



Destiny

A Peaceful Pilgrim Novel

Excerpt

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Prologue

“Dad?”

Christian Riley looked up at his twenty-year-old daughter, Destiny. She was stunning in a deep blue satin dress with bell sleeves. Eighteen-year-old Aidan wore a tuxedo similar to the one Chris had on with a blue satin bowtie. Tonight’s celebration was multi-fold—dual twenty-year wedding anniversaries and the bestowing of the city’s annual Humanitarian Award. The three of them were in the family room, waiting for Elizabeth to finish getting ready.

“Since we may be waiting quite a while for Mom to get ready,” Destiny started, “I wanted to talk to you.”

“What is it, honey?”

“James asked me to marry him last night,” she said without preface. Her face was pink

in the lamp light glowing softly in the room.

Chris goggled at her. His daughter was so young, and she'd only been dating James Sparks for a few months. He glanced at his son to see Aidan had obviously already heard the news. He wondered if Elizabeth had been told first, or guessed. She would.

When Chris didn't speak, *couldn't*, right away, Destiny went on. "I know it's fast, Dad, but...I've never felt like this before. He says he hasn't either. I love him madly. You and Mom dated a long time before you got married, didn't you? Is it better to wait before we take such a big step?"

Chris raised an eyebrow, offering, "Actually, your mother and I didn't date for a long time. Not at all."

Destiny's beautiful face scrunched up in confusion. Sometimes she still looked like the adorable little girl she'd been. Other times...he couldn't deny she was all grown up. "But you said you knew each other forever."

Chris couldn't help smiling as he nodded. "We did. That much is true. We knew each other all our lives. We didn't actually start dating until we were thirty."

"Thirty?" Destiny repeated in shock. She and her brother exchanged glances. "But then...well, were you in love all that time, even before you started dating?"

Chris rubbed the back of his neck that felt too warm in the full dress tuxedo. "Not exactly."

Now Destiny really seemed surprised. "But I've never see a couple more perfect for each other than you and Mom. Well, except maybe Oscar and Yolie."

The mention of the second couple celebrating their twenty-year wedding anniversary made Chris recall the craziness of two decades earlier. Who could have predicted how their lives would ultimately turn out? Certainly not him. He never would have guessed this. That he'd get everything he ever wanted just when he'd lost it all.

"So, how did you and Mom know it was right when you did finally get together?"

A jumbled mix of emotions washed over Chris. He'd come so close to complete devastation. So close to losing the only woman he could ever love. Losing the faith that had turned his life into something unrecognizable, even miraculous. Losing a childhood friend who'd become his *best* friend.

Chris glanced up at his daughter when she said, "Dad?" again. He shook his head in wonder and murmured, "How did we get together? Sweetheart, that was destiny hard at work..."

Part I:

Destiny's Design

Destiny -- A mysterious, powerful force believed to control everything in your life and ultimately suggests that you can't change or make choices about anything that's meant to be.

"If it's got your number on it, you'll get it, no matter where you are!"
~C. Fremlin, *By Horror Haunted*

Twenty-one years ago...

Chapter 1

Chris welcomed the call that came in while he was in late afternoon L.A. Metro traffic. Anything to break up the monotony of impatient waiting. He really had to consider rescheduling this weekly meeting with his corporate onsite senior manager to a time of day when he wouldn't hit the slow-moving blockade on the way back to his high-rise apartment, where he kept his office.

Until he heard the voice on the other end of the line, he assumed the call was from his girlfriend, Afton Ray—someone he'd been dating for about three weeks now. They were supposed to see each other that evening. *Maybe I should cancel our date tonight. Ever since that...impotent disaster, she's been on the fence about getting serious and taking it to the next level. How can I blame her? I've never been more humiliated in my life. Afton must be wondering if a relationship with me is worth pursuing, just as I have been about her.*

But when Chris glanced at his phone in the dash holder before letting the call go through the Bluetooth system in the car, he saw the caller wasn't Afton. He didn't recognize the subscriber number—only the area code and exchange. Peaceful, Wisconsin, where Chris had been born and raised until he was seventeen and all but fled to Los Angeles to escape the suffocating sense that he had no control of his life whatsoever.

Frowning, he pressed the button on the steering wheel to accept the call, then moved up the few inches traffic afforded him. "Chris Riley."

