

Part of MOD Life Epic Saga

Unwritten Life

Amy Shannon

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<https://essenceenterprises.com/mod-life-epic-saga>

Malta, New York

2023 Edition

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*In memory of my loving mother,
Susan Shannon*

Author's Note:

The first version of Unwritten Life was written in 2004 and published in 2005 (under my married name, Amy Witkowski). Since then, there have been six printings of this book, not including this current one. Some of the stories have been fixed or changed minorly. The cover was created for the 2018 version, including a complete rebranding of the entire saga. The final story has been written, ending in volume 67. Enjoy this story, then read on. The best is yet to come. -Amy Shannon

Introduction

Four years ago, tragic events changed Alex Garrison's life forever. She's been running away from it and trying to put the past behind her. She changes her name, moves to a new town, and even starts a new career. Just when she feels that she can move on with her life, her past comes back to haunt her. Her best friend, Greg, appears out of the blue and constantly reminds her of what she did four years ago. During her personal venture for freedom, she gives in to her attraction to a married man. When a violent stalker sets his sights on her, she finds love in an unlikely place. But who wants her love so much that he is willing to kill her for it?

Chapter One

Alex Garrison was looking for something new in her life. She was trying to put her past behind her and start over. She even started a new career as a Technical Customer support supervisor at a two-year-old company, Solutions Computer Systems, in her neighborhood.

It was definitely time for a change. The past needed to be put to rest. She needed to start a fresh, new life on her own. She's worked for Solutions for about six months. Recently, she applied for a technical job opening in another department and was hired. She finally finished her probationary period on the job, which required a lot of traveling. She was excited now that she would finally have her own office and the best part of it was that she was now the supervisor. When she applied for the job, there were a few positions opened, and since she excelled during the test period, she received the supervisory role. Alex didn't let the company know about her previous business background. That was only a small part of her past, and it didn't need to come forward. This was her new life. As a new person.

She arrived in her new office, of course, it was a little smaller than she imagined, but that didn't matter, it had a door that could be closed. She unpacked the box that she had brought from home, just a few plants that would make the office less sterile. On her desk was a pile of office supplies. She sat down at her desk and booted up the computer. She picked up the phone and accessed her voicemail to personalize it.

"Finally, privacy," she sighed, as she put her feet up on the desk and leaned back in the chair. A few minutes later, there was a knock on her door. She quickly put her feet back on the floor. "Come in," she said.

"Hey, just wanted to see how you were doing in your new digs," Karrie Olsen, Alex's manager, said.

"Just getting used to the quiet. It feels good not to need to run around anymore," Alex replied.

"I know what you mean," Karrie paused for a moment. "In a few weeks our district manager will be here, so, there will be a lot of prep for his arrival."

"Oh, I didn't realize that we had a district manager for this department."

"It's a new position. Steven Welch found him and liked his style. So, we just need to live with it. I guess that's just part of being a new company. They start with adding more managers," Karrie sighed.

"Well, I guess we'll just need to deal. How will this affect us?" Alex asked.

"I'm not sure. This department isn't very old. It's been here for about a year. We've had people come and go. Seven months ago, they split the department. We're the customer support end and there's the hardware support end. He'll be setting up in the empty office upstairs. This building may be large, but there isn't enough office space. That empty office has the escape hatch to the roof," Karrie explained. "Well, you should get back to work, and I have another interview in a few minutes."

"How many more interviews do you have? We have, what, three positions to fill?"

"It's down to two but I think that Joe might try to steal that one for the hardware department. He always tries to get the best picks out of our hires," Karrie snickered. "We'll see how he does on the probation trip. See you later."

Alex smiled. Ah, yes, the probation trip. The company sends you to different customer businesses so that you can upgrade their computer systems while establishing good customer relations. That way they will be more willing to renew their contracts and call the Customer Support center, which generates revenue.

