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**Girls Ride Horses, Too**

A THESIS

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By

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**Girls Ride Horses, Too**

A THESIS

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## ABTRACT OF THESIS

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Maggie Fitzgerald is a young, widowed mother of two. Her brother Alan is a police detective in Atlanta, Georgia. The brother is killed on duty, and on the day of his funeral, Vince Howard, one of Alan's friends, stops by Maggie's apartment just after the funeral. Although Maggie is angry that none of her brother's so-called friends showed up at his funeral, she is still intrigued by the attractive and older Sergeant Vince Howard. She convinces Vince to take her to dinner, all the while wondering at herself and her brazenness.

Although worlds apart, Maggie is the daughter of a wealthy banker, and Vince has always had to work for a living, the two can't stop thinking about each other. After several days of daydreaming, Maggie invites Vince to attend the annual policeman's rodeo held at the ranch of the chief, who is also Maggie's uncle, a former rodeo star.

During the rodeo, Maggie is shot by a sniper who, although surrounded by police, manages to escape. There is rumor of a possible second attack coming, so Maggie, although she receives only a minor injury, is banished to Vince's apartment to hide during her recuperation. During her stay, the man who tried to kill her, tries again. Maggie survives the second attack, and she and Vince realize they have very strong feelings for each other and embark on a relationship together.

*Girls Ride Horses, Too*

## GIRLS RIDE HORSES, TOO-RUTH ANNE McAFFREY

### Chapter 1

Marc watched while the children all rode around the arena. He was proud of his small class, made up of the children and grandchildren of his friends and neighbors. During the off-season, he loved teaching the next generation what he knew.

No one noticed that Maggie, headstrong and determined, was no longer with the group. She grew tired of the theatrics of rodeo very quickly. More than once, she complained that she wished she were a boy, so she could do the “real” tricks. She yearned to rope a calf and ride a bull. Barrel-racing bored her. She knew it was not easy, and she didn’t want to insult her friends by calling their events “girlie,” but they didn’t interest her. She wanted real adventure—she wanted to be like her favorite person in the world, Marc Riordan, three-time National All-Around Cowboy.

Jacob Riker noticed the raven-haired seven year old before anyone else did, but by the time he saw her, it was too late. She had entered the chute with the bull and was now mounted on his back, her tiny fist wrapped tightly in the leather strap. She had a dreamy look on her face. Before anyone could reach her, she hit the lever to open the gate. The bull leaped into the arena, bucking wildly. Jacob yelled something incoherent as he entered the arena on

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the run. He knew he was jumping head-first into danger, because the bull was leaping around the arena wildly, trying with all his might to relieve himself of his tiny burden, but Jacob entered anyway.

Jacob was terrified. He knew Maggie was headstrong, but he also knew the bull weighed 2500 pounds. If the little girl was thrown, she would be trampled. As Jacob tried to contain the bull, he noticed several other men joining him in the arena. Marc had a rope and was preparing a lasso, hoping to stop the bull. As Maggie flashed by, Marc let fly his lasso. His aim was true. The bull stopped short in his tracks, dust billowing around him as his hooves slid in the dirt of the arena. Maggie looked around, puzzled that the ride had suddenly stopped.

Marc raced to her side, grabbing her and pulling her off the back of the bull. “What were you thinking?” he scolded. “You could have been killed!”

“But Uncle Marc. . .” Maggie’s lower lip began to quiver as she tried to prove how strong she was by not crying. She thought her uncle, the cowboy, the bull rider, would be proud of her. Instead, he seemed angry. She didn’t see the terror in his eyes, the fear that she would be hurt. She only saw the anger. She heard it in his voice and saw it in his eyes.

Marc sent her to the house with a firm swat on the rear. She held her head high until she cleared the gates of the arena. After she was out of view of Marc, the other men, and the members of her rodeo class, she broke down. She cried all the way to the house, ran up to her room, threw herself on the bed, and continued crying. She knew it wasn’t fair; she had stayed on the bull until he stopped bucking. That was the point, right?

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Martha followed her up the stairs, wondering what happened. She found the little girl lying across the bed crying, her muddy cowboy boots staining the white bedspread. Martha didn't care what had happened. She loved the girl and hated to see her like this. The only time Maggie behaved this way was when her parents went away or when they missed another birthday.

As Martha sat on the end of the bed, she heard Marc's boots on the stairs. She hurried to the door, questions on her lips. Marc brushed her aside, stepping past her into the room.

"Maggie?" he said. "We need to talk. What you did . . ." The words caught in his throat. He was still shaking. "I can't believe you tried that. You could have been killed."

"But you do it," she responded, her voice muffled by the bedspread.

"I've been trained to do it," Marc sat next to her on the bed and gathered her into his arms. "Little one. . . ," he didn't want to discourage her enthusiasm, but he didn't want to encourage her misbehavior, either. "You are still a little girl. If you'll wait a while, when you're old enough, I promise, I'll train you to ride the bull." He heard Martha's sharp intake of breath behind him. She had never expected anything like that. She assumed Maggie had gotten in trouble for something else . . . not something that could get her killed.

Maggie started to get excited, but Marc cut her off. "When you're old enough," he repeated, firmly. "And I decide when that is." The dark head bobbed as she nodded, with a sigh. "And," he continued, "if you ever try a stunt like you did today, not only will I not train you, I will never let you ride one of my horses again. Not any of them. Not even the gentle ones. And I will make sure you have no more horses at home, so when you are not here, you

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will still not ride.” He took her delicate face in his hand and looked down into her violet eyes.

“Do you understand me?” She nodded, with a scowl.

“When will I be old enough?” she asked, slipping her arms around his neck, and looking into his sun-and wind-burned face.

“When you can see over the bull,” Marc replied. He knew this would be a long time, because Maggie was small for her age. His oldest sister, Maggie’s mother, had never really come into her height, and he knew that by using height as a measuring stick, he had quite a few years before he had to worry about this again. He also knew that Maggie would surrender a limb before she would give up horse-back riding, so his stipulation should discourage her from attempting the dangerous stunt, for a while.

After extracting Maggie’s promise never to attempt to ride the bull without supervision, Marc stood up and set her on the bed. He told her that lessons were ended for her, for the day. She was grounded from the arena for two weeks and from the barn for an entire week. He knew it was cruel because when she was stuck at his house while his sister traveled, visiting and riding the horses was all she had to look forward to. Glancing around her well-stocked room, at the books, toys and games that surrounded her, he knew that, if she made right decisions, she would not be bored.

Leaving Maggie pouting on the bed, Marc took Martha’s hand and led her from the room. As soon as they reached the hall, however, he dropped her hand. He saw the hurt look that crossed her face, but he was powerless. He did not want their relationship to stay the way that it was, but she refused to allow it to move forward.

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Looking back over his shoulder, Marc saw Maggie lying on the floor in her room, a stuffed horse in one hand and a plastic horse in the other. There had never been any reason to buy her toys that didn't relate to horses, because she ignored them. As the spoiled daughter of a wealthy man, she could, and did, have any and every toy she wanted. She didn't care, though. She only cared about horses. Marc knew that someday, she probably would ride the bull—maybe not in competition, because women didn't usually do that—but his stubborn niece on the back of a wild bull would buck her way around an arena.

Chapter 2

On a cold, wet Atlanta night, Maggie shivered on the balcony, too cold to stay, but too alone to care. She couldn't remember the last time it had gotten this cold before Thanksgiving, but the rain suited her mood. She had buried her only brother today. Alan, a decorated police sergeant, was killed on duty, but the only officers who attended his funeral were his partner Jerry Blair, Maggie's childhood sweetheart Dale Riker, a young officer Maggie didn't know who introduced himself as Dwight Powell, and, of course, Chief of Police Marc Riordan.

Their parents did not even call. She did not understand their silence. Alan was their pride and joy: a man who knew what he wanted and had gone for it each and every day. Maggie had always felt as though she were a disappointment to them. She didn't finish high school, but instead had married and become a mother right away. Now she was a single mom with two kids and a job that came nowhere close to paying her bills.

A loud banging on her door shocked her. She was not expecting, nor did she want, company. Wiping her eyes on the back of her hand and brushing the dust from the porch swing off her black silk dress, she went inside and crossed the warm, firelit room. She hoped

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it was her parents, or at least a telegram explaining their absence.

When Maggie opened the door, she stood face to face with an enormous man, clearly a foot or more taller than she was. He stood at least six foot nine, with the broadest shoulders she had ever seen. She had no idea what he wanted, nor did she care. When the man flipped out his badge and identified himself in a deep, dignified voice, with a soft but distinctively recognizable Southern drawl, he instantly dispelled her suspicions about his purpose. She half-expected him to try and sell her life insurance or magazines.

"Detective Sgt. Vince Howard, Mrs. St. Clair. I'd like to talk to you about your brother. I realize today isn't the best time, but it's important," he hesitated, because he'd been warned about her temper. Even though she was small, he didn't relish the thought of having her charge into him for mentioning her brother and his request. Finally, he decided the best approach was honesty, and he plunged in. "Fitz made me promise him a long time ago I'd look in on you, if anything ever happened to him. He always worried about you, but I guess you know that."

Maggie nodded, but she still didn't speak. Opening the door wider, she stepped back, allowing him into the apartment. The cold air from outside circulated around her stockinged legs and bare feet, causing her to shiver involuntarily. She had never gotten warm from the funeral, and sitting on the balcony had not helped. The north wind made it even colder here than on the balcony.

The man stepped into the apartment. With one sweeping glance he surveyed the large room. The place was basically neat, but there were telltale signs she had neglected her

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housework in the last few days, including the wineglass behind the couch, lying next to an empty bottle emblazoned with the colorful label of an expensive vintage. Newspapers cluttered the floor next to the armchair, and the sergeant noticed the article about Alan's death right on top, scribbled on with red and purple crayons. He cringed inwardly when he saw the article. He had never missed a fellow officer's funeral, but knowing what he knew, he could not attend.

Two large oil paintings dominated the room. One was of Maggie and Alan as they stood on either side of a huge, coal black horse. Two beautiful little girls sat astride the horse. Sergeant Howard guessed them to be about five years old. Opposite that painting was another, of another tiny girl about the same age. Alan stood next to this horse as well, but the girl astride the huge stallion was obviously Maggie. Her violet eyes practically glowed. The artist had obviously noticed this special feature and made those eyes come alive on the canvas. She sat proud and tall and was obviously in control of the giant horse, even at her small size.

Maggie led the sergeant toward the loveseat but remained standing herself, looking absently across the room. She twisted her hands together absently.

"Please," he began. "Don't be nervous. First of all, I want to tell you your brother was a good cop and a friend of mine."

"Some friend!" she snapped. "I just got home from my brother's funeral. There were exactly nine people in attendance, two of whom were reporters hungry for a story and none of them was you! Don't try to tell me what a good friend you were! My brother was murdered!"

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He was a cop, and he was murdered! Doesn't that count for anything, these days? I've been to other officer's funerals and the place is filled to the rafters. Alan was a good cop. He was willing to put his life on the line for any one of you, and none of you had the decency to show up at his funeral!"

Maggie knew she was ranting and tried to wind it up. Words continued tumbling out, even as she tried to bite them back. "Just because of one stupid little article in a local scandal rag, none of you had the decency to pay your respects! Now you come here trying to pretend none of it really happened, and wanting to ease your own guilty conscience by telling me my brother was a good cop! I already know that. If that's all you wanted to say, there's the door!" Maggie extended a trembling finger in the direction of the front door. She tried to hold back the tears, but one by one, they trickled down her cheeks. Sobbing uncontrollably, she ran from the room, and Sgt. Howard heard a door slam in the rear of the apartment.

Chapter 3

Feeling responsible for Maggie's untimely exit, Vince decided he should stay at least long enough to apologize. Looking around the room, he located a telephone on a small table in the corner. Walking over to it, he picked up the phone and dialed the station. Telling the desk sergeant he must have eaten something that disagreed with him, Vince said he would not be working his early shift that evening, which was to be his last night on the late shift until rotation again, in six months. He generally worked a double at the end of each rotation, because it was easier to transition to another schedule that way.

Feeling guilty for lying, he hung up. He'd never done that in more than eighteen years on the force, but this was a unique situation. In truth, he did feel a bit sick. He knew his partner, Gene Littlewolf, would understand after he had a chance to explain. Tomorrow.

Vince stood by the fireplace thinking about the excuses he'd made to others, about not attending the funeral. They were lame, to say the least. None of his cases were going anywhere; the drug dealers would still be there. He knew he should have gone because Alan had been his friend. Most of the seasoned officers opted to stay away, giving the newer

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officers an excuse not to attend, either. Vince had inside information about Alan's death and he could not sit through the funeral under the circumstances.

Vince thought back in time, to the first time he saw Alan Fitzgerald, on the initial day of academy training. The big, red-haired recruit who was to share his room has been friendly, almost to the point of being nosy. They often found themselves teamed together during training. Fitz was a crack shot and had helped Vince hit the target on the firing range until the day when Vince managed to score higher. Fitz flatly refused to assist him anymore, saying he intended to be the best. He wouldn't train someone who could wind up beating him.

Fitz earned his gold shield more than three years before Vince and moved to Homicide. Vince went on to Narcotics. They didn't socialize much, but they'd been friends for nearly twenty years.

Vince was sure Maggie would be back soon, so he hung around. While he waited, he looked around the room, not trying to be nosy, but he was curious about why someone with her social standing would choose to live in a condominium downtown, when she could have easily convinced her parents to turn over her grandparents' big house on the edge of town.

Alan had given him a tour of it once. Vince knew the family was wealthy, but until that tour, he'd had no real concept of the money involved. What Alan had called a house was practically a castle, set in the unlikely surroundings of suburban Atlanta. The back yard was nearly the size of a football field. It was absolutely the most perfect color of green, even on that hot summer day. Below the yard, were a tennis court, a huge swimming pool and a stable, now empty of horses, but it once housed thoroughbreds.

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Shaking himself back to the present, Vince looked curiously around the huge room. A baby grand piano in the corner with a multitude of photos on it caught his eye. The photos all seemed to be of Fitz, or the two little girls. Vince knew the lady was married. The fact there were no photos of her husband anywhere seemed a bit unusual, but he dismissed it without much thought. Some men don't like to have their picture taken. Maybe she simply kept the camera out of his face and focused on her beautiful daughters instead.

In the corner opposite was a large trophy case, and he walked over to it. There were more than a few trophies with horses riding the air, declaring to the world she took first place in some of the most elite rodeos all across the country, including the annual Atlanta Policeman's Rodeo. More surprising to him were the trophies announcing excellence in karate tournaments in Atlanta, New York and other cities around the country. She wasn't even five feet tall. How could she be this good?

Looking back at the rodeo trophies, he grew more confused. *She's not a cop*, he was talking to himself, mindful she could come back at any time, *why would she participate in such a rinky-dink little rodeo? The competition must be a joke, compared to what she's used to.*

Above the trophies, in an ornamental sheath studded with glittering gemstones, was an antique sword, hanging regally in its place of honor. Thinking it probably outweighed her by several pounds, Vince wondered whether it was real. Reaching out hesitantly, he pulled the sword from the jeweled sheath and tested the razor-sharp edge.

"It's real all right and, just as sharp as it looks. Couldn't you tell without touching it?"

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Fingerprints tend to tarnish the blade, Sgt. Howard."

Vince, startled by the voice, nearly as sharp as the blade, jumped and almost dropped the sword onto the glass top of the trophy case. With a noticeably guilty look on his face, he wiped the fingerprints off with his handkerchief and slid the sword back into its case. He turned toward Maggie. Her violet eyes were red-rimmed but dry, and she started to apologize for running off, but he interrupted her.

"You aren't the one who should be sorry. I guess I am trying to ease my own guilt for not attending the service. I told myself I was too busy, but it isn't true. Alan really was my friend. A good friend. I didn't want to say goodbye. See, if I don't say goodbye, he isn't really gone." Maggie looked confused, as he continued. "When my father died, I wouldn't say goodbye and I convinced myself for six nearly months, that he was visiting his parents in Manitoba." He smiled slightly. "I was seven." Maggie nodded vaguely. "Now I intend to find out who killed Fitz and why."

Maggie twirled a diamond cocktail ring nervously around her finger, but her head jerked up at this last statement and the ring fell to the floor unnoticed. "What do you mean? They have those two men in custody. Jerry Blair told me they turned themselves in after the shooting. He said he and Alan got a call to back up the uniforms on an armed robbery. In the course of events Alan was shot."

She seemed almost ready to cry again. Vince didn't want that. Tears were something he couldn't handle. His daughter had learned early in life that tears would get whatever she wanted from Daddy. Tears made him nervous.

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Taking Maggie's small hands in his huge ones, Vince looked down into her face and asked, "Since when does the Assistant to the Head of Homicide do routine backup on a liquor store hold-up? Something about Blair's story isn't right, and I intend to find out what it is."

Carefully removing her hands from his, Maggie began mechanically to clean up the room. She picked up the wineglass and bottle from behind the couch and gathered the newspapers from the floor. The latter she put by the fireplace to burn. After putting the numerous toys back in the toybox in the corner, she went into the kitchen and began washing dishes. Vince started to follow her, but his foot crunched something into the carpet. Bending over, he picked up Maggie's ring and absently carried it with him, intending to put it on the counter where she would find it. As he entered the kitchen, Maggie turned away from the sink.

In a steady voice, betrayed by the tears in her eyes, she said, "I'm sorry I snapped at you. You probably don't deserve my temper tantrums, but you're the only one here," she smiled, trying to make amends. "Now," she said firmly, "I don't want to talk about Alan anymore. People will eventually forget about that article and he'll be remembered only as the good cop he was. Tell me, have you had dinner?"

Surprised by the sudden mood swing, Vince only looked at her. Impatiently, she asked, "Well, are you going to ask me to dinner or not? That is the tradition, isn't it? Take the widow to dinner? Alan didn't have a widow, only me and the girls."

"Oh sure, uh, dinner's fine," he stammered. "Are you ready to go? We can leave right away, if you have someone to stay with your children," he smiled. "Or they can come. I love

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kids, and your girls would make beautiful dinner companions.” She looked confused and he added, “The painting?” She nodded, with a wan smile.

“They're not here. I left them with Uncle Marc because I wasn't in any mood to answer their million and three questions tonight. He took them to his place right after the funeral, and I'll pick them up tomorrow after school,” she added. “Don't get me wrong, I love my children, but they can be a handful at times and in my present temperament, I'd probably throw them or myself off the balcony if they said the wrong thing.”

Vince smiled slightly at her remark and she shrugged. She disappeared toward the bedroom with a whisper of silk. She called over her shoulder that she'd be ready in ten minutes. Vince thought the black dress was fine, but if a change of wardrobe would make her feel better, he could wait ten minutes. He was still feeling guilty for not attending the funeral and he wanted to make amends.

Chapter 4

Maggie scolded herself in the mirror while she changed clothes. *This man was Alan's friend. Why am I treating him like yesterday's garbage? Sure, he's trying to gloss over the fact no one attended the funeral, but don't take it out on him personally. He already feels guilty about it. He apologized, so why make it worse by acting like a spoiled brat on a revenge mission?*

She threw her shoes into the closet with a satisfying thud, then continued scolding herself. *There was no reason to bite his head off about the sword either, because everyone who ever enters this apartment has to touch it, to see if it's real or a toy. I know that, but still I lashed out at him like a crazy person.* She pulled the dress off over her head and discarded it in the corner like an empty flour sack. Her mother would have a coronary if she could see the bedroom right then. There were clothes everywhere. Not just her jeans, but also the very expensive clothes, like the dress she'd just removed and even a mink jacket that had been a Christmas gift.

Maggie continued to berate herself in the mirror as she chose clothes from the closet

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and slipped them on. *I can enjoy tonight if I want to, but it could turn out to be a real nightmare, if I make it into one.* She looked at her reflection in the mirror. *Relax. Have a good time. Have a drink. Forget about today, just for an hour. He's not my type, but he's handsome enough.* She could use a friend right now. Vince was available, so she decided to take full advantage of the opportunity. She dressed casually but appealingly, choosing bright colors in an attempt to lighten her own mood and ease the tensions she sensed from Vince. No man, no matter what the circumstances, enjoys having dinner with a gloomy, depressed woman in mourning clothes, and he wasn't looking forward to it, she could tell.

She practically dragged him into this evening and it surprised her; she didn't generally initiate dates. She didn't have to. This was a new experience for her. She shook her head at her reflection. She knew she enjoyed the feeling of control she had over the man in her living room, but she promised herself not to abuse the situation. She might lose the slight edge she had. She was in charge right now, but the long dead emotions threatening to erupt could change her position. She'd be at the mercy of Alan's friend, the tall, attractive but older, Sgt. Vince Howard. *What is it about him?* she whispered to herself. He was certainly nothing like Erich, nor was he like any of the numerous men she'd dated since that relationship ended. But she found his drawl intriguing, and there was something about those deep blue eyes that seemed to melt her to her very core.

Checking her makeup in the strong light over the bathroom mirror, she realized she looked worse than she thought. She couldn't possibly go out looking like this. She had mascara all over her face and tears had cut a jagged pattern through her blush. Glancing at her

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watch, she hurriedly repaired her makeup. As she walked toward the door, she impulsively freed her hair from the knot at the nape of her neck. She brushed it quickly and tossed it casually over her shoulder.

Chapter 5

Standing in the living room, Vince looked up at the portrait above the couch. He again wondered why her husband wasn't in it and where the man was, right now. Not much of a man, if he left his wife alone on the day she buried her only brother. He couldn't imagine any man ever wanting to leave her side. That little snip of womanhood barely reached his elbow, but she had some mysterious effect on him, tugging at the edges of his resistance. No woman had affected him this way since Felicia walked out of his life eighteen years ago. He enjoyed the company of a variety of women, but none of them got more than a weekend or two from him. He refused to let them get too close. This one was different. With this one, he could get burned.

*Howard, this is Fitz's kid sister. She's married. Even if she wasn't, she's much too young for you. Fitz told you he was in high school when she was born, or something like that. She's barely older than your own daughter. It's abnormal for you to be feeling this way, so cool it, man.* He grinned, knowing he was acting exactly like the men he warned his daughter about. Taking a deep breath, then exhaling slowly, he looked once more at the painting above

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the couch, then turned away to wait.

Vince heard a slight movement in the hallway. He turned toward the sound, glancing at his watch. He was surprised to see the ten minutes had stretched to forty-five. It seemed only a few minutes since she left the room. When she entered, he had to admit it was well worth the wait. Maggie had repaired her face, getting rid of the tear streaks. Black designer jeans and a pink silk western shirt with roses on the lapels had replaced the dress. The shirt was open down the front to an almost indecent level to show the edge of her low-cut lace bra. Vince felt his heart skip a beat as he took it all in. Around her throat she wore a delicate gold chain with a small gold crucifix hanging from it. Her black hair hung loose, cascading over her shoulders like a midnight waterfall. The ensemble was completed with white cowboy boots and a braided belt of the same soft white leather. The belt buckle was large and probably weighed several pounds. It was made of silver, with a large turquoise inset. The gold lettering stated: 'BEST ALL AROUND---EL PASO RODEO'.

"Well," she asked, "is this all right, or should I wear something a little dressier? I live in jeans, but you're pretty dressed up, so if jeans aren't appropriate. . . "

"You look breathtaking," he answered, taking a deep breath to calm his pounding heart. Two minutes ago, he'd been reminding himself not to be obvious about her having charmed him. He took another deep breath and exhaled, then asked, "Where would you like to go?"

"It doesn't really matter. Since Erich died, I've stayed close to home. Atlanta has changed a lot since I lived here as a child. Wherever you choose is fine."

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That explained the husband's absence. Now Vince really felt like a heel. *She's lost her husband, now her brother, and here I am, acting like a teenager on a first date.*

Maggie got her jacket from the hall closet. It was made of soft white leather. She pulled the door shut and they started down the stairs. Opening the car door for her, Vince asked, "Do you want me to put up the top? It's kind of windy."

"No," she answered. "I can use the fresh air. Maybe it'll blow some of the cobwebs out of my head. Besides, now that the rain has stopped, everything smells so good."

Chapter 6

During the ride to the restaurant, Maggie and Vince didn't talk much. Just letting the wind blow through her hair and watching the stars fly by was stimulating enough. After a while, Maggie broke the silence and asked, in a slightly teasing tone, "Do you always drive this fast, Sgt. Howard? I thought the police were supposed to enforce the speed laws, not break them."

"Sorry," he replied, his foot moving to the brake. "Force of habit. High speed chases and all that, you know."

He grinned and looked at her as she said, "No, don't slow down, I love it. My car has a sunroof, but Alan always has. . . had a fit if I drive too fast. Besides, I'd never endanger my kids that way. I still manage to entertain my fantasies of being A.J. Foyt when the girls aren't with me, sometimes with unfavorable results." She laughed and Vince smiled, pleased to see her smiling instead of crying.

Maggie was silent for a minute, then continued. "The last three days have been a blur. I haven't been able to think straight. I haven't slept. I've been living on adrenaline, I think."

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She smiled at him and he shrugged. "After this ride with you, I should be able to go back to work and face all those screaming little monsters. Thanks. Really."

Bewilderment on his face, Vince asked, "Are you a teacher?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Actually, I'm a photographer. Everyone's grandma wants a picture for Christmas. My own children seem so well behaved compared to the ones I see at work. It's just amazing how children can all be so different. Marc is the only one allowed to spoil them. They take full advantage of it. I've never had the heart to ask him to stop. Besides, he did the same for me when I was young. It wouldn't be fair to deny them the same privileges I had."

"What are your girls' names? Tell me about them. I'll even tell you about my own kids, who also happen to be twins."

This surprised Maggie. She'd never suspected he was married. Alan spoke about his friend Vince, but he'd never once mentioned a wife or kids. He didn't wear a ring, but that didn't mean much. Not all men chose to wear a ring. Now she was embarrassed about the way she'd practically forced him to take her to dinner.

Almost as if he could read her mind, he grinned and patted her hand. "I've been divorced for more than eighteen years. As a matter of fact, my children are nearly as old as you are. Besides, married or not, it's still tradition to take the widow to dinner. As you pointed out, you're the closest family Alan had." She nodded and he continued. "My ex-wife lives in Paris with some painter. Last year it was a poet in Rome. Sometimes I think the only reason she doesn't marry one of them is so I'll still have to support her. A new husband might

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put her to work instead of just sitting back and living off her alimony."

Maggie laughed slightly, knowing that, being a cop, he couldn't be paying her too much. She leaned back on the seat and closed her eyes. In a few minutes, without looking up, she said, "My girls are six years old. Their names are Ericha Nickolette and Franciska Marie. I call them Nikki and Franki. Franki looks like me, but Nikki has Erich's blond hair and blue eyes. No one really believes me when I say they're twins, because they don't look or act anything alike. Of course, you saw their picture. You already know what they look like, right?"

Vince nodded and said, "Yes. They're beautiful, just like their mother." Maggie blushed and Vince continued.

"Where should I begin? Mine were born on New Years' Day—they'll be twenty-one next year. Aimee is at Harvard studying law and Tony is at Annapolis. He'll be finished in a few months and he'll be commissioned an Ensign. They're both very smart, good-looking like their father and, I guess that's it."

Maggie smiled and looked around. She had no idea where they were, so she asked, "Have I been abducted? I don't think I've ever been in this part of Atlanta in my life. Where are we?"

Vince laughed, glad she'd suggested they have dinner together. The flood of tears was nowhere in sight. She was beautiful. There was no doubt about that, but he was now able to look at her as a young woman in need of a dinner companion to forget about her troubles for an hour or so. During the times he had performed this duty before, had never felt any thing

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for the widow except anger for her loss and regret for her children. He tried to remain that professional now.

He hoped he wasn't making a mistake by bringing Maggie to this place. He pulled into the parking lot of Flanagan's Restaurant and Bar. "The reason you've never been here is probably because you're smart. Don't ever come here unescorted. The men who hang out here are rowdy and unpredictable, so be prepared."

"Maybe I should have brought my sword. No one would bother me then, would they?"

"Only if they were insane, I suppose," he agreed. "Do you really know how to swing that monster? It weighed a lot. Can you actually lift it?"

"Of course I can. Not to brag, but I'm very good with it." She tried not to look proud, but it was hard.

"Where did you get such a magnificent piece? You don't see those in this part of the world very often."

"Alan bought it in Japan when he was there fifteen years ago. He gave it to me with the stipulation that I learn how to use it and demonstrate at least once or he'd take it back." She smiled at the memory of her enormous brother looking a little nervous when she swung the sharp sword in his direction. She was in complete control, but he still looked worried.

"I assume you learned," Vince said, "considering you still have it."

"You assume correctly," she grinned and added, "Alan was, to say the least, very impressed. By the way, I want to apologize for snapping at you about it, but I have always had a nasty habit of speaking before I think, so you got the full treatment. I'm sorry."

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Vince accepted her apology with a casual shrug. He turned off the engine and walked around to open the door for her. Maggie was surprised, because men just don't do that anymore. Of course, he was older than the men she generally went out with. He had probably been raised to be the true Southern Gentleman his accent suggested, instead of the ultramodern 'Do it for yourself' men clogging the streets of Atlanta.

At Maggie's request, the hostess seated them at a secluded corner table. She sat with her back to the wall and Vince sat across from her. After they placed their order, Vince confessed, "Actually, there are two reasons why I brought you here. First, a lot of cops hang out here and they're continually teasing me about not bringing a beautiful woman with me. You definitely fit that description. Second, I just can't get enough of their cheese fries." He grinned and she shook her head. It was obvious this man did not eat a lot of cheese fries.

Maggie gazed around. Very few men would meet her eyes, and she hoped Vince didn't notice. She was embarrassed about what she had become over the last few years. Suddenly, she did not want him to find out about her past. What he thought of her mattered. She wasn't sure why, but it did.

The men in the bar area watched her intently and had since she'd walked in with Sgt. Howard. When he looked around, they immediately looked away. Sgt. Howard never brought dates here. Usually he hung out with Sgt. Fitzgerald or some of the other men, before leaving alone. The ones who did make eye contact were the men of his own generation, or the ones happily married who were pleased to see him with a woman.

Maggie had been hurt once. She didn't want to give anyone the chance to do it again,

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so she held all men at arms' length. She only let them in to push away the loneliness she felt in the darkness. When she made eye contact with a couple men she recognized, they barely acknowledged her before they turned away. She wasn't sure if it had something to do with Alan, or her choice of dinner companion. She decided she didn't care. She was here to forget, not to over-think things. She smiled up at the waitress and ordered a drink. She wasn't driving, and the girls were not at home so she could have one drink. Or more.

Even though no one was making eye contact, Maggie felt many eyes on her. Some were just curious, but she felt something was wrong. Someone was staring at her and it felt malevolent. She glanced around but no one seemed to be paying any attention. She had felt the same eyes on her at Alan's funeral, but she wrote that off to her imagination. Everyone there was either family or cop. Who would be paying attention to her? And why would they be angry at her? She shrugged off the sensation as that little tickle many people feel during a funeral. She turned her attention back to Vince, who was watching her.

Purposely ignoring everyone in the bar, she looked deep into Vince's pale blue eyes. She suddenly discovered she could easily drown in those eyes. She needed to concentrate, so she wouldn't get lost and carelessly give in to her desires. This man was different from the others. She didn't want to be a one night stand with him. She could wait.

"Your brother isn't the only cop who's been shot, Maggie," Vince was saying. "We lost two rookies last month in much the same way. I checked the roster. This is getting too frequent. One cop shot is a tragedy, three is a pattern. Something is happening and I intend to get involved in the investigation. I may work Vice, but I'm offering myself to the task force

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tomorrow. And I won't take no for an answer."

A loud voice from nearby interrupted with, "You think you can do better than Homicide, Howard? We are all monkeys, running around falling over our feet, right? You are lumping the dear departed into that category, you know." The alcohol-slurred voice belonged to Jerry Blair, who had strolled over to their table as though he too had been invited to dinner. He had been listening to their conversation behind Vince's broad shoulders. Maggie looked hurt, and Jerry looked like he wanted to leave. But, since he'd started, he obviously felt he might as well go on. Besides, she'd hate him just as much, even if he apologized and left.

"Since you are obviously drunk, Blair, I'll give you one chance to apologize and get the hell out of here, before I punch you out," Vince threatened.

"No," Maggie said. "Let him talk." She looked up at Blair and said, "Go on, say what's on your mind."

Before Blair spoke, she stood up and walked around the table so she was standing in front of him, but, even as short as he was, she couldn't look into his extremely bloodshot eyes. She'd known him for more than five years, ever since he'd been assigned to Alan when his previous partner was killed, also on duty. Until this moment, though, she'd never noticed how truly vile Jerry's appearance could be. His stomach hung over his belt, his pants looked baggy and un-pressed and his brown hair appeared greasy and dirty. Jerry hesitated, so she prompted him.

"It must be awfully important if you felt you had to disturb us with it, Jerry. This is the first peace I've had all week."

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She moved in closer. Jerry tried to inch away. Escape was impossible because a crowd of officers had gathered as a result of his first loud statement. They pressed him closer to her instead of allowing him to get away. Everyone was waiting for his answer; most present knowing it could prove fatal if he said the wrong thing.

Realizing his mistake too late, Jerry muttered under his breath, "Alan may not be the super cop you thought he was. Not invincible, not special. Just human, like the rest of us. He's dead. Get over it. Get on with your life."

Before anyone else could react, Maggie lashed out with a right cross that caught Jerry square on the chin. He fell to the floor and lay still. Looking at him pathetically crumpled at her feet, she told him, through clenched teeth, "Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind and kill you! That goes for anyone else who'd like to voice an opinion about my brother." Maggie spun on her heel and stalked off, leaving Blair on the floor, not caring what happened to him.

Sgt. Kenny Ellis yanked the drunk officer to his feet and shoved him to the door. Blair had made plenty of enemies here tonight. Not attending a fallen officer's funeral was one thing. Insulting his memory was another thing entirely. Vince, leaving Blair in Kenny's capable hands, darted off to pursue Maggie.

Kenny Ellis, Blair's rescuer, was a short, stocky man of forty-seven, with a noticeable beer belly and an ever-growing patch of gray in his thinning brown hair. He'd known Maggie since she was nine; she'd gone to Sunday school with his daughters. In all that time, he'd never seen such temper from her, or such intense hatred in her eyes. Something more than

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Alan's death and Blair's rum-induced comments had brought on this fit of anger. It was beyond his ability to figure out what was wrong. He decided to leave her to Vince, who had a way with angry women.

Maggie was sitting on the rear fender of Vince's car, her small fists still clenched tightly in her lap. Vince approached with caution and asked if he could sit down, knowing the karate trophies hadn't lied; she was good. Vince removed his jacket and placed it around her shoulders, even though he didn't think she was shaking from the cold as much as from anger—at herself and at Blair.

"Where did you learn that? I haven't seen moves like that since Bruce Lee died," he teased, hoping to take her mind off what had been said.

"Thanks for coming out here. I'm surprised you're willing to be seen with me, after that performance. I feel like I've just been sent in from the school playground and I'm waiting for Sister to come and scold me for fighting. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you." She took a long drag from her cigarette.

Vince knew he needed to remain quiet and allow Maggie to cool off. He could see the tension draining from her body until she was in total control. Then she continued. "I lost my temper and acted without thinking. That is blatantly against all the rules. Maybe Mother was right all along. Maybe I should have listened to her. That would have been the first and only time in my life and it would more than likely caused her to have a stroke."

