we’ll decide we’re not interested in each other after all. But I’m not leaving until I know that for sure, and right now, I don’t know for sure.”

“Well, I can answer that little question for you right now.” She said her voice a pinch more sarcastic than she’d planned. “We’re not compatible, we’re not ever going out and there’s no

need for you to ‘stick around’, especially on my account. You’re free to leave. I give you my permission, as if you need it.”

The hurt on his face made her stomach clench. He looked down at his food, the smile fading slowly from his face, laid his napkin beside the plate and stood up. He looked around the room, walked to the door where his coat was hanging on the knob, picked it up, looked at her and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

Alexa hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath since her little speech and with the closing of the door she let all the air out of her lungs. She wanted to run after him and tell him to come back, that she was sorry to be so rude. The look on his face killed her, and she had the gnawing fear she would never see him again. What had she done? Was it the right thing?

“It was the right thing for me,” she said firmly to herself. She slowly picked up the plates of untouched food and carried them to the sink, scraping the uneaten food into the disposal. As she turned it on and watched it disappear down the drain, she said again, “it was the right thing for me.”

“You did WHAT?” Tahleah was clearly stunned.

“Listen, Tahleah,” she said with warning in her voice, “don’t ever do that again. Don’t EVER let a complete stranger into my house, or anyone for that matter without my permission. Do you hear me? That had better never happen again.”

“He may be gone for good now,” said Tahleah, ignoring her. She was clearly exasperated.

“I can only hope so,” Alexa looked down the counter to the spot where Cayman usually sat. It was breakfast, and his chair at the counter sat empty.

“Oh for crying out loud Alexa! What were you thinking! How could you let a fish like that get away? I saw how you looked at him. I thought if I let him in there you might just acknowledge those feelings and give it a go. I can’t believe you chased him away.”

“Believe it. I feel great.”

“No you don’t. You can’t even decide if you did the right thing. It’s on your face plain as day.” Tahleah stomped off in a huff.

Alexa wondered how Tahleah could know her so well. Still, there was a clear void inside her and no amount of stomping, fussing or being hard to live with was going to change it.

Just then Keith came through the door and headed to his seat. He stopped when he saw her and said, “Why, Alexa, what’s wrong? You look like you lost your best friend.”

“Oh good grief! Have you been talking to Tahleah?”

She grabbed the coffee pot and a menu and followed Keith around to his booth.

“Well, no, did she quit?” he asked, obviously confused.

“No, she didn’t quit, but I told that Ham and Eggs guy to buzz off and leave me alone and now she thinks I missed out on the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“And you’re not so sure she isn’t right.” Keith smiled, turning his coffee cup over.

“No, I’m absolutely sure I was right and---“

“Don’t play those games with me, young lady,” said Keith, “I’ve been around too long, and don’t have that much time left that I would enjoy the game now. You liked him, and you know it.”

Alexa dropped dejectedly down in the seat across from Keith. “Did I really blow it? I can’t fall for anyone again, Keith. I really can’t.”

Keith chuckled and looked down at his empty coffee cup.

“How old are you? Twenty-six? Twenty-eight max? Don’t you think that’s kind of a long time to be alone? You may have to do that ‘kissing-the-frogs’ thing for a while, but you don’t have to sleep with every frog you kiss, and you don’t have to expect every one of them to turn into a prince. But you could at least enjoy yourself along the way. I need some coffee.”

Alexa sighed and reached across the table to pour the steaming coffee into his cup.

“I can’t, Keith. I mean it; and I don’t *want* to. I don’t want to deal with another human being in my life.”

“Yes, you do.” He said with determination.

“How do you--How could you even remotely know that?”

Keith looked at her across the table. He picked up his coffee cup and took a slow sip, then put the cup back down on the table and stared into the dark liquid.

“I know that because there isn’t a human being on the face of this earth that doesn’t need to be loved.” He looked into her eyes. “You’re not betraying the memory of your father, nor are you giving in to a life you swore you’d never want. Be *human* Alexa; live again. Square your shoulders, take a deep breath and give it a go. It’s a ride you can stop at any time.”

She set the menu down in front of him and squeezed his hand.

“Thanks.”

“For what? Free advice from an old codger? What’s that worth?”

Alexa laughed and headed back to the front of the diner. She walked around the end of the counter and put the coffee pot back on the warmer.

She was standing with her back to the front door when the bells sent out the warning that

someone had come in. It was him, she knew it was him and she couldn't bring herself to look.

She felt the warmth of his body move in behind her, leaning into her.

"Go out with me, just once," he whispered in her ear. "If you're miserable I won't ask you again. Promise."

Alexa softly put down the coffee cup and paused briefly. She turned to him, placing her hands on his magnificent chest.

"I'm sorry I've been so rude. You made that incredible breakfast for me and I didn't even so much as thank you. I'm...I'm truly sorry." Her eyes reached deeply into his, searching...questioning.

"Yes, I'll go out with you. Just don't be expecting anything more than a date."

"Ha!" laughed Cayman, "Are you questioning my most noble intentions?"

His laughter was music and it made her smile just to hear it.

"Yes. Yes I am. Now move it and let me get to work." She pushed him gently to the side and turned to pick up a menu. Cayman walked around the end of the bar and sat down in his usual place.

"I'll have the #3 with coffee."

That evening Cayman picked her up and they drove to the 'famous' ponds to throw a few

rocks. Alexa laughed when she heard where they were going and what they would be doing.

“I have to warn you,” she said playfully, “that was always my favorite date with my dad and I have a pretty good record at rock skipping.”

“Not as good as mine, I’ll wager,” he grinned back. “I’ve got the record for my high school of eight.”

“Eight kids? That’s not a very big high school. Where’d you grow up, anyway?” she teased, knowing full well what he’d meant.

“Very funny. Eight skips. That’s good and you know it.”

She smiled slyly at him, “Eight? Really? Well, that’s small stuff for me. My record is ten.”

He pulled into the gravel parking lot and parked the car.

“No way! You couldn’t have gotten ten. That is impossible. No way.”

He got out and came around to her door and opened it. As she stood up his hand went to the back of her neck and he pulled her into a kiss. He slid his hand down her back, to her waist, pulling her whole body into his.

Alexa wanted to run, she wanted to run so far no one would find her, but that kiss... She couldn’t deny the warmth it sent rushing through her body.

“You’ve got to stop doing that,” she said, “or I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

“I’ll take full responsibility for any actions you want to blame on me.”

With her last ounce of emotional strength, she moved away, her hand lingering in his.

The ponds were nestled amongst the beautiful fir trees native to the area. There was a small beach all the way around them with trees and brush lining the beach. Popular for camping and hiking in the height of the summer, the ponds drew people from all over the area. Not many outsiders used them, as it was pretty much a secret kept by the locals. It was beautiful and refreshing; a wonderful place to come and spend time thinking...but not tonight.

The two of them threw rocks until their arms felt like they were going to fall off, both competing against the other, trying for the longest skip. Alexa won with five.

“Wow. I must really be out of practice. And it looks like you are, too.” She laughed at their feeble scores.

They sat down on a couple lawn chairs Cayman had in his trunk. Everything was still wet from the day’s rain and if they hadn’t had chairs they’d have been soaked in minutes. No rain fell while they threw their rocks and chatted with each other, though, which made the evening even better.

“So, where did you grow up?” Alexa tipped her head and looked at Cayman.

“Down the road about two miles, in Sultan.”

Cayman responded

“Really? Where have you been for this past year? I’ve never seen you around before.”

“Working, mostly, out of the country.”

“And what do you do for work?” Now it was her turn for a piqued curiosity.

“I’m a spy for the government,” his eyes twinkled with the tease.

“Really? Like for the FBI?”

“I’d tell you but—“

“Then you’d have to kill me. Yeah, I’ve heard that one before.”

“Dang it, I thought I had you with that one. You’re not from Washington, are you?” Cayman asked her, smiling.

“Nope. I grew up in Page, Arizona,” she said proudly.

“Page? I’ve never been there. What’s it like?”

Alexa thought for a moment. “It’s beautiful. Not quite in the desert, not quite in the mountains. It was the perfect mix. I loved it there and all the places my dad and I would go. It seemed like there was something new to learn anywhere we went. We never had to travel far from home because there was so much to see right there.

She hadn’t realized how incredibly homesick she was until she started talking about the area. She missed her home, and her life there.

They sat in silence taking in the beauty of the pond. The sun's rays were softly streaming through the breaks in the clouds and dancing on the surface of the water.

A movement to the left of them caught her eye and Alexa glanced in that direction. She saw someone standing on the shore, hands in his pockets, staring directly at her. He must have seen her look at him because he suddenly turned and disappeared into the bushes.

"What the--" Alexa was up and running toward the spot with Cayman in hot pursuit.

"Alexa! What are you doing? Hey! There are cougars up here, you know." He was gaining on her and finally grabbed her arm, pulling her to a stop. "Where are you going? Was the date that bad?"

Alexa was in no mood for a joke. She tried to be calm but instead she began yelling at Cayman.

"It was my dad! I saw him again. He was here at the pond. I know it was him."

"You didn't say your dad lived here. Does he live in Startup?"

"No, actually," she said taking a deep breath and trying not to sound sarcastic, "according to my records, my dad has been dead for going on two years."

Cayman let go and stared at her like she'd lost her mind.

"You've seen him before today?"

“Yes, outside the diner, it was the same day you showed up.” Alexa was looking in the direction she’d seen him standing, nervous, anxious. “He was standing outside the window, in the rain staring at me. It was him, I know it was him! It was him.”

She nearly whispered the last words of the sentence as her arms fell limply to her side and she leaned hopelessly against Cayman’s chest, sobbing.

“I’m so sorry, Alexa. Someone is playing a cruel joke... You have to understand that.” Then tenderly he asked her, “You have to think about it. Why would your dad do something like this, Alexa? From what you’ve said he was a devoted father, not someone who would pull some cruel hoax on his only daughter.”

She pulled back and looked up at his face.

“I’ve thought this through a hundred times since I first saw him that night.” Looking down she wiped her eyes and then looked up at Cayman. “I know he’s gone. I saw his casket, watched them put him in the ground. It was a closed casket service because he’d been shot in the face...by my then fiancé.”

“Oh, Alexa, I’m so sorry. No wonder you were so distant. I had no idea. I wouldn’t have come after you like I did if I’d known.” His arms wrapped a little tighter around her. She could feel his sadness mix with her own and felt the warmth of knowing someone understood her pain and loss.

“Of course you didn’t. How could you? It’s not your fault. It’s not my fault. It’s just the way it is, and *that* was my dad.” She pulled slowly away, her hands lying softly on his chest. “It was my dad that night in the diner and it was my dad just now.”

Cayman hesitated for a minute before speaking.

“Let me look into this, Alexa.

It’s...well...it’s kind of what I do. Let me make some calls and see what I can find out. I’ll take you home now, it’s almost dark.”

Alexa hadn’t even noticed the dimming evening light. Together they walked back to the car, arms around each other. As he opened the car door, Alexa turned to him.

“I had a great time, Cayman, really. I appreciate your kindness and your willingness to help me out. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, little lady,” he said in his best John Wayne voice. It was a horrible impression, but it made her smile.

They rode most of the way home in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. They were approaching the diner when she turned to him.

“Would you walk me up? I’m feeling a little shaken right now.”

“I’d be happy to.”

Cayman parked on the empty street beside the diner. They walked around the back and she put the key in the lock and they went in. As they

climbed the stairs inside the back of the diner, they heard footsteps above them. He touched her arm softly and they stopped.

“Does anyone live up here besides you?” he asked quietly, his muscles tense.

“No,” she whispered looking up the stairwell, “no one.”

“Wait here,” he said softly. “I’ll come back for you. Don’t move.”

He tiptoed up the remaining stairs. She heard a shout and then scuffling. Before she could move to a safer position a man came running down and pushed her out of his way, sending her flying down the stairs to the landing below. The last thing she saw was the concerned face of Cayman repeating her name as he knelt over her before everything went black.

“Alexa! Alexa! Can you hear me? Alexa...

Chapter Three

Alexa woke in her bedroom with a throat that felt like gravel and a head full of marbles. She moaned softly.

She gingerly turned to see her easy chair from the other room had been brought in beside her bed and Cayman lay stretched out in it, sleeping soundly. Sunshine poured through the window causing sharp lightning strikes in her head. She closed her eyes quickly and another moan escaped while the room spun out of control.

Cayman woke with a start and leaned forward, his face filled with concern.

“Alexa,” he whispered softly, “I’m here. How are you feeling?”

“Light...” she mumbled, her own voice pounding in her head, “hurts.”

Cayman rose quickly and closed the blinds, hurrying back to her side.

“Mmmm,” she mumbled. “Better.”

She opened her eyes to see Tahleah now standing on the other side of her bed.

“Hey girlfriend,” Tahleah said quietly. “How you feeling?”

“Good,” Alexa lied. Then she smiled weakly. “Okay, not good, but I’m here, anyway.”

The room was beginning to stabilize and she opened her eyes a little more. She reached up and touched her head, felt the bandage wrapped around it.

“What happened? I remember someone running down the stairs and...that’s about it, I think.”

Cayman moved closer to her.

“You took a nasty spill with the help of some guy trying to get into your place.”

She tried to sit up, to digest what he’d just said to her. As her shoulders moved, it felt like a sword passed through her head and she let out a small cry, which hurt her head all the more.

“Oh, no you don’t,” said Cayman lowering her head gently to her pillow. “You need to stay down and stay still for a few days. You cracked your skull and you have a pretty good concussion.”

“But, why would anyone want to get into my house?” her voice was still a whisper. “You’ve seen it; I don’t have anything anyone would want. *I*

don't even want most of it." Her throat was dry and scratchy, making her whispered voice sound like gravel.

Tahleah smiled at the comment and Cayman stifled a laugh.

"She's feeling better by the minute, I can tell," chuckled Tahleah.

"Hey..." she mumbled, looking at the arms on her Pajamas. "How'd I get..."

Cayman lifted his hands in defense.

"It wasn't me. I was in the other room.

Tahleah got you into your night clothes when the Doc left." Cayman was grinning. "I kept offering to help, though, just being thoughtful, you know." His cute boyish face was apparent even through the pain.

Alexa smiled weakly. "Don't make me laugh, even a grin hurts, I think. I feel tired."

"Well, Doc Barnes said when you woke up, we were supposed to keep you awake. I could sing to you if you like. My mother always told me I could wake the dead with my singing."

Tahleah covered her mouth with her hand to smother the laugh.

"I said don't make me laugh." Alexa smiled and winced at the same time.

"Sorry."

"Just a word of warning for you," said Tahleah, patting her hand, "He hasn't left your side

since this whole thing happened. I think you're in for some mothering."

Cayman smiled and looked down at Alexa.

"You got that right. And you've tasted my cooking, so you know you're in for a treat."

"Uh, actually I haven't," she whispered. "I, um, dumped it all down the sink."

"What?? You *dumped* my delicious breakfast down the sink? Why, that's...that's...that's not just insulting, it's...it's food blasphemy! You *dumped* my hard work down the sink. Well, the only other alternative now is to cook double and make you eat it all and you're going to want to, mark my words. I can't even fathom you doing that. Really."

Cayman walked from the room shaking his head and muttering.

"He's a good one, Alexa," grinned Tahleah. "You'd best hang on with both hands."

"Yeah, maybe," she looked to the door of her room where Cayman made his exit, "maybe."

A couple days later Keith came up to see her with a bouquet of fresh picked wildflowers. She was still feeling the pain in her head but she was so happy to see him. He visited with her for only a few minutes then left so she could rest. It was the highlight of her day. She didn't realize how much she'd missed him.

The days passed slowly as Alexa gradually gained her strength back. The State Police came to

her home and interviewed her, but she couldn't tell them much. She hadn't seen the man's face, didn't recognize his clothes and hadn't seen any suspicious cars parked outside that night. Cayman didn't help much either, though he gave a pretty good description to a sketch artist. Alexa didn't recognize the sketch as anyone she knew, and Cayman didn't know him either. They were left with pretty much nothing to go on.

It had been about a week since the incident and Alexa was quickly becoming stir crazy. Cayman decided maybe he needed to give her a little space and told her Tahleah would be coming to stay with her in the evenings.

Alexa frowned, but didn't know what to say.

"What?" asked Cayman, "What is it?"

"I don't want to impose...I mean, you've been great to stay here and you probably have a life of your own to take care of. It's just..."

"Just what? Remember Alexa, I'm a man. You kind of have to spell things out for me."

Alexa smiled and took a deep breath.

"It's just that, I feel safer with you here. I...I just feel safer, that's all. But I don't want you to feel like you have to stay. I mean, I'm sure Tahleah and I will manage just fine. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

Cayman smiled.

"No, really, I get it. You need me." He smiled slyly.

“Oh, don’t go getting a big head about it or I’ll change my mind.” She faked a frown and threw a pillow at him.

He easily knocked the pillow away.

“I’d be happy to stay. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t getting tired of all my wonderful company and delicious meals.”

“Whatever.” Alexa gave him a flat stare and smiled.

Tahleah was taking great care of the diner. All the regulars, especially Keith, were asking after Alexa and wanted to know all the details, of which she had none to give them.

Alexa got up and walked to her only bookshelf. She reached to the top and was struggling to get a large picture album down.

“Whoa!” called Cayman as he hurried to her side, “what do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m fine, Cayman, really. I’ve been thinking about that last outing with my dad and how weird it was. I was going to look at some pictures I took and see if I could get anything from them.”

“Well, ask, would you? You’re supposed to be taking it easy for another three days, and I’m not letting you out early for good behavior.” He smiled down at her as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead. “I was so worried when I couldn’t wake you up. Next time, don’t bump your head, and stay awake when I call your name.”

Alexa smiled, rolling her eyes and giving him the ‘oh brother’ look. She rested her head on his chest, over the album now squished between them.

“I’m fine. I keep telling you that. I’m not dizzy anymore, the headaches are gone and so is the light sensitivity, all the things Dr. Barnes said to watch for.”

They walked to the couch and sat down. She opened the book and fought back the tears that formed as she saw the images of her dad, playful, laughing and having fun. She missed him, so much it made her chest feel empty, like her heart had been buried with him. She missed the time they spent together.

“Hey,” said Cayman softly lifting her chin, “you ok? We don’t have to do this now.”

“I know, but I need to,” she said as she looked back to the pages and wiped her eye. “I think the last outing we went on together is...” she turned the pages looking for the right photos, “here. Right here.”

She pointed to a picture of her father. He was tall, grey haired with an air of confidence. His love of his daughter was obvious in every picture. He looked at her with adoring eyes, smiling into the camera. He was having fun.

“Look at all these pictures. We were having a good time, you can see it on his face.”

She turned back through the photos pointing out different shots of the two of them, some together, some individual.

“Look at his face in these pictures.”

She went back to the original photo.

“Now,” she said, pointing to the last picture. “Look at this one. Look at how his eyes are looking over me, past the camera. You can see the set of his mouth, too, like he’s trying to convince me he’s having fun, but clearly, something is wrong.”

Cayman took the book and flipped back and forth through the pictures, comparing them.

“Yes, I see that,” he said, “but couldn’t he just have seen an animal or something simple? It looks like you’re out in the desert. Where was the picture taken?”

“We were in Arizona, not far from where we lived. And, no, he wasn’t looking at something simple. Because as soon as I snapped that shot, he bent over and started picking up our picnic things and stuffing them in bags as fast as he could. He only said, ‘we’re going’ and that was it. I kept asking him what was wrong, what he saw, why we weren’t staying longer. He just told me not to question him and to get in the car. He never talked to me like that, Cayman, ever.”

She hadn’t noticed the tears running down her face until she felt his thumbs gently wipe them away. She laid her head on his chest and welcomed the warmth of his arms around her. She sat back

up, gazing into his beautiful green eyes, mirroring the feeling in hers. Cayman drew closer, holding her face in his hands. He lightly brushed her lips with his, as if in preface to a passion held back.

His lips were warm and inviting. She felt a hunger she hadn't felt in a very long time as their kisses grew passionate, hot and wanting. She needed to feel loved again, she needed to feel the passion that was stolen from her, needed to know that passion was still there.

Her lips clung to his, her mouth wanting more and more. She pulled his shirt up, found his well muscled back. His hands wandered to the soft skin beneath her shirt---when suddenly his kisses abruptly stopped. Pulling himself from her embrace, he quickly stood beside the couch looking down at her. She could feel the heat from his eyes. He took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair, as he softly whistled a labored sigh.

“I can't, Alexa, not like this.”

She sat up slowly, heart pumping, trying to control her breathing.

“Alexa, you're beautiful, you're smart, you're incredibly sexy, but right now, you're vulnerable, and I can't take advantage of that. I want you to want me when you're free of this, when you're well and you can know we are right for each other. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

Alexa stood and put her arms around his waist, hugging him tightly.

“Thank-you,” she whispered. “Thank-you.”

“I want you, Alexa. You need to know that. It’s not that I don’t want you because I do. I...well... then changing the subject he said, “How are you feeling? Do you feel strong enough to go for a short walk? Get some fresh air?”

His arms were wrapped around her waist. They stood in the sunlight now streaming through the window.

Alexa accepted the change of subject, glad one of them had the good sense to keep the entanglements to a minimum.

“That sounds nice. I’ll get my shoes and coat.”

It was a beautiful day, with sun sparkling off the still wet leaves. They walked along hand in hand and enjoyed the quiet afternoon.

“What you did back there, at my flat,” she began, “thank you, again. I’ve never felt so uncertain, so alone, and so crazy. People must think I’m nuts to keep seeing my father, and have no proof of it. Sometimes I think I’m losing my mind. But I know what I saw, I know it.”

Cayman’s demeanor was pensive, quiet.

“Sometimes the right thing to do just plain sucks.” He laughed. “You said the pictures were taken in Arizona. Do you think you could find the place again?”

“I...I suppose so, what are you thinking?” she asked.

“I’m thinking we should take a road trip. Drive down to Arizona and find the place the picture was taken, see if we can find anything that might give you some answers. How would you feel about that?”

Her mind raced, fear mixed with excitement, mingled with uncertainty. She could feel the wheels spinning, her mind racing to find a reasonable excuse to stay and at the same time, a reason to go.

“I don’t know if I could leave the diner. I haven’t been out of Startup for a year. I...” Alexa stopped. She stood in the middle of the sidewalk staring up at Cayman, who had taken another step and turned back to her.

“Listen, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked that of you. We’ll figure out another way.”

“You believe me,” she whispered staring at him.

She hadn’t had anyone break that trust barrier for more than a year. *He actually believed her.* She felt emotionally naked, afraid of this man, but still wanting more of him. She was wonderfully frightened, and then questioned if her reasoning made any sense at all.

“Yes, I do believe you. The guy who was trying to break into your flat wasn’t a figment of your imagination. I’m almost certain he was

looking for those pictures. I know that sounds kind of lame, but it's the only thing that makes any sense."

Alexa took a deep breath, soaking in the sunshine and the day. She smiled.

"I know Tahleah will take great care of the diner, and she can hire someone to help her out until I can get back. I still have the house in Page, I...I just couldn't sell it, so we could stay there."

"So, you'll go? You want to go?" Cayman asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Let's go to Arizona."

In a couple days the arrangements had been made for Tahleah to hire someone to help with the diner and for her to take over the managing of it while Alexa was away. Keith said he'd keep an eye on things, as well, and help out where he could. With all that settled they packed Caymans SUV and were on the road in a matter of hours.

Cayman asked how Alexa came to own a diner in Startup, Washington, and she explained about finding the ad and driving up to check it out.

"You drove all the way up here from Arizona, by yourself?" he asked incredulously.

"Uh, last time I checked I was an adult, you know," she said smiling at him.

"Oh, well, yeah, I get that. It's just a really long way from Arizona. You could have had a friend drive up with you or something. Road trips

are way more fun when there's more than one person."

Cayman smiled at her and her stomach just about flew right out the window.

"It was a really difficult time in my life, you know?" she said gaining control again of her stomach. "I...I really needed some alone time, and road trips can be good for that, as well. It was a great trip, and I had lots of time to think, grieve and move on."

Cayman shook his head. He had a faint smile, like he knew exactly what she was talking about.

They'd driven for a couple hours, but silent for only a few minutes, when she heard Cayman break into her thoughts.

"Hey, you still there?" He was smiling at her with a look of concern.

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I just get lost in thinking sometimes."

"You know," said Cayman with a smile, "I know nothing about you. How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"Me? Oh, I was an only child, which made losing my dad even harder," she said with a scowl.

"What? No siblings?" He was truly astounded. "I can't even imagine not having any brothers. You don't talk about your mother, were your parents divorced?"

“No, my mom died in childbirth, so I never knew her. My dad talked about her a lot and there were always pictures around the house. He never married again so it was always just the two of us, plus our housekeeper, Gina. What about you?”

“Well,” he said with a smile, “I have two great younger brothers, but don’t ever tell them I told you they were great. They’d never let me forget it. My folks are both still living and all of us boys are grown and living on our own now. I stay with Mom and Dad when I have a few days off, like now. You’ll have to meet them. They’re really something.”

“Sounds like you are all very close. That must be nice.” Alexa looked out the window as they sped down the highway. She hadn’t meant for that to sound so wistful, but it did, and it felt wistful. She often wondered how it would feel to be part of a large family.

“Hey,” said Cayman softly, “we’re going to find out what this is all about. We’ll figure it out.” Cayman’s window was down and the rush of fresh air into the car felt wonderful.

“I know,” Alexa smiled back, “I just wish I could know right now. It’s so hard to wait, to wade through it all---

Suddenly there was the sound of screeching tires coming from behind as a car sped around them, swerving into place alongside the SUV.

Everything happened at once as Cayman pulled a gun from the back of his jeans and began firing at the car beside them.

“Get down!”

They fired back as Cayman took the back of Alexa’s head and forced her down out of harm’s way.

He hit the brakes and the other car sped by, disappearing around the corner ahead.