As Alex started going through her email, her mind started to drift. I hope this works out. I want it to be different this time. She took a deep breath and let out a sigh. Suddenly, Alex got a strong scent of cologne. She took in another deep breath. What a wonderful smell, she thought.

"Excuse me," she heard a man's voice say.

Alex looked up and smiled. To her, the most beautiful man stood in her doorway. "Um," she stammered. "Yes, what can I do for you?"

"Hi, I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Randy. I just got hired. I'm just about to leave for my trip and I thought I would stop by and say hello before I left," his eyes smiled as he spoke. He was an older man with salt and pepper hair.

Alex composed herself, as she felt automatically drawn to this man. She stood up and stretched out her hand. She took a deep breath, breathing in his cologne, and trying to hide her attraction to him.

Randy Harrison shook it with a strong but gentle grip. His hands were so soft to the touch. He smiled back at her. "Well, off I go. I'll see you when I get back," Randy turned around and left.

Alex stood in the doorway for a few moments watching Randy walk down the hallway. "Damn," she whispered. "Certainly, can't chase an employee around," she dropped down into her chair. "Too bad," she sighed, rubbing her forehead back and forth with her hand.

She thought about what Karrie had said. What if Joe hired Randy? She smiled. No, this isn't the place to go looking for that. I'm here to work, and that's all.

She sorted through the pile of papers on her desk and reviewed the new specification documents for the upgraded computers.

Alex worked a full day. Before she knew it, it was time to go home. She had made up her mind that she would not think about Randy. It's no use having a dream when you're just living your life one day at a time. She stopped at the convenience store on her way home to pick up a few groceries. Sars Springs was a very small town, where all businesses were family-owned. She knew that there were no chain stores or restaurants allowed. She liked that even in a small town, she could get lost and just find her own way.

She walked up the front steps of her apartment building, grabbed her mail, and headed for the third floor. She opened the door to her one-bedroom apartment. Cardboard boxes still cluttered the living room. She moved in about six months ago and still had a lot of unpacking to do. She looked at the boxes, shook her head, and walked into the kitchen with the groceries.

After she put the groceries away, she sat down at the kitchen table. "Things are going to get better," she said aloud.

The next morning, she headed off to work. "Just a few more weeks until the big boss shows up. I'm counting the days of freedom that we have left," Karrie said, coming up behind her.

Alex turned around and looked at her. Karrie was a petite woman with thick owl-rimmed glasses. Alex sized her up in her head. "Karrie, no offense, but what happened to the clothes you were wearing yesterday? Right now, you look like you shopped at nerds-r-us."

Karrie's smile disappeared. "I thought I should start dressing more like the men around here. It seems like it's the only way that I'm going to get ahead. I wanted that district manager job."

"Karrie, even the men around here don't dress like that," Alex looked at her face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude, but you shouldn't need to dress like a man. It's no longer just a man's world out there," Alex explained.

Karrie smiled. "I guess you're right. I do look kinda dopey like this, plus this wool suit itches like crazy," she laughed.

"Don't let anyone ever tell you that you're not better than you are," Alex said, as she turned away and

walked to her office.

"Thanks, Alex," Karrie called from down the hall.

When Alex got to her office, she noticed that the door was open, and a man was waiting for her, with his back to her. "Um, excuse me. Can I help you with something?"

He turned around and smiled. "Hey, it's been a long time," he said softly.

She didn't recognize him at first, but then she looked into the soft brown eyes that were smiling back at her. "Greg?"

"Yeah, Alexis. In the flesh. Well, now there's a little more flesh than the last time, but, yeah, it's me."

She quickly shut the door. "It's Alex. What are you doing here?" she was still in shock over the fact that he had put on some weight, about 100 pounds more. She hugged him and once she did that, she realized this was really Greg.

He hugged her tightly, but gently. "Oh, that felt really good. It's been a long time, sweetheart," he said. "I'd know you anywhere, even with blonde hair. I like it. You look really good."