"What does any of this have to do with your mother?" Vince asked, wanting to keep her talking and possibly to take her mind off the incident. Her voice, free from any accent,

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had a quietly sonorous tone. He enjoyed hearing it. Besides, she seemed much more relaxed while talking about herself. While she talked, he studied her face. The violet eyes mirrored intense feelings. Her face was round, probably the only part of her body with a spare ounce. The rest of her body was toned and exquisite, perfect—as if it had been carved by a gifted sculptor and preserved for the world to enjoy.

Maggie turned to face him, her shirt slipping aside, revealing a portion of her shapely breast. Vince looked away, a little embarrassed, but he couldn't keep his eyes off her, so he tried to be discreet, admiring, unnoticed. Maggie knew she was flaunting her assets, but she didn't make any move to close the gap in her blouse or to shift her position in any way to shield herself from his view. She'd use whatever means were available to find out about Alan's death. She was already fantasizing how it might be to sleep with this man.

She finally answered him. "Mother always told me that with my temper I should never take classes that would teach me to kill with my bare hands. But I argued, since I'm so small, I should be able to defend myself somehow. Besides, my karate instructor is the one who taught me how to use the sword. I'd have never been able to master it without his help," she explained. "Marc and Daddy agreed with me. Mother finally gave in, but she made sure everyone knew she was against it from the onset. She's told me more than once if she'd wanted a trained assassin in the family, she'd have adopted Chuck Norris instead of having me."

Vince laughed, "Well, I'm going to let these men think about what happened tonight. I'll nose around tomorrow to see what I can find out."

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Maggie was shivering noticeably now, and he suggested they go back inside where it was warm. They walked back in and sat down at their table. Maggie tried to ignore the apprehensive looks she was getting from the men who didn't know her and the knowing smiles from the ones who did.

Kenny Ellis was talking to Dale Riker, but both of them looked her way several times, smiling behind their hands, thinking Maggie might just be the one to help the Sarge relax a little and take life in stride. At the same time, he might be just the one to tame her wild streak, a little.

The waitress brought their food and eyed Maggie nervously, standing as far away from her as possible without appearing too obvious. After she left, Maggie sat looking at her plate, playing with the food. "I'm really not hungry anymore and I don't want to talk about Jerry. He's just drunk." Her eyes misted over. "He buried another partner today, so he's having a pretty hard day, too." She fixed her eyes on the wall behind Vince's head and was quiet for a minute. Vince wasn't sure how to comfort her, so he sat across from her, feeling useless.

Gathering her wits, Maggie sighed, "Let's drop all the cops and robbers talk. You can tell me about your life. It's refreshing to talk to someone who isn't ashamed to have a true Southern accent. I love to listen to it." She took a sip of water and added, "Alan always tried to hide his accent, and for some reason I've never really had one. I guess that's because I lived in so many places and learned so many different languages, always trying to perfect that country's dialect."

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“How many languages do you speak?”

“I’m fluent in three, and could probably have a conversation in two more without insulting anyone.”

“Wow!” Vince looked impressed, but she shrugged it off.

She continued, "Alan was probably the phoniest person I've ever met when he was in public, but when we were alone he'd loosen up a bit. That's the part of him I loved, not the part of him you knew. You and anyone else who didn't know the real man behind the public good manners," she paused. "But I asked about you, and here I am, monopolizing the conversation. I'm sorry."

Vince stood up and threw some money on the table. "I like listening to you talk. Let's get out of here, if you don't want to eat. These clowns need some time to think about what happened here tonight, anyway." He walked with her to the door, ignoring the grins from Ellis and others.

Chapter 7

When they got back to her apartment, she started to get out of the car. Impulsively she leaned toward him and, almost whispering, she said, "Thanks, Vince. In spite of everything, I had a good time. I just needed a friend and you were there. I appreciate that. My door is always open to you."

Without waiting for an answer, she slid out of the car and ran up the stairs. He waited until she opened the door. She turned and waved, then disappeared inside. For a split second, he had an insane urge to follow her, but it passed. He pulled out of the parking lot into the surge of late-night traffic.

The haunting smell of her perfume remained with him, in spite of the fact he had the top down. He drove through the quiet, empty streets, and on impulse, he dropped by the all-night convenience store where Alan had been shot. Luck was with him. The same toothless old man was working tonight. Vince was sure there was something missing from the reports. He intended to find out what it was.

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The man finally admitted he had withheld some information. He was scared because of what he had seen and heard before Alan was shot. Vince was quite sure, as he loomed over the man, threatening him with jail for helping to cover up a crime, helped to loosen his lips. Now he had to fit the pieces carefully together to discover the truth of the crime.

Chapter 8

Upon her arrival home, Maggie immediately got ready for bed, fed Mr. Whiskers the cat, and called the Circle R ranch where the girls were spending the night. Despite the late hour, the twins awaited her call. The sound of their voices made her feel better. She talked to them on the extension phones and promised to pick them up after school the next day. They groaned in unison. They'd hoped, being more than an hour from town, to skip another day of school and ride the ponies. Marc got on the phone, promised to have them in school on time, then spoke to Maggie briefly.

"I'm fine, Marc. Tired and depressed, but it will pass. We all knew this day might come when Alan became a cop. I've prayed it never would. Thank God, I'm an adult. I know I couldn't have handled it, if I'd still been a little kid."

"I know, little one. I miss him, too." She could hear the tears in his voice, but he was fighting them. The twins were at his feet, tugging on his sleeve, begging for a bedtime story.

Maggie went to bed with a book and a glass of wine, only to be interrupted by the

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shrill ringing of the phone. It was news of her parents. She relaxed fully for the first time in a week; they were on their way home. She put down the book, finished the wine in one swallow and turned off the light. Not really expecting to sleep, she was surprised when the banging on her door, accompanied by several long rings of the doorbell, woke her around one o'clock.

Vince stood outside. She asked, "Don't you ever sleep? I suppose you don't realize what time it is, either."

"No. I'm sorry if I woke you, but I discovered new information and we've got to move on with the case." He avoided looking at her, because her silk gown was thin, and the wind blowing through the door pressed it against her. The dim light behind her made it almost transparent everywhere it touched her body.

Maggie, unaware of the effect, asked him, "Did you want something, or did you decide since you couldn't sleep, I should keep you company?"

Vince ignored her feeble attempt at humor and began, "If we're going to solve this case, we've got to move quickly. Tell me about your family. Other than you, Alan and your parents. Young men around twenty."

"No one. Both uncles are in their mid-sixties and Uncle Edward has no children. No one knows much about Uncle Patrick. I do know his children were in grade school when I was born, so they would be a little older than twenty, because they're older than me, by a few years." Vince looked embarrassed when she mentioned her age, but she didn't notice. "I don't know where they are, though. The three boys had some sort of falling out. Uncle Patrick and

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his entire family left town before I was born. I don't believe any of them have ever returned. I've never met them. Why?"

Instead of answering her question, Vince asked another one, "Are you sure there aren't any others? Where are these uncles now?"

"As I said, Uncle Patrick left town before I was born. He moved the whole family to South Africa when I was about four. I assume if his children returned to this country, they would have written to Mother. Alan used to say they worshipped her. Uncle Edward is in Hollywood, producing and directing a new spy movie. Why do you care?"

"I just finished talking to the clerk in that market where Alan was shot. He suddenly seems to remember a third man in the store that night. Why he waited so long to say anything, I don't know. He said they looked enough alike to be brothers. I doubt even that befuddled old man would confuse a twenty-year old kid with a sixty-year old man. You don't possibly have a brother who shamed the family, hidden away in an attic somewhere do you?"

"This is the south, Vince. We don't hide family members, we put them on the front porch for the world to see. Besides, it's the twenty-first century."

Vince shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably. Maggie invited him in. After she sat down, he relaxed. She offered him coffee, but he hastily declined, not wanting her to get up again. After seeing her nearly naked in the doorway, he wasn't sure he could control himself if she gave the slightest indication she might be interested in a quick tumble. It had been a while, and she was beautiful. He shook his head to dispel the image of her; she was a lady and deserved respect. All women deserved respect and he was not going

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to be that type of man. He never had been, and he refused to start now.

Vince continued his interrogation, asking Maggie where her parents were. She was slow to answer. He'd been looking at her strangely ever since she'd opened the door. She wasn't sure why.

Maggie had seen the desire in Vince's eyes and it intrigued her. Now that she wasn't standing in the windy doorway, though, her gown wasn't so revealing. In fact, she looked younger than ever without her makeup, especially with her long hair tousled from sleep. Suddenly, Vince realized she was watching him. She appeared unsure what to say. He smiled encouragingly and she told him, "My parents are in London. I was getting worried because I hadn't heard from them, so I called London yesterday. Because Daddy works for many banks and government agencies, advising on banking matters, Scotland Yard was more than glad to help out. They finally got back to me a couple hours ago."

She adapted a parody of the English accent and continued, "Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald are fine. They had not received your cablegram because they changed their plans unexpectedly. Because this was a personal trip, they have not stayed in contact. Please be advised your mother had to be heavily sedated upon hearing the news of her son's death. This will delay their return by one day. They will be arriving at Kennedy Airport early Saturday and be in Atlanta by midday."

Vince laughed at her accent and told her how bad it was, then asked what her father did.

"You've either been working too hard, or you really weren't listening to me. I've

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already said Daddy is an international financial advisor. He works all over the world, telling very important people how to invest their money. I can't believe Alan never mentioned it. He was really proud of Daddy and his career. Just like Mother and Daddy were, of Alan's public service career." Vince detected a note of bitterness in her voice, but wrote it off to his imagination. Surely, they were proud of this amazingly beautiful daughter, as well.

Vince shrugged. "I'm sorry I bothered you," he said, as he stood up. Walking to the door, he realized she was behind him and he had to fight the urge to take her in his arms. "She's not like that," he told himself. He opened the door and was gone.

Maggie went to the window and watched him pull away. She started to let the curtain fall into place as his car disappeared around the corner, but something caught her eye.

"It's back," she whispered into the room. She peered cautiously from the window, the curtain barely ajar. The small, black car was again sitting in the handicapped space across from her building. She wondered whether she had a new neighbor, but in this upscale building, it was doubtful anyone would drive such an old, beat-up automobile. Just when she'd decided it belonged to a friend of a neighbor, a tiny light flared for a second in the front seat, then disappeared, as if someone was lighting a cigarette and realized the flame could be seen from outside. Someone was sitting in the car. She had the eerie feeling someone was watching her.

Chapter 9

Dwight Powell sat in his car watching the window. Earlier today, at the funeral, he had almost felt sorry for Maggie. She appeared genuinely sorrowful over the death of her brother. She had cried and mourned, like every other human being caring about someone who died. Now, Powell smiled tightly, knowing that she, too, would get what she deserved.

Looking up at the condominium complex where she lived, he scowled. Life dealt her a great hand. She drove a fine car, not like this old piece of junk. He glared at the car, as if he felt the car itself played a role in his low station in life.

Bile seeped up the back of his throat as he glared at the curtained window. She was happy, but soon—soon—she would pay.

When he watched, the door opened. Someone stepped out and started down the stairs. Not knowing for sure who was coming, Powell ducked down below the dashboard. If the person glanced his way and noticed someone in the car, the assumption would be the occupant was looking for something on the floor and would investigate no further.

A minute later, Powell again watched the window. He saw the curtain twitch and Maggie's face appeared. She had an aura around her, as the light from behind her framed her

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head like a halo.

“Maggie? An angel?” he snorted. “Yeah, right.” He chuckled cruelly, knowing that soon, she would be making her appeal to St. Peter. He knew, deep in his heart, she would be denied entry. Maggie did not deserve heaven. She did not deserve half of what she had. She was a spoiled, pampered princess who had been given everything she ever wanted.

Powell grabbed the cigarette pack from the car’s console and tapped one out. Putting it into his mouth, he lifted the lighter to the tip and flicked the wheel. The flame jumped to life. Realizing anyone watching would know the vehicle was occupied, he immediately cupped the flame with his hand.

Powell spent most of the night watching the apartment, sure other men would show up before the night was over. Maggie ushered a string of men in and out of her life. Powell resented her for that, as well. She could have any man she wanted just by looking his way. He had never had a steady woman in his life. When he met someone, she took one look at the way he lived, the car he drove, and hit the road. All the good that had come to this creature, just because of the luck of birth really wasn’t fair .

Powell knew he could no longer live this way. As a police officer, he made a fair paycheck for a single man, but he squirreled it away. He had grown up sinfully poor and refused to ever return to that poverty-stricken life. He had a large sum of money in the bank from a lucky investment. When Maggie was dealt with, he would take the money and disappear.

No one would notice if he fell off the face of the earth. He would live somewhere

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warm, with some brainless, skimpily-dressed women to wait on him, knowing once and for all he controlled his life and the women worked for him.

But right now, he had work to do. He must tie up some loose ends before he made his escape, and one of those loose ends lived right up those stairs.

Powell wondered whether he could enter her apartment right now and take care of business. He had wanted to do it at the funeral, a feat almost poetic, if he pulled it off. Too many people drifted around the site, though. He resolved to wait.

When Powell glanced in the rear-view mirror he almost didn't recognize himself. Such fire in his own eyes, that hadn't been there in years—maybe ever. This “job” made him feel more alive than ever before. He could not wait until it was finished. He shivered in anticipation and smiled, showing the crooked, tobacco-stained teeth his mother couldn't afford to straighten.

Settling more comfortably into the dilapidated seat, Powell stared up at the door, behind which the pampered princess resided.

Chapter 10

Finally, Maggie went back to bed. She lay awake thinking for a while. What was happening in her life? Was there anything she needed to do? Anything she needed to change? She was surprised at her behavior tonight. Since Erich's death, she hadn't had much use for men. Raising ambitious twins single-handedly was a full-time job. She did not allow time for intimate relationships. She dated off and on, but never seriously. She simply enjoyed the company of men and the attention they gave her. She willingly used them at times to achieve temporary sexual fulfillment, but she never allowed them to get too close.

During the last three years, Maggie slowly built a wall around her emotions. Now here she was, thinking about this man, who was not like anyone she had ever known. Vince somehow brought out the flirtatious side of her she thought was dead. She didn't understand it; she knew better-looking men. She could tell he was understanding, though. When she lashed out at Jerry, he gave her room to vent.

She lay in bed thinking about those dancing blue eyes, remembering his sandy blond hair was a little long, but she liked the way wisps curled around his ears. He was too stiff and he dressed like a conservative lawyer. "He's probably experienced, though," Maggie

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whispered into the darkness. "I could learn a few things from him." Not knowing she'd affected Vince in much the same way, she finally drifted off to sleep thinking about him. She was almost able to feel his presence, his strong arms wrapped around her body. All the time she wondered at herself for thinking this way. In her dreams, she envisioned herself walking barefoot on the beach, hand in hand with Vince. They were making plans for the future, talking about their children, their lives and themselves. Maggie drifted in and out of sleep all night. When she got up for work the next day, the dark circles under her eyes became clearly evident, breaking through her makeup.

When she got to the studio, Doris looked at her with raised eyebrows, but considering what she'd been through the last few days, she was entitled to look tired for a day or two.

Chapter 11

On the other side of town, Vince, back at home, sat in his easy chair thinking about those violet eyes and that beautiful face. Her eyes flashed little sparks of silver when she got mad, and he wondered how she could be so different from her brother. She was dark and mysterious, while Fitz was the true Irishman his name implied; big as a bear, with red hair and freckles. Alan had mentioned once his mother was of Italian descent, and had won multiple beauty pageants as a child and a teen. *Maggie must take after her*, he thought to himself. Squeezing his eyes shut, he drew in a deep breath, then exhaled it slowly. *I have got to get her out of my head*. He muttered, trying to bring his tumultuous feelings under control. *My kids are her age, for God's sake! She can't possibly want anything from me, except a shoulder to lean on while she deals with her brother's death*. He knew once she got her life back on track, he'd never hear from her again. He tried to put her out of his thoughts. Finally, knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep with her on his mind, he got up. He started going over all of Fitz's old arrest records, which he had liberated from the file room while Gene had the over-worked clerk looking for a file on a non-existent bust.

Vince hoped to find some clue as to who might want Fitz dead, but he didn't have any

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idea what he was looking for. Sgt. Fitzgerald had arrested several hundred people in his career, and many of them were out on parole. Another question was, if Patrick or Edward Fitzgerald were involved, how did they get the orders through division? And why would either of them want Alan dead?

Kenny Ellis was sure someone in the department was involved, but he refused to say why, or who he might suspect. He simply stated that the men chosen for the task force that was investigating the deaths of the three officers might not be the right ones. Vince decided he would meet with Chief Riordan and possibly get assigned to the task force. Attending the annual Policeman's rodeo during the upcoming weekend would give him a chance to see Maggie again, too. Vince examined all of Alan's recent cases, but nothing jumped out as significant. He finally stumbled to bed around three, for a short nap before work.

Chapter 12

Over the next few days, Vince wanted to call Maggie, but he held back because he didn't have anything new to tell her. He dreamed about her every night. He'd wake up with the scent of her perfume still on his mind, seeing her standing in the windy doorway in her thin nightgown. Still he wouldn't call her, because he was afraid he only wanted her body, and he wouldn't dishonor a woman that way.

Jerry Blair and his bruised jaw seemed to be a favorite locker room topic, but that was to be expected when the incident happened in full view of half the department. Of course, the eyewitness accounts got more exaggerated. Each retelling made the story more unbelievable, but that too, was to be expected. Vince ignored most of those stories because they were boring and repetitive.

With Maggie invading his waking and sleeping thoughts, it wasn't very long before Vince began looking like a zombie. He had dark circles under his eyes and his already gruff demeanor got gruffer. On Thursday afternoon, Gene looked across the desk at him and suggested he get some sleep. "Real sleep, Vince. Take a pill or something, so you don't take this case to bed with you. Alan is gone, and he'll be just as gone tomorrow. If you get some

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sleep, you'll be more effective not only on his case, but on our own caseload."

Vince looked at him, his chin propped in his hand. At first, Gene thought he'd spoken out of turn, but Vince nodded. "You're right. I can't live on coffee anymore. I'm not twenty, anymore. I'm going home." He stood up, grabbed his suit jacket and disappeared down the stairs. Gene watched him go, unsure what had happened, but hoping he would actually get some sleep.

Chapter 13

Maggie tried to get on with her life. Her mother was an emotional wreck when she arrived home, and getting her settled took a lot of time. The girls were adjusting to never seeing Uncle Alan again, and Maggie didn't really have much time to grieve, something for which she was silently thankful.

Several times she felt a presence, someone watching her. Sometimes the presence gave her comfort, other times it made her nervous. She knew it was part of the adjustment period everyone goes through after losing a loved one, and she wrote all the feelings off. More than once the black car appeared in her parking lot, but she decided someone must have purchased a car for a teenaged child. Some people did not feel their children needed a brand new car the minute they got a license. When she saw it around town the same places she went, she assumed the young man (she had seen him behind the wheel) was running errands for his mother. The driver looked a little old to be a teen, but who knew, these days? Boys matured pretty quickly, sometimes.

Maggie found herself thinking about Vince several times, and she talked to Gene about him. He warned her not to get involved, because Vince made it clear he hated women

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and would never again allow himself to be tied down by one. After hanging up, Gene turned to his wife and said, with a smile, "Vince may have his hands full with Maggie, Dana."

"Good. They both need someone in their lives," she touched his hand and asked, "Why did you warn her not to get too close to him?"

"Because I know Maggie. Tell her she can't have something and she'll get it, just to prove you wrong," he laughed. "For that matter, if Vince discusses her with me, I'll tell him the same thing. He's as stubborn as she is."

Dana nodded, then went to the kitchen to start dinner.

Chapter 14

After talking to Gene, Maggie found herself thinking about Vince even more.

*Probably just the challenge*, she told herself. *Gene says he hates women and I have to find out.* She was making chocolate milk for the girls' afternoon snack, ten days after Alan's funeral. *You're too old to have a crush on someone.* She reminded herself. *But he's investigating Alan's death personally*, she argued, wrestling with her conscience. *That's all I'm interested in.* She realized she didn't care about his investigation. *Marc is working on it. He'll find out what happened. I want to see Vince because he excites me. I want to sleep with him and it has nothing to do with the case.* As she put cookies and milk on the table for the girls, she decided what to do. Walking to the phone, she dialed, then waited for an answer.

Vince was sitting at his desk pushing some files around, not really looking at any of them. He was no closer to an answer than he had been when he started. He had no motive, but he was sure he was missing something important, something right under his nose. Something Maggie said at dinner was nagging him, but he couldn't remember what. All he could remember about that night was how seductive she'd looked and smelled. He could remember every detail about the way she looked and walked, including how desperately he'd

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wanted to touch her when she'd answered the door practically naked. When the phone rang, he scooped it up unconsciously and snapped, "Sgt. Howard. Narcotics."

"Ooh, so formal! Did I call at a bad time? I could call again later."

"Maggie? Wait! Don't hang up. It's funny you should call. I don't have any new information, but I was just sitting here trying to think up an excuse to call you."

"You don't need an excuse, remember? I told you to come around any time," she paused, then added, almost in a whisper, "Come by. I want to know you better." Vince didn't answer, and she went on. "I'm actually calling about the rodeo tomorrow. You said you've never been to one and I think it's high time you remedied that situation, don't you?"

"I'm not sure if I'm ready to trust my life to a horse, but I'll watch you compete, how's that? I may even let you talk me into riding. Everyone I've talked to says you're the best. . .except Gene. He says you think you're the best and it's gone to your head, but you're really only second best."

"Ignore Gene. He's jealous because I can make a monkey out of him," she laughed, adding, "I have to admit he is as good as he says. He gives me a run for my money. But really, Vince, riding a horse isn't any more dangerous than getting up in the morning. My horse, Morning Star, is very gentle. I taught both of the girls to ride on him. Besides, he's so old he couldn't throw you or run away with you even if he wanted to. Both are highly unlikely, since he's such a sweet-tempered old thing. You can work your way up to Lady's high spirits later."

"You've talked me into it. Star, not Lady. What time should I pick you up?"

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"To be honest, even though the rodeo doesn't start 'til eleven, I should be there around six-thirty. Seven at the absolute latest. If that's too early, you can meet us there later." She couldn't resist teasing him, so she said, "If I can trust you to actually show up, that is." He assured her he'd be there, omitting the fact he might be willing to do several things against his nature, to see her again. "I have to be there early, because I've been so busy Lady hasn't been ridden in nearly two weeks. I've got to get her hyped up to compete, or Gene will beat me for sure."

Vince was surprised. "I don't know too much about rodeos, but don't women generally have their own events? You don't actually compete against the men, do you?"

"Girls ride horses, too, Sgt. Howard," was her answer. "Even on the circuit, I competed against the men, because Uncle Marc trained me that way. Most of the spectators bet against me simply because I was, in their words, 'a tiny little girl who didn't know how to act like a girl.' Uncle Marc used his influence and finally convinced the association I should be allowed to compete with the men. I eventually proved myself to those chauvinists and became sort of a mascot among the other riders. That's when I gave up the professional circuit for good. I'm nobody's poodle."

Vince laughed, thinking about her beautiful face and sexy body, and he knew she could be his poodle anytime. He knew he would probably be willing to be her poodle, too. She was still talking, so he returned his attention to her.

"So don't be a sexist pig, okay? I'm as good as any man, but now I only compete against Gene once a year, at the police rodeo. So far, I've always been able to beat him, just

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like that first competition in El Paso, but you never know, do you? He might get lucky one of these days. Maybe he can take the trophy home instead of me."

They talked for a few more minutes, then Vince offered again to pick them up, silently telling himself it was Saturday and he didn't usually get up early on his days off. He'd been especially looking forward to this one, because it was his first real day off in weeks. He'd planned to sleep until noon, and then maybe get up long enough to fetch the paper and a donut and take a nap until dinnertime. Making up his mind, he said, "I'll see you a little before six, okay?"

"Sweet dreams, Sarge," Maggie said, then hung up the phone and spoke to the empty room. "Dream about me."

Chapter 15

Vince saw Gene coming out of the file room with a stack of old case files. Usually the first one to suggest overtime, today Vince wanted to get out of the office before something else came up that kept him late. He planned to duck out before Gene noticed him.

Gene, tall and thin, was the exact opposite of Vince. He was quiet and kept to himself most of the time, not getting involved in the politics of the department, while Vince made his presence known with the subtlety of an angry buffalo. Gene's coal black eyes glittered and his black hair was longer than most officers were allowed to wear. Since he worked undercover most of the time the department let it slide: besides, no one quite had the nerve to tell him to cut it. The small, jagged scar on his left cheek he'd gotten from a spur when he was ten only added to his menacing appearance, giving him a mean, unemotional image, which he played to the fullest extent possible. Vince generally used Gene's quiet demeanor to his advantage and now was no exception; they worked the good cop/bad cop routine well together. Most suspects and cops alike were surprised when Vince, the one with the quick temper, was always the good cop.

Vince had his jacket on and was nearly to the stairs when Dale Riker came up,

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blocking his path. "Sneaking out, Vince? It's not five-thirty, yet."

"Got a couple of interviews on my way home," Vince mumbled.

"Really?" Dale appeared to be in no hurry, and Vince glanced over his shoulder. Gene was at the coffee machine, and had not seen him yet. "Looks like you're ducking Gene."

"He has a bug up his ass about some old case files that relate to the one we're working," Vince said, thinking fast. "He wants to work all night going back over them. It's a non-starter, but he's all over it. I want to watch the game tonight, so I'm ducking out. Okay? Get the hell out of my way."

Dale showed no signs of moving, and Vince growled, "I outrank you, damn it! Get out of my way!" Dale laughed and stepped aside, knowing there was more to the matter than Vince not wanting to work all night. Vince darted past him and down the stairs, pretending he didn't hear Gene calling him. He arrived at his car a little winded, but succeeded in evading Gene and his dusty files.

Chapter 16

Maggie spent all evening getting ready for the next day. She laid out clothes for herself and the girls. They were bugging her for a chance to ride since they'd come home from the Circle R Ranch, the day after Alan's funeral. Now, they would get their chance and they were bouncing off the walls all evening. Maggie watched them, amused. She remembered the first time she'd been given a horse that was truly hers and hers alone. She had been about the girls' age, and her behavior had been similar.

She intended to enjoy the time she spent with the attractive and intriguing Sgt. Howard. *Sgt. Howard could indeed be an interesting conquest*, she told herself. *I wouldn't mind at least spending a few nights with him.* She smiled into the mirror. *Just to be sure he continues looking for Alan's real killer, of course*, she rationalized. With a sly wink, she turned away and sped up her ironing. *Yeah, right.*

While tucking the girls into bed, she listened to the weather report on the radio. The local weathergirl predicted snow before the weekend was over. *Terrific! That's all we need. This cold snap will drop attendance by itself*, she thought to herself. *Threats of snow will make it worse, because town folk tend to panic at the mere mention of the word.* To the girls,

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though, she tried to put on a cheerful face. Still, she seemed as depressed as she felt.

"Well, ladies, Uncle Gene just might win this year. You know how skittish Lady gets in bad weather. I may have to ride Morning Star. No matter how much I love him, we all know Arizona can beat that old gluepot without leaving the stable. Five years ago riding him was a dream. Now he couldn't win a race with a snail, if his tail was on fire!"

"Mama, Lady won't let you down. If she does, you can ride Diablo. Uncle Marc won't mind. He's trained for the rodeo, just like Lady. No one but you can make him perform, but he's trained. Beside, it's the rider, not the horse that makes the difference. You've always told us that. God promised it won't snow until after the rodeo is over, anyway. I said please and everything."

Franki turned around with such a look of confidence Maggie's chest got tight, thinking how lucky she was to have these two sweet little angels. She kissed them both good night, patted the cat, and flipped the switch on the teddy bear with the nightlight in his tummy. Franki rolled her eyes and Maggie gave her a stern look. She turned off the overhead light and left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. Nikki was having frequent and terrifying nightmares ever since the night Alan died. She was convinced he really wasn't dead. She even threw a fit when she realized they were going to put the casket into the ground. Nikki started screaming that Uncle Alan couldn't breathe if he was buried underground. Finally, Dale Riker took her outside and explained it all to her again. He felt the same way about funerals, but he never allowed himself to miss a fellow officer's final farewell. Especially when he'd died on duty. Besides, he felt he owed it to Maggie, his

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childhood love.

Maggie stood outside the bedroom door for a moment, wondering how she was going to survive with her babies now that Alan wouldn't be around to help her out. A solitary tear slid down her cheek before she could squeeze it back. She wiped it away angrily. *He's gone and I need to stop crying and get on with my life.*

A knock on the front door sounded just then, but before she could reach it, her father let himself in. "Sorry to just barge in, little one, but it's cold out there." He kissed her cheek and seated himself in the easy chair by the fireplace.

While fixing coffee, Maggie and her father talked about Alan.

"I really miss him, Daddy. How will I ever get by without him? He's been my rock since Erich died. And he didn't seem in too much of a hurry to marry and have kids of his own. He was the only daddy my babies had. Now he's gone."

"Are you upset for you, or for your girls?"

"What do you mean?"

"You talk about how you need him, but you say you need him for the girls. Is it you, or them?"

Maggie looked at him for a minute, then smiled. "Both, I guess. I know how much I miss him. I can't imagine how it is for you. You lost your only son."

"I still have another child, Maggie." He stood up and entered the kitchen, putting his arms around her from behind. "I know we weren't always there for you and I'm sorry for that. But I do love you, and I am proud of you. Over the past few years, you have had to accept

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more tragedy than anyone your age should have to face. And a lot of it you have done alone, because your mother and I weren't here. Now you're dealing with this, and your mother, and the girls. Without Alan's broad shoulders to lean on."

"Daddy, I'm fine. I just wish Alan could have known the thrill of having a child of his own, before he died." She looked up at her father. "Why did he never marry? Surely there was some woman, some time, that he cared about and wanted to be with."

"Alan was socially inept as a teen. He got his height very early, and he was awkward. People assumed he should play football or basketball, but he was never athletic. Girls teased him unmercifully about his ineffective social interaction. He simply chose to stay single, because dating was painful." His voice was tight and she knew this was a sore subject. "You are much younger than Alan, Maggie. You weren't there when he was growing up, so you have no idea what he went through as a teen. He never fit in. You know how smart he was, right?"

"High I.Q. I know. He was forever handing me a book by some moldy dead guy I'd never heard of, telling me how much I would love it. I couldn't always decipher the title. I always thanked him, then put the book on my shelf. The pages will never see the light of day." She laughed and Sean nodded. His son had handed him some of the same titles. "But seriously, Daddy. . . ," she recalled, "why did Alan drop out of Brown after only two years and become a cop? That has always puzzled me."

"Personal issues, little one."

She shrugged and kissed her father's cheek, knowing it was time to end the

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conversation. When her father refused to answer, it was time to change the subject.

Sean returned to the easy chair and Maggie handed him a cup of coffee, then offered the cream pitcher. She sat down on the love seat and added cream and sugar to her own coffee. "Daddy, I don't know if there's anything to this, but Sgt. Howard thinks Uncle Patrick or Uncle Edward might be involved in this, too."

"Maggie honey, I don't see how anyone could suspect either of my brothers of such a terrible thing. I know Edward was in California at the time of Alan's death, because I spoke to him that day. Patrick made some mistakes, but I'm sure he couldn't kill Alan. There are many things you don't know about your Uncle Patrick. I can't begin to explain them. Just trust me. Please."

"I've never met Uncle Patrick, Daddy. I have to trust you. I just thought you should know so you'll be prepared if Vince decides to question you." She looked away, into the fireplace. "I invited him to the rodeo tomorrow."

"He's a member of the department, Maggie. He doesn't need an invitation." Her cheeks colored slightly as Sean added, "Are you're interested in his theories about Alan's death, or is there another reason?"

He smiled when she suddenly stood up and headed for the kitchen, purposely ignoring his question; the answer was obvious in the color on her cheeks. "More coffee, Daddy? I made plenty."

Sean set down his coffee cup and said, "I should go. We need to get to the ranch before it snows."

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“We?”

“I have to pick up your mother at her bridge club. She won't consider letting Martha cook all that food alone, even though she's more in the way than anything. The only thing Mother does well is Thanksgiving dinner. Marc hired Martha to do the cooking for him. She's been preparing meals for those rodeos for nearly twenty years.”

No one mentioned the other reason Marc kept Martha around. Although he had hired the pretty redhead to cook and clean for him, as well as take care of Maggie when she was visiting, everyone knew they generally went to sleep looking at the same ceiling. Maggie wondered why he never married her, but she assumed the main reasons were society and social standing. Martha was and always would be a servant. They seemed happy in their relationship.

Sean interrupted her thoughts. “How is Gene? Is he still ranting about the black-haired witch and her devil horse?”

“Only at rodeo time. Most of the time, he's perfectly normal. This time of year, he gets a little paranoid that maybe I have some paranormal assistance when I beat him every year.”

Sean laughed and picked up his over coat. Kissing Maggie's cheek, he walked to the door and left. She locked it behind him, then changed into her pajamas. Pouring herself a glass of wine, she sat on the floor by the fireplace until the embers died down.

Chapter 17

Around one-thirty, Maggie woke up suddenly, sitting straight up. She looked around her, sure she had heard a noise. The dark room was quiet, and she finally lay back down. She tried to go back to sleep, but it was impossible. She knew she'd heard something; she just couldn't determine what or where it had come from. She finally gave up trying to sleep and climbed out of bed. She checked the front door. It was locked. All the windows and the balcony door were latched, so she knew that no one was in the apartment who wasn't supposed to be. She made more coffee; it was going to be a long night. She curled up on the sofa with her coffee mug. Mr. Whiskers slipped silently out of the girls' room to join her. As she sat on the couch, she felt something was out of place in the room, but she couldn't figure out what. She got the small silver pistol out of the closet and sat with it in her lap. She sat staring into space, silently stroking the cat. She was still slightly scared, but her heart beat slowly returned to normal.

Lying down on the bed around three, she closed her eyes, but the images of someone in the room instantly jumped back into her mind. She got up and took a long, hot bath before waking the girls to get them ready for the rodeo. It was much earlier than they were used to

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and they stumbled around a bit before having breakfast and getting dressed.

Promptly at five-thirty on Saturday morning, Vince knocked on Maggie's door. The door opened a crack and a small blonde head peeked out. The door instantly shut in his face. He heard childish giggling on the other side. He prepared to knock again as Maggie opened the door.

She wore black jeans that hugged her tiny waist, nearly enveloped by the huge belt buckle. Her white satin shirt sported big yellow polka dots. Today, she had fastened more buttons than she had, the night they went to dinner. Vince knew Maggie's parents attended the rodeo. He assumed they were the reason for the attempted modesty today. That, and the fact that her children were home. He wasn't convinced she had been trying to seduce him that first night, but it was possible. Her long black hair hung in a single braid down her back, tied at the end with a yellow ribbon. His eyes lingered on the buckle and she shrugged, with a smile.

"I can't resist an opportunity to tease Gene. He wanted this buckle so bad it kills him to see me wear it."

"I assume you do it often? Tease him, I mean."

She smiled, "Whenever I get the chance."

Both of the girls wore jeans. Like their mother, they wore polka dotted satin western-cut blouses. One was blue with pink dots, while the other was pink with blue dots. Both wore their hair in braids, tied together at the ends with pink ribbon. Maggie hadn't been exaggerating, and neither had the artist who'd painted their portrait: beauties, both of them.

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The dark-haired one looked just like her mother, except she had green eyes instead of her mother's violet ones. The other girl was fair-skinned and blonde with blue eyes. Although she looked nothing like Maggie, she was still very much her mother's daughter.

