



Falcon's Bend Case Files, Volume III

Excerpts

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First Sight

"He who seeks vengeance must dig two graves: one for his enemy and one for himself." ~*Chinese Proverb*

"You had me at hello." ~Dorothy Boyd from *Jerry Maguire*

Chapter One

*Friday, September 21
1:05 p.m.*

"We were just kids when we married. And I was at the hospital for so long every day, every night, I couldn't have a life."

Though it'd been almost a week since the spontaneous conversation with his ex-wife, Michaela's words strolled through Chad Martin's mind often, like a jarring toothache, no matter what else he was doing. Each and every

time, he recalled his own unspoken response, too. *"So what's changed, Chael?"* They both lived in Falcon's Bend, Wisconsin, a small town that wasn't exactly a mecca for entertainment. Chad had grown up here and, following college, returned after he got married and they both got jobs in the community. He and Michaela had been divorced for almost seven and a half years now, yet she hadn't bothered to take any of the job offers he suspected she must have gotten from larger hospitals--ones with more advancement opportunities for a doctor with Michaela's single-minded focus.

They'd run into each other at the coffee shop on Saturday and ended up sitting together despite the awkwardness that tended to accompany their infrequent meetings. She'd made an uncomfortable comment on how good he looked, which made him cerebrally aware she was as attractive as he remembered her. He'd been wondering how to politely say he had papers to grade when she'd done a U-turn and started talking about, of all insanity, getting back together. She hadn't apologized for what happened to split them up, something he believed was entirely her fault. Their marriage had been rocky, underscored with extended periods of times when he was alone, getting infrequently, last-minute, harried, you-understand calls from his wife. She'd never apologized back then either. Their divorce had been hard on him. He'd gone through months of wondering what was happening to his life, and then he'd realized almost abruptly that he was relieved. Their marriage had been cold, distant, barely there considering the unbelievably long hours she worked.

Convenient for sex. That was the best I could say about our marriage. Even if she was never home, the few times she was I could count on getting laid. But, frankly, I'm in a good place right now. No, I don't date and I get lonely sometimes, and maybe that bothers me more lately because my friends ask me if I'm dating someone too much, but my work fulfills me. I love my job, love the kids that challenge and motivate me to do my darndest to make this a time in their lives that shapes who they are and where they're heading.

His desire to be a positive influence in the life of high school students was a big part of the reason he'd agreed to take on the Careers class while a fellow teacher went on maternity leave. He had the block open anyway and maybe it meant he had to do a lot more grading at home instead of during the free period until October, but this was worth any questionable sacrifice on his part. While most of the kids in his advanced mathematics classes were on the college track, he didn't share Mrs. Rusk's jaded attitude that the kids in her Careers class were destined for a future of manual labor. She claimed they used the period to catch up on sleep anyway. While he couldn't totally deny the assessment since Mrs. Rusk had left him in charge, he'd used the time to get to know the kids one on one, attempting to figure out their interests and encourage them to stretch themselves.

The very first Careers class he'd substituted, he'd walked through the

desks and woken up every kid slumped and only half-listening after lunch, saying, "Maybe you've learned otherwise from your parents or friend's parents, but life isn't about grinding through the days to make it to the weekend when you can blow your mind with alcohol or drugs, trying to forget your ordinary life. It's about finding out what *you* want, *enjoying* your life, *loving* your job. You've got the freedom to make choices about what's coming up next for you that don't mean you slide by, watching your own reality like you've got no say about where it's all going. It's about starting to build on your dreams, *now*, dreams that you can make reality if you've got enough determination. I'm here to help you do that. Every teacher and employee at this school is here for that purpose."

To that end, he'd gone off Mrs. Rusk's syllabus and contacted the parent of one of his more prodigious students, asking her to speak to his Careers class. Sixteen-year-old Laura Oligney's mom, Sloane, had been born blind, but she was an in-demand freelance computer programmer. With the technology coach and her tech team made up of students, Sloane had organized the school's LAN network.

Laura talked about her mother often. She was one of the few-as-to-be-otherwise-singular students who actually got along with her parent (according to Laura, her father had never been in the picture beyond the initial donation to her existence) and even claimed that she told her mother everything. Laura was the whole package--an eager, go-getter with equal amounts of charm and genius, highly regarded by both students and teachers--and she'd become Chad's unofficial teaching assistant within the first few weeks of the school year starting. She'd been the one to suggest to Chad that she privately tutor some of the students struggling to comprehend his lessons. Chad had been offering private tutoring sessions to all his students since he'd come to work at Falcon's Bend High School, but he couldn't deny some kids did seem to work better with fellow students, especially Laura with her outgoing, affable personality.

A few weeks before, Laura had come into his classroom while he was talking to Isabelle Granville, a senior who'd had a sports-related accident a few years before that resulted in permanent blindness. Isabelle had previously been ambitious, a good student with unequalled competitiveness. In the years since, Isabelle had withdrawn, all but given up on going to college, on having a real career, of ever leaving her parents' house. Since he'd taken over Mrs. Rusk's Careers class, Chad had been encouraging Isabelle not to give in to despair despite the obstacles, drawing out her interests and relentlessly trying to get her to believe her life hadn't ended when she lost her sight.

After Isabelle had left, agreeing to at least consider his perfectly realistic suggestions, Laura had urged him to contact her mother about speaking to his Careers class--specifically for Isabelle. She'd given him Sloane's email, and Chad had been excited because Isabelle had admitted to

enjoying all her computer classes since this year's tech team had installed text-to-speech programs on her school laptop.

Sloane had responded to his initial email with enthusiasm and they'd worked out a date. While email wasn't exactly a place to infer disposition, Chad had incongruously enjoyed the eager, informal back-and-forth, relaxed and fabulous correspondence they'd shared for the week they'd worked out details for the visit. Every response had him anxious and distracted until it arrived, and he'd derived almost as much pleasure crafting his own responses to her witty and captivating notes. He'd been sorry when there'd been nothing more to discuss once all was in place and the possibility of an email from Sloane was no longer forthcoming...until the one he'd been able to send earlier this week with a gentle reminder that'd felt more to Chad like a desperate plea for renewed attention than touching base.

This past weekend, he'd found himself smiling, goofy, considering all the "electronic conversations" they'd had. Unbelievable that he'd never actually met someone who occupied so many of his most pleasant thoughts since the very first time she'd emailed him back. He could barely wait to meet her for her Careers visit. Beyond that, it was still early in the school year and they'd yet to have a parent-teacher conference, but he'd realized how much he was looking forward to the first one in early November. Surely Sloane would come. Her daughter was one of the most popular, brightest students, and Sloane had already proven herself happy to get involved in Laura's school activities.

Feeling like his thoughts were inappropriate, Chad had forced himself to get out of the house on Saturday. He'd ended up at Java & Jazz, not a place he often visited after an unfortunate and surreal event that'd happened only a few months after his divorce. Just his luck, he'd bumped into Michaela there and she'd sprung the let's-get-back-together trap on him literally out of nowhere. They hadn't seen each other in years. While he'd initially been flattered that she found him attractive enough to blurt out a crazy proposition he wasn't interested in, he'd only realized the source of his gratification after he'd (lied and) told her he'd think about it and fled the scene. In the relative safety of his car on the way home, he'd laughed his ass off--during which his face and neck became furnace conduits--when he wondered hopefully if Sloane would find him attractive.

I'm so rusty at physical attraction, it's hard to imagine I've ever had any relationships before, especially a lot of them. He'd gone from girlfriend to girlfriend as a popular, smart, athletic teenager; a party-crazed, intelligent-enough-to-get-bored-easily, (still) athletic college student; and, even after he'd settled down a little, he'd had no trouble attracting the opposite sex. But even he had to admit since he'd tied the knot and subsequently gotten divorced, he'd entered some bachelor's no-man's-land. That incident more than seven years ago, when he'd met a woman who could have easily become the love his life if not for the fact that she was

brutally murdered barely a day after their hook-up had scarred him in a way no one else had probably even noticed because he'd buried the trauma deep inside himself, far from the light of day. He rarely thought about anything but the reproductive biological imperative that surprisingly reared its head less frequently with each passing year.

Every day of this week had increased his awareness that he would soon meet the woman behind the email, the woman who'd mothered one of his favorite students. In the back of his mind, though, was Michaela's proposal and his inability to know what to even say to her. She'd texted him that morning, and he'd ignored that as well. *Maybe she just wants convenient sex. That was always good between us, regardless of the disappointing rest of our relationship. Maybe I should take what I can get, get laid by an attractive woman and call it even. It's been years since I've so much as kissed a woman. And it's not like we have to fall in love again, if we ever shared that once upon a time. So why doesn't that "free milk" interest me even remotely?*

Chad didn't experience so much as a twinge of victory that Michaela must be stunned at his silence. She'd always considered herself a catch, the kind of gorgeous woman any man would fall all over himself to have, even if just temporarily. That she'd had to text when he should have been jumping at her offer the second it was given would result in delayed punishment if he did choose to respond to her. From a strange sort of distance, he realized he had no intention of contacting her, not even to tell her he wasn't interested. He had zilch desire to hurt her, despite her cruel breakup more than seven years ago, and she'd undoubtedly be offended by anything he had to say in turning her down. Better to say nothing so she could preserve her dignity and find someone who could give her whatever she was looking for. Did she even know?

Isabelle Granville's name drew his attention from the other side of the teacher's lounge, where he'd come for a last cup of coffee during lunch period. He got up and moved over to the school nurse talking to the secretary.

"What's going on with Isabelle?" he asked after politely interrupting the two women.

"Oh, I sent her home last period," Charlotte said. "Fever. Must be coming down with something, poor thing."

Chad murmured something, went back to the chair he'd been sitting in, got his briefcase and coffee and left the room on autopilot. He navigated himself to the Careers classroom on the opposite side of the school from the classroom he'd taught math in since he'd started working there. He went back-and-forth in his mind on how to handle the news that Isabelle wouldn't be here for Careers today--the very day he'd most wanted her to be present. Should he email Sloane, try to reschedule? Would she even get the email in time? He didn't have her phone number. Trying to get it from Laura would

probably take too long.

A cursory glance at his ultra-geek calculator watch told him there was no time for anything. Sloane would already be on her way here. The bell would ring in less than ten minutes. Even though he'd been looking forward to meeting her and having her talk to his students, the one person who would benefit the most from her career advice was absent. Could he ask Laura to come in a second time? While her work was freelance, she was booked solid and she'd had to do some rearranging and hoop-jumping to come in for today's hour-and-eighteen-minute class. To ask her to do it again within the time he had until Mrs. Rusk returned from maternity leave would be stretching his luck.

Chad grimaced in frustration. If he left the situation to Mrs. Rusk, quite frankly he left the advantage to chance. While he wasn't one to speak ill of colleagues, he knew Rusk saw Careers class the same way the students did: A free, useless period for those who weren't on the college track and didn't have the ambition to do more than endure a bunch of random adults shuffling through to drone on about what they did for a living. Mrs. Rusk normally taught social studies but she'd agreed to also take on Careers long ago and no one could remember anyone else having ever taught it before her, despite that she was still young enough to have a baby and she was perfectly adequate at teaching her regular subject. She didn't care about the class any more than her students did...and it showed, or had until Chad had agreed a month ago to take it on temporarily.