"Please, sit down," she sat behind her desk, and he took a chair from the corner of the room. "Now, what are you doing here?"

"I just got hired. You know me, wherever you go, I'll follow," he smiled.

"Greg, it's been three years since I've seen you. We were and always will be just friends," Alex tried to explain.

"Sweetheart, I know you think you feel that way, but I know how I feel. I'll always love you. You're so important to me. I don't care about anything but you. As you can see, I did put on a little weight."

"A little," Alex whispered. "But ..."

Greg Shapone interrupted. "I just need a job. I'll settle for being your friend. You aren't the only one who lost a part of their life four years ago. We seemed to be the only two that made it out."

"You're right, I'm sorry. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here either," she sat back in her chair and said. "What department are you working in?"

"Well, I work for you. As you know, I'm not very technical, but I have great customer service skills."

"I have to admit that I'm glad to see you. It's nice to have someone around that I already know. You must do something for me, though. You cannot tell anyone, and I mean anyone, what happened four years ago. I'm trying to build a new life and not everyone would understand," she rubbed her forehead back and forth with her hand.

"Still do that I see," he smiled pointing to her hand. "You always did that when you were stressed or nervous. Don't worry. I'll never do anything to hurt you. No one needs to know that we even knew each other. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you six years ago. I can do it again. Can I ask you a question, though?"

"Go ahead."

"Why here of all places? it's such a small town, not like what you're used to."

"Matthew grew up around here and he always talked about how great it was. He said it was quiet and peaceful. Right now, that's what I need," she stood up and grabbed a pile of papers off her desk. "Well, let me show you to your desk and how everything is going to work around here. Hey, wait a minute. Aren't they going to send you on your probationary trip?"

"No. I guess they don't want a fat man interacting with customers."

"Did they say that?"

"No, not in so many words. But, I know."

"Greg, you're not fat. Sure, you put on a few pounds since I last saw you, but you were just a beanpole. You needed a little meat on those bones."

Greg smiled. "Thanks, sweetheart."

"I'm really glad that you're here," she paused. "We still have a few more people to hire. Right now, there's only one other person to answer the phone. Besides, you have such a soothing voice. You're perfect for the phones."

"I guess so."

"I know so," she hugged him and then opened the office door. "Follow me." She walked him straight across the hall into a large room filled with double cubicles. "Most of the cubicles are double, which means they're shared by two people, but there's a large cubicle that's single and you can have that one. Feel free to make it your own, pictures of the family ... oh, sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it. I didn't see any pictures on your wall either,"

"Well, just make it your own. By the way, no burning candles here. I know how you are."

Greg grinned as he sat down in the chair and Alex started explaining how things worked. "Just boot up the computer and when it comes to the login screen, log in using this account," she handed him a piece of paper. "Tomorrow, you'll have your own account, and when you log in, it will automatically clock you in at the same time. For today, I'll sign a paper timesheet and get that down to payroll at the end of the day"

"Thanks, sweetheart."

"Greg, please don't call me that at work," she looked around his cubicle. "Oh, your phone is over here. You can read the written instructions on how to set up your voice mail. If you need to make a personal call, hit the OUT-call button. If you need to return a customer call, hit the CUST call button. When the phone rings, one of the extensions listed on your phone will blink, just pick up the receiver, and hit that button. we'll be getting new headsets at the end of this week, but for now, just use the receiver."

"Thank you, Alex," Greg turned away and started familiarizing himself with the phone system.

"I'll see you later. If you need me, I'll be in my office, preparing for the new district manager."

Alex walked across the hall to her office and sat down at her desk. "Why does he need to be here?" she sobbed. "Well, there's not much I can do about it now," she sat down and started going through the papers on her desk. She walked down to the payroll department to get Greg set up for his log-in and time sheet recording.