"Well, are you just going to stand out there or are you coming in? It's cold out there."

Vince stepped into the room and the little blonde beauty stepped forward and said, "Hi. I'm Nikki. I'm sorry I closed the door in your face, sir, but Mama never lets us open it, so she would be real mad with me and I don't like making her want to yell at me, especially just before she sees the horses. It would make her extra nervous and Uncle Gene might win, then she'd be extra mad with me, since she can't let him win, or he'd tease her about it forever, even though she always beats him and he never wins and I only opened the door, 'cause I wanted to see what Mama's new boyfriend looked like."

Her honesty seemed sincere even if her grammar raced into gullies and the entire statement was one long sequence. Vince and Maggie both appeared embarrassed by Nikki's innocent comment about his being her new boyfriend. He hoped maybe it was a good omen; maybe he was destined to be her lover after all. He could see Nikki was worried Mama would scold her in front of company. She looked up at him with true remorse. Maggie must've seen it too, because she said it was okay, this time.

The girls ran off to their room to finish packing. They were spending the night with their grandparents. Maggie planned to shoot three weddings the following day and her babysitter had come down with the flu. Maggie and Vince watched them go. He laughed.

"Thanks for not scolding her. I think that was really cute."

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"I could tell you felt that way. If I scold her, you might root for Gene and I need all the support I can get. It's going to be a rough ride. I'm not sure if I can actually beat him this year. It's cold and windy. No matter how talented Lady Satan is, she a bit of a priss. She hates cold weather. She may refuse to leave the stable. Nikki's right, though. If Gene wins, I'll never hear the end of it, even though it will be the first, last, and only time it will ever happen." She smiled up at him and asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

"Don't go to any trouble. I've already had several cups."

Maggie didn't bother to tell him she'd been up most of the night, so it wouldn't be any trouble.

"Do you have room for all of us in your car? It's awfully small. So is mine."

"I borrowed Gene's jeep, so we'll all fit. Since the girls are going home with your parents, I can bring you home in my car. If we don't all freeze to death today." He looked around the corner, but the girls were still in their room.

After Nikki's comment, he wasn't sure how much she wanted her daughters to know about their relationship. "Since you won't need to find a babysitter, maybe we could have dinner after. . . you know—wine, candlelight, soft music . . ." He left the rest of his thoughts unsaid. He wasn't sure whether he'd actually go through with it. Although he had tried to fight it, now that he was here with her, he wanted her desperately, but he wasn't completely sure how she'd react. He didn't know whether he wanted her only because she was so sensuous and would feel great in his arms for a few nights, or because he wanted to build a relationship with her. He promised himself he would wait to find out whether there was a chance for a

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future before launching a sexual relationship.

She didn't answer, and he didn't ask again. "Tell me, is Nikki always that forward?"

"Nikki is my rebel. Franki's the quiet one. Nikki's going to miss Alan most of all, I think. He always took her to the fights and the football and basketball games. I guess that's over now unless I do it, or Daddy does. I certainly can't imagine him or me going to a wrestling match and sitting there watching two sweaty men in their underwear giving each other bear hugs until one of them gives up and falls down."

Vince chuckled politely at her description of a professional wrestling match, then he said, "We'd better get going, if you want time to see your horse."

Maggie went into the hallway and called to the girls and they appeared immediately, dragging a huge suitcase between them. "Are you two moving out? I'm coming to pick you up tomorrow night, after I shoot those weddings."

The girls protested they needed everything they'd packed and Maggie silently told herself it was her own fault. She gave them the opportunity to pack for themselves this time. She got their coats out of the closet and helped them put them on, insisting they also wear their hats and mittens. She picked up the suitcase and headed for the door.

Vince swooped up both girls and lifted them easily onto his shoulders. He ducked under the door frame so he wouldn't bump their heads. He held onto their ankles and, when he started down the stairs, Maggie watched apprehensively for a moment. She locked the door and followed them. Vince reached the bottom step without incident and started to set them down, but they protested so loudly he carried them all the way to the jeep. Opening the

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back door, he dumped them giggling onto the seat.

Maggie tossed their suitcase behind the seat and opened the front door, catching Vince's look. She winced, knowing she should have let him get her door. "Sorry," she said. "Most men don't open doors anymore." He shrugged, but nodded. "I promise when we get there, you can open the door."

"It's all I ask," he said, with a smile.

The ride to the ranch passed quietly after Maggie gave Vince directions, except for frequent outbursts of giggling from the back seat. Maggie had moved to the center of the seat, and her nearness invaded Vince's senses, while her perfume filled him with renewed desire. He had to pay close attention to the road, because the ranch was on the old state highway. No one had bothered to pave it since the interstate came through. Some of the potholes were big enough to lose the jeep in. He shuddered to think about Gene driving his little Mazda over this road. He casually put an arm around Maggie and she snuggled closer to him, putting her head on his shoulder, one hand on his thigh. As they neared their destination, he asked, "So, are we actually having a rodeo today, or will it be postponed because of the weather?"

"I called this morning to check. We'll have an abbreviated version with only four events instead of the usual seven. Marc told me which ones, and I think Gene has an unusually good chance of winning this year. He picked my worst four. It's clear to me, if not to everyone else, that Marc has decided Gene should win. Marc always says I'm too cocky for my own good. I think he tried to even the odds a bit to give Gene a chance. I'll show him, though. I'm not only cocky; I'm stubborn."

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Vince laughed out loud at her rash statement. He pulled into the huge circular driveway and parked beside his own car, that Gene had driven. It looked small and out of place amid the pickup trucks and horse trailers. Looking over at Maggie, who had moved back to the passenger side as they'd crested the last hill, he grinned and said, "I didn't realize we had so many cowboys in the department. Where have they all been hiding?"

"Most of these so-called cowboys never saw a real cow, unless it was medium rare. They all have horses, though. Riding is a favorite American pastime for normal people, unlike those among us who are scared of God's most beautiful and gentlest creatures." He made a face at her and she laughed.

Gene walked over and opened the back door. Lifting the twins down one at a time, he grinned at Vince over their heads and teased, "Bucking for Lieutenant, huh, Sarge? Dating the Chief's niece could be bad for your career, you know." He winked at Maggie and added, with an almost serious expression. "If I'd known who you were bringing, I might not have let you borrow my truck. Her absence strengthens my chance of winning today."

Maggie stuck her tongue out at him. She headed for the stables while the twins ran toward the house, giggling. Vince watched Maggie go, not sure that he'd heard correctly. Chief Riordan was Maggie's uncle? Why hadn't she said anything? He'd practically accused the man of murdering her brother and she'd never batted an eyelash.

Chapter 18

Gene walked with Vince toward the house. They walked slowly. Gene talked about the rodeo, surprised that Vince had been convinced to attend, even by Maggie. Vince listened with only half an ear, but did hear him mention Patrick Fitzgerald being at the stationhouse the evening before, looking for the Chief. Vince remained lost in his own thoughts, tucking that morsel away for later.

By the time the men reached the house, the girls were dancing around their grandparents, chattering about the twin Arabians Uncle Marc gave them on their last birthday. Today was the long-awaited day; the ponies were finally old enough to ride and were saddle-broke and tamed. The girls bubbled with anticipation.

Maggie returned from the stables. She introduced Vince to her mother. Vince remembered Sean from Alan's days at the Academy. Twenty years hadn't lessened Sean's grip. He greeted Vince warmly, with a firm strong handshake, almost daring him to try something improper with Maggie. The twins each had Gene by a hand and slowly dragged him toward the stable to see their ponies. Maggie told them to go ahead. She wanted to talk to Gene and Vince for a minute.

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"I can only stay for a short time. John is giving Lady a rubdown. I usually do that myself, but since we were a little late, he went ahead and started on his own. Besides, he loves making her shine and he's better at getting Lady worked up to compete. Especially when it's cold."

Vince followed Maggie into the house and looked around him. The place exuded wealth, tasteful, abundant wealth. Maggie's beautiful mother, was obviously well-bred and very spoiled, just like her daughter. This house belonged to her brother, so he came from money: old money and lots of it. Gene wasn't joking when he said Maggie came from a good family. The Chief had nothing to gain by eliminating the son of an old-line banker.

Designed in enormous ante-bellum style, with high ceilings and heavy oak paneling, the layout featured a spiral staircase that led to the upper regions of the house, like many of the old plantation houses in and around Atlanta. The enormous entry hall gleamed with marble floors and several crystal chandeliers. Off to the right, Vince spied a huge open area, decorated with early American art but no real furniture. It appeared not to be used on a regular basis, except as a gathering point for visitors. Before being presented to the master of the house in his own inner sanctum, guests stood, admiring their opulent surroundings. It currently served as the gathering place for the many family members not yet willing to brave the cold and wind of the arena.

Maggie noticed Vince looking around. "Uncle was the only son. Of course he would inherit the family home. I guess it's mine, now. Along with Silver Oaks and Plantation House, when everyone I love is gone and I am completely alone in the world." The tears

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welling in Maggie's violet eyes threatened to overflow. Vince hoped to avoid the flood. Her tears affected him in a way he would never have thought possible. Still, her innocent quality made him desire to protect her from the world and keep her for himself.

He took her hand in his and squeezed it softly. They stood in the open doorway and a brisk, cold wind blew in from outdoors. Her hand felt cold and, on impulse, he lifted it to his lips and kissed her fingertips. Gene noticed the friendly exchange, but said nothing. He smiled to himself. Things were shaping up nicely. It couldn't be going better if he'd planned it himself.

They were approached by a tall, heavy-set man in his mid-to-late fifties. He sported the same green eyes as Angelica Fitzgerald. The smile tugging at the corners of his lips when he spotted Maggie told of his affection for the fiery-tempered beauty. His black hair, reminiscent of Maggie's, was sprinkled with gray. Maggie hugged the older man and kissed his cheek, receiving a loving smile and kiss on the forehead in return. Vince recognized him as Marc Riordan, Chief of Police for the city of Atlanta. Maggie pulled him toward Vince. "Vince, you know Chief Riordan, don't you?" Vince nodded, still a little put off that she hadn't told him of her relationship with the man.

Marc smiled down at his niece, then offered his hand. Vince took it and found it to be just as firm and strong as Sean's. He knew they both sent a subtle warning for him to watch his step where Maggie was concerned, or he might find himself in over his head. "I already am," he muttered to himself.

Marc interrupted Vince's thoughts. "Now tell me, Sgt. Howard, are you going to ride

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this afternoon? Most of the spectators take a trail ride after we eat."

"If I can't talk Maggie out of it, I suppose I am. I'm not really dressed for it, though." He indicated his slacks and loafers. When Marc offered to find him something suitable, Maggie giggled at Vince's expression. Turning to face Maggie, Vince winked at Gene over his shoulder and said, "I'll make you a deal. You told me on the way here you think Gene might take the trophy this year, right?"

"Yes. So what? I don't intend to let him, but stranger things have happened. Why?"

"If you win, I'll ride with you—if he wins, I won't. Fair enough?"

"That's blackmail! Gene has the advantage. I've already told you that. He and Marc stacked the deck." Maggie protested, stamping her foot, almost like a spoiled child learning she wasn't getting what she wanted for her birthday. "If I beat your partner while you watch, he'll be hell to live with!" She glared at Gene over her shoulder. Not giving anyone a chance to interrupt or have any say at all, she continued, "Have it your own way, but don't you dare say I didn't warn you!" She glared at Gene, who was laughing at her. "Let's ride, Gene! I'm going to get him on that blasted horse today if it kills you and me both!"

She stomped out the back door toward the stable, and Vince laughed at Gene's expression. "Now why did you have to go and do that?" Gene asked. "She was going to let me win, until you put her on the warpath. You owe me big for this one, friend." Marc shrugged and disappeared from view. Vince considered following him, but decided to catch up with him later. Right now, he had ribbing to do.

Vince continued laughing, slapped Gene on the back and said, "Go for the gold,

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Cochise! She can beat you blind-folded, with both hands tied behind her back. It doesn't matter which events you talked the Man into omitting. I think everyone knows it—including you, partner. You two got together and set her up, didn't you? You chose her worst events to give you a fighting chance, right?" Gene shrugged, but nodded. "You know she'll beat you anyway, even if you did cheat."

"You do know I'm Cherokee, right? Cochise was an Apache." Gene strode purposefully to the door. With Vince's laughter following him out the door, Gene he realized he didn't want to win that way. He and Marc had laughed about it as they set the roster that morning on the phone, but he knew he wouldn't feel right about beating her that way. When he beat her (and someday he would), it had to be fair and square. Not because she threw the match, or because he cheated, which, in a sense, he had. There was no cowboy anywhere better than Gene Littlewolf—except little Maggie Fitzgerald. Gene's first rodeo saw him beat his childhood idol, the legendary All American Cowboy Marc Riordan.

It grated on Gene's ego to think he was getting too old to beat a girl, no matter who trained her. He made up his mind to compete as if his life depended on it. In a sense, it did. Vince would never let him forget a loss like that, especially after Maggie's challenge. Vince wandered into the front room hearing greetings from various men. They knew the effect Maggie's looks had on men, but Sarge seemed different from most. He was older and so set in his ways that it amazed all around to see him with her. He never seemed to have time for women. It would be interesting to see who bent to whom if they stayed together long. All bets were on Maggie loosening him up a bit. She wasn't the type to change for anyone, especially

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a man. Just the fact that he was here lent support to the belief that she would loosen him up. Everyone knew he didn't do the rodeo scene, yet here he was, with the raven-haired beauty on his arm.

Several had tried, but so far, no one had succeeded in getting close to Maggie since she returned to Atlanta after her husband's death, three years ago. She was willing to be friends with everyone, but she didn't want serious boyfriends or commitment. She made this clear to any man who convinced her to let down her guard and have dinner with them. Many of the men knew about her totally free approach to sex, but valuing their lives, decided it probably wasn't a good idea to mention this to Sarge. He might already be sleeping with her, or still trying to get into her bedroom. Either way, conversation about her sex life was off limits.

Vince talked to the men for a few minutes, then noticed Dana Littlewolf sitting alone in a corner. She wasn't able to ride this year. She was seven months pregnant and seemed a little depressed. She wasn't nearly as good a rider as Maggie or her husband, but she enjoyed herself and usually managed to finish in the top ten. Dana was a heavy-set but pretty woman with soft, coppery curls, usually in an unruly but attractive mess. Given her sweet personality, Vince was continually amazed she put up with Gene's frequent fits of moodiness and his odd hours. His volatility worked well in police work, but Vince wondered how it played at home. *That's real love for you. Most women don't know when to stay, but a woman in love doesn't know when to leave.*

He walked over to her and described the scene in the hallway. He admitted teasing

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Maggie, but asked Dana to keep his secret. She promised not to tell, asking, "Why have you never been out to a rodeo before?"

"To be honest, I don't know. Gene pesters me every year to watch him compete, but I never seem to find the time. This year seemed right."

"Admit it, Vince. You're intrigued and interested. You've never been to a rodeo before and you still aren't sure. If Gene can't win, you want a firsthand look at the little lady who does. Besides, it will give you something to tease him about in the future. He was literally ranting last night. If he doesn't win today, you'll never let him hear the end of it."

"I guess you're right, hon." He looked at Dana for a moment. "I have a question." She looked up at him expectantly. "You both know Maggie and you know me. You fix me up with women, I assume you introduce her to men?" Dana nodded. "Why have you never put us together? Just as an experiment? My age?"

"No," she looked into space for a minute, then said, "it actually never occurred to me. You look good together, though. Despite the height difference." Vince grinned and nodded.

Vince wanted to talk to the Chief before the rodeo. He excused himself from Dana, kissed her on the top of the head, and walked away. He asked the housekeeper where to find him and she ushered him to the study, near the back of the huge house. When she tapped on the door and pushed it open, Marc looked up and his face lit up. Vince wondered about the relationship between them, then decided it was none of his business. "Sir, this man wanted to speak to you."

"Thank you, Martha." Marc smiled at her and she blushed rosily and disappeared.

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Vince could tell this woman was more than a housekeeper. Although a few years his senior, Marc was an eligible bachelor and she was an attractive lady. Vince didn't blame the man for being attracted to her. It seemed strange she was only his housekeeper since he was not, and never had been, married. He reminded himself it wasn't his business.

Vince looked around. This was definitely a favorite room. It was richly furnished, with a comfortable air. The oak paneling set off the deep brown carpet and the furniture solidly built from the finest mahogany. "Please have a seat, Sergeant. I've been expecting you." Vince chose the seat directly across from the desk, an over-stuffed armchair. He related his findings to Chief Riordan.

While talking, Vince studied the vast gun collection behind the desk. Some of them clearly dated back to the Civil War and before. Marc was an authority on firearms, old and new. He kept an impressive collection in his home. Vince noticed an empty space in the display case, but he dismissed it without a second thought. It was a not that secret Chief Riordan lent his weapons to gun clubs for demonstrations. Several local museums displayed pieces he had lent or donated. Last spring, he personally supplied all the muskets to the Drama Club at one of the local high schools for use in their yearly production of some unknown playwright's work. The most recent work, a dramatic presentation about the Civil War from the viewpoint of a true-blue Southerner, concluded with the South winning. Most of the weapons here were old and would not fire, but they were beautiful and well-preserved. He could just detect the faint odor of gun oil in the room.

Marc listened intently while Vince outlined all the things he'd learned. He offered

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comments from time to time. He supplied some information previously unavailable, kept under wraps until Internal Affairs finished their investigation.

"The part about Sean's brother is a bit far-fetched, don't you think? He hasn't made contact in years. Why would he start now, and in such a violent manner? Patrick and I grew up together. He was always the first to back out of a game if there was the slightest chance one of us might get hurt. Vigilante cop-killer doesn't fit his profile. I think you're off base, here. Keep looking and let me know what you find. Monday, I'll have you address the task force with what you have discovered." This was what Vince wanted; an appointment to the task force. Marc glanced at his watch, then stood up, an indication the discussion was over. "We'd better go, Sergeant. It's almost time to start. You'll like this part. All the competitors ride around the arena, allowing the spectators to get one last look before they place final bets." He smiled slightly, as he added, "Of course, since gambling on such events is illegal, I don't allow it on the premises."

Vince nodded, knowing the man wouldn't say anything so long as it didn't get out of hand. During the past hour, while talking to the men, he had heard many bets and challenges. "All horses love to prance and show off. Maggie and Lady Satan always stand out in a crowd. I wouldn't miss the chance to see her, even if I weren't the announcer and Master of Ceremonies."

"Why would Maggie name her horse Lady Satan? It makes her sound so dangerous."

"She is dangerous," Marc said, with a slight laugh. He explained as they walked toward the arena. "Lady's sire is Diablo and she inherited his coloring and temperament. Her

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dame is Lady Violet. She likes the name much better than Morning Star, because Star always sounded so passive. Lady Satan's name alone makes her sound like she's playing to win."

"But is Star safe?" Vince asked. "She thinks I'm going to ride him later and I'm not looking forward to it. I've never been on a horse in my life, and I'm not ready to change that now."

"I don't mean to alarm you, Sergeant, but Morning Star isn't even here. John said he was acting strangely last night so he didn't bring him out. Surely he told Maggie when she talked to him this morning. I don't know which horse she expects you to ride, because there isn't one in my stable gentle enough for a beginner," he smiled. "I breed thoroughbreds and they're very skittish. They'd never settle for a tenderfoot on their back. You'd be in the hay before you could get out of the corral."

"I'm not sure if I've just been insulted or not, but thanks for the warning. I'm sure as hell not riding now. I just can't believe she would make such an issue about it when her horse isn't even on the premises. She promised me a saddle horse too old and tired to throw me off. If she can't supply it, I'm not going to hold up my end of the bargain, either."

Marc showed Vince to the bleachers built a few years ago, when the rodeo got to be such a big event that it could no longer be held in the regular corral. Marc approached the judges' stand, knowing Maggie was going to kill him for telling Vince about the horse. He also suspected she would try to get Vince onto the Prince of Darkness. That arrangement wouldn't be fair to man or horse. Prince was Lady's half brother, but he hadn't been lucky enough to get Diablo for a sire. Instead, he got the bad blood of Black Knight, a big black

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stallion Marc had since gotten rid of due to his bad temper. Prince was rebellious and mean. He wasn't easy-going enough to allow a beginner on his back. Prince's father had won multiple races, but Marc retired him early. The horse permanently injured a jockey, ending his career by purposely throwing the young man into a stone wall. Prince never got so violent, but he did manage to let the rider know he was in charge.

"Maggie is one of the only people on the planet who can handle Prince. She should know better. I can't even ride that damn horse," Marc muttered to himself as he climbed the stairs to the announcer's booth. "If she cares about this man, she shouldn't be trying to kill him on their first date."

Chapter 19

Vince located the twins and they insisted he sit between them. They shyly took hold of his hands and he smiled down at them, returning the greetings from several people around them. He noticed many men still making bets on the outcome. He watched them, wanting to know whether others had as much faith in Maggie as she had in herself. Listening to some of the younger officers betting on someone other than Maggie or Gene, he knew those fools and their money would soon be parted. Everyone knew who the real competitors were, if what Maggie and Gene said was to be believed. He had seen the trophies in Maggie's house, so he knew she was good. Gene had a fair number of trophies, as well.

As Vince sat down, the PA system crackled to life. Everyone turned their attention to the arena below. The riders entered the arena one at a time as Marc called their names, introducing each rider and horse.

Gene led the procession. He was dressed in buckskins and war paint, his long hair hanging in braids and fastened at the ends with leather bands studded with turquoise. His horse, Arizona, was a Palomino. Gene had braided Arizona's mane and tail, adorning him with red and blue feathers, symbolic of a true warrior. The horse's recently-brushed golden

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coat glittered like a freshly minted coin and the silvery white mane shone in the pale sunlight.

Maggie was in the middle of the long line, behind Kenny Ellis on his black and white Pinto pony, Shalimar. Vince thought they looked cute together; the horse was a bit small for Ellis' large frame.

Maggie appeared suddenly from behind Ellis, almost as if by magic. She was dressed in white leather from head to toe, a red shirt barely visible under the jacket. Her raven hair, now unbraided, flew free under the white hat, free of feathers and hatpins. The wind whipped around her, kicking up little wisps of hair into her face. She sat astride a coal black mare with white stockinged feet. Lady's glossy midnight mane sported free-floating red and white ribbons. The ribbons danced in the strong north wind. Vince could feel the precipitation in the air. He wondered whether anyone would leave.

"Lady Satan is a quarter horse," Nikki leaned over and informed him, telling him that Diablo, Lady's sire, had won a multitude of races and Lady Violet's babies were all winners. Lady stood sixteen hands high, a picture of endurance and speed. Maggie looked small and unprotected on her back, but Vince could tell she was totally in control of the highly-spirited young horse.

He sat looking down at her in the arena and he felt the same faint tug of the uncertainty that he always felt when entering into a situation where he wasn't totally in control. Maggie had assured him her horse was safe, but after the Chief's revelation, he was having visions of himself perched precariously in the saddle, holding on for dear life, while some horse fulfilled the dream of a lifetime: scaring the hell out of an oversized, chicken cop.

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He pondered the situation for a while. Maggie had lied to him. Why? Could he have a relationship with a woman who lied to him, no matter the size of the lie? No matter how beautiful she was?

Vince didn't pay much attention to the other riders because his eyes followed Maggie as she circled the arena, her young mount high-stepping proudly. Lady followed Kenny and Shalimar until they exited and were lost from view. Vince caught sight of Dale Riker near the end of the line, just before he disappeared through the gate, and he was surprised. Dale was a city boy like Vince. He'd never mentioned competing with Gene.

Vince questioned Sean Fitzgerald, and he gladly explained that, although Dale was a third-generation policeman, Marc had been good friends with Jacob Riker, Dale's father. When asked to give Dale riding lessons, he had readily agreed. Marc had taught Dale to ride practically before he could walk. He'd joined Maggie's rodeo lessons, too. He never achieved her level of excellence, but unlike her, he only competed for fun. It didn't matter when he was beaten, which was frequently. He entered the competition for the thrill of it, not for the trophies.

Looking around the grandstand, Vince noticed Dale's wife and three children on the end of an aisle, three rows in front of them. Nikki saw them too and she wrinkled her little nose in distaste. She pointed toward them, speaking to her sister across Vince. "Yuck! Franki, look! Cory Riker came out here to see his daddy lose to Mama, again. He was bragging at after school care they were going to be taking home the trophy this year, but I know better! Cory is such a dreamer!" She stated. "Not to mention, he's a creep!"

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Vince smiled, but Sean shook his head, silently telling him not to speak. "She has a crush on him," Sean whispered, not loud enough for Nikki to hear, because she was on the opposite side of Vince.

Nikki looked up at Vince and asked, "Are you rooting for Mama, or Uncle Gene? You can still sit with us, but Uncle Gene doesn't have a chance. Mama wipes him out, every year!"

"Well, I've never seen either of them compete, but your mom has more trophies than Uncle Gene. I do know that." Vince smiled and promised to root for Maggie.

Just then, Marc announced the first event: Calf roping. After the calf had been released into the arena, Gene entered like he'd been shot from a cannon. He thundered up beside the unsuspecting calf and threw himself off the horse, tying the animal's feet together. Maggie beat his time by three seconds and he paced around the holding area muttering incoherently to Dana, waiting his turn in the saddle bronc competition. He was tied with Maggie after this event. She fell behind on the team roping, when she was paired with newcomer Stacy Calahan. Gene had Dale Riker, a seasoned veteran. Maggie suspected Marc had again stacked the deck against her, but they had drawn names from a hat, so she couldn't be sure.

This was Stacy's first year, and he wasn't very good, but he tried hard. Maggie was an excellent heeler, but as a header, Stacy was a bit sluggish. Maggie knew synchronization was vital if you were going to be successful. She was watching him to time herself. Twice, his lasso missed its mark, requiring her to quickly shorten the rope so as not to confuse the poor creature any more. Stacy knew how much the competition meant to Maggie. It made him

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more nervous when Gene told him about the deal between Maggie and Sgt. Howard, not realizing that this was exactly the reason Gene had mentioned it.

Maggie was leaving the arena when she caught sight of someone standing high above the grandstand. Her heart leaped to her throat. She slid off Lady's back and started to leave the holding area because she was sure she'd just seen Alan watching her ride. Gene stopped her and asked her what was wrong.

She explained and Dale, who was standing behind her, offered to check it out, because she was the first to ride in the next event. He left the stable and started up to the top, but stopped when someone touched his shoulder. He turned around to face the person standing in the shadows and he scolded, "What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be dead. If anyone sees you. . ." Dale paused, stepping into the shadow of the building. Not only was it warmer out of the wind, but they were hidden from view. "Maggie did see you. Just now. What should I tell her?"

"I don't know," Alan said. "I have to protect her. Something I didn't tell anyone—she was threatened that night, too. When you found me in that alley with a bullet in my gut, I wasn't thinking too much about anything. She's my sister and I love her, but I was in a lot of pain. When I realized the rodeo was today, I knew she'd be here, making herself an attractive target. I had to come."

"We're taking care of her, Alan. Go back up to the house and stay there. How did you get past Martha?"

"I can be sneaky," Alan said, with a laugh. "All right, I trust you, I'll go back to the

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house, but you take care of Maggie.”

“You have my word,” Dale promised.

Dale hated lying to Maggie, but he knew was for the best, right now. He went back to the arena and told Maggie, who was on the fence preparing to mount the bull, she hadn't seen Alan, but rather, the son of one of the policemen who did indeed have red hair and was very tall. The look on her pretty face was almost too much to bear. He was glad when Kenny Ellis called to her, telling her it was time to ride. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep the secret he had been saddled with, that night in the alley.

Maggie felt Alan's presence strongly; much more strongly than she should. This was the first time she'd ridden in this particular rodeo without him being there, and she felt something was missing—something vital. She knew if she didn't get her mind back on the competition, she would lose.

Vince was hiding something, too. She planned to confront him with it on the ride home. "Right now, though," she muttered to herself, between clenched teeth, "I have a trophy to win, and I'm way behind because of that last disaster." She knew she couldn't blame it entirely on Stacy, because her mind wasn't fully on the competition. "I'm spending too much time daydreaming about getting Vince alone in my apartment later," she whispered to herself as she threw her leg over the fence and pulled on her gloves. "I know he's interested and I'm sure I can get him to stay, if I ask right."

The final event would determine the winner. When Marc announced it would be bull riding, Nikki's exaggerated groan made everyone around her laugh. Maggie hated this event

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with a passion, even though she'd never gone fewer than the eight seconds required.

Maggie, clad now in jeans and a plain brown shirt, the shirt clinging to her lithe figure in the strong, cold wind that raised little tornadoes on the arena's dirt floor, was preparing to ride. Everyone was freezing, as the temperature had dropped to about twenty-five degrees and the bitter wind took their breath away, but no one left. Word had gotten around that if Maggie won, Sgt. Howard would get on a horse for the first time in his life. No one wanted to miss seeing that. Vince, ignoring the sidelong glances and ill-muffled jokes, watched the action below him.

Maggie had drawn the first position and she was in the chute on the bull, wrapping the heavy leather strap around her gloved left hand before Vince realized exactly what this event was. Before they pulled the gate and the bull leaped into the arena, he asked Sean, "Isn't that pretty dangerous? How can you allow your daughter to participate in such an event?" His eyes never left Maggie and he added, without giving Sean time to speak, "Never mind. I've seen her temper up close and personal. Lucky for me, I wasn't the poor devil on the receiving end of it." Sean grinned, but didn't answer. No answer was necessary.

Just then, as the gate went up and the bull threw himself forward into the arena, a shot rang out from high above the grandstand and Maggie fell to the ground. She had enough sense to let go of the tether holding her on the bull, so she wasn't dragged around the arena.

Chapter 20

Several of the women shrieked. Exclamations of surprise could be heard all over the grandstand. Gene and several other men ran into the arena. While others helped the colorful clown corral the enraged bull, Gene picked Maggie up and carried her out of its erratic path. Most of the spectators were on their feet, many of them milling around mumbling to themselves, but Vince, a cop to the core, directed one of the senior officers to take a few men and try to locate the gunman before he had a chance to escape. He then told Corrine Riker, the only woman who seemed to be in control of her emotions, to take charge and try to get the women and children calmed down and back into their seats, if possible.

Vince told Sean to stay with his wife and grandchildren, then he made his way through the crowd, shoving people aside and stepping on numerous fingers and toes, muttering "Get out of my way, damn it!" at least six times, Vince climbed over everyone in front of him to get to the floor of the arena. Vaulting the low fence with little difficulty, he entered the sheltered area where the riders had waited for their names to be called.

By the time Vince arrived, Gene had exposed the wound on Maggie's left shoulder and was applying pressure to stop the bleeding. Vince knelt in the dirt and took her hand,

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looking down into her face. He could see the pain mirrored in her violet eyes and he dialed back his anger so he could focus on her.

"Really, Vince," she said, with a wink at Gene. "You could have found a less drastic way to keep me from beating Gene, couldn't you? If you'd just looked at the scoreboard, you could have saved us both a lot of trouble. After that fiasco with Stacy, I couldn't have won anyway. Gene got his wish without trying very hard. That trophy was his, even if he'd fallen off the stupid bull. Which has never happened." She grinned crookedly at Gene, who shook his head in disgust, then disappeared, to take charge of the search for the gunman.

Vince stroked Maggie's soft hair. When she struggled to sit up, he tried to keep her still. "There's blood running down my back, Vince. I think you might want to put some pressure back there, too." She pulled her shirt aside to show him the bullet had gone through. He pulled her neckerchief loose and pressed it against the back side of her shoulder. She winced in pain, drawing in a sharp breath, but never cried out.

Vince could hear the chaos outside the arena as the men were still trying to corral the bull. He could hear, in the distance, loudly-speaking women and crying children. He ignored the noise outside, focusing on Maggie. He knew they would calm down eventually, and crowd-control had always been his most despised duty.

Sean and Angelica entered at a more sedate pace, and as soon as they as they entered the holding area, Maggie's smile returned. Vince wondered why she felt the need to put on a front for her parents, but he didn't say anything. Marc arrived to say that the ambulance was on its way. He looked down at Maggie, her head lying in Vince's lap, blood on her shirt and

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neck. He turned away angrily. He cursed himself for allowing the rodeo to go on at all with a crazy cop killer on the loose. Even though Maggie was the one shot, what better place to find plenty of cops to shoot at, than at a rodeo where they were all together?

The twins were running around wildly trying to help but only managing to get in the way. Dana finally took them to the stable where John and Gary were waiting, with the Arabians, to take them riding. She explained what had happened and the men promised to keep them busy for a couple hours, until Dana could get back and take them to her house. She knew the girls' grandmother would be spending time with her daughter and did not have time to deal with the little ones. "On the condition you tell me if Miss Maggie needs anything." Gary added. "Is she all right?"

"It looks like a flesh wound, but I'll let you know."

Dana kissed each of the girls on the top of the head and left, to drive Gene to the hospital. She ended up with a full load, because everyone wanted to go so they could give blood if necessary. They were all leaving their wives their cars, to take the kids home.

She was surprised to see many of them leave their horses and gear at the ranch. "No matter if this is Marc's place," she said to Gene. "I wouldn't leave my gear here."

"I did," he answered, picking up her hand and kissing it.

She smiled at him. "But your horse goes to the Fitzgeralds anyway, remember? John and Gary are still here to load your equipment. Just like always."

He shrugged and leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes. "This is my fault, Dana," he whispered. "I should have been keeping a closer eye on her, instead of worrying about

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winning. Hell, none of us should have allowed her to ride at all."

"How could any of you have known something would happen today? Especially to Maggie? She's not even a cop." Gene didn't answer. He simply looked out the window at the gray afternoon.

"What aren't you telling me, Gene?" He shook his head, but he wouldn't meet her eyes, so she knew he was hiding something.

"You can tell me," she insisted.

He looked over his shoulder at the men behind him, then looked back at her. "No," he said. "I can't. Not here. When we get home."

"I'm holding you to that," she said, with a smile.

He nodded and lay his head on the seat, closing his eyes. "I should have followed Vince's lead last night and slipped out early. I'm exhausted. Maggie should have won, anyway. I didn't bring my best game."

"I thought Vince was with you," Dana questioned. "You never work late the night before a competition. I figured he guilted you into it."

"This one was my idea. I know I've seen that kid's name on a file somewhere and I want to find it."

"What kid?"

"One we busted last week. He doesn't have a record, but I know I've seen his name before and I want to find out why it's familiar."

"Oh," she smiled and patted his hand. "We have more than an hour," she reminded

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him. "Catch a cat nap."

Chapter 21

While Maggie was with the doctor, Vince paced around the waiting room. He was cursing himself for not being more observant. "I should have been paying more attention, damn it!" he muttered. "All I was thinking about was getting her alone, later. Alone and to myself." He was surprised when someone touched him on the shoulder. He swung around fast, praying that it wasn't the Chief or Maggie's father, ready to lay him out for what he'd said about their little girl. Seeing Dana standing behind him, he forced himself to relax, releasing the clenched fists and wiggling his fingers to get the feeling back into them.

"Relax, Vince," she said, with a smile. "I won't tell anyone."

She smiled and he looked embarrassed. "If I'd been paying attention, instead of fantasizing about that sensuous little body, I might have prevented this from happening."