Cayman quickly pulled over, holding his upper left arm as blood began dripping from the wound.

Chapter Four

Alexa sat up when the car stopped and gasped at the sight of blood running down Cayman's arm.

"You've been shot!"

She could hear the fear in her own voice, feel it welling up inside her.

She quickly grabbed her shirt, ripping the buttons off the front as she tore it open and stripped it off. She worked her way around the console and reached across him, so intent on his injury she was completely unaware she was placing her breasts right in front of his face as she frantically wrapped the cloth around his arm to slow the bleeding. Her hands trembled as she worked, adrenaline coursed through her veins.

Once finished she worked her way back over the console to the passenger seat and leaned her back against the dashboard. Alexa's rapid breathing caused her now completely exposed chest to rise and fall rapidly, making her red lacey bra move with each labored breath. She leaned toward Cayman and checked his pupils.

"Wow..." he said smiling faintly. "I wonder...if... if they could... come back and...and shoot the other arm; drastically...improved the view...around here."

Suddenly she realized she was sitting there with no shirt. She let out a cry of embarrassment and grabbed her coat, pulling it on quickly and zipping it up.

"I...I...I'm sorry," she began, "I just – we need to get you to a hospital. I'll drive. Do you feel strong enough to walk around the car to the passenger side? I could help you into the back seat if you need me to." The whole thought of the shooters coming back served only to escalate her anxiety level and raise her desire to get the car moving again.

Cayman was still smiling.

"I vote we wait...and see if they come back and...shoot my other arm. But if they do, you'll have to...use that coat," he pointed weakly to the coat she was wearing, not lifting his hand, "and I want you...to come around this side," he said, nodding his head toward the driver's side, "so you

have to...to...lean over me like you did only...only on the other side. I think it may have...have...made the bleeding worse, though...getting the heart...pumping...like that.”

“Oh, would you stop?”

Still feeling the heat of her own embarrassment, she forced herself to focus on the situation at hand.

“You’re really bleeding badly, Cayman. I need to get you to a hospital. Where are we? How far is the next town?”

Cayman didn’t answer. She could see him drifting out of consciousness, getting weaker by the minute. She quickly jumped out of the car and as gently as she could, pulled him over to the passenger seat. This was no small feat considering they were separate seats and he was a lot bigger than she was. When she saw the blood still soaking his arm, the adrenalin kicked in and with one final pull he was on the passenger side. She buckled him in, ran around to the driver’s side, and slid into the seat. She pulled out her phone, pushed a button as she gunned the engine, pulling out onto the road and said, “Find me the nearest hospital.”

The antiseptic voice answered calmly, “There is a hospital 6.25 miles from where you are. Would you like directions to it?”

“Yes! Of course I want-?”

Realizing she was arguing with a cell phone, she said simply “Yes.”

She sped down the road using the directions from the phone and nervously glancing back and forth from the road to Cayman, making sure he was still breathing. The bleeding had not stopped and she was worried he was losing too much blood too fast.

In minutes they were at the hospital. She pulled into the emergency entrance, tires squealing as she came to a stop. She ran into the ER yelling that her friend had been shot, was bleeding badly and she needed help. Instantly there were emergency personnel rushing to the car with a gurney between them.

A male nurse was asking her how it happened and as she began to tell him how the incident unfolded, so did her nerves. She began to cry and couldn't seem to get any words out.

"Miss, let's get you sat down. You're in shock. Don't worry about your friend. He's in good hands and we'll take care of him. His injuries are not life threatening. Now, deep breaths, that's right. Just sit back and keep breathing. You'll be okay."

The gurney with Cayman aboard sailed through the doors into the hallway. Alexa and the nurse were left sitting in the sterile waiting room. The breathing helped and she could finally talk again, explaining what had happened through worry about Cayman and her own frazzled nerves.

“I’m going to have to call the police, it’s standard procedure with injuries of this kind. You understand?”

The nurse touched her shoulder as he spoke.

“Yes, yes, I understand,” she said, her mind coming back into focus.

“Will you be okay here while I make the call?”

“I want to be with my friend. I don’t want to wait out here. I need to be with him.”

“No, Miss. I’m sorry. You’ll have to wait here, but I will tell them to come and get you as soon as he is stabilized. Try not to worry. Like I said, he’s in good hands in there, the best in the county.”

As the nurse walked away, Alexa was finally able to think through the events of the afternoon. She remembered the car coming up alongside the SUV. But, what had happened next? It was Cayman. He’d reached behind him and pulled out a gun! A *gun*? It was a smooth reflex, like he’d done it a hundred times. Who was this man? He didn’t even know what was going to happen and he was already drawing his gun when the car came up alongside. He fired the first shot!

Alexa’s head began to spin. She didn’t know what to think, or what to believe. Cayman shows up on the exact same day as the sightings of her father. Why? Was the man she saw really her

father? Was he some plant Cayman was using to manipulate her?

The most important thing she'd learned from her dad growing up was to listen to her instincts. She knew in order to do that she had to calm herself down. She had to think and think clearly. Why was this happening? What happened that day out in the desert with her father? What did he see? Did he see anything?

The more questions she asked, the fewer answers she had and she definitely wasn't calming down. She wondered if she could truly trust anyone. She could feel the paranoia climbing up her throat and into her brain. Paranoia was not logical thinking. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, reaching inside herself to find that place of clear, logical processing. What had the nurse said? Breathe, deep breaths, relax. She sat back in the hard chair, leaned her head against the wall and forced her muscles to relax, first the toes and then on up the legs. She remembered the procedure from a relaxation video she used occasionally. She continued breathing deeply. It was helping.

The biggest question she had to ask herself right now was could she trust Cayman? Why did he have a gun? Raised in a houseful of boys...makes sense he would hunt and fish. Did she have any other choice but to trust him? No. She didn't. She couldn't steal his car and leave him stuck....here...wherever 'here' was.

She picked up her phone, “What city am I currently in?”

The sterile voice responded, “You are in Ellensburg, Washington.”

Alexa stood and walked to the doors leading into the ER from outside. She looked to the parking lot where Cayman’s SUV was parked and wondered how far she could get before she was pulled over. She wanted to run, anywhere, somewhere, nowhere, to be in another place, any place other than here, even if she had to walk. She put her hand on the door to push it open when she heard a voice behind her.

“Miss?” It was the nurse that had been sitting with her. “He’s ready to see you now.”

She quickly took her hand off the door and turned. She smiled at the nurse and let him lead the way to Cayman, or, whoever he was.

Alexa was led into his room where he lay partially awake, and very drugged.

“He’ll have surgery to remove the bullet from his arm today. He’d lost enough blood that he’ll need a transfusion and because of that they’ll keep him here for a couple of days. Just until they’re sure he’s strong enough to go home. Push the red button on his bed controls if you need anything.”

Alexa thanked him and watched him walk out the door. She sat by Cayman, watching him with different eyes than she had before. She didn’t

know how long she had been staring at him when he moaned and moved his head on the pillow.

“Alexa...” he whispered. “Alexa...”

She leaned over him and a flood of emotion filled her.

“I’m here, Cayman, I’m here.”

His eyes opened slowly and he smiled weakly up at her.

“I wasn’t...sure...you’d still be here...when I woke up.” He said hoarsely.

“Why would you think that?” she asked.

“Well,” he swallowed and looked around for some water.

Alexa grabbed the plastic pitcher and filled the small cup with water. She put it to his mouth and held his head with her other hand. Once he’d had enough he nodded. She gently laid his head back down on the pillow.

“I thought you’d think it was pretty crazy that I had a gun on me, and that I actually used it.”

She looked deeply into his eyes as if searching for...something.

“Truthfully, I almost left.” She stood up and looked away. “I mean, who are you? Where did you learn to shoot like that and why were you carrying a gun in the first place?”

Cayman closed his eyes for a moment, heaved a sigh and opened them again.

His voice was still dry and hoarse, but sounded a little stronger.

“I usually always carry a gun, and one of the few times I wasn’t carrying was the night that guy pushed you down the stairs. We did a lot of hunting and target shooting as a kid and when we got older my dad told us to always keep a concealed weapons permit. So, I always have. I’m a good shot because my dad taught me how to shoot.”

He looked at her face, hopeful. At that moment, she felt the same old feelings returning. She was comfortable with him, she could trust him to always protect her, that he *was* being honest with her. She bent over and kissed him gently.

“I believe you,” she whispered. “Now go to sleep and get better so we can get back on the road.”

He smiled as he shut his eyes and fell quickly under the control of the pain pills. He was out in seconds.

The next couple days, Alexa spent watching over Cayman, shopping for a new shirt (which made Cayman smile again) and getting supplies for the trip to Arizona. She thought a bit comical they were actually only two and a half hours from home. She’d called Tahleah, but didn’t give her any details of the shooting. She just said they liked the area and decided to spend a couple of days. She knew it would upset Keith if he knew what had happened and he’d probably have been in his car, on his way down before she even hung up the phone.

Cayman’s surgery went well, as expected. It wasn’t really a surgery at all, but a local anesthetic

to remove the bullet and then a couple of stitches to close the wound.

There were more visits from the State Police once Cayman was available for interviews, although there really wasn't much to tell. He said he saw the gun come out the window of the other vehicle and immediately drew his gun and started firing. The car didn't return to see if they had killed him, they just disappeared. Neither Alexa nor Cayman got a good look at the people in the car, as he was looking at the gun barrel and she had her head on her lap.

Alexa kept quiet, though she knew this wasn't the right version of the story. Why would he lie about who fired first? *Was* he lying? Was he just not remembering it right? Cayman didn't strike her as the type to 'forget' something as important as who fired first. Something was just not right. Alexa decided to wait, she didn't know why, but now didn't seem like the time to argue with him. She needed to keep an eye on him, and she would do just that.

They finally released Cayman and as they wheeled him to the car, he started to direct them to the driver's side.

"Uh, no." said Alexa flatly.

"Hey, it's my car and I'm fine. You're not going to mother me the whole way, are you?" he said sounding a bit defeated.

“Yes I am, and I’ll bet if I called your mother she would agree with me. Don’t ask me how I know that, I just do.”

“No doubt she’d agree with you.” He said dismally.

The nurse pushing the wheel chair agreed it was probably not the best idea for a patient full of pain killers to be doing a lot of driving.

They pulled away from the hospital with a list of things to watch for, medications to give and warnings about over-doing. But both of them were happy to be on the road again and heading to Arizona.

“You still packin’ heat?” Alexa said with a laugh she couldn’t stifle. “I’ve always wanted to say that.” She was talking through her laughter.

Cayman just shook his head. “Movies make that oh so much more glamorous than it really is. And I’m finding when you get shot in real life, it hurts way more than they show on film.”

Chapter Five

“Well,” said Cayman, teasing, “you’re not as bad a driver as everyone says you are!”

“Very funny. I’m sure you’ve been talking to so many people, too.”

“You never know,” said Cayman, “I could’ve been.”

“Yes, and I’m so not a private person, so all that information would be freely out there. And no one in Startup has ever seen me drive -- why am I even discussing this with you?”

Cayman laughed.

“I have no idea, but it was worth the look on your face, for sure.”

They rode in silence for a moment when Alexa remembered their conversation about his siblings.

“So, what are your brother’s names? Are you the oldest? Youngest? Middle?”

“Yeah, I’m the older, more experienced brother,” he grinned. “Then there’s Patrick, and bringing up the rear is Samuel...Sam. I think we turned out to be pretty good people.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” grinned Alexa. “I think you’re a bit forward.”

Cayman took playful offense at the statement.

“Forward? *Forward?* Considering it took me three weeks to grab you and kiss your neck, I would say I was certainly a gentleman. What did you want, a year? Too bad if you did. All that beauty, just wasting away; I think I was definitely a prince.”

“Oh, now that’s funny!” laughed Alexa, “a prince, really. That’s how you see yourself? A prince?”

“Cayman reached across his chest with his good hand and gently stroked her cheek.

“You know, if I wasn’t so wounded from protecting you, I’d pull this car over right now and let you have your way with me.”

Alexa leaned into his hand and said, “Yes, and who’s driving the vehicle? I would be the one pulling over, and as charming as you are, that’s not going to happen. We have work to do. And speaking of work, what are we doing? What are we

going to do once we get to Arizona, assuming I can even remember the place Dad and I went to.”

“We’re going to figure this out, that’s what we’re going to do.”

Just then Alexa’s cell phone rang. It was Tahleah, talking excitedly. Alexa immediately went pale. She pulled to the side of the road and stopped.

“Whoa, slow down! Say it again, slower this time.”

From the way Alexa was pressing the phone to her ear, it was apparent her friend had slowed down and she was able to digest what she was being told.

“Thanks, Tahleah. Thanks for letting me know. Keep me posted. Thanks for cleaning it all up. Sorry you had to do that.”

She hung up the phone and turned to Cayman.

“What’s happened?” he asked with concern.

“My place was broken into. They don’t know when, but it looked to be shortly after we left. It was pretty trashed, but nothing was broken. It would seem whoever was in there was particularly interested in my book shelf, which is where I kept my photo album- the one we brought with us.”

Cayman sat back and sighed.

“There’s something in that album we’re not seeing. We need to scrutinize every photo tonight when we stop.”

Time flew by like the mile markers on the side of the highway. Cayman was feeling pretty tired by the time they pulled off the road for some lunch. They decided they would go as far as Boise and stop there for the evening so he could rest. Alexa helped Cayman get settled into his room. She put his shave kit items on the counter in the bathroom so he could easily get the things he needed.

“I may need a sponge bath tonight, you know. The doctor said no showers for a few days.” He smiled at her invitingly.

“In your dreams, gun boy. You play with bullets and you’re going to get hurt. Think about that next time. And sponge bath with your good arm.”

Cayman crossed the room to where Alexa sat and pulled her to her feet with his good arm.

“What?” she asked smiling up at him.

“What do you mean ‘what’?” he grinned. “You’ve been amazing, and I need you to know that.” He lifted her chin with his hand and kissed her gently.

“Cayman, I-”

“I know, I know,” he said as he sat down at the table. “I get it, Alexa, but sometimes I just need to kiss you. No strings attached, just a kiss.”

If he only knew what those kisses did to her, he would probably have used it much more to his advantage. Her stomach lurched each time she

looked into his eyes or followed the curve of his mouth. She loved the strength of his arms and the security of being wrapped up in them. She often found herself aching to feel them around her. She loved how hard her heart beat whenever he held her, how her head spun out of control with each touch.

But there was something there she'd never experienced before. He seemed to have a real respect for her, for what she needed the relationship to be. Even with the conflicted feelings about him that plagued her, she still felt safe with him.

She refused to tell him any of these feelings right now. She needed more time to figure him out, so she just smiled, and promptly changed the subject.

"You knew they were following us, didn't you?" she asked pointedly, smile fading a little.

"What makes you say that?" he said, clearly evading the question.

"You knew...you were pulling your gun out before they even got up alongside us. You knew. How did you know, and how did you know you were going to need a gun? Cayman, I asked myself so many questions while I sat in the ER. I need to know what you know. Back at the pond, where we saw my dad, you said you'd 'make some calls'. What calls did you make?"

"Nothing earth shattering, I can tell you that. I know some people in law enforcement because I've grown up in the area, that's all. I just thought

I'd give them a call and see if they'd seen any strangers hanging around. When they came up empty there was nothing to tell you. That's it. That's the sum of my phone calls."

"I want to believe that, Cayman, I really do. But I can't afford to take anything at face value anymore. My life was devastated when my father died, and all the events surrounding his death. My heart can't take any more than it's already taken. I feel like you're holding something back. I don't know what exactly, I can't *imagine* what, but something. I know it."

"I've told you everything I can," said Cayman softly, "you have to trust me now. You are just going to have to trust me."

"What does that mean?" Alexa could feel her voice rising and the fear bubbling into her head, permeating her brain. "I have to trust you but who are you? Why should I trust you? I don't even know you."

"Yes, Alexa, you do know me. I've been with you for weeks now. You know exactly who I am and you know *me*. *ME*, Alexa. You know everything you need to know about me."

Alexa calmly stood and picked up the album. Cayman's eyes followed the album as she moved from the table.

"What are you doing?" he asked caustiously.

"I'm going to my room," she said. "I'm tired and I want to go to sleep."

“Alexa, I’m sorry, I wish I had more to tell you, really. Please, sit down. Let’s look at some photos and see what we can figure out.”

Alexa couldn’t look at him. With each accusation she made regarding his character and her mistrust it was clear she hurt him more. She wanted to stay, but there was something not right about this, about him. At the same time she thought that, she wondered how she could possibly suspect this man who so clearly cared for her, and she for him. What *was* she doing?

She walked to the door, and he didn’t follow her. The look in his eyes, begging her to stay, was all that needed to be said. She opened the door, closing it behind her and walked across the hall to her own room. She unlocked her room door and pushed it open, reaching up to turn on the light at the same time.

Suddenly she was pulled inside as she screamed, “CAYMAN!” A hand went over her mouth and someone grabbed at the album knocking it out of her grasp. The album hit the floor and the hand left her mouth as her assailant reached for it. She turned quickly to face him, kneeing him soundly in the groin. She heard him grunt as she pushed him over into the dresser and grabbed the album, racing out the door.

“Cayman! Cayman!” Before she could get another scream out, Cayman was out his door and reaching for Alexa.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

She was completely out of breath from the struggle.

“A man...in my room,” she gasped, “tried to get the album. He’s still in there!”

Cayman reached behind him and under his shirt with that same fluid motion he had in the car.

“Go!” he said pointing, “My room. Go in the bathroom and lock the door. Here’s my phone, call 911 and don’t come out unless I tell you.” She grabbed the phone and rushed to the bathroom.

He was already walking stealthily to the door of her room. Using the wall as a shield he peeked around the corner into the room. Alexa bolted through his door and into the bathroom locking the door behind her. Her hands shook so bad she could barely dial the phone. Somehow she managed to dial 911.

The calm voice on the other end was in clear contrast to Alexa’s terror.

“9-1-1; what is your emergency?”

“There’s a man in my room. He tried... he tried...”

“Ma’am, where are you?”

“I’m at the Family Inn on Main, room 135. Please hurry.”

“Yes, Ma’am. There is a patrol car on the way right now. Are you in a safe place?”

“Yes.”

“Stay on the line with me until the officers get to you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Did he harm you, do you need an ambulance?”

“No...no, I’m fine. But my friend went in there.”

“He went into your room?”

“Yes!”

“Stay where you are. You should be able to hear the sirens soon.”

It wasn’t longer than three minutes, but it seemed like hours, when she finally heard the sirens blaring. After what seemed like more hours she could hear Cayman in the hallway talking with the police. She heard footsteps and heard Cayman again, this time outside the bathroom door.

“Alexa, it’s okay. You can open the door.”

She turned the knob and pulled the door slowly open. When she saw Cayman she flew into his arms. He gingerly moved his sore arm out of the way and grabbed her with his good one, wrapping it tightly around her.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

The concern in Cayman’s eyes made her want to cry. No one cared for her like that for a very long time.

“No, no, I’m fine, a little shaken up, but fine.” She said as she swallowed, blinking back tears.

There were more questions from the officers, more inquiries regarding his first encounter, and now this one. They had to go to the police station, fill out the required forms and endure even more questions. By the end of the whole ordeal Alexa was exhausted. She just wanted to go to bed, but with that thought the terror returned.

It was a few hours before dawn when they entered the motel the following morning. Cayman walked her to her door and saw the look on her face.

“Why don’t you stay with me, Alexa?”

“I--I--”

“I’ll sleep on the couch, I promise. I know you don’t want to be alone tonight and I can’t blame you. I’d feel safer if I had you where I could see you.” Cayman put his arm around her and held her close.

“Let me grab a few things,” she said, “and...thank you.”

She opened the door to her room. Cayman took her arm gently and pulled her back.

“I’ll have a look around first, if you’re okay with that,” he said.

She nodded and he went through the door first, turned on the light and found it just as it was left. Alexa went in and grabbed a few things for the night and quickly left the room without looking back.

They sat together on the couch for a few minutes looking through the pictures again, hoping

to find something that would give them a clue to her father's murder and to whatever it was others were looking for in this album.

Fatigue was quickly overtaking them both, and Cayman leaned his head back against the couch. He could feel her breathing slow and then move to the steady rhythm of one who was sound asleep. He gently stroked her hair, wondering how long he could keep his lie from her. He hadn't planned on Alexa being who she was. He hadn't planned on her beauty, on her strength and her heart. He wondered how this whole thing would play out. He carefully pulled his gun from the back of his jeans and stared at it. He sighed and tapped the barrel against the side of his head, thinking. He replaced the gun, let his eyelids close and he, too, fell asleep.

Chapter Six

Alexa woke and wiped the drool from her mouth. She slowly moved her head and her cheek hit a button, a shirt button. With horror she realized she'd slobbered all down the front of Cayman's shirt. He was sitting back and grinning from ear to ear.

"We finally slept together. I gotta ask...was it all you'd hoped?"

Alexa blushed and gasped when she got a good look at his shirt.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry...I can't believe I did that...I-"

"Well, if you'll give me a minute, I'll get up and put on a clean shirt. Actually, I'll get up and shower, unless you want first dibs. Of course, we

could conserve water and shower together..." His voice trailed off as he laughed at his own joke.

"You really think you're funny, don't you?" she chided him.

"I do what I can, you know...it's a gift."

She slapped his good arm and stood up, stretching.

"You first, I'll wait." She walked to the still made bed and pulled down the covers. Crawling into the comfort of the clean blankets she pulled them over her and snuggled into crisp clean sheets. Cayman walked to the side of the bed and sat down. She smiled up at him. He moved the hair out of her face with his finger and bent down, softly kissing her cheek.

"It's such a corner I feel myself in," she said, "I'm so grateful to have you with me, but still wondering who you are."

"You know who I am. I keep telling you who I am, and you're incredibly beautiful."

"Go take your shower," she said smiling.

"It'll have to be a cold one, that's for sure."

She watched him gather up clean clothes, shave kit, shoes and socks. He walked into the bathroom, closed the door and soon she heard the water running.

Alexa lay in bed, feeling no less confused than she had before. There was a part of her that was falling for this man, in a guarded, not-so-sure sort of way. He was kind, protective and she felt

she could count on him. That meant something, right? She tried to reason with herself, or was it justifying her position? It seemed to her that if she ever figured out if it was reasoning or justification, she'd have her answer about him.

She had her turn in the shower and as she finished dressing she gathered her things from the bathroom counter. She opened the door and with her first step from the bathroom she stopped. Cayman's incredible cologne filled her senses. Oh the things that smell made her want to do, but she couldn't and she knew it. Biting her lip for support she squared her shoulders and with great difficulty reminded herself of the reason for this trip. Answers. She needed answers about her dad...and Cayman.

Alexa turned from the hallway and found Cayman sitting patiently on the side of the bed with his bag already packed. Their eyes met and sent the familiar stirring through her she'd so come to enjoy. It was a moment that seemed to last an eternity until he spoke.

“Ready?”

It was clear by the look in his eye, as he took in the whole of her standing before him, he was having the same conversation with himself that she was. He had a lot more on his mind than *'ready'*, in fact, she wanted to ask him *'for what?'* but she dared not go down that road. Instead she just cleared her throat and nodded her head.

They went together over to her room, which still gave her the creeps, and Cayman waited with her while she grabbed what few things she'd left there and hurried out the door.

They walked to the motel restaurant for breakfast. It was about nine-thirty and they were anxious to get back on the road, even though they were both tired. They figured it wouldn't be a long day, as their night's sleep had been pretty short. Still, they wanted to get at least a few miles of road behind them.

They ordered their breakfast and discussed the night. Cayman asked her again if she would recognize the man that attacked her if she saw him. She laughed and said, "No, but my knee probably would."

Cayman's laughter filled the restaurant and brought that flip flop feeling back to the pit of her stomach. She forced herself not to give in to the ache that made her want to give herself to him. She watched him as his laughter died to a smile. He looked at her with such warmth. *Is it real? Is he real?* Tearing her eyes from his, she turned her head and gazed out the window and gasped.

He was there again, her father, there in the window. Cayman was on his feet in an instant.

"What? What is it?"

She'd jumped up and was already heading to the door, but her father was gone. Had he even

been there? Was this really someone impersonating him? How could he look so much like him?"

Cayman knew immediately who she was looking for. She could see the flashes of lightning in his eyes as he spoke.

"I don't know who is doing this, Alexa, but we'll find out. And he better be prepared when we do. No one has a right to play this kind of sick joke on anyone. Especially, you, after all you've been through. Come back inside." He put his arm around her waist and gently walked her back into the restaurant.

She wasn't crying this time, she wasn't hysterical. She was thinking, mulling over the whole incident in her mind, all the incidents where she'd seen her father. *Every* time she'd seen him, Cayman was with her. He had to be connected to this, but how? Maybe he didn't have anything to do with any of it, but that seemed like a long shot.

Cayman helped her into her seat and went to the other side of the booth and sat down. He stared at her as she looked out the window lost in thought.

"This isn't the reaction I'd expect from you." His voice floated into her head.

"Hmm?" she mumbled absently.

"I said, this isn't the reaction I'd expect from you."

"Oh, yeah," she said, coming to the present, "I, uh, was just thinking. I mean, why do you suppose he all of a sudden shows up in my life? I

mean, why now? And he's obviously following us. I just have a million questions and no answers."

Cayman looked down at his breakfast and then back up to Alexa.

"You're amazing. After all you've been through you can still break this down and look at it piece by piece. Who can do that? I can't even do that. I just want to crack his head."

He sat there, staring at her with a softness that made her want to jump into his arms. His concern for her made him all the more difficult to resist. She'd almost let herself jump in that ring a couple times, and with all that had happened since he appeared on the scene, she couldn't allow herself the luxury of falling for him.

She forced herself to eat, only because with food in her mouth she didn't have to say much. It gave her time to sort through the events of the past few days, the proximity of Cayman to all those events and the appearance of her father, as well. Thinking through just that much of it made what food she had managed to get down come right back up her throat.