"Christy, my boy, how the heck are you?"

Chris instantly recognized the voice of his father's only brother. Uncle Bo could be described as nothing less than the black sheep of the family. In contrast, Chris's father had served as pastor at the Peaceful Pilgrim Church for more than twenty years. He'd retired only six years previously. Uncle Bo had been in jail far longer than that—closing in on fifteen years now.

"You're calling," Chris said in surprise. His uncle generally wrote letters. Not long ones, but a handful of lines at least once every couple weeks.

"I am. I'm calling 'cause I'm out."

"Out?" Chris repeated. "Out of prison?"

His uncle had gone before the parole board more than once in his years inside and he'd been denied—mostly because there was plenty of opposition to his release.

"That's what I said." His uncle's laughter boomed through the confines of Chris's air-conditioned luxury vehicle.

"Out? When? How?"

A car behind him beeped impatiently because Chris hadn't crept forward another few inches to catch up to traffic. He performed his duty, but his entire mind was on his uncle's release. Fifteen years ago, Bo had been found guilty of manslaughter. Chris had never believed his uncle killed his wife. Sure, the couple didn't get along, and anyone who merely glimpsed them together knew that beyond a shadow of a doubt. But who could question the situation? Chris had never been fond of his aunt himself. She'd been self-righteously disapproving of everything, mostly her husband. Chris often thought as a teenager that it was a good thing the couple never had children of their own. She would have driven her own kids to suicide.

Chris had been closer to his uncle than with any of his other relatives except his mother, and even in that relationship there'd been a barrier. He'd always known *who* his parents wanted him to be, what their expectations were of him. Bo had been far from perfect himself, and he'd seen no need to lead a perfect life. To add insult to injury, he'd had little use for a holy God without tolerance for the sinful creatures He'd created so shortsightedly. Uncle Bo questioned things his brother, Pastor Nathaniel Riley, would never have dared to. Most Christians didn't allow anyone to ask why God, all-powerful and capable of anything, hadn't created a human race instilled with equal parts freewill and no taste for sin. How hard could it be to come up with this combination when you ruled the world and *spoke* tangible matter into existence? Why build in the desire for sin in man, then draw a line before him? Chris had questioned the same things as his uncle for most of his life, but when he graduated high school he changed. He made the decision to rule his own life. He would be in control of his own destiny.

"Did you know you were getting out?" Chris asked when Bo told him he'd been released that morning and had headed straight to Peaceful with the few bucks in his pocket to have one of Michael's world-famous Italian-style French dips. He frequently said it was what he missed most during the fifteen years he'd been locked up.

"These decisions always seem to happen on a dime, my boy."

"Why didn't you tell me? Write to me when you first found out?"

"I'm tellin' you now. I know you're busy. You got a big business out there, don't you?"

Chris was the owner of a game design technology company called Riley Gaming Unlimited headquartered in Los Angeles. Their sales were worldwide and they'd become a raging success after thirteen years in the industry. Chris rarely went to work anymore. His high-rise was equipped with everything he needed to work out of his home, including a personal assistant who did most of the running around he normally would do himself. His project directors and managers did most of the day-to-day, hands-on delegation and facilitating, and he trusted them implicitly to handle the various departments within the company. Chris primarily handled company strategy and development.

"I'm not so busy that I don't want to know what's going on in your life," Chris insisted. "What will you do now?"

He could almost imagine his uncle shrugging and contemplating whether or when he could afford another French dip. Bo always wanted just a little bit more than he had yet his goals tended to be simplistic, even superficial. "I guess I'll go home. Get a job. Didn't sell the old house, so I'll just go back there and hope it's livable."

Chris swallowed the lump that filled his throat. He couldn't fathom how his uncle could consider going back to the place where his wife had plunged to her death from the top of the steep staircase—something that everyone else was convinced had been deliberate. "Will you be okay there?" he asked his uncle.

Bo snorted. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well...you know..."

A strange note entered his uncle's voice when he started, "Chris, you don't still think..."

Chris frowned. "Still don't think *what*?"

There was a short pause, then Bo sighed. "I figured after all this time, you'd just accept it like everybody else."

"Accept what?" Chris shook his head, an unanticipated sense of dread creeping along his nerves. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Bo."