"Vince, as I told Gene on the way in here, this isn't your fault. No one could have foreseen that Maggie would be a target. She isn't a cop. You can't blame yourself for this. No one is to blame, except the monster who shot her." She patted him on the arm, then handed him a cup of coffee. "I'll be giving this same lecture to the Chief and to Ambassador Fitzgerald momentarily. None of you individually, nor all of you together, could have kept

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her out of that arena today. If you think you could have, you're nuts," she smiled. "And, you're in over your head. You should get out now."

Vince grinned despite himself, and Dana kissed his cheek, then walked across the room to where the Chief was sitting with Maggie's parents. She glanced over her shoulder at Vince, and he smiled when she began lecturing them. She was probably the only person on the planet who could get away with talking to them in such a manner. The doctor entered the room soon, looking for Maggie's parents.

"Your daughter will be fine, in a day or two. She's lost some blood. She's going to be very sore, but there is no permanent damage. The bullet went through. There was no arterial or bone damage. The muscle will be sore and she's got stitches, but she'll be fine. We'll keep her for a day or two, just to be sure." He turned to leave, but looked back and said, "The sedative I gave her might knock her out for quite some time. You all go home. I'll call you when she wakes up."

"I'm staying," Angelica insisted. "She's my daughter and she needs me."

"Ma'am, she'll sleep 'til morning. You should try and rest."

Angelica shook her head and the doctor shrugged. Sean took her hand and they sat back down. Dana offered to take the twins home. "They'll be fine with me, Mrs. Fitzgerald. Has anyone notified Maggie's boss? She won't be working tomorrow. I know she had a wedding to shoot."

Angelica shook her head and Dana promised to take care of it. As she was leaving the room, Marc called after her, "Don't let them leave the house, Dana. We have no idea who

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might be the next target, but I don't want anything to happen to the twins. Don't take them to church tomorrow. If you still have them on Monday, don't send them to school. Officers will be at your house when you get there. Don't go inside until they check the place over, and they are to stay in front at least until Gene gets home. If Gene feels it's warranted, keep the patrol until morning. I'll authorize it."

"Yes, sir," she nodded in agreement.

Marc suddenly stood up and put an arm around Dana. "You look tired, lady. Are you all right to do all that driving? You already brought the boys here. Why don't I call Gary and have him drop them at your house? I'd have them stay at my place, but the ranch is outside my jurisdiction and I can't assign my officers there. The county sheriff isn't going to help, since I headed the committee to try and oust the crooked bastard at the last election."

"I'm a little tired. I'll be fine," she insisted.

"No. Go home, and I'll have Gary and John drop them off. You wait for the officers before you enter the house; they need to check it from top to bottom."

"Gene won't be a target, sir," she insisted.

"Humor an old man, honey," he said with a wan smile, and she nodded.

As she went down the hall, she ran into Gene, who was just coming to join the group after donating a pint of blood. She told him the news about Maggie. He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

"Thank God!" he whispered.

"I already did," she told him, then touched his arm softly.

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He turned to face her and pulled her into his arms. As they kissed, he whispered, "You know I have to stay here for a while, baby. It's just something I have to do. The Fitzgeralds are my friends."

"I know, Gene. They're my friends, too. Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"I'll be fine, baby. You just take care of the twins." He smiled and caressed her stomach and added, "And my son."

She smiled and asked, "How disappointed will you be, if your son is a girl, Gene?"

"It's mine, right? I don't give a damn if it's a boy or a girl, as long as I know I'm its daddy."

"You know you are, love," she whispered, as she kissed his cheek. "No man would be stupid enough to mess with the wife of a big crazy Indian, would they?" She giggled and added, "Even if I wanted to have an affair, which I don't, no man would come near me, if he knew you're my husband."

"Good," he said, with a grin.

He tightened his grip on her and kissed her again. He pulled her to him with intense passion. "Are you going to take me right here in the hospital corridor, Gene?" she asked. "Or can you wait until you get home tonight?"

"You won't let me touch you, anyway," he complained. "You haven't been in the mood for weeks."

"Seeing you on that horse today was plenty arousing, mister. Not to mention those buckskins, which happen to turn me on. You know I think you're the sexiest man alive, and

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when you're dressed in leather, you make me hot."

"Does that mean I might get lucky tonight?"

"As lucky as you want to get. Especially if you wear the buckskins home."

He released her and shrugged, grinning sheepishly. "You go home, baby. I'll see you later. Maybe not tonight, though. I don't know how late I'll be here." Dana didn't say anything. Gene saw the look flash across her face as she turned away. He pulled her back and said, "I'm sorry, baby. I'll be home by ten, okay? I swear." She nodded and kissed his cheek, then started down the hall. "I love you, Dana," he called after her. "You know you're the only woman for me."

She didn't answer. He went on to the waiting room. Vince looked up as he entered. Seeing the embarrassed grin and the traces of Dana's lipstick on his face, he teased, "Did you get laid out there in the hall, or something?"

Gene gave him a dirty look, then smiled and shrugged nonchalantly as he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped off the lipstick. "Close," he replied. "Just a promise for later." He moved on to business and said, "The gun belonged to the Chief," he said. "It came out of one of the locked cabinets in the study. The only fingerprints on the gun or the cabinet were Marc's and Martha's and the lock wasn't broken, so I have no idea how the shooter got it out of the cabinet."

"Don't pursue that, Gene," Vince grinned and added, "Unless of course you think the Chief or his housekeeper had any reason to want Maggie dead."

Gene looked disgusted and ignored him, turning to face Sean and Marc, who had just

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re-entered the waiting room after getting coffee from the dining room. "I'm sorry, sir. I guess the guy had his escape route planned. We found no trace of him, except the gun. He left it at the scene. He knew it wouldn't implicate him."

"It was one of mine, wasn't it?" Marc asked, quietly. Gene nodded hesitantly and Marc looked angry. Angelica touched his arm and he looked down at her, with a forced smile.

"It's all right, Marc. You didn't shoot her." They all sat in the waiting room, but no one spoke, except the occasional question about whether or not the twins had made it to Dana's, if the horses had been taken home and stabled, whether anyone wanted food or more coffee.

Finally, around nine, Gene stood up and said, "Listen, I promised Dana I'd be home by ten. Is there anything else I need to do, before I go?"

"No, Gene," Marc said. "You go home. We'll call if anything comes up."

"Yes, sir," Gene glanced at Vince, but he was sitting with his head back. His long legs were stretched into the middle of the room. He was staring at the ceiling, his fingers laced together behind his head. Gene knew his partner well enough to know he was lost in a trance, trying to put together all the facts. It wouldn't do any good to talk to him. They might as well be on separate planets when he got like that. Gene walked out of the waiting room and down the hall. He couldn't resist the urge to look into Maggie's room. She was sleeping peacefully, with a nurse sitting beside her bed. She looked small and defenseless in the bed. It really bothered him to see her that way. Small or not, she was usually in control. At least she

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thought she was.

Chapter 22

It was nearly midnight when the nurse told Sean and Angelica they could see Maggie for a few minutes. They walked down the hall together, holding hands. Marc followed, leaving Vince alone in the waiting room. He was still staring at the ceiling. Now he was thinking about Maggie. She hadn't told him she was the Chief's niece, because she thought he knew. She'd never actually said she was interested in him, except for her comments about getting very well acquainted.

"I'm crazy if I think she wants more than a short-term affair," he whispered into the quiet room, then he chuckled and added, "That might be nice, too. She's got a great body and I'd be crazy not to want to spend a few nights with her, commitment or not." He looked around, realized he was alone, and took a deep, relieved breath. "Whew! That was close!"

After they saw Maggie, Sean insisted Angelica go home and she agreed. Marc informed Vince they were leaving and he moved to Maggie's room, sitting beside the bed, holding her small hand and talking to her. "Lady, you make me nuts. Part of me wants to take you to bed, just to see what it's like. Part of me wants to spend some time getting to know the real you. A third part of me says I should run like hell, while I've still got my sanity and my

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privates intact. Your father and uncle would string me up by my. . . "

"Vince," she whispered. "Don't worry about my father. What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

"What?" He leaned close to her. "Did you say something, sweetheart? Doc said you were passed out for the night."

"With all the poking and prodding? Please." She opened her eyes slowly, looking up at him interestedly. "Why are you still here? Shouldn't you be home sleeping?"

"Not as long as you're here, Maggie. I'm not leaving you alone."

"That's a noble attitude, Vince, but totally unnecessary. This hospital has great security. No one who doesn't belong will get in." She stroked his hand with one finger. "Such strong hands. I'll bet they're rough, too. I mean, you're a sailor, right? All those ropes and salt air and water?" Without a word, he reached up and caressed her cheek.

She smiled when she realized his hands were actually soft. "I'm a smart sailor who wears gloves, Maggie." She took his hand in hers and held it in her lap. He looked surprised, but she only smiled.

"Like I said, what Daddy doesn't know won't hurt him," she smiled. "It could hurt you if he found out, of course."

"Would you tell him?" Vince asked, as she reached for his tie and loosened it. "If I touched you, I mean."

"Not if I wanted you to," she replied, pulling the knot out of his tie and unbuttoning the top button of his shirt. She was slow and clumsy because she could only use one hand,

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but he didn't try to help her. He wasn't sure what she had in mind.

"Do you want me to?" he asked, slightly breathless as he waited for her answer.

"I haven't decided yet." She unfastened two more buttons, then slipped her hand inside his shirt. "Broad shoulders. You should show off this chest. Leave the tie at home. Wear your shirt open at the collar." She looked into his blue eyes and asked, "Do it for me? Stop dressing so uptight?"

"You think I'm uptight, Maggie?" His tone was light and teasing, but he wanted to hear her answer.

"You look stuffy," she replied. "But I'll bet you could be a killer stud. Especially with a body like this."

"Me?" he said with a laugh. "A stud? That's a good joke."

"It's no joke, Vince. Just try it for a day or two, okay? Leave the tie off and open the collar. Show off this great chest a bit. Do it for me. It might benefit you, in the long run. If you know what I mean." He shrugged, but didn't answer. He was enjoying the feel of her small hand on his bare skin and he was a bit disappointed when she took it out of his shirt.

"You work out much, Vince?" she asked, changing the subject. "Or did you just grow that way?"

"The height came naturally, but I've had to work for the rest of it. I spend two hours at the gym, four days a week ever since high school. I played football. I wanted to be the biggest and best. I wanted to go pro, but when Felicia got pregnant on prom night, I knew I needed a real job, not the possibility of a football career."

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"It's worth it. You look great," she replied, closing her eyes, as she reached out to hold his hand again. "I'm really tired, Vince. I'll be fine if you want to go home and get some sleep. You look pretty worn out, too."

"I'll be right here if you need me, sweetheart. I'm not going anywhere. I already told you that."

She was nearly asleep, but she nodded slightly. "Okay. You cops are so stubborn. I hope you know that."

He didn't answer. He was asleep in the chair when Sean, Marc and Angelica arrived the next morning. All of them noticed Maggie holding his hand, softly stroking his thumb. She put a finger to her lips and whispered, "He's only been asleep for a short time. I want to let him rest."

"We'll go have coffee and come back, okay?" Angelica offered.

Maggie nodded and smiled at her mother. "Thanks, Mother. He's been standing guard since you guys left last night. He couldn't stay awake any longer. He just sort of faded out while we were talking."

"He's a good cop, Maggie. He's just doing his job," Marc added, as he held the door for his sister, then followed Sean out. As soon as the door closed, he leaned close to his sister and asked, "Did you notice?"

"That she was holding his hand, or that she doesn't seem so melancholy since she met him?" Angelica asked. "Yes, I noticed."

"It's about time, too," Sean replied, as he took Angelica's hand. He looked at his

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wife's brother over his shoulder. "You think he's only doing his job, Marc? I hope you're wrong because Maggie seems to be in love." Angelica smiled up at her husband and they walked toward the elevator together.

When they returned an hour later, Vince was just beginning to wake up. He looked at Maggie guiltily. "You should have punched me, or something," he said. "You've been unprotected here while I was asleep."

"I have a feeling if someone had come through that door with guns blazing, you would have been awake in a split second to protect me. You'd have thrown that incredible, strong body in front of me as a shield, in a flash," she smiled at him. "True or false?"

"True, I guess." He realized he was still holding her hand as her parents entered the room. He pulled away.

"It's too late, Vince. They were here earlier. They know I was holding hands with you." He looked embarrassed, but no one said anything. Marc asked Maggie how she was feeling. "I guess I'm okay, but I know how those outlaws from the Wild West days feel now, since I've had my horse shot out from under me."

"They shot you, not the bull, silly," Marc replied. "That's good, because he was one of my best. He's still pretty spooked, but I think we can probably get him back into the ring. And, he might buck better if he's nervous about his surroundings."

She shook her head sadly. "You're more worried about your stupid bull than you are about me? Thanks loads."

Marc smiled and leaned close, to kiss her forehead. Turning to Vince, he said, "I got a

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note this morning that you might be interested in, Sergeant Howard. I believe it involves this case and Alan's. I've already turned a copy of it over to the rest of the task force. And I still expect you to brief them, on Monday."

Maggie looked surprised. She didn't know Vince had been added to the task force. She was glad, because she knew he wanted to be, and this way, she could get more information.

Marc extended a piece of paper toward Vince, who took it willingly. He read it out loud.

*Chief Riordan,*

*My name is Jack Fitzgerald. I am the youngest son of Patrick and Millicent Fitzgerald. I was born in South Africa, where my family was banished by your brother-in-law, Sean Michael Fitzgerald. I am trying to be courteous and inform you that I have committed several crimes in your fair city. It was I who pulled the trigger when your nephew Alan was shot and I hired the man who shot the little black-haired bitch, Maggie. I am going to continue eliminating family members until no one but Sean remains, because I want him to suffer like my father did. My brother and sister died in Africa and my mother took her own life soon after my birth because she couldn't deal with the loss of her older children. I grew up without the love and nurturing of my sweet mother. My father has had to live with this for nearly twenty years and I want to see that man suffer for forcing him out of his home and stripping him of his heritage.*

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The letter was written in a crude hand, on cheap paper. The envelope bore no return address and a local postmark.

Maggie looked up at her father and asked, "Did you force Uncle Patrick to leave home, Daddy? Why would you do that?"

"It wasn't my idea, sweetheart. My father disowned Patrick when you were a small child. Father suggested maybe he should leave. To make amends for all the evil he'd done."

"What did he do, Daddy?"

"I can't tell you that, little one. It isn't up to me." Sean looked over his shoulder at Angelica. She was staring intently out the window, a slightly pained expression on her face. Marc watched them both, but no one tried to explain.

"It might be important, Sean. It might have a bearing on this case."

"I'm sorry, Marc. It isn't my place." He again looked at Angelica, but she was still looking out the window.

Vince asked, "Did you know his children died and his wife committed suicide?"

"I heard from Millicent soon after Kelley and David died, yes. They contracted malaria and my brother didn't trust their 'witch doctors' so they had no medical care whatsoever. You and I both know they would have gotten excellent care had Patrick chosen to seek it out, but he was stubborn." Sean looked at Angelica again, but she refused to meet his eyes and he continued. "It had nothing to do with being in Africa, Maggie. Patrick never trusted doctors here, either. Millicent had to sneak the kids out of the house for immunizations, because Patrick felt they were unnecessary. He thought doctors were over-

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rated and only wanted money, so they made up diseases and syndromes to steal from unsuspecting parents. He was a bit zealous about it.”

“What about the rest of it, Sean?” Marc prompted.

“I had no idea there was another child. I had no idea Millicent took her own life. I tried to convince my brother to return to the States. Edward and I were more than willing to take care of him. Patrick was young. He made a mistake. Patrick never answered my letters so I assumed he wasn't interested. I suppose I should have kept trying.”

Angelica touched his arm and said, "It isn't your fault, darling, or Edward's. You couldn't have known." She stifled a sob, then added, "We were too late to save our son, but we still have Maggie to think about. We have to protect her." She had tears glistening in her green eyes as she turned to Marc and asked, "Don't you have someplace where you can protect her? I don't think she should go home until you have located Patrick and this boy, Jack. My son is dead because of him, but we must protect our little Maggie."

"I agree, Angel," Marc said. "But we don't really have anyplace suitable for her, either. We know she can't stay at the ranch, nor at Silver Oaks. You are already a target. We shouldn't make things too easy for him."

"Suppose I go home and take care of myself? I'm a big girl, you know."

"Not so big," Vince said, with a grin. She made a face at him, but he only shrugged. Sean glanced at her and saw the way she was looking at this hulk of a man. He was pleased she might finally quit mourning her lost love and get on with her life, but unsure whether he wanted her involved with this man. He was older and more mature, though. Maybe she

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needed someone stable and down to Earth. He knew about her recent past, and it saddened him to know she had been giving herself to so many men in loveless relationships.

"Little one," he began, "I know you want to be independent and take care of yourself, but we're talking about a madman here. He wouldn't think twice about killing you and your girls. He's already tried once. His letter indicates he will make another attempt."

"I know, Daddy. I just. . . "

"Maggie, trust me, honey," Sean turned to Marc. "Any suggestions?"

"Yes," Marc had also seen the way Maggie looked at Vince, and he liked it. It made him nervous because of what he was about to do, however. Gene, whose opinion he trusted implicitly, assured him Vince was a decent man. After a second of thought, he decided to go ahead with it. "I think she should stay with someone who isn't already marked as a target." He looked at Sean over his shoulder, then said, "Maggie, I want you to go home with Sergeant Howard. He'll be on duty to protect you. You'll be safe because no one will know you're there."

Maggie's heart was in her throat as she asked, "Does he have room for my kids? I'm not leaving them alone, where they'll be sitting ducks." She wouldn't look at Vince, because she was sure he'd read her thoughts and accidentally let it slip what she'd said the night before.

"With your permission, I'd like to send them to Arizona, to stay with Gene's parents until this is all cleared up," Vince said, looking at her for confirmation. She nodded, a bit reluctantly. He moved to the phone and called Dana. "Maggie said okay. Have you made the

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plane reservations yet?"

"Yes."

"Good," Vince agreed.

"We do have one problem, Vince," Dana said. "Nikki refuses to leave until she sees her mom. She won't believe she's all right."

"Have Gene bring them by later, okay? I'm sure Maggie will want to see them, too."

She nodded and he smiled at her, unconsciously stroking her hand as he hung up.

Chapter 23

Angelica soon chased everyone out of the room and helped Maggie put on the nightgown they'd gotten from her apartment. "Let's do your hair, too. You still have some blood in it."

"It's okay, Mother. When I get home, I'll take a shower and wash it."

"Not alone, you won't. You aren't going to be using that arm for a few days. And since you aren't going home with us, I'm curious who you plan to get to help you take that shower. I won't be there and neither will Ruby. You'll be alone with Sergeant Howard."

"Okay," Maggie said reluctantly, her face slightly flushed when she realized what her mother was suggesting. "Comb it out, I guess. Maybe you can get some of that spray stuff hospitals use with people who can't get out of bed." She sat up carefully, feeling the skin under her bandage stretch against the stitches. It hurt a little, but not as much as she'd expected.

Out in the hall, Marc had taken Vince aside and he asked, "What exactly is going on between you and my niece? I was under the impression yesterday was your first date. You're both very chummy, for simple acquaintances."

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"Yes, sir. Well. . . almost. We had dinner at Flanagan's the night of Alan's funeral, sir. It was the least I could do, considering none of us showed up at his service."

"Why is that, Sergeant Howard?"

"To be honest, I didn't go, because. . ." he paused then took the chief's arm and led him into an empty room. He leaned very close as he spoke. "I know Alan's alive, sir. I couldn't go, because I was afraid I'd look at that casket, knowing it was empty, and not be able to go through with it. I was afraid I'd give something away, and if the killer was there, he'd know he missed, this time and he'd try again."

"That actually makes sense," Marc said. "I had a very rough time, because Maggie really wanted to open the casket."

"How did you prevent that?"

"I told her it wouldn't be good for the girls. Alan was a god to them. They wouldn't have understood. At least, that's what I told her."

"How did you prevent funeral home visits?"

Marc closed his eyes and exhaled. "Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to lie to her? I practically raised her, while Angel and Sean traveled. I told her Alan didn't look right and she wouldn't want to remember him that way. I had a real fight on my hands, but she finally relented when I told her Alan wouldn't want to be remembered, that way. He was a vital, commanding presence and would never want to be seen in that condition." He smiled slightly. "She bought it."

"Now, about you and Maggie. . . "

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"I don't know, sir. I think she's beautiful and I'd like to get better acquainted with her." He could see the Chief was going to protest and he said, hurriedly, "I had planned for dinner last night, maybe some dancing. A movie. All that will have to be put on hold for a few days, but I do intend to date her, if she'll have me. I don't really know how she feels, because she hasn't said."

"Women are allowed to be mysterious, Sergeant Howard. That's how they keep us interested."

"I know, sir," Vince agreed. "I was married once. A long time ago. It ended practically before it started."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. We were too young to be married, for one thing. Other than that, I guess we simply weren't compatible, after high school. She was a cheerleader and it was generally accepted she should date a football player. When her parents found out we'd. . . well, we were teenagers, you know? When they found out, her father insisted we get married. It didn't last very long. I don't regret it, because I have two beautiful children."

Marc nodded. "I didn't play football, but I dated a cheerleader." He smiled slightly, as he added, "Of course, her parents never found out we were, shall we say, making the Earth move? I'm older than you, so I expect I'd have had to marry her, too. That's the way parents were, in those days."

"Why aren't you, sir? I mean, surely you've had opportunities."

"Ample opportunities, Sgt. Howard. The only woman I've ever been interested in

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won't marry me."

"Why not? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Marc answered, getting a far away look in his eyes. "Unless you're less of the detective than I think you are, you already know why she has refused me for so long."

"Because she's your housekeeper," Vince said. "Women!" he said, with a smile. "It was obvious she feels the same about you. She won't marry you, because she's an employee, right?"

Marc nodded. "She'll sleep with me. She even offered to have my baby a few years back, but she won't accept my name. Doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it?"

Vince shook his head. "Fire her," he suggested. "When she's no longer an employee, ask again."

"Maggie has suggested that, but I'm afraid if I fire her, she'll leave before I get the chance to propose. Then I'd be totally alone. I couldn't bear that."

Vince turned back to the door and knocked. Angelica opened the door. Maggie was sitting up in the bed, her hair brushed, the last of the blood washed off her face and neck. She smiled slightly and he grinned. Marc followed him into the room. "I think you should go home for a while. I'll remain here to protect my niece."

"If you say so, sir," Vince wouldn't meet the man's gaze, unsure why he was being dismissed.

Marc could read his concern and he smiled. "I think you should try and sleep, so you'll be awake tonight, when you come back for the graveyard shift. I love Maggie, but I've always

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hated sitting up all night. I always assign the task to someone else, if possible."

Vince leaned over the bed and kissed Maggie's cheek. Whispering in her ear, he said, "You still owe me an evening, gorgeous." He looked around the room and added, in the same low voice, "This isn't quite what I had in mind, but I suppose it will be all right. . .this time."

"Me neither," she replied, also whispering. "My idea of an evening alone with a man doesn't usually include spending the night in a hospital bed. Bed maybe, hospital, no."

He grinned at her, surprised she'd be so obvious, then he looked over his shoulder to be sure no one had heard her. He patted her hand and moved toward the door. As he disappeared, Maggie felt a twinge of dismay at being left alone.

Chapter 24

When Vince got home, he fell into bed exhausted. He slept, dreaming about Maggie, aroused, knowing she wanted to share her sexy body with him. *I can't believe she was so honest about it.* He thought to himself. *Most women try to be a little more subtle.* In a flash, he knew he needed time to get a handle on his emotions before he made any permanent plans. It was going to be hard to resist her, especially when she was staying in his apartment. He knew that he could—somehow.

Standing in a steaming hot shower later, he realized, aside from all the other reasons for going slow with Maggie, there was also Aimee. Even after eighteen years of absolutely no contact, she still believed the situation could work out with her parents. Vince hadn't allowed himself to think about Felicia in years, but now his mind wandered to those carefree days in high school and in the first year of their marriage. It wasn't until after the twins were born things started to go wrong. "I can't blame the kids," he muttered into the spray of water. "I can only blame me. I was never there when she needed me. It wasn't even her fault, it was mine." He turned off the water and reached for a towel. When he pulled back the curtain, he heard the phone ringing. Adjusting the towel around his waist, he stepped out and stumbled to the

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phone. He spoke sharply when he answered and was surprised by the voice on the other end.

"What is it?"

"Dad, are you okay?" Aimee asked. "You sound funny."

"I'm fine, honey. I was expecting someone else is all."

Vince was trying unsuccessfully to get dressed while he talked, but he finally gave up and sat on the side of the bed to talk to his daughter, checking his watch on the nightstand. He wanted to get back to the hospital, but he wasn't going to hang up. "Dad, Tony and I are at the airport. You didn't forget that we were coming in today, did you?"

"To be honest, sweetheart, I did. I'm sorry. I'll be there in twenty minutes, okay?"

"Dad, what's going on? You're acting real strange."

"I've only been awake about half an hour, honey. I'll explain later. Let me get dressed. I'll be right there."

He stopped. After twenty years as a cop, his senses were finely honed. He felt, rather than heard, someone in his living room. "Hold on a minute, Aimee."

"What is it, Dad?"

Vince didn't answer. He laid the phone on the bed and opened the top drawer of his dresser. Lifting out his spare weapon, a Colt .45 with pearl handgrips (Aimee called it his black tie weapon), he moved toward the closed door. His .357 was hanging on the back of a chair in the living room, stupid on his part. Turning the knob carefully, he observed a dark haired man in jeans and denim jacket standing by the window. He positioned the weapon carefully. "Turn around, with your hands in the air and move slow! I haven't shot anyone all

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week. I'm getting an itchy trigger finger."

The man raised his hands and turned around slowly. He took one look at Vince and burst out laughing. Vince recognized him as Officer Dwight Powell. The young man had trained with Vince for a couple days a few years back. He had finally given up the idea of being a detective and was trying to be satisfied with routine patrol. Vince was surprised he was still on the force. He had marked him either to quit or get killed long before now. "What the hell are you laughing at?" Vince demanded.

"Look at yourself, Sarge! Even you don't look dangerous standing there with a gun and no pants on! Especially with that girl's gun."

"What are you doing here? Stay there." Vince laid the gun on the file-strewn coffee table. He moved back into the bedroom, grabbing his shoulder holster off the chair as he went. He picked up the phone and apologized again for not meeting the planes. He hung up, dressed quickly, grabbing the first choice in his closet, jeans and a blue plaid shirt.

Powell picked up the gun from the table as Vince returned, pulling on his jacket. He grabbed the revolver out of Powell's limp grasp and shoved into his belt at the small of his back.

Motioning for Powell to follow him, Vince strode toward the door, speaking over his shoulder. "Talk to me on the way down. I want to know why you're here. I'm late picking my kids up at the airport. We'll take my car." He expected his commands to be obeyed without question. Powell followed him out the door.

"Chief Riordan assigned me to you for a few days, sir." They reached the outside, and

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he added, "By the way, sir, you might want to change that lock. It's pretty easy to open, and I've never been good at picking locks. I usually have to kick in the doors."

Vince ignored Powell's last comment. He drove to the airport, tires squealing, taking corners without slowing down. He loved the way this car handled.

Finally, Powell asked, "If you don't mind my asking, sir, what are you doing with such a fancy little revolver? It doesn't suit you. I see you as more of a magnum man. That's definitely a woman's gun."

"Or one purchased by a woman, Powell. My mother bought it. I've considered having it re-tooled, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. Besides, I think it makes me look a little like Wyatt Earp, the most famous cop in the world."

"Some folks say he was the biggest crook of all, sir," Powell replied. "One of the first lawmen on the take, so to speak." Vince ignored him and pulled into the airport parking lot.

He went inside alone. Aimee spotted him immediately. She stood up and approached him. Without so much as a word of greeting, she demanded, "What was so important you left us sitting here, for an hour? Please don't say you've been with one of those floozies you hang out with. I'll be very disappointed."

Vince kissed her cheek and said, "Hi, honey! I'm fine, thanks for asking. How was your trip?" He didn't wait for an answer, but instead, said, "I told you I overslept. I spent last night at the hospital with a friend who was shot and needed protection. I slept all day. It simply escaped me you two arrived today, okay? Can the old man be forgiven?"

Aimee shrugged with nonchalance, then nodded. "I guess. Who is this friend and

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when did you start working protective services? Aren't you still a narc?"

"You remember Alan Fitzgerald, don't you?"

"Tall guy, red hair?" Aimee asked. "I read about his death in the paper. Funny thing, a cop gets killed anywhere on the planet, it makes national news. You guys get nearly as much press as President Kennedy did."

"That's him. Anyway, his sister, Maggie St. Clair, was shot yesterday at the annual Policeman's Rodeo. As you said, Alan was killed on duty a few weeks ago. The two shootings might be connected. I was on the scene and I sort of got elected to be her bodyguard last night."

"You were at a rodeo?" Tony hadn't spoken, but now, he unfolded his large frame, so like his father's, from the metal airport bench. He handed Aimee her shoulder bag, then grabbed the others himself. Vince tried to take some of it, but he shook his head, with a smile. "I got it, Dad."

Vince made a face at him, but nodded, with a wry grin. "No smart remarks, son, or I might go back to the hospital and leave you here to fend for yourself."

Tony grinned and moved toward the door. "How beautiful is she, Dad? I assume she's the reason you were attending the one sports event you've been so careful to steer clear of your entire life?"

"She's gorgeous, son, and yes, she is the reason I was there."

Never one to beat around the bush, Aimee began the inquisition. "Tell us about her, Dad. Give with the info. The whole truth and nothing but." Aimee was breathless. Vince and

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Tony smiled at each other. She had been doing that her entire life.

"I'm not sure about her age, but she's not much older than you two. I hope that's not a problem for you?" Aimee shook her head and Tony shrugged. "She's a photographer by trade, but believe me, she doesn't need to be. She could sit back on her laurels and not do a damn thing, because her family is one of the wealthiest in the state. Not that money makes one whit of difference to me. I don't know for sure how she feels. I hope she likes me, because I'm crazy about her." He didn't mention the fact they had already discussed sleeping together. He wasn't ready to bring his children into that confidence.

Vince introduced Powell casually, then stowed the kids' bags in the trunk. "I can't believe you plan to put all of us in this car, Dad," Tony said, as he dropped into the seat. "I guess you get my lap, sis." Aimee shrugged, then perched on her brother's lap. He managed to fasten the seat belt around both of them, but Aimee could barely breathe.

Vince looked at Powell. "You go home. Take a cab or call a unit. They'll come get you. Find me at the station in the morning. I'll figure out something for you to do."

Aimee twisted around, trying to get comfortable and to reestablish her airway. As she did, her mini-skirt slid farther up her long, attractive legs, revealing her yellow panties. Powell looked at Aimee appreciatively, until Vince glared at him, then dropped his eyes quickly. He moved away to call for a ride, as Tony loosened the belt across his sister. Vince got behind the wheel, heading for the hospital. He immediately put Powell out of his head.

Powell watched them leave, surprised the Sarge had told of his kids about the black-haired bitch. "He must not care if they know he may be only out for a tumble in the sack," he

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muttered into the darkness and slouched toward a security officer to borrow a phone.

Sometimes he thought he wanted a cell phone, but he didn't want to be that accessible. He liked his privacy and most of them came with GPS, making him a sitting duck with one of those devices in his pocket. He carried one at work, but refused to carry it on his free time. Technically, he was on duty now, but he had purposely left the phone at home. "That's all anyone gets from that rich whore. She'll use him for a while, then dump him, like she's done with all the rest."

On the way up to Maggie's hospital room, Aimee looked up at her father. "You say this woman is gorgeous. She must be, to make a confirmed woman-hater like you even consider going out with her."

Vince denied with vehemence that he hated women, but Aimee simply giggled. "I'm teasing, Daddy. I love you. I'm not sure if I want to share you with another woman after all these years, but I promise to be objective. I won't be rude or obnoxious until I've given her a fair chance. Deal?" She extended her hand and he shook it solemnly, then they both burst into laughter and he hugged her. She hadn't called him Daddy in years and it made him see her as his young, innocent angel again, just for an instant. He kind of liked the vision.

She saw the look on his face and she smiled. "Dad, I'm not seven, anymore. I know you and Mom won't be getting back together. I'm over it." He kissed the top of her head and she squeezed his hand. "Get on with your life. You deserve it. Mom has."

Chapter 25

When Marc arrived home, he went immediately to his study, used the intercom, and asked Martha to join him and bring tea. "Bring two cups," he requested. "I need to speak to you on a matter of utmost importance."

Martha fixed the tea, nervously carrying it to the study. Marc met her in the hall and took the tray from her. Placing the tray on the coffee table and motioning her to the couch, he closed the door firmly. The maid stood in the hall and watched him, wondering about his strange behavior. He never showed personal interest in Martha during working hours. They were, they thought, always discreet.

Martha sensed something wrong, because Marc drank coffee. He knew she preferred tea. He always asked for it when he had something bad to tell her. He'd asked for tea the day he had to tell her about her brother's death in a cross-country road race accident and also the night her mother had a stroke.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, handing him the cup. "Is it my family?" Marc shook his head. "Did I do something to displease you?"

"As a matter of fact—yes." He was looking at the bookshelf behind her head. He

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knew if he watched her face, he wouldn't be able to get through what he wanted to say. He had rehearsed it in the car on the way home.

"Marc, what is it?" she looked at the closed door and asked, "Or, is it Mr. Riordan today? The door is closed. No one can see or hear us."

"Martha, I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go. Effective immediately."

"What?" she set down her cup and bounced to her feet. "What are you talking about? You're firing me? After twenty years, I deserve a bit of an explanation, don't I? What did I do wrong?"

Instead of answering, Marc stood up and walked over to his wall safe. Spinning the dial, he opened it and removed a small box. Turning to face her, he spoke slowly, deliberately, "Because you've told me, maybe three hundred times, as long as you're my housekeeper, you can't accept this. I don't need you to clean my house, but I do need you in my life. I need you desperately, as my wife. Martha, I love you and I have, since. . . hell, I don't know. Practically since you've been here. I know for sure I've loved you at least since you nursed me when I got shot, nineteen years ago. You were barely more than a child when you came here to work. I know I'm probably a horrible person for taking you to bed back then, but I've loved you forever."

She moved into his arms. "I love you, too. Our love is the only reason I've stayed here for so long. My sister has been begging me to come live with her in Miami. But I couldn't bear to leave you."

Marc lifted her face and kissed her, passionately. "Does this mean you'll finally

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accept my proposal? I mean: You're fired! You no longer work for me."

She studied his handsome, pleading face, then nodded in assent. A single tear ran down her cheek. "Oh, how I love you, Marc. Being your wife would mean everything to me."

He dabbed at the corner of her eye with his handkerchief. She made a face at him.

"Now it's our house together, love." He pulled her close and kissed her. Slowly unzipping her dress, he kissed her shoulders and caressed her breasts.

Chapter 26

Maggie lay in bed watching the clock, waiting until the hour Vince would return. Gene was sitting beside her, but he was nervous. Dana was flying today and he was worried about the baby. They had tried so hard, and waited so long. He was worried something would happen. The doctor had assured them she would be all right for the short flight to Phoenix, but he would worry until he heard that she was on the ground, and, until she was back home with him.

When the door opened, Gene was instantly tense, his hand moving to the revolver under his arm. "Don't shoot me, you crazy Indian," Vince said affectionately, stepping into the room. He was followed by a young woman and a moment later, a young man. Maggie knew without introduction they were his children. She smiled up at him and he grinned, slightly embarrassed. "Where is everybody?" he demanded. "I thought you'd have more than one guard."