"I think I'm done," she said with a smile. "Are you ready to go?"

She hadn't been looking at him, but when she looked up he was studying her face.

"You're sure doing a lot of thinking over there," he said, trying to sound light.

“Yeah,” she said casually, “guess I was just hungrier than I thought.”

“Oh, sure,” he said with a laugh, “you ate all of two bites. You must have been famished.”

She was standing up and heading to the register as he spoke. He threw the tip down on the table and quickly caught up to her. He paid for the meal and they headed for the car. The effect of the pain killers gone, they decided he could try driving for a while and see how it went. He backed out of the parking space and headed for the freeway. It wasn't long until they were at freeway speed. They would try to make it most of the way through Utah, at least as far south as they could.

“You know, you don't need to pay for every meal,” she said turning to look at him.

“And why not?” he said most gallantly, “Isn't that the chivalrous thing to do?”

His grin was incredible, causing her insides to tighten in a most deliciously uncomfortable way.

“It's not about that,” she said, forcing her concentration, “it's about sharing the expenses. This trip isn't your responsibility, it's mine.”

In that instant in the restaurant, Alexa had changed. She was no longer the weak, fearful woman he had put in the car back in Startup. She was now a woman on a mission.

“What happened back there?” asked Cayman curiously. He was exiting the freeway,

opting for back roads with less visibility than a freeway.

“What do you mean? You know what happened. I saw my father again, or someone that looked like him.”

They had been on the road for about an hour, talking for some of the time, sometimes lost in thought. Now they sat in silence and finally Alexa spoke.

“Where’s the map?”

“In the glove box, why?”

“Because at the next major city, you’re going to drop me off at a car rental place and I’m going on by myself.”

Cayman came unglued.

“No you’re not!” he said firmly. “Alexa, there are people after you, after that album. You can’t do this by yourself. You need someone with you!”

“And how would you know I can’t do it by myself?” she asked turning to him. “I made it through my father’s murder, the trial and conviction of my fiancé, the purchase of the diner, a whole butt load of heavy duty issues. What makes you think I can’t do this myself?”

“Well, for one thing, you don’t have a gun, and if you did, could you even shoot straight?”

The car was in the middle of nowhere and Alexa said, “Pull over.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.” She was determined.

Cayman pulled the car over. Alexa got out and opened the passenger door. She fumbled around in her overnight bag until her hand hit the cold steel of her small hand gun. Grabbing a pop can from the garbage bag in the car she set it firmly on a rock off the side of the road. Crossing to the other side of the road she lifted the pistol she’d just pulled from her bag, aimed and shot the pop can off the rock. She crossed back to where the can lay on the ground, picked it up and placed it back on the rock, the bullet hole facing her. She went to the other side of the road again and shot the can just as she had before. The pinging sound of the bullet hitting the can resounded through the canyon. She crossed the road one more time, picked up the can and took it to Cayman, who was standing dumbfounded outside the driver’s side of the car. She handed him the can.

There was just one bullet hole in the can. She’d shot the can twice in the same spot. He was impressed.

“Wow-” he said, stopping abruptly as he looked up and into the barrel of her gun. “What-- what are you doing?”

Her arms were straight, both hands on the gun in a perfect shooting stance.

“Do you really think my father would raise me the way he did, and not teach his little girl to shoot?” she looked at him blankly and continued.

“I don’t know who you are, or why you’re determined to help me, but you’re not kidding me. Either you *tell* me what your interest is in this right now, or I put a bullet in your knee cap and leave you on the side of the road.”

The dynamic between the two of them had just made a serious left turn. This was going to be a problem, and Cayman knew it.

Chapter Seven

“You had your gun out before that car ever got to the side of us. You knew something was going to happen. How did you know?” The gun was still pointed at Cayman, her voice was filled with suppressed anger.

“Geez, Alexa! It all happened so fast I’m not sure what I know.”

“DON’T LIE TO ME!” she screamed, her rage focused and intense. She had reached the limit of her willingness to follow blindly. She needed answers and she needed them now.

“I don’t remember! I just saw this car coming up behind us kind of fast, and my gut instinct told me I needed to be ready. What do you want me to say? I don’t know what you want from me!”

She stared into his eyes, frozen in time as the thoughts rolled around in her head. With a hard sigh she finally released the trigger on the gun and dropped her hands to her sides. She turned away from him and trudged across the road, looking over the dry plain that surrounded them. She could feel the familiar sting of tears forming in her eyes, but refused to let them fall. She only knew she would never be anyone's stooge again, but she had no clue how to protect herself from that. She was frustrated, angry and confused, right back where she was before Cayman ever came into her life.

"Why did you come to my diner?" she muttered to herself. "Why couldn't you and the rest of the world just leave me alone?"

Cayman was right behind her.

"I was hungry, but I can't speak for the rest of the world."

The situation was so ridiculous it made her smile. She turned and looked at him and saw the same confusion and uncertainty she felt, and for some stupid reason, that made her laugh. Still holding the gun, she placed the back of her hand against her mouth and laughed. Soon she was bent over, trying to suppress it, but it just felt so *good* to laugh. She realized she hadn't laughed this hard since before her father died. How had she lived without laughter?

"First you're going to shoot me, and now you think I'm funny?" he asked, incredulously. He

ran his hands through his thick head of hair and said, “You are one strange woman...one beautiful, strange woman.”

She finally regained control of herself and took some deep breaths.

“Sorry...but *man* that felt good!”

They walked back to the car and he continued.

“Maybe you need some meds, I mean, who does that? Really.”

They slid into their seats and Cayman started the car and looked at her.

“What?” she said defensively.

“What? That’s all you have to say is ‘what’?”

“Oh, I forgot this part, ‘shut up and drive.’”

That made her laugh all over again and she spent the next few miles trying to explain what was so funny.

It really did sound crazy, but somehow Alexa felt relieved. It was like a million pounds of mistrust and fear had been erased. For the first time in more than a year she felt in control of herself and her situation, free of the benefactor in her diner purchase, free of the death of her father, free of the loss of her fiancé, and free of the hatred of him. She felt free, and as she rolled down the window and the wind rushed through her hair, for the first time, she felt she was going to find out the truth about the death of her father.

Cayman was still a piece in the puzzle. There was a secret he was keeping and she knew it. Knowing she was aware of that added to her feeling of peace, as she could watch him, be aware of him and figure out which side he was on. She wondered what sides there were to be on, but now she knew she would figure it out and finally put all of this to rest. Finally, it was her life again, and she was definitely the one in charge.

The remainder of the drive to Salt Lake City was spent discussing whether or not Alexa would continue on by herself. Cayman was right, she knew he would follow her, and what was the point of driving two cars?

“So, are you ever going to tell me what you really do for a living?” she asked, gazing out her passenger window. The landscape was flat with hills in the distance. Though some might say it was boring, she thought it beautiful, like Arizona.

“Oh, I guess we never did quite get to that,” he said. “I work with insurance companies, big insurance companies. I’m an insurance investigator. I have to investigate claims all over the world, which means I have to go on site to the different companies we insure and take a look at the problem. Then I report my findings back to the company and they either pay or deny the claim.”

“Ah, I see. So *you’re* the one I would blame for a rejected claim.”

“Yup. Fortunately for me, no one knows I’m the bad guy, so I don’t get any flack. That goes to the company.”

They were quiet for a few miles and finally Alexa asked, “What did your dad do for a living?”

“Farmer,” said Cayman. “We have a ranch in Sultan. We used to have livestock, we had horses, about seventy head of cattle, if I remember correctly, and Dad grew hay and lots of wheat that he sold every year. It was a fun place to grow up.”

“Sounds wonderful,” she replied with a smile.

“You never told me what your dad did for a living,” he said.

“My dad?” she began, “Oh, he was in the export business. At least that’s how he explained it to me. He’d find buyers overseas for people that had large items to sell here in the states, or big lots of items and then he’d hook the two of them up and they’d make the sale. He traveled a lot with that because a lot of the items went to China or Africa. Some of it went to the Middle East, but that wasn’t very often. He didn’t like going there much.”

They chatted the rest of the way, stopping for lunch and enjoyed a walk in the sunshine for a bit before returning to the road. It was a couple more hours before they reached Salt Lake City. The

perfect stopping place, they had to decide where they wanted to stay the night.

“I don’t care where we stay, but no more main floor rooms!” she smiled at him. A nice cheap two story motel would be fine with her.

“Well, now that I know you’re not a helpless innocent, I can feel a little better about agreeing to you staying in your own room.”

“Oh, like you’ve had to babysit me? Is that what you’re saying?” she teased.

Cayman smiled and shook his head, knowing any answer at this point, would be the wrong one.

They pulled up in front of the Grand America Hotel in downtown Salt Lake.

“They must pay you pretty well to afford to stay here,” she laughed, “I’m a Motel 6 kinda girl.”

“Well, there’s more security at a hotel like this,” he said glancing up the side of the building. “I definitely feel safer here.”

They entered the lobby, complete with marbled floors and giant columns. Approaching the counter Cayman asked about a room.

The woman at the counter checked the availability for the night.

“You need one night?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Cayman.

“Are you here for Conference?” she asked them.

“Conference? No, we’re just passing through,” said Cayman. “What conference is going on here? You probably have a few.”

“Oh, no, just one this weekend, but we fill up pretty fast. It’s the LDS Church General Conference. On these weekends we fill up months in advance and rarely have anything available until Monday night. But, I do have one suite with two bedrooms if that would work for you. I’m sorry I don’t have anything smaller at this time.”

Cayman booked the room and they headed to the top floor. It was an amazing view from the windows set around the outside of the room. Mountains surrounded them with soft rolling sides and craggy tops. They had very few trees, these mountains, but they were green and huge. The gentle contours of the mountainside were somehow relaxing, comforting. Alexa had to ask herself how a mountainside could be comforting, but it felt true.

The room was amazing. Very elegant, each room had its own bathroom with a central lounging area. Alexa was impressed, though she looked a little sad.

“What’s with the sad face?” joked Cayman.

“Oh, nothing,” she lied, “it’s nothing.”

He crossed to where she stood and put his good arm around her waist and pulled her to him.

“I’m assuming it’s still okay if I do this?” he said with a smile.

She nodded and rested her head on his shoulder.

“So...why the sad face, then?”

She sighed and pulled away from him, walking to the window and looking out to those beautiful mountains.

“It’s just...” she began, “I’d always thought this was the type of room I’d have on my honeymoon. Instead, I was home, alone. More alone than I’d ever felt in my life. Just seeing this room brings all that back to me. I’d thought I was finally past it all.”

Cayman came up behind her and gently turned her to him.

“I’m sorry, Alexa. I didn’t think about that.” He lifted her chin and kissed her softly. His hands moved to the small of her back and he pulled her into a kiss. She melted at his touch, her mouth hungrily accepted his offering. She could feel the muscles in his back, strong and firm. The kisses became more passionate, more heated and he lifted her with his good arm and carried her to the bed. She had both arms around his neck, the heat inside her made roiling and burning. Their lips never parted as he laid her gently down and then moved in beside her. She pulled him to her, wanting him, needing him, her body burning with a fire she’d thought had long died.

There was a knock at the door and everything stopped.

Cayman jumped to his feet and motioned for Alexa to go to the bathroom as he pulled his gun from the back of his jeans. She smirked at him and pulled her own gun from her backpack. He called to the door.

“Who is it?”

“Room service, sir,” came the reply.

“Sorry, wrong room,” said Cayman. “I didn’t order room service.”

“It comes with the price of the room, sir.”

“Hang on, I’ll be right with you.”

Cayman quickly dialed the front desk.

“This is room 783,” he said softly, “have you sent room service up to my door?”

“Yes sir, we did,” came the perky reply.

“You have a complimentary fruit basket included in the price of the room. The employee’s name is Anthony and he should be at your door now.”

“Thanks.” Cayman hung up the phone.

“Would have been nice to know when I paid for the room.”

They both put their guns away and Cayman opened the door. It was a beautiful basket, and the employee set it on the table and waited.

Cayman handed him a ten dollar bill and he smiled.

“Thank you sir,” he said as he exited the room, shutting the door behind him.

“Hmmm,” he said, inspecting the basket, “A complimentary, ten dollar fruit basket. Really. I sure had other things in mind.” He said flatly.

Alexa had already gone into her room. She shut the door behind her, breathing hard, trying to calm the fire that still burned inside her. She couldn’t go out there now, she couldn’t let this happen, *wouldn’t* let this happen.

There was a soft knock at her door and she opened it to see Cayman, his good hand holding on to the top of the door jam, shirt pulled up, revealing a well muscled stomach.

“Killed the mood?” he asked with a half smile.

“Uh, yeah. Just need to clear my head,” she said looking nervously around the room.

“Yeah, I think I need to clear more than that,” he said with a sigh. “I’m sorry Alexa. I won’t let that happen again.”

“I know, I’m sorry, too, and I won’t either. Please, Cayman, I won’t get involved right now. I won’t go there. I have to think clearly. It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t even have let it start.”

“I know. We’ll take care of business before we...take care of business.” His charming grin widened and Alexa couldn’t help but smile.

“Sounds like a plan.” She couldn’t bring herself to look at those eyes, not right now, not yet. She hadn’t completely doused that fire and she

knew it would take very little to start it raging again. If he just didn't smell so good.

"I...I'm going to relax for a while before dinner, I...need--"

"I know, I won't bother you. Let me know when you're ready to eat."

Alexa shut the door and leaned against it with a sigh. She felt like *she* needed that cold shower now. Instead she reached for her backpack and pulled out her cell phone. She dialed a number and waited for the other party to pick up.

"Hi, Keith, it's me. I need a favor."

"Hey pretty lady! How is the trip going?"

"It's...it's good. I mean, it's going. But, about that favor..."

"Name it, Alexa." Keith was always there, he was her rock. Someone she could always count on.

"I need you to look up a farming family in Sultan and tell me what you find out."

"What do you *need* me to find out? What am I looking for?"

"I don't know," she said, her heart pounding in her chest. "Just anything that seems strange or out of place. Can you do that for me?"

"Give me the name and I'm on it," said Keith firmly.

"It's Richards. I don't know a first name, but there can't be too many there that farm or ranch. His property sounds like it's a pretty big spread.

Let me know, okay? But don't call me, I'll call you back in a couple of days."

"What's going on, Alexa? You sound on edge. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, yes, everything is fine. Really. Please, just find out about that family and let me know. Don't forget, I'll call you back, don't try to call me."

"Okay, you got it."

There was an audible click on the other end of the line and she knew Keith had hung up. She bit her lip and wondered if she was doing the right thing. Her dad had always told her to pay attention to her gut feeling. He'd been very clear about not being afraid to check someone out if she felt it was necessary. Well, she definitely felt it was necessary.

Chapter Eight

They dined in the amazing restaurant at the hotel and Alexa savored every bite. She and Cayman decided they would spend the evening after dinner reviewing the photo album page by page until they found the answers they were looking for.

Arriving back at their rooms, Alexa grabbed the album and a can of soda from the fridge.

“You want anything to drink?” she called to Cayman.

“No, I’m good. Let’s get this thing started.”

They sat for what felt like hours, pouring over each page, looking at every detail of the pictures of Alexa and her father’s last outing together. Though the pictures made her miss her dad, it was now more important to find whatever it was she needed to find, and that made it much easier to concentrate. Cayman asked questions

about names of landmarks and Alexa told him as much as she could make out from the photos. There was nothing new in them, nothing they hadn't seen before.

It was almost eleven when they shut the book and leaned back on the couch. They had found nothing.

"It's in there, Cayman, I know it is. One more time, come on. We can go through it one more time."

Cayman sat up, cracked his neck and stretched. "Let's do it."

They turned the pages slowly, mentioning items in each picture they had already discovered, but hoping it might stir some memory in Alexa. They came to the last page and Alexa was about to close the book when she looked back at the pages lying neatly on top of each other.

"What's this?" she muttered.

Cayman sat up and looked at the album.

"I see that." He said with interest. "What is it?"

A tiny corner of what looked to be another photo was sticking out from between two pictures in a pocket toward the front of the album. She quickly turned to the page and pulled on the corner.

Whatever it was, was stuck between the two photos and wouldn't budge. She pulled the group of three out of the pocket and gingerly tried to separate the

middle one from the 'picture sandwich', being careful not to rip any of the three pictures involved.

"Can I try?" Cayman took the pictures and began to breathe between the two. "Sometimes warm moist air can loosen a photo without damaging the picture."

Sure enough, in a few minutes the two outer photos came loose revealing a smiling picture of Alexa. It was taken in that same spot in the desert and Alexa gasped.

"I always wondered where that picture went." Her mind went back to the day the photo was taken and she could clearly hear her dad's voice.

"Let me take one of you, Alexa. Stand over there, a little to the left. That's right. Now give me that pretty smile...oh come on...prettier than that..."

"Does it mean anything to you?" Alexa was snapped out of her reverie by Cayman's voice.

"I had just taken that picture of him, the one where he's looking past me. He motioned for me to hand him the camera. He said he wanted to take a picture of me. I remember this. I must have asked him a hundred times where this picture went. He'd just shrug and say he didn't know."

"Whose car is that," asked Cayman.

"What car?" Alexa took the photo from Cayman and looked closer at it. "I didn't notice that car. Daddy kept asking me to move more to the

left. He was such a perfectionist; I thought he was just trying to center me in the picture. I have no idea who that is, or why he would want it in there.”

Far in the background there was a man standing outside of a sedan talking to the driver, but facing the camera. It was so far away Alexa couldn't make out who the man was, and definitely couldn't see the driver. It made sense that this was the photo everyone was after, but why? To Alexa it was just a guy leaning against a car, having a conversation.

Cayman pulled a magnifying glass out of his duffle.

“You always carry a magnifying glass with you?” she giggled. “That’s a bit weird, don’t you think?”

Cayman was pouring over the photo, scrutinizing the automobile. “Oh, you laugh, but I’m prepared.” He was joking, but Alexa could see the concentration on his face.

“The car is sitting with its rear end toward the camera. I think if we could get this enlarged, we might be able to read the license plate and that may give us more information.”

“Wow. Sounds like you’ve done this a few times.” Alexa was studying his face.

“My mom and dad have tons of old photos we found up in the attic back home. They had to look at each one of them and remember ‘who was who at the zoo’, as they were fond of saying. We

came up empty on some of them, but Mom and Dad were able to identify a lot of relatives using this very method. It works.” Cayman was still studying the photo and though he was trying to act nonchalant, he was *really* looking.

“Whatever are you looking for? You wouldn’t know who was in the car or who was standing outside it. What do you think you’re going to find? A puppy?”

Cayman hadn’t realized he was working so hard at it and quickly handed the picture back to Alexa.

“Oh, sorry,” he muttered. “I guess it’s just habit.”

Alexa studied him for a minute, then tucked the photo in her backpack and carried it and the pack to her room.

“Where you going? This was just getting fun.” Cayman called out.

“I’m tired. I’m going to hit the hay and try to clear my head. Good night.”

She shut the door, locking it as she did and grabbed her cell phone. She quickly dialed Keith’s number and prayed he would answer.

“Hi beautiful!” came the soothing voice on the other end of the phone.

“Wow, Keith. Sometimes you sound just like my dad,” she said with a smile in her voice.

“Well, then he must have had a very sexy voice,” came the reply.

Alexa laughed quietly so as not to arouse suspicion. “What did you find out? Anything yet?”

“Well you didn’t tell me it was *Bob*

Richards. I’ve known Bob for years. Never really knew his kids, they were all grown and gone by the time we met, but he’s a good man. He used to have horses and a few head of cattle, but doesn’t anymore. His health isn’t good enough to keep that going. I don’t know the boys, but they come from a good family. Are you telling me Cayman is his son?”

“Yeah, he is,” said Alexa, feeling a little better about things.

“If that’s the case, I feel better about you traveling with him than I did when you left, and I was fine with it then. He comes from good stock, I can tell you that.”

Alexa was silent, thinking. People change when they move away from the watchful eye of mom and dad. He could have fallen in with some bad people and his parents wouldn’t even know it.

“Are you still there?” asked Keith.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” said Alexa softly.

“Thanks for checking on that for me, Keith. Yes, those are his parents. I’m glad to have a good report from you. I’ll call you later, and tell you all about this when I get home. How’s Tahleah doing with the diner? Everything okay there?”

“Yes, she’s doing great. Loving taking the helm for a while, but I think she’ll be glad to have you back here. Take care, you hear?”

“Will do. Talk to you soon.”

Alexa changed into her pajamas, which tonight was one of her father’s shirts she’d kept with her when she left Page. His smell was long gone with all the washings it had been through, but still she loved wearing it.

She walked into the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. She was just about done when there was a knock at the door between the two rooms. She quickly spit out the paste and rinsed. She was wiping her mouth when she opened the door.

Cayman took one look and smiled that big gorgeous grin.

“Wow. You really shouldn’t wear that. It...It--”

“It’s pajamas, and it’s my dad’s shirt. Makes me feel close to him.”

“Of course it does. Sorry, I was just checking on you before I hit the hay.”

“Did you want to check my teeth? I just brushed.” She was being completely sarcastic, but he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into him. She could feel his hand softly, gently exploring her back and waist and felt the ache inside her growing.

He kissed her, his mouth exploring every inch of hers as she sank into his arms. He stopped abruptly and smiled down at her.

“Great job on those molars!” he said smiling. With that he turned and shut the door.

She stood there, staring at the door and breathing heavily. She swallowed hard, leaning her forehead against it.

“We gotta figure this out, and fast,” she whispered to herself. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

Chapter 9

The following day they ate breakfast at the hotel and decided to stop at a local Wal-Mart and get the photo enlarged. It took about a half hour for the whole process, but they left the store with the enlargement in hand and started out on the final leg of their journey. All they got from enlarging the photo was a better view of the license plate, not good, but better. As for making out anything else, it wasn't a good enough photo to see more detail.

Once in the car, Cayman wanted to send a picture of the license plate to his friend in the State Patrol to see if they could find out who it belonged to. Using his phone he took a picture of just the plate and forwarded it on.

“Don’t know if he’ll be able to help, but it’s worth a shot.” Cayman tucked his cell phone into his jeans pocket.

They drove the remainder of the way to Page with the usual stops for gas and food. They pulled into town at about four o’clock in the afternoon and Alexa gave him directions to the house she’d grown up in.

She hadn’t sold the home, hadn’t changed a thing about it since her father died. She kept the cleaning lady coming every week to dust and keep the place looking lived in. It was an expense for her, but one she just couldn’t eliminate. It was still her home, and she wasn’t ready to part with it yet.

The house was a sprawling one level Spanish Style home with four bedrooms and three baths. It had a stunning kitchen conducive to cooking for large groups of people. Open and spacious, it boasted a sub-zero fridge, granite counter tops and beautiful stained hickory cabinets. A large semi-formal dining room bordered the kitchen area with a huge formal dining room off of it that housed a table to seat twelve. The living room was huge as well, with a fireplace taking up one wall and a large overstuffed couch and several chairs to lounge in. Across the hallway from the living room, passing the front door, was the library, which was also her dad’s office. His desk now sat clean and free of the clutter of paperwork she was so accustomed to seeing when he was alive. The

dark mahogany wood matched the bookshelves surrounding the room with one large picture window looking out into the backyard and another looking out the front of the house. The desk was positioned in such a way that, if sitting at it, you would have a clear view of both the front and back yards and the entry. From the entry one could turn left before entering the kitchen and go down the hallway where the bedrooms were found, each one with its own queen bedroom set and individual décor. The home was beautiful.

As they entered Cayman let out a low whistle.

“What a spread,” he said, admiringly, “You grew up here?”

“Yes,” Alexa replied, “and I loved every minute of it.”

“Your dad must have done a lot of entertaining,” said Cayman, still admiring the house.

“Yeah, we did,” she said, “how did you know that?”

“Well, why would you have a table to seat twelve and such a huge kitchen for just the two of you?”

“Never thought of that, I guess.”

“Why didn’t you sell it when your dad died?” he asked, “If that’s not too personal a question.”

“No, it’s not,” she said touching the back of the couch. “I just couldn’t part with it. It cost me a lot to keep it maintained, but I couldn’t let it go. It was my connection to my dad. I just couldn’t part with it yet.”

She walked him through the kitchen, office and living room before showing him the room he would be staying in. She decided on the trip down she would stay in her dad’s room.

After getting Cayman settled in, she walked across the hall and opened her dad’s bedroom door. It was exactly the way he’d left it. His dresser still had his brush and comb on it. She walked over and picked up the cologne sitting by his brush. Opening the lid she sniffed it and smiled, remembering the scent of the father she loved and missed so much. She could feel him around her with every item she touched. After her dad’s death, she’s slept there every night before she moved to Startup.

They brought their things into the house and since there was no food, decided to go get something to eat. Page was a beautiful town with blue skies overhead and green trees dotting the streets. It was clean and the air smelled fresh, just like Alexa remembered it. It had only been a little over a year since her father died, but it seemed like she’d been away for much longer than that.

They got to the small diner and were seated by the window. The town was just one of those that made you want to sit somewhere comfortable and

watch the street all day. People carrying bags from shopping, greeting friends they bumped into along the way. Watching them laugh and hug, it was a warm feeling for Cayman. It reminded him of the small town atmosphere of Sultan. Everyone knew everyone there.

Alexa was enjoying the scene outside their window as well. She watched the people and also gazed from store to store remembering going into and out of each one with friends. She remembered shopping for prom dresses, new shoes, even make up. She felt the tug at her heartstrings, knowing that while she was doing all those fun things, her dad was home, waiting for her, ready to review all her purchases and ooh and ahh over them just like her girlfriends. She missed this city, she missed that fun growing up time, but most of all she missed her dad.

They ordered their food and Cayman grinned at his full plate.

“What?” asked Alexa as she took her first bite.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just this place, I guess. It reminds me of my grandma’s house in Washington. It even smells like it. Somewhere in this diner is a tub of apples. I can smell them, just like my grandma’s pantry.”