Once inside the classroom, he quickly set up his laptop and emailed Sloane, not surprised when the minutes ticked by without a reply and students started to trickle in. Realizing he was just going to have to go through with this and appeal to Sloane's clear willingness to help out someone who faced similar obstacles she had herself, he got up and started mingling with the kids who entered the initially quiet classroom.

Chad considered it a victory that no one slouched in their desk from the time they sat down in it the way they had when he first started teaching the class. Even the kids who had no interest in the class, in learning period, and, quite frankly in being in school at all, seemed to be more willing to engage in semblances of conversation with him. The only one who resisted was Jeron Zabek, or JZ as he liked to be called (and Chad refused to), a senior who'd just barely gotten through to his last year of high school. At six-foot-one, the muscular eighteen-year-old already had a moustache and a police record for drugs, alcohol and vandalism. While his natural state was withdrawn and uncommunicative when not around his tough-guy-delinquent crowd, in the past few weeks, Chad had made some progress in getting him to open up.

For someone who was eight months from graduating, Jeron seemed to have no direction in his life, and, not surprisingly, Chad believed that to be a direct result of his upbringing. His parents had divorced in his single digits.

His dad was a deadbeat womanizer, and little more needed to be said on that. The mother had remarried after divorcing Jeron's father, had more children with the new husband who had about as much interest in Jeron as his own father appeared to. The times the school had tried to get hold of the biological father, he'd insisted Jeron's mom "took care of all that". Only if the school social worker insisted he come to the school to deal with Jeron would he appear. The man could be counted on not to say a single word the whole time he was on the premises.

The mother had divorced the second husband after several years as well. She'd just remarried a third time a year ago, and, according to the school counselor, she was beleaguered with her own cares--her other children, her new relationship. She'd resigned herself to Jeron's bad behavior, convinced there was nothing she could do to help him beyond lecturing and insisting he wasn't doing his part at home, while silently looking forward to the day when he wasn't her problem anymore. Apparently, the legal system was all she envisioned in her oldest child's future.

"Everything all right, Jeron?" Chad asked him, noticing the larger young man's body language--rather than being his status quo of withdrawn and sullen, Jeron seemed restless, maybe even nervous. He was sitting up straight as an arrow in his tight desk, his hands folded into one huge fist. His dark, hooded eyes refused to meet Chad's.

Unfortunately, it was at that exact moment the guest he'd been looking forward to meeting materialized in the classroom. Chad briefly squeezed Jeron's thickly-muscled shoulder and moved toward the woman entering the room behind a large, salt-and-pepper German Shepherd on a leash. Instantly, every girl in the class flew from their seats with cries of adoration.

Chad swallowed the sudden lump in his throat, recognizing his own nervousness at a meeting he'd been looking forward to with almost inappropriate eagerness for weeks. Sloane was a couple inches under his height of five-eight in barely heeled, straightforward black leather boots, wearing a quarter-sleeve, ribbed turtleneck sweater and jersey-knit cotton black pants that perfectly showed she took excellent care of herself. Slim without being too thin, it was obvious she wasn't a "fashion hound" (Laura's own words) like her daughter. She wore no discernable makeup on her peaches-and-cream complexion, nor a stitch of jewelry, nothing fancy. Her streaked blond hair was pulled into a deceptively sloppy twist at the back of her head with a plain, thick, black headband holding the mass back. She wore black sunglasses that completely covered her eyes, and, when several of the female students commented on how much they liked them, she acted completely natural about wearing them indoors on an early autumn day.

The ease she displayed in interacting with the kids made Chad smile, hanging back while she introduced her guide dog, Stallion: "A name that, I

know, should have given him a complex, but as you can tell, he's too humble and sweet to be intimidated."

Chad laughed out loud, and Sloane lifted her head a fraction as if she'd taken notice him in the circle of giddy, giggly girls around her. A rush of excitement flooded him, forcing him to tamp it down. He had to talk to her before the class got underway.

Behind her, lurking in the doorway was another woman holding a set of car keys that jingled suddenly and made Sloane turn in that direction to say, "Mary, thanks for driving me. I'll see you at two-forty--is that right, Mr. Martin?"

Chad shifted so he could approach Sloane from her right side. "Call me Chad. If you don't mind, could I talk to you privately, Ms. Oligney?"

"Sure. And it's Sloane."

They'd agreed to first names in their emails, but he understood that venue seemed to dictate informality the way this one didn't assume.

Very carefully, he put a hand on her forearm and gently steered her toward her driver Mary still standing in the classroom doorway. He turned back to tell the students to keep the noise to a minimum until they returned.

"Everything all right?" Mary asked when Chad closed the classroom door behind them. A few students were still in the hall, rushing to classes in the mere minutes they had before the bell rang.

"I guess that's what I need to figure out. Unfortunately, Isabelle Granville was sent home with a fever before lunch, Sloane. I just found out, so the email I literally sent you six minutes ago couldn't have reached you in time. The rest of the class will benefit as much as Isabelle, but I was really hoping she could be here for your visit. She could really use some encouragement not to give up hope. But I know your schedule is packed and giving us your time today wasn't easy to accommodate."

Sloane didn't appear stressed by the news. "I was hoping to talk to Isabelle myself. I don't mind coming back at another time when she can be here. We'll work it out."

"Thanks. You'll be a hit both times, even if the majority of students attending doesn't change," Chad said appreciatively, wondering self-consciously if he was gushing. He wasn't sure why, other than that Sloane smelled like sugared grapefruit, and he couldn't help being finitely aware to the point of giddiness of the scent beckoning him closer.

"So, should I come back at two-forty, Sloane?" Mary asked.

"That'd be great, Mary. Thanks. See you."

When the other woman walked away, Chad felt relief because he'd been convinced Mary could see his physical reaction to her employer and was judging him. Focused on Sloane, he uneasily brushed back the natural long curls his students sometimes compared to ramen noodles. He had little by way of a hairstyle, let alone concern about his hair, and he was frequently told by other teachers and staff that his hair was too long and

"hippie". "Thanks again for agreeing to stay today and come back another time, Sloane...but I admit I'm hoping you can come back *before* October."

She grinned like he'd said something amusing. "Why October? Did Laura tell you about my Halloween sunglasses collection?"

Chad chuckled, unwinding a little in the presence of someone so easygoing that even his odd inability the last few years to be comfortable around most single women dissolved. Sloane was like her daughter-- confident without being conceited, the way so many young women were these days in the age of "female self-empowerment", warm, funny, just a little off-beat. "No. She never mentioned it, but I may have to ask her about it now. I meant because I'm teaching the Careers class temporarily, just until Mrs. Rusk returns from maternity leave. I've heard she tends to be...well, *unhappy*...when substitute teachers try to change her set-in-stone curriculum."

"Have you done that, Mr. Martin?" she asked in mock astonishment.

"Well, now, I admit I have, Ms. Oligney, and radically," Chad rumbled. "If possible, I'd like to keep that a secret as long as possible."

A smile unfurled in response, transforming Sloane's face into the most beautiful he'd ever seen. Chad was captivated by her flawless skin and unadorned mouth. "In the interest of providing my daughter's schoolmates with a quality education, I'll do my best to oblige your deception as soon as possible."

Feeling a little breathless, he chuckled again and could only be grateful she couldn't see the heat and color creeping up his neck past the collar of his shirt and "rock star" blazer, as Laura called it. "I appreciate it, Sloane. I really do, and I know all my students, and Isabelle especially, will benefit from the time you spend with them."

"No pressure now?"

They laughed as one.

"Not a problem," she said.

"Then I guess we should get in there."

"If you don't mind, I like to walk around a new room and get a feel for it, so if you'd be so kind as to be my escort?"

"Just tell me what to do," Chad said enthusiastically, reaching for the door and her arm.

"Stallion will keep me from crashing into anything, but I'd like to see the room through your eyes as you give me the tour."

The kids in the room were restless, mostly forming their little clicks outside their desks while the more withdrawn, lone wolves were sitting quietly in their desks. Chad walked around the tight space, giving Sloane the lay of the land, before the bell rang, he called the class to order, and everyone rushed to their seats. He introduced Sloane, mentioned that Isabelle had gone home with a fever, and that Sloane had already agreed to come back--something that was met with cheers he didn't try to quell. He

opened the floor to Sloane, then went to sit behind his desk.

Mrs. Rusk...Charlotte...had told him she generally worked during any class-time that featured a speaker, grading social study papers, facilitating only when she was required to. Chad had never done that. He treated the class like any other he taught, and he was actively engaged with the room. He noticed that most of the kids were avidly and enthusiastically engaged in Sloane's life of their own volition, asking interesting questions without being prompted, and he couldn't blame them.

As Sloane told them her story of being born blind to parents who refused to let her view her condition as the means to live a life without dreams, direction or determination, Chad saw his own philosophy brought to life. She spoke in a laidback manner, coaxing easy laughter from a group he'd called grumpy out loud the first time he'd substituted for them. In ways, he couldn't help feeling as if he and Sloane were the only two in the room. She'd fallen in love with computers when she was in high school, programmed her first one when she was a sophomore, which entailed completely rewriting the code from scratch until it read text back to her, and she'd gone to college, intending to make a career of this love. Now she used text-to-speech programs with customized modifications, and she'd built a self-sustaining freelance career out designing computer programs from her home. She didn't have to do any marketing to garner jobs; word-of-mouth did that for her.

Chad glanced at Jeron, noticing again how restless he was--more so than usual. *And something more. He looks like he's grappling with some inner turmoil just barely contained.* Though he knew Jeron met with the school counselor at least once a week and Chad believed Violet cared deeply about the students she worked with (at times, Chad doubted the social worker, Patrick, harbored the same concern), he was also aware Jeron said little if nothing during those sessions. He hadn't gotten much further than the counselor in getting the boy to open up, but he'd made some headway. *I'll get someone to cover my Focus class, contact Jeron's Focus teacher after Careers is over, and see if I can't get him to tell me what's bugging him today.*

Chad didn't easily pass his Focus Period off to anyone else. The goal of Focus Period was to help students with their individual needs, like monitoring grades and dealing with homework they might be struggling with, and naturally it was a time to teach character-building concepts. He took Focus seriously and saw it as an opportunity to bond with students, though there were the occasional periods that were more like study hall with everyone focused on homework alone, so he could grade math papers. As much as possible, though, he tried to take time with every single person in his Focus classroom each school day. But he sensed whatever was bugging Jeron was critical and required some one-on-one time with someone who cared that the guy resembled little more than a time bomb about to go off in the middle

of an otherwise oblivious atmosphere.

Identity

"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." ~Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

"Dreams do come true, if only we wish hard enough. You can have anything in life if you will sacrifice everything else for it." ~JM Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Chapter One

*Tuesday, September 25
12:05 a.m.*

Pete Shasta woke with a start, not sure what roused him because the house was utterly silent, his wife sleeping peacefully with her head on his chest as it'd been when they'd fallen asleep. He turned to see the clock, informing him he'd barely been asleep for an hour.

"Old age. Or a heavy heart."