"You think I need more than one, with him here? No one tangles with Gene. You should know that. He is your partner, right?"

"What about outside? What about the elevators? What about. . ."

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"Whoa!" Gene interrupted. "Chief Riordan thought we should maintain a low profile. Bring less attention. The fewer body guards, the better. No one is getting past me, Vince. I do know how to do my job."

"I guess," Vince looked unsure, but didn't pursue it. He sat on the edge of the bed and took Maggie's hand and she smiled. Gene watched them, glad to see them hitting it off.

Maggie looked past Vince to the duo in the doorway. "Please introduce your friends. I'm not a witch, nor am I psychic." She glanced at Gene, but he didn't say anything. He only made a face at her.

"These are my kids, Maggie. Aimee, Tony. Come say 'hi' to Maggie St. Clair."

"It's Fitzgerald, Vince. I went back to my maiden name when Erich died."

"Sorry, honey." He patted her hand and stood up, as Aimee approached the bed. "You never told me that."

Aimee looked down at her for a long moment. "I suppose she'll do, Dad. But I'm kind of surprised. You've always been partial to blondes."

"Don't worry, sis," Tony said, reaching over to muss her short hair. "Dad will always love your dirty blonde mop."

She slapped his hand away, with an exaggerated shake of her head. "You are such a clown." She moved back beside her brother, who was lounging in the doorway.

Tony looked at his dad and asked, "Where'd you find her, Dad? Does she have a sister?"

"Sorry," Maggie said. "I do have two daughters, if you'd like to wait a few years."

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They're six."

"No thanks," Tony replied. "I have a girl. Besides, I can't see me dating a girl fifteen years younger than me." Aimee giggled, as Vince looked embarrassed. Gene laughed out loud, but Maggie ignored them all, choosing to observe Vince. She smiled up at him with a wink. He returned the smile, still flustered.

Gene stood up and moved toward the door. "Are you here for the night, Vince? If you are, I'm going to hit the road. I promised to drive Dana and the girls to the airport."

"So hit the road," Vince said. "I'll put the kids in a taxi, or something."

"We can take your car, Dad," Aimee suggested. "Just give us a key to the house and we'll get out of your way."

"Aimee, honey, I thought you were the smart one. I sold the house, remember? I doubt the new owners will want you sleeping there."

"So tell us how to find your new place, Dad. We can just go there."

Vince looked at Maggie. "This isn't working out right, is it?" She looked confused and he reminded her. "The Chief banished you to my place until we find the man who wants you dead. There's no way the four of us can stay there. I live in a one bedroom apartment."

"The two of you there alone? You need a chaperone."

"They're adults, Tony," Aimee reminded him.

"What I meant," Vince insisted, "is that there won't be room for all of us. I can sleep on the couch so Maggie can have the bed. No room for you."

"What about my apartment, Vince? Your kids are welcome to stay there."

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"And be targets? No, thanks," Vince shook his head.

"I just made Law Review," Aimee interjected. "I'd like to live to see my first article published, if that's okay with you guys."

"I'll put them at a hotel," Vince said, thinking to himself he was going to have to work some serious overtime, to pay for it. He would never let his kids know how hard it had been the last few years, keeping them in school.

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Sergeant Howard." Tony was still blocking the doorway, but it was obvious who was speaking by the slight accent and honeyed tones. Tony moved to the closest chair. Angelica entered the room, bringing Sean and a cloud of expensive perfume. "They'll be staying at Silver Oaks. You're protecting Maggie. The least we can do is take in your children. We have impressive security." Angelica's tone suggested finality, and Vince decided it was best not to argue with her.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"We're heading home. If you want to visit longer, I can certainly send the car back for them later." Angelica moved to Maggie's side and kissed her cheek. "Marc went home hours ago, dear. I insisted your father eat, but now, he wants to drag me off to bed." She colored slightly, as Maggie giggled. "You know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean, Mother. You mean what you said. Daddy wants to take you to bed." Maggie winked at Vince, and he barely managed to hide his smile.

Aimee put her arm around her father, facing Lady Fitzgerald. "Hi, I'm Aimee Howard and that's my brother, Tony, nearly passed out in the chair over there. Dad always forgets to

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introduce us."

"I'm not asleep," Tony protested, then yawned, trying to cover it with his hand.

"Maybe we should get him to bed," Aimee said, "before he embarrasses all of us and shames the U.S. Navy by falling out of that chair." Tony made a face at her, but she grinned and dragged him to his feet. "Dad, we'll see you in the morning, okay?" Vince nodded and hugged his daughter, then kissed her cheek. She pushed her brother out the door. The door closed behind them. Vince suddenly felt nervous, alone with the beautiful woman in the bed.

Chapter 27

Vince sat next to Maggie, the rail of the narrow hospital bed groping him uncomfortably in the groin. He leaned toward Maggie, intending to kiss her cheek. She surprised him by pulling his face to hers and kissing him on the lips. When she released him, he took a deep breath. "And here I thought you were basically naive, needing to be taught about loving."

"Vince, I was married and have children, remember?"

"I guess I assumed I was going to have to talk you into sharing your sweet self with me."

"Talk me into it?" She looked deep into his eyes. "I had plans for last night after the rodeo. Plans that only included you, me, and Mother Nature. There was no hospital in my fantasy, either."

"What did you have in mind, beautiful?" Vince asked, as he caressed her soft cheek. "I'll get strung up if anyone suspects I've seen you naked."

"You haven't," she reminded him. "So, don't worry. Besides, who could do that to you? The only person I know who came close to your size was Alan and he's gone. I'd say

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you're safe, for a while."

"How about your father? Or the Chief? Or Gene?"

"I have a feeling you could defend yourself against any one of them. Besides, Gene doesn't. . . never mind."

"Gene doesn't what?" Vince asked.

"Nothing, Vince," Maggie smiled and stroked his hand. "Do you really intend to sleep on the couch?"

"We barely know each other."

"What do you want to know? We seem to be all alone. I slept most of the day, so I'm not the least bit tired. Let's talk."

"Why do you work?" Vince asked. "Wouldn't your parents support you?"

"They do," Maggie said, with a smile. "I don't make enough to pay for my children's private school. I certainly can't support my own extravagant lifestyle. I don't even pay the rent. I allow Daddy to spoil me. He's very good at it."

"Then why do you work?"

"Because the girls are in school. I hate sitting around the apartment waiting for them to come home. Shopping is an art form I leave to my mother. I love clothes and I can shop with the best of them, but I can't imagine spending my life doing that. Nor am I much for charity events and serving on committees. My mother even took care of my current outfit."

"I'm sure she did," Vince smiled, looking at her. "But I'm not a real fan of flannel-granny gowns."

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"She knew you'd be here, so she made sure to bring the proper gown."

"Proper would have been something sexy."

"She's a mother, Vince. A sister or best friend might bring something seductive, but not a mother."

"I suppose you're right," Vince agreed. "You do own other nightgowns, right? For when we're completely alone, I mean?"

Maggie giggled and said, "Who needs a gown, if we're alone?"

Vince shrugged, then moved into the chair beside the bed. "I happen to find silk and lace totally sexy," Maggie smiled and nodded. "Maybe I should get Gene or somebody to stay with you. Your family wants you to be protected. I may not fit the mold of what they're looking for."

"Uncle Marc suggested it, remember? Did you eat?"

"No. What about you?"

"Hospital food? I think not." Maggie reached for the phone. "I'll call Armand's. They deliver, for the right price."

"You can get a place like that to deliver? I can't even get reservations," Vince replied.

Maggie smiled. "You aren't Sean Fitzgerald's only loving daughter, Vince."

When the food arrived, the nurse was in the room changing Maggie's dressing. The delivery man set up the food just after the nurse pushed back the curtain. Maggie handed over her credit card, over Vince's protest.

"You can pay next time, Sarge," she said. "I need to put this one on the card. I doubt

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either of us has the cash to cover the tip I promised."

Vince nodded, a bit reluctantly. "The next one is my treat, though."

The nurse warned them not to burn down the hospital with the candles on the table, then she left, pushing the delivery man in front of her. Maggie got out of bed and walked unsteadily to the table. Vince put a hand on her arm and pulled out the chair for her.

As she sat down, there was a timid knock on the door. It opened a tiny crack and a white flag was extended. Jerry Blair followed his arm into the room. Maggie looked up at him. "What do you want?"

"To apologize," he said. "Alan was my friend, Maggie. I didn't mean what I said about him."

"So why did you say it?" she asked coldly.

"It just sort of popped out," he insisted. "I swear. I'd been drinking and . . . I don't know. It just sort of popped out."

"Fine," she said. "Apology accepted. Now leave, please."

"Wait," Jerry said, knowing that she'd willingly give him a ride on the Tony Llama Express. "I have information. I was at Baker's Tavern last night. I heard something. I thought it might be important."

"Why?" Vince was trying to get rid of Blair, so he could be alone with Maggie. "Why would we care? And why were you at Baker's? No cops go there. That place is a dump."

"I'm sort of not welcome at Flanagan's anymore," Jerry said, looking at the floor. "I'm sure we all know why." Vince could barely conceal his smile as he looked at Maggie. He

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could see that she, too, was enjoying Blair's discomfort. She nodded. She knew why he was persona non grata, and it pleased her that Alan's memory was important, even though no one attended the funeral. "There were two people talking at the next table and I heard them mention Fitz, so I listened. I had my back to them, so I couldn't see who it was without them finding out I was eavesdropping."

"What did they say?" Vince asked, casually holding Maggie's hand under the table.

"Someone was saying he'd done his part and he wanted his money. The other person said he needed to find out where Maggie would be when she left the hospital. The first person refused, saying he wanted no part in hurting a civilian."

"Do you have any idea who it was, Blair? It could be very important."

"Lt. Davidson."

"Jim Davidson? He's due to retire in a few months. Why would he jeopardize his pension by getting involved in something like this? He could go to prison. Hell, he could get the death penalty. No amount of money is worth that."

"You got me," Jerry said. He turned toward the door, but looked back and said, "Oh, I got ballistics. On Alan's shooting, I mean. Those two clowns we busted didn't pull the trigger. We got proof of that now. You want to see the report?"

"Do you have to ask?" Vince held out his hand and Jerry gave him the file.

Maggie reached for Jerry's hand. "I'm sorry, Jerry. For hitting you, I mean. If it had been any other day, I probably would have just blasted you verbally, instead of physically."

"It's okay," he insisted. "I deserved it."

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"You did, didn't you?" She smiled again and patted his arm casually. "I'm still sorry, Jerry. Did it hurt much?"

"Only my ego," he said, with a rueful grin.

Vince was looking at the ballistics report and he asked without looking up, "Did you read this?"

"I work Homicide, Howard. Of course I read it. You're the one who doesn't really have a right to it. Why?"

"Because this proves those two goons didn't shoot Fitz. That leaves Ellis, Powell and you."

"Wait just one damn minute, Howard," Jerry protested. "Fitz wasn't only my partner. He was my friend. You don't actually think I'd shoot him, do you?"

"Vince, that does seem a bit far-fetched," Maggie interjected.

"I don't think Blair shot him, Maggie. I know both Jerry and Kenny Ellis would take a bullet to the brain before firing on another cop, unless that cop had gone rogue. I'm simply saying the old man in the store might not be so crazy, after all. He said there was someone else there. I think that may be true."

"Why didn't he tell anyone about it that night?"

"He was scared."

"How'd you get that out of him?" Jerry asked, earning a scowl from Vince.

"How do you think?" Maggie laughed and Vince patted her hand. Jerry looked away, because he knew she was falling for this guy. He knew she'd never be his. It was somehow

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easier, knowing she might finally be happy with one man, someone who could and would protect her from all the young sharks who only wanted to see whether they could score. He'd heard rumors about her in the locker room that he hoped weren't true. If they were, maybe Vince was just the man she needed—he would keep her panties on and keep her out of multiple beds.

Jerry moved to the door, but looked back and said, "You know, Powell did go a bit nuts for a minute. He fired off a shot that nearly creased Ellis' skull. That wasn't in the reports, because Ellis and I agreed it wouldn't look good for Powell's record, to shoot at a fellow officer in a time of distress."

"Did anyone check out the store for other men?"

"Of course we did, Howard. The fire door was open and the store was empty. You read my report, so you know that already. Why are you asking me the same questions again?"

"I have not seen your report, Blair. IA told me it's none of my business. I've only just joined the task force and am not yet privy to the information they have. Fitz was my friend, and besides, three good cops are dead. I think that makes it the business of all of us, don't you? Who knows when one of us might be next?"

Blair nodded, then opened the door. He glanced at Maggie again, then slipped out into the darkened hallway. Vince stood up to follow him, telling Maggie he'd be back. He reached Blair as he pushed the elevator button. "How'd you know she was here?" he asked. "It's not supposed to be common knowledge."

"Well it is," Blair said. "Everyone was talking about in the locker room today," he

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smiled wickedly and added, "They were also placing a few bets about whether or not you'd gotten past the living room yet." He looked up at Vince and, knowing he was asking a potentially dangerous question, he said, "Are you sleeping with her, Sergeant Howard?"

"No," Vince answered. "But the thought has crossed my mind. I mean, she's one sexy woman, right? I'd have to be gay not to notice her, right?" Blair nodded and turned away. "I think she's less innocent than she appears, Detective Blair. Have you been a part of her education?"

"What?" Blair looked at him. "Hell, no! I respect Maggie, and her brother was my partner! He would have killed me for making out with his sister."

"That hasn't stopped you from thinking about her, has it?"

"A person can't always control his thoughts, Sarge." The door started to close and Blair added, "Take care of her, Sarge, or you'll answer to me. Fitz might not be here to protect her, but I am."

"You can't actually think I'm scared of a fat little troll like you," Vince laughed and Jerry looked disgusted. The door slid shut and Vince returned to Maggie's room. "Don't let me fall asleep tonight, sweetheart. If everyone at the station knows you're here, then whoever Davidson was talking with probably does, too. You could be in danger."

"You're taking care of me, Vince. I know I'll be safe."

Vince smiled and patted her hand. "By the way, why didn't you tell me the Chief was your uncle? "

"I never occurred to me," she insisted. "You've known Alan since I was a baby. I

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assumed he told you. I never would have taken you there without telling you. I'm not that cruel," she laughed and admitted. "I might have waited until we were halfway there so you couldn't chicken out, but I would have told you before we arrived."

Chapter 28

Monday afternoon Vince took his kids to lunch so they could talk. He knew he wouldn't be seeing as much of them as he'd like because he was guarding Maggie. He felt guilty. Aimee was quiet all through the meal, an unusual occurrence. Finally, as the waitress laid the check on the table, Aimee blurted out, "Dad, I have to tell you something. It's important," she glanced at Tony and he nodded, patting her hand to give his support. "Dad, I'm dating a really special guy, Ron Carver. He's a medical student at Harvard. I'd like you to meet him, because I think he's about to ask me to marry him."

"Terrific," Vince studied his daughter's face. "Okay, what's wrong with him?"

"Nothing," Aimee insisted. "He's perfect," she hesitated, then said, ". . . he . . . well . . . he's black, Daddy."

"And?" Vince replied. "Do you love him?" Aimee nodded when Vince smiled. "Then I think it's wonderful. Why don't you invite him here for Thanksgiving? I'd like to meet him."

Aimee looked at Tony and they smiled at each other. He had known how his father would react and had insisted that if Aimee didn't tell Vince about Ron, he would. "I told you he'd take it like a man," Tony teased. "He's not willing to lose his baby girl, so he'll accept

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any boyfriend you bring home."

"Not necessarily," Vince said. "I hated all the boys she dated in high school. I wouldn't allow her to marry any of them." Vince leaned over and hugged her, then kissed her cheek. "I love you, little girl."

When they returned to the hospital, the Fitzgeralds' limousine was just arriving. After a short visit with Maggie, Angelica, Aimee and Tony went to the estate.

Chapter 29

"Are you ready to go?" Vince asked, as soon as the door closed behind the family. "We aren't officially checking out—we're slipping out the back way. I'm sure they aren't worried about your dad paying the bill." She shrugged. "We're going down to x-ray so you can get dressed. Then, you'll slip down the stairs and meet me at the basement door." He was holding her hand, unconsciously stroking her finger while they talked. "I'll drive you home, then. . . "

"I thought I was being banished to your place, Vince. Why are you driving me home?"

"That's what I meant," he said. "It is my home, and yours—for the next few days—until we can find the person or persons responsible for these shootings. Besides your parents, there are three people who know where you'll be. Me, Gene, and probably Dale Riker. I think we can trust him, don't you? If that makes you uncomfortable, we won't use him."

"I used to date him, Vince. I think I can trust him."

"Date him? Dale has been married for years."

"I was twelve, Vince. He was. . . sixteen, I think. It was a long time ago."

"So there's nothing to be jealous about, right?"

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"Do you honestly think anyone could come between Dale and Corrine?"

"Not even someone gorgeous as you, hon. They're still so in love it's scary," he said, with a grin. The nurse entered the room, telling Maggie it was time to go. She was pushing a wheelchair. Maggie got in, holding her clothes in a bag on her lap. No one except the nurse knew she was leaving. Vince rode down with them, but stayed in the elevator when the nurse pushed Maggie toward x-ray. He went directly to the garage, pulling his car up beside the stair door. Maggie joined him soon, leaning back in the seat. "I can't believe how much that hurt." She returned her arm to the sling. "I could have used some help fastening all these buttons." She stole a glance at Vince, but he was looking through the windshield, paying attention to the late night traffic.

"You had a nurse there. Did she not help you?"

"Of course she did," she continued, "I just think I'd rather have you unfastening them."

"Maggie," Vince began, "We both know talking like this isn't a good idea. You're going to be staying with me for a while, but this kind of relationship isn't smart."

"We're both grown-ups, Vince. Why is it wrong to say how we feel?"

"Because if I know you want me, I may not be able to hold you at arm's length, but I know I should," he smiled at her and added, "You aren't like most of the women I've dated, Maggie. With them, it didn't matter what happened, but you. . . you're special. You don't really want to be a one night stand, do you?"

"Who said anything about just one night?" she asked with a sly grin. She put a hand on his thigh, but he tried to ignore it, watching the heavy traffic. When they stopped at a light,

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he leaned close to kiss her forehead. "One night with this sexy body would never be enough, sweetheart," he whispered. "Two lifetimes wouldn't be enough."

He drove to his apartment holding her hand. As they went upstairs, she leaned against him, her arm around his waist. "I could get used to having you at my side, Sarge. I feel safe with you to protect me."

"That's my job, Maggie," he grinned and added, "Of course, guarding you is also a pleasure."

"If you want it to be," she agreed.

"Sleeping on the couch while you're in the bed will be hell, for sure."

"That's your idea, Sarge. Not mine," she reminded him, as he unlocked the door and flipped on the lights.

Maggie looked around the small apartment, but didn't say anything. "I'm sorry it's so small, but it's right for me. I don't need much space."

"This is fine, Vince. You have no reason to apologize for where you live." She glanced into the kitchen and saw a pile of dishes in the sink. "Of course, an apology for how you live might be in order."

"It's not what you're used to, I know," he said. He moved some papers so she could sit down.

She pushed him down and sat on his lap. "Neither are you, Vince. I usually date guys my own age, but maybe I need someone like you. I've never been thrilled about the men I go out with, because they're rude, conceited, boorish, childish . . ."

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"I get the idea. You like me because I'm old."

"That's not what I said," she protested. "I don't think you're old. Not at all." He grinned, kissed her nose and put her on her feet. "I like you because you're a gentleman and you care about people."

He stood up. "I bought a couple new locks. The ones on the door are pretty flimsy. I should put them on."

She sat in the chair behind the door watching him as he worked. A couple of the bolts didn't want to turn and she noticed the rippling of his muscles as he forced them into place. She felt a shiver of desire run up her spine as she watched him work.

After placing the new locks, Vince ordered a pizza. After they ate, they snuggled on the couch and watched a movie, until Maggie began falling asleep. She was still taking pain pills, which made her sleepy. Vince stood up and lifted her to her feet. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, then turned her toward the bedroom with a swat on the butt and said, "Get ready for bed. I'll be right here to protect you. Take a pill and get comfortable, okay?"

"I still feel bad about putting you out of your bed, Vince. I can take the couch."

"What sort of host would I be, if I made you sleep on the couch?" He shook his head. "You'll be taking the bed."

Maggie shrugged and turned toward the bedroom. "You could join me," she whispered. When he didn't speak, she reached for her overnight bag, but Vince picked it up and carried it for her.

He put it on the bed and disappeared, pulling the door shut. "What do I have to do?"

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She asked herself, as she slipped the sling off. She undressed slowly, because the stitches in her shoulder were sore. She slipped into her nightgown, brushed her hair and washed her face. There was a soft knock on the door. "Come in," she called.

"I just realized I should have gone first," he said, sheepishly. There's only one bathroom and it's in here." He entered the room, worried she'd look as seductive she had when he'd returned to her apartment in the middle of the night. He knew if he saw her in the silk gown, he'd be a goner.

She was wearing a high-necked flannel nightgown. In a flash he remembered that, like the gown at the hospital, her mother packed these things. Angelica would want to make her gorgeous daughter look as plain as possible.

"Help yourself," Maggie could see relief on his face. "What's wrong? You're looking at me like I'm some sort of leper."

"Hardly," he protested. "I was afraid you'd be wearing that sexy gown you had on the other night."

"I thought you said flannel wasn't sexy," she said, with a giggle. "You specifically said something else would be better."

"I don't mean last night, Maggie," He turned to face her, putting his arms around her shoulders. "I mean the day of Alan's funeral. The silk gown that molds to your incredible body. I guess you aren't aware it's transparent?"

"What?" Maggie looked horrified. "My God! No wonder you were so nervous."

"I was afraid I wouldn't be able to leave you alone, looking so damn hot."

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She moved back to the side of the bed and patted the place beside her. "Next time, don't be such a gentleman," she suggested. "Just say what you want."

He sat down beside her. "If I'd asked to stay that night, what would you have said?"

"Well," she put her head on his shoulder and looked into space, "I'm not sure. I mean, it was the day of my brother's funeral. You were supposed to be one of his closest friends and you didn't bother to show up. Was I supposed to just forget that and jump in bed with you?"

"Uhm. . .," Vince wasn't sure what she wanted to hear. "No. I guess not."

"On the other hand, you are an incredible specimen of manhood. Any woman would be crazy to let you get away. I'll bet you're a dynamite lover. Right?"

Vince looked embarrassed. "I don't know. I never spend enough time with any woman for her to care enough to tell me."

"I know the feeling," Maggie admitted. "I don't have a real good track record, either." She looked at her hands and whispered, "There have been several men who've shared my bed, but. . . This is embarrassing, but I have to be honest, Vince. I sleep around quite a bit. It helps me to forget about Erich. I miss him terribly. Especially at night."

"Were there any relationships I'd care about were they to mention it to me?"

"I can't imagine they'd say anything if they wanted to live," she replied, closing her eyes, and crossing her fingers as he left the room.

Chapter 30

Vince lay down on the couch. He laced his fingers together behind his head. "I can't believe I left her in there all alone," he said, into the darkness. "She said she wants to sleep with me, and here I am, on the stupid couch."

"Sounds like you're the stupid one." The voice surprised him and he sat up quickly, reaching for the .357 magnum under his arm. "Of course, if I'd found you in bed with my sister, I'd have to kill you. It would be the honorable thing for me to do." A chuckle came out of the darkness. "Don't shoot me, okay?"

"Fitz?" Vince was shocked, as he re-holstered his weapon.

"Quiet," the figure mumbled, finger to his lips. "Maggie will hear."

"What the hell. . . ? Aren't you supposed to be playing dead? Are we giving up the charade? Should I go get Maggie? You can tell her and end at least part of the tragedy in her life."

Alan flipped on the light and sat beside Vince on the couch. "You can't tell Maggie, yet. She's never been good at keeping secrets, and I have to stay dead for a while longer. There's somebody besides Davidson helping Jack, but I haven't got the faintest idea who.

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Until I know who's trying to kill me and why, I have to stay dead. We know who's after Maggie. I know she'll be safe here, since no one has the faintest idea where to start looking."

"Unless the same leak is aware of her current location."

"That wasn't much of a secret, Vince. Every damn person at the rodeo knew where she'd been taken. Several of them gave blood."

"Well, I've got to go to the station for a while tomorrow because if I don't, people will ask questions. You know me. Dedicated to the death. Even when I was shot, I was back at my desk the minute I was allowed out of the hospital. Dwight Powell has been assigned to me for a while. Can I trust him to watch the place?"

"Don't know him except that he worked with Ellis for a while. Ask him. Do you want to tell him Maggie is here?"

"Hell, no!" Vince shook his head. "Maybe I can think up a reason for having him here without telling him why."

Alan stared into space for a full minute, then he smiled. "I'll have Marc tell him. He can say he's not sure he trusts you, that he wants to know if you have any visitors come by while you aren't home. Visitors who might be delivering a pay-off, or new instructions, or something. Someone who wants to remain anonymous and would come while you aren't home."

"You don't trust me, Fitz?"

"You have my sister in your bedroom, pal. Of course I trust you. That was my idea, by the way. Marc argued, but he gave in, because Jerry had a convincing argument. She trusts

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you and she might be willing to stay here, since she likes you. It's just a good story. Right?"

Vince nodded. "Better than I could come up with, I guess." He looked baffled for a minute, then asked, "Has the Chief known that you're still breathing, all along?"

"The plan was Dale Riker's idea, but Uncle Marc went along. I've been staying at the ranch. I know it was risky, with the rodeo and all, but I needed a place to stay where someone could take care of me and Martha, being the housekeeper of a cop, knows how to care for bullet wounds. She's taken care of several for Uncle Marc, over the years."

"Housekeeper? You are not up on current events," Vince replied. "I understand he fired her, then again asked her to marry him and she finally accepted."

"It's about damn time!" Alan exclaimed. "I've been telling him for ten years to fire her, but he wouldn't listen."

"I know. He said Maggie's told him, too. I guess he finally took everybody's advice."

Alan stood up and walked to the door. "Don't betray my trust, Vince. Maggie might not be innocent, but she is naive. She's a hell of a lot more vulnerable than she'd ever admit. You hurt her, you're dead."

"Crazy man—I think I'm falling in love with her, Fitz. So how does your sister feel about older men?"

"Don't be calling yourself old. I've got a couple years on you," Alan replied. "Other than Erich, all the men in her life are older: me, Dad, Marc, Gene. . . "

"Gene? She's been with him?"

"I didn't say that," Alan replied, looking at the wall. Vince shrugged, but nodded. Alan

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opened the door and was gone. Vince lay back down but still couldn't sleep. He was thinking about that sweet, beautiful face, those violet eyes that bored into his soul. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep the secret from her. He saw the pain in her eyes every time he looked at her, and it was torture, knowing that he could heal a lot of it, with only a few words. He had given his promise, and he had to keep it. But it was getting harder. The more he cared for her, the harder it was to keep. He finally fell asleep that invitation to join her still ringing in his brain.

Chapter 31

Maggie woke around five-thirty. She looked around the dark room, feeling lost. "Where in the world . . .?" She saw the photo of Aimee and Tony beside the bed and remembered she was in Vince's bed. Getting up quietly, she slipped into her robe and went into the living room. Vince was snoring softly, his legs hanging off the end of the couch. She moved past him into the small kitchen and found a jar of instant coffee in the cabinet.

"Yuck!" She looked disgusted, but made a cup, anyway. She was curled up in the armchair drinking her third cup when Vince woke, an hour later. He stretched and yawned, then noticed her looking at him. "You can't be comfortable," she informed him. "No arguments, mister. I'll be sleeping out here from now on. I'm two feet shorter than you, and I'll have couch left over."

He shrugged, but nodded. "Okay. I'm smart enough to not argue with a woman. No matter how much we protest to the contrary, no man ever wins an argument with a woman. Unless she feels sorry for him and gives up," he grinned.

He went to the bedroom to get ready for work. When he returned, Maggie had breakfast on the table. "What are you doing? The doctor said to take it easy. That means no

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waiting on me. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," she said, with a giggle and a salute. He grinned and sat down. She started to sit beside him, but, instead, perched on his knee, her uninjured arm around his neck. "I could get used to fixing meals for you," she said. "A man like you would probably appreciate my talents in the kitchen."

"I think I'd appreciate any talents you'd care to show me. And we don't have to be in the kitchen. You can use those talents anywhere," he said, pulling her close to him. "I have to go in to work for a few hours today. You think you'll be all right here alone?"

"Do I have a choice?" she asked, reaching for her coffee. "Marc basically ordered me to stay put."

"I noticed that," Vince said. "Do you take that sort of command from anyone else?"

"Not even my father," she replied. "Marc raised me, since I was about two. Mother and Daddy were always out of the country. I stayed at the ranch, until I left for boarding school." Again Vince heard the bitterness in her voice, and this time, it was definite, not his imagination.

Vince promised to be home early, then pulled her into his arms and kissed her passionately. "You'd better lock me out of the bedroom tonight, love," he whispered, close to her ear. "I'm not sure I can keep my hands to myself."

"If I have merchandise you want to check out, be my guest," she said.

Vince pulled away and walked to the door. "Don't say things like that," he said. "Unless you mean it."

"I do mean it," she said. "What do I need to do to prove it to you?" She reached for the

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button at the neck of her gown. He knew if she did, he'd never make it to work.

"Not now, honey," he said. "Maybe we can talk about it tonight. I have to go to work."

He kissed the top of her head and picked up his weapon from the table.

She followed him and put her arms around his waist, kissing him in the middle of his broad back. "I'll be right here when you get home, Vince. Are you bringing dinner, or will we cook?"

"I can cook if you want me to, but to hear my kids talk, you won't like it much. We can order out. How's that?"

"Okay by me," she said, pulling away from him. She closed the door. He heard her lock the door, then fasten the chain. After a second, she fastened the new locks Vince had installed the night before. Going down the stairs, Vince noticed Powell on the opposite corner watching his apartment. He still had a feeling Chief Riordan didn't trust him. As he got into his car, the feeling of distrust increased when Powell ducked behind a tree.

Upstairs, Maggie considered taking a shower, but her shoulder was extremely sore this morning. She decided against it. She sponged off in the sink instead. She sat down to watch television, thinking she could catch up on her soap operas. The T.V. wasn't loud, but when someone knocked on the door, it made her nervous and she turned the T.V. off, choosing to sit quietly and read a book her mother had tucked into her overnight bag. She did glance through the peephole in the door, but she couldn't see anyone. She assumed it was one of Vince's neighbors, but when no one answered, they assumed he wasn't home and left. Maybe a package had been delivered, but she was scared to open the door to find out.

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Although she tried to put on a brave face and tell the world she wasn't scared, in truth, she was terrified. She had faced danger before. As a child, she had climbed atop a bull and rode it around the arena. As a teen, she had learned all of the rodeo events and performed them admirably, but now, in the face of real danger, someone wanting her dead, she was frightened. She had decided, even before Marc had insisted on hiding her, that she was going to lay low for a while. This way was better, though. It hadn't been her idea, so she didn't have to tell anyone she was scared.

Chapter 32

When Vince returned at three-forty, she was asleep on the couch, her leather jacket pulled over her. Vince got her a blanket, then went into the kitchen, intending to clean up the breakfast dishes. He stayed quiet so she could sleep. When she woke around six-thirty, he was just putting dinner on the table. "I hope you like Chinese," he said. "I got a little of everything, so you could have whatever you want."

She smiled at him and nodded. "Chinese is wonderful," she replied. "Of course, the places here can't compete with authentic Chinese food. Maybe someday I'll take you to Hong Kong for the real thing."

He didn't say anything, but her offer to take him on a journey across the ocean suggested that she expected him to be in her life for a while. That seemed even more permanent than the promise to go sailing with him in the spring. He felt his heart jump as he thought about how nice it might be to be with this woman forever.

He held her chair. As they began filling their plates, he marveled at the amount of food she took. "You actually plan to eat all that?"

"And maybe a little more," she said.

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He held her hand softly and caressed her fingers. "I could love you, Maggie."

"I've already told you I wouldn't put up a struggle, Vince. I want to make love to you."

"No, I mean real love, not just sex. I want to be more than just a body in the bed."

"Yeah?" she said, with a smile. "You want to protect me, Sergeant Howard? Are you sure this isn't just the cop in you, rearing its ugly head?"

"Don't make fun of me," he protested. "I'm a good cop, sure. But I'm a man, too. I want more from life than bad guys and arrest reports. I want love, affection and. . . and I want some one to care, if I get my ass shot off."

"What about your kids? I think they'll care."

"It's not the same thing, Maggie. I want someone to be waiting for me when I get home. I want a sweet, gorgeous woman who willingly and lovingly takes care of me and my family."

"So you want some little trophy who just sits around waiting for you all day? Sorry. Can't do that. I'm an active person."

"I can't afford a trophy wife, silly. I want a partner, a lover, a friend. Someone to take care of me and my kids."

"You want more children, Vince?" She moved to his lap and put her head on his shoulder. He stood up and carried her to the couch, sitting down with her still in his lap. "I wanted more, but. . ."

"How many do you want, love? I wouldn't mind having babies with you. I'm sure they'd be gorgeous, like their mother."

Maggie blushed, but kissed Vince on the cheek. "Actually, I used to think I wanted eight

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kids. After pregnancy, labor and delivery, though, I think I'd be happy with one or two more. I'm not sure I want to go through that so many times."

They spent the evening together on the couch, but every time Maggie suggested they go to the bedroom, Vince shook his head.

Around midnight, he stood up and said he was going to bed. "Are you sure you want the couch?" he asked.

"Puleeze," she looked disgusted. "You can't possibly be comfortable out here. I mean, not all of you fits on the couch."

"Let me get changed and I'll be out of your way." She got her things out of the overnight bag and went into the bathroom. When she returned to the bedroom, Vince was lying on the bed, wearing only his slacks. She sat beside him and leaned over him. "Kiss me good night, lover," she whispered. She caressed his broad chest, enjoying the feel of the strong muscles under the skin. He put his arms around her and pulled her close, feeling her small, soft body next to him. He kissed her with a growing passion and she pressed closer. "Make love to me, Vince. Let me spend the night with you."

"No," he said. "I can't."

She put a hand on the bulge in his slacks. "Seems like you can," she teased. "Unless this isn't for me."

"Of course it is," he replied. "When I say I can't, I don't mean physically. Obviously that's not a problem."

"Then, why?"

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"I promised."

"Who?" she asked, snuggling down beside him. "Daddy? Uncle Marc? Gene? They'll never have to know."

"I think they'd know by looking at me, Maggie. I'm not good at keeping secrets."

"Yes, you are," she disagreed with him. "You've been keeping something from me, all day."

"What are you talking about?" He looked confused.

"No one has told you about me, huh?" she asked. "I'm surprised," she smiled and said, "I've been able to read people, my whole life. It's not mind-reading or anything that sci-fi. It's more like sensing feelings. Like that alien race on *Star Trek*. I think they call them Empaths, or something."

"You've been reading my mind these last few days?"

"Your feelings would be more accurate," Maggie nodded. "I've known how much you wanted to be with me from the very first night." Vince looked embarrassed. "But there is definitely something you're hiding."

"I can't tell you, Maggie. Please, don't ask me again, because I don't want to lie to you, but I'll have to."

"Okay," she stood up and moved to the door. "Are you sure you want me to leave, Vince?"

"No," he replied. "I don't want you to, but you have to." He blew her a kiss and she left the room, leaving the door ajar. She lay down on the couch and was asleep within seconds.