She brought the final paperwork to Greg upstairs. "Hey, I went down to payroll early. They will have you set up for eight hours today and this is your log-in for tomorrow. Here is your packet that describes all the rules and regulations. It also has the benefits information and payroll information. The workday is normally 8:30 to 5:00, but if you need other hours, we do work out flexible times for you. You also get an hour for lunch. Feel free to eat in the cafeteria, which is catered every day between 11 and 2, or go out to lunch."

"Are you free for lunch?" His eyes danced with excitement as he gazed at her.

"Not today, I have too much work to do. Besides, this is your first day here. It wouldn't look right if we ate together."

"That's all you ever worried about. Get over yourself. It's just lunch. It's not like I'm asking you to a motel room or anything," he snapped.

"That's NOT what I meant. It's just not a good idea to have lunch with your boss on your first day. They have so many rules. Read your packet and you'll see what I mean. Do you have any questions?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure that I will. I'm sorry that I jumped down your throat."

"I'll tell you what. At the end of the week, we'll have a team lunch. We have two more people to hire, and Randy will be back then. After that, if we want to have lunch together, we can do that."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll see you later and thanks for getting the paperwork done so quickly," Greg's phone started to ring, so Alex left his cubicle.

She walked over to Karrie's office. "So, any more hires that you want to tell me about?"

Karrie looked up from her computer screen. "Oh, I see you met Greg."

"Yes, I got him all set up for payroll and he is already on the phones answering calls."

"Good, then that's all settled," Karrie said.

"Why didn't you send him on the probationary trip? What will be his probationary period now? it's not because of his weight, is it?"

"Are you kidding? He is an extremely good-looking man," she smiled. "But aside from that, his résumé is remarkable and based on that he doesn't need to have a probation period."

"Good, I heard him on the phone. He knows what he's doing," Alex turned to walk out the door.

"Hey, is there something you're not telling me?" Karrie asked.

"No, I'm OK. I've got to get back to work," Alex went back to her office. She sat down at her desk and closed her eyes. It will be OK. Everything will be OK.

Chapter Two

Sitting on the sofa, she just stared at the boxes that inhabited her living room. "I need to unpack, I really do," she said aloud.

She went into the kitchen and fixed herself a sandwich. After she ate, she went back into the living room and turned on the television to watch the news. She picked up one of the boxes and started to unpack it. Carefully, she pulled out each item one by one. This box just contained some books, so she started putting them on the built-in bookshelf.

She came upon her favorite book, William Shakespeare's Book of Sonnets. She touched the embossed letters in the leather jacket. As she put the book on the shelf, a picture fell out and slipped to the floor. She bent over and picked it up. There they were. The six of them. Matthew, herself, Greg, Amanda, Mary, and John. They looked like one big happy family. The picture was about five years old when they were all the best of friends. "Lost forever," Alex whispered.

She put the picture back into the book and put it up on the shelf. She finished setting the books on the shelves and looked around at the room. Just a few more boxes to go, she thought.

She finished putting the rest of the items away and was down to one box. She pulled the pile of photo albums out of the box and carried them into her bedroom. She didn't dare look through them. She opened the bottom drawer of her dresser and crammed them into a drawer. When she went back into the living room, she hit her foot on something that was sticking out from under the coffee table. It was a black album. She picked it up and noticed the print on it, My former life. She stared at the cover as she ran her fingers over the etched print.

"What in the world am I doing? It always comes back to haunt me. I just want to be free. I just want to be free and there's only one way to be free," she cried.

She sat down on the sofa and put the album on her lap. She stared at the album on her lap. Frustrated, she threw it on the floor, stood up, and went into the kitchen. She opened the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of red wine. She poured herself a glass. I'll need this, she thought as she sipped from the glass. She brought the bottle, and glass out into the living room, and sat back down on the sofa.

She kept looking at the album as it lay on the floor as if it was something that could jump out and hurt her. Just then, a knock came at the door. "Who could that be? No one knows where I live," she muttered.

She answered the door and there stood Greg. "I thought you could use some company," he lifted a bottle of red wine.

