



Degrees of Separation **Excerpt**

Book 1 of the Falcon's Bend Series
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"A certain period elapses, and some unseen mysterious principle again sets in motion the magic pinions and the wizard wheels. The silver cord was not for ever loosed, nor the golden bowl irreparably broken. But where, meantime, was the soul?"

~from "The Premature Burial" by Edgar Allan Poe

Prologue

I've done the right thing, Stephan Kelley told himself.

Just yesterday, seventeen-year-old Tyaa Savic had given birth to twin daughters. Considering the young girl's many dangerous addictions, it had been a miracle in itself that Tyaa managed to carry them for seven months.

"The first little girl that came out was kicking and screaming," the nurse had told Stephan--the adoption case representative--outside Tyaa's room. "Healthy as a horse with good lung development. All that blond hair! The second is smaller. Frail. She'll need to be taken care of 'round the clock for a good long while. I hope she makes it, poor little thing."

Throughout a sleepless night, Stephan had wrestled with the knowledge that finding parents who would take two newborns at once was difficult at any time. This time it had been

impossible. Only weeks ago he'd located two couples, each of whom wanted a single child, and the paperwork and interviews had been completed in record time.

How do I choose? Stephan had agonized in the darkness of his living room, his hands clenched into tight fists. *How do I decide which girl goes where? How can I make a decision like that when the worlds are so severely different?* If both couples had been middle class...it would be easier. *So much easier.*

Stephan had finally taken a deep breath and told himself to be logical, the way his boss was. "Face facts instead of emotions," Mr. Corley was always saying. Never mind that the differences in the couples had been antipodal to the extreme.

The fact was, the DeMazzinos owned a chain of posh restaurants around the United States and were in the process of expanding overseas. They literally had servants on every doorstep. They were the type of ideal couple the Second Chance Adoption Agency loved to provide children for.

The fact was, one of the twins was weak and would need medical care for the first few weeks or months of her life to survive. Logic dictated that her parents would need money to afford the expenses. The DeMazzinos had the finances and the love to give this weaker twin everything she needed to thrive.

As soon as Stephan called them with the good news that morning, they rushed to the hospital to meet their new daughter. They insisted that money was no object. She would have the best doctors in the world to nurse her to complete health. While they hugged each other and smiled with tears in their eyes as they viewed their beautiful new child, Stephan reluctantly forced himself to depart.

The fact was, the strong twin would survive. She would have to spend her life fighting for everything she got, but she would survive better anywhere than with a mother who cared nothing for her.

Now, with the strong newborn behind him in the backseat of his car, Stephan drove through the precarious streets in one of the worst sections of the city. The Bronstons owned a run-down hotel in this area. Regardless, they'd passed the usual battery of tests required and had three foster children already--all girls under the age of ten.

As he approached the building, a shudder ran through him. He had to ignore the dread that had multiplied with each visit to the Bronstons' home. They'd passed the tests *more* than once. The cold feeling in Stephan's middle had to be nothing serious--a mere reaction to the poverty the family lived in, especially compared to what the DeMazzinos could offer any child.

Jane and Elmo Bronston were waiting for him, looking anxious as he presented the child to them. The little girl was crying with all the gusto of a tidal wave, and Stephan's own instincts were to comfort her. Smiling slightly as he took the tiny child from the car seat and snuggled her in his arms, he watched her become calm against him.

"She's ours?" Jane asked, a woman who'd never been able to have children of her own. She'd explained that numerous times during the interviews. She'd said there was nothing more she wanted in this world than a child of her own.

Swallowing with difficulty, Stephan handed the cherub over to her new mother. *Why don't I believe her?* he wondered. *Why don't I feel her and her husband's desire to love and care for this child is genuine? I'm being foolish.*

"Go back in your room!" Elmo shouted suddenly, forcing Stephan's attention to snap to the doorway behind them. One of the foster girls ducked back into the darkness beyond so quickly, Stephan was certain he must have imagined what he saw. *She was probably outside, playing in the dirt. That was dirt all over her face.*

Mrs. Bronston handed the baby to her husband, hurrying through the doorway the girl had disappeared back into.

"Is everything all right?" Stephan asked when the newborn wailed alarmingly.

"Not easy with so many kids. They're into everything," Elmo said in a you-know-how-it-is tone. "But we love 'em."

Stephan nodded, feeling that chill again in his middle when he looked into Mr. Bronston's eyes. *Cold eyes. Heartless eyes. The eyes of a predator.*

"It's been hectic this morning. If you wouldn't mind, Mr. Kelley--" he started pointedly, and Stephan nodded.