Painful nostalgia made Pete reach up and rub at his stinging eyes. His whole life seemed to be an amalgamation of regrets and fears he thought he'd dealt with long ago, yet lately...lately all he could think about was just how badly his mother had destroyed the lives of everyone in her family-- Pete, his younger brother Jordie, their older sister Crystal... *And Dad. Most of all Dad. Even after the separation that, at the very least, stopped the violent fights between him and Mom, he didn't sleep very well most nights. Usually got home late from work. Crys would have dinner waiting for him 'cause she knew better than to try anything else. Dad would eat, then sit down in front of the TV and conk out in his chair. 'Few hours later, he'd drag himself off to bed, where he rarely slept. Mom destroyed him and he did the best he could taking care of us, but he could never take the place of a mother, one we needed. Even when Dad forced Crys to fill that role...because she was older, because she was a girl--*

Pete let out a soft, annoyed sigh. Why was he dredging all this stuff up again? It was ancient history. Not just ancient history but water under the bridge. His dad had forgiven his ex-wife for her years of cheating. Even Pete had finally reached that point, though he frequently struggled with returning to the old fury.

And Crys. Crys was long gone.

Dad talks about her all the time though. That's why I can't stop

thinking about this. He's dying, and he'll never forgive himself for making Crys take on more than an eleven-year-old could handle. I'm a cop. Why can't I find her? Why has she made it impossible to locate her? Did she hate her life--us--so bad, she never wanted to look back?

"You're not sleeping," Lisa whispered, and Pete opened his burning eyes to see her looking up at him in the semi-dark.

He should have realized his restlessness would wake her. For the last six months, since what Pete referred to in his mind as "The Harbinger", she was so attuned to him, he sometimes felt like he didn't have a single moment of privacy. Lisa hadn't cheated on him, not fully. She'd let another man kiss her and maybe a part of her had wanted him to for second seconds. And Pete couldn't forget that. Even when he hated that he'd allowed the best thing that'd ever happened to him to become tainted, he couldn't shake the insidious questions from whispering in his ear when he was at his weakest. *Does she really love me? Am I really the man she wants to be with?*

His first marriage had been eerily similar to his parents'. Bonnie had been cheating on him for years before he caught onto it. And even when he'd forgiven her more times than he should have, not wanting the relationship to end in divorce like his parents' had, he'd finally conceded she didn't love him, didn't want him, and he'd initiated the divorce. *Vowed there was no way I was ever gonna put myself through that nightmare again. And then I met Lisa, and she's like a goddess--the most perfect woman I've ever met. That she seemed to want me was ludicrous. But she did. And the first years of our marriage were like life in a snow globe. Idyllic. Everything I ever wanted. I kept waiting for it to shatter. Instead, it kept getting better and better. We adopted Teddy. Then six months ago...*

The Harbinger. And, no matter how bad I want to, I can't stop hearing that whispering.

The worst part was he knew Lisa was reading his mind pretty much all the time. She knew exactly what he was thinking, didn't want to think but couldn't help. She would never forgive herself for what she considered pure insanity brought on by the manipulatively dangerous man and his psychotic wife who'd lived next door to them in the subdivision before they'd moved. Even as Pete fought that ruthless voice, she was beating herself up for what happened, constantly trying to make it up to him and prove her love and complete loyalty to him.

I don't deserve her. She's the prize in this relationship. I don't wanna be unforgiving. My dad was unforgiving for most of his life. He deserved to not have to forgive the injustice done to him. I passionately believed that. But he forgave Mom a few years ago. That blew my mind. After all her crimes against him, that he should have to be the one to forgive was the worst. But this isn't the same. Lisa has always been angel, giving me everything I could want and need. One mistake on the scale against so

many years of pure bliss doesn't balance it in favor of unforgiveness. Not even close.

While Pete's dad had never adequately explained why or even *how* he'd learned to forgive his wife, Pete had spent the years analyzing the unfathomable situation since the reconciliation that hadn't ended in them getting back together as anything more than tolerating friends. Lately, he'd been torn up about it more than usual, desperately wanting to forgive Lisa so completely he didn't even remember what she'd done, and to do it a lot sooner than his old man had done.

How?

Turning on his side, he drew her tighter against him and kissed her. Her arms slid around his neck, her body molding itself to his so he found himself stirring despite the pleasure they'd shared little more than an hour ago.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

Assuming I'm thinking about exactly what I am thinking about.

Stubbornly, he wasn't about to admit it and instead, deflecting to the other thing bothering him. "Dad talks about Crys all the time now. Every time I see him, he asks if we've found her. If the private investigator we hired has tracked her down."

"He's in the hospital. He believes he's going to die," Lisa murmured her understanding.

Ted believed that because his doctor had told him so. His father had end-stage prostate cancer. He wasn't expected to live out the year. Pete and Jordie had fought him every step of the way because the old man hadn't wanted his life to turn into a "cuddle party", but the cancer had progressed so quickly he'd had to be hospitalized against his will a few months ago.

"Crystal is the one area in his life he hasn't had closure."

Lisa nodded against him.

"What happened to drive Crys away when she was just a kid wasn't his fault. We all know whose fault it is." Maybe it was true their dad had expected way too much of someone so young, but it was their mother's infidelity that caused all the problems in the first place.

"I forced you into forgiving your mother, didn't I? Because I wanted everyone to get along."

Aware she was reading into everything he was and wasn't saying out loud, Pete sighed. "It's not that I don't forgive her. I do." *I think I do. I want to.* "I just... All this is constantly *there* lately. Can't seem to escape it, whatever direction I turn."

"Because your dad is dying."

He swallowed at the words he hated and she spoke so gently. "Yeah. I don't understand why Crys did it, took off and never came back. I mean, a part of me does understand, even if I'd rather not."

"What do you understand?"

He took a deep breath, shaking his head at a lingering fragment of something like a dream mingled with a memory--that was what woke him up. "Something that happened when we were kids. Mom and Dad were separated but not divorced yet. I was ten. Crys was eleven. She gave me and Jordie our dinner, made sure our homework was done, got us into a bath and then bed. Dad got home late, like he usually did."

The hours being a detective on the Falcon's Bend Police Department could be long when they had a case. Pete knew that as well as his dad since he'd gone into the same line of work. But he remembered when he and Bonnie had been married. He'd suspected she was cheating. He hadn't wanted to go home to confirm the truth. So he'd worked, worked even when there was almost nothing to do. Anything to avoid going to that place where everything hurt like crazy. That was why his dad had worked such long hours, Pete had realized around that time when he and his siblings were kids.

"Dad was home late again, and I heard something, got up. Crys was crying. She didn't do that a lot. Almost never. She was a bulldog all the time. She was a witch most of the time. But...she was crying and I got up and sneaked into the living room, hid behind the sofa. Jordie came out a little while later and hid with me, too. Dad was taking off his boots, and she was crying and screaming at him. About how she was too young to take care of everything. She listed all the stuff she did that day. Made us breakfast. Got us up. Made us brush our teeth, got us off to school. After school, she cleaned the house, made us dinner, homework, bath, bed. On weekends, she did the shopping, too."

Lisa murmured in shock under her breath. "She was eleven?"

Pete nodded. "I don't think about that a lot. I know it doesn't make any sense, but she always seemed so much older than me and Jordie. Mom was never a mother. Not the way...well, Crys was, had to be. But she never...she didn't..."

"What?"

"Crys didn't do anything kindly, graciously. Lovingly. She made sure we all knew every sacrifice she made. And Dad said there was no one else to do what she had to. She was the oldest. She knew how to cook. And he had to work. Had to make money and support the family."

"I suppose he was a product of his time. Girls were expected to do all that stuff."

"He didn't put up with her blubbering for long. He told her he was tired and hungry and wanted his supper. We didn't even have a microwave back then, and even if we did he never would've let her use it to make a meal. It was nine o'clock at night, and usually Crys had his supper waiting when he got home. But she didn't that night, probably thinking she could actually put her foot down with him for once. Dad was furious, and he told her to march into the kitchen and get his dinner on the table."

Lisa gave a little tight shake of her head.

"She was screaming how she hated Mom, but she did go to do what Dad told her to. And then she was howling for another reason. Dad ran into the kitchen, and me and Jordie panicked and rushed back to bed. If Dad saw us up when he was already that mad, he would've paddled us black and blue. We found out the next day she dropped the heavy iron skillet on her foot. You should've seen it. Crys had the ugliest feet you've ever seen in your life. All her life, we teased her about her Bride of Frankenstein toes--each one from a different dead body and 'sewed on' at weird angles. They were all yellow-nailed, crooked, hairy, different lengths and sizes. She had big feet in general. Well, after she dropped that skillet on it, the right foot was even uglier than the left. It was so swollen, she couldn't wear a shoe for a week. The bloody and purple big toenail, which was as big as Cinderella's step-sisters even before this, eventually fell off and it never grew back." Pete found himself chuckling at the only amusing part of a memory that'd caused him so much pain, he'd shoved it to the blackest abyss of his mind for most of his life.

"So...Crys just kept playing mother to all of you after that?"

"For four more years. Then she ran away because she thought she was pregnant and she knew Dad'd have a cow about it. She went to live with Dad's sister in Texas."

"And your dad just let her go?"

"Yeah. I guess as a concession. Me and Jordie didn't need so much mothering by then, and Crys was so miserable all the time, we were all sick of her pissing and moaning."

"Pete, she was a child, being asked to juggle things that are hard for grown women."

He drew in a rattling breath, trying not to acknowledge all he'd buried. "I know."

"Why does this bother you so much, honey? You always seem so angry at her, almost like, if your dad didn't push it, you wouldn't bother trying to find her."

She doesn't wanna be found. She's proved that in every conceivable way.

Feeling like an idiot, he shook his head, not wanting to talk about this but knowing she'd see his closed mouth as further proof he was holding her sin against her still. "She was more of a mother to us than Mom ever was, even before the separation. And she didn't see us as anything more than obligations. Burdens she would've done anything to get rid of. She did what Dad told her to because she felt like she didn't have any other choice. And then she took off, and...she came back here that one time to drop off Nikki...but she didn't wanna see us. She hasn't looked back once. After she disappeared, after Aunt Flora died, the only person she kept in touch with is Dad...once a year, if even. She didn't tell him anything about her life. Didn't

care about how any of us were doing. We didn't mean a thing to her. So why...?"

Lisa's hold on him tightened just a little. She nodded, allowing him to stop bringing ancient poison out of the black pit inside him with her movement and the simple word, "Okay."

"I don't wanna feel any of this. Wish it'd just go away and I'd never have to deal with it ever again."

"I know."

"But Dad's gotta see her again. He'll never... He needs closure. And I don't know if I can give it to him. That p.i.'s been looking for her for so long and *nothing*. She's gone off the face of the earth. I don't wanna keep paying for it. Not when we're gonna adopt again, and..."

Lisa had given up her career a few years ago to be a full-time mother to their infant son. Pete had loved her for being so willing to do that. But things were a lot tighter. They'd moved into a house that was nothing if not a fixer-upper. They didn't have a savings anymore, let alone the money for a nursery, yet he and Jordie were pouring a fortune into finding someone who didn't want to be found. *For someone I don't give a darn if we ever do find. She didn't care, so why should we?*

I haven't grown up a whit since that night so many years ago when I was ten-years-old, and I haven't learned anything from my old man about forgiveness, something that took him nearly a lifetime to bestow. I just keep following the worst possible course because anything else would be a serious miscarriage of justice. But to who? I'm not benefiting from all this anger and bitterness. The opposite, in fact. So why can't I make a break from it, be done with it?