"How did you know where I lived?"

"Sweetheart, you may not have seen me for three years, but I have seen you. I know every place that you have been since then."

"You know, that scares me a little bit," she said, rubbing her forehead back and forth with her hand.

"I don't want to scare you. I swear. I was looking out for you. When I saw that you had lived here for about six months, I figured that you were planning on staying. So, I decided to stay, too."

"Come in and sit down. I think that we really need to talk."

Greg walked into and sat down on the sofa. Alex sat next to him. Greg noticed the album on the floor. "I definitely know what that is."

"How do you know?"

"I have one just like it at home," he put his head down.

"Yeah, I can't bring myself to open it. I feel like it would all just catch up to me again."

"You'll be fine," he leaned over and kissed her cheek. Alex turned away and put her head down. He lifted it gently with one finger and pulled her into a kiss.

She quickly pulled away. "Please don't. I care deeply for you, but I don't share the same kind of love that you feel, or think you feel for me."

"I'll wait, forever, if I have to."

"Have you forgotten about Amanda? it's this whole feeling thing that started all the ... the problems we went through"

"Amanda is gone! I'll never forget her, but I must move on with my life. Whether she was around or not, I'd still be HERE!"

"You seemed to forget that ... never mind."

"Alex, I did not forget, nor did I forget the reason why it happened. I love you and you need to know that none of that was your fault."

Alex stood up and walked over to the album on the floor. "I can't do this right now, not yet," she picked up the book and put it in the desk drawer.

"You don't have to. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"All I want is to be free. Free of the past and free to do what I want with the rest of my life. I don't want to need to look over my shoulder anymore. I want to have some fun. I don't want to worry about people finding out. I want to be free to love again. I'm sorry, but that's what I want."

"Someday you will. This is a small town, it isn't very likely that anyone will find out, or that anyone will show up and destroy what you have started to build."

"You showed up," Alex shook her head, and then she smiled. "But in a way, I'm glad that you did. At least someone knows where I'm coming from."

"Come over here and sit down," Alex walked over and sat next to Greg on the sofa. She laid her head on his shoulder as he put his arm around her. "It'll be OK, sweetheart. I promise."

They had a few glasses of wine and sat there without talking. Greg just watched her with his sad brown eyes. He deeply loved Alex and wasn't afraid to tell her or the world how he felt. He believed that someday she would feel the same.

After about an hour, Alex fell asleep. Greg carefully got off the sofa, covered Alex up with a nearby blanket, and left, locking the door behind him. As he walked down the hall to the elevator, he just smiled to himself. "Someday, sweetheart, you'll be mine."

Chapter Three

Alex woke up a few hours later and noticed that Greg was gone. She got up off the couch and went into her bedroom to go back to sleep. As soon as she closed her eyes, the nightmares began. The faces of Matthew, Amanda, John, and Mary flashed through her head. Screams of terror echoed in her dreams. Then it became quiet. She heard Greg's voice. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," his voice repeated.

Alex couldn't take the pain anymore. Suddenly, she woke up screaming. She looked around the room. Everything was in its place. The room was dark and quiet. The voice was gone.

She lay back down in the bed. He brought it with him. Why didn't he just stay away? She cuddled up with her pillow and cried. She was just too afraid to go back to sleep.

The morning light shined through her bedroom window. She hadn't slept all night. She dragged herself out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. While the coffee was brewing, she went into the bathroom to take a shower. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. She barely recognized herself ... looking back at her was a dark-haired woman with sad eyes, the woman she used to be, the woman she tried to forget ever existed. She rubbed her eyes a few times, and then there she was, the blonde woman with the red eyes. She dried her hair and put on some makeup. "At least I look alive now," she said, as she left the bathroom.

After she got dressed, she sat down at the kitchen table and slowly sipped her coffee. She looked up at the clock. "Hmm, it's only six-thirty, another long morning before work," she drank a few cups of coffee as she watched the early morning news.