Obvious discomfort filled the older man's voice. "You know. But I paid for my crime. It's over now. I did the time. You of all people must understand what I did, Christy. *Why* I did it. At the time, it didn't seem like there was any other way to get through a single 'nother day with that woman."

Chris choked in shock. His uncle couldn't be saying... "Any other way to what?" he said, sounding as strangling as he felt.

"Escape. I couldn't take another minute, my boy. I had to end it. I didn't have a choice. Not if I was gonna stay sane."

Chris let out a low moan. Dear God, this couldn't be happening...



"Well, I think it's a crime," Oscar Albright said. He didn't slow down from his "run" on the twin elliptical trainer he was using beside Elizabeth Horace's in the living room portion of her studio apartment. As they did most every weeknight, they were watching a rerun of a 7th *Heaven* episode while they worked out. "They're supposed to be a Christian family. How can they be on board when their oldest son renounces Christ in order to fit in with his new bride's Jewish family?"

"I don't think that's what they intended to display with this episode," Elizabeth said mildly. "The character fell in love..."

Oscar snorted. "Love doesn't cover every sin. It doesn't make everything right. Matt made the poorest choice he could have by denying Christ simply to make his new in-laws happy. I don't think the writers of this show knew the first thing about what it means to be a Christian..."

Elizabeth tuned out the disgust in her best friend's voice. She'd known exactly what Oscar would say about this situation anyway. It wasn't necessarily that she blamed Oscar for his way of thinking. She agreed with him in theory. But sometimes falling in love left a person without options. Sometimes love was simply destiny at work, and you had to follow wherever it went.

Oscar was still grouching when her cell phone rang. She instantly slowed and stepped off her machine to grab the phone from her coffee table, recognizing the ringtone she'd set to let her know when Chris was calling. Every nerve ending in her body went to red alert.

"I'll be back," she called to Oscar, not turning to face him as she all but ran to her bathroom—the only private area in her tiny loft. Before she could close the door behind her, her Turkish Angora cat, Arwen, darted inside the room with her. She jumped up on the sink while Elizabeth pressed the button to answer Chris's call.

"Are you alone?" he asked without preface.

She swallowed, feeling like the electrical impulses in her body had been interrupted by the sound of his voice in her ear. "I can be. Where are you?"

Elizabeth's breathing became ragged, erratic. It was as if Chris was reading her mind. Her heart raced. She'd desperately needed to talk to him and she hadn't known how to get to him. She never contacted him, whether by phone or by visiting his apartment. He was always the one to call and come to her. But this... What if he'd gone months on end without contacting her? She'd wondered constantly what she would do. It wouldn't have been the first time he abandoned her for so long either. How could she tell him the truth though? She didn't *know* the truth. *I suspect. That's all.* What would he do when he found out her fears? Would he become upset? Blame her? Walk away? *Dear Lord, I'd die. I couldn't survive that.* The sweat on her body felt cold, and she shivered against it.

"I'm in the parking garage," Chris said, his tone sounding noticeably agitated.

Her apartment building provided free access to a parking garage—only it wasn't connected to the building, located instead across the street. She had her own space in the garage that came with her loft rental, but she'd never been able to afford a car of her own, nor did she do much driving herself anyway. She and Oscar had purchased a good used vehicle when they moved here thirteen years earlier. They shared all expenses associated with the car. When they had separate appointments, Oscar used public transportation while she used their car. More likely than not, however, Oscar tried to work the situation so he could drop her off at her appointment, go to his, then come back for her later. His parking space was the one they put the car in each night, since they lived in the same building, and technically his was closer to the apartment building. Whenever Chris came to see her, he used her space rather than pay the small fortune he'd have to if he could even find a parking spot overnight in Downtown Los Angeles.

Elizabeth stroked Arwen's long, silken white fur. Despite the distraction in her caresses, the cat purred in ecstasy. Unable to help herself, Elizabeth flushed, reminded of the last time Chris had come to her. She moved to the small, narrow window in the room. "Chris, are you all right? You sound upset."