Alexa smiled at him and they enjoyed the rest of the meal. Once finished, Cayman checked his phone, once he finished eating, to see if he’d

heard back from his friend in Washington, but there was nothing yet. It had been a long travel day and Alexa was exhausted, so rather than tour the town, they drove straight home.

“I’m going to go to bed,” she said, stifling a yawn as they came through the front door. “I’m tired and I just want to spend some quiet time alone in my dad’s room.”

“Understood,” said Cayman with a smile. “I’m going to stay up a while and see if there’s any good reading material in that library. If you get lonely--sorry, never mind. I’m just going to read.”

Alexa laughed as she stood and started down the hallway. Entering her dad’s room, she walked to the closet to pick out her ‘pajamas’ for the evening. Picking up one of the shirt sleeves she held it against her cheek and then over her nose. She breathed deeply. She could still smell her dad in the shirts, but the smell was fading. That realization made her sad, though, as she knew it was inevitable. She pulled a shirt from the closet and laid it on the bed. As she unbuttoned her shirt she walked back to his dresser. Picking up his cologne again, she opened the lid for another whiff of memory. She smiled as she gently placed the bottle back on the dresser.

She took off her shirt and dropped it to the floor as she continued walking around the room, examining items left there. She unbuttoned her jeans picking up a carved Indian doll she’d admired

so often as a child. She absently pulled her pants off with one hand, never taking her eyes from the doll and let them drop to the floor. She stepped out of the jeans as they hit the floor and she placed the doll back in its spot on the dresser and continued around the room.

There was a knock at the door and forgetting she had completely disrobed she went to the door and opened it, much to the surprise and joy of Cayman, who stood wide eyed on the other side of the door.

“What’s--” She looked down and her eyes widened in embarrassment as she slammed the door shut in his face.

“Hey!” he called through the door, “no need to be shy. I’d be happy to strip down to my underwear if that would make you feel more comfortable.”

Alexa could feel the heat in her face and quickly putting on her father’s shirt she opened the door.

Cayman was still there, waiting.

“That is no better than before, you know. No better at all.”

“Yeah, but it’s my dad’s room, so that kind of kills the mood right there.”

“Oooh, I don’t know...” began Cayman.

“Go to bed.” Alexa shut the door, her heart pumping. “*What in the world was I thinking?*”

She looked across the room at the open closet doors and saw several small boxes on the shelves. She'd never noticed these before. Curious she walked to the closet and pulled one of them off the shelf, placing it on the bed. She folded the blankets down and crawled into bed pulling them back over her. She moved the box closer, carefully opening the lid.

There were many pictures of people she didn't know, but most of them included shots of her dad. Some showed him wearing fatigues, some suit and tie and one had him in hospital scrubs. Scrubs? What was that about? She looked on the back but there was only a number. She checked the back of the others and there were more numbers, but none really in sequence. She came to the bottom of the box rather quickly, and putting the photos back into the box, folded the flaps closed and placed it back in its spot on the shelf. She pulled another box down.

Crawling back under the covers she opened the second box. There were more photos, but this time she found a small voice recorder. She tried the play button, but apparently the batteries were dead. Frustrated she went into the kitchen to see if there were any batteries in the fridge. Her dad had always kept batteries there because he said it lengthened their shelf life. She hoped he was right because she was itching to know what, if anything was on the recorder. Just the thought of hearing

her dad's voice again made her hands shake as she grabbed the door handle.

She opened the fridge and was thrilled to find some batteries inside. But there was something taped to the batteries, a note on a piece of folded torn paper.

“Listen to me.”

It was her father's handwriting. She stared at the writing and tears filled her eyes.

“I wish I could, Dad. I wish I could listen to you.”

Gradually a light went on in her head. She looked at the batteries and thought of the recorder she'd left on the bed in the other room.

Listen to me. Was it a message? A message from her dad? Why would he put that there? Did he want her to find the recorder? Did he know she would?

“Are you okay?” Cayman called from the living room.

“Oh, umm, yeah, fine,” she mumbled, “just getting some...”

Not finishing her sentence she walked back to the bedroom, lost in thought. She picked up the recorder and opened the battery compartment. There were no batteries in it, so she quickly placed them inside the recorder. Her hands were shaking as she turned the unit over and pressed the play button.

The voice came through distorted, slow and creepy. The batteries were no good.

“Perfect.” She said her voice thick with disappointment. She quickly removed them.

She went back out to the kitchen and brought the whole package of batteries to the bedroom. Surely *some* were still good. She tried several of them and finally found a pair that worked. Her father’s voice filled the room.

She lay back in bed and just listened to him speak to her. She didn’t even pay much attention to what he was saying; it was just so amazing to hear his voice. She smiled as she lay there, envisioning his face, his hair, his grin as she would hear him softly laugh into the microphone.

At light went on in her head as she remembered the note on the batteries. *Listen to me.* She quickly went back to the beginning of the recording and started over. She paid attention to each word but wondered after a while what she was listening to. It sounded like ramblings, like maybe he was trying to figure out what he wanted to say, or who he was talking to. She gasped and backed up the recording to replay the last few words. *They can’t fly.* She played the sentence over and over listening carefully to the whole sentence, but it wasn’t the whole sentence she was listening for. It was the three little words *they can’t fly* and how they fit into the sentence or didn’t.

“Yeah, I told him flying pigs would land on him before I would agree to that, but we both know ‘they can’t fly’.”

She quickly stopped the recording and searched the nightstand for a pad and pen. She found one and scribbled the whole phrase and sentence onto the paper. She returned to the recording and listened to more of the recording that made absolutely no sense. But soon she heard another very familiar phrase. *‘A moon of cheese? Oh, please’.*

She listened to the whole sentence.

“He turned around and laughed out loud. A moon of cheese? Oh, please.”

The sentence itself and even the sentences before it made no sense, but she knew the phrases, she knew them well.

She listened a little longer to more nonsense and then another familiar phrase came up.

‘You’re the fairest of them all.’ Alexa knew the word ‘fairest’ was actually meant fair, as in being fair in her treatment of others. She remembered these.

She jumped up and ran to Cayman’s room. He wasn’t there. She ran to the living room with the recorder in her hand remembering he was going to read. She found him sitting in an easy chair reading the complete works of Sherlock Holmes. He smiled up at her and then stood up when he saw the look on her face.

“What is it? What’s wrong.”

“I...I don’t know, maybe...maybe nothing. I found this recording and I was listening...” She could feel the tension in her body rise and the room started to spin.

“Hey, Alexa! Hold on!” Cayman grabbed her as she started to sink to the floor. He led her around to the couch and gently lowered her to the seat.

“Just breathe, Alexa. Just breathe, slow down and breathe. I’m not going anywhere, there’s no hurry. Breathe.” The soothing tone of his voice helped her relax as he sat down, facing her on the couch. “Better?”

She nodded. Taking a deep breath she started at the beginning.

“Cayman, I think I’ve found something, but I don’t know what. When I was a little girl, sometimes my dad would have people pick me up after school because he was either out of town or in a meeting. I really never knew who was going to pick me up, a neighbor, a family friend, Gina, our housekeeper. I never knew. But they always had a security phrase they would use. As soon as the phrase was used it was changed, never used again. There were some that were my favorites and I still remember them. “

“One was ‘They can’t fly’. Another was ‘A moon of cheese? Oh please.’ And then still another one was ‘You’re the fairest of them all’ but it meant

fair as in playing fair and part of using that phrase meant the person picking me up had to explain that detail.”

“Okay,” he said patiently.

“Well, I found this recorder and I was listening to it...okay, first, before I could even listen to it, I went to the fridge for batteries and found this note.” She handed the note to him.

“I wondered what it meant, but went back to the bedroom and put the batteries in. I didn’t pay much attention to what he was saying, you know, I was just enjoying actually hearing his voice. Then I remembered the note. So I went back over it and started actually listening to the words. They made no sense, but every once in a while I would hear these familiar phrases. Cayman, it’s like he’s trying to tell me something. It’s a message he knew only I would understand. But just listen to it. There’s no rhyme or reason to any of it.”

They spent several hours pouring over the recording until they couldn’t listen anymore.

“We’ve gotta get some sleep, Alexa. Let’s put this away until tomorrow and we’ll try listening again on our way out to the spot you and your dad last picnicked. Okay? Can you let it go for the night? Do you need me to take it so you’ll get some sleep?”

“No.” It came out a little more forceful than she’d planned.

“Okay, okay,” said Cayman, holding his hands up, “just trying to help. Make sure you get some sleep, though, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

Alexa was standing up and wandering back to her room, the voice on the recorder droning on and on. She was mumbling something to herself, oblivious to the young man she just left on the couch.

As he watched her walk away in her father’s dress shirt he sighed.

“Time for another one of those cold showers.”

Chapter Ten

Alexa finally nodded off to sleep still listening to the sound of her father's voice. The transition from wakefulness to full sleep was interspersed with sounds from the recording, and words directly from her father, like he was standing right next to her. She woke in the morning confused and disoriented.

Cayman knocked and Alexa rolled over and moaned, "Come in."

She lay on the bed, covered by only a sheet. The sheet did an amazing job of outlining the shape of her perfect body. Her hair was a mass of curls and sheen covering her pillow. She was beautiful, even having just awakened.

He cleared his throat and tried to sound like a man in full control of his body.

“So, I, uh, took the liberty of going shopping for some breakfast foods and...”

He was carrying a tray of that amazing coffee she remembered from their first encounter in her kitchen back in Startup. She pushed herself to an upright position, instantly ready for coffee, a sleepy but pleased grin spreading across her face. Cayman placed the tray (actually a cookie sheet because that was all he could find) in her lap. She smiled at the plate of wonderfulness before her; eggs, bacon, hash browns and sausage, all perfectly cooked and waiting to be devoured. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until she smelled the food and then realized she was famished. She ate with abandon.

“Now I know why you always attacked your food at the diner. You must have been as hungry as I am today, only for you it was every day.”

Cayman reddened as he sat beside her.

“Actually, I have a confession to make. That dark haired guy that cooks for you?”

“Thomas?”

“Yeah, Thomas. He actually can't cook, at all.”

“Really? Why did you keep ordering breakfast there?”

“You're really going to ask me that? Really? I ate there because of you, of course. And if you'll think back, I used an awful lot of Tabasco.”

Alexa started laughing.

“And why, then, did you eat like you hadn’t eaten in months?”

“Because the faster I put it down, the sooner it was gone. And the Tabasco didn’t really help all that much, but it helped enough.”

Alexa was really laughing by this time. She thought about how she’d made fun of him for eating like a heathen every time Tahleah brought his name up. Now she finds out he was eating like that to spare her feelings! The whole thing was so comical she could hardly hold the cookie sheet on her lap.

“Okay, fine, laugh it up. I was sacrificing my cholesterol for you, you know.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. It’s just so funny! If you only knew all the cruel things I said about your eating habits, and now I find out you were choking down every bite. That’s just too funny!”

“Really. I have half a mind to take all that breakfast and toss it down the sink. You actually made fun of me?”

“Without shame,” laughed Alexa. “Touch this tray and I cut off both your hands.”

She took another bite and, chewing slower, closed her eyes. He was right. By this standard, Thomas couldn’t cook at all.

“How about you come and cook at the diner when we get home? This is incredible!”

She ate bite after bite, stifling the small moans that escaped her throat as she chewed,

savoring every morsel and swallowing so she could taste it all the way down.

Cayman studied his hands, trying to keep his thoughts where they needed to be. If she just wouldn't moan like that it would make this whole 'breakfast in bed' thing a lot easier on him.

After the wonderful meal, Alexa showered and dressed and was ready for their trip to the desert. She kept the recorder in her pocket, close to her. She was not about to lose it, and heaven help the groin of the man who tried to take it from her.

They drove for about an hour and a half when Alexa pointed and said, "There, turn right there."

Cayman slowed the car and turned off on a dirt road that looked as if it was going nowhere. They drove for another twenty minutes through large potholes and around even larger rocks.

"You sure you're not taking me out here to shoot me and leave me for the vultures?"

Alexa chuckled and said, "Don't tempt me."

They arrived at the spot Alexa remembered and she pulled out the photo to match the landmarks. Exiting the car and walking a few yards to a small rise, Alexa found the area much the same as she and her father had left it a year ago.

Alexa hadn't counted on the memories still being so fresh and painful. She stood in the middle of the small area, partially surrounded by large boulders. There were cactus randomly placed by

Mother Nature but that was about all the green she could see. She felt if she listened hard enough and focused she could still hear her dad joking and laughing with her, she could see his face as he looked into the distance when she took the picture of him. She could see him place his hand over his eyes to shade them from the sun and then quickly begin to pack things up. She relived the whole scene again. It was her last outing with her father, and she had gone over it a hundred times in her mind and now she was here, in the actual spot, doing it all over again.

She took the photo out of her pocket to make sure she was remembering the place he stood correctly. However, she soon realized she didn't really need the photo as she remembered it perfectly.

Cayman approached her and touched her arm.

"Hey, we don't have to do this if you're not ready. We can come back another day, or we don't need to come back at all. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said with a sigh. I am. I--" She was looking around the perimeter as she spoke.

"Here," she said, pointing to the spot. "He stood here, I was over there and that would mean the car was out there."

"Let's go have a look." Cayman started for the place where the car was parked.

“What do you think you’re going to find? It was a car, and it’s been a year. There have to have been a dozen other cars out here in that time.” She followed him out to where the car had been parked, feeling it was a complete waste of time.

Cayman walked around the area, looking...no...scrutinizing the ground around where the car would have been parked. He found a cigarette butt, gingerly picked it up and placed it in a small snack baggie he pulled out of his pants pocket. He seemed way too careful not to touch the filter end of the cigarette. Alarms went off in Alexa’s head.

“You’re doing it again,” she said, tamping down the fear. “I’ve seen enough police drama’s to know what you’re doing. You’re looking for DNA on that cigarette butt.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing. And I’ve seen enough cop shows as well, plus I have a friend in the State Police who told me what to look for and what to do with anything I found. Thus...the baggies. I picked some up when I went to town to buy breakfast stuff this morning. Pretty smart, eh?” he grinned, obviously so very proud of what he was doing.

Alexa thought if she didn’t stop doubting this man she was going to scream. She just didn’t know if it was safe, and yet he’s the one that had been keeping her safe. Was he doing that just to get information from her? Was he the man looking out

the back window of the car in that photo? She wanted to scream at herself, “STOP IT!” but her gut wouldn’t let her. Her brain continued spinning and kept picking away at him, doubting him.

Alexa’s stomach rumbled, reminding her it was well past lunchtime. As she was getting ready that morning she thought it would be fun to bring a picnic lunch. It was a good thing she did. Just as she’d thought, they weren’t ready to head back to town to eat. This visit would be a one shot chance to investigate the area, which made them not ready to leave, but definitely ready to eat. She walked the short distance to the car and pulled out the basket of food, lugging it back to where they would eat. Had she really packed *that much* to eat? The thing was heavy!

As Alexa pulled out the blanket and lay it on the hard packed earth, Cayman thought they should eat and head back into town and work on the recording some.

“Hey, this is supposed to be a fun picnic,” she complained teasingly, “so sit down, relax and eat.”

On the outside, Alexa really did think it would be fun to have a picnic. She hadn’t been on a picnic since this last outing with her dad. On the inside she was a ball of skepticism, even doubting her own ability to know if she should doubt Cayman or fall in love with him. She went back

and forth constantly pro-ing and con-ing herself into insanity.

“You can trust me, Alexa.” Cayman’s voice floated into her head.

She looked up at him and saw that he had been studying her face while she sat spinning her emotional wheels and getting nowhere.

“You can trust me. If I wanted what you have, I would have taken it weeks ago. You know that.”

She took a bite of her sandwich and chewed slowly. She looked away, her feelings causing a rush of guilt to flow through her. It crushed her to see the look on his face. Swallowing her bite she turned back to him.

“I want to Cayman, but I can’t. I’m trying, and logically it feels like I should trust you...sometimes. You just do these investigative things too well, you handle your gun like a pro and you know your way around a crime scene.”

Cayman started laughing.

“Listen to yourself! You talk like a CSI. Come on Alexa, you’ve seen WAY too many cop shows, that’s all. Everybody that watches those today knows the lingo. Anyone that wanted to find out anything can act like an investigator. Think about it. You’re doing it yourself.”

Alexa started laughing.

“Yeah, I guess I am. I’m sorry. You’re right, I just need to chill out.”

She moved closer to him, took hold of his shirt front and pulled him to her, planting a hot passionate kiss on his warm, soft mouth. He returned the kiss, then gently pulled away with a look of frustration on his face. He sat back and whistled a low, breathy whistle.

“Did you learn to be so forward on TV, as well?”

She playfully slapped his arm.

“I am not forward! It’s your fault, you know...mister ‘I’m-all-CSI-and-I-know-it’.”

Pulling her closer again, he gently rolled her over him and onto the ground, playfully pinning her beneath him. The weight of his body on hers made her aching start all over again. She could feel the heat travel slowly up her body. He kissed her firmly, passionately and she returned the passion, their breathing hard and hot.

He felt her begin to pull away and stopped kissing her. Holding her head in his hands, he look intently into her eyes.

“We can stop now, or not. You tell me.”

“We need to stop. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I know it’s the right thing, but sometimes the right thing just sucks, and I mean that in the non-sexual way.”

She giggled as he got up and pulled her to her feet. They brushed the dust off themselves and he spun her quickly around. He began brushing the

dust off her backside, taking a little longer than needed.

She turned around and gave him a flat stare.

“What?” he asked innocently. “You had a lot of dust ground on there.”

“Uh, huh,” she said knowingly. “Let’s go.”

After cleaning up the remains of lunch, Cayman grabbed the picnic basket and together they walked to the car, hand in hand, laughing and joking with each other. They kept the mood light, knowing full well it would only take one intimate touch to bring them right back where they’d left off moments ago. As they pulled away, Alexa took one look back in the side mirror.

“*Goodbye, Daddy,*” she said softly.

Chapter Eleven

The drive back to the house seemed longer than the drive out to the photo site. Alexa sat mostly in quiet contemplation, and it appeared to her Cayman was doing the same thing.

“Maybe it’s too soon to love again. Maybe I’m not ready yet.” She couldn’t help but smile at that, because her body sure seemed ready. It was her soul that didn’t want to trust or love or be loved. She thought she was stronger than she was when it came to her father. She had found that strength inside her, but going out to the desert today, she felt like she’d lost it, again. It seemed that’s how her life was now, this roller coaster of emotion. First she felt one way, then that was gone and she felt another way and then that was gone and she felt still

another way. Her mind was a mess and she didn't know how to fix it.

She knew she could lose it all in loving this man sitting in the car beside her, but was that because of the loss she felt from her fiancé? She couldn't even bring herself to speak his name, hadn't said it since he was sentenced to "life in prison without the possibility of parole". She was certain not saying his name would make the pain go away, but it hadn't.

Now, she wondered if she'd lost the independence and strength she had thought she'd found. She was too independent to lose herself in a man, what was she even thinking? Still, she wanted to lose herself in this man, she wanted him. Was that even healthy? And around and around she went.

"Hello?" Cayman was trying to get her attention.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she started. "Were you talking to me?"

"Only for the last half hour," he said with a laugh. "And here I thought you were listening so intently."

"Yeah, I guess I'm a little distracted." She gazed out the window. "What were you saying?"

"I was asking you if you ever played spy when you were a kid. Did you ever have one of those super cool spy rings, because boy, I sure did,

and I *loved* my spy ring.” Cayman waxed a bit nostalgic in the memory.

“One day, when Sam was a baby, he swallowed it. They had to rush him to the doctor and see where it was. We had to watch his diaper for days to see if...well...if it came out, which it did. But somehow, no matter how my mom cleaned it, I couldn’t bring myself to play with it again.”

Alexa burst out laughing mid-story and the end of it, she couldn’t breath at all.

“Are you *serious*? Your little brother ate your spy ring and gave it back to you in his diaper?” Her laughter filled the car, and lightened her mood.

“I’ll have you to know, that was a pretty special toy to me. It’s what got me started on my current hobby of deciphering codes. I used to make up my own and then give the whole family a different note with the cipher code and they’d have to figure it out. Mom was the only one that would take the time to actually figure it out, but sometimes Dad would, too.”

“Well, isn’t that just cute,” she said pinching his cheek.

“Okay, well, I tell you all that to tell you this. I’m wondering if your dad’s recording isn’t in some kind of code. Did you guys ever do anything like that?”

“What?” Alexa was laughing again. “No, he spent his spare time at my awesome Barbie table having tea with me. Now, that’s a *normal* kind of

kid thing. That's just funny; my dad sending a message in code? How would he even know how to do that?"

"Yeah, I guess it is pretty stupid, but it sure was cool as a kid, although, the Barbie tea party sounds like a blast." His sarcasm was quickly taking over the conversation.

"I mean, wow...that is absolute extreme fun. I'm sure it got very, very dangerous, too. I mean, how did you know where that tea cup had been?"

They continued to poke fun at each other's favorite toys as kids and soon they were back at the house. Alexa went straight to the kitchen and grabbed a couple of Gatorades from the fridge, taking them into the living room.

"Thanks for buying all the groceries. Want a drink?"

"Yeah, I'll take one."

They sat down on the couch and Alexa pulled out the recording. They started the playback and listened for a few minutes.

"Stop, there." Said Cayman.

Alexa stopped the recorder.

"What?"

"Well, tell me if I'm nuts--" He started.

"Okay, you're nuts." Alexa laughed.

"Cute. What I was going to say was, doesn't this recording sound like nursery rhymes? I mean it doesn't rhyme like that, but it's kind of

metered like a poem or nursery rhyme or something like that.”

Alexa’s eyes widened. She turned the machine back on and listened carefully. A smile moved across her mouth, growing bigger the more she listened.

“No, not a nursery rhyme, it’s Dr. Seuss! He was my favorite author as a child. I *loved* his books. My father had to have gotten so sick and tired of reading them to me, but--”

“What? But what?” Cayman leaned forward, wincing and grabbing his arm.

“Did you take that anti-biotic today?” Asked Alexa. “Are you okay?” She studied his face and glanced at his arm.

“Yes, yes, it’s fine, just pinches every once in a while. I’m fine. You said ‘but’ and stopped. What were you going to say?”

“I was just wondering, what if it’s in the books? What if there’s something in my set of Dr. Seuss books?”

Alexa jumped up and ran to her room. She opened the door and walked quickly to her book case. Cayman was right behind her.

The bookshelf contained all kinds of books, it was like a children’s section at the public library. She squatted to see the bottom shelf, found the set of Dr. Seuss books and began pulling them from the shelf.

“Can you carry these with one arm? I’ll take the rest,” she said, handing some of the books to Cayman. Cayman assured her he could carry the books just fine.

They walked back out to the living room and set the two piles of books on the coffee table. Sitting side by side they each picked up a book and held it by the cover, binding up, so the pages would hang free. They did this with each one, shaking it, hoping something would fall out. Nothing did.

“I don’t understand. I thought for sure there would be something in these. When you said rhyme, it was the first thing that came into my mind. I really thought there would be *something* here.”

“There probably is,” said Cayman, rubbing his chin in thought. “Do you remember the order you got these in?”

“What?! How in the world would anyone remember that?” Alexa looked at him, dumbfounded.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s true. But, there’s got to be a clue in here. I mean, like the rest of the world, I love Dr. Seuss, but to have to read every one of these, and not just read, but really scrutinize them? That would take weeks. For you to think ‘Dr. Seuss’ he must have set the recording up so that is what you would think of, but why?”

He leaned back against the couch again. Sitting quickly forward he snapped his fingers.

“Your favorites! What were your favorite books?”

Alexa smiled and began pulling her favorites out of the pile. She pulled nine books out.

“Okay, now,” Cayman said thoughtfully, “you’re going to have to really think on this one. Order these favorites from one to nine, one being your most favorite.

“Cayman, this is ridiculous,” she said, “My dad didn’t know anything about codes and ciphers. He was my dad, the expert guy. There’s no way he would have any idea how to put something this extravagant together.”

“Something happened out there in the desert that day, Alexa. I don’t know what it was, but from that point on, even more than usual, his main goal in life became keeping you safe. I think he was desperate, I think he needed to make sure you had some piece of information that would keep you safe.”

Cayman sat back and sighed. “There just has to be something, don’t you think? I mean, he left the picture for you to find. Why would he do that and not tell you what you need to do with it? It just doesn’t make sense.”

Alexa looked at the books. What he said was logical. She hadn’t put it all together like that.

“Well, okay then, since you put it that way. Let me think. My favorite books in the set...I never thought of them like that, but, hmm...let me see...”

She began pulling books out of the favorites stack one at a time. She'd smile as she set them in a row and went back to pull another one out. Once they were all in order she stared at the row of books and began moving them around.

"No, I really think I liked Hop on Pop the best, better than Green Eggs and Ham, but I *really* liked Green Eggs and Ham, too."

"Really...? Can it be that hard to figure this out?" Cayman was clearly impatient.

"You didn't get read to much, did you?" said Alexa eyeing him curiously.

"Well, no, we were busy most of the time milking cows and chasing cattle."

"When you were *two*?" Alexa shook her head sadly. "My kids are going to get seriously read to. *Seriously* read to. They're going to know all the classic kid books, the fun ones. Some of my best memories are on my dad's lap as a kid listening to his deep, soft, voice reading me stories. They're my best memories."

Alexa looked out the window, remembering those times with her dad.

"Uh, yeah, I get that," Cayman's voice interrupted her reverie. "But, we really need to look at these nine. May I pick one up, or will you hurt me?"

Alexa sighed and chuckled. "No, I won't hurt you, but you better respect the books. With my dad gone, they represent some of the best memories

I have of him. My kids are going to be read to out of these books, and I'm going to tell them about their grandpa every time I open them."