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Sometime in the night, she heard a noise in the hallway outside the apartment. Looking toward the door, she saw a thin beam of light shining underneath. Her heart was in her throat, as she stood up quietly and moved toward the bedroom. Pushing open the door, she approached the bed and touched Vince on the shoulder.

"Vince," she whispered urgently. "There's someone in the hall outside. I heard them moving. I saw a light under the door."

Vince was out of the bed before she finished speaking. He grabbed his gun off the dresser and told her to stay put. He left the room and opened the front door quickly. The person hunched down outside his door looked up, in surprise. "What are you doing here?" Vince demanded. "You really don't trust me."

"Of course I do, Vince," Alan insisted. "She's my sister. I have to protect her."

"That's my job, pal," Vince argued. "Maybe you should be pestering your parents. Jack did threaten your mother too."

"What?" Alan looked as if someone had just kicked him. "No one told me that. Why?"

"Because his mother and siblings died in Africa. He blames your father and intends to eliminate all of his loved ones."

"Damn!" Alan exploded. "Why didn't anyone tell me this?"

"I don't know." Vince stuck his gun into the back of his slacks and offered Alan his hand, pulling him to his feet. "Why don't you go protect your mother? I assure you, Maggie is safe here with me."

Alan nodded and walked toward the stairs, looking over his shoulder at Vince. "Are you

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sleeping with my sister? I know you want to, because of what you said last night."

"I do want to, yes. But, no. I haven't touched her." He looked guilty as he added, "Well, I have touched her, but we've only kissed. We haven't slept together."

"You won't be the first, you know," Alan said, quietly.

"I met the kids, moron. I know she's not a virgin. That doesn't matter. Neither am I."

"She's been a bit free, the last couple years," Alan said. "None of them have mattered to her, because she didn't care about them. You, I think, are different. Marc says she acts like she's in love again." He looked at his hands and said, "If all you want is her body, make sure she knows that beforehand. If she knows it's about sex, she'll be okay. If she thinks you want more, she'll get hurt when you leave. Then I'd have to kill you. I'd hate to do that to a friend."

"Can you imagine anyone leaving a gorgeous woman like her?" Vince asked. "I can't."

He glanced over his shoulder into the apartment, but Maggie was still in the bedroom. He had felt her fear when she woke him. She'd actually been trembling.

"Really? Her husband had one affair after another while she waited patiently at home. All he really wanted was Dad's money. He got her pregnant so she'd ask for more money, which he promptly spent. On drugs and other women."

"Does she know?" Vince glanced over his shoulder to be sure she wasn't coming to see what was taking so long. "About the other women, I mean."

Alan shook his head. "I warned the little bastard if he ever told her, I'd kill him." After a moment of hesitation, he said, "And Erich isn't dead. Dad and I finally got tired of him treating her like a meal ticket. We paid him off, warned him never to try and see her or the girls, then

made up the story of his death. I know it was cruel because she idolized him. But she's my sister and I love her. If she found out about his infidelities, it would destroy her."

Vince moved back to the door of his apartment. "Go on. She'll be fine with me. I won't hurt her—not emotionally, physically, or any other way. Trust me, okay? I think I'm in love again, too." He grinned. "Maybe for the first time ever. In love for real, I mean."

He went back to the bedroom and found Maggie in his bed. "It was some kid, trying to find an easy lock," he said, avoiding her eyes. "I warned him to get his butt home and said if I found him in this building again, I'd bust him."

"Good," she said, patting the bed beside her. "Come on, join me."

"No way," he said, looking past her at the wall. "I know I can't be good, if I'm with you."

"Yes, you can," she informed him. "If you insist on being good, that is. I know you have great willpower." Vince hesitated for a minute, then lay down beside her. She moved into his arms, laying her head on his shoulder. "Good night, Vince." She turned out the lamp over the bed and pulled the blanket over them. "See you in the morning."

Chapter 33

The next afternoon, Vince had been home from work only a few minutes, when there was a quick, nervous knock on the door and Vince stood up. "Go to the bedroom," he whispered urgently. "Don't come out until I say."

She moved toward the bedroom without protest. His urgency made her nervous. Even though she protested to the contrary, she was glad to have a personal bodyguard right now. He waited until she shut the door, then he pulled his gun and moved to the door. "Who is it?" he called out.

"Don't shoot, it's only me." Gene opened the door and stepped inside as Vince reholstered his weapon. "Where is the little witch?" he asked affectionately. "I brought her some of that Japanese raw fish she likes so much." Maggie heard Gene's voice and left the bedroom and greeted him, accepting the sushi with a kiss on the cheek.

"I wanted to let you in on the plan for tomorrow," Gene said. "Jack Fitzgerald is holed up in a cheap motel downtown, near the hooker district. We've had uniforms on him, all day. He's been in and out of the motel all afternoon, prowling around, going into pawn shops, buying illegal weapons and ammo from the trunks of cars, stocking up on beer and junk food. He looks

to be planning a long stay.”

“Who’s watching him now?” Vince asked.

“Blair insisted on the night shift. He’s pissed as hell and plans to be there for the take-down. We go at seven a.m. I’m going to hang out with him for the night. Dana’s not home anyway. Might as well get a little OT.”

“I’d like to go with you, but I need to stay here with Maggie. You should have a good stake-out with Blair,” Vince said. “As much as I hate to admit it, that little troll is a damn good cop.” Gene nodded, said goodbye to Maggie and left.

Maggie could tell Vince really wanted to go with Gene, so she decided to give him something to take his mind off the stake-out. When she kissed him, pressing her body close to his, she knew he wasn't thinking about anything but her. She liked knowing she could take his mind off the world outside, just by kissing him. When she pulled away, he asked, "What is that perfume, anyway? I haven't been able to forget it, since the first night I met you."

"Lavender. I order it from England, because I haven't found a brand here that I really like."

"You're going to be the most expensive woman I've ever dated. You know that, don't you?"

"I'm worth it. I promise." She leaned close to kiss him again and he grinned.

"I'm sure you are," he agreed. Vince put Maggie on the couch next to him and stood up. He picked up the container Gene had brought. “I don’t suppose you’d let me fry this stuff up?” he asked. “I hate eating anything raw unless it’s leafy and green. I’m not even really hot for fish. I’d

rather have a steak.”

“Sushi is served raw, Vince. Frying it would make it—I don’t know—a filet or something. You should be willing to try new things. Besides, steak is very bad for you.”

“So is raw fish. I hate to think of the germs crawling around on that stuff.” She made a face at him. “And for the record, I am not against trying new things. I’m willing to try you,” he said with a grin. He pulled her to her feet and into his arms, burrowing under her long hair.

“Someday.”

“Any time, stud.” She snuggled comfortably into his arms.

Chapter 34

Gene and Jerry sat in a car outside the motel watching the room. They didn't talk much. Gene was a man of few words. Besides, Jerry annoyed him. They read the paper and drank coffee. Jerry brought along an endless supply of junk food, all of which he continually offered to Gene. The latter refused, politely at first, then with more determination. He never spoke a word. As Jerry offered him jerky, nuts, cookies and chips, he simply shook his head. Finally, Jerry couldn't stand the quiet.

"Why did this happen?" he asked. "Three good cops are dead. We all assumed some psycho was on a cop-killing spree. When Maggie entered the arena and was blasted off her horse, all bets were off. Why were the other officers shot, when he was after the Fitzgeralds specifically? Why did he shoot the other officers?"

Gene looked at Jerry for a minute, as if examining an interesting bug. "Good questions," he studied Jerry for another excruciatingly long period of time. "Got any ideas?"

"Yeah," Jerry responded. "Do you really want to hear one?"

"I asked, didn't I?" Gene was staring through the windshield at the closed door of the motel room.

“Well,” Jerry began, not sure whether Gene was really listening. “Since Lt. Davidson was involved, I think this may be more than it appears to be. There has to be. He wouldn’t risk prison, not to mention his life, just for a little cash. He’s a good cop, who believes in the rules.”

“And?” Gene asked. It annoyed him when people drew things out, instead of answering.

“Davidson’s only job was to get us out there on the street. No way he agreed to hurting Maggie. I think the other two were just random killings, to get everyone a little on the defensive. They wanted us nervous. The reason we were asked, by Davidson personally, to back up the uniforms, is because everyone is on edge about the killings. At least, that’s what he said when he asked. He wanted experience on the scene.”

Gene turned his gaze toward Jerry. When he spoke, his tone showed amazement and a touch of respect. He had never spent much time with Jerry because he was a little creepy. Alan sang the praises of Jerry’s excellent mind, and it looked as though maybe he had been right.

"Vince was right. You are a damn good cop."

“Sergeant Howard said that? I’m surprised. He called me a troll, at the hospital.”

"You are a troll," Gene informed him. "But what law says trolls can't be good cops?"

Jerry shook his head in disgust, but Gene ignored him. They spent the night in the car, only leaving for coffee, or a call of nature. Gene planned to be in charge of the operation until Vince showed up, so as officers arrived, he began deploying them to strategic places.

Chapter 35

In the morning, Vince left Maggie asleep in his bed when he went to work, because she looked exhausted when they went to bed. She convinced him to sleep again in the bed with her. It was getting more difficult to be with her and not make love to her.

Vince, Gene, Jerry and half the police force surrounded the bungalow at the motel where Jack was staying by seven a.m. They quietly evacuated the surrounding rooms before taking up their positions. Vince stood behind a patrol car with a bullhorn.

“Jack Fitzgerald! This is the police! You are surrounded. Come out with your hands above your head!” There was the sound of glass breaking. Shots echoed through the early morning stillness. The officers waited for the order to return fire, but Vince wanted the man alive. He wouldn't allow the order to be issued. As ranking officer on scene, he made the call.

For several tense moments, bullets rained around them, slamming into the ground and peppering the patrol cars. The officers hunched down, trying not to get hit. The barrage soon stopped. Vince again called for surrender. The door opened slowly and two scantily-clad working girls slipped through the crack. They walked toward the police with their hands in the air. As they reached the patrol cars, two officers grabbed and handcuffed them. When the shooting started

again, Vince knew Jack wasn't going to surrender without a fight. He gave the order to return fire. Less than a minute after the police returned fire, the door opened again. A white pillowcase extended through the door and waved in the breeze.

Vince ordered Jack to throw out his weapons, then step outside. Soon as the young man reached the sidewalk, Gene leaped up and grabbed him. He shoved him against the wall and handcuffed him. Vince could barely believe it. This "man" was a kid! He knew they were after a nineteen year old, but this kid looked like he should be making out under the bleachers with a cheerleader, not running around killing cops.

Being shoved into a patrol car, Jack looked up and growled, "I'll be back. I'm going to get her and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. I'm not alone. Unless Miss Perfect wants to stay hiding for the rest of her life, looking over her shoulder, she's as good as dead!" Gene felt as if someone had just stuck a knife in his stomach. His experience and years of training prevented him from saying anything. He slammed the door on Jack and turned to Vince. Jerry looked sick. So did some of the younger officers. If he was telling the truth, Maggie was history. If someone wanted to kill her, there wasn't anything they could do.

Gene and Jerry had never been friends, and after Gene had called him a troll the previous day, Jerry was miffed, but he tried to get his attention. He had something important to say. Gene brushed him off. He walked over to where Vince was on the phone with Chief Riordan, telling him Jack Fitzgerald was in custody. Jerry followed Gene, again trying to get his attention by tugging on his sleeve.

"Damn it, you little troll, go away!" Gene snapped, when he realized Jerry was again at

his elbow. He looked at Vince, who was still talking to the Chief on the pay phone at the corner.

"I need to tell you something, you big dumb Indian!" Jerry said, grabbing Gene's arm and swinging him around, nearly earning himself a rap in the mouth. "I just now figured out who Lieutenant Davidson was talking to about Maggie. I told Howard about the conversation, but I couldn't place the other voice, until just now." He paused and Vince looked at him questioningly. "Davidson was talking to Dwight Powell. I don't know him real well, but . . ."

Vince threw down the phone and sprinted for his car. Jerry stared after him in confusion. Gene called over his shoulder, as he too headed for his car. "Powell is standing guard at Vince's apartment. Maggie is there alone right now!"

Jerry got into the jeep just before Gene left the lot. "I'm going after the Chief," he said. "He'll want to be in on this bust. I think we both know Vince can handle Powell." He was quiet for a minute, as he puzzled through the new evidence. "I understand the kid getting bent about a family slight, but Powell being involved doesn't make much sense. Do you get it?"

Jerry shook his head, as he reached for his seatbelt. "You always drive like this? How have you survived so long? Does your wife get into the car willingly or do you have to drag her at gunpoint?" Gene ignored the barb, as he drove at breakneck speed through downtown Atlanta during rush hour. He was weaving in and out of traffic, flashing his lights and hitting his siren whenever necessary to clear the path. He approached the police station when Marc was arriving. They all went to Vince's apartment, again at a dangerous speed. Several times, Marc told him to hurry up. Jerry grabbed the edges of his seat and held on, praying they would get there alive.

Chapter 36

When they arrived, Dale Riker was just stepping onto the curb. He was one of the few who knew where Maggie was. After hearing part of Jack's confession on the way to the station, he had headed for Vince's place. As they started up the stairs, he informed them of Jack's partial confession. "He admits planning the entire thing. He swears it was his father's idea, though. Powell shot Maggie. Jack admits to shooting Alan, but since he isn't dead, he'll only get charged with attempted murder."

"Alan isn't dead?" Gene repeated. "What do you mean he isn't dead?"

"I mean, he isn't dead, Gene. He's been in hiding, trying to find out Powell's identity. His wounds were serious but not fatal. Martha has been treating him out at the ranch, so there was no medical trail. He knew someone inside the department was involved, but he didn't know who." On the second floor, he stepped back, allowing the Chief to go in front. "Powell wasn't out front. I can only assume he's inside. Vince will have taken care of him. We should relieve him of his prisoner."

All four men entered the apartment cautiously, weapons drawn. The doorframe was splintered and the door hung askew. They needn't have bothered being careful. Powell was

handcuffed, seated on the couch. He stared sullenly at the floor, unconsciously sucking on his bleeding lip. Maggie stood by the window, staring at the horizon. She cradled her wounded shoulder. Gene noticed there was blood seeping through the bandage, soaking her shirt. He started to move toward her, but decided against it. She'd ask for assistance if she needed it. Marc demanded an explanation and Vince, who was leaning on the wall behind the door, provided it. "When I got here, Maggie had Powell on the floor. I guess she used some of her karate on him, or something. She says she only flipped him. Judging from the shiner and the fat lip, I'd say she used that famous right cross, first." He grinned at Maggie, but she didn't seem to see him or anyone else.

Marc moved over behind her and put an arm around her waist. "Are you okay?" She nodded slightly, a solitary tear sliding noiselessly down her cheek. She turned away from the window.

Taking a deep breath, she looked at Powell and asked, "What did I ever do to you? I've never even met you. Why do you hate me?"

"Because you're living in the big house on the hill. I grew up in a place smaller and tackier than this dump," he said, still staring at the floor. "I should have been living up there, too." He struggled to his feet and glared down at her. "Alan being Patrick's bastard isn't the reason he was disowned. Your father agreed to take your mama as his wife and raise the boy as his own. She and her family weren't dishonored because no one knew." He took three deep, gasping breaths and continued. "Patrick just didn't know how to keep his pants on. He got my mother in the family way, too. See, I'm Patrick's son, too."

Maggie's legs gave out when Dwight said Alan was Patrick's son. Jerry, who was the closest, caught her arm and led her to a chair. She looked up at Dwight and asked, "Why does this concern me? I still don't understand why you want me dead."

"If it wasn't for you, my father wouldn't have been chased out of his home. I could have lived in that mansion on the hill, too! My mother was ready to give me up—for the right price. Patrick's wife was willing to take me in, when your father, with his brand-new little daughter to inherit all the marbles, told the old man about it. The whole family got banished to the wilds of Africa. My mother moved us to New York. Somehow, she got it in her head that she could make it on Broadway, even though she couldn't dance or sing, and she wasn't very attractive. She was a waitress in a greasy spoon for twenty years, until she died last spring. I grew up in a rat-infested dump on the Lower East Side. We shared one filthy bathroom with twelve neighbors. I barely managed to get out alive, let alone with a real education. If I hadn't done years' worth of studying under a bare bulb in my lonely, empty room, I'd probably be living on the street right now. Or dead. I should have been in a private school. Or a fancy boarding school like you attended."

Maggie stood up again, brushing Jerry's hand off her shoulder. "You don't have to be so bitter," she told Powell. "You worked so hard, now it's all gone because of this. How does that make sense?" She turned away, as the tears continued rolling down her cheeks.

"And you get all the money now, since your brother is gone! You can spend it on shoes and slutty outfits to entice more cops into your bed. When you get through with Howard, there's a hundred more waiting in line to get a piece of your cheap ass."

Marc took over, looking at the file he held in his hand. "Jack made a full confession,

Officer Powell. I suggest you do the same, or you'll be going down for these crimes alone. He implicated you—as the ring-leader."

"Me?" Powell looked incredulous. "He came to me! I swear! I was supposed to get someone to put Alan and Jerry on the street on a routine patrol. We been short handed 'cause of the flu, so it was easy. Lieutenant Davidson agreed to do it—for a price. Sergeant Fitzgerald always was a sucker for hard luck stories. Davidson told him we was short-handed. He agreed to help out," he took a deep breath. "Jack made all the plans. He told me what to do. I took a shot at the pampered little bitch at the rodeo. I guess we all know I'm not a great shot." He decided he had nothing more to lose, so he said, "I guess I've proved I'm not real smart, either. She's been here for two days all alone. I've been right down there on the corner. I could have killed her any time and no one would have known it was me. I was too dumb to figure it out. Even after Sarge told his kids he craves that hot little body." He glared at Maggie and added, "I guess he's been getting it, these last couple nights. I found the little bitch in his bed when I kicked in the door."

"You screwed everything up, didn't you? Ellis and Blair were supposed to end up dead too, weren't they? Jack would give you a superficial wound so it would look like you'd been shot in the line of duty. How am I doing?"

Vince and Gene were looking at Marc in surprise. Jack hadn't confessed these things to them. "Jack shot Alan. Then he came out front to shoot you. You panicked and missed Ellis on the first try. You didn't dare make another attempt. Jack disappeared. Ellis and Blair didn't think it would look good on your service record to take a shot at another officer in a blind panic. They both agreed to omit it from their report," he glared at Jerry, who looked embarrassed and stared at

the floor.

"It's her fault!" Powell insisted, looking at Maggie. "If she'd never been born, I could have had the good life, too!"

"I don't think so," Marc disagreed. "I spoke to Patrick last night in a cell downtown. He came in of his own volition. He's been having nightmares since his son was murdered. Patrick wanted Maggie dead. He admits that. Jack made the decision to eliminate his brother."

"So?" Powell was still scowling at Maggie.

"Sean didn't tell his father about you. He knew nothing about you. Patrick was disowned for what he did to Angelica. Sleeping with her was bad enough. She was only fourteen. Getting her pregnant was worse. What got him kicked out of the family wasn't refusing to marry her when she told him about the baby. Instead, after she and Sean were married, he threatened her. If she slept with Sean, he'd kill her. She was terrified and finally told Sean. After that, Sean warned Patrick if he touched her, or came near her, he'd kill him. Sean intended to deal with his brother himself. But their father got wind of the threats and that, not you or Alan or any of Patrick's bastard children, got him kicked out of the family. The elder Sean Fitzgerald never knew about you, or the other boy living in Macon, or the two girls in Savannah, or the eleven children he fathered with the women in Africa, some of those by force, I believe. Patrick was real good at getting women pregnant. He wasn't, however, good at accepting his responsibilities for those children after he created them," Marc's voice changed—it was hard and angry. "He used my sister, then discarded her like so much rubbish, leaving her with a baby on the way and no honor." Powell's face fell when Marc mentioned that Alan's mother was his sister. Jack hadn't

told him that. All he'd said was Sean married the woman and they had one child together:

Maggie, the exalted bitch.

Jerry and Dale moved in beside Powell and took him by the arms. "Wait, Chief," Gene interrupted. "What about Lt. Davidson? He had a part in this, too. He'll have to be punished. I mean, he's a cop. He helped kill cops."

"He wrote me a letter, which I received in the morning intra-departmental mail." Marc reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope and opened it. He unfolded a single sheet of paper, which he read aloud.

*Chief Riordan,*

*I am sorry for my part in your nephew's death and the deaths of the other two men last month. The man who approached me offered a great deal of money. Since I know I won't reach my retirement, I accepted, so my wife and children will be provided for. I have a malignant tumor in my head that is inoperable. My life is over anyway. This was the only way to provide for my family. I am truly sorry, Chief, about your niece and for my involvement in this matter.*

*Lt. Michael James Davidson*

Marc put the letter back into the envelope and said, quietly, "This morning at five minutes

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before three, Jim Davidson went into the locker room and ate his gun. He's no longer a threat to anyone."

All the men were silent for a minute, then Jerry shoved Powell out the door and down the stairs. Dale followed. Gene stepped into the hallway, but Marc remained in the room. Vince looked at him and said, "Let me take Maggie home, and I'll be downtown in an hour."

Chapter 37

"You'll do no such thing, Sergeant Howard," he winked at Maggie, as he said, "It's against my better judgment after what Powell said, but you are still on protection detail. We can't be sure Powell and Davidson were the only help Jack had. Until I'm comfortable she's safe, you should stay with her." He took Maggie's hand and asked, "Are you okay, little one?"

"I'm fine, Marc." She looked up at him, tears shining in her violet eyes. "Did you know about Alan? Being Patrick's son, I mean?"

"I never even suspected. I knew she was pregnant when they married. I knew Sean had never even looked her way because she was so young, but, no. I had no idea. She had been away at school, much like you were, and when she came home for Christmas, she wasn't herself, you know? She locked herself in her room for hours, she barely talked to anyone. The only person she would talk to was Sean. He was quite a bit older than all of us, but our fathers were friends and we all went to him to 'counseling', for lack of a better word. On New Year's Eve, at the big family party, Sean announced his engagement to Angel. We were, to say the least, shocked. She was in high school, and he'd been out of college for several years and learning the banking trade, traveling to Europe practically on a weekly basis. I suspected the baby wasn't Sean's but

remember, precocious or not, I was only ten. When Alan was born with red hair and green eyes, I assumed some of Sean's visits to New York had included visits to my sister at school. Until this all came up, I never asked questions. Patrick tried to deny it, but I could tell he was lying. Sean and I talked about it, yesterday. There is a reason you are so much younger than Alan. Your father respected your mother and never tried to force her. When she was ready, she came to him and, then you happened." He put his arms around her and held her close. "It doesn't change things, Maggie. Alan is still your brother. He's the same person you grew up knowing and loving."

"And he's still dead," Maggie said, biting her lip. "It was so senseless, Marc. This wouldn't have happened, if Patrick and Jack weren't so greedy. Grandfather provided for all of his grandchildren in his will. Patrick was the only one left out. Jack could have gotten his share and supported his father very comfortably for the rest of their natural lives. If Powell could prove his parentage, he would have gotten the money, too. Now he's going to prison."

"Hatred can cloud the judgment of even the wisest of men, little one," Marc replied. Maggie nodded, cradling her sore arm to her side. Marc wanted to offer her comfort, but he knew her well enough to know that she wasn't ready yet.

Instead, he said, "The announcement of Alan's demise might have been a bit premature. Alan is alive."

"What? Are you kidding?"

Marc shook his head, looking to Vince for aid, but Vince was standing by the window, staring at the same skyline Maggie had been studying so intently just a while before. "Dale

brought him to the ranch after he was shot. Martha took care of him. She has a nursing degree, you know.”

“You lied to me?” Maggie looked at Marc. “You called me personally and told me he had been shot, and was dead. You didn’t have someone else do it, you did it yourself.” The tears welled up in her eyes. “How could you do that? You, of all people.” She turned her back on him, as the tears started down her cheeks. She blinked hard to keep them back, but it was no use. The one person she trusted, more than any other, had betrayed her. Marc wasn’t sure how to proceed. He loved Maggie like a daughter and had assumed the news would seem a little less harsh, coming from him. He took a hesitant step toward her, but paused, unsure of what to do. Maggie stood facing away from him for more than a minute, then she spun around and practically leapt into his arms, sobbing. He held her while she cried, stroking her hair and talking softly to her, explaining why he’d chosen to lie to her, and apologizing for it.

After several minutes of crying, Maggie managed to bring herself under control. She tried to wipe the mascara from her eyes as she turned away from Marc. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her, with a smile. She wiped her eyes and moved to Vince’s side. “That’s what you’ve been were hiding from me, right?” Maggie put a hand on Vince’s elbow. “How long have you known?”

“Dale told me, the next morning. That’s why I didn’t go to the funeral. I knew the casket was empty and I was afraid wouldn’t be able to pull it off.”

“I understand,” she smiled at Vince, then turned back to Marc. “I’m a terrible actress. You do remember my one attempt at stardom?”

"The infamous first grade play," Marc said, with a nod.

"I forgot my lines, stared at the audience like a puppet, then I fell off the stage," Maggie laughed at the memory. "Broken arm number three."

"Three?" Vince asked.

"The first two were horse-related injuries," she admitted.

"I told you those things are dangerous," Vince muttered.

Maggie laughed. "Not if you mount them correctly, and don't try to gallop them when they aren't completely saddle-broke." Vince still looked skeptical.

Marc hugged Maggie tightly and kissed the top of her head, then released her. He walked to the door, but turned back and, after a moment of hesitation, he asked, "Is there any truth to what Powell said, Maggie?"

"What?"

"Were you in the bed?"

"Marc," Maggie began, closing her eyes for a moment. "How do I explain this?"

"I suppose you could say, get out of my life," Marc suggested. "But I'd rather have the truth."

"I can't say butt out," she shook her head. "You'll think I've done something wrong. I don't believe sleeping with Vince is wrong." She could feel Vince looking at her and she hurried on. "But we haven't, Marc. The first night I slept in the bed and Vince slept on the couch. The next night I insisted we trade because I could see he was uncomfortable. After some little neighborhood kid tried to break in, I didn't feel safe out here. I slept next to him, but nothing

happened." She reached up and caressed her uncle's cheek. "Okay? Trust me to do the right thing."

"It's not you I don't trust, little one," he glanced at Vince and added, "It's not you either, Sergeant, I just don't want Maggie to get hurt. She's the only child I'll ever have." He smiled at Maggie. "Even though Martha has finally agreed to marry me, we found out six years ago she can't have children. You'll still be my little girl, right?"

Maggie nodded, hugging Marc tightly. "Always, Pop."

"She won't be hurt, sir," Vince said. "I respect Maggie. That's why nothing has happened."

Maggie suddenly realized what Marc had said. She jumped up and down, squealing like a little girl on Christmas. "You and Martha are getting married? When did this happen?" She was again hugging the older man; this time, in happiness.

"While you were in the hospital. I went home, fired her, then proposed, one last time. She finally said yes." Maggie hugged and kissed him, then released him and returned to Vince's side.

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Marc left and Maggie went to the bedroom, getting out bandages and tape. "I could use some help, Vince," she called. "My arms don't bend in the right direction to do this alone." He followed her to the bedroom, but when she started untucking her sweater from her jeans, revealing her smooth, tanned stomach, he backed away.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake!" she exclaimed. "We're both adults!" She struggled with the sweater until she got it over her head. She stood in front of Vince, but he wouldn't touch her. He simply looked at her shapely body, clad only in jeans and no bra. She waited, but he didn't offer assistance. She gave up and removed the blood-soaked bandage from the front of her shoulder. She poured peroxide on a gauze pad and tried to clean away the drying blood. Vince finally took it away from her and cleaned the wound, then re-banded it. His hands felt big and awkward as he checked the stitches to be sure none of them had broken or torn free. While he worked, he fought the urge to take her into his arms and pull her perfect, nearly naked body to him.

He carefully bandaged her shoulder front and back, then handed Maggie her sweater. "Here," he said gruffly. "Get dressed before someone shows up."

"But you've been a perfect gentleman," she pointed out, as she discarded the bloody

sweater he gave her and reached for a blouse out of the open suitcase on the bed. "Too perfect, if you ask me." Her bare breast brushed the back of his hand as she reached past him, and he pulled her to him. He lifted her off her feet and kissed her, his lips pressing against hers almost painfully. When he released her and put her on her feet, his hand strayed to her breast, as if it had a mind of its own. He caressed her for a moment. Realizing what he was doing, he pulled away as if she'd slapped him. He left the room without a word.

Maggie stared after him and, as the door closed behind him, she muttered, under her breath, "Damn! I almost had him, too!" She pulled the shirt on and buttoned it, then threw the rest of her things into the suitcase and slammed the lid. She walked into the living room a minute later carrying the suitcase. Vince took it away from her, setting it on the floor by the front door.

He wouldn't look at her, as he said, "Maggie, I . . ."

"Don't apologize, Vince. If I'd minded having you touch me, I'd have slapped your face, days ago. It's been quite a while and . . . and I really want to. I want to sleep with you. I've been telling you that for days."

She moved into his arms, but he stood still, his arms stiffly around her waist. Finally, she moved away from him and sat on the couch.

There was a knock on the door. Vince looked up to find his children standing in the open doorway. Aimee looked nervously at the splintered doorframe and the damaged door. Vince hurriedly assured them everything was fine—the man who had broken the door was in custody. "I know we were told not to come around here right now, Dad," Tony began, "But Aimee has something she needs to discuss with you."

"What is it, honey?" Aimee looked at her father and, although she liked Maggie, it bothered her, just a little, to see another woman in his apartment. She knew she would get used to it; it would just take a while. "Well, what's up?"

"Dad, I called my roommate, a while ago. I got a letter from Mom."

"So?" Vince's tone was harsh. "What did she want?"

"She wants to come here for Thanksgiving. She also wants us to come to Paris for Christmas. She'll wire when to pick her up."

"We'll wire first," Vince said, darkly. "Tell her she can't come. I don't want her to think she can just waltz in and out of your life whenever it suits her. She wasn't around when you kids needed her. She can't just show up now that the hard part of raising you is over."

"But Dad. . ." Aimee protested.

"But nothing," Vince growled. "Where was she when you both had the chicken pox, the mumps, and the measles? Where was she when Tony broke his arm falling out of that fort you kids built in the tree? Where was she when you graduated from kindergarten, grade school, junior high and high school? Where will she be when you make that Valedictory speech at Harvard? She wasn't there, and she won't be there, unless it suits her. She missed your first date, your first high heels, your prom dress. . ., "

Aimee didn't say anything. The tears started as she ran out of the room and down the stairs. Tony looked at his father in disgust. "How could you say those things? It's been really hard on her all these years. I mean, Grandma tried. I know you did, too, but it's just not the same thing as having your mother around. She's had it lots harder than me, because she's a girl," Tony turned

away, but said, over his shoulder, "You're going to lose her, Dad. Unless you let Mom back into her life."

"What about you?" Vince asked quietly. "Am I going to lose you, too?"

"No," Tony shook his head. "But I'm not scared of you. I've been seeing Mom for years. Whenever she came to town you always forbade us to see her, but I went anyway. Aimee came with me sometimes. She felt guilty going against your orders. She usually stayed home and only talked to Mom on the phone. That was all the disobedience she could muster."

Tony started out the door after his sister, but Vince put a hand on his shoulder and he stopped. Maggie slipped out the door and down the stairs. "Is Aimee scared of me, son? I never intended for that to happen."

"Only when it comes to Mom. You get so angry if someone even mentions her name."

Vince nodded, then put his arm around his son's shoulders. "Let's go find your sister and tell her to find out when Mom's plane is coming in." Tony grinned and followed his father out the door. They found the girls on the front steps, where Aimee was crying on Maggie's shoulder. The latter was waiting, her arms around the other girl. She knew Aimee would talk when she was ready. "Aimee, honey?" Vince squatted behind his daughter. "I'm sorry. I've been a pig-headed bully and I apologize. I love you. If you want your mother here for Thanksgiving, then we'll have her here," he winked at Tony and added, "But, remember, we've already agreed to spend the day with the Fitzgeralds. That means your mother will have to deal with Maggie and . . ." he paused, then looked away. "As much as I loved her once, I don't feel that way anymore. She won't be able to compete."

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"She doesn't want you back, Daddy. She just wants to spend a holiday with us. This will be the first time in nearly twenty years we'll all four be at the same table. Or in the same house, for that matter."

Vince pulled his daughter into his arms and hugged her tightly. They walked back up the stairs, arms still around each other. Tony followed, but Maggie lingered on the sidewalk. She was enjoying the fresh air, even though it was very cold. She saw Dale Riker sitting in a car at the curb, so she walked over and knocked on the window. "Hey, pal. How's tricks?"

"Are you supposed to be down here, hon? The old man will have kittens when he realizes you didn't come back up."

"We'll see how much he worries about me then, won't we?"

Dale grinned, leaning across the seat to open the door. "Get in," he suggested. "It's cold out there."

"You're going to lecture me too, aren't you?" she said, as she pulled the door shut. "It wasn't my idea to be here and no, we haven't had sex, but it could happen at any time. Happy?"

Dale looked embarrassed, turning toward the window. "I was going to ask if he's bored you to death, yet. His women don't give him a very high rating in the interesting department."

Maggie giggled and patted Dale's hand. "I'm sorry. Everyone around has been lecturing me like I'm some fifteen year old kid who doesn't know enough to keep her thighs together."

"Do you?" Dale asked, with a grin. "Rumor has it, you've experienced some trouble in that area."

She nodded, but added, with a wink, "That doesn't mean I'm not going to sleep with him,

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Dale. He turns my knees to jelly, just by smiling at me."

"Then I say go for it," Dale said. "That's the way a man is supposed to affect his woman. And you are old enough to decide for yourself."

"Does Corrine go weak when you walk in?"

"She says I can still turn her head."

"Good. You two are really right for each other." She glanced toward the stairs, but they were empty. "Does Cory know? That you aren't his father, I mean."

"I am his father, Maggie. The only one he'll ever have."

"The best one he could have, I'd say. He's so much like you, it's scary." Dale grinned and Maggie leaned over to kiss his cheek, then got out of the car. "I'm surprised Vince hasn't come looking for me," she said. "Maybe he isn't as crazy about me as I thought."

"He's been watching from the doorway for five minutes, hon," Dale pointed to Vince, just inside the door. "His kids left and he's been right there. Always the protective bulldog."

Maggie blew Dale a kiss and walked over to Vince, hooking her arm through his. "Let's go upstairs and pack. I want you to take me home, so we can have a fire," she suggested. Vince walked over to Dale and they spoke for a minute, then Dale nodded and pulled away from the curb. Vince took Maggie's hand and they walked up the stairs together. She had most of her things together, so it only took a minute to gather the rest.

Vince put on his jacket and picked up the suitcase. Maggie picked up her jacket and followed him to the door. Vince managed to return the door to its hinges, but the lock refused to catch. He decided it didn't really matter. He had nothing worth stealing, anyway. If someone

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needed his things that badly, he guessed he was wrong to keep them under lock and key. He grinned, realizing he, a vice cop, was rationalizing junkies stealing to feed a habit.

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When they arrived at Maggie's apartment, they walked up to the third floor with their arms around each other, stopping on each landing for a kiss. Maggie knew she was completely in love.

Vince insisted Maggie sit on the couch while he started a fire. He got a bottle of wine and glasses from the kitchen. She put pillows from the couch on the floor and she down, as he poured wine. It was a little early for alcohol, but he decided that, for once, he wasn't going to be so stuffy. He sat down beside her and she leaned against his chest, taking one of the wine glasses from him.