She shouldn't have been surprised. Chris only came to her when he was a low point, when he felt like everything was going wrong and he was at his wit's end. *And I always let him. I can't imagine anything else. I wouldn't want to imagine not giving myself to him whenever he reaches for me.*

From the time they were children, Christian Riley had a bright, radiant glow

surrounding his entire being. When she looked at him, he appeared larger than life in her reverent eyes. Countless times, he'd proven how much of a hero he was to her when he gave of himself selflessly to others—the church, the Lord, to the people he ministered to. All she required was a tiny bit of his attention. In truth, she wanted every single ounce of his attention. But he'd never given her more than enough to make her his slave. Sometimes it seemed to her that her entire life came down to him. Seeing him. Wanting him. Dying to be with him constantly, in any way he agreed to. She'd never gotten what she wanted with him. Ever. She couldn't get herself to believe their relationship might ever be the way she desired, yet giving up was simply unimaginable to her.

"Can you tell Oscar to go home?" Chris muttered, guessing correctly that their childhood friend was with her. "I can't deal with him right now. I have to see you, Elizabeth."

Her insides melted, pliable to his every demand. "Of course. Give me a few minutes."

She'd never enjoyed having to "get rid of" Oscar, especially when she had no choice but to lie to make him go. But she knew best that having Oscar and Chris in the same room was violence waiting to happen. The two men had ceased to be friends, the way she'd always assumed they were when they were children. They grew up together, spent most of their time as a group because their families were so involved in the same church ministries. She couldn't say exactly when the guys' friendship had fractured, but they were closer to enemies than friends now. The mere mention of Chris's name turned Oscar into an uptight explosion. Once the pin was pulled, he'd go off. Chris simply sneered and tried to get rid of Oscar as often as he could.

Though their workouts weren't complete, she said as soon as she left the bathroom, "I'm tired, Oscar. I'm sorry. We have such a big day tomorrow. I think I'm just going to go to bed early tonight."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you not feeling well?" he asked with concern, stepping off the cardio machine.

He knew best that she'd been ill often lately, though she hadn't confided in him the reason why. "I'm fine. Just tired. I'll be refreshed tomorrow morning. I promise."

Her smile seemed to do nothing to reassure him, but after he'd folded up the exercise machines and arranged them carefully in her closet, he made her promise to call him if she needed anything or changed her mind and decided not to go to bed early after all.

"I will."

"Okay." He nodded yet lingered in her open doorway.

Elizabeth thought she'd go insane, waiting for him to accept the disruption to their daily routine. Oscar was nothing if not a creature of habit. She smiled again when he got to his apartment on the opposite end of the hall, then she turned away and closed the door. Anxiously, she picked up her cell phone again and called down to the doorman, Jelipe, to let him know Chris would be coming and to let him in as soon as he arrived. Then she closed her cat inside the bathroom. Arwen was the sweetest, friendliest cat in the world, but she didn't like Chris at all.

With nothing to do but wait, she couldn't help sniffing herself. She hadn't done a full workout, had barely worked up a sweat yet, but did she smell bad? There was no time to change out of her elastane polyester shorts and tank top. Chris would have already left the parking garage, was probably in the lobby right now. Nervously, she tidied her apartment, turned off the television and her cell phone, glanced at her makeup and hair in the mirror

over the vanity table near her bed. Not liking what she saw, she went into the bathroom and tried to repair the damage.

The very soft knock on her door sent her flying across the room in response. She opened the door, he came in and closed it, and she just barely resisted throwing herself in his arms. Nothing seemed to matter except that he was here again. He'd obviously come straight from a meeting. He wore a well-tailored suit and gold and navy tie that made his amber brown eyes more luminous. She reacted from head to toe to his presence. Her fingers wanted to thread into his short, professionally trimmed, reddish brown hair. He parted it at the side and more than a few strands were slightly mussed now, falling over his forehead and making her fingers itch to touch. At six foot, he was only a few inches taller than her, but he was muscular, broad-shouldered, and imposing in a way that made her feel smaller, softer, infinitely feminine.

Unfortunately, she recognized the expression on his handsome, clean-shaven face. The agitated tone of his voice on the phone earlier matched this. She knew from the first instant that he wasn't there for her. Even as her world became balanced with his presence, he was obviously ungrounded and even half-crazed because of whatever had upset him. He started talking and she didn't interrupt him except to summarize, "Your uncle was released from prison. It's been...fifteen years? I know. The charge was manslaughter, but the jury judged it to be accidental..."

"Was it?"

She frowned at him. "Was it what?"

Chris shook his head. "I don't know anymore. Bo said he thought I'd accept the truth like everyone else. That he'd paid for his crime, did his time, and now it was over."