Cayman smiled at her. "You're going to be a great mom," he said as he squeezed her shoulders. "Now, start reading." He patted her back and it made her laugh again, but she picked up a book and began slowly leafing through the first few pages. She surprised herself at how she remembered the words without even having to read them and she went through the pages quickly. She didn't see anything unusual so she tried the next book, still nothing. Finally she decided to slow down, to examine each page, perusing the books from front to back. Opening the book again, Alexa noticed a number on the inside of the cover on the lower right hand corner next to the binding. It was very light and she almost missed it, but found it just as she was about to go on to the first page.

"Here we go," said Cayman. He'd opened Hop On Pop and was paging through it. "Look closely at the words. Can you see it?"

Alexa looked at the words. She could see that some of the letters were very lightly underlined. She knew she hadn't done that.

"And look at this," she said pointing to the number she had just found. "I didn't write this in here and I didn't underline letters. This has to be from my Dad."

They looked through each book and on the inside of each cover found the numbers one through three and five through ten. On the inside of the back cover, on the lower left hand corner, near the binding, she found random numbers.

“Obviously your father disagreed with how many favorites you had, and your order for those favorites.” Cayman laughed softly.

“Well, then there is one more favorite in that stack. How am I supposed to know what he thought it was?”

“We look for a number four in the lower right hand corner of one of these,” he said pointing to the remaining stack of books.

Alexa hadn't left out one of her favorites, she'd forgotten her dad's favorite title, Yertle the Turtle. They placed the book amongst the favorites and began to write down the underlined letters on a piece of paper under the title of each book. None of it made any sense at all.

Alexa started the recorder back at the beginning and together they listened with the paper in front of them. They listened to the whole thing before Alexa leaned forward and studied each book, still listening to the voice. She turned off the recorder.

“We're missing something,” said Cayman, searching the titles.

“Yeah, and I know what it is.” Alexa was touching each book and looking at the paper. “We

forgot the titles, and we also forgot the code phrases. Look at this title. She held up Horton Hears a Who. Do you see it?"

There was so much age on the cover, mixed in with crayon marks and smudges it had been easy to miss. Under two letters of the title he saw the same soft pencil mark they'd seen inside the book.

They quickly began looking at the other books and found the same thing. They wrote down the additional letters they'd found and then listened to the tape and wrote down the phrases.

It was useless. All that seemed to accomplish was more letters mixed in with the jumble they already had. It was frustrating and Alexa began to feel that Cayman was trying to relive his glory days with his code ring. There was nothing to be found.

"Wait!" cried Alexa jumping up and running to her dad's room. "Pictures! There are pictures in boxes in Dad's bedroom with random numbers on them..."

Her voice trailed off as she ran down the hall and into the bedroom.

She brought back the box and they pulled out the pictures, matching them to the numbers in the back of the book. There were ten books and fourteen photos with numbers. Ten of the photos appeared to match up with numbers in the book, but four of the pictures had no corresponding book. They checked all the remaining books in the set and

none of them had numbers, so they stuck them in the front of the book numbered one for safe keeping.

It was getting to be dinner time and Alexa heard Cayman's stomach rumble.

"Let's go into town and get some dinner. I'm hungry, you're hungry and we need a break."

They did need a break. As they drove away, Alexa looked back at the house. There were eyes there, she could feel it, eyes that were watching them. She looked at Cayman but got no hint he was concerned at all. She shrugged it off, thinking with a smile that maybe it was her dad, happy she'd been able to at least feel him there in the books they'd once read together. She changed her mind, however, when she felt those same eyes on her as they drove down the road and into town. These were not the loving eyes of her father.

Chapter Twelve

Cayman and Alexa stopped in at a little Mom and Pop diner, which made Alexa feel right at home. She enjoyed watching the waitresses, looking at the décor and comparing it to her little diner in Startup. She and Cayman visited about her diner while they waited for their food to come. The subject turned from the diner to Cayman's family.

"So...what was it like growing up with *three* boys in the family? I can't even imagine having a brother, let alone three of them."

Cayman's face lit up.

"It was awesome. When we weren't trying to kill each other, we were best buds, all of us. I would have to say we were friends more than enemies, but there were a few times I would like to have done one or both of them in. Especially being the oldest."

Alexa chuckled. "Someone to actually fight with...it had to have been fun even in the bad times."

"Oh, it was definitely fun, and getting together now is even better. We all sit around and re-visit the goofy things we did and the times when we made each other the angriest, laughed the hardest, hid the longest. It was fun then, and it's even more so now."

Alexa looked down at her food, her eyes studying the food on her plate.

“Hey,” said Cayman softly, “what’s the matter?”

“Sometimes when I would watch the kids at school meet up with a brother or sister to catch the bus or walk home, I wondered what that would be like.” She looked up and smiling, said, “But, don’t get me wrong. My dad and I had an awesome relationship. He was a great dad, and he would play with me like a little girl when I was very small. He was never bored, never put up a fuss. When he was home, he was all mine, and he let me know that. So, really, there are things we give up on both sides of that fence, eh?”

“Very true. I had to share my dad with two other boys, but you’re right. It all works out somehow.” Cayman went back to eating his steak and potatoes, and Alexa did the same.

They chatted now and then about the trip, and joked with each other about the fun and the mishaps. It was a good meal and they enjoyed one another’s company.

They stood to go and Cayman started to pull out his wallet.

“Not this time, mister,” smiled Alexa, “It’s my turn to pay.”

He could see by the look on her face he wasn’t going to change her mind so he stepped back and let her pay the check. He did however sneak back to the table and leave a tip.

They walked to the car hand in hand. He bent to open the door and kissed her so softly it made her heart back flip into her stomach and sit there, on top of all the food she'd just eaten.

"You are one amazing woman, Alexa." He said, smiling and staring deeply into her eyes. The green in his eyes was mesmerizing.

She smiled at him as he released her and helped her into the car. "So, do you paint that green into your eyes every morning, or is that natural?"

Cayman blushed and shut the car door with a dismissive snort. He walked around to his side, slid into the seat and started the car. As they drove along Alexa pointed out places she would go with her friends or with her dad. They took the long way home so she could show Cayman some of the places she frequented as a kid. It was fun remembering and Cayman seemed to genuinely be enjoying it as well.

As he turned onto Main Street to head back to the house he glanced at Alexa.

"So, how long did you know James before you got engaged?"

The blood in Alexa's whole body seemed to freeze. Her face fell and her eyes turned to frost.

"I've not spoken that name in over a year. How did you know his name?"

The look on Cayman's face said it all. He knew immediately what he'd done.

“Pull over,” she said evenly. When he kept driving she screamed at him, “I SAID PULL OVER!”

He pulled to the side of the road.

“Get out, *now*.”

It was his car, his keys, but he didn’t argue. He stepped out on the road and she slid over into the driver’s seat. “I’ll leave the keys in the car and have your things on the porch when you get to the house. Don’t bother to come in. Just leave.”

“Alexa, please, let me explain...”

“You aren’t who you say you are, you’re one of them. You just needed to string me along to get as much information out of me as you could. Well, good for you. I hope you got what you needed, because I never want to see you again. Stay away from me, and stay away from my diner. You’re not welcome there, ever.”

She slammed the door and drove back to the house. Tears stung her eyes as she made her way through the stop lights and turns, trying to hold in the heartbreak threatening to tear her apart once again. Her mind felt numb, like her body was functioning separate from her head. She turned, stopped, started, turned again and didn’t even notice the actions. She hurt everywhere and nowhere at all. She felt cold with hurt and hot with anger all at the same time. She wasn’t sure she could hold herself together this time.

Eventually she arrived at the house, and pulled herself out of the car forcing each step through sheer will. She walked into the house, onto the walk and through the door. Oh how she wanted to slam that door behind her. She wanted the world to know how angry she was. She just didn't have the strength in her arms to push it that hard. She had no strength left at all.

How could she have been so stupid as to trust him? Why hadn't she listened with her head and not let her heart have so much of the attention? The sobs were coming in great gasps now as she hurried down the hall to Cayman's room and gathered up his things, stuffing them haphazardly into his bag. She grabbed the bag and hurried back down the hall. The pain in her heart was growing with each step, she feared it would take over her whole soul and she would be lost in a world of pain and heartache all over again.

This was the same pain she'd felt when she got the visit from the police telling her that her father was dead. It was the same pain she'd felt as she watched James being led away in handcuffs, not even looking sad or sorry for what he'd done. Pain. More pain. And yet more, even more than she could bear.

Opening her front door she tossed the bag onto the porch and shut the door, locking it behind her. She leaned against it, shoulders bowed, hand to

her forehead. Somehow she had to get through this. Somehow she had to figure it out.

Or did she? Couldn't she just let it all go and drop the whole thing? Isn't it enough she was alone in the world? Did she have to know all the little secrets that took her father from her? Couldn't she just catch a bus back to Startup and begin again? So many holes in her heart, so little of her heart left to break.

She stumbled to her dad's room amidst the anguished tears and fell on the bed. The emotional exhaustion of the last week seemed to come to a head. Alexa wanted to fall asleep and wake up sometime next year, when the pain was less and the love was gone. She could forget it had ever happened. That wasn't going to happen, and she was left with questions asked only by her heart.

Why do people do these things to each other? How is anyone ever supposed to trust anyone? The only human being she ever trusted was dead. Her dad had been her life, he was everything to her, yet here she was, losing him all over again. How many times could she endure this? How many times did she have to re-live it?

She lifted her head to find the voice recorder lying on the night stand. Picking it up, she held it to her feeling the despair and loss even more keenly. It was all she had of her father now. She turned on the recording and listened to her dad's voice speaking to her. It was still nonsense, but it was

nonsense from her dad, and she needed to hear his voice right now. She didn't even listen to the words, just the voice. She listened to the different tones of his voice, his soft laughs and stern warnings. Warnings? She played it back again, but it was just gibberish, making no sense whatsoever. But she could remember that tone when she was heading out the door with her friends.

“You be careful out there, Alexa. You know what time your curfew is, right...?”

The words faded slowly in her mind as she saw herself smile at him and wave him off.

“Oh, Daddy, I know when curfew is. I'll be careful. It *is* ok if I have fun, though, right?”

She watched the replay in her mind as her dad raised a finger and pointed it at her.

“Absolutely not. NO fun. Have I taught you nothing?”

Alexa laughed and slowly shut the door. She shut...the door. Her dad was on the other side of the door, and the door was closed. The image of the closed door faded and Alexa sobbed longer and harder than she had before.

She held the voice recorder in both hands close to her chest. Her eyes were closed and she felt her lungs would burst at the wracking sobs that flew from her throat.

Alexa soon fell into the sweet oblivion of sleep. She dreamed she was dancing with her father. It was a Strauss waltz, the one he always

played when they'd dance together in the living room. She had on a beautiful red fitted silk dress that went all the way to the floor and he was handsomely dressed in a full tuxedo. They twirled and turned on the dance floor, her feet seemed airborne as she followed her father's lead through each turn. Her father, so handsome, so happy to be with her, was smiling proudly at his only child. Her heart was light again, the pain was gone. She was with her father now, and nothing could change that. She was happy, so happy....

Suddenly, all the red drained from her dress and ended in a puddle on the floor. She gasped as she stared at her white dress, the music stopped, the hall was silent, a gunshot rang out. Her eyes moved to the red stain on the floor and she gasped again. In the middle of the red puddle was her father, face blown away, body strewn awkwardly in its death pose. Alexa screamed and screamed. No one was coming, what was she to do? She continued screaming, hoping someone would hear her. However, no one heard her. She stood there, alone on the dance floor, her father dead before her, still screaming again and again and again. She woke herself up trying to shout, but all that was coming out of her mouth was forced, empty air.

Alexa's eyes were swollen from the tears, she was breathing hard and her body was sweaty. She sat up and put her hand on the bed to steady herself. As her hand touched the bed, she felt

something cold beneath it and jumped in alarm. She looked down and saw the DVD she'd set aside. How did it get on her bed? It was supposed to be on her nightstand.

She picked it up and pulled the DVD out of the case. Checking the back she could see it wasn't blank, so she picked it up and walked to the living room. It was dark outside now, she didn't know how long she'd slept. She put the DVD in the player and pushed play. She walked to the couch and sat down.

She gazed to the window, wondering if Cayman's things were still on the porch, but checking would mean showing herself to the world, and she couldn't, not yet. She didn't care if his things were gone.

She turned back to the TV and a cry escaped her lips as her father began to talk to her from the screen.

Chapter Thirteen

“Honey, if you’re watching this, I’m either dead or missing, or both. I have put some people in your life to watch over you for me. These are good people. I’m hoping there is a young man with you by the name of Cayman Richards, and if you’re the same Alexa I raised, you are suspicious and unsure of him. I want to put your mind at ease. He is a good man and you can trust him Alexa. You’re old dad says so.”

Alexa’s hand went to her mouth as she struggled to breath. “Oh Daddy, it’s too late.”

“Now, for the hard part,” he continued. “I was never fully open and honest with you about what I did for a living, Alexa. I didn’t exactly own my own business. There are all kinds of reasons why I didn’t tell you the truth, but trust me when I tell you, it was for your own safety. Telling you

what I'm about to tell you is going to put you at risk, but I need your help. If you're watching this DVD then I didn't get a chance to finish my mission, and you have to know these things to be able to help."

"I was part of a Special Ops team associated with the FBI. The name of that team doesn't matter, but what I am about to say does. I need you to listen to me, and listen well. There may be men trying to get to you, to get information you don't have. They will not hesitate to kill you, Alexa and they will stop at nothing to pick your brain. They may think I told you things that I did not tell you. In not telling you these things, I fear all I accomplished was to put you into harm's way after all. If they are following you, then they don't know you have nothing to tell them. This is not good. If they get to you, give them any information you can think of. Tell them everything you've found so far. It may save your life."

"I'm hoping by now you've found the photograph. The man standing outside the car in the picture is James. He was part of the drug ring we were trying to stop. I suspected he may be, but didn't know for sure until that day in the desert when I saw him. We've tried to convict the leaders of this ring a dozen times and they beat the charges every time. However, that photo is the key to putting them away for life. You **MUST** get the picture to my field office in Washington D.C.. Give

it to no one but Jonathan Truseau. If anyone else says they'll take the photo to him, tell them no. They can't make you give it to them, Alexa, and as long as Cayman is with you, they won't try. Jonathan Truseau, Alexa. Remember the name and give the photo to no one else."

She moaned at this and squeezed her eyes shut, covering them with her hands. Her dad continued.

"I can't tell you more about the picture than I have, and I may have said too much. Just get it to Washington...get it to Jonathan. Use Cayman any way you need to. He's an excellent agent and he *will* keep you safe. Don't be too hard on him, Alexa, he's been told to keep what he knows to himself. I know I taught you a lot about keeping yourself safe, but Cayman is a perfect choice for a bodyguard. Keep him close to you. He'll get you safely to D.C."

"Cayman and his brothers are all part of the same Special Ops team that I'm on. I've worked with his father for years, he's on the team as well. They are all good people, Alexa. Cayman is a good man. We've worked many missions together, and I trust him, not only with my life, but now with yours as well."

"You have undoubtedly found the cipher I left for you. I know it makes no sense, but take the books, the recording and the pictures from the box in the bedroom (you found those, right?) with you

and give them to Jonathan, and only Jonathan along with the photo from the album. The photo is the key, Alexa, without it the cipher is useless. Make sure they stay together and are delivered together.”

I made sure in the event of my death there were eyes on the house at all times with instructions that you were to be the one to get the information to D.C.. I did this because I left the picture in your possession. I knew you would one day come back to the house and put the pieces together, at least enough to know there was something there. I didn’t want the information stolen from the house, so I ordered a watch posted 24/7. They will remain there until the information is removed by you and Cayman, and he dismisses them.”

“I love you, Princess. There is so much I want to tell you, so many things I want to say, but I have to make sure above everything else, you’re safe. Please know I’m so sorry our time was cut short. Where ever I am, just know I’m missing you terribly.”

The screen went dark and then to snow.

“Daddy...” Alexa whispered at the empty screen. She put her head in her hands, and then suddenly realized she was on her own. Cayman was gone, by her own doing and she was going to need to get to the airport on her own.

She stood to get her pistol out of her backpack and her eye caught the silhouette of a man

standing in the alcove at the front door. Alexa jumped and rushed to her backpack.

“It’s me, Alexa,” said Cayman softly. “It’s me. I... wanted to tell you this all along, but I couldn’t.”

Alexa stopped and faced him. Her hands hung at her side, her face a mask of sadness and betrayal.

“It was all a job to you? I’m just an assignment? Is that how this whole spy thing goes?”

At this point Alexa was beyond the confusion and frustration she’d felt in the past. She was still reeling from the pain and heartbreak of his fake life and his fake identity, his lies and deception. However, now she carried a numbness in the very core of her person, centered in her, a cold, dark, void.

Cayman walked from the shadow and faced her, his face solemn, determined.

“I took you down the hallway that night at the diner because the drug runners found you and I’d received word they were coming for you. I needed them to see you weren’t there, that the diner was empty. When I saw you, when I kissed you that night, yes, I was hiding you, and no, it’s not all been the job. I can explain everything later, but now it has to be a job, one I have to do for your dad. He needs this stuff taken to Washington, and he needs

me to protect you. I will not betray his trust. I'm sorry, Alexa, but this is how it has to be for now.”

Her life immediately shrunk back down to the size of Startup. She wanted to go home, to her small but comfortable flat. She wanted to leave all this behind and forget the whole affair. She didn't want to love anyone, care about anything, want anything. She wanted go back to her life the way it was and be perfectly...numb. She liked it that way. Numb was a good, safe place.

Chapter Fourteen

The next few hours were a mish mash of packing clothes, the Dr. Seuss books, the recorder, deciding who should carry what and how it should be divided. Cayman felt it was important Alexa have none of the information on her person. Alexa felt like he was being ridiculous, as there was no figuring any of it out anyway. However, to avoid having to actually speak to Cayman, she let him take the backpack with all the information for the field office in it. He would carry it in the airport, and on the plane. She was sick of the cloak and dagger anyway. Let them play their stupid little games. She was done with the whole thing. They brought everything out to the car, with Cayman on

alert, his eyes searching the area as they walked to the car.

Alexa now knew there were guards out there and had been all along, but at this point she just wanted to get this done. She wanted to be free of this man, free of the memories of her father, free of it all. She moved like a robot, cold inside and disconnected from everyone, but she managed to do what it was her father asked of her. It was the last thing she could give him, her final offering in his behalf, and she would see it through.

They drove in silence, all five hours and twelve minutes. Cayman had no idea what to say to her...she had nothing to say to him. She stared out at the barren desert she had once thought beautiful and wondered how her heart had ended up in this place, in this situation, again. She tried to back her mind out of it and see how it all began. Every time she ended up at the diner with those beautiful green eyes gazing up at her from his place at the counter.

Her mind wandered to the words from her father on the DVD. Had he been the one to teach her to be so mistrusting? She'd heard children learn things from their parents, things even unspoken. As a child, had she seen his searching eyes on the horizon like she'd seen in Cayman this morning? Had his eyes said things to her small child self she subconsciously stored away? Who was her father, really?

She stopped herself right there. Her father loved her, she had known this from the day of her birth. She would not let herself start doubting the one love she knew she could trust. She could trust that love, right? She sighed and looked out at the spring desert. She tried to focus on the new growth she saw. Spring was usually a beautiful time of the year here, she would find the beauty and think on that.

“Alexa, I--”

“Don’t.” Alexa’s voice rang hard and cold, reflecting her feelings inside, and her anger. The once hot and painful anger was now cold, unbending, like steel in a snow storm. Her eyes remained fixed on the scene outside her window.

Cayman ran his hand through his hair in frustration, eventually resting his head on his fist, his elbow propped against the door.

Neither was hungry so they drove through to Phoenix. They parked the SUV in long term parking, packed suitcases and duffle bags onto a cart and headed into the airport. In the terminal, waiting at the entrance was a young man who looked a lot like Cayman. Sandy hair, blue eyes and about six foot...give the boy green eyes like his brother and he could have been Cayman’s twin.

Cayman smiled and embraced him. He turned to Alexa and said, “Alexa, this is my brother, Patrick.”

Patrick smiled and stuck out his hand. "I've heard a lot about you, Alexa, all good things for sure."

Alexa smiled, trying not to be rude. "Thank you. It's very nice to meet you." That was it. She had nothing more to say, or even to pretend to say. She looked away, studying the crowd.

Patrick glanced at Cayman who also looked away into the crowd of people. His eyes registered a sadness Patrick had never seen in his brother before. Not knowing Alexa, he wasn't sure if she always looked this downcast or if this was new. From what he'd heard about her through Cayman, he was pretty sure something had happened between them.

He looked expectantly at Cayman.

"Don't ask," he said flatly.

Patrick helped with the baggage and they were soon heading through check in. It was the usual harried taking off of the shoes, putting everything in the drab gray tubs and pushing them onto the rollers for their trip through the radar machine. Alexa hated this part of flying, usually, but today she was glad for the distraction. Now she had *two* Cayman's to contend with, and she was quite certain she hadn't been enjoying the first one. She wanted to get away from them both. There was a twinge of guilt at her rudeness, but that quickly melted into the emotionless pot of numbness she now carried where her heart used to be. She had no

idea what was pumping the blood through her body, because her heart was gone.

Cayman and Patrick talked together about their parents and their brother, Sam. He wanted an update on his mom and dad, how they were doing, how the farm was, was it getting to be too much for them, all the things family would talk about. Cayman glanced toward Alexa a couple of times, hoping she might soften some and join the conversation, but it was clear that was not going to happen.

Arriving at their gate, Alexa walked to one of the shops and began casually looking at what they had to offer. She wanted to give Cayman and Patrick some time together, and she wanted some time to herself as well. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Cayman watching her nervously. What did he think? Someone would come and snatch her right out of the airport in broad daylight with a million people around? Whatever. This was so much more pathetic than the worst spy movie she'd ever seen.

Patrick turned to Cayman.

“What’s happened? You two look like two love birds about to die of loneliness.”

“I blew it Patrick. I did the greenest agent thing I could ever have done. I asked her how long she and James had been engaged.”

“Yeah...so...” urged Patrick.

“So...she’s not spoken his name since he killed her father, that’s ‘so’. I shouldn’t have known the name of her fiancé,” Cayman spat.

“Her fiancé killed her father?” Patrick was shocked. He whistled softly and patted Cayman on the shoulder. “That’s pretty heavy stuff to have to deal with. It would be hard to care for anyone after something like that. I can’t even imagine it.” He looked pensive.

“Why didn’t we know that? I mean, the part about her fiancé?” Patrick asked, “It’s not part of the file we have.”

“It’s personal information, not made known to other agents. At least that’s the only reason I could think of. It was a surprise to me when she told me.”

“She cares for you, Cayman.” Patrick looked at his brother.

“Yeah, she cares for me about like she cares for the cold steel of her gun.” Cayman whispered, looking for her in the shop.

“She can shoot? Wow...that’s hot--”

Patrick was interrupted by Cayman as he rushed toward the shop.

“Patrick, do you see her? Make the call! Does anyone have eyes on her?” He was frantically searching the shop, behind the counter, under the racks. “Alexa!” Turning to the clerk he said, “Ma’am, do you have public restrooms in your shop?”

The clerk looked at him, not understanding what he was saying.

He pulled out his badge and flashed it front of her face.

“DO YOU HAVE PUBLIC RESTROOMS IN THIS SHOP!”

The frightened clerk shook her head no. There was no sign of Alexa anywhere. He went to the front of the shop and looked hopefully at Patrick. Patrick shook his head. He’d stayed with the bags and now radioed to the agents assigned to watch the airport.

“Subject is gone, I repeat, Subject is gone. Begin sweep. Repeat: begin sweep.”

After one more search of the shop, Cayman hurried back to where Patrick was standing. He was distraught, out of breath and angry.

“I shouldn’t have let her go in there by herself. What was I thinking? Where’s Dixon? He was supposed to be watching the shop? Where is he? We need to initiate a sweep--”

“It’s already been done, Cayman. Just stay calm, you know the routine.” He was eyeing his brother suspiciously, wondering if his involvement with Alexa would make him unable to think clearly enough to complete this mission. Before much more could be said, Cayman started running down the concourse, checking each gate to see if she was being or had been forced onto another plane.

“*Nah, he’s good,*” said Patrick to himself. Grabbing the backpack with books, recording and DVD in it, he hailed the person at the gate counter. The man came right over.

“We have a missing person,” he said pointing to the remaining bags, “and I need you to store these bags behind the counter until we can come back for them. Do you understand? I will be the one to come back for them. Give them to no one else. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll keep them with me.” The young man took the bags and headed back to the counter. There were multiple messages coming over the radio by now and Patrick started responding to each, one by one. He started down the concourse and saw the now unmanned counter in the shop where Alexa disappeared. He hurried into the shop with his gun out. Checking behind the shop’s counter he saw a pile of fabric that was the apron worn by employees of the shop.

He looked quickly around the shop and saw the back room door had been hidden behind the magazine rack. Pushing it to the side, he opened the door and entered the back room. Agent Dixon lay unconscious on the floor, blood trailing from a head wound. He was coming back around when Patrick knelt beside him.

“What happened?” Patrick checked Dixon’s eyes.

“I saw someone forcing her into the back room, I saw the clerk heading back as well. I ran in here and everything went black.”

Patrick radioed ‘agent down’ and told him to stay where he was. Patrick headed out the front of the shop onto the concourse, running in the opposite direction Cayman had gone and did the same thing at each gate along the concourse. The two brothers ran back to the gate empty handed. Alexa was gone.

Chapter Fifteen

Cayman had never been on this end of the need for information. He'd never known the pain that sat in the gut when someone was waiting for word from his team on the wellbeing of a loved one. He laughed sarcastically at that one. A loved one? At this point in time he knew Alexa never wanted to see him again, didn't care if she ever saw him again. But he loved her and as much as his brain didn't want him to admit that, his heart couldn't deny it. He didn't know whether to shoot something or...shoot something.