"I love you," Lisa said in a fierce whisper. "This is hard for all of us, but especially for you. You're so much like your dad."

At the same time Pete would have said he'd spent a lifetime imitating his dad, he wished he done it less and equally done it more. His thoughts didn't make any sense.

"I'm sorry I make everything so much harder than it has to be," he offered.

"I wouldn't change a thing about you, Pete Shasta. Everything you are is everything I love."

I don't deserve you. "I love you." I'd rather die than live without you. And I'm so scared I'm gonna do something stupid and lose you 'cause I can't deal with a mistake, one stupid mistake that's nothing compared to more than any man could ask for in a lifetime.

When he kissed her again, she responded without hesitation. Pete eased her over him, blanking his mind to anything but how much she meant to him, how good she was to and for him.

Though set on a low volume, he heard and then saw his cell phone bouncing around on the night table beside him. Not for the first time since

his dad was hospitalized, he found himself hoping it would be work, calling him in for something. *Something that doesn't have anything to do with my life. Another thing I wish I didn't feel 'cause it's a crappy thing for a cop to think.*

Turning toward the nightstand with Lisa still against him, he reached for the phone, his heart all but stopping when he saw who was calling.

Jordie, dammit, no...

"I'm sorry for calling so late...but you better get down here, Pete. All of you."

All of... 'Cause it's the last time...

"Was it your dad?" Lisa asked when he disconnected.

"Yeah. Can you get Teddy? We can put him in his car seat and put blankets over him instead of waking him up for a coat."

"Oh, no. Pete--"

He sat up, tears in his eyes, thinking, *I've had all this time to prepare myself for the eventuality that Dad was gonna die, and probably soon. Too soon. So why don't I feel even vaguely ready now that it's here?*

Cupid's Romance

"What we have once enjoyed we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us." ~Helen Keller

"Love is a temporary madness. It erupts like volcanos and then subsides. And when it subsides, you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your roots have so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part." ~Louise de Bernieres

Chapter One

*Saturday, October 27
7 p.m.*

"The dominant spirit, however, that haunts this enchanted region, and seems to be commander-in-chief of all the powers of the air, is the apparition of a figure on horseback, without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon-ball, in some nameless battle during the Revolutionary War, and who is ever and anon seen by the country folk hurrying along in the gloom of night, as if on the wings of the wind. His haunts are not confined to the valley, but extend at times to the adjacent roads, and especially to the

vicinity of a church at no great distance. Indeed, certain of the most authentic historians of those parts, who have been careful in collecting and collating the floating facts concerning this spectre, allege that the body of the trooper having been buried in the churchyard, the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head, and that the rushing speed with which he sometimes passes along the Hollow, like a midnight blast, is owing to his being belated, and in a hurry to get back to the churchyard before daybreak. Such is the general purport of this legendary superstition, which has furnished materials for many a wild story in that region of shadows; and the spectre is known at all the country firesides, by the name of the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow."

Danny Vincent had heard his wife's voice, perfectly intoning the drama of the story, from their daughter's bedroom while he cleaned up the bathroom after Deidre's bath, but only recognized what tale the words belonged to when he got close to the pink, unicorn-and-glitter decorated door. Anticipating his little girl would be wide-eyed and trembling, he instead saw her eyes were closed in utterly relaxation when he stepped into the room. She sleepily doled out her precious hugs and kisses and words of love, turning with her arms bulging with her unicorn stuffed animal, Marshmallow Pea, a name she'd chosen after playing a silly game online.

"First she watches the Disney version of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and then you read her the story. You want her to have nightmares, babe?" Danny asked as they went out with the monitor.

"She wanted me to read her that story. Besides, she didn't understand half the words."

Danny snorted a laugh. "A ghostly dude without a head on a giant, demon horse that breathes hellfire? I think she got that much from the movie, even the kids' version of it. That used to scare the crap out of me when I was little."

Melody laughed, sounding like a soft musical note as they moved downstairs. "You're just afraid of Washington Irving stories after that case you had around Halloween a couple years ago that was a modern take on *The Devil and Tom Walker*."

"You would've been creeped out, too. That was some seriously scary stuff."

She grinned. "Well, I love Halloween, and so does DeeDee. I don't want her to be a scaredy-cat about everything, like your sisters' kids are. What's the harm in being afraid? There is a difference between *good* scared and *bad* scared. Our baby doesn't even need a nightlight and her cousins are all much older than she is." In her Southern accent, the words were as swaggering as they were proud.

"Okay, but when she has a nightmare tonight, you're getting up." Melody chuckled, then said, "She won't."

He pulled a beer from the fridge, not missing the confidence in her

voice when she moved over to him with fingers curved like claws to tease him. "I think you're more worried about yourself, Mr. Poltroon."

"Watch who you're calling...whatever you said," he warned, good-naturedly.

"Let's face it, Halloween terrifies you."

"Actually, I think Halloween's terrors last time were a coincidence."

Melody smiled just a little, her voice becoming more serious. "What is it, baby? Something's bothering you today."

He'd removed the cap on the beer bottle but didn't drink it yet. "Never like it when Pete goes on vacation," he muttered, not facing her until she swooped over to him again with dawning in her eyes.

"Oh, *that's* what this is all about. I should have known."

His partner at the Falcon's Bend Police department and best friend all his life had gone on vacation today--though not exactly a conventional vacation. He and his wife Lisa were adopting a newborn baby. Just a few weeks ago, after spending time getting to know them, the pregnant fifteen-year-old had decided she wanted Pete and Lisa to be the parents of her baby when he or she was born. She'd gone into labor earlier today. They'd already had everything in place for when the event got underway. Their two-year-old son Teddy would be staying with Pete's brother Jordan and his family until they got home with the newborn. Pete would be absent from work for at least a week, probably more like two, depending on how everything went once the teenager gave birth.

And so often when Pete leaves town, I get the most insane, creepy cases. Melody knew about the one from two years ago that'd given him nightmares for weeks afterward. He hadn't told her about his very first case after he joined the FBPD--the one where a young woman had been murdered, her eyeballs stolen. Though it'd been seven years, he still got the heebie-jeebies whenever he thought of that one that'd he'd solved and yet the horror of the events hadn't diminished even after the supernatural aspect had been explained by cold, hard facts.

"I'm happy for them," Mel said, putting her hands on his chest. "They've had such a hard year."

Pete and Lisa were the kind of couple fairytales were written for. Their love story was a model for all others. Earlier this year, they'd faced a marital conflict that put their happily-ever-after in question. Luckily, the incident hadn't torn them apart. And, despite the death of Pete's father only months ago and finding--and once more losing--his long-lost sister, things were finally going their way again.

Danny had almost-but-not-quite felt guilty because, for once, his and Melody's volatile marriage had been the one to admire. She'd quit her job when she found out her boss was trying to sabotage their marriage, she loved being a full-time mother to their little girl, her dad had returned to Falcon's Bend, and they were finally going to expand their family.

"Yeah," he murmured, leaning forward to kiss her lips.

"Do we really have to wait three months to tell everyone we're pregnant?" she asked, pouting.

Danny laughed because she was so darn cute.

"I suppose we should," she conceded. "There are just too many other things going on. Pete and Lisa's baby. In December, Shayna and Gage are getting married."

She'd shown him the invitation that'd come in the mail today. His favorite sister was the last to tie the knot, and Danny couldn't be more thrilled for her.

"But if we wait too long..."

"Everybody'll know without having to be told." When Melody was pregnant, she was *seriously* pregnant. He remembered how uncomfortable she'd been while carrying DeeDee. She'd called herself a beached whale for seven of the nine months.

She sighed, her smile filled with the same bliss he was feeling about life--other than Pete's absence and the very strong potential for weirdness in his immediate future. "Everything's coming up roses," she said softly.

"For once."

He leaned forward again, thinking about how they could fill the hours before bedtime. But, before their lips could touch once more, his cell phone rang. They groaned as one.

"Tell them you're busy," she grouched but let him go when he answered the call from work.

"Amber's on her way to pick you up," Chopp, the patrol sergeant, told him.

Amber was currently between partners. Her previous one--her husband Warren Jensen--had retired in September and the chief had been very slowly and carefully maneuvering through the tricky process of hiring someone new that the city council would approve of that could actually do the job. In the meantime, Amber was working a variety of cases. With Pete gone, she'd be paired with Danny since she was being groomed for the currently-inconceivable day when he or Pete retired and the department needed another detective to fill one of their shoes.

"What do we got?" Danny asked warily.

"Local computer tech guy called about some stalker he just chased off his property."

Chapter Two

7:22 p.m.

Danny waved to Amber to stay where she was in the driver's seat, then walked around the patrol car. The night was strangely foggy with a

sharp, wet chill that made him glad he'd chosen a heavier jacket. The waning gibbous moon did little to penetrate the dark night. For a moment, Danny almost expected to hear a wolf howl. It was that kind of night. He shivered uncontrollably as he slid into the warmth of the passenger's seat and closed the door, feeling a second of panic before he was securely out of the creepy shroud of darkness.

"What do we got?" he said, knowing he should be laughing at himself but unable to shake the willies enough to do it.

"Rye Iverson made the call. He's forty-one, owns Iverson Computer Repairs."

Danny nodded. The business wasn't far from the police department. He passed the understated sign on the shop nearly every day.

"He and his wife were recently separated. He filed for divorce. He assumes she's the one stalking him."

"That's a harsh word. He actually used the word 'stalking'? Not harassing?"

"Yeah, he says she's *stalking* him, following him around town, sending him notes, and that this wasn't the first time."

"Why assume she's the one stalking him?"

Amber laughed. "I guess that's what we're gonna find out. Must've been an ugly separation. Divorce is likely to get even uglier if she really has been stalking him."

Iverson lived in a middle-class neighborhood, his house neat, well-kept but nothing fancy. He opened the door to them before they reached it. He was tall, whipcord thin, silver hair, and looked like he'd fit into the corporate world like he was made for it. Despite that the time could be considered after hours, he still wore nice slacks, a button-down shirt with a fashionable V-neck cardigan over it, and shiny loafers. He looked visibly distressed when he greeted them and introductions were made. "I was relaxing for the evening when I heard a noise in the backyard. It must have been around six-forty-five. I looked up, and I was floored when I saw someone looking at me through the curtains in my living room. I don't know how long we looked at each other--a few seconds, maybe a little more."

"Maybe you should show us," Danny invited, and Rye led them inside the open door of his home. The living room was large, dominated by the elaborate computer system with three separate, huge monitors attached on the walls over the massive cherry wood desk. Rye pointed to the oversized leather office chair to indicate where he'd been sitting. To see through the living room window he also indicated, he would have to look up and off to his left side on the far end of the room. All three screens had the same unremarkable screensaver that no doubt hid what he'd been doing just before the incident. The rest of the room was filled with furniture that appeared to be chosen like afterthoughts, given the obvious focus of the room.

"Were the curtains pulled like this?" Danny asked.