"Your family knows about all the men, right?"

"Alan and Marc do. I don't know about Mother and Daddy. Why?"

"Alan had a little warning for me when he came by the other night." She looked up at him questioningly. "There was no kid playing with the lock. Alan was checking up on you." Vince pulled her close. "He said if all I wanted was your body, I should be truthful, because you could handle it. He said if I led you to believe I loved you so you'd sleep with me, then left you at that point, he would kill me. He said you deserve better." He kissed the top of her head, enjoying the

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feel of her in his arms. "And he's right. That's one reason I want to wait, baby. I want you to know how much I love you, before we make a serious commitment. Okay? I do love you, and I desperately want to be naked with you. Just not yet."

A knock on the door interrupted them. Vince looked at his watch. "That will be Alan." He stood up and looked back at her.

Maggie was sitting on the floor when Alan entered the apartment, followed by Marc. Her arms were folded across her chest and her legs were stretched out in front of her, crossed at the ankles. Marc looked at Alan, over his shoulder. "Uh, oh," he said. "She's mad. I suggest you deal with this one."

"Maggie, I'm sorry I couldn't tell you, but I . . ."

"You didn't trust me, right? Thanks. That's a real vote of confidence coming from my own brother." She put a hand on his chest and pushed him away from her. Alan looked at Marc over his shoulder. He could see the pain in her eyes and he knew he was the cause.

"I'm sorry, Maggie. I had to do it. I had to know who all the players were, and the only way to do it, was to let it play out."

"My kids think they'll never see you again. Nikki hasn't slept in three weeks." Maggie still had her arms crossed over her chest, but Alan could see the tear forming in the corner of her eye.

Alan moved to her, squatting in front of her. "I'm sorry, Maggie. Where is Nikki? I'll tell her myself. I'll even get tickets for wrestling tomorrow night. We'll go. Just her and me, like always."

"She's in Arizona with Dana. After Jack threatened the entire family, we thought it best to

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get them away from him. If he couldn't find them, he couldn't kill them, right? I wanted them to be safe, even if the rest of us weren't."

"Makes sense," Alan sat down beside her and took her small hand in his. She still stared into space, looking away from him. "Jack threatened you at the mini-mart, but I didn't really believe he'd go through with it."

"He didn't shoot me. Powell did," Maggie explained. "Did you know he's related to us?"

"Not until Marc told me about his confession," Alan squeezed her fingers. "I don't care what Patrick said about being my father, either. He isn't. Dad is. He always has been and he always will be. Okay?"

"I thought it was weird Powell coming to your funeral. I didn't know him, but he did introduce himself. I assumed you had befriended him, since he looked like no one paid any attention to him, at all. He was watching me all funny, and he kept patting his pocket like he'd forgotten his keys. Maybe he had a gun then, and was hoping to get a shot at me. I don't know." Maggie finally squeezed her brother's fingers to let him know she wasn't really angry with him. "I missed you." She put her arms around his neck and squeezed him. "You were at the rodeo, weren't you?"

"It was a risk, but I had to see you ride. You were spot on, as usual." Maggie blushed. "I would have paid big money to see Vince on a horse. Too bad Powell screwed that up." Vince made a face, but Alan only grinned.

"Have you seen Mother yet? Does she know you're not moldering and frozen in the cold, dark ground?"

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"We're on our way there next."

"So go," she suggested. "I need to wash my hair. I'm going to try and take a shower. I must be pretty rank."

"I have water, soap and a shower," Vince replied. "Why should you be so disgusting?"

"Because it's hard to take a shower with a bullet hole in a shoulder. Especially when you're left handed and the injury was to the left shoulder. I haven't had a real shower since before the rodeo on Saturday."

"God!" Alan exclaimed. "I'm supposed to be dead, but I'd wager a guess I smell better than you do." He stood up and moved toward the door. Maggie got to her feet and followed him.

"Go home, Alan. Leave me alone." She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek, then pushed him toward the door. The moment the door closed, Maggie pushed Vince onto the couch. She sat in his lap kissing him until he pushed her away.

"I can't do this," he insisted. "I promised Alan I wouldn't. I won't break that promise."

"That's not what you told me," she said. "In your own words, you said you promised not to lead me on."

She stood up and moved toward the bedroom. "I'm going to take that shower now." She said. "I'll be a while, unless you'd like to help me wash my hair."

"Wouldn't I need to be in the shower with you, for that?"

"Probably. Don't think you can handle it?"

"No."

She shrugged, with a sweet smile. "Okay," she said, then disappeared down the hall,

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calling back that he should call Gene and invite him to join them for dinner, since Dana was still out of town. Vince reached for the phone. He called Gene, but he declined, saying he needed to clean up a little before his wife returned and shot him for making a mess in her spotless kitchen. Vince then called the estate and asked Aimee and Tony if they wanted to join them for dinner.

"I really need to study, Dad. I've got finals after the break. Tony was down at the stables watching a new foal enter the world. I could run down and ask him if he's interested."

"Naw," Vince said. "He's always been interested in animals, you know. He almost went to Veterinary school instead of Annapolis, but the thought of going to sea was just too strong."

"I know, Dad," Aimee said. "I miss him, too."

"Yeah." Vince said. "Well, I guess I'll see you later, okay, hon?"

"Tomorrow, for sure."

"Tomorrow. We'll have dinner."

"Terrific," Aimee blew a kiss into the phone and hung up. Vince felt guilty for spending so much time with Maggie instead of his kids during their visit. After a moment of thought, he picked up the phone and made two calls. When he hung up, he leaned back on the couch with his fingers laced behind his head.

When Maggie entered the room wearing a comfortable-looking terrycloth bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel, he was still reclining, with a pleased smile on his face. "What have you done now?"

"I'm just happy," he replied. "I have a beautiful woman. I have a job I love. My kids are happy, and I put a cop killer behind bars. What's not to be pleased about?"

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She pulled the towel off her head and began blotting her long hair. She felt the cat rubbing against her leg and she reached down absently, caressing his head. "I need to blow dry."

Maggie was a little surprised at herself. No man ever made her this comfortable. Here she was, wearing nothing but a bathrobe and a towel in her living room with a man she hadn't even slept with yet. She went back into the bedroom and closed the door. When she returned a few minutes later, still in her bathrobe and combing her long hair, he looked up at her. "I thought you were going to dry that mane. You're dripping on the carpet, girl." She shrugged, then sat on the arm of the couch beside him, still combing her hair. Her robe fell open, revealing her soft, deeply tanned leg. Vince took a deep breath, then looked away. Maggie arranged her robe to cover herself, with a slightly pained smile.

"You get ahold of Gene?"

"He's cleaning house. Something about messing up the kitchen."

"You want to grab a bite? Nothing fancy. A pizza, maybe?" He nodded and she stood up. "I haven't been home in a couple days, so I don't think there's anything here to fix."

"Pizza is good," he answered. She returned to the bedroom and he returned to his daydream. When she returned, in jeans and a red and white ski sweater, with cowboy boots, he looked up and smiled. "You ready?"

"When do I get my kids back?"

"Dana booked a nine a.m. flight tomorrow. They should be home before snack time."

They went out the door and she locked it behind them. When they reached ground level, she hooked her arm through his and dragged him to the car. "I think we're in for some heavy

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snow, before this cold snap is over. Just think, I left Detroit because of the snow and it followed me back to Atlanta."

"So this weather is your fault? We haven't had a real snow in years." Vince said. "Remind me to thank you, when I'm digging my car out, in the morning." She just smiled and shrugged.

When they arrived at her favorite pizza place, Gene was sitting at a table in the corner, staring at a menu. The waitress was standing next to him, pad in hand, but he didn't acknowledge her presence. Vince pushed Maggie into the seat across from Gene, then slid in next to her. "Hey, pal. I thought you were cleaning the kitchen."

Gene looked at him absently and Vince added, "How long you gonna make this poor girl wait for your order?"

"What?" Gene looked up, noticing them all for the first time. "Sorry. Thinking about Dana."

He smiled at the waitress and asked for another minute. She rolled her eyes, but moved away from the table. They studied the menus, then Vince signaled the waitress. She returned, but popped her gum annoyingly.

They talked about the case for a while, then Maggie asked about Dana and her ultrasound appointment the previous week. "It's a girl," Gene announced proudly. "And she's doing well. Both of my girls are doing well."

Maggie was glad, because her friends had lost five babies to miscarriage over the years. This was, according to Dana, their last attempt. She knew how badly the woman wanted a child. Seeing the look on Gene's face, she knew he wanted a child as badly as Dana did. She leaped up

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and hugged him, then sat next to Vince and held his hand.

Later, while Maggie was in the ladies room, Gene grilled Vince about their relationship.

"She is an amazing woman, Gene. What could she possibly want with me?"

"She has a thing for uniforms."

"I don't wear a uniform."

"Badges, then," Gene responded. "It's obvious you don't listen to locker room gossip, or you'd know half the men on the force have seen the inside of her bedroom."

What?" Vince looked at Gene incredulously. "She said she'd been with a few cops, but I had no idea there were so many."

"Why do you care, so long as you're one of them?" Gene asked, a bit sharply. "That's all you want from her, right? Sex?"

"How can you say that?" Vince asked. "I haven't slept with Maggie."

"Give me a break, Vince. I'm a man and, I'm a cop. I'm paid to be observant. Powell said he found her in your bed this morning. I know you didn't sleep on the couch, or you wouldn't have been able to stand up straight. The other morning you slumped, until after lunch. You insisted it was because you slept on the couch the night before."

Vince looked at the table for a long moment, then he said, quietly, "she slept with me in the bed, but I haven't touched her. Not really. We've kissed and. . . and this morning while I was helping her change her bandage, I touched her breast. I couldn't help it. She was naked from the waist up and..." He took a deep breath. "But we haven't had sex, Gene." He looked at the man beside him. "You and I have been partners for a long time, right?" Gene nodded. "Have I ever

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lied to you?" Gene shook his head. "And I'm not, now. I desperately want to be with her, but not yet. Not until I'm sure she believes I love her. I want to spend the rest of my life with her, but so far, all she's offering is her body."

"She offered?" Gene grinned and Vince nodded. "I understand all it takes is a kiss on the cheek and a 'do you wanna' and she's stripping out of her clothes for a race to the bedroom."

"She continues to offer. I'm afraid if I keep saying not yet, I'll lose the opportunity, but I want it to be special."

"Keep saying not yet, pal." Gene suggested. "I know she wants you. I don't expect her to give up until she's had you at least once. She usually doesn't, if she wants a guy bad enough."

"I'll keep that in mind," Vince stood up as Maggie returned to the table, and she was again amazed by his manners. It was one more thing she loved about him.

Chapter 40

Maggie unlocked the door and flipped on the light. As she stepped inside, she stopped short. Vince ran into her, nearly knocking her off her feet.

"Watch out, baby," he scolded, as he steadied himself against the wall and grabbed her shoulder to steady her, as well. "I could kill you, if we fell with you on the bottom." Maggie didn't speak and Vince followed her gaze. Dwight Powell was sitting in her living room on the love seat. He was staring at them, his pale blue eyes unblinking. He was holding a silver Derringer in his right hand. He was not waiting to kill Maggie, however. The small red hole in his temple and the crimson spray on the wall behind him, told the true story.

Maggie finally found her voice and asked, "Is he dead?" she whispered.

"I think so. Let me get past you and I'll find out for sure." He pushed her toward the bedroom and she went mechanically. Vince approached Powell. Maggie walked into the girls' bedroom and closed the door. She stood in the dark crying over the death of a man she didn't know, a man who'd twice tried to kill her. When she finally returned to the living room, the body was covered and the place was crawling with uniformed police officers. Vince walked over to her and showed her the gun Powell had been holding. "You ever see this before?"

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She nodded. "It's mine. Uncle Marc gave me the set when I moved to Detroit, because Erich was gone so much. He was scared for my life and wanted me to be able to protect myself."

"With this?" Vince laughed. "These little things don't do much damage."

"Powell is dead," Maggie retorted, turning away. Vince put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her close to him.

"I'm sorry, baby. You're right. But to be honest, unless it's fired point-blank, I doubt one of these things would kill someone. It might hurt like the devil, but it wouldn't be easy to kill someone with it."

"How did he find it? They were in the closet in a locked box. I didn't want the girls to get their hands on them by accident."

"We found it. He broke the lock." Vince pointed to the box on the table where the other Derringer was. Just then, Alan stepped through the door.

Most of the officers present turned to stare. The last they'd heard, Sergeant Fitzgerald was dead. They clustered around him, all firing questions at the same time. Everyone wanted to know the whole story. They had heard about Powell being arrested, but not the whole story. Alan ignored them, moving to Maggie's side. "Are you okay, munchkin?"

"I wasn't even here, Alan. I'm fine. And don't call me munchkin."

"You don't look fine," he said. "You look like hell."

"Thanks," she retorted. "For a dead guy, you're pretty cocky." Vince laughed and put an arm around her shoulders. "Come on, kiddo. You go get ready for bed. They're almost finished out here. I've already called a clean-up crew. This will be all gone before the girls get home." He

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led her down the hall and opened her bedroom door. She turned on the light, looking around cautiously as if she expected to find another body. She went into the bathroom and washed the mascara off her face, then brushed her hair and slipped into her nightgown and robe. The room was cold, so she turned up the heat on the waterbed before she left, hoping it would make the bed toasty when she crawled into it. She returned to the living room and realized everyone but Vince was gone. The body had finally been taken out, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Vince was sitting on the couch and she moved into his arms, avoiding looking at the love seat beside them. "Are you leaving me, too?"

Vince shook his head. "Alan and I talked about it. Since Powell obviously found a way out of the city jail, we figure Jack Fitzgerald might, too. I'm not taking the chance he'll come after you, again." He looked at her in the doorway. "I'll be there in a minute," he said. "I need to make a couple phone calls, first."

"Is anything going to happen, when you join me?" she asked. Vince shrugged and she moved toward the bedroom.

"I don't know," he admitted. "We'll have to wait and see." He reached for the phone and she closed the door. She threw her bathrobe on the bed and crawled under the blankets, snuggling into the warm comforter. When Vince entered the dark room half an hour later, he spoke quietly. "Maggie? Honey, are you awake?"

She sat up and flipped on the light. "Yeah. Come on." She patted the bed beside her and Vince sat down, balancing awkwardly on the wooden edge of the bed. "Join me."

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, honey."

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"Why not? Don't you want to?" She stood up and moved into his arms. "I want you, lover. There isn't a man on this planet I ever thought would make me feel the way I felt the first time I met Erich." She bit her lip. "Vince, you make me weak in the knees, just by entering a room. I love you. More than I ever loved anyone before."

"Including Erich?"

"Yes." She was playing with the fabric of her gown and the tears started down her cheeks. "He isn't dead, Vince. He lives in Atlantic City with a couple of prostitutes." She choked back a sob. "Alan sends him a check three times a year, so he'll stay away from me!"

"You know?" Vince looked surprised. "Alan told me, but I had no idea you were aware of it."

Maggie smiled through her tears. "I took Alan's tax papers to our accountant last year, when I dropped off mine. I dropped the file with his cancelled checks. While I was picking them up, I found some of the checks. I went through Alan's address file and found out where he was living. I contacted him a few months ago."

"Why would you do that?"

"I don't know. I guess I wanted to know why he lied to me. He said he loved me and I was the only woman he'd ever been with. I discovered right away he was lying about that. He knew too much, you know?" Vince nodded, holding her hand. "Anyway, I told him I wouldn't say anything to Alan, if he'd sign some papers for me."

"What sort of papers?" Vince asked, as he lifted her off her feet, to kiss her.

She smiled through her tears. "Custody of our children. I know Daddy and Alan had the

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marriage annulled, but I had no protection if he decided he wanted to take the girls from me. If he thought about it, he probably would try, so Daddy would continue supporting them. He'd get the money to spend on drugs and women. My dear, sweet little babies would be raised in squalor by his whores. I won't allow that."

"Do you actually think a judge would give him custody? I mean, you can afford the better lawyers, right? He's a junkie and drug dealer."

"Suppose he only managed to get visitation? Would you want my babies in that situation? Children get killed all the time during drug and prostitution wars, right?"

"Did he sign the papers?" Vince asked, as he put her back on her feet and began to kiss her neck, fondling her breast through her gown, sending shivers up her spine.

"For a price. I guess he thought giving up his babies was worth a few bucks, even though he hasn't seen them in years."

"How much do you send him?"

"Twenty-five hundred a month. I don't care what he does with it, so long as he stays away from me and my kids."

"Where do you get the money?"

"From Daddy. I told him they'd raised the girls' tuition again," Maggie laughed. "He probably thinks I'm buying more clothes I don't need. He didn't question it, so I never offered another explanation."

Chapter 41

Vince's caresses lessened and she sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at him.

"What's wrong? You seem a bit . . . I don't know. Maybe annoyed."

"Why did you lie to me?"

"What? I've never lied to you."

"At the rodeo. About the horse. You made such a big deal about me riding with you, and your poor old horse who would never throw me off wasn't even there. The Chief told me there were no horses in his stable gentle enough to allow a beginner to ride them. Were you going to sneak some crazy wild stallion under me? The one Marc says no one but you rides?"

She smiled and pulled him close for a kiss. "I didn't lie to you. I was going to put you on the gentlest horse in the stable. Lady Violet, Uncle Marc's horse. He can't face the fact that she's getting on in years. He never thinks about her as old and gentle."

"A former rodeo horse?"

"Lady Vi produced winners but never was one herself. Besides, she's older than Morning Star. She can barely trot, let alone gallop off with you." She pressed her body close to his. "I would never put you on Diablo or Prince. They're definitely too much horse for a beginner."

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Vince smiled, then slipped his arms around her waist and laid his head on her bare breasts. "Make love to me, baby. You are the last woman I ever want to be with."

"Is that a compliment?" she teased, as she pushed him backward onto the bed and unbuttoned his slacks. "Some people say that when the person in question it totally undesirable."

"It's a compliment, lover," he said, as his lips left her neck and moved toward her breast. "I . . . Maggie, I want to ask you something."

"What?" She pressed close to him, enjoying the feel of his caresses.

"Marry me? Be my wife? I never really asked you," he said. "I have to make it official." He struggled off the bed, then dropped to one knee and took her left hand in his.

"Well then, an official question is on the floor," she stated. "And the official answer is yes. Now get off your knees and make love to me," she smiled. "Unless you can think of something fun to do while you're down there."

"Next time," Vince grinned, then pulled her close, kissing her hungrily. "Right now, I don't want to be kinky. I just want to love you."

They lay together for quite some time, kissing, touching and getting to know each other's bodies. Maggie loved the feel of his rippling muscles under his strong hands. The silky smoothness of her skin excited him in a way he hadn't experienced in years. After a while, though, she tensed up and he asked, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, biting her lip. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"Yeah, sure," he said. "You're upset."

"I have to know something." She wouldn't meet his eyes. Instead, she stared at a spot in

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the center of his massive chest. "What is it you love about me?"

"What?"

"Why do you love me?"

"You're beautiful, sensitive, smart, exciting. . ." She looked up at him. "You want more?"

She nodded. "You told me I make your knees weak by coming into the room, right? I feel the same way about you. I want to be with you. I want to love you, protect you, sleep with you, grow old with you."

"What about money?"

"What about it? I haven't got any."

"But I do. Does it factor into how you feel about me? When you were considering getting involved with me, did you ever think about the money and how it can affect things?"

He looked thoughtful, then he nodded, slowly. "Yeah," he admitted. "I thought about it a lot." She started to pull away, but he held her close. "I almost walked away. How can I compete with your family? They give you everything, but I haven't got a penny to my name. You saw my place. That's it. That's me. All I have goes to keep Aimee in law school."

"So my having money was nearly a reason not to get together with me?"

"I'm not Erich, honey. I don't want your money. I want your body." He grinned, then pulled her close and kissed her passionately. "Spend your father's money. Make yourself and the girls happy and comfortable. Just let me be a part of your life. That's all I ask." She pressed against him and returned his kiss.

"Do you want me to leave? Sleep on the couch? I will, if that's what you want."

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"No," she returned the kiss, pressing close to him. "I want you."

"That's what I was waiting to hear." He pulled her naked body to him, kissing her lips, her neck and her shoulders, his fingers tracing a pattern on the soft flesh of her back. His lips moved farther down, to her breasts. Maggie melted against him, but when he reached for the small package he'd placed on the table by her bed when he'd removed his slacks, she pulled away from him.

"Wait a minute," she protested. "What is that?"

"Protection, Maggie."

"You don't trust me, Sarge? You think I have something fatal?"

"Of course not." He propped up on his elbows, looking into her face. "Are you telling me, with all the men you've been with the last three years, you haven't insisted on protection? How'd you keep from getting pregnant?"

"That's different," she insisted. "None of them meant anything to me. I love you."

"Maggie, we aren't married."

"I thought you'd want me to have your babies, Vince."

"I do," he agreed. "But not until after we're married. Honey, I love you. You don't want to be a widow before the wedding, do you? Alan might not say anything about our sleeping together, but I guarantee he'll kill me if I get you pregnant before marrying you."

Maggie closed her eyes and was quiet for a minute. Finally, she looked up at him and nodded. "I guess you're right." She moved back into his arms. "But the minute we're married, you get rid of those things, right? I don't believe in birth control. Not even that kind."

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"Right," he agreed, with a smile. He kissed her again and they spent the next two hours enjoying one another. Maggie gave herself to him willingly, almost wantonly, and he loved her with a passion he hadn't felt in a long time. Afterwards, she lay in his arms feeling very contented. "All you expected?"

"More," he said, stroking her bare shoulder. "Much more. I've never been with a woman who was so. . ."

"So easy? So willing? So free and lusty?" she teased.

"I've been with that type. You don't fit the bill." He shook his head. "So small. If you know what I mean."

"Was that bad? I've never been with a man as big as you either. I was kind of nervous about that. Dana told me it really hurt, the first few times with Gene. Until she got used to him," she smiled. "But I was worried about nothing."

"It wasn't bad at all, lover. It was maybe the best sex I've ever had." He kissed her forehead.

"Maybe?" she feigned a pout. "All I get is a maybe?"

"I'll need to experience you a few thousand more times before I can say for sure it's absolutely the very best. But I have to say you're in the top three."

"Whenever you're ready, love." Maggie pressed against him, but he shook his head.

"Not tonight," he said. "I'm tired. Being with you these last few nights has made it difficult to sleep." He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "Tonight, I'll sleep. I haven't been this relaxed, since I met you. Since the moment I saw you in that silk gown in the doorway, for

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sure." Maggie smiled and snuggled into his arms. "I love you, Vince."

She suddenly sat up. Vince sat up with her, looking at her in the moonlight. "What is it, honey?"

"Will the crime scene clean-up be done before the girls get home? I would hate to have my babies walk in and see that."

"Absolutely," he promised. "If I have to stand over them and get it done." He kissed her. "Are you going to be able to live here, knowing what happened?"

"Until we get married," she said. "Then we'll move somewhere more appropriate for a family."

"Whatever you want," he pulled her into his arms and she lay her head on his shoulder. "Good night, doll face."

She snuggled into his embrace and closed her eyes. Vince was asleep practically before they said good night, but she lay awake for a while, enjoying the feel of his body against hers.

Chapter 42

When Gene rang the doorbell, Vince struggled against sleep. He sat up in the tangle of bed sheets, looking around, disoriented. He tried to wake up, shaking his head several times to clear the fuzz. When he realized Maggie was no longer beside him, he got up and pulled on his slacks. Stumbling to the living room, he checked in the bathroom and the girls' room, but he couldn't find Maggie. He unlocked the door and Gene grinned at him. When he realized how Vince was dressed and there were no blankets on the couch, he asked, "What happened to that iron will?"

"Shut up," Vince growled. "Where would Maggie have gone, at this hour?"

"Don't know. Her car was gone, but I assumed she'd gone for breakfast, or something. Didn't she tell you she was leaving?"

Vince shook his head. "I woke up when you rang." He walked into the kitchen and pulled open the refrigerator. There wasn't anything there. "I guess you're right." He walked back to the bedroom. "I'm going to get dressed."

When more than an hour had passed and Maggie still hadn't shown up, Vince started getting worried. He dialed Alan's number, but hung up before he answered. "I don't want to worry

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her family, yet." He picked up his coat. "What kind of car does she drive? I'm going down to the car and broadcast the info. Maybe someone will spot her and just let me know where she is."

"It's a black Porsche. Late model, license—COWGURL." Gene picked up the phone. "I'm going to call Alan, anyway. I won't alarm the rest of the family, but he may know where to find her."

As Vince opened his car door, he saw Maggie pull in beside him. He walked over to her and opened her door, leaning in to kiss her. She accepted his peck on the cheek, then pushed past him. She opened the trunk and he noticed it was full of groceries in hot pink fabric bags. He remembered seeing them at the mall, from a high-priced store he couldn't afford to window shop. They were famous for putting all of their merchandise in these bags. The number of bags she had indicated frequent trips to the exclusive shop. He shook his head, knowing he was getting in deep with this one.

"The girls will be home tonight. There's nothing in the kitchen but wine and a week-old lasagna." She handed him a box of donuts from the top of one bag. "Here's your breakfast. Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Yeah." Vince grabbed all but one of the bags and headed up the stairs. Maggie lifted the other bag from the trunk and followed him up the stairs. "I could get used to this. I usually have to make three or four trips to get all this up." He grinned and shrugged. When they entered the apartment, Gene told Alan she was home, then hung up.

The phone rang and Maggie scooped it up. "Hello, Doris." Maggie smiled over her shoulder at Vince as he entered the apartment, brushing the snow out of his hair. Turning away

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so she couldn't see the face that drove her so crazy, she asked, "What's up?"

"Marilyn is having her baby. Alex is in class until three. Could you work? I know you aren't really ready to come back, but I need you."

"Now is fine, Doris. I'll be there in time to open."

"Thank you, Maggie." They hung up and Maggie walked toward the kitchen to put away the groceries. She and Vince put things away together, and she was a little frightened at how natural it felt, side by side with him.

"I could get used to this," she whispered. "Both of us, working together."

He leaned close and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll carry your groceries any time," he promised. "Just agree to feed me now and then."

"Anytime you want," she agreed. "Any appetite that needs feeding." She kissed him, then went to the bedroom to get dressed. Vince followed her, opening the door just as she lifted the gray sweatshirt over her head.

"We both have to work, so I can't stay and enjoy the view, but I wanted to say good bye before I leave." She moved easily into his arms and his hands moved freely over her nearly naked body. "God!" he whispered against her hair. "You feel so good!"

"I have to get dressed, Vince. I promised Doris I'd be there in an hour. That gives me about five minutes to get dressed and twenty to drive."

He kissed her, then pulled reluctantly away.

"You are coming by tonight, aren't you?" Maggie asked. "The girls will be home. They'll love to see you, again."

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"Maybe I shouldn't."

"Why? They go to bed at eight-thirty and they never wake up until I call them. You can stay over and they'll never have a clue. Besides, they're six. What are they going to think? Besides we're having a sleep over. They think those are cool and Nikki keeps telling Mommy to get a good friend, one who stays more than one night."

"Then I'll see you for dinner. You a good cook?"

"Gourmet. I learned at that fancy boarding school Mother insisted I attend. I would have been happier here at St. Michael's. But then I never would have met Erich and I wouldn't have my beautiful babies. So, maybe Mother was right," she smiled. "Don't tell her I said that."

"Your secret is safe with me," Vince leaned close to her, kissing her cheek. Vince walked to the door, looking back at her once more. She was in the closet choosing an outfit when he pulled open the door and left.

When she got to work, Doris asked her how she was, wondering about the dark circles under her eyes. Maggie waved her off, with a vague explanation about Dwight Powell and a long night.

The day passed quickly, and soon Maggie was on her way home with groceries on the seat beside her. Although she had visited the store that morning, she'd promised Vince dinner and she wasn't prepared to feed a man. She had gotten mostly cereal, fish sticks and hot dogs, the girls' favorite foods. She planned to create a special dinner for Vince and for the girls' homecoming, so she shopped again. When she got upstairs, there was a message from Vince, saying that he was going to be late and not to hold dinner. As she was putting the groceries away,

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the phone rang again.

"Hey, honey," Vince said. "I hope you aren't upset about dinner."

"I just spent an hour shopping for groceries and another twenty minutes trying to pick out a special dessert, but no, I'm not the least upset," she laughed. "At least I won't be, if you'll be here in time to take me to bed."

"I forgot, but I promised to take my kids to dinner, tonight," he explained. "I should be there before midnight."

"I'll wait up," she pouted out loud for a minute, then she asked, "What's your favorite color?"

"Grey," he answered. "Why?"

"I had planned to put on something tempting for you, but gray isn't sexy."

"Oh," he thought about it for a minute. "In that case, how 'bout red? I'll bet you look great in it, with that gorgeous black hair."

"I guess. So we've settled on red?" She was going through her closet as they talked and she pulled out a see-through red lace gown. She threw it on the bed then walked back to the kitchen to start dinner for the girls. "You have to eat these left-overs tomorrow night." She warned.

"You've got a deal." Vince hung up, then leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. "Lace, I'll bet," he mumbled. "Red lace. I think I'll like that."

Chapter 43

Maggie was sitting in front of the fireplace reading a book when someone knocked on the door. She stood up and hurried to answer it, arranging her robe so she didn't expose herself in case it wasn't Vince. When she opened it, the smile faded. She looked at the tall, stern-faced woman on her porch. "May I help you?"

"Maggie Fitzgerald?" She asked.

"Yes. Who are you?" The woman didn't answer. Instead, she turned and motioned to someone at the foot of the stairs. Maggie watched the young, athletic man climb the stairs carrying an attractive, blonde woman with ease. He put her on the couch and turned to leave.

"I will return when I am called," he said, in clipped English, heavily laced with a French accent. Maggie was still standing in the doorway as he went out. He took the knob out of her hand and pulled the door shut, leaving the two women alone.

Maggie finally walked to the living room and sat in the armchair. "Do I know you?"

"No," the woman smiled pleasantly. "I simply wanted to meet you. You're sleeping with my husband."

"Now hold on," Maggie was back on her feet. "I don't know who you are or who your

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husband is, but I swear, he didn't. . . "

"Relax, dear. My name is Felicia Chesterfield and I am. . ."

"Felicia? You're Vince's ex-wife."

"That's right. My daughter told me of your relationship and I wanted to meet you before I leave."

"You're supposed to be here for Thanksgiving. That's in only three days. You couldn't wait until then?"

"I will not be here for Thanksgiving. Vince and I haven't been in the same room for nearly twenty years. It's worked this long. Why should we change the arrangement? I just wanted to meet you. To tell you he is a wonderful man and I hope you will be very happy together."

"I think that would be a bad idea," Maggie said, as she sat back down. "He hasn't worked through all his feelings for you. If he doesn't do that, we can't have anything together."

"I guess I don't understand. He's refused to let me see my children for twenty years. When I tried, he threatened them with losing allowance and other privileges. He certainly didn't want to see me himself."

"True," Maggie leaned close. "I don't think he's aware of this himself, but he wants to see you."

"Are you saying he still loves me? That he wants me back?" Felicia leaned forward, looking interested.

"No. What I'm saying is that he wants to see you, to be sure there are no more feelings.

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Don't you see? You just left, you didn't talk it out or give him the chance to make the decision with you. He's blamed himself all these years. That's why he hasn't allowed himself to get close to another woman. He needs to see you. To work it out in his head."

"How'd you get through the barrier he's built?" Felicia asked. Maggie smiled. After a minute, she stood up and opened her robe to reveal the short, red lace nightie. "He wanted my body. I didn't give it right away, and he realized there was more between us than just a strong desire for passionate sex. We got emotionally involved before we got sexually involved and we both know it's really love." Maggie purposely left out the fact that she offered Vince her body on nearly every occasion they were together, because she wanted the woman to know how genuine her relationship with Vince was.

"He wouldn't be here right now, would he? Considering the way you're dressed, I assume it's possible."

"No. He was having dinner with the kids, but he's supposed to be here later. I'm waiting up for him. He promised to be here by midnight. Why?"

"I'm leaving in the morning to spend Thanksgiving with my brother in Texas. I should see him before I go."

"Let me page him," Maggie suggested. "I've been bugging him to get a cellular phone, but I haven't broken him down yet. Maybe I'll just get him one for Christmas. I know he'll carry it, if I do." She crossed to the phone, retying her robe. Dialing Vince's pager number, she left a voice message: "It's Maggie. Something important has come up. Please come to my place as soon as possible." She hung up, then turned back to Felicia. "I'll be in the bedroom."

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Maggie stood just inside the half-closed door, waiting for Vince. She knew he'd show up soon—just how soon, was the question.

Chapter 44

"Man, I hate this!" Vince muttered. "I've got to get her off the third floor. By the time I get up here, I'm too tired to do anything." He tapped on the door, but it wasn't closed all the way and it opened as he knocked.

"Maggie?" Vince looked instantly on the defensive, as if he could barely resist the urge to pull his weapon before he stepped inside. "Honey, are you okay?" Maggie smiled to herself when she heard his voice booming through the wall. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, when he saw Felicia sitting on the couch.

"Nice to see you, too," Felicia smiled and his heart leaped. She was just as beautiful as when they'd fallen in love.

"Where's Maggie?"

"She left us alone, for a minute. I think she wanted to give us time to talk."

"We can do that Thursday."

"No, we can't. I'm going to Texas to spend the holiday with my brother." She reached for his hand and he moved to her side. "Vince, I came here to meet your woman and tell her to be good to you. She tells me you suddenly have some unresolved feelings about our divorce, so I

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thought we should get together.”

“Feelings?” Vince tried to sound puzzled, but he knew she could see through him. He finally shrugged, but nodded.

“There is something I need to tell you.” She hesitated, then smiled. “Vince, I’m getting married at Christmas. Claude is a Texas oilman and he really loves me. He doesn’t care about my injury. He just loves me for me. Wild sex and dancing ’til dawn aren’t as important as companionship, at our age. That’s good, because I’m not as active as I used to be.”

“What injury?” Vince asked, a confused expression on his face.

“No one told you?” He shook his head. “I was in a car accident two years after our divorce. I broke my back. I can’t walk. I’ve been in a wheelchair since then. I suppose the children never told you because they would have to admit they’d seen me and you would have punished them.”

Vince looked embarrassed about his behavior toward his children and his ex. Felicia simply smiled. “That’s why I’ve always had someone living with me. Those men were my nurses. I’m a little big for the average woman to haul around.”

“Any of them your lovers?”

“You always were direct, weren’t you?” Vince shrugged, but nodded. “None. I always hire homosexuals because I know they won’t try anything. I haven’t had sex since the last time you and I were together,” she smiled. “At first I wasn’t interested. Then I had the accident and the men weren’t interested.”

“You’re finished?”

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"I didn't say that, Vince. I'm sure I'm functional. But how many men do you know who want a woman who can't move her legs or hips? I'd just lie there like a dead stump. That's real romantic."

"I actually can think of lots who like that type, but I can't see you with any of them. They're all sickos who don't care if the woman responds or not," he chuckled, then leaned over to kiss her cheek. "You know—that was like kissing my sister. I guess I am over you. For real."

"That's good. Your new lady friend deserves all of you. Just remember how fast you showed up when she called, Vince. If that had been me, I'd have waited hours just for a return phone call. You never came running home to me like that."

"I'm older now, Felicia. I need Maggie in my life. I love her more than anything. More even than I ever loved you." He looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but it's true."