Patrick explained to him what happened with Dixon and that the woman at the counter wasn't a store employee. They'd asked around and spoken with the owner of the shop and it was

actually supposed to be closed for cleaning.

Cayman wanted to pick Dixon up by his lapels and scream at him. How could he let this happen? Why didn't he call for help when he saw the kidnapping go down? What was the matter with him?

However, Dixon was nowhere to be found. When the EMT's arrived, he was gone. No one had seen him since which made Cayman wonder if they'd come back for something, found him conscious and took him with them.

Cayman sat down in one of the chairs at the gate. Patrick sat down beside him. They were waiting to see if Alexa would magically show up. Cayman knew that wasn't going to happen, but he also knew regs were regs, and this was what you did when there was a missing person...you waited.

"I have to ask you some questions, Cay, you understand." Patrick was nervously rubbing his palms together. They were sitting at the gate now, waiting for word. Patrick looked straight ahead, elbows rested on his legs.

"Yeah, I know. Go ahead." Cayman was leaning forward in the chair, arms also resting on his legs.

"Have you slept with her?" Patrick let the words spill from his mouth.

Cayman pursed his lips at the intrusion into his privacy. Then he shook his head from side to side as if clearing cobwebs.

“No, Patrick. I have not slept with her,” he replied.

“Serious?” This was Patrick the brother talking not Patrick the agent.

“Serious.” Cayman replied. Then sitting up and heaving a big sigh he continued. “I haven’t slept with her, and do you know why? All this time, I thought it was because of her situation, and I didn’t want to take advantage of her, you know? She’s been through a whole lot of hell this past year. But there’s just something about her, Patrick, something that made me see she was more than a body, more than a shell. I wanted to understand her. I wanted a clear view of who this amazing woman was, not a view clouded by sex. I just wanted to get to know the human being first. So, no, I haven’t slept with her.”

Patrick wanted to know who this man was sitting next to him and where they’d taken his brother. However, there was something in Cayman’s eyes, a heartache in the words he spoke that made Patrick realize this woman was the real deal. He’d never seen Cayman this distraught over anything before, especially a woman. Patrick cleared his throat in an effort to sound at least a little professional.

“What has your relationship with her been to this point?” Patrick continued with the required set of questions.

“My relationship with her?” Cayman thought on this for a minute and a wistful smile crossed his lips. “I talked her into coming with me to Page, to help her answer some questions about her father’s death. In reality, I lied my butt off so I could get more information from her and possibly catch some very bad men. If you want to call that a relationship, then there you go. I succeeded at my mission. I got the information for the Bureau, but I lost the most important piece of my life.”

“We’re going to find her Cayman, and when we do, are you going to tell her how you feel?” Patrick looked at his brother.

“I don’t think that’s on the list of questions,” said Cayman.

“No, that’s on the brother’s list of questions,” smiled Patrick.

“I don’t know, Patrick. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I do know I’m never going to let her out of my site, and if I have to tell her how I feel to accomplish that, then so be it. I can’t breathe without her. I can’t think straight and I certainly don’t want to live without her.” Cayman sighed, sitting back in the stiff chair and running both hands through his hair.

“We’ll find her,” said Patrick, looking at his watch, “and it’s time to move. C’mon, let’s go meet up with the others.”

After getting the luggage from behind the counter, and thanking the young clerk for taking

care of them, Cayman and Patrick walked swiftly to the front of the airport. They joined the remainder of the team still there and waited for the others of the team to pick them up and take them to where Cayman's SUV was parked.

Sliding into the driver's seat of his SUV, he could feel her presence in the car. He missed her; he missed her not speaking to him. His anger rose when he thought of anyone hurting her, anger that rose to a fury that both frightened him and kept him sane. Patrick eventually opened the passenger door and sat down, shutting the door behind him.

"I'm riding with you," he said. "You're not going to be alone until we find her. I'm going where you go. The team is heading to the Phoenix field office and we're welcome to meet them there. There'll be a situation report on what is known so far, they'll map out the known places where this group has been seen. We'll fan out from there and start a search. Are you up for that?"

"Yes. I'm definitely up for that, and when I find them, if they've so much as broken one of her fingernails, I'm going to--"

Patrick finished his sentence for him. "You're going to stand back and let us get her safely back to you. This time we have what we need to put them away. You know we do."

"I...I know. I know." Cayman followed the team ahead of him as the two brothers drove the remainder of the way in silence.

When the first man grabbed Alexa in the shop, a hand went over her mouth before she could utter a sound. The agent they called Dixon saw them grab her and turned his head gazing blandly down the concourse. Had he seen them? Why didn't he call to Cayman? What was he doing?

She kicked and fought, trying to bite the hand covering her mouth. One of her hands got free and she punched her attacker in the groin as hard as she could. He started to fall and the woman at the counter rushed to steady him, punching Alexa in the stomach and then ran to open the door to the storage room. Alexa grunted as her captor gained his footing with a groan and a curse, nearly twisting her head off her neck. In the storage room her mouth was stuffed with a handkerchief and taped, her hands taped behind her back. A cloth was tied around her head, covering her eyes.

She could hear Cayman screaming her name and she tried to call out to him, but the tape was sure and the handkerchief held the sound inside her mouth. Her heart broke at the anguish in his voice. Remembering what her dad said about this group of men, how ruthless they were, she decided to do all that she could to save herself. She would see Cayman again, and when she did, she would not be afraid to tell him how she loved him.

She was wrapped in a coat with a large hood and taken to a car apparently parked in a hangar, from the echo she heard as her kidnappers called out to each other. The trunk of the car was opened and she felt a fist hit the side of her face and everything went black.

Dixon saw Mitchell come up behind Alexa and grab her mouth. He quickly looked away before Mitchell actually touched her, so she would think he hadn't seen anything. Had he looked away quickly enough? If she'd seen him, it could ruin everything.

The woman behind the counter nodded to him as the back room was emptied and he quietly walked into the shop.

“Make it count,” he said to the woman, “plant it right here.” He pointed to a spot on his forehead and the woman hit him with the butt of her gun. Everything went black.

The woman went back out to the front of the shop, moved a rack holding magazines in front of the door to the stock room and quickly took her place behind the counter. It was seconds before the agent they called Cayman stormed into the shop. He didn't see the hidden door, and once he was gone, she took off her apron, dropping it on the floor behind the counter, put on a hat and long rain

coat and started down the concourse. A large group of people from Seattle were deplaning and she easily disappeared into the crowd.

Alexa felt the tape around her ankles, felt the legs of the chair they were taped to. Her hands were taped around the back of the chair so tightly there was no way to wiggle free. Her face was throbbing, her neck ached.

Her attention changed when she heard voices not too far from where she sat. She strained to hear what they were saying.

“What if she doesn’t know anything? What then?” urged a male voice.

“Then we kill her, cut our losses and move on.” Said a second voice, also male.

“That won’t work, you idiot. And let me tell you why.” The third voice was menacing and angry. “Because I’ve worked a lifetime for this, I’ve kept you out of jail and I’ve made sure the product gets where it needs to be without any legal entanglements. I needed that picture and it’s obvious she doesn’t have it on her.” There was a muffled gunshot and what sounded like a body dropped to the floor.

“Does anyone else want to question my authority?”

The room was silent and the speaker continued.

“I’d be willing to bet that by now the Bureau has enlarged that photo enough to get the information they need. That means we have a very small window of time to get out of the country. Ideas.”

The room remained quiet and Alexa heard the hammer on the gun move into shooting position. “Somebody better have some ideas or I start picking you off one by one. The only person in this building of any worth to me at all is the woman in the next room, and she’s only valuable if I can find a way to use her to get me out of the country. One of you better come up with some good sound planning, and I better hear it real soon.”

The silence erupted into full out chatter. She couldn’t understand a word, some of it was in Spanish, some in German and there was one language she didn’t recognize at all. Her heart was pounding in her throat and she wondered how much longer she had until they would change their plans and decide she was no of use to them. There was nothing she could do but wait, and pray Cayman and the others would get there before they came to that conclusion.

Chapter Sixteen

The two men approached the warehouse quietly, stalking the building as if it would come to life at any moment. Cayman had the lead with Patrick following close behind. A group of four agents watched the back of the warehouse for anyone who may try escaping that way.

Cayman signaled with two fingers to watch the door, and cover him as he went in. Their guns were drawn, knees slightly bent, eyes following the barrel of their guns, they kicked open the door and shouted, “FBI, drop your weapons!”

The building was empty, with no sign anyone had been there in months. Cayman lowered his gun and kicked an empty chair over in his anger.

“That’s not going to find her, Cay,” Patrick reminded his brother.

“How many of these empty shells do we have to search? It’s pointless. They can’t have left the city; there are agents at every gate in the airport, on every concourse, roadblocks on every road out of the city. Someone would have seen them. They have to be holding her somewhere in the city.”

Cayman was agitated and with each passing hour he became more so. He knew the statistics, he’d told the family of victims many times, and he knew he was running out of time.

“Every empty one we find is one building closer to finding her, Cayman. We’re not the only ones, looking. There are more than two hundred agents doing the same thing we’re doing. We’ll find her.”

Cayman looked at his brother with eyes full of doubt. He wanted to believe, he *needed* to believe. His arms ached to hold her, to smell her hair and touch her face again. He felt lost, and couldn’t separate his feelings for Alexa from the job at hand, because the job at hand *was* Alexa. He needed her back and if she rejected him, he would be happy just knowing she was safe.

His misery was interrupted as Patrick called to the other agents.

“Clear!”

They all responded with the same call, signifying the area to the back of the building was empty as well.

They all went to their cars. Cayman and Patrick were riding together. They crossed off another warehouse and headed to the next one on the list. Cayman was quiet and let Patrick drive this time. It was as if all the wind had been knocked out of him. He was losing hope and Patrick could see it in him.

“Cayman, you have to separate Alexa from this search. You are going to have to think of the group we are after, try to forget Alexa is part of this. You’re not going to last if you don’t and I need to know I can count on you, that you have my back.” Patrick waited for him to respond.

“I know, Patrick, I know. And I’m trying, but what you’re asking me to do is like suddenly losing an arm and then being told to just forget I ever had one. You know? How do I do that? I’ve only known her for a short time, Patrick, but I *know* her...what’s she’s thinking at any given moment, what a certain look on her face means, I *know* her, and now I could lose her, without her ever knowing how I really feel about her.” Cayman rubbed his forehead as if it might help him think clearer. “Where’s the next warehouse?”

Patrick handed him the list. The next place wasn’t a warehouse at all but a building comprising several offices. Often this particular set of offices was home to more than one drug and/or gun runner. Though they hadn’t been seen there, the agents had

to be sure they weren't there, which was why they were checking all the buildings on this list.

Cayman considered it pointless, futile. He needed to be in the middle of the fray, shooting something. He needed to feel like what he was doing was actually accomplishing something. As the hours dragged on into the afternoon, he felt more and more like he was useless. It was going on eight hours now, and hope was waning.

The radio crackled and the voice on the other end said, "Sit. Rep. back at the office in fifteen, round 'em up and head back." No one had found anything.

As the agents filed in and took their seats, Cayman and Patrick stood near the back. Cayman was too full of nervous energy to sit, so he paced back and forth across the back of the room. When the lead agent, Agent Grantham entered, the room became very quiet.

William Grantham was considered the 'old man' of the agency. He was everyone's father, kind and gentle with an air about him of having experienced heartbreak and then using that heartbreak to lift others. His compassion for the agents, or as he referred to them, 'his kids' was unsurpassed. The men revered him and on not a few occasions, sought him out for his wisdom with problems at work and at home.

“Okay boys and girls; we have some news, thanks to Cayman and Patrick, and it’s actually quite disturbing.”

He hung an enlargement of the photo Cayman and Alexa found in her photo album. After working to sharpen the pictured and clean it up, it was clear there was someone in the backseat. Whispers of ‘who is that?’ rolled through the room as the group buzzed with speculation.

“This is why Agent Menetti needed us to see this picture. Take a good look at the face in the back window. That face belongs to Agent Carl Dixon.”

Disbelief hung heavy in the room. No one said a word. Cayman stiffened and stopped pacing.

“It’s one of us...one of our own?” Cayman called from the back.

“Yes,” said Grantham, “it is, and my guess is this is why they’ve been a step ahead of us since the onset of this investigation. It may be easier for us to find him, now that we know who we’re looking for, but be warned: he is the leader of this drug ring. He’s not the man we thought he was, and he’s incredibly dangerous. You are authorized to use deadly force should it come to that, but as always, we want him alive if at all possible.

“The intel we have at this time supports our belief he is still in the city. We have reason to believe he is holed up in a smaller building at the airport. He may be waiting for the situation to cool

down to make his escape. Joller, Smythe, Danner and Hepworth; I want the four of you to take one agent with each of you, but the Richards boys are to stay put, for obvious reasons.”

“You can’t--” Cayman started, but before he could get any more out of his mouth, Patrick pulled him into the hallway.

“Don’t ruin your career over this Cayman! You know better than to question a superior. Think what you would be doing if someone else were in your position. You’re a mess! Look at you! Cayman, you can’t even think straight, and these agents are walking into a nest of drug runners. They need men with them that don’t have an agenda, men who have one thing in mind and one thing only. You *know* this is the right call.” Patrick was inches away from his face.

Cayman pushed Patrick back and stalked to the windows overlooking the city below. His fists were white knuckled and he couldn’t look at the agents as they filed out of the room. Logic told him it was the right call, emotion was pushing him to run after them, force them to let him go. He had been trained that emotion was wrong in almost every instance. Acknowledging that fact was the hardest thing he’d ever done.

Cayman felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned to see Agent Grantham standing beside him.

“I know how you’re feeling, Cayman. I do.”

“With all due respect, sir, how could you possibly know what I feel?” Cayman was bitter and it showed in his voice.

“Thirty-nine years ago next month, our baby was kidnapped from our backyard. He was three years old. Agents just like these went out and found our son and brought him back to us. Trust me, I know what you’re going through.”

Cayman swallowed. “My apologies, sir, I had no idea.”

“I know you didn’t, that’s why I told you. Had I gone out with those men, someone would have been killed because I would have been looking for my son. Nothing else would have mattered to me but finding my boy; not the lives of the men who were trying to rescue him, not rules and regulations, nothing.”

The lump in Cayman’s throat refused to let him respond. He just nodded his head and returned to looking out the window.

Agent Grantham left him there with Patrick and a warning for Patrick to keep an eye on his brother. Cayman tried not to scoff, but even with the story of Grantham’s son, it was difficult to stay put, and he wasn’t sure it was something he could do.

Chapter Seventeen

Once the men finished their conversation in the other room, Alexa heard them enter her room. She was pretty sure the voice she'd heard was the agent everyone called Dixon. She couldn't be sure, as she was still blindfolded, but the voice sounded like what she'd heard briefly in the airport. Admittedly she wasn't paying a lot of attention to any of them.

Dixon strode quickly up to her and asked her the same questions she'd heard a dozen times.

"Where is the picture from your album?" he demanded.

"I turned it in to the FBI." She was being totally honest with him, just like her dad had told her to be. She'd lost count of how many times they'd asked her the same question.

There was a sound *slap* across her face. She refused to give him the satisfaction of a painful response, which only served to make him angrier and he slapped her again. Her head started to swim, and she slumped forward, pretending to have passed out.

Dixon scoffed and walked away from her. “Leave her. We’ll deal with her when we get back.” She heard retreating footsteps growing softer, as another command was given. “Hunter, watch the door, we won’t be long.”

Her captors left, leaving her alone in the room. Try as she might to wiggle even one finger free, she was bound tightly and could not move.

Alexa thought of Cayman, about how she had hurt him so many times with her mistrust and her suspicions. She thought of the look on his face when she told him to get out of her flat that first morning and when after he left, she’d dumped his food down the disposal. These things broke her heart and she wished for just one chance to tell him how sorry she was, to tell him how she would never hurt him again. Her heart ached to see him.

Tears filled her eyes as she realized that was never going to happen. She didn’t care that she would die when the men returned, she cared that her dying meant she would never see Cayman again. She would never feel his arms around her, hear his heart beating in time with her own. The tears soaked her blindfold, but she could not stay them.

Still at the windows, Cayman watched the city, knowing Alexa was out there, alone, possibly fighting for her life.

“I know what you’re thinking, Cayman,” said Patrick. “Forget about it. I’m not letting you leave this building.

Cayman felt like a caged lion, ready to pounce...*needing* to pounce. How could anyone expect him to stand by and do nothing? He turned and started for the door. Patrick stepped between him and his escape.

“Don’t make me deck you, Patrick,” he warned. “I’m not staying here, waiting. If you want to stop me, you’re going to have to shoot me. I’m going.”

“Cayman, be realistic. You don’t even know where to look. You’ll wander around out there without a radio, without any contact with the team; you won’t even know where they are.”

“I would know if you came with me,” said Cayman.

“You know I can’t do that,” replied Patrick. He turned away, unable to look his brother in the eye.

“What would you do if you were in my place?” Cayman asked.

“I can’t answer that Cayman, you know I can’t. I’ve never loved anyone the way I see you love Alexa. I have nothing to even compare it to. I know you love her, I knew it from the minute I saw you two in the airport. So in all honesty, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Cayman’s face was hard, angry, but full of pain. His eyes flared with a passion Patrick only wished he could know.

“Cayman, you can’t ask this of me. We’ll both lose our jobs; don’t ask me to do this.”

“Okay, Patrick, I won’t ask you, but I’m leaving, and you can go ahead and shoot me, but you better aim to kill, because if I have an ounce of breath in me, I’ll keep going, and I’ll find her. Whether she’s dead or alive, I’ll find her, and when it’s done, I’ll come back and kick your butt for shooting me.”

Patrick paused and stared at his brother. He turned to his pack, grabbed his radio and tossing it to Cayman said, “I’ll drive.”

“You know, I bet I can get you to talk,” came the menacing voice of the guard as he moved slowly in her direction.

Alexa said nothing. The only man left behind when the others left was the one Dixon

called Hunter. She didn't have a clue what anyone but Dixon even looked like.

Suddenly the blindfold was ripped from her head. The light was blinding and she blinked to try and focus. Hunter grabbed her hair, yanking her head back hard against the back of the chair. Alexa grunted at the effort it took to keep her head from being torn off the end of her neck.

“Yeah, cutie. That’s right. You’re going to talk to me, because if you don’t, they’re going to kill you. So, let me just save your life for you.”

With a full fist he punched Alexa in the face and her chair fell backward. Her head hit the back of the chair with a thud and the room filled with stars. Her ribs hit the arm rest and she groaned in pain. She could feel the chair being righted. She groaned again.

“You want some more of that, sweet stuff? You’re not so tough with those knees of yours taped to the chair, are you?” His voice was dangerous and angry.

So this was the man in her motel room. The one she'd kneed in the groin. She looked through her now swollen eye to see him pull his pistol from the holster.

“Do you see this, *sweetheart*? It can be very handy when I need it to be. For example, it can do this.”

Taking the butt end of the gun he hit her hard on the side of her head and she heard her skull

crack. With the other hand he punched her again in the face, hitting her square in the mouth. She tasted blood and felt it run down her chin.

Just as Hunter was about to throw another punch, the door swung open and a very angry and surprised Dixon yelled, “*What are you doing?*”

He rushed to Hunter and knocked him to the ground as he pulled his gun from his holster, finger on the trigger.

“I...I just thought...” Dixon stopped him.

“You just thought you were tired of living, so you decided to disobey me?” Dixon’s finger began to slowly squeeze the trigger. “I told you to guard the door, not beat the life out of the *only* person we have that can give us the information we need. You must have some kind of death wish.” Dixon was taking aim, his arm straightening toward his target as he spoke.

“No! No! I...I thought maybe a little more force would make her talk! That’s all! A little more force.”

Dixon was enraged. He pulled Hunter to his feet, “A *little* more? LOOK at her, you imbecile! She’s no good to anyone now!” He pushed Hunter back with disgust.

“Get him out of here before I kill him. *GET HIM OUT OF MY SIGHT!!*”

The others grabbed his arms and pulled him into the other room.

Dixon stood before her rubbing his lip nervously. She thought about what he'd said; that she was 'no use to anyone now' and she knew what he was thinking. But instead of killing her right there as she was certain he would, he spun on his heels and walked out the front door, away from the others.

Alexa could barely see out of her swollen eyes, her face was bleeding in several places and her ribs hurt. Still, she breathed a pain filled sigh of relief.

What had they been talking about in the other room? Her mind wandered through the past few days with pictures in her mind of Cayman laughing, of her wrapping his injured arm with her shirt, how he came to her father's bedroom door and she'd answered in her underwear, so totally wrapped up in what she was thinking about she'd forgotten she wasn't dressed. She remembered pointing her gun at him on the road through Idaho. Her dad...pictures of her father flashed through her mind, walks in the park when she was small, rides in the car, camping and horseback riding.

The pictures ended abruptly with angry voices from the other room. That must mean she was conscious. Had she been unconscious before? Breathe...pain, don't breathe. Who were they talking about? A takeover? Someone was trying to take over the cartel? Locally? She couldn't tell. They referred to him as...she couldn't quite hear the

name, but it was obvious they were all afraid of him. It sounded like ‘snake’ or something like that. His name was Snake? What kind of a name was that? Focus...focus...what were they saying? Dixon shouted several times that he wanted to know who this man was that was “squeezing” him.

Alexa tried to breathe but her ribs reminded her again that was not a good idea. She felt like she was floating in and out of consciousness. When conscious, she forced herself to listen, to hear what they were talking about. She could hear their voices again, which meant she must be conscious. It was hard to not feel the pulsing in her face, the pain in her ribs and the aching in her head. If she could just force herself to listen, it often served as a distraction, taking her mind off of her pain. If she died before she could tell anyone what she heard then it was all for nothing, but it helped her to not always think about how her legs ached and her arms tingled.

She heard snippets of conversation, threats and angry voices. There was someone trying to take over Dixon’s spot, she was sure of it. It seemed that even he didn’t know who it was, but it wasn’t clear to Alexa where he’d gotten this information. From his voice, she was certain he was nervous. Nervous was not good. People did bad things when they were afraid, made rash decisions. Heavy footsteps were coming toward her again. How angry was Dixon now?

Chapter Eighteen

Agent Grantham laid his heavy hand on Cayman's shoulder.

"When I give an order, Cayman, I mean for it to be obeyed. If you go out again, against standing orders, I *will* take your gun and badge. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Cayman. "It's just that...what if she's dead? I-"

"Stop right there, son," Grantham said, "We will find her, and until we know differently, she is alive. Do you hear me? She *is* alive."

Cayman nodded his head and turned again to the view of the city. He rubbed the back of his neck to slow the aching he felt there. How long had it been since he'd slept? He felt instantly fatigued.

Cayman and Patrick hadn't even made it out of the parking lot. Agent Grantham had a feeling Patrick wouldn't be able to hold his brother back, so he waited. Once they were in their car, he'd pulled up behind them and ushered them patiently into the building.

Grantham knew that Cayman's frustration level was building. He was aware for every hour that went by, the possibility of finding Alexa alive grew smaller and smaller. Cayman, having been on the investigative side of the fence many times, also knew this was the case, and it was hard for him to not hit the panic button. Still, he could feel panic rising in him like a sour stomach. The team had been gone for two hours and still no word.

Patrick's radio crackled with the news a Sit. Rep. had been called and all the team was to head back into the office.

It was a very disappointed group of agents that filed into the room this time. A few would pat Cayman on the arm; most avoided making eye contact with him altogether. The bitter taste of a double agent was on all their tongues, and that made the situation even harder to deal with. There was a small amount of chatter as Agent Grantham walked to the front of the room. The enlarged photo from Cayman and Patrick still hung on the board.

Grantham pulled a map of the city down from the ceiling.

“We’ve had some reports of activity in these areas,” he announced, pointing to a specific portion of the map. “We need to concentrate all our efforts in these spots. I need you all to go home, get some rest and we’ll get a fresh start in the morning. The second team will continue looking through the night, but you kids need to get some sleep.”

Cayman spent the night pacing, trying to figure out why this whole thing felt so wrong to him. Not the kidnapping (which was wrong enough), but the rescue. It was wrong, just *wrong* and he couldn’t seem to put his finger on *why*.

His heart ached to find Alexa, he’d never felt like this before and he didn’t like the feeling. What was happening to her? Where could they possibly have her if they were still in the city? Every time he lay down to sleep, the only thing he could see was Alexa, smiling back at him, laughing. He could feel her lips as she moved in to kiss him, and then his eyes would pop back open and the heartache would start all over again.

Daylight was finally showing through the windows of the sleep room. He and Patrick were required to stay in the building, and thankfully, there was a locker room with showers. Cayman thought maybe a warm shower would help to keep his wits about him. The brothers both kept a couple

changes of clothes for just this contingency. The shower and change of clothing did feel good, but not that good. He couldn't get his heart off of Alexa, and that made his brain ineffective.

Agents were filing back into the room for their morning briefing by the time Cayman finished showering and headed to meet with the team.

"Here's what we have so far," Grantham began. "Dixon has gone dark. We've heard nothing from him since the kidnapping at the airport. He knows about the picture by now, and is probably trying to figure out how to get out of the city. We need to find him before that happens, and this time, the order is shoot to kill."

A soft murmur went through the ranks, but Grantham could see most of the agents were ready for that order, all of them except Cayman. He stood in the back, his jaw dropped staring at Grantham.

"Isn't that just what we don't want to do?" Cayman asked with a voice of surprise. "I mean, don't we need to know how this happened, to avoid the same problem again? How will we find out what he knows if we just kill him? Truthfully, I'd love to be the one to do it, but it just seems wasteful to have gotten this much information only to throw it away because we have no idea what happened to Dixon to make him turn."

Grantham cleared his throat. "Clearly Agent Richards, you don't have the whole story, and I will forgive the disrespect due to the

emotional state you're in. I have given an order as the Lead Agent on this mission. You *will* comply with that order. Do you understand?"