"Yes, they were just like this. I didn't touch them. The room is exactly the way it was when I saw her looking at me--the lights, everything. See the gap? That's where I saw her looking at me and smiling. When I shouted and ran out the back door, I saw the trash can was knocked over and I chased the person, but I only caught a glimpse of her as she disappeared around the front of the house and down the sidewalk."

"Did you give chase beyond that?"

"I did, but I only made it to the end of the street before she disappeared in the fog and I didn't have a clue which way she went."

Beside him, Amber had her notebook open and she was scratching the facts into it steadily. "You keep saying 'she'," she said without looking up from what she was writing. "You're sure it was a woman?"

"Very sure. I couldn't really see anything in the window other than a white face and bright red lipstick on a woman's mouth. The upper part of her face was...obscured."

"And when you went out to the backyard?"

"I saw someone about five-six, slim, with short, dark hair. She was wearing high-heeled boots. She ran away from me, around the house and down the sidewalk."

"How 'high-heeled'?" Amber asked pointedly.

"Easily five-inch. Stiletto. They were those tall, leather, lace-up kinds that go up to mid-thigh. She was wearing black from head to toe, the jacket and slacks form-fitting in the shape of woman. It was a woman. Definitely."

"And you think it was your wife?" Danny asked.

"Who else could it be?"

"Mr. Iverson, are you sure it was your wife? You actual verified for a fact it was her?"

"Well...if it wasn't Moira, then who else would it be?" the man asked, as if flabbergasted by the concept of any other suggestion.

Danny glanced at Amber, then asked again, "Mr. Iverson, was it your wife? Are you a hundred percent sure it was her?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Did you recognize anything about this woman? Her lipstick, the shape of her mouth, the clothing she wore? Anything?"

"No. Not specifically. It was dark and it happened so fast. And it's not as if I've memorized what's in her closet either. We were only married for a few months."

"You're divorcing after being married...what? Three months?" Danny asked.

"That's right."

"*You* filed for divorce?"

"Yes. We separated a few weeks ago, and I filed for divorce last week."

"And when did this 'stalking' start?"

"A few weeks ago, about the same time we separated. It has to be Moira."

"Because she didn't want the separation or divorce? Is that why it has to be her?" Danny clarified.

"Well, yes, if you must know."

Iverson drove his hands deep into his pants pockets, looking more than a little uncomfortable and even put-out. If he thought his wife was stalking him, why did he suddenly seem like he didn't want to talk about any of this?

"So you wanted the separation and divorce, and she didn't?"

The man nodded, abruptly mute.

"Infidelity or some other reason that would make her want to stalk you? What do you think incited her to stalk you?"

"No. Nothing like that. Look, I don't see what my marital situation has to do with any of this."

"If you really believe your wife is stalking you, then the reason you're divorcing may have everything to do with this if she's the one doing it."

"I'm not certain it's her. I just can't imagine who else it could be."

Danny tried to keep his impatient sigh from escaping. "Okay, let's go back to the beginning. Do you know for sure it's your wife who's been stalking you, or are you just assuming that?"

"I don't know it's her. I've been assuming all this time."

"In what other ways have you been 'stalked'?"

"For the past several weeks, I've been feeling like I'm being followed all over town. It wasn't the first time I've felt I was being watched at home either, but I've never actually seen anyone before tonight. I've caught a glimpse here and there out and about town and even took a picture with my cell phone once." He took the device out, and, after a few minutes of playing with it, handed it over. Amber took it, and both she and Danny viewed the fuzzy back of someone who fit the very vague description of a 5'6, slim woman with her head covered by an extremely large, straw hat, dressed in clothing and boots that were both fashionable, attractive and debatably sexy. She was pretty far away but zooming in only made the photograph too blurred to reach any conclusion about the identity.

"So you don't know if this is your wife?" Danny asked after Amber secured permission to send the photograph (the only one) to her own phone so it could be analyzed.

"No. I can't be sure it's Moira."

"Do you think you would recognize your wife, even from a distance?" Danny asked as tactfully as possible.

"Look, Moira and I haven't known each other long at all. We met earlier this year in Marshfield. She works at an office supply store there that I frequent." Falcon's Bend was a small town with little shopping. Only by

going an hour in any direction could a decent-size city with more amenities be found. "We had what I suppose you might call a whirlwind relationship. We were married within a few weeks after we started dating. I realized recently that I didn't spend enough time thinking this through, didn't get to know her well enough, before we married. It was unfortunate she was hurt by this, but I didn't see any point prolonging the inevitable."

"And I'm guessing she wasn't too happy about your 'change of heart'?" Amber asked, somehow managing not to sound as judgmental as Danny knew he would have if he'd said the same thing out loud.

"No. She wasn't happy. She doesn't want the divorce, and she...expressed her disapproval frequently when we first separated."

"Would you say she harassed you as a result of her disappointment?"

"Not in an illegal sense, I suppose, but she didn't take my decision lightly or easily."

"Do you have a picture of your wife?"

Sighing, Iverson walked over to a console table near the window and righted the face-down picture frame there. With her cell phone, Amber snapped a picture of the woman in it with Iverson on what was clearly their wedding day. They both wore nice clothes, suitable for a courthouse ceremony. In the vaguest of terms, the woman could easily be described as 5'6, slim with dark, shoulder-length hair. She looked ecstatically happy and had to be at least a decade younger than her new husband. Her outfit and makeup were understated. No bright-red lipstick, thigh-high stiletto boots, or sexy clothing were visible or even imaginable. She was undeniably attractive, if not outright beautiful, but could be described as the girl next door.

"How long have you lived in Falcon's Bend, Mr. Iverson?" Danny asked, figuring the man didn't care to keep going on this topic so they might as well get the general interview out of the way. Iverson might relax again if they distracted him with mundane information-gathering.

"Ten years."

"And before that?"

Iverson muttered warily, "I lived in Wausau."

A little more than a two hour drive north of Falcon's Bend.

"I worked at a large corporation that specialized in computer programming. All Things Tech was its name."

"Does your job, now or then, have anything to do with why you moved?"

The man nodded, his gaze shrouded. "Something like that. I'd wanted to start my own business for a long time, and I found living in a city as large as Wausau not to my taste. I wanted to live in a small town. I settled in Falcon's Bend and started Iverson Computer Repairs. I've done good business since then. I've kept to myself, at least I did until I met Moira. I should have realized the two of us wanted different things out of life. That's

the whole story, Lieutenant Vincent, and I'd rather not talk about my marriage or divorce any further."

"Is there a chance you have any enemies?"

"Here in Falcon's Bend? No."

"Any that might have followed you from Wausau?"

Iverson took a deep breath, shaking his head. "That's ludicrous. I've lived very quietly here for ten years. The only thing that's happened is an ill-considered marriage."

"Did anything specific occur that made you feel you were being stalked a few weeks ago, beyond the sense you were being followed or watched?"

Iverson nodded. "The night Moira moved out, I got a card, the first of many. It'd been pushed under my door."

He pulled open the drawer on the table beneath the wedding photograph then lifted out a neat stack of vintage Valentine's cards printed on heavy, off-white cardstock. Danny slipped into the latex gloves Amber handed him to leaf through all eight of the greeting cards. They were commercial, probably expensive. On the front of each were distinctive winged cherub art that Danny figured was straight out of the Victorian age. Inside were handwritten quotes, each one followed by a signature: *Cupid*.

"Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope." ~Maya Angelou

"You'll never get to the happily ever after if you don't move past the current chapter..." ~Carmen DeSousa

"We loved with a love that was more than love." ~Edgar Allan Poe

"This is what we call love. When you are loved, you can do anything in creation. When you're loved, there's no need at all to understand what's happening, because everything happens within you." ~Paulo Coelho

"There is no remedy for love but to love more." ~Henry David Thoreau

"Everyone says that love hurts. But that's not true. Loneliness hurts, rejection hurts, losing someone hurts. Everyone confuses these with love, but in reality love is the only thing in this world that covers up all the pain and makes us feel wonderful again." ~Anonymous

"This is real life. Happily ever after takes effort." ~Julie Klassen

"One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: That word is love." ~Sophocles

"Maybe that's what it all comes down to. Love, not as a surge of

passion, but as a choice to commit to something, someone, no matter what obstacles or temptations stand in the way. And maybe making that choice, again and again, day in and day out, year after year, says more about love than never having a choice to make at all." ~Anonymous

Not exactly threatening. Some might even consider them sweet.

"These didn't come by mail?"

"No. They were just slipped under the door--here and at my office."

And there were no envelopes or stamps included that might allow them to trace them.

Amber slid them into a plastic bag so they could check for fingerprints other than Iverson's. "Do you recognize the handwriting as your wife's?"

"No. That's not her handwriting. But she could have gotten someone else to write on them."

"Why don't you show us the backyard? Maybe we'll find some evidence or footprints."

They went out the back door and stood together on the wooden porch while Iverson pointed to the overturned, steel garbage can, which was empty considering today was when the city went around with the truck and picked up trash from this neighborhood. Iverson said he'd brought the receptacle back from the front of his house when he got home from work at five. The can would have been directly under the window, he told them, under the gap in his curtains. Beyond the small porch, there was a carefully "winterized" garden off to the side near the waist-high fence that separated the property from the neighbor's backyard.

"See if we can get some prints from the can," Danny told Amber.

She nodded. "I'll also talk to the neighbors while you finish the interview, see if we can get any witnesses."

"So what now?" Iverson asked while Amber went to work.

"We'll have to see what we can come up with. Have you discussed this with your wife, Mr. Iverson?"

"You mean, have I asked her if she's stalking me and sending those cards?"

Danny nodded.

"She denies everything."

He'd figured that. "Well, we'll talk to her. But those cards aren't exactly threatening."

"I don't deny that. Moira hasn't been threatening me verbally either. She just can't let go."

"So you don't believe she means you harm?"

"No. Not specifically, but following me, sending me those ridiculously romantic cards, peeping at me inside my home...it has to stop."

"A home that was her own not long ago," Danny pointed out.

"Look, regardless of her reasons, I want it to stop. Some people don't

need a reason to do insane things."

Maybe this woman does have a reason.

Danny took out his notepad and took down the wife's full name and contact information, along with the details about the office supply store where she worked. Surprising him, Amber was back by the time he closed the pad and tucked it back into his jacket.

Amber pointed to the neighbor directly behind Iverson's house. "No one saw anything except this neighbor, Mrs. William Stenson. Her description matches. Wearing all black, average height and thin, dark medium length hair. Made a run for it, knocking over the trash can, when Iverson came outside and chased her down the sidewalk."

"Anything else?"

"Witness is sure it wasn't the wife."

"How can Mrs. Stenson be so sure?" Iverson demanded.

"She says she's seen your wife out here in the backyard, working in your garden since she moved in. She's sure this person wasn't your wife. She couldn't point to any specific reason beyond that this woman was dressed differently. And there's the weird thing: She said she saw this woman tonight just as she was turning to run because she must have heard or seen you coming. She was wearing a mask--what you'd call a 'Cupid's Mask' with jewels and elaborate filigree metal shaped into a heart with satin ribbons. It was a black mask but the heart on the forehead was red."

Iverson reacted almost violently to the news. "That's it! *That's* why I couldn't see the upper half of her face. It was covered by something dark and sparkly. I couldn't put together the reason why I couldn't see her above the mouth until now. The person staring at me through the window was wearing a masquerade ball mask."