Felicia smiled. "It's okay. I understand. Claude is the love of my life, too. We were too young to be married. Way too young to be parents. She took several deep breaths, then she asked, "Could the kids come to Europe for Christmas? I'd love them to attend my wedding."

"Depends on the date. We may have to split them. Maggie and I are getting married around Christmas, too. What date have you chosen?"

"The twenty-eighth. You?"

"I'm not sure. She seemed to be leaning toward the twentieth, when we spoke this morning."

"You haven't set a date yet, but you know it's going to be within the next few weeks? I didn't think rich girls did it that way."

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"She wants to tie me down. And I'm ready to be tied down by her."

Felicia smiled. "I'm glad you're happy, Vince. I still care about you. But Claude is definitely the man I want to grow old with," she patted his hand. "Would you call my nurse? He'll come up for me."

"That's your limo down there? This oilman takes good care of you, huh? "

"Yes. Claude spoils me."

"And you don't sleep with him?"

"Not yet," she smiled. "I'm saving something for the wedding night. Something I didn't do, last time."

Vince smiled. "Where did Maggie go?"

"To the bedroom."

"I'll take you down to the car," Vince said. He picked her up easily, then started down the stairs. He could feel someone watching and he glanced over his shoulder in time to catch Maggie looking through the curtain. He didn't say anything, but carried Felicia to her car.

Chapter 45

Vince stood in the rain until the limousine disappeared from view, then he turned to go back upstairs. Maggie was standing on the curb, looking at him anxiously. She had her robe pulled tightly around her, the tips of her bare toes just peeking from beneath it. "Relax, honey. It's really over between Felicia and me. I was just saying good-bye to a closed chapter of my life." He put an arm around Maggie's shoulders, and they walked back to her apartment together. "Can I stay tonight?" he asked, quietly. "Or are you worried about what your neighbors will think?"

"You've practically moved in, Vince. Besides, my neighbors are probably thrilled to see the same man leaving my apartment every morning. I know they all were sure my ways would rub off on their kids or something."

Vince grinned and pulled her close. "So let's go get naked."

But when they got upstairs, Nikki was standing in the living room clutching her small blue teddy bear. She'd had another bad dream and was crying. Maggie tried to gather her into her arms, but she ran to Vince, her arms raised. He lifted her off her feet and she laid her head on his shoulder. He carried her into the bedroom, but Franki was also awake, and she leaped into his arms as well. They had already had a tearful homecoming with their mother, then their

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grandparents, and finally Alan. When Nikki first saw Alan, she screamed, thinking he was a ghost. It took a while to get her calmed down. Then she wouldn't talk to him. She was angry that he'd lied to her. It took him pulling tickets to the weekend wrestling extravaganza out of his pocket to get him back in her good graces. After that, she sat on his lap for an hour, telling him all about what he'd missed while he was away.

After the initial hugs, Franki was reserved with Vince, but Nikki took his hand and pulled him into the room, talking about her visit to Arizona and spending time with Dana's parents. "They had horses and we got to ride everyday," she said. "Don't you just love horses? I love them and I want to own a hundred someday." Vince looked at Maggie over the little girl's blonde head and noticed her trying to control her laughter. He scowled at her, then grinned, knowing she would tease him about his fear forever.

When the girls finally went to bed, Vince and Maggie sat together on the couch, just holding hands, not feeling the need to talk.

Maggie stood up, suddenly. "I had planned a romantic evening in front of the fireplace. Wait right here." Maggie went into the kitchen and gathered up the wine glasses and bottle she had put in to chill, then she pulled the cheese and crackers out of the refrigerator. When she returned to the living room, Vince had stoked up the fire, pulled all the pillows off the sofa and gotten a couple heavy quilts out of the hall closet. Maggie felt her heart leap when he turned around. He'd removed his shirt and the sight of his massive chest always gave her chills.

She took off her robe, sat down on the blankets and smiled up at him. He sat beside her and handed her the glasses, while he worked the cork out of the bottle. "Red lace," he said, with a

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smile. "Like I thought," he winked at her. "And like I hoped. You look incredible." He poured them each a glass, then put the bottle behind him on the floor. "To us," he said, with a smile. They touched their glasses together, then took a sip, their eyes never leaving each other. Vince leaned close and kissed her on the lips, one hand slipping around her while the other clasped her lace covered breast. He put an arm around her shoulders and she sat looking into the fireplace, mesmerized by the dancing flames. "Seriously heavy foreplay first," he said, leaning over to move her onto the blanket. He lay down beside her and began removing her gown, kissing her creamy skin as he moved down her body. "Then we'll have sex," he promised.

"Then we'll move to the bed and start over?" she said, with a smile.

"Deal," he agreed, as his lips closed around her right nipple and she reached for his zipper. Maggie fell asleep in his arms later, feeling like she had finally done something right.

Chapter 46

Maggie expected Thanksgiving to be a quiet affair. Alan was not there. Dana had gone into labor early that morning. When Gene called Maggie, she was leaving her house. "Dana chose today," he said. "You may get that birthday present after all."

"You gonna name her after me?" she teased.

"We already decided," he said. "I already told you it's a girl. Lily Jean. After you and, after me. If we ever stop being friends, which I doubt, I can always tell her I named her after my grandmother."

"Funny. You think I'd let you stop being my friend? I need you guys. Besides, you gave me blood, so I think we might be related or something. We have to stay involved in each other's lives."

"Well, Dana needs me right now so I gotta go. I'll call you later."

"We'll be at Silver Oaks until late, I'm sure. Daddy will forget my birthday until the last minute. He and Mother will probably insist I stay around for a small party they throw together."

"Don't blame your parents, Maggie. They're old. They've had a lot on their minds recently."

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"Yeah? That's their excuse for my whole life, Gene. They've always been busy. They've been forgetting since I was about six."

Maggie smiled at Vince, who had appeared in the doorway while she was on the phone.

"The girls are ready to go, honey," he whispered. "Franki insisted on going with me, so you get Nikki."

"Go on, then. I'll be down, in a minute. Tell Nikki to lock the doors. She'll be fine until I get there."

"I don't know where your parents live, remember?"

"Right. Gene, I gotta go. Call us when my namesake is born, huh? We'll probably be at my parents' place." She hung up and moved into Vince's arms for a quick kiss. "You know what I'm thankful for this year?" she whispered. He shook his head. "You. And last night." She giggled. "That was the best loving yet."

"I thought I was wonderful every time," he said, with a feigned pout. She shook her head at his teasing. He kissed her forehead and propelled her toward the door. "Let's go. I'm hungry. And I haven't had nearly enough time with my kids. They both leave on Sunday to go back to school, and I feel like I haven't seen them, at all."

As Maggie gathered the last few items she was taking to the estate, Vince looked at her, puzzled. "Gene told me he was naming the baby Lily Jean."

"Yeah," Maggie agreed. "So?"

"So how is she your namesake?"

"I understand your confusion," she laughed, patting his cheek. "Lily is my middle name."

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Well, one of them. My complete name is Magdalena Cristiana Lily Fransiska.”

“Why do you need so many names?”

“Because I’m the only girl born this generation in my mother’s family. Everyone had an idea what I should be named, and no one would back down. There were family arguments, tears. Mother and Daddy decided to just give me all the names. I usually keep them to myself. But Dana is my best friend. We know all of each other’s secrets. And if Dana knows, Gene knows.”

“Makes sense.” Vince kissed her nose, then pushed her playfully out the door. “We’re going to be late.”

“Chill. My parents expect me to be late. Mother always tells me to be there an hour before she plans to have dinner ready, because then, I’ll be on time.”

“You better get over that, woman. I can’t be late. It gives me a rash.”

“You better get over that,” she responded, with a laugh, as she locked the door and headed down the stairs. Nikki looked out the front window of the car at her mother. Seeing lipstick on Vince’s cheek, she asked, “Were you guys kissing up there while you left us sitting in the car? It’s cold down here, Mama.”

“Sorry, little lady.” Vince got behind the wheel and Franki waved at her mother.

In the car, Maggie patted Nikki’s mittened hand and started the engine. “Let’s go see Grandpa. He’s waiting for you.”

“Did he buy you a birthday cake, Mom?”

“I doubt it,” Maggie muttered. “I don’t really expect a card, until later.”

“Why do they forget? I mean, you never forget our birthday, Mama.”

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"I'm not as busy as they are, honey." Maggie headed for her parents' home, checking to be sure Vince was following her. She had often wondered the same thing when she was young. She waited by the mailbox all day, hoping the mailman realized he'd forgotten a special package. When it got dark, she'd go inside and mope through dinner, not enjoying Martha's chocolate cake or any of the gifts Marc always had for her. She knew he put her parents name on them, because a package always arrived from Europe about a week late, with gifts and an apology for forgetting.

Maggie pulled into the driveway and parked behind Marc's car.

Aimee left the house and ran down the stairs. Taking her father by the hand, she pulled him aside. "You have to keep Maggie busy for a few minutes, Dad," she whispered. "Mrs. Fitzgerald expected Maggie to be late as usual. She's not used to you and your rigid schedule yet."

Vince protested. "I'm simply punctual."

"We're still decorating." Aimee announced. "Can you keep Maggie out of the house for a few minutes? I'll take the girls in."

"Maybe we can go see the horses," Vince responded.

"Good idea, Dad. We need half an hour, okay?" Aimee leaned close to kiss his cheek and whispered, "Because her parents have forgotten more birthdays than they've remembered, they want to make this one special."

"I'll do my best," Vince promised. He walked over to Maggie. "Honey, you want to introduce me to that special friend? I guess if we're getting married, I should get used to him, huh?"

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"Lady Satan isn't a him, Vince. But I'm glad you still want to meet her."

"I like ladies even better." He smiled at Aimee while the girls stood on the front step.

"You guys can manage without us, right?"

"We're helping Grandmother cook dinner," the girls chorused.

Aimee herded them up the stairs, and Vince and Maggie walked hand-in-hand to the stable. "Tell me about this horse's lineage," Vince began. "Is she a thoroughbred?"

"Yes. She's the incredible offspring of Diablo and Lady Violet. Marc found Morning Star at an auction. We don't know his family tree, but Marc has always recognized good horseflesh and we began right away to train him for the ring. He's a natural."

"I really hate horses, you know." He squeezed her hand. "I hope to get over my fear, but if I don't, please don't stop loving me."

"How could I, after last night?" she smiled. "Even if I stayed with you only for the sex, it would be a worthwhile relationship."

He put an arm around her shoulders and leaned over, for a kiss. "I love you to pieces, woman. Maybe I'll have to get used to horses, for you." They entered the stable together and Maggie ushered him around before they went to see the horses.

"Okay. Show me this horse before I lose my nerve."

Maggie led Vince into the main stable and introduced him to Morning Star, then took his hand, easing him to the end of the long row. "And this," she said, "is Lady Satan. She used to be the love of my life." She stroked the horse's satiny nose. "Then I met you."

After a moment of hesitation, Vince reached out and touched her. "She's softer than I

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thought. Almost as soft as you are."

"Yeah? Does that mean you're staying when we go home tonight?"

"Franki informed me on the way here how we're moving when we get married. That I even get to live in your room with you all the time. Did you tell her we were moving?"

"As a matter of fact, I spoke to Daddy. He's agreed to give us Grandfather's house if that's okay with you. We can hardly live at your place, and, well, my apartment really isn't large enough either."

"Has your dad ever refused to give you something you wanted?"

Maggie thought about it for a minute, then shook her head. "Nope. Sometimes it's nice to be a rich guy's daughter. But. . ." she paused.

"But what?" Vince actually stepped into the stall with Lady Satan. Surprised, Maggie winked at him, "Want to take a quick ride before dinner?"

"No way!" Vince stated, emphatically. "I'm not ready for that." He put a hand under her chin and lifted it so he could look at her. "You didn't answer my question, Maggie."

"Well, sometimes, I kind of resented my father's job. International travel taking him away from me on important days. He and Mother missed my graduation and my prom. Most years, I didn't even get a birthday card until a week or so later. There was always something more important: a banking conference in Europe, a skiing trip to Switzerland, anything. But they never missed an event of Alan's when he was growing up."

Vince frowned. "I've sensed a little resentment, but I didn't realize it went this deep. I promise, no matter what is going on, I will never miss any important event in our childrens'

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lives." He saw Maggie's eyes well up and he kissed her lightly on the lips. "Do you blame Alan for your being second in importance?"

"Alan never missed a birthday. When I fell off the stage in first grade, he was the one who picked me up. He held me in his lap all the way to the hospital while Marc drove. Alan was always there for me." She smiled. "I think he was trying to make up for our absent parents. He knew Marc was there, but he was always there, too."

"I'm glad you didn't lose him. I know you aren't ready for that."

"If he ever gets shot again, I'll do the killing myself," she said with a smile.

"When is your birthday, love?" Vince pulled her close. "I swear I'll never forget it. I've always been very good with dates."

She smiled, a little self-conscious. "Oh, that's right. You don't know. Actually, it's today. But don't worry about not having a card or anything. I'm not expecting a present from anyone except my girls. They never forget."

With a sly smile, Vince reached into his jacket. "I was going to give this to you tonight, snuggled in front of the fire or in bed, but. . ." He held a small box out to her. "Happy Birthday." It was covered in blue velvet. She took it cautiously, but opened the lid immediately. Nestled inside the white satin interior was a ring with a large, light blueish stone, an emerald cut, surrounded by tiny diamonds.

"Is it an aquamarine?" Maggie asked, as she slipped it on her finger. The ring was too big and turned upside down immediately. She turned it back and held it out in front of her so she could examine it.

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"It's a blue diamond," Vince replied excitedly. "My grandmother wore it for nearly fifty years. Mom had the setting redone after Grandma died, but it's exactly the same as before."

"It's beautiful, Vince. I already love it!" Maggie pulled Vince down to her and softly kissed his lips just as Lady Satan nuzzled his neck and Vince jumped away, making Maggie giggle. "Lady's just trying to get a kiss too," she explained. Maggie stroked the horse and kissed Lady's satiny nose. "I'm getting cold, Vince. Let's go back to the house."

"Now?" he glanced at his watch.

Vince still hesitated. When Maggie looked back at him, he reached out to stroke the horse, again. "What's going on? I'll bet Aimee told you to keep me out of the house, right?" He shrugged. "Why?"

"I'm not allowed to tell, honey, and we need to wait another ten minutes. What would you like to do?"

"Slip into the tack room where it's warmer and make out," she whispered, putting her arms around his waist. "Just to give you a preview of what's to come later tonight when we get home."

Vince followed Maggie willingly. When they entered the tack room, she playfully pushed him down on a pile of old feed sacks and crawled into his arms and kissed him, as she unbuttoned his shirt to caress his broad chest.

Vince unfastened her shirt and slipped her bra up, to caress her breasts. "This is a preview I can live with," he whispered against her ear. "I love you so much, Maggie."

"I love you, too, Vince," she replied, snuggling up under his neck. "Since Alan isn't here,

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we'll be expected to stay and make nice for a while, but I do want to meet your family sometime.

As soon as I can. Are they in town at all for the holiday?"

"They all live here, honey. I grew up about twenty blocks from here. We can go by any time. Just say the word."

"Maybe over the weekend," Maggie suggested. "We should have invited them today. I just never thought about it."

"That's okay. Mom generally has all the grandkids in for dinner. Mine are the oldest, so the group tends to get a bit rowdy at times. I'm sure she won't even miss us, this year."

"Well, I guess you know better than I do."

Maggie kissed him again, rubbing her breasts across his chest.

"You're cruel, woman," he complained. "Now I have a serious hard on. How am I supposed to go into the house like this?"

"You aren't," she said, as she unzipped his fly. "I can take care of it for you." She slipped her hand into his pants and started caressing him. "But you'll owe me."

"Deal," he agreed, closing his eyes and leaning back against the feed sacks. "Oh, baby!" he moaned, as she intensified her stroking.

In a few minutes, they were both fully dressed and walking toward the house hand in hand. Maggie went immediately to the bathroom and washed her hands, as Vince went into the living room.

Chapter 47

"Mom! What are you doing here?"

"Your daughter invited me. It seems your sisters and their families all decided to have a quiet simple dinner at home this year, while I was going to be sitting home alone." She smiled at her son. "How is it possible your daughter knows this, and you don't? I even had to find out from your sister you have a new girlfriend. One serious enough you have a change of address."

Vince looked guilty. "I'm sorry, Mom. It just happened so fast. Then, she was injured at the rodeo and I was protecting her, then we arrested the shooter and..." before he finished he leaned over and hugged his mother tightly. "I was going to bring her by this weekend to meet you." He looked around. "Where is Aimee? She invites you, then she leaves you here sitting all alone? How is that better than home?"

"Aimee's downstairs with two beautiful little girls."

"Nikki and Franki. Mom, I am sorry."

"If I can meet your new woman, you'll be forgiven."

"She's in the bathroom. We aren't just seeing each other, Mom. I gave her Grandma's ring, a few minutes ago."

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"And those beautiful little girls belong to her?" Vince nodded.

Dorothy Howard stood up and wiped the lipstick off her son's cheek. "I sure hope you love her. I'd hate for you to get into another bad relationship."

"Now, Mom. My divorce was as much my fault as Felicia's. But. . ." he put an arm around Maggie as she entered the room. "I got married too young, Mom. Like you tried to tell us. I'm much older and more mature now. I need this little filly in my life."

"So now I'm a horse?" Maggie laughed. "It thought you hated horses. But that's okay, Vince. I've been called worse." She kissed his cheek.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Howard. I hope you're comfortable?"

"Could anyone not be comfortable on such a lovely sofa?"

Maggie felt Mrs. Howard studying her. She knew as soon as she left the room, Vince would get the third degree about her. Mostly about her age, she assumed.

Vince could see his mother's hesitation, and he thought he knew why. "It's her age, isn't it?" he asked, leaning close to his mother.

"What?" Mrs. Howard looked away from her son and shook her head. "No. I've seen her before."

"Where?"

"At the restaurant. You know the hostess sees all, son."

"Mom," Vince hesitated. "I'm not going to lie to you. She's been around. I don't care. She needs me, and I need her. She is the most amazing woman. You're gonna love her." He couldn't believe that, at his age, his mother could still reduce him to a whimpering little boy. "I

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don't care what you've seen. Just give her a chance. I can't marry her without your blessing, Mom. Please. Just give her a chance."

Dorothy Howard nodded hesitantly.

When Maggie entered the hallway, the doorbell rang. She pulled the door open, to discover a very tall black man and an attractive blonde woman on the porch. "May I help you?"

"Is Aimee Howard here?" the man asked. "We gave the address to the cabby and he dropped us here. I hope it's the right place. This isn't quite what Aimee described as her father's usual haunts."

"This is the right place. Come on in." Maggie stepped backward and called to Aimee.

"My name is Ron Carver. This is Tina, Tony's girlfriend. I guess he's here too?"

"Tony, could you come here for a minute?" Maggie called over her shoulder.

As Aimee entered the hall, she squealed like a school girl and launched herself into the man's arms. "Ron!" She kissed him, then asked, "What are you doing here? I thought you were working."

"I had someone cover for me. When your dad called the other day, I had to come. He said you were a little depressed."

Vince entered the hallway and Aimee put an arm around his waist.

"Thanks, Daddy." She turned back to Ron. "I want you to meet someone. This is Ron Carver. The most wonderful man in the world next to you." The men shook hands. Vince greeted Tina with a hug and a kiss on the forehead. They had met before, so getting her to come for a visit hadn't been difficult. Tony was in the basement rec room with the twins, so it took a few

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minutes to get him up the stairs. When he saw Tina, however, he grinned and pulled her close for a kiss.

Maggie headed to the kitchen, and Vince took his mother back to the living room so the kids could be alone with their dates.

Chapter 48

Just as they were sitting down for dinner, the phone rang. "That might be Gene." Maggie said, jumping to her feet. "I'll get it." She hurried to the foyer and snatched up the receiver.

"Hello, Gene?"

"No, munchkin, it's me," Alan spoke softly. "Gene asked me to call. Dana is going into surgery, about now."

"What's wrong?" she asked, feeling a lump forming in her stomach. "Is she going to be okay? What about the baby? They've waited so long, tried so hard."

"Calm down, munchkin," Alan said. "The baby hasn't turned, so they have to do a C-section. Everything else is fine. The baby is strong and healthy. We'll call you later, okay?"

"Please call and let us know when she's born."

"What makes you think it's a she?"

"Gene told me. They're naming her after me."

"Oh?" Alan asked.

"Yeah. I was the one who encouraged them when everyone else told them it was impossible. Whenever one of them was ready to give up, I encourage them with a pep talk. So,

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they're naming her after me. Lily Jean."

"That's pretty," Alan observed. "And it even sounds a little Indian."

"Yep. Well, gotta go. You think we should take them a plate, later? And we can bring you one at the station, if you want. Since you drew the short straw and got stuck with duty."

"I'd appreciate that. Make sure you bring extra rolls, too. Mom's rolls are to die for."

"I know. I'll see you later, big brother. Love ya."

Maggie went back to the table and told everyone the news. When Sean gave the blessing, he said a special prayer for the baby, hoping she and her mother would come through the surgery all right.

Chapter 49

After dinner, Angelica told Maggie to take her new into the family room, while she and Aimee took care of the dishes. Maggie tried to protest, but was dragged there anyway. Nikki stood in front of the closed door until everyone was gathered, then she flung the door open. Maggie gasped in surprise. The entire room was decorated with candles, balloons and streamers. "So this is why we went to the stable?" She looked up at Vince. "You didn't really want to meet my horse, did you?"

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Vince grinned. "I do what I'm told," he explained.

"This is wonderful," Maggie responded, and Aimee entered the room carrying a huge birthday cake, followed by Angelica with ice cream.

"After all that food, we're supposed to eat cake?" Vince said, a little skeptical.

"I can. Are you too full?" Maggie asked. "We can save you a piece for later."

The phone rang and Sean picked it up. After a minute, he turned to face the room. "Lily Jean Littlewolf presented herself about ten minutes ago. She weighs exactly six pounds and she's eighteen inches long. All healthy and ready for the world." Everyone cheered and Sean turned back to the phone. "We're all very happy for you, Gene. I'm sure you heard." He hung up and

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turned to Maggie. "For your birthday, I'm turning over to you Father's house, the furnishings, and," walking over to a wall safe behind a painting of an English hunting scene, "Grandma's bracelet. I promised if you could hold onto the cocktail ring for two years, you could have it, remember?"

She nodded, barely able to breathe. "Daddy, I have to confess something." Maggie clenched her fists and closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she said, "I lost the ring, Daddy. A couple weeks ago. I'm sorry."

Vince reached into the pocket of his jacket. "Could this be it?" he asked. "On the day of Alan's funeral, you dropped it, and I sort of stepped on it. I brought it today—almost forgot." He looked guilty. "The mood you were in that night, I figured you would kill me when you saw it was bent, so I had it fixed. I picked it up yesterday, but I forgot during the rush of getting the girls out of the house, this morning."

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"Fantastic," Maggie replied, as she took the ring from him.

Maggie wouldn't meet her father's eyes while he fastened the bracelet around her slender wrist.

"I had a safety chain put on this," he said. "My mother misplaced it more than once, so I know you probably will." He smiled and bent down to kiss her cheek. "It's all right," he whispered. "I knew you'd lose it at least once."

Dorothy Howard busied herself helping with the cake and the dishes as Aimee served the ice cream.

Everyone had cake and ice cream, then Angelica gave Maggie several more gifts,

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including a red leather outfit from Alan. The girls were very proud of their present, a huge, overly decorated yellow pin, covered with sunflowers and daisies.

"I have just the blouse to wear with this, Maggie responded." She smiled at Nikki, who was holding her breath, waiting for her mother's reaction.

Vince rolled his eyes, but his mother nudged him, and he took the pin from Maggie. "It's unique, girls," he said, bringing a beaming smile to Franki's face. Then he handed it back to Maggie and leaned close, to whisper, "Do Dad's get gifts like this, too? Aimee had great taste, even when she was four."

"Ask Daddy about the tie," she suggested. "It was the ugliest thing I've ever seen, but when I was six, I thought it was wonderful. He still wears it sometimes just to bug me. Only around the house, of course."

"Did he ever wear it out?"

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"To Church on Father's Day, the day I gave it to him. Nearly every man in the place had on some ugly tie, socks or gaudy tie-tac so he didn't feel out of place."

"We didn't forget this year, Maggie. Aren't you proud of us?" Sean Fitzgerald pronounced.

"Very. I love you so much, Daddy." She hugged him and thanked him for the outpouring of gifts—the bracelet, the house and furniture and, especially, for not forgetting her birthday.

"Now, I want to go see Dana and the baby before we go home," she told Vince.

Meanwhile, Nikki walked up to her and tugged on her sleeve. She looked down and asked, "What is it, honey?"

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"Can we stay here tonight? Aimee said she and Tony are leaving in a couple days and Tony says they're going to be our brother and sister when you guys get married. We want to stay here with them."

Maggie glanced at her mother, who nodded. "You know they're always welcome to stay, dear. Why don't you go on to the hospital and see Dana, then finish your birthday alone with Vince? That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"It sure would, Mother," Maggie agreed. It was then that Maggie showed her mother the ring Vince presented to her in the stable and reported she and Vince were getting married on December twentieth.

"But, that is not enough time, Maggie dear," Angelica protested.

Maggie gave her mother a pleading look, knowing her mother would go along. "Maybe Mrs. Howard would like to help, too." Dorothy nodded, pleased to be included. After spending the afternoon with the young woman and her family, Vince's mother could see that Maggie and her son were meant to be together.

Maggie went to the kitchen and prepared plates for Gene, Dana and Alan, then got her coat from the closet.

Vince suggested she leave her car for the night. "We'll pick it up tomorrow, since we aren't taking the girls home tonight."

Chapter 50

At the hospital, they spent several minutes admiring the beautiful black-haired, black-eyed baby in the nursery. Then they went to Dana's room. "Thanks for the birthday present," Maggie said, as they entered the room. "She's beautiful," Maggie said, handing Gene two of the plates she'd brought.

"Your mother should cook all the time," Gene said. "Her meals are to die for."

"We need to move on and take Alan his dinner, since he drew desk duty tonight."

"He didn't draw it. He volunteered," Gene said, earning a scowl from Vince.

"You have a really big mouth, partner," Vince told him.

"Why? What does he mean? Alan said he drew duty, tonight."

"I drew duty today," Vince said. "Alan wanted us to be able to have the holiday together, so he offered to take it off my hands." He kissed her forehead. "I hope that's okay."

"You bet. I so wanted to be with you, baby," she said. "I've spent every Thanksgiving of my life with Alan. This year, I wanted to spend it with you."

"Next time he draws short straw, I owe him a return favor."

"I understand." Maggie kissed Gene, then Dana, congratulating them again on their

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beautiful baby. "Call when you go home, so I can hold your little angel." She kissed Dana on the cheek again, then hugged and kissed Gene. "Congratulations, guys. She was well worth all the trouble and the wait, wasn't she?" They both nodded.

Vince followed Maggie to the elevator. "Let's go see Alan so we can get home to bed," Maggie replied, sounding exhausted. She leaned against Vince in the elevator.

When they reached the station, it was quieter than Maggie had ever seen it. Alan sat at the front desk in his uniform, feet on the desk, waiting for a phone to ring or something to happen. He had a book open on his knees and just reading the title made Maggie shudder. She hoped he didn't offer it to her, because it was another one she knew she would not understand. She was afraid he would someday realize that she never read any of the books he gave her, and she knew it would hurt his feelings.

She and Alan only talked for a few minutes, then Maggie hugged and kissed her brother, thanking him for everything.

Alan glared at Vince, but he raised a hand. "I didn't tell her," he defended himself. "Gene did."

"Why didn't you want me to know? Brother dear, it was a sweet thing to do."

"A girl needs to be with her guy on her birthday, munchkin."

"And I so appreciate it," she said. "What's a great gift. Even better than the gorgeous skirt and jacket outfit you sent to Mother's."

"You said you really like it, right?" He looked at the book in his lap. "I started to get you a copy of this. but decided to give you something you'd use."

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She looked at him guiltily. "How long have you known?" she asked, embarrassed. "That I don't read them, I mean."

"Since the very first one," he said. "I tucked something special inside the front cover. Since I've never seen you wear it, I know you never opened the book."

She looked at her hands. "I'm not as smart as you, Alan. I tried to read some of them, but they just confuse me. I'm sorry if it hurt your feelings, when you went to the trouble of getting them for me."

"Dad never reads them, either," Alan said, "but they look impressive on the shelf, all leather-bound and intellectual." He grinned, and she knew he wasn't angry or hurt.

Vince picked up the book and looked at the title. "I read this one. It's pretty good."

Maggie exhaled loudly. "Great. Another man in my life who reads stuff I can't understand. Now I really feel stupid."

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"Never, ever say that in my presence, woman," Vince scolded.

Alan interjected, "I can't take pictures, munchkin. You know people don't have heads when I get my hands on a camera. We all have our strengths."

"I guess," was her only reply.

Alan reached for the covered dishes Maggie'd brought. "What do you have me?"

"Some of everything," she replied, "with extra of the mashed potatoes and gravy because I knew they're your favorite. And half a dozen of those rolls you like."

Alan groaned. "Do you know how long I'll have to work out to get rid of those?"

"You said to bring you extra," she said, "and you always eat at least four." She smiled.

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“And I included three pieces of pie, all different kinds. And I left the Jell-o thing at the house for Daddy, because he’s the only one who likes that stuff.”

“He and your girls,” Alan replied.

“Don’t remind me,” she shuddered. “They’re always asking me to make it, but it’s just too nasty. I always send them to Grandmother’s for it.”

“You’re my favorite sister, you know that?”

“How would you know?” she retorted. “You never met the rest of them.”

“I’m going on what I’ve seen,” he said. “The two brothers I’ve been in contact with recently aren’t really my cup of tea. Especially since they tried to kill us both, remember?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We’re gonna get out of here. The girls stayed with Mother, and Vince and I can have a fire and enjoy some grown-up time.”

“Too much information, little sister,” Alan said, with a grin. She stuck her tongue out at him, as Vince put an arm around her shoulders to guide her to the door.

Chapter 51

When they got home, Vince lit a fire while Maggie walked to the bookcase and took out a book. She opened the front cover. She shook her head as she lifted the delicate necklace from between the pages. She put the book back on the shelf and fastened the tiny gold crucifix around her neck. Vince walked up behind her and turned her to face him. As he looked down at the necklace, he lifted her chin. "Don't feel guilty. He knew you weren't reading them, but he continued giving them because he loves you. He enjoys them, and hoped you would, too." She nodded. Vince lifted the book from the shelf and looked at the title. "I haven't read this one."

"It's yours," she said. "with my compliments." She pulled out of his arms and moved toward the bedroom.

Vince set out a bottle of wine while she changed. When he returned to the living room, she was sitting on the floor with her robe untied revealing her small sexy body.

Vince shook his head. "You are brazen," he said, moving to her side. "First, you slip your hand into my slacks in the stable. Now you're lying here naked."

"No one is here but us, mister. I can cover up, if it bothers you." She started to pull the robe together.

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"Don't you dare," he said, drawing her close. She unzipped his pants and began caressing him, but he shook his head. "Wait a minute. Let's relax together for a while, and enjoy each other's company. Recently, our whole relationship has been sexual. As wonderful as that is, I want more."

"Okay, baby. What do you want?"

"To dream a little," he kissed her neck and whispered, "About the future. I'm not against more kids, but if you aren't interested, I'll understand."

"I love children, Vince. I used to say I wanted a dozen." He looked horrified, "But," she smiled. "I don't think that way any more. Let's just wait and see, okay?"

"With everything given to you tonight, we have lots of dreaming to do—and planning. I only hope I'm up for it all."

"I think you are, lover. You only need be here with me and I'll be happy. I'm safe and comfortable with you. I can't imagine life without you."

"Good. I'll have to stick around to satisfy your personal needs. Finally you'll have a guy as sexually needy as you are." Maggie made a face at him. Vince grinned. "Besides, your little girls will need a daddy to keep the boys at bay. Those beauties will be breaking hearts in a couple years."

"They already do. There are boys at school who are crazy about them."

"Then I'm staying, for sure."

"Of course, the one boy who is totally nuts about Nikki is the one boy she says she hates the most."

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"Who's that? I've never heard her mention any boys."

"Well, he's a little older."

"How much older? Do I need to have a talk with him?"

"He's nine, Vince. And I think his daddy has him pretty well in check."

"Who is he?"

"Cory Riker. He's crazy about Nikki, but he won't admit it. Probably because she says she hates him."

"He's a good looking boy. Did you know he wants to be a cop?"

"So that means he's the one, in your book, right? Maybe we should just get them betrothed, right now."

"Works for me," Vince said, with a grin. "What about Nikki? How does she feel about him?"

"She adores him, but it would never do for him to find out, too soon. She likes to keep him on a pretty short leash, without him really being aware of it. He hangs around her like an ant drawn to honey, even though she ignores him. She loves the situation, and he wouldn't have it any other way."

"I've known women like that," Vince said. "Crazy how men lap it up."

"Yep. Franki likes all the boys. She'll do anything to please."

"So I guess she's truly her mom's daughter, huh?"

"You want to go home?" Maggie asked. "Keep that up, and you'll be sleeping alone."

Vince grinned, but promised to be good.

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Lying on the floor in front of the fireplace, not talking, they were enjoying being together.

Vince smiled at Maggie and asked, "What's your favorite color?"

"Green. Why? You going to buy me a sweater?"

"I think it's important that we know these things about each other. I told you mine, remember?"

"Who has gray for a favorite color? That's insane."

He shrugged. "What about food? I know you like gourmet cooking, but what is your favorite?"

"Promise you won't laugh?" she asked. He nodded, and she said, "Hotdogs. Don't tell my mother." He smiled and promised. "What about you?"

"Steak and baked potato," he replied. "And, as we discussed earlier, I enjoy reading. I like pretty much every type of writing, but biographies are my favorite."

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"I'm a fiction gal, all the way," she said, snuggling deeper into his arms. "Stephen Crane and William Faulkner are probably my favorites."

"Faulkner?" he shuddered. "Too deep for me. Maybe you are the smart one in this relationship."

"Don't make fun of me," she said.

"What about movies?" he asked. "No chick flicks, please."

"I like movies where things explode," she said. "Lots of gunfire. Or a good comedy."

"If I watch comedy, I want it to be a bad one. You know, one of those really cheesy, silly teen slasher flicks?" he admitted. "I find them highly amusing. When I need to just forget about

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the world for a couple of hours, I rent a cheesy teen slasher movie, because they are so predictable, they make me laugh.”

“Slasher films make you laugh,” she repeated. “What a sad state of affairs, when cops find slasher films amusing.”

“Oh, come on,” he said. “Don’t you? I mean, all my friends who went into that park are dead, so I’m going to follow them, instead of kicking off the six-inch heel hooker shoes and running like hell. You don’t find that mildly amusing?”

She tried to keep a straight face, but it was impossible. “Actually, Alan and I have laughed ourselves sick over some of those movies,” she said. “He says some of the same things you do. And he can always tell which kids will get it next.”

“And—as far as the horses are concerned. I’m going to do my damndest to include them as part of my life from now on—even if I don’t ever ride one.”

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“Oh, Vince, I don’t really care if you ever ride. Just allow me my one hobby. Remember—girls ride horses, too.”

Vince pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “You and I are meant to be together,” he said. “All this proves it.”

They soon went to bed. Maggie snuggled against Vince’s broad back, feeling she was in the safest place on Earth. She had never been this happy. She wasn’t sure she deserved to be, but she intended to enjoy it.