When he got outside the house, he stood on the doorstep for a minute, wondering if he could get himself to leave here without looking back. At once, he knew he shouldn't but couldn't stop himself from shifting over to the dirty panels of windows next to the door and peering inside.

What he saw there took the air from his lungs. Mr. Bronston had laid the baby on the floor and knelt on hands and knees over it. Though Stephan had told them as soon as he arrived with the child that she'd just been fed and her diaper had been changed at the hospital, the baby now lay naked beneath Mr. Bronston. His lips were curled back like that of a hungry wolf.

Jane Bronston came into the room, barely noticing her husband as she instead hurried toward the window. Stephan ducked his head back quickly to avoid notice and rushed to his car.

He'd imagined it. The man was just checking the baby's diaper. Surely if the wife hadn't noticed anything amiss...The couple had passed the tests. Their other foster children had all looked healthy and claimed to be happy, though their extreme shyness and empty eyes had bothered Stephan on more than one occasion.

I had no choice, he told himself over and over until he convinced himself.

And Stephan Kelley washed his hands of it, never once believing it was a decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Chapter One

Twenty-one years later...

*If this day sucked any worse, it'd have a straw, Teresa thought, heaving in the fresh air as she stumbled out of *Danse de Minuit* into the darkness. She felt better than she had a little while ago when she'd puked up just about everything that wasn't permanently fixed in place. *Sure ain't gonna tell Andre I feel a world better though!**

If she did that, she'd be back on stage faster than she could wink. Andre never allowed any of them to "shirk" their duties to him.

Tottering slightly on her stiletto heels, she turned toward the front of the building and headed out onto Third Avenue. Her throat felt raw, and she wished she'd had time for a drink of water before Andre appeared demanding to know why she wasn't out on stage dancing. She'd run the risk of having to do what her boss expected of her or the even more dangerous task of lying to him. She'd gone against her every instinct and lied, saying she'd thrown up and felt feverish now. The first part was true. Looking peeved, Andre had told Lacey to go get Roy to drive her home.

According to Lacey, Roy had been "throwing some p@#k out." Teresa had assured everyone she could walk home; she'd make it somehow. Silently she'd wondered if the truth of the matter was that Roy didn't want to be in that close of contact with her. After all, less than six hours ago she'd told him it was over between them. *I chose Andre over him; Roy's got a right to be royally pissed at me. Can't blame him...but Lord, I miss him.*

She'd never forget the look on his face when she blurted out that she couldn't run away with him. Lordy, but he'd been infuriated after that, convinced Andre had brainwashed her, threatened her. Worse, Roy believed she'd used him the whole time.

Teresa pressed a hand gently to her stomach. Roy was no good for her. He was no better than a sugar pimp, using his charm instead of violence to control her--she knew he wouldn't have changed even if they got away. But...she loved him, loved his gentleness, his sweetness. He was a teddy bear encased in armor and she'd found her way straight to his heart. They shared something so vital. How could she have let Andre talk her out of their plans?

No sense crying over spilt milk, hey. It's all over now anyway. Andre blackmails me with my own emotions, just like forever, no shame for him. He always gets what he wants, one way or another, and you know it, girl.

A chill went up her spine when she remembered how he'd grabbed her by her arm so hard and yanked her toward him. She'd never forget the look in his eyes as he'd said coldly, "You'll never leave me. I'll never let you get away, baby. Never. If you try--if you even *try*--I'll kill you and anyone foolish enough to go with you."

No, she'd never forget again. She belonged to Andre. *'Til death do us part.*

But me and Roy, we were so close! Ah, damn it, so close. Roy loved me. Somehow I don't believe Andre even cares unless it benefits him somehow. Roy'll never forgive me now. No

way. He told me I was one of Andre's stupid b@#s, tied tight to the post with a leash. He'll never forgive me--never, never, never.

Unless...unless I tell him...

As she neared the park, Teresa decided to cross the parking lot and sit on a bench awhile, give herself time to think. Maybe she ought to go to Roy's instead of home. Tell him when he got back later that she was stupid--that she'd changed her mind, if he'd still have her. Somehow they'd get away from Andre.

Yeah.

She'd made the detour through the entrance of the park and toward the nearest bench overlooking the pond when she felt something come down hard on her neck. For a moment she didn't have a clue what was happening to her. Then she realized she couldn't breathe. Something cold cinched around her throat. Before she could more than grapple for the constrictor, a knee slammed into her back and a weight came down on her. She was falling, clawing for air.

Ain't happening...ain't-- Not when...my dreams...finally...coming true. My Roy...baby...

The darkness swooped down from above and swallowed her whole...