After saying they'd contact him if they needed more information or had a lead, Danny and Amber returned to the car, where she said drily, "This case's got Cupid's name all over it. Literally and figuratively."

Out of Mind

Chapter Three

5:35 p.m.

This day was nothing if not quiet, Amber conceded as they headed back toward the station. They'd had an almost clean board with hardly any calls pending. *Gee, can hardly wait for another day with this crabby woman tomorrow.* Fergie had grunted a half-dozen words in the hours, and she'd

resisted Amber's every effort to get to know her better. The worst part was that they'd barely had anything to do. A few welfare checks, traffic violations, a fender bender, issuing speeding tickets, and a ton of boring reports to go with them had barely kept them occupied. *And a lunch break that was excruciatingly uncomfortable.*

Amber actually jumped when their radio squawked for the first time that day. She reached for the handset just as she heard an ambulance siren go off nearby. Dispatch explained the reason for it. They'd found a woman at a rural farm, hiding in the barn. She'd been exposed to the elements, starved and dehydrated, disoriented to the point of extreme confusion. She hadn't given them her name. The owners of the property had brought her in the house. Amber confirmed they were heading there, not sure if she was glad for something to do or bummed she'd have to put up with her partner on something real for however long it took.

They beat the ambulance to the address, and Amber led the way to the porch, where the owner introduced herself then said, "We had no idea she was inside the barn when we closed it up last night. When we found her just a little while ago, she tried to bolt, but she collapsed. She's in bad shape. She kept asking where 'Mommy and Daddy' were. I hope it's okay, but I read the journal she had with her--a little bit, just enough to find out her name is Molly Keane and she's twenty years old. She's got some kind of amnesia. I gave her some hot tea, and even that she only holds for warmth instead of hydration. Poor thing looks terrified. I can't imagine what she's been through. When I showed her the picture in the back of the journal, she took the book and read it, didn't want to give it back, but I told her you'd need it to help her get home once you arrived."

Amber opened the journal to the first page, which had only a few lines written: "Your name is Molly Keane. You're twenty years old. You have anterograde amnesia and you're unable to form new memories. This book contains the information you need to get help."

"Anterograde amnesia," Amber read out loud.

When Fergie said, "I've heard of this", Amber realized she'd been reading over her shoulder. When she turned her head, her partner immediately took a step back.

"What is it?" Amber asked.

"Basically, a person who has it retains procedural memory...basic skills, but has lost declarative memory."

"So she can't recollect facts about herself, or everyone?"

"Usually only about herself. And generally this is focused on actual memories. She'll know how to speak, read, write, do all the things someone her age normally does. She'll know history and maybe even current events. She just doesn't have autobiographical context about her own life."

Amber glanced at her. "*Finding Nemo's* Dori? Is that what you mean? She doesn't remember her own life and what's written in this journal will be

all new to her?"

Fergie nodded. "Exactly. She might remember bits about the current day. But once she goes to sleep, that's that. She'll wake up without remembering anything, and, even after she reads her own journal, she won't feel a connection to the events that happened to herself prior to waking up."

Amber reeled at the possibility that this could be a real disorder. *No memory? What are we without our memories?* "Is this something a person is born with?"

"Not usually. Could be caused by drug use, severe trauma or violence. Maybe some other things I can't remember."

Amber had flipped through the handwritten journal to find small, careful print on most of the pages. In the back had been taped a photograph of a very thin woman with an expression of disorientation. The man next to her was smiling but something about the smile looked sad. Below the picture was written, "Molly and Father" with a full name and phone number.

Amber heard the ambulance getting closer and asked to be taken to the woman. "My husband is waiting inside with her," the farm housewife said and led the way.

The woman wrapped in a blanket was shivering despite the hot tea she held between her small, frail hands. When she reached for her journal frantically, Amber saw she was skinny to the point of being skeletal, not wearing the proper clothing for a cold day in November. Her eyes were blue, so pale, something about them unnerved Amber.

"How long have I been here?" she asked in a skittish voice after Amber introduced both her and Fergie and assured her they were there to help her.

"We can't be sure. Do you remember anything, Molly?"

The fragile woman shook her head, her eyes darting around the cluttered room like she wanted to run.

The husband told his story about finding her all but buried in a pile of hay and horse blankets, all that'd kept her from freezing last night. "Molly, do you remember anything? Do you remember coming here?" Amber asked gently.

"No."

"Okay. Well, there's an ambulance here. You need to go with the paramedics so they can be sure you're okay, and we're going to contact your father and make sure he comes to get you as soon as possible."

The expression in the woman's eyes said what she didn't out loud--she had no memory of her father beyond what she'd read of him in her journal and the photograph of him in the back of it.

"I know you don't want to part with your journal, Molly, but we need to take it to contact your father."

Molly shook her head fearfully, her grip on the book tighter than seemed possible for someone so undernourished.

Amber glanced from the farm wife, who obviously understood what this position felt like, to Fergie, who looked as if she might grab the journal out of Molly's hand because she didn't have the patience for her silliness. The woman was already terrified. Amber wasn't willing to make it worse.

Amber faced Fergie. "Will you go out and tell the paramedics I'm going to bring Molly out in a minute? Let them know what's going on, will you?"

Fergie seemed annoyed but also appeared to realize she was the junior officer and the paramedics might need a bit more information with this one. Both property owners drifted away to give Amber privacy. "Molly, I understand what this journal means to you. It has all your memories, and you don't want to let it out of your sight. But I need it for a short time. I need it to help you. I promise I'll give it back to you as soon we get to the hospital."

Molly looked at her without relenting, her gaze almost child-like in her uncertainty. But she was listening, and Amber wondered if she seemed just a little less afraid. Her gaze shifted down to Amber's throat, reminding her she'd put on the locket her father gave her for her birthday that morning. "Molly, what about this?" She reached to pull the long chain over her head. "What if you take my locket while I take your journal? When we get to the hospital, I'll give you back your journal and you'll give me back my locket?"

Without handing over the book, instead tucking it under her arm, Molly opened the gold heart Amber offered her and gazed down at the photograph inside. "Who is this?" she asked softly.

"Me and my dad when I was little."

"He calls you Elfy?" Molly asked when she looked at the inscription on the opposite side of the photograph.

Amber nodded.

"The two of you are close?"

"When I was little, yes, and now we are. But we haven't always been," Amber explained patiently. "Are you and your father close?"

Molly's eyes lifted. "I don't know," she offered, bringing her journal out from the crook of her arm.

Amber's heart winced as she realized Molly didn't remember her dad. She had no memories of him, just words written in a journal. But then Molly was tentatively proffering her the journal. "Do I have to go in the ambulance?" she asked as Amber carefully took the book from her. "Can't I...go with you...in your police car?"

"I'm sorry, Molly. We don't know what you've been through. But the paramedics will take good care of you, and I'll meet you at the hospital. I promise it won't take us long to get there. But I need to contact your father and let him know where you are."

Without making any sudden moves, Amber helped Molly to her feet, putting a light arm around her. Molly's gaze was glued to the locket now around her neck. For the moment, she let Amber lead her out of the house,

but she tensed as soon as they reached the paramedics. Amber repeated her promise once more, saying they needed to know more about Molly's condition, before one of the medics led her to the back of the ambulance and shut the doors once she was inside.

"I called Sergeant Chopp and asked him to call her father," Fergie told her.

"You remembered the phone number?" They'd only glanced at the journal for a few minutes before going in the house.

"Eidetic memory," Fergie offered vaguely. "He was obviously relieved, and he's on his way here now."

"From Minnesota?" Amber had recognized the area code. He wouldn't be here for almost three hours.

Fergie nodded. "Hope that locket didn't mean too much to you."

So her partner had noticed she and Molly had swapped. Amber shouldn't have been surprised Fergie noticed she was wearing it earlier and recognized the same around Molly's bird-like neck. She seemed to have no trouble observing everything. *I've got a photograph memory. How much more annoying is an eidetic one?*

"She probably won't remember you, the locket or the journal by the time we see her again, if she falls asleep between then and now."

Amber felt like she'd been slapped in the face by the comment implying she was an idiot and Molly was all but brain-dead. "She needed reassurance. And we need to read this journal. You drive so I can read. But first we need to check out the barn. Come on."

There was nothing to see or learn from where Molly had spent what had to be an extremely cold night. The only way to find out anything before Molly's father arrived, Amber knew, was to read as much of the journal as she could. She opened it and planned to peruse as much as she could, as quickly as she could, before they got back into town and went to the hospital.

Fergie interrupted her almost immediately. "Look, you handled her well. Even if you had to give up your locket to do it, she seemed to trust you, and she'll probably need that before her dad gets here. I've never been any good with that part of the job. Interpersonal skills."

For a minute, Amber thought about laughing her ass off and saying the sarcastic thing she was thinking: *Lady, you didn't need to say that out loud.* She could almost hear Warren telling her to play nice with her new partner.

Instead of speaking, she started reading again.

Lonely Hearts

Chapter Three

7:11 a.m.

It wasn't the first time Shelley had been late for work since she'd gotten the job at the busy gas station Four Corners. Brant Crewe, her co-worker every day, had covered for her even the first time, and she'd known he did it because he found her attractive. She'd used his attraction to her advantage, but she hadn't been sure about him. He was so young, barely twenty, and he looked so strange with the weird, long "padawan" braid hanging down his back along with tight, close-cropped, dark curls over the rest of his head, his sideburns shaved way up past his eyebrows. Along with the scraggly beard and moustache that looked like his very first, she hadn't found him at all sexy, though he wasn't, at the very least, fat. He'd asked her out a dozen times during work and at the Lonely Heart meetings before he started buying her expensive gifts that made her look at him closely. Now she found his brown eyes and mildly muscular body perfect.

Izzy Dennell came out of her office just as Shelley rushed into the gas station. The bell over the door was still tinkling when her boss asked her if she was late, clearly certain she was.

"I'm house-sitting for my sister for the week, and I had to drop my daughter off there before I came to work," Shelley defended as she put her purse under the counter. She caught Brant's apologizing gaze and knew he would have told their boss she wasn't late if she hadn't been caught in the very act.

Izzy's dark gaze swept over her, noticing everything and all but making Shelley squirm under the scrutiny. "Maybe if you spent less time prettying up for eight hours in a gas station, you'd be on time for once."

"Come on, Iz," Brant said in his most charming tone. "It's almost Thanksgiving. Cut her some slack."

"Today. You better not be late ever again."

Shelley seethed as the female troll returned to her office, mainly because she'd been right in her assessment that led to her snide comment. These days, Shelley took much longer getting ready than she'd ever had to before. Sometimes she didn't recognize the person looking back at her in a mirror. She'd never had to worry too much about her looks. No matter what she did or didn't do, she was pretty. But, with a little effort, she could be stunning. Lately, though, that effort required more and more time. She hated the lines around her eyes, the puffiness, the redness that took forever to cover up. When she'd complained about her hair in just the right way, Brant had opened his wallet and sent her to the salon to get her hair and nails done. She'd pouted about the clothes she was wearing one too many times a few weeks after she got this job, and Brant saw fit to make sure she had a few adorable outfits to wear to work. She planned to finagle the same on Black Friday. She might get a whole new wardrobe out of it.