Cayman folded his arms and nodded, leaning against the back wall. He'd never seen Grantham like this, ever. He was always the level headed one, the one that would break a situation apart and put it together piece by piece to understand it better. This was not like him, not in the least bit.

"You won't have to worry about shooting him, Agent Richards, because you won't be allowed out of the building. Should he show up here, however, I would expect you to shoot to kill." His voice was level, almost threatening.

"Yes, sir." Cayman and Patrick answered at the same time. Grantham nodded.

"Now," Grantham continued with the briefing, "Dixon has brought shame and embarrassment to this team. He has taken everything we stand for and tossed it down the crapper. There's no excuse for putting his own team members in danger the way he has. No excuse! We will find him today. We will rescue the hostage and rid ourselves of Dixon once and for all. There will be no news footage about him being one of ours so we're treating him differently. We will show this city how we deal with anyone who turns on their own team. Now go get 'em, Kids!"

The team stood, slapping each other on the back, shouting words of angry encouragement to each other as they headed to their vehicles. There were high fives and shouting back and forth about how they would find him and put an end to “this kind of thing.” They were ready to do what was needed to bring closure to this chapter in the lives of the team. Cayman watched, dumbfounded, at how Grantham, the usually quiet and reserved man he’d always known, had removed all the safeguards agents are trained to keep in check and tossed them out the window.

What was going on? Had the Bureau gone mad? It was baffling to him, but he knew one thing. He would get to the bottom of this, even if he had to break a few more rules to get it figured out. He would do it.

Grantham left with the team, leaving Patrick and Cayman alone in the conference room. Cayman was thinking, wheels turning so loud Patrick had to raise his voice to bring Cayman back to the present.

“Hey! Can you hear me? Where did you go?” Patrick was worried about his brother. He wasn’t acting like he had the past few days, and it appeared he had come to some resolve about his being kept in this cage.

“Patrick, did you see what just happened?” Cayman asked.

“Yeah, it was hard to miss. I’ve never seen Grantham like that before.”

“Neither have I, and that’s the strangest part of all of this,” Cayman began, “what’s up with him? Why is he so emotional? This is the man that’s always told us to take the emotion out of it and keep our heads. Do you think he’s cracking under the pressure?”

Patrick shook his head. “I really don’t know, but there isn’t anything we can do about it. I’m sure it will all blow over. You know how the team gets when one of our own is in danger, or if someone turns. And in this instance, we have both. I mean, Alexa is the daughter of one of our own, and Dixon is the kidnapper. We have a double whammy, so it makes sense everyone would be just a little off.”

“It’s more than being a little off, Patrick.” Cayman was chewing his lip, staring at the now empty rows of chairs. “Come on, we’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

“Here we go,” muttered Patrick. “He’s going to have my head on a chopping block one way or another.”

He followed Cayman down the hallway to Agent Grantham’s office. The door was locked. Taking one look around, Cayman brought out his tools for picking locks and started in on the door knob.

“What are you doing??” Patrick hissed, quickly glancing up and down the hallway. “You can’t do this Cayman, you have to stop, now!”

Patrick put his hand on Cayman’s to get him to stop.

“I know what I’m doing, Patrick. Just let me do this. I have to do *something*! I can’t just sit around anymore.”

Patrick sighed and the lock slipped open. They entered the office and shut the door softly behind them. The blinds were closed so no one would see them, and immediately Cayman headed for the desk.

Right away Cayman noticed the backpack sitting in a corner by his credenza.

“What is that still doing here? That was supposed to have been sent to Jonathan in Washington D.C.” Cayman eyed the backpack and turned to the desk, thinking.

“What are we looking for?” asked Patrick as he followed Cayman around the desk to the filing cabinet.

“I’m not sure,” said Cayman, “but I’ll know it when I find it. I want to see the file for this case. I want to know the details of the case Grantham said I didn’t know.”

They searched through the file cabinet and there was no file. Cayman knew there would be a file. There was always a file, every case has a file with a number assigned to it.

“Maybe someone else has it,” he muttered, out loud but to himself, “but that’s not the Grantham I know. He’s a control freak...has to have his eyes on everything.”

Patrick pulled open several desk drawers, and with the last drawer he heard something drop to the floor under the desk. He squatted down to see what fell and found a manila envelope with no address or label on it.

“What’s this?” he said picking it up and handing it to Cayman. There was tape on either end of the envelope showing it had been taped to the top of the drawer he’d opened.

They opened the clasp and pulled out a file...*the* file, along with the cipher from Alexa’s Dr. Seuss books. That cipher was supposed to be sent to Washington with everything else. Why was it in this envelope? Cayman quickly laid the file on the desk and started skimming down the first page, which turned out to be a recent update for the file. About halfway down the page there was a notation handwritten, regarding a witness to a kidnapping in a large warehouse south of town.

Cayman leafed through the loose pages looking for a follow up to that report. There was none. There had apparently not been a follow up.

“Why would he not have followed up on *any* leads in this case?” Patrick mumbled as he stood beside Cayman. “And we’re not even checking the south end of town. Grantham said all the leads had

been for the north end of town. What is he doing, Cayman? There's got to be something we don't know, something we're not seeing."

Checking each page, it was clear there had been no follow up and no one searching that end of town.

"Let him take my badge and gun. I'm looking at the south end. You're not coming with me Patrick; I'll not be responsible for you losing your job."

Before they left the room, Cayman dialed the number for the main office in Washington, D.C.

"Yeah, Agent Cayman Richards here. I need to speak with Jonathan Truseau."

"One moment please," came the crisp reply.

It was a few seconds and there was a voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey Cayman! How's it going? I haven't heard from you in forever."

Cayman's heart stopped.

"You haven't heard about the situation here in Phoenix?"

"Situation? No...should I have?"

Cayman went through the whole thing with Jonathan. He explained about Alexa, his assignment to keep her safe, the airport, kidnapping, and how he was supposed to have received the backpack that was still sitting in the corner in Grantham's office.

“I’ll take care of this Cayman. You take care of you, and be safe. I’m flying out there as soon as I can get a flight. We’ll talk soon. Oh, and, uh, keep this under your hat. I’d just as soon nobody knew I was on my way.”

“Will do. Thanks, Jonathan.”

Cayman hung up the phone, his gut telling him something was about to happen, and he wasn’t going to like it very much.

“This is surreal,” said Patrick. “Why would he not know about this case?”

Cayman shook his head gravely and took the code information out of the file, placing it in the backpack so Jonathan could review it with the rest of the information. Patrick taped the file back in the top of the drawer and headed for the door. Just as they were about to turn the handle, they heard Grantham’s voice coming down the hall. He was back, and heading to his office.

Chapter Nineteen

Cayman and Patrick could hear the key slipping into the lock as Grantham spoke with someone in the hallway. They looked at each other in panic, both thinking of a viable story as to why they were there...inside a locked office. Nothing came to either of them and they prepared for the worst.

The door began to open as someone came down the hall calling to Grantham about a new development in the case. The door shut and Cayman could hear footsteps heading away from the door, down the hall.

They breathed a sigh of relief, quietly opened the door and peeked out. The hallway was empty and they slipped out and softly shut the door behind them. They went the opposite way Agent

Grantham had gone so they would come into the conference room from another direction. They did not want Grantham to know they'd been anywhere near his office.

As they walked hurriedly through the hallway, Patrick looked like he was going to be sick.

“Really?” asked Cayman with a small smile, “have you never done undercover work before? This was small beans compared to some squeezes we’ve been in.”

Patrick faked a smile. “Yeah, I know, but at those times it was just my life on the line, not my job and the respect of my superiors.”

“May I be the first to say...you have your priorities in a bit of a wad, I think.”

The two strolled casually into the conference room as agents were preparing for another report. Walking to their usual spot in the back, Cayman leaned against the wall, arms folded over his chest.

“So what are you up to, Agent Grantham?” Cayman thought to himself. The little jaunt through Grantham’s office had managed to take some of the sickness out of Cayman’s stomach, but once he had time to think again, his mind went right back to Alexa. The ache returned and he wondered if she was still alive. The thought made him sick all over again.

Agent Grantham strode quickly into the conference room. He was late, which was unlike him, his face a mask of concern.

“Ladies and Gents; we have a serious problem here. We need to find Alexa Menetti and we need to find her now. We are out of time. From the intel we’ve received there appears to be a changing of the guard in the cartel, and this could mean they have private means to get out of the country. We need to step up our search of the north end of town. Every building, every home, every business will be searched by the end of the day. We have the night team coming on to help with this, as you can see by their attendance at this briefing. You’ll find the breakdown of the areas each team member will cover. You’ll see on the breakdown that you will go in pairs, so be careful. Watch each other’s back. Stay alert.”

“So,” Cayman said, raising his hand, “We’ve had no witnesses reporting in? Nothing more to go on than intel?”

Agent Winston raised his hand. “No, not true. I have a snitch I’ve used for years and I turned in his statement witnessing an exchange of a female prisoner south of town. Just wondering what the follow up on that is.”

“Yeah, about that snitch,” Agent Grantham began slowly. “He was found dead from a gunshot wound to the head about two days ago. His system was full of Meth and alcohol.”

“But-” Agent Winston began and was cut off by Grantham.

“Like I said, stay alert out there. Be aware. Dismissed.”

Alexa’s head hurt, she still couldn’t see through her swollen eyes and her mouth was so swollen she couldn’t tell if it was open or closed. Breathing hurt, and she continued to float in and out of consciousness. This time as she woke, she heard a new voice coming from the other room. It was a voice of authority, one she hadn’t heard before, and his tone frightened her.

“Where’s Dixon?” demanded the voice.

“Uh, he went to pick up a shipment at the airport.” She only knew one name other than Dixon, and that was Hunter. But this voice didn’t belong to Hunter.

“I think they’re getting too close, and I don’t think Dixon is doing enough to keep this place hidden. He’s in and out too often and he’s going to blow the cover. He almost did getting the girl in here. It’s time to move.”

This time Hunter spoke up.

“Are you saying we’ll leave the country or just move to another warehouse in the city? The Feds are all over the city, this is the only safe area we’ve been able to secure.”

“Yes, I know,” came the reply. “You’ll know in the next twelve hours. Do NOT leave this building again. Stay put and keep a sharp eye out, you may have company in the next little while, take care of them.”

“What about Dixon?” Hunter responded.

“I’ll take care of Dixon.” The words were final and threatening.

Alexa wondered, as the footsteps came closer, what this turn of events meant for her.

“Your boyfriend is getting a little too close, Miss Menetti,” came the voice, softer than it had been in the other room. “But don’t worry your pretty little head. We’ll make sure he doesn’t find you.”

There was a sarcastic laugh from this new man and the rest of the group sniggered at his comment. Alexa said nothing, hoping they would just walk away and leave her alone, and that’s exactly what they did. Her heart skipped when they mentioned ‘her boyfriend’ and she worried for his safety. Did he know they knew about him? She wondered what use she was to them if they were getting rid of Dixon. Did they still want the picture? Would this new guy want the same thing? He didn’t say anything about it, or about the cipher. The cipher was the one thing Dixon had never mentioned. Maybe none of them knew there was a cipher. From what she’d heard on the DVD, without the photo, the cipher was useless. How

could that be? What would the photo have to do with those useless numbers and underlined letters? Had any of it reached Truseau? Still so many questions, and hopefully a little more time to ponder those questions.

As the group filed out, Grantham made his exit from the front of the conference room. Once he was out of sight, Cayman grabbed Agent Winston and hurried him into the hallway and around a corner.

Winston was tall with dark hair and dark eyes. Well built and solid inside and out. He was a good agent, not accustomed to politicking and useless verbiage. He was a no nonsense agent, and he didn't like the recent exchange with Grantham. He had a bad taste in his mouth.

"Your snitch," Cayman said, "was he a user?"

"No." said Winston firmly. "He was recovered, hadn't used in more than ten years."

"Could he have relapsed?"

"Not according to the last time I talked with him. Something's not right...a bullet to the head? That sounds like a hit to me. I swear, this guy was ten years clean."

"Thanks," said Cayman, "Stay low."

“Yeah,” said Winston as he walked away, “You, too.”

“I’m outta here, Patrick, and you’re staying put.” Cayman was determined, he knew what he had to do.

“Okay, well, then,” said Patrick, turning the tables on his brother, “you’re going to have to shoot me to keep me from coming with you, Cayman.”

“Don’t be a fool!” hissed Cayman angrily. “If this isn’t what I think it is, your career with the team would be over. This is my fight, and I intend to make it count.”

“You can’t head off without someone covering your back. I won’t let you do it. So, shoot me, because I’m going with you if you don’t.”

Cayman shook his head. “You always were the stubborn one. As soon as the team is gone, we’re gone.” He said.

“Me? The stubborn one?” Patrick laughed. “Now, that’s *rich*.”

Searching the parking lot directly below them they watched each car leave the lot, waiting to make sure Grantham left with them. He was the first one out, the other cars followed him, breaking from the line as they turned off and headed to the area they would cover. Patrick and Cayman watched them moving off until they were completely out of sight, lost between buildings.

“Let’s go.” Cayman’s voice was sure, determined.

They headed to their car and drove south instead of north as the others had gone. They wound through the shipping warehouses and parked in the shadow of one that allowed them a view of who came in and out of the area. It was a short twenty minutes and a car pulled in. It was Dixon. Just seeing him made Cayman want to jump out of the car and shoot him. That would be a foolish move, and logic told him to sit tight, Dixon would take him right to the warehouse.

As the car moved away, Patrick spoke up.

“Okay, Cayman, think this through. What are just the two of us going to do when we get to that warehouse? How many of the cartel are inside? Where is Alexa? Will she be in the line of fire when everyone starts shooting? We have to have a plan.”

There was crackling on the radio and the voice of Winston came through.

“We’ve brought the infrared. There are four men in the north side of the building. Hostage is on the south side, looks to be bound. If we keep it tight and strictly to the north, one of us should be able to get to the hostage while the others keep the north side busy.”

Cayman’s voice was firm, “Winston! What do you think you’re doing? Everyone that has a radio has just heard what you said. Get outta here! NOW!”

“Check your radio frequency, Agent Richards,” came the casual reply. “There are three cars with two agents each on this same frequency. We changed them before we left, and changed yours as well. No one hears us but who we want to hear us. And like I said, we’ve got infrared.”

Cayman smiled. “Remind me to buy you a big fat steak when this is over...all of you.”

“Roger that,” came three enthusiastic replies. Patrick laughed and clapped his brother on the shoulder. “What are you gonna call your new team?”

Cayman was smiling bigger than Patrick had seen for some time. He didn’t respond, but got out of the car to find three more SUV’s lining up behind him. They all left their vehicles and met together in the alley to plan their attack.

Chapter Twenty

Jonathan Truseau stepped off the airplane to a dry Arizona heat. It was so different from the heat and humidity in D.C., but this time of year that wasn't so bad there either. At five feet seven inches tall, Jonathan wasn't a tall man, and he knew it. However, scanning the area with his deep brown eyes, his dark hair waving in the wind, he knew for a twenty seven year old (or any age really) he was good at what he did, and what he did...his specialty...was codes.

Currently, his head was trying to sort through the information given him over the phone by Cayman Richards. Cayman was an agent Jonathan knew to be pretty straight forward, one of the best the Bureau had. It wasn't like him to spout

off with accusations of tangled webs and double agents. Something was not right.

He hailed a cab and on the way to the Phoenix field office pulled out his laptop and began to make notes on what he knew so far. He would go directly to Agent Grantham's office, retrieve the backpack and get to the bottom of this, hopefully, before anyone else got hurt.

The cab dropped him at the office and he walked in, prepared for anything. After showing his badge and ID, he headed to Grantham's office. All agents were out and the office was quiet, with only the sound of ringing phones and clicking computer keyboards.

He stopped at a desk to get a key to the needed office.

"I'm sorry, I can't give you that key without Agent Grantham's permission," said the receptionist. She stared across the desk at him through frameless glasses, her graying hair in a tightly wound bun on the back of her head.

"Miss..." began Jonathan

"It's Mrs...Mrs. Pickett."

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Pickett. Please check my clearance level. You'll see I have clearance to open any office I feel it necessary to open, in any Bureau run building on this or any other continent." He smiled congenially.

"One moment," she said, her annoyance at this young upstart apparent. She pulled up the

appropriate screen on her computer. Her eyes widened.

“My apologies, sir, I’ll get those keys and meet you there.”

Jonathan smiled and gave her a polite ‘thank-you’ as he walked to Grantham’s office.

Coming around the corner, Mrs. Pickett walked briskly to the door. Slipping the key in the lock she opened the door and Jonathan walked through.

“Thanks, again,” he said politely as he shut the door.

Cayman had told him where the backpack was and he went right to the corner. Picking it up, he walked from the office and went back to Mrs. Pickett’s desk.

“I’ll need a private room to review this information. Can you direct me?”

“Certainly, sir,” she said.

She led him around the corner to a small conference room and opened the door for him. He walked in and Mrs. Pickett swiftly closed the door behind him.

For the next two hours, he was immersed in codes, pictures and Dr. Seuss. He worked from his laptop, comparing the information on the sheet written by Alexa and Cayman, with his own he, too, had written from the same books and pictures.

He worked feverishly, comparing to codes Max Menetti had used before, extracting similar

code strings and placing them with the pictures. He also continued to compare each picture to the photo Max had said was the key to all of it. From what he could see from the original photo, there was nothing in it that would have anything to do with the other pictures.

He picked up the codes Cayman and Alexa had written and compared them to the code strings he'd found. There was a reason Max told Alexa to get this information to him. However, to his total and complete frustration, he could find nothing.

He sighed heavily and sat back in his chair, surveying all he had done so far. He remembered the words from the DVD he'd just watched.

"The picture is the key...without it the cipher is useless."

"The picture is the key..." he mumbled to himself as he moved pictures and notes around on the desk.

Jonathan picked up the photo of the car in the desert again and stared at it.

He flipped it over and looked at the back as he had done a million times. Reviewing each book and page, nearly microscopically, he analyzed every inch. There was something he was missing, and he knew it.

Jonathan sat back again in the chair, clasped his hands on the top of his head and rested them there. His mind wandered to games he played as a kid. Hidden Objects games, where he had to find

things in the picture, how many monkeys could he find, how many peaches, how many-

His mind screeched to a stop. He jerked forward in his chair, hands flying to the desk. He picked up the picture of the man leaning against the car and, like he'd done a dozen times at least, picked up the magnifying glass and combed through the picture.

This time, he made his eye see small, insignificant things, lines, pixels, colors where they didn't belong, and suddenly, there it was, big as life.

He quickly picked up the recording and began writing down the first letter of every sentence. It took some time, but the recording wasn't five minutes long, so in a matter of a few minutes, he had the letters. He picked up the pictures and placed the numbers on their backs alongside the letters from the recording.

Of course! Max hadn't used the Dr. Seuss books for Jonathan! They were for Alexa and Cayman, to get them to look closer and figure something was there, but not give them enough to break the code. It was like a code within a code and that's why he couldn't break it.

When he looked closer at the body of the car he could see tiny lines on either side of the trunk lines. He had to go to a special lens to see what those lines said, and they were the missing number that would put it all together. The lines put together read "Twenty Seven", and putting that

number with the others in the code string, completed the fragment he'd been unable to see earlier.

Now, there it was, laid out on the table in front of him. The words were these: "Leader of the pack, Phoenix". And who was the leader of the pack here in Phoenix?

Jonathan's eyes grew wide with panic as he jumped out of his seat and ran to Mrs. Pickett's desk.

"Where is Agent Grantham?" He asked, breathing heavily.

"He's helping with the search. Shall I call him?"

"No, no, I'll call him. I'll call him right now." The person Jonathan Truseau actually called was Cayman Richards, but it was too late.

Chapter Twenty-One

Cayman and the others laid out a plan to cover as many possibilities as they possibly could. The bulk of the team would head into the north end of the building, allowing Cayman to get to Alexa and get her out, hopefully before the shooting started. They positioned themselves along the back of the warehouse in question and listened as voices inside the warehouse began to rise.

It sounded like accusations against Dixon from what they could make out. There were shouts he'd put the whole operation in jeopardy; that he wasn't who he said he was. He could hear Dixon yelling back at them, asking where they were getting their information. The anger continued to escalate.

“That's not good,” whispered Patrick.

“Stay focused,” said Cayman into his radio.

“Heads up everyone,” came the voice of Winston, “We’ve got company.”

The transmission was immediately followed by, “What the--what’s *he* doing here?”

“Who, Winston? Who’s here?” asked Cayman.

“It’s Grantham! I say again, Grantham is on site. Oh, no...no...”

In that instant Cayman’s phone vibrated in his pocket, but there was no time to answer it.

A gunshot rang out and everything went silent. Agent Jason Barnes had been the unlucky one paired with Grantham.

“Agent down! Agent down!” Winston was trying his best to keep his voice quiet. “He got out of the car after Grantham and Grantham turned and shot him in the head!”

Cayman leaned back against the building. He knew Barnes. They all knew Barnes. Was this really happening? How could he do this?

Inside the warehouse the level of voices reached a peak, and it was clear when Grantham entered, the commotion suddenly ceased.

Cayman had a gut feeling this was going to escalate to an all out war within the drug organization itself. He motioned for the signal to be given just as gunfire broke out inside the building.

“Go! Go! Go!”

It was the needed sign to rush the warehouse, and they did just that. Cayman bolted

around to the south entrance and worked his way to the door leading into the room where he saw Alexa taped to the chair. He gasped when he saw her face and all the blood on her clothing. He leaned against the wall outside the room, anger boiling inside of him, so much so it was hard to see through it.

There was someone kneeling beside her. Who was that? What was he saying to her? Cayman looked frantically to see if the man had a gun, if he was threatening her in any way. He wasn't. Cayman had no more asked himself the question, when the man leaned forward and kissed Alexa on the forehead. Who *was* this guy?

Alexa felt the emotions rising in the other room. She feared their anger would be turned on her, that she wouldn't be able to give them any more 'useful' information because she'd given them all she had.

Suddenly she felt someone kneel in front of her, though she'd heard no one moving toward her. Was she imagining it? Who was it? She tried not to panic as she waited for the gunshot that would end her life, but it never came.

"Cayman? Is that you?"

She could barely make her mouth form the words.

“Hey Princess. Sorry it took me so long to get here. You’re as beautiful as ever.”

“Daddy...”

Alexa saw stars dancing in her head. She tried so hard to open her eyes so she could see her father kneeling before her, but they were far too swollen. Instead she saw more stars, many, many more stars fading gradually to darkness. Her head fell to her chest and she heard nothing else.

When the shooting started in the other room, Cayman ran to Alexa, ready to fight whoever it was beside her. To his surprise, the man that stood and turned to Cayman, gun at the ready was her father. Her *father*, who was supposed to be *dead*.

“Max...you’re...” Cayman said, stunned and stopping in his tracks so he didn’t get shot.

He couldn’t think about her father, couldn’t think about the bullets in the other room. He could only think about getting to Alexa. He gave Max a nervous glance, walked quickly to Alexa and knelt down.

“Is she...” his voice trailed off.

“No, son, she’s not dead,” came the pressing reply. “But if we don’t get her out of here, we all will be.”

Max was frantically cutting the duct tape, but there was so much it was taking too long.

“Grab a side, let’s move her away from here and call an ambulance,” called Cayman over the gunshots.

As they were about to pick up the chair, Dixon ran into the room. Cayman spun and aimed his gun at Dixon’s head, ready to shoot. Suddenly he didn’t care if they ever found out what turned him. He wanted him dead for what he’d done to Alexa.

Max was at his side in an instant, lowering Cayman’s arm with his hand.

“Don’t do it, Cayman. He’s one of the good guys. Now, come on! We’ve got to get her to a safe place.”

“What? He’s one of the what?” Cayman thought he hadn’t heard correctly.

“MOVE!”

Cayman didn’t question. He needed to get Alexa out of the warehouse, safely away from the chaos. With a brief glance at Dixon, he turned to Alexa and together he and Max grabbed the chair and ran for the door. They hurried to the side of the neighboring warehouse and Max was immediately on the phone calling for back up and an ambulance.

“He’s a plant, Cayman,” said Max when Cayman hung up his phone. “He was planted two years ago to try and determine who it was that was getting these guys off, who was leaking information

to them and making every one of our advances too late. Guess we found out who that was.”

Cayman was frantically working on the tape and Max was right beside him. Eventually, as they heard the sirens blaring, Alexa came free of her bonds and fell into Cayman’s arms. Tears of anger quickly turning to rage filled his eyes.

“Who did this to her?” he said, glaring at Dixon who’d run with them from the building.

“WHO DID THIS TO HER!?”

“His name is Hunter,” said Dixon, clearly ashamed. “I didn’t know he would do something like this. Had I known I would never have left him guarding her.” Dixon looked drawn and tired.

“Get her to the hospital, Max. Take care of her. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Max pulled Alexa into his arms, holding her to him.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Son. She loves you. Heaven help her, but she does. You come back for her. Do you hear me? You come back for her.”

There were dozens of police and FBI cars coming into the compound. Cayman nodded to Max and ran into the warehouse, gun drawn.

The gunfight was going strong, and trying to find cover in an otherwise empty space was a big problem. His team had hidden behind an overturned metal sheet, but it was the only thing in the room, and it was obviously not going to fit

another person behind it. Cayman hid beside the open door, glancing quickly around the door frame every now and then to see where the cartel members were. Once he got his bearings, he ran back out the door and around to the back of the building, staying low to avoid stray bullets.

As he rounded the corner, a bullet came through the metal wall, hitting him near the hip and traveled on to a fuel tanker parked nearby. The bullet hit the fuel tank dead center. The explosion was deafening. Cayman was thrown to the ground holding his hip, ears ringing. He struggled to his feet, grabbing the wall and limped to the back entrance of the warehouse.

Anger pushed him forward. He couldn't think of anything but Alexa, of what they had done to her. He wanted to kill them all in the worst way, but first, he was going to find out who this 'Hunter' was and make him pay.