Understanding flooded Elizabeth and made her nervous because she knew Chris had never been able to see the forest for the trees when it came to his uncle. No one else who knew Robert, or Bo as Chris called him, doubted for a second that he'd killed his wife. He'd entered a plea of innocence at the trial and insisted his wife's death was an accident. Although Elizabeth always had been and always would be on Chris's side, she knew Robert had killed that poor woman. Nevertheless, she'd admired Chris for his unwavering faith in his uncle's innocence. It was like him to give the benefit of the doubt and believe the best of everyone—everyone except Oscar. When his uncle said there'd been a power outage during a nasty spring storm, that he and his wife had been going down the steep staircase together that night, and he'd lost his footing, grabbed onto anything—grabbed onto his wife, accidentally sending her down the stairs to her death, Chris had believed his story even while everyone else questioned it. Robert had wanted to divorce the woman for years, but she'd refused to grant him an escape from what she insisted was a God-ordained union. They'd fought constantly, in public and no doubt private. No one had been surprised to learn of her suspicious death. Chris had been adamant in defending his uncle. His father wondered later if the jury had been swayed by Chris's passionate defense in providing his uncle with a witness to the "accident".

"Chris, did something happen?" Elizabeth asked, putting a soothing hand on his arm.

"I asked Bo if he lied in a court of law, and he said if he did, he did it for me. That I was just a kid. He couldn't tell the truth and devastate me."

"He's admitting now that he lied, that his wife's death wasn't an accident after all?"

Chris exhaled frantically. "I don't even know. He wouldn't out-and-out admit it at first, but my response must have thrown him. After that, he kept saying her death was an

accident. But I can't help wondering..." His eyes met hers. "I never doubted once he was innocent. I lied for him because I believed it so completely."

Elizabeth had suspected Chris had made false claims to protect his uncle. She couldn't say anything then because having *her* question him would have infuriated and made him feel more justified in his actions. But the truth was coming out now, and, instead of making him dig his heels in even firmer, he seemed helpless and lost in the face of it. His uncle had been his unworthy mentor—the very person that Elizabeth, Oscar, and Chris's own parents believed had led Chris to the faithless existence he was leading now.

Realizing that his mentor had feet of clay couldn't be easy for him. She would be here for him in whatever way he needed her. Her own problems could wait.



His jaw rigid, Oscar Albright opened the door of his apartment a crack and peeked out. As if conjured—certainly not by Oscar's wish—Chris Riley appeared in the hall and knocked softly on Elizabeth's door. A moment later, he disappeared inside. Fury ripped through Oscar like a hurricane. He only just resisted the impulse to slam his door with every ounce of the force growing inside him now. There was no question in his mind that Elizabeth was throwing away her common sense right now because she believed herself to be madly in love with Riley. She'd believed that all her life.

She has to be blind. What else explains her stupidity? And I'm madly in love with her. Have been all my life, and she doesn't even notice. Why should she? We're best friends. That's all. Maybe that's all it'll ever be. No matter how cruel and heartless and immoral Riley proves himself to be, she'll always let him back in without a second thought to questioning the wisdom in doing so. And I'm just as blind because I love her too much to shake some sense into her.

He dropped into a wooden chair a few feet away from his door, propped his elbows on his knees, and tried to control the storm brewing inside him. This had happened so often in the past thirteen years, since the three of them graduated high school and Riley ran from Peaceful, Wisconsin like he had a demon on his heels. Maybe he did. Just like that, Elizabeth made the decision to follow him to Los Angeles. What could Oscar do? He knew she couldn't survive in a big city like L.A. all by herself, not simply because she had the worst luck of anyone he'd ever met, but because she was a small town girl and would never be anything but. Oscar had known for damn sure Riley would do nothing to take care of her when he found out she'd followed him. So he went with her, left the only home he'd ever known, the only home he cared to know, left his family, his church, everyone and everything he loved because Elizabeth needed him.