Brant moved toward her the second the office door was closed, despite the few people already in the station. None of them were ready to check out. He pulled her into a long kiss that made her toes curl--and would have had Izzy in a positive tizzy if she'd glanced at the security monitors right then. *Another thing I love about being with a much younger man. Brant never gets tired.*

Shelley smiled her sexiest smile, aware exactly how it would affect him. "Can I see you after work?" he asked, his tone wild, as eager and unrestrained as the hot look in his eyes.

He never talked about Ariel. She'd told him about her daughter, but he liked to pretend she had no strings on her time, no responsibilities other than him and her job. She didn't mind most of the time, but early in their relationship it'd caused some problems. That social worker had made it clear she'd lose her daughter if she didn't straighten up. Shelley had gotten a job at a bar and grille, hating waitress work the most. There was too much running around, trying to remember things, having to be nice to earn a big tip. She'd never been good at that kind of thing. But one of her fellow waitresses, Wilma, who also had a kid she could barely support and had endured far too many bad romances, had told her about Lonely Hearts. The support group was very small. They were extremely selective about who they accepted, and there'd only been six people involved for more than a year before Shelley joined. Aaron was the leader, Wilma his girlfriend, Brant and three other guys who were just a little older than him rounded out the group. Wilma said they didn't want to turn their group into a dating service. Shelley had been intrigued mostly because Wilma had said the group helped her strike it rich, and during Shelley's first meeting Brant told her about the full-time job opening at the gas station he worked, the biggest and busiest in Falcon's Bend.

Shelley hadn't asked any questions, though she wondered often, about how much money Brant seemed to have to throw away. They worked the same hours for the same pay, yet he always seemed to have wads of money. True, his apartment was cheap and that had to allow him to afford the expensive car he drove, the one he'd bought her after she let him seduce her, all the jewels, perfume and makeup he'd given her, the clothes and the money they spent on eating out often. Even though she was no closer to understanding how he afforded it all, she didn't care. She was reaping the benefits. She'd even started letting herself think maybe he'd ask her to move in with him soon. She'd talk him into getting a better place for them to live. *And maybe I won't have to work at all anymore. Brant has enough money for both of us, and to spare.*

The thought always brought a jolt when she realized she had a daughter, and Brant would have to move them into a better but also *bigger* apartment. *I could have worked on him during this week if I'd let Ariel go with MaryEmma on their stupid family vacation with the money they got*

when Jordie's dad died and left behind a crapload of money for him and his brother. She wouldn't have asked me to go on that vacation with them. No, just Ariel. She kicked me out of her house but wanted me to agree to leave my daughter with her. And then she called Child Services on me after I left with Ariel for a couple days while I tried to make a life for us. Did she think I'd ever forget that? Some sister. If I hadn't gotten such a good job, met Brant, we'd be out on the streets, no thanks to her.

The uncomfortable truth Shelley didn't like to consider was that Ariel would have been thrilled to live with her aunt, to go on vacation with them. *My own sister turned my daughter against me. I can just imagine how they make me sound like some abusive monster behind my back, MaryEmma and her sister-in-law Lisa, so self-righteous in their expensive houses and cars with a windfall inheritance.* Shelley wrinkled her nose on the memory of nosy Lisa, checking up on her that morning, making sure she wasn't going to leave Ariel out on the freezing cold sidewalk.

I could've spent all my time with Brant if I'd just agreed to let MaryEmma take Ariel. But, even if I didn't, Ariel'll be over at Lisa's.

Shelley smiled, agreed that they could go to Brant's right after work, and they kissed one more time before a customer sidled up to the counter. Brant handled the transaction while she punched in, took off her coat, and put it with her purse under the counter. Brant had brought his gun, the way he usually did and hid it in a paper sack so Izzy wouldn't know. Shelley didn't like the thing, but Brant said what Izzy didn't know wouldn't hurt her. She had no idea how dangerous it was to work in a gas station, especially those shifts they had after hours. *He's just protecting us.* She shivered anyway. Then she wondered if they should go to MaryEmma's house tonight instead of his apartment or hers. The house was luxurious with an indoor pool and a hot tub, the fridge no doubt stuffed with food.

Lisa'll be rubber-necking out her windows, even if Ariel's over at her own house. No. I don't need her gossiping about me. She just barely refrained from groaning out loud at the thought of going to Brant's apartment, which was filled with computers and electronic stuff, and he never cleaned. He'd put out air freshener, but that just kind of hung over the reek, worse than if he'd just left it stinking. *I'll steer the conversation to his new apartment, maybe getting a new one, bigger and better...*

Surprisingly, work went quickly for once, and he grabbed her and kissed her as soon as they were outside near his car. "What do you wanna do today, bae?" he asked, using that weird term of affection she hadn't known how to respond to the first time. She'd thought he meant "babe" or "baby", but she'd realized starkly at that moment the differences in their ages. She hadn't wanted him to consider the same, and so she'd waited until later and asked her sister. Jordie's older daughter from his first marriage had answered and said it was a term of affection for couples...and incidentally, the Danish word for 'poop'. Shelley had blushed while everyone

else laughed, and every time Brant said it now, she substituted the word 'poop'. She hated it but didn't want to sound like an old woman by asking him to stop because she didn't understand what slang young people used these days.

"Anything I want?" she asked.

"You got it."

"Let's go to Eau Claire. We can go shopping, dinner..."

"Overnight?" he asked in a growly, sexy voice.

Shelley realized with a start that she hadn't thought about Ariel all day. Something like guilt crept up into her chest. "Well, we better not do that. But we don't have to get home early. Ariel'll be with the neighbors. And we have to work tomorrow anyway. We don't want to be rushing around."

"I guess you're right." He got that look in his eyes she well-knew, and asked, "Can we go to my place first? I gotta get some money, and I've been waiting all day to get you under me, bae."

Shelley tried to push the word 'poop' out of her mind, especially since she knew they'd now be detouring to his apartment for their quickie. She liked the idea of taking the edge off, but immediately regretted it once they were inside his pigsty. No one could accuse her of being a neat-freak herself, but his apartment was a million times worse than hers. His was pretty much one room, the only other room the bathroom and the lock was broken on that so there was no privacy at all. Clothes and junk were everywhere. Her nose wrinkled at the stench, and he rushed to light candles and spray room deodorizer, then he was kissing her, pushing her down on his unmade bed that smelled of sex and sweat from a hundred encounters. He was already aroused, but she had trouble getting past the stink and general filthiness she was literally laying in.

In more ways than one, she wanted a shower when they were done. He rolled off her and went to the mail he'd tossed onto a massive heap of junk mail when they'd come inside the apartment. "Jackpot," he said as he leafed through it, pulling one envelope out and kissing it.

"What is it?" she asked, sitting up and reaching for her clothes.

He ripped it open and pulled out a gold card, passing it to her. "Newly minted. We can splurge today. On Mr. Hugh Devon."

Shelley looked at the silver credit card, seeing the name Brant had spoken on the front of the card. Smiling, she asked, "Who is Hugh Devon? Are you related to him?"

Brant laughed out loud. "Sure. He's my uncle."

Generous uncle. "Is this an early Christmas present?"

"Definitely. Unlimited. Go crazy. From you to me, bae. "

Shelley didn't stop to think about poop this time. She was considering all she could buy with this credit card.

Assassin

"The truth may not set you free, but used carefully, it can confuse the hell out of your enemies." ~Laurell K. Hamilton, *Micah*

"Being an assassin means knowing when to kill - and when not to kill."
~Jennifer Estep, *Snared*

"Now, now my good man, this is no time to be making enemies." ~Voltaire on his deathbed, in response to a priest asking him to renounce Satan

Prologue

Monday, December 17
1:03 p.m.

"Cyber Mage," Azure Fennwick-Lock greeted the black shape on her laptop screen. As she always did when she made contact, she'd taken a seat in the most isolated section of the internet café--a new one, since the leader of the pseudo Christian doomsday cult refused to meet anywhere a second time. Their contact places and times were always decided spur of the moment, in an attempt to prevent hacking. He didn't trust anyone, especially her.

She made a slight adjustment to her headphones and the microphone attached to them just as he spoke her name in greeting in a distorted voice she knew wasn't his own.

Regardless of what she was seeing and hearing, she knew Cyber Mage was in the crowded café with her right this minute, but she didn't give away the knowledge by scanning the patrons. She'd already scoped out the area when she'd come in and gotten set up. In the meantime, her small team of mobile techies were monitoring, attempting to trace his location based on the signal from his computer connecting to hers via the program that allowed them to meet for a video chat.

"You surprise me, Azure. Truly you have. You've become a valuable agent to me. I didn't anticipate that."

"I didn't expect you to, but I'm serious about this. I'm making a break from my past ties. I intend to make the most of my connections while I do."

"Understandable, but you realize I can't overlook the fact that you're the daughter of the FBI's Associate Deputy Director."

"We talked about this. I won't harm my father. Compromise his position and steal secrets, spy, yes, but never physically harm. I've gotten all the information you asked for. That proves my loyalty. Dozens of times over."

"Are you above killing, Azure?" Cyber Mage asked with a hint of mocking laughter. "I've never seen you show an ounce of fear about anything."

"Because I have nothing to fear. I've been trained for this, to be stealthy, get in and out of any place I want to go and no one is the wiser. But I'm not an assassin, and I don't intend to become one for you. That's not what your association is about, not what we agreed to. I get you the information you need, and you take me into your confidence fully. I've proven my loyalty by doing everything you've asked of me. And I've done it quietly. No one suspects me. I've covered my tracks without a trace. They'll never see you coming when you do unleash the package. And that's because of me."

"And I couldn't be more grateful. But I'm not asking you to harm your father, Azure. I was thinking someone a bit closer to home..."

"My family is off-limits--" she started angrily.

"I was thinking of your husband."

The rockets firing in her head at where she'd assumed he was going with all this stalled so abruptly, she felt winded by the U-turn. *Can't let Cyber Mage think he's thrown me off-guard.* "If you know of Robert, then you know our marriage is nothing more than an arrangement my father put together to protect me from people like you."

"So you feel nothing for your husband?"

Azure's jaw tightened. Once upon a time, she'd been so smitten by Robert Lock, she'd never stopped to wonder why he'd taken a sudden interest in her. Robert had been an FBI agent, one of the brightest her father had taken under his wing early on, and he'd brought him home and introduced him to his family. Azure would probably never forget how she'd felt the first time she'd laid eyes on him. Despite that Robert was fifteen years older than her, she'd fallen head over heels for him. He was sexy and charming beyond all imagination, his deep, rumbling, husky voice and aphrodisiac-cologne the things straight out a teenage girl's fantasies.

When she'd been nineteen, she'd had little if no direction in her life, beyond going to college without declaring a focus, though even then her ideals were slanted toward law enforcement. She'd considered joining the FBI after she got her degree, but her father had been vehemently against that. He'd wanted his baby girl to follow her older sister's example. Get married early, settle down on a ranch and push out a passel of children. And then Robert was there constantly, and he'd paid attention to her more than ever before, joking, teasing, flirting. She'd never considered for a second her father had been the one to put Robert on the course of seducing her into a marriage that'd been little more than a sham from the start.