The fire from the tanker had caught onto several other buildings. The whole area to the north of the warehouse was in flames. Cayman found the back entrance and slowly opened the door. There was one of him and six of the cartel members. If he shouted for them to drop their weapons, he'd be a goner. He had to take some of them out before they knew he was there.

Quickly he checked the chamber of his gun. He had four bullets left. He threw the door open and emptied his gun into the backs of the drug

runners. Every shot found its target, and when he finished there were two of them left. The firing stopped with a “hold your fire” command from the agents across the room. The two members not hit by Cayman’s bullets turned in surprise and seeing they were outnumbered, dropped their guns and raised their hands. Cayman kept his gun on them as the others ran forward and shoved them to the ground, cuffing them. They were immediately pulled back up into a kneeling position.

Cayman limped to the two on the ground. Grantham couldn’t look him in the eye. Cayman would have spit in his face if he had. He couldn’t even ask Grantham why, it was like looking at no one of any importance at all. He was filth, the lowest form of scum.

Cayman leaned over with a snide smile on his face and whispered in the traitor’s ear.

“I’ll bet your son is *so* proud of you right now.”

He stood up and glared at the two prisoners.

“Which one is Hunter,” he demanded, pointing to the men he’d shot. There was no answer from either of them. He cocked his gun and held it to the traitor’s head. “*WHICH ONE IS HUNTER?* Give me a reason to pull this trigger, Grantham, just one reason. It would be so easy for me.”

Grantham nodded to the man beside him.

Cayman leaned over and picked Hunter up by the hair, cranking his head back so hard he

yelped. Hunter quickly obeyed the command in an effort to keep his head where it was.

“You get a kick out of beating up women who can’t fight back, do you?” he hissed at him. “Here’s a present from the little lady next door.” Cayman winced as he lifted his knee planting it soundly in the man’s groin. Hunter collapsed on the floor in agony and Cayman grabbed his shirt with one hand and pulled him off the floor, ignoring the pain screaming from his hip. Forming a fist with the other hand, he pulled back and punched the man soundly in the face. He pulled his fist back again, ready to plant it one more time.

Immediately there were three men behind him, pulling him off Hunter.

“You’re hurt, Cayman,” said Winston. “Let’s not waste perfectly good blood on losers like these. I say we get you to the hospital.”

Cayman wiped his upper lip with the back of his hand still holding the empty gun. He tried to steady himself, leaning against Winston for support.

“Sounds good to me,” he said breathlessly.

Hunter was writhing in pain, his face bloodied as a steady stream of blood dripped from his face onto his shirt.

Cayman still had a fist full of Hunter’s shirt and he let him loose with a shove. He groaned as he hit hard cement, and Cayman smiled sardonically.

With a fellow agent on either side of him, he put an arm around each of their shoulders for support. Together they started for the door.

“Let’s get outta here,” he said with disgust.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cayman was wheeled into the ER asking after Alexa with every breath.

“Where is she? I need to know where she is. Where is she?”

The nurse gave Winston a quick look while holding up a syringe. It contained a mixture of sedative and painkiller. She looked back down at her anxious patient and said flatly, “He leaves me no alternative.”

She was joking, but still she pushed the needle into his IV and emptied the syringe so he would relax...and relax he did.

The bullet just grazed Cayman’s hip and required only a few stitches. He wasn’t admitted as a patient, but the hospital wouldn’t release him until he could put together a coherent sentence. Once he was released, he went straight to Alexa’s room.

Using the crutches he'd gotten in the emergency room, he walked in, went right to Max and hugged him. He shook Keith's hand and said, "Good to see you, Keith."

Cayman looked at Alexa from the end of the bed with the other two men.

"She kept telling me you were alive," he said to Max, "and I just knew someone was playing a joke on her," he shook his head. "Why didn't you just show yourself...let her know it was you?"

"I couldn't," said Max, sadly. "I didn't think she'd see me, but she's faster than a rabbit and several times I didn't make it out of sight soon enough. Had I come out of hiding, it would have been worse for her, if that's possible. The cartel would have been all over her as soon as they found out I was alive. They would have used her to get to me.

"I just needed to know she was okay. I had to see her, but it was stupid of me. I knew the cartel had found her and I was worried they'd try to get information out of her she didn't have. When I saw you were with her, I breathed a little easier."

Cayman smiled. "I can't even tell you how good it is to see you."

Max smiled and looked at Alexa, his smile fading to sadness and concern.

Alexa looked much better than the last time he saw her. Though her face was still black and blue, the swelling was going down. She'd been

placed in a medically induced coma to allow them to get the internal wounds checked and bleeding stopped. She looked peaceful.

“When will they wake her up, did they say?” Cayman asked, walking around the bed to her side.

“A couple days at most,” replied Max. “I’m sure her body needs the rest anyway. Knowing her, she probably did everything she could to listen in on their conversations. She’s a strong one, always has been.”

“Well,” began Cayman, “from what I’ve heard, she was well trained. She’d make a great agent, if we could find a way to control that stubborn side.” Cayman laughed and Max chuckled.

“Yeah, she’s that, for sure.”

“Hey, Max,” said Cayman hesitantly, “you...you said she loved me. How do you know that? I thought she wanted to get as far away from me as she could.”

“When I found her and knelt beside her in the warehouse, she thought I was you. The way she said your name was filled with relief and sadness. A Dad can hear these things. Her voice told me she was in love with you, that’s how I know.”

Cayman grinned at Max. He grabbed a chair from the side of the room and pulled it to the bed. His hip complained a little and he grimaced as he sat down beside her. He took her hand and held it gently, moving the hair from her face with the

other. He felt like he'd let her down in the worst possible way. He'd allowed her to be taken, by not going into that shop with her, he'd been careless and thoughtless. Every blow she took was his fault. Every broken bone, every drop of blood was because of him. The guilt weighed heavily on him and he wondered if he could ever get past it. He wondered if his guilt would destroy the love he felt for her, wondered if she could ever really love him knowing how he had caused her this pain.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Keith, silent until now.

"I know what you're thinking, Cayman," said Keith softly, "and you couldn't be more wrong. You didn't hit her, not one time. Put the guilt where it belongs, on the people that did this to her. You could never hurt her like this, you know that."

Cayman whispered, "Thanks."

He knew Keith was right, it was just hard to let go of things like that. He swallowed hard and turned to Max.

"You've been in witness protection... for a year?"

"Yes, sort of," said Max, "not really witness protection, but the cartel knew I had something on them so it became necessary to go into hiding. What I think is, they saw us that day in the desert and figured I had seen them, as well. I did see them, and I took the photo, not knowing there was anyone in the back seat at the time. When I got it

home and printed out the picture, I enlarged it and did see someone in the backseat. I destroyed the enlargement right away until I could get the information to the Bureau and I planted the code, hoping you could get it to Truseau in time.”

“Yeah, thanks to Grantham, that didn’t happen. He never sent the backpack on to the office in D.C., so by the time Truseau got it figured out, Grantham had already shot Barnes.”

Max shook his head.

“It wasn’t Dixon in that backseat, it was Grantham. That’s why I needed the photo to get to Truseau. I knew he could be trusted. But when you didn’t make it out of Phoenix, Grantham was the most likely person to get the picture and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it.” Max rubbed his chin with, disgusted with the way that went down.

“How’d you find that out?” asked Cayman.

“Never mind...I just found it out. But I had no proof, and Barnes paid the price for that.”

“How’s Dixon doing? Have you been talked to him?” Cayman asked.

“He’s fine. I guess he left Hunter not knowing the history between him and Alexa.”

Cayman turned to him with eyes of thunder.

“What history.” His voice was suddenly cold.

“Oh, well, apparently she kneed him pretty soundly in the groin in a motel room somewhere when he tried to get--”

“--the album...” said Cayman, finishing his sentence and laughing out loud. “That’s hilarious, because I kneed him in the groin at the warehouse and told him it was a present from Alexa.” He chuckled as he said, “Was it ever!”

They all laughed softly, enjoying the moment.

“Poor Dixon,” said Cayman sadly. “I almost killed him, and would’ve if you hadn’t been there Max.”

The nurse came in and injected something into the IV. She explained they were going to bring Alexa slowly out of the coma and check for any brain damage or permanent sight issues. She told them it would be good for someone to talk to her as she comes out of it. She explained it’s comforting to the patient and might bring her out of the coma a little sooner. She smiled at the group of men and walked from the room.

“Brain damage?” Cayman asked incredulously. “Sight issues?”

He looked to the others and they said nothing. Cayman, still holding Alexa’s hand, looked determined.

“Doesn’t change a thing.” He said firmly, staring into Alexa’s face.

“She’s too ornery for any of that,” smiled Keith. “She’s going to be just fine. Wait and see. She’ll be cussing us all for standing around like she’s incapable of caring for herself.”

“She’ll be fine, Cayman. She’s a tough one, my girl. She’s going to be fine.” He glanced at Cayman and then to Alexa. “You two are both going to be fine.”

Max and Keith left Cayman with Alexa and headed to their motel rooms to get some sleep. It had been a long couple of days and everyone was exhausted.

Cayman snagged a nurse and asked her if he could get a copy of Dr. Seuss’ Green Eggs and Ham. She looked at him kind of funny, but said they would probably have it on the Pediatric floor. Within minutes she had the book and delivered it to Cayman.

He gazed at the book and smiled. This was one of her favorites, he remembered her telling him. He glanced at Alexa and walked around the bed to sit on his chair. Slowly he leafed through the pages trying to imagine her as a little girl on her father’s lap, listening to him read these lines. He smiled again.

Scooting his chair closer to the bed, he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, holding the book before him. Clearing his throat and feeling just a tad silly, he began.

“I am Sam. Sam I am. Do you like green eggs and ham...?”

His voice continued on smooth and soft. When he finished the book, he looked over at

Alexa. She remained asleep so he opened to the front page and began again.

Ever so gradually, Cayman began to feel sleep overtake him. He shook his head and continued reading, placing the open book on the bed and scooting a little closer to it. Still, his head began to lower onto the blankets as his eyes closed.

In minutes he was sound asleep, his head resting on the bed beside the sleeping body of the woman he loved.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was late afternoon when Max stepped into Alexa's room with Keith. What he saw made him smile.

Alexa continued sleeping peacefully, and there with his head on the bed beside her was Cayman, leaning over from the chair. On the bed beside Cayman lay the book, "Green Eggs and Ham" open, but not finished.

"Looks like he read himself to sleep," smiled Keith.

"Yeah, sure looks like it," chuckled Max.

"I've missed her Keith, I've really missed her." Max smiled admiringly at his daughter.

“Oh, she has missed you as well. Not many days went by she didn’t talk about you one way or another. You were always her hero.” Keith grinned as he spoke.

“I never told her the truth about her mother. She still believes LeAnn died in childbirth. She was always so small, too small to understand. Then suddenly she was old enough to understand, but I couldn’t tell her without telling her what I actually did for a living. I keep wondering if that decision, to not tell her about my work, was a mistake.”

“No, Max,” said Keith firmly. “You probably saved her life. If those men even thought she knew more, they would have tortured her until she spilled it all, then they would have killed her. I would think an idiot could have seen that she didn’t have a clue about your life. It’s just a good thing Dixon was there to at least offer some protection.”

“Yes, I owe Dixon a great debt. It’s got to be hard to be thought of as a traitor and then have to integrate back into the team. We’ll have to help with that.

Max gazed at Keith with warmth, his eyes moist with tears that did not fall.

“I can’t thank you enough for looking after her. I suppose she didn’t think she needed a lot of looking after. I hope she wasn’t a pain in the butt for you.” He said softly.

“Are you kidding? I missed nearly all the years of her life as a child, and clearly all of her young adult life. It was a pleasure, every minute.

“I was afraid she wouldn’t see the ad I placed in the Page newspaper. I was hoping it was something she would be interested in. It paid off in a big way, and I was so glad to see her arrive in Startup. I suppose they’ll move away from there now. That will be the hardest thing for me.” Keith gazed at Alexa with a mixture of pride and sadness.

Max clapped him on the shoulder.

“Couldn’t have asked for a better brother, you know. It helped me a lot knowing you were there with her.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” Keith said, tearing up a little and blinking them back.

Alexa stirred just then and smacked her lips, trying to get some moisture into her mouth. She turned her head slowly, eyes still closed and moaned softly.

“Cayman...Cayman...” she whispered, then mumbled several unrecognizable words.

“She’s crazy about him, you know,” said Keith. “From the first minute she saw him, but darned if she would admit it. You’re right about the stubborn part. I do believe she got that from you.”

“Well,” began Max, a little wistfully, “she got a lot of that from her mother. Wish she could have known her, but I guess it would have been like

looking in a mirror. Maybe they wouldn't have gotten on so well, being so much alike. I guess we'll never know the answer to that one." Max smiled sadly.

Alexa awoke to a feeling of fog. There were soft voices around her and she panicked for a moment, wondering if now they would finally finish their job. She moved her legs, moved her fingers, her arms. She could feel the clean sheets against her legs, smell the sterile hospital room. She wasn't in the warehouse and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Slowly her mind remembered hearing her father at her side when she was taped to the chair. She remembered whispering his name. Was it really him? Had she been dreaming?

She tried to force her eyes open but they simply would not cooperate. Her mouth was dry and she needed water. Were her eyes still so swollen she couldn't open them?

Gradually the fog lifted and she tried to blink. Her eyes opened. The light in the room was bright and blinding. Everything around her was a blur. Someone was sitting on the bed beside her. She moved her head to the right and saw silver hair.

Was it true? Had it really been her dad that rescued her from the cartel? Was he really there?

Alexa forced her eyes to focus on the person beside her.

“Daddy...? Is it...you?” her mouth was dry, her voice hoarse as she whispered the words. “How...?”

She’d buried her father, watched his casket put in the ground. She was the first to throw a handful of dirt over it. How is it him? How could it be him?

“Yes Princess, it’s me. I’m right here.” Max picked up her free hand and held it gently in his. No one had called her princess for a very long time. It was her dad’s pet word for her, had been for as long as she could remember.

Tears filled her eyes as she squeezed his hand. A soft cry left her throat as she focused on her dad. “It’s you? It’s really you?”

“Yes, Alexa, it’s me. I’m here and I’ll never leave you again.” Her dad whispered as he lifted her hand to his lips and gently kissed her.

She smiled weakly, trying to soak it all in to a head that just wasn’t accepting logical thought.

“Where...am I?”

“You’re in the hospital, Alexa. You were in pretty bad shape when we brought you in. I’ll explain all of it to you when you’re better, but for now, we’re a family again.”

“How long...been out?” Her voice was still so dry and she coughed bringing horrendous pain to

her sides. “Water, please...” she said trying not to cough again as she held her side.

Max quickly grabbed the water pitcher and poured some in the cup. He put it to her lips, cradling her head with his other hand.

“Mmm...good...good...thanks,” she whispered. That felt much better as the pain in her side subsided. “Where were you?”

“They’ll be plenty of time for all of that later. You had surgery, honey, and you’ve had a rough go of it. Let’s just think about getting you better for now. It’ll give us something to talk about when we get you home.” Max patted her hand and smiled at her.

Alexa looked to the end of her bed and saw Keith standing there.

“Hey, Keith,” she said a little stronger. “How did you get here?”

Keith chuckled, “Well, we do have modern transportation these days, you know.”

Alexa smiled as her dad touched her cheek.

“Honey, I want to introduce you to your Uncle Keith,” said Max, smiling. “He used to throw you in the air when you were tiny and make you laugh and laugh.”

Her eyes closed for a moment and she remembered a dark haired man throwing her in the air. It was an early memory and she smiled. She remembered him chasing her playfully around the

living room. The memories were fuzzy, but she remembered bits and pieces.

“You’re...you’re...my uncle?” she asked, trying to digest this new information. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Max patted her hand.

“He was in the same situation I was, only for probably twenty years, instead of one, like me. Every time we tried to bring him out, that same cartel came right after him. It was decided he would stay hidden until we could stop them altogether. That’s why you don’t remember him, and that’s also why he couldn’t say anything to you. He’s the one that came forward with the additional funds for the diner. Knowing you, that’s been bugging you as well.”

“Are you kidding me?” she exclaimed in her still raspy voice. Her eyes were wide with surprise.

“How many times did I talk to you about that? You are a *great* liar, Uncle Keith, but thank you for helping me get the diner, really. What an amazingly generous thing to do. I’ve wanted to say that to my benefactor for the longest time.”

“You’ve said it over and over. You just didn’t know you were saying it to the one that gave you the funds,” Keith smiled proudly at her. “You’ve done incredibly well with the diner, Alexa, incredibly well. My little donation just makes me

part owner, right? So I have an interest in how things go there.” He laughed at his own joke.

“It absolutely does! I told you how you reminded me of my dad, didn’t I? I said it all the time!”

She smiled at him, still weak, but gaining her voice.

“I kept telling him that, Dad, because he’d do things that just looked like you! Now I know why.”

Suddenly she realized someone was missing. She felt a stab of fear pierce her, rising up from her stomach like bad heartburn. Her eyes widened and filled with tears.

“Where’s Cayman? Daddy, where’s Cayman? Is he okay?”

Her voice was loud enough that it woke the sleeping Cayman on the other side of her. He sat straight up and winced at the pain in his hip. Still a little groggy, he had to take a minute to remember where he was. It didn’t take him long, and he blushed at the open copy of “Green Eggs and Ham” lying on the bed.

He gasped as he realized Alexa had woken up. He grabbed one of his crutches and stood up beside her bed. Lifting her hand softly to his lips he kissed it, never taking his eyes from hers.

“I was reading to you, did you hear me?”
He said, grinning.

Her tears fell as she gripped his hand. She was so thankful he was alive, the fear she'd felt in that moment faded slowly leaving a lasting impression on her heart. She couldn't live without this man, she didn't even want to try. She wouldn't take her eyes from his, feeling his hand in hers, trying to make herself believe he was alive. There was so much she wanted to say.

"I'm...I'm so sorry, Cayman, so sorry. I thought I'd never see you again and all I could think of was how I'd never get to tell you how sorry I was for treating you the way I did."

Cayman softly put his finger over her lips to shush her.

"You were smart to not trust me, Alexa. Once I got my emotions mixed up with what I was supposed to be doing, I did a lousy job of being professional. I should have watched you better; I shouldn't have let you go into that shop by yourself. It's me that's sorry."

"Shut up and kiss me," she said with a smile.

Taking a deep breath and wrinkling his eyes, he moved slowly through the pain in his hip. He bent over the bed and planted a gentle kiss on her lips. He didn't care that her father was there, he'd wanted to do that from the minute he got to the hospital. The warmth of those lips heated him through and he kissed her again and again.

“Alright already!” exclaimed Max. “Am I going to have to get a bucket of water?”

“A hose might be more appropriate,” laughed Keith.

Cayman winced in pain as he stood again and Alexa caught the look on his face.

“You’re hurt!” she said, concerned. Then she laughed and said, “Again?”

“Yeah, well, it would seem loving you is going to be one of my most painful experiences. Can’t seem to keep you away from the gunfire for some reason, and when I try, it hurts.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” said Alexa as she gingerly held her side. “It hurts to laugh.”

“Yup,” said Cayman looking from Keith to Max, “heard that one before, too, and from those very same lips. This relationship could be very dangerous for me.”

Alexa lifted her hand and slapped him playfully on the arm.

“You better be nice to me or I’ll tell your mom.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The room erupted in laughter. Patrick had just walked into the room when Alexa made that announcement.

“She knows Mom?” Patrick said in surprise.

“No, she doesn’t know Mom,” said Cayman with a smile, “but she knows enough about her to know she would automatically be on her side with finally having another woman around.”

“A wise woman, indeed, your mother,” said Max walking up to stand beside Cayman. Placing his arm around his shoulder, he smiled down at his daughter.

Alexa smiled at Cayman. She was thoroughly enjoying the corner she’d put him in.

“You know, Alexa,” began Max, “I have always thought of this young man as the son I never

had, his brother as well. We've been in some pretty tight scrapes and they've saved my life more times than I can count."

"Back atcha," smiled Patrick, "I'm sure the count of who saved who the most would end up in your favor."

The feeling in the room was family. It felt like a family separated for some time had now found their way back to each other. Alexa smiled and then put on a mock frown.

"Well, I guess that does it for you and I, Mr. Richards. I can't be making out with my brother anymore, now can I? How gross is that?"

There was another eruption of laughter.

"You're all going to have to leave if you keep this up," warned Alexa. "I told you it hurts to laugh."

Cayman cleared his throat and looked at Max.

"About that...I have a question for you, an important one."

"Now, that sounds serious," smiled Max.

"Maxwell Menetti," said Cayman, clearing his nervous throat, and stepping back a bit so they stood face to face, "I would like to ask you for permission to marry your incredible daughter, if she'll have me."

"Well, I can't speak for her, of course, because she'd skin me alive," he laughed, "but I can't think of a thing that would make me happier."

Cayman looked around the room and grinned. He moved the chair away from the bed and set his crutches against the bed. He started to kneel down on one knee. The pain in his hip wouldn't cooperate, so he awkwardly stood again and inched as close to the bed as he could, pulling a small box from his jacket pocket.

“Alexa Menetti; I've looked my whole life for you. From the minute I laid eyes on you, I knew you were the one I'd searched for. If you'll have me, I promise to cherish you until the day I die. You will always be my priority, my beautiful soul mate, my wife. Alexa, I love you, more than I love breath itself. Will you marry me?”

He handed her the box with an amazingly large diamond engagement ring sparkling in the light.

Alexa's eyes filled with tears as she reached for his hand.

“Yes... Yes I will marry you, and cherish you as well for the rest of our lives. I love you, Cayman Richards. I always will.”

Cheers erupted in the hospital room. Soft, not so explosive as they would have been if they hadn't *been* in a hospital room. Cayman flinched again at the pain in his hip as he bent over and kissed Alexa.

He stood and took the ring from the box, placing it proudly on her finger. The diamond

nearly covered the whole of her finger below the knuckle.

“I just have one question for you, Cayman,” she said seriously, struggling to take her eyes from the gorgeous stone.

“What?” he said, his nervousness gone.

“Are you gonna cringe like that every time you kiss me?”

“Now, you might think that is a negative thing, my love, but it is merely a manifestation of how desperately and completely I love you.”

The room filled with a moan from the whole group, except Alexa. She grinned at him encouragingly instead...

“You can call me ‘my love’ anytime you want to.”

She pulled him down into another kiss, ignoring the pain on his face.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The beautiful couple walked through the massive double doors into the bridal suite. Alexa approached the huge freestanding mirror. Her new husband sauntered slowly up behind her and gently unzipped her strapless gown. She let it fall to the floor, goosebumps forming on her skin where the dress touched her as it fell. She turned to him, kissing him passionately as she removed his jacket.

She giggled playfully, moving her head to the side as he kissed her neck, and explored the contour of her body. She slowly removed his tie, tossing it to the floor. Their eyes met and both smiled as she unbuttoned his shirt, kissing his chest with each opened button. He was finally hers...forever. She felt the thrill of knowing tonight

was only the beginning of many, many nights together...

He kissed her so very softly on the shoulders; the passion began to burn in both husband and wife. She removed his shirt, then unbuckled his belt, released the button on his slacks and pulled gently on the zipper. Cayman let the pants fall to the floor. He stepped out of them, kicking them to the side with one leg as she giggled again. His arms embraced her and she melted into him. He lifted her into his arms, kissing her again.

He carried her to the bed, their kisses growing more passionate, ready, inviting. He laid her head gently on the pillow, his lips never leaving her mouth.

There will be no interruption this time, no stopping to wonder if they should or they shouldn't. They are now Mr. & Mrs. Cayman Richards, and they will not be pausing for anything or anyone.

Their passion ignited as they realized once again, how very, very in love they felt. They gave themselves to each other willingly, passionately, forever.

Epilogue

Patrick removed the covers and sat up, his toes playing in the thick luxurious carpet. His sandy hair looked like he'd been in a tornado, his deep blue eyes staring at the carpet. Checking the clock, he stood, stretched his six foot, well muscled frame and headed to the bathroom. He grabbed his clothes as he walked by the end of the bed. Before leaving the bedroom, he turned and looked at the beauty he'd spent the previous night with.

What was that Cayman had said to him?
"...there's just something about her, Patrick, something that made me see she was more than a body, more than a shell..."

He still couldn't understand what that felt like. Kenady was beautiful, a perfect body, smart, easy to talk to. What more could anyone want? Would I still be able to breathe if she were gone?

He walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower, laughing softly to himself.

"She'll be gone by the time I'm out of the shower, and I won't care. How do I find the kind of love Cayman was talking about? Do I even want

*that kind of love? Why am I even thinking about it?
Am I looking for that?"*

Patrick shook his head as he stepped into the shower and let the water pour over him. He thought about the wedding the night before, how happy his brother was, how beautiful Alexa was. It seemed to him they'd both glowed with the love they felt for each other. He thought of his mom and his dad. He wondered if that was how they felt when they'd married. Did they still feel that way, in a "we've-been-married-forty-five-years" kind of way? It was obvious his dad loved his mother. It was beyond obvious Cayman loved Alexa.

When he turned off the water he had no idea how long he'd been in the shower. He really didn't care. He wrapped the towel around him and opened his shave kit setting it on the side of the sink.

His cell phone rang in the other room. He walked out and snickered when he saw the bed was empty, Kennady's things gone. He was right...he didn't care. Goodbyes like that were always so messy.

The phone rang again. Rummaging through his pack he pulled the howling cell from inside and pressed the button to answer it.

"Richards" he said briskly.

"Patrick, it's Max. Are you alone?"

"Yes...what's going on?"

“It’s Sam. We need you at the hospital,
now. Don’t call your parents, don’t call Cayman.
Just get here...”

To be continued...

I hope you enjoyed “The Lies That Save Us”. Watch for the second in the series, coming soon, “Solitary Tears”.