So much for the Three Musketeers. Oscar's teeth clenched again. Elizabeth had spent her life oblivious to the obvious. She'd assumed the clichéd "church kids" were best friends, but Oscar had forever been able to see right through Chris Riley. Everything he did was to glorify himself. And Riley always did get the attention for everything. Maybe Oscar wouldn't have minded so much if the reverent spotlight that inevitably fell on him hadn't

included Elizabeth's. She'd fallen for him from the very beginning. Oscar didn't remember a time she wasn't hovering around Riley, begging for a molecule of his attention. Riley had been so unworthy of her worship. As teenagers, he'd led her on, allowing her think they'd be together always. She'd hung on his every word, performed his any request, was there for him to command at a moment's notice. *No different than I was with her. But she only saw me as a friend who tagged along with her and Riley. That jerk barely seemed to notice her most of the time...yet he relies on her. Always has. He expects her to be there for him. When he has a need, oh, then and only then he notices her. Treats her like a servant at his beck and call, and Elizabeth's happy to be his slave.*

Oscar grimaced in disgust. The fact that Riley didn't date other girls when they were teenagers had bothered him for a long time. That action made no sense. Riley had to know Elizabeth would allow him to date anyone else as long as he always came back to her. Naturally, she didn't care to date anyone else herself, though she'd had her pick as well. Instead, Riley let everyone, Elizabeth included, assume they were a couple. But they never really were. Riley proved that truth when he abandoned her without so much as a goodbye and left to attend college in Los Angeles. Just as Oscar had forever realized, Riley proved his for-show Christianity as a kid and teenager was nothing more than an act. Chris Riley didn't believe any of it. His relationship with the Lord was nonexistent. In that thirteen years that followed, Riley had been returning to Elizabeth whenever he hit rock bottom—which was often, considering that the SOB had no moral compass at all.

What does that say about Elizabeth?

Oscar covered his face with his hands. Riley had so easily passed himself off as everyone's hero. Everything he did turned to gold, and he had a knack for doing his good deeds in a big way, so everyone would see what a miracle worker he was. Oscar saw through his love for the praise of men. It was inconceivable for Riley not to let his left hand know what his right hand was doing so he could get his praise in heaven, where it would amount to something real and lasting. Remembering the simpering adoration on Elizabeth's face whenever Riley was honored by all the people made Oscar's stomach turn sour.

Riley was so careless with her—why couldn't she see his heartless cruelty? Why did she accept whatever worthless scraps he tossed her way?

But how could Oscar blame Riley for wanting her if only for superficial reasons? All her life, Elizabeth had possessed otherworldly beauty with her long, shiny chestnut hair that softly curved around a face with smoky, slanted, velvet black eyes, ultra-thick eyelashes and a mouth made for fantasies. Oscar was convinced that the word 'hourglass' had been created just to describe her absolutely incredible body.

Her looks were simply icing on the cake though. She was smart and feminine with an innate kindness that was so rare as to be unheard of. Oscar could see her as nothing less than the perfect woman. She was the whole package, and his goal in life was to be there for her every minute of every hour of every day.

I'm worthy of her. Riley knows it, and he enjoys tormenting me because he'll always have Elizabeth in whatever way he wants her. He plays with her like he's a cat with a timid mouse. Does he have any idea how beautiful and sweet she is? How innocent? She believes in true love like it's something magical and healing and transforming. Nothing I say to make her see reality where Christian Riley is concerned will ever get through to her. She believes Riley's going through a phase and someday he'll accept his destiny—that he belongs to God and her.

She's so naïve.

Guilt for his thoughts came and went like a changing wind. He had to protect Elizabeth, and much of the time, it meant protecting her from herself. He'd worked out their lives here in Los Angeles as much as he possibly could to protect her. They were both employed by The Department of Public Social Services (DPSS). Convincing his supervisor to hire her hadn't been easy, but she did have the right credentials, since they both graduated college with the same degree. Her strength was hands-on helping people. She was a mama bear with these underprivileged people. Her compassion could sometimes be unwarranted considering that their cases frequently included those who were "down on their luck". Their own poor decisions and actions had led to their situation; they couldn't blame anyone but themselves. Yet Elizabeth seemed to believe no one was capable or even responsible for a lack of self-control or ambition—that those who possessed the ability to take care of those less fortunate were obligated to do so. She wore those same blinders in Chris Riley's case.

Getting her to forget the jerk wasn't possible. Oscar faced that every time her cell phone took a call with the distinctive ringtone he'd come to dread. Riley was there with her now, causing irreparable damage to a woman who couldn't save herself from the blindingly obvious truth or the consequences of the love she believed was destined to be between them.

I can't save her. I can't convince her. I can't stop this torture.