We put up a good front for my family when we have to, but we're enemies and there's little I wouldn't do to hurt him. Hurt him where I know it'll wound him the most. Like sleeping with Mitchell.

Azure had graduated college with a major in criminology and minor in computer programming. She'd gone straight into the FBI training program. She and Robert had lived apart in what he called an open marriage from the time of their honeymoon--not something her family had any clue about--but she'd recognized Robert's intention to watch over her from afar (and thereby keep his "in" with her father) when he'd sent Mitchell Beloit her way. She'd allowed Mitchell to seduce her, the way Robert intended so he could act as her bodyguard, but once Mitchell thought she'd become pliant she'd confronted him about the fact that he worked for Robert. He'd denied it, but her own seduction allowed her to get him to quickly admit the truth and agree to feed Robert whatever she wanted him to keep her husband from interfering and acting like he had any say in her life.

"I feel something, but not what you assume," she offered Cyber Mage vaguely.

"You may already realize he's thwarted my endeavors often in the past. He's the reason my entire operation has to be conducted in secret and as mobile as possible."

"Has he irritated you?" Azure said, seemingly without interest. "I can understand that more than you can imagine."

"We have that in common."

Azure evaluated the form on her screen. "So you don't trust me despite that I've done everything to prove my loyalty to you?"

"You know I want to. But I need to be assured just how seriously you take all this."

"Let me get this straight: Before you'll fully trust me enough near the package...what? I make sure Robert will never be a problem for you again?"

"I need that thorn neutralized, Azure. Surely you can understand that? And what better way to prove your loyalty to my cause than to be the one to pull the toxic thorn out of my paw?"

Azure allowed herself a second to consider what he was suggesting. *Kill Robert, a man I've learned to hate as much as I desire--against my own will.* Her teeth clenched, she let her gaze move cautiously around the café, only pausing for an fraction of a second on the overweight woman with messy hair, wearing sweats and John Lennon blue-tinted sunglasses, glued to her laptop and looking mildly animated about whatever she was doing. *Cyber Mage?*

"Look, even if I agree to this, you realize I can't do this overnight? I have to gain Robert's trust, and we don't really have that. We're apart most of the year. We see each other once a year."

"Yes. I'm aware. During the Christmas holidays, if I'm correct?"

Azure clenched her teeth again. *This was planned, and he's been watching me as much as he has Robert for far longer than I assumed. That's why he dared to go through with this when I approached him. Somehow he knows how I feel about Robert, understands the anger I harbor like a living*

thing. And he planned everything that happened since I approached him so it would culminate in this moment. All this time, I thought I was proving my loyalty to him so he'd allow me into the inner sanctum, but all I was doing was tightening the noose.

"I want this done by New Year's, Azure. And, if it's not, I'll conclude that you aren't loyal to me and our association will be terminated."

Translation: He'll have me killed--along with Robert--if I don't do what he's telling me to.

"And, if I do this, you'll trust me?"

"Exactly right. The next time I contact you, I expect you'll have good news for me so we can move forward."

"I expect I will."

"Good."

Just like that, he disconnected. Attempting to busy herself in closing the program, pulling her headset down to her shoulders, she surreptitiously scanned the crowd again. No one was getting up to leave. Chubby Shabby hadn't glanced around, let alone moved. She was playing with an earring and staring intently at her screen with a little half-smile. *Not Cyber Mage.*

She tapped her ear mic impatiently, muttering without moving her lips obviously, "Source location?"

"Geolocation traced. Get out of there now."

"Understood."

* * *

Only after Azure left the café did Robert Lock close his laptop and tap his ear microphone. "Alpha, attach to target. Beta, location of the signal trace to the source piggybacked?"

Both of his shadow teams checked in with affirmatives. Robert stood and moved out, making his way back to the hotel Azure was also staying. Once inside his room, he removed the fat padding and double-chin that'd seamlessly disguised his five-o'clock shadow, the wig, earrings and sunglasses while he tapped into the surveillance in Azure's room, bringing her up on his monitors.

Darn that his wife was a rebel by nature. Her old man Ozzie had realized she would be, despite that she contradictorily got along so well with her family rebellion shouldn't have been the course she should have taken. But her father had foreseen her joining the FBI and even getting herself in this position of putting herself in the line of fire for those targeting Robert.

"Now let's see what you're gonna do about it, darling," Robert muttered under his breath, fully expecting her to contact her Supervisory Special Agent immediately about the development in her undercover assignment. Instead, she started her total body, equipment-less, hardcore workout as soon as she got into her hotel room, then went to shower. By the

time she came out, Mitchell was knocking, bearing the gift of dinner for two.

What is she doing? She's an FBI agent. Why isn't she reporting in? There are regulations, SOPs. For Pete's sake, she agreed to kill me and do it by New Year's. Surely her SA needs to know the details so he can get started on a viable plan?

Robert grunted in disbelief. When Ozzie had asked him to personally take care of his daughter, Robert agreed to it, not realizing his mentor and father figure had marriage in mind. But it soon became clear that was exactly what the old man was angling for. At first, getting in good with the man had been a calculated career move, but Robert had soon come to feel much more for the Fennwick family. After growing up an orphan, unwanted for anything but the money provided as a foster kid, he'd learned about family from the Fennwicks over the years. *And I care about them. I feel loyalty...love...for them. Ozzie treated me as a good as a son, his only, since his biological children are both girls. I knew for a fact he considered me one of the family when he asked me to take care of Azure--specifically, to marry her, make her fall in love with me, keep her as far from the danger as I can get her, even as her daddy realized she would join the FBI and put herself in the thick of things sooner or later.*

Robert had done exactly what had been asked of him--and he'd felt guilty about the seduction because he'd realized Azure was too young for him and too impressionable. *And I figured Ozzie had to know the job I do isn't for a married man. Monogamy isn't in the cards. Ozzie tried to ensure it was when he laid the groundwork for me by putting in my transfer to the Milwaukee Field Office, where I was promoted to Special Agent in Charge. It took a few years to make that go through and become reality, but by that time the damage had been done. I told Azure on our wedding night exactly what she could expect of me as a husband. An in-name-only marriage, an open relationship. Putting up a show for her family once a year, making them believe genuinely that we're in love and happy together.*

From that moment on, she'd been cold as ice when they weren't showing off for her family. She put in the same appearance he did once a year for the holidays, and they had their plan to get together in Milwaukee on December 22nd, just before they were expected at her sister's ranch in Dallas, already in place.

Her infiltration of this cult I'd been chasing and trying to shut down for the last twenty years, up until three years ago when I was promoted and transferred, has to change things, doesn't it? How can I know for sure?

Robert sat in front of the monitors, rubbing his jaw, sensitive from the adhesive and flesh tone color grease wheel he'd used to attach and coat the latex prosthetic. He'd hired Mitchell to keep Azure safe three years ago, and at the time he'd fully expected Azure to realize what he was up to and seduce the agent for the sole reason of getting her own mole. Robert had encouraged Mitchell to cultivate the double-agent role. Azure hadn't yet

figured out Mitchell was still reporting back to Robert, telling him everything, and only giving her the information Robert wanted her to have about him. *But my loyal lapdog turned stupid and fell in love with the woman he was supposed to be protecting...and playing.*

Robert unconsciously reached for the bottle of whisky he'd been ploughing through since Azure arrived in Chicago last night and set up in the hotel room next door so she could make contact with Cyber Mage. Robert's surveillance was already in place in her hotel room at that time, and he'd had to endure the sight of his lackey having sex with his wife. Following the cuddly, vomit-inducing act, Mitchell had met with Robert at their agreed-upon destination--the exercise room of the hotel, the last place Azure would frequent--and Mitchell had said he didn't want to keep working for Robert, not when he was in love with Azure and wanted her to know the truth.

Luckily, a sucker who fell for anything resembling love was easy to manipulate. Robert had made him see Azure was using him. She obviously knew Mitchell was working for Robert, not her. She'd tell Mitchell whatever he wanted to hear to keep her best source of information. Even though Robert had encouraged the physical relationship, he didn't like it when Azure was falling into bed with the double-agent...again. Surprising him, Mitchell didn't try to make Azure admit her love for him as soon as the act was over, merely told her how much he loved her. When she lay back on the opposite pillow, he rolled toward her to ask how the undercover assignment was going. "Did you find Cyber Mage?"

"Yes. But I have the feeling it'll be a blind, just like all the other times before." Azure smoothly slipped away, out of bed, making Robert groan out loud. Her body tormented him, naked or clothed. At 5'10, she was honed to perfection, yet her curves were ripe and full.

"There's only one way to get to him. He issued an ultimatum when we met today. If I kill Robert, he'll open the last door, the one that gets me near the weapon he's developing."

"What?"

"You heard me," Azure said without looking back at him. She'd shrugged into a robe, smoothing her waist-length, flame-red hair--a huge improvement over the magenta dye she'd sported for years in college.

"So you contacted your SA?" Mitchell said, gasping out the way Robert had in the hours she'd avoided doing what she should have first and foremost.

"No. Not yet. I will. Soon."

"Why haven't you done it already?"

She shrugged, sitting in a chair and reaching for her laptop. "It's close to Christmas..." she offered, not a reason at all. She clearly didn't have valid justification for not reporting this development instantly.

Because she wants to go ahead with it, whether her SA approves or not? What the--

"Why don't you head out?" she said to Mitchell without an ounce of emotion, not looking at him. "I need to contact my team and see where we are on a physical location."

Robert waited more than five minutes before leaving his room to meet Mitchell near the third floor vending level. He took the stairs down to it, moving slowly and trying to talk himself out of cold-cocking his lackey on sight. *If I fire him, I lose my way of protecting and watching over Azure.*

More than anything, he hated to admit the change in himself. Azure was Azure, and he couldn't deny he'd had a hand in shaping her, especially where their relationship was concerned. She hadn't expected that blow on their wedding night. *She loved me--full-on rose-colored glasses. Disillusioning her hadn't been easy, but I didn't have any other choice. I accepted the consequences as she become stone-hard against me in the ten years we've been "married". I never expected to wish things were different between us, not the way I did last year at Christmas.*

Dammit, I'm getting too old. Told myself all this time I just didn't like being in charge, that I miss the undercover work I did when I was just another agent at the Minnesota Field Office. But it wasn't that. I'm tired. I spent the holiday last year looking at Azure's sister and husband, her parents, and wishing I was a different person, that I'd chosen a different path in life. I considered myself weak all my life for wanting a family, to be part of one. But I want that. I want that more than anything. I want a real marriage--to Azure. I fell in love with her last year.

What an idiot I am.

Six foot six, two-hundred-fifteen-pound Mitchell was all but bouncing off the walls of the small vending machine alcove when Robert ducked into it. As usual, his employee assumed Robert knew as much as he did.

"Do you want me to push her and see if I can find out why she's not reporting this to her SA?"

Robert shook his head. "She'll suspect you if you do. Right now, she thinks you're so much in love with her, you'll do anything she wants. Tell her I've been asking about her, what she's working on. I'm a pit bull, but you didn't tell me anything."

"I don't like this--"

Robert's hands clenched, and he let his fury loose. "You think I like watching you with my wife? Neither of us are gonna get what we want here, and all that matters is that she's safe. Stay where you are. Keep me informed. Protect her at all cost. But you can stop enjoying the sex so much, you louse."