At eight o'clock, she left her apartment and headed for work. When she arrived, Karrie was outside having a cigarette. "Good morning, or should I just say hi?"

"I'm fine, Karrie. Just a long sleepless night," Alex said. "Any new hires today or should I just be surprised?"

"I have two more interviews today; hopefully, we'll hire them. Their résumés are good, but I need to meet with them to see how they really are."

"Well, just let me know. I'd like to get the paperwork done before they show up for work. Oh, by the way, that outfit is much better suited to you"

Karrie smiled, her blue eyes became large behind her large-rimmed glasses. "Thanks, and I'll definitely let you know as soon as I hire them. I'll even bring them over to meet you."

Alex nodded and walked up the front stairs to the building and headed for her office. She sat down behind her desk and booted up her computer.

She noticed that the pile on her desk had gotten larger. "How can I get more work? There are only three people that I need to worry about, and one is on the road."

A few minutes later, her inside line rang. "Um, Alex, there's a Randy on the line. He says he's on the road and he needs to talk to you," Greg said.

"OK, transfer him to me," Alex sat back in the chair and smiled.

Greg transferred the call as Alex took a deep breath. "Randy, what can I do for you?"

"Alex, I could really use your help. The upgrade that they sent me out with isn't working anymore. It just won't install. I have one more station after this one."

"Randy, which station are you at now?"

"I'm at the Farmers Insurance Company in Afton. I know it's not far from the office, but the manager, Rodney, isn't going to let me leave until his computers are up and running."

"Don't worry about it. Afton is about 30 minutes from here. I'll make a few copies and bring them to you."

"I wish you didn't have to do that, but, thanks."

"It's not a problem. Karrie has interviews and there are only two people on the phones right now. I'll see you in a little while. Keep Rodney calm and it'll all work out," Alex hung up. She went across the hall and walked up to Helen's cube. "Helen, can you make me four copies of the upgrade? Randy's disks are corrupted, and I have to bring new ones to him. You know Rodney, he won't let Randy leave his sight."

Helen looked up at Alex. "Yeah, not a problem," she turned her head. "Hey, Greg," she yelled. "Keep an ear out for the phones. I'll be in the computer lab."

"No problem, Helen," Greg yelled.

Alex walked down the hall to Karrie's office. "Hey, I hate to interrupt, but I have to make a run to Afton. Randy's there with corrupted upgrade disks and ..."

"I know. Rodney won't let him leave," Karrie interrupted.

"Yeah, I don't know what it is about Rodney. He stood over me the whole time I was there, and I didn't need to do any installs. All I did was teach him how to keep the system clean and to make sure he didn't turn it off at night."

Karrie laughed. "It took me a while to explain to him the difference between the PC power and the monitor power. Don't forget to track your mileage."

"I know," Alex left Karrie's office and headed for her own. Helen met her in the hall.

"Here are the upgrade disks. If there's another problem, we can just upload the file to him directly."

"Thanks, Helen," she went back into her office, and then she thought. "How in the hell am I going to get there? My car is still in the shop. Greg? Maybe?"

She headed for Greg's cube, but before she could say anything, he held up his keys. "Here you go."

"How did you ..."

"Your car is in the shop and Helen told me that you had to drive to Afton," he smiled. "I hope you don't mind driving a truck."

Alex looked puzzled. "How'd you know that my car was in the shop? I never drive to work."

"I know everything. So, do you want to take the truck or not?"

"Yeah, thanks," Alex grabbed the keys and headed out without saying another word. She stopped in her tracks. "Uh, which truck is yours?" she yelled back.

"You'll know when you see it," Greg smiled.

Alex headed out to the parking lot, she looked around, and then, there it was. A large black truck, with the license plate STK R. "Hmm, stalker? it's gotta be his," she walked over to the truck, and sure enough, the keys fit.

Alex got in and started the truck and the disk in the CD player started to play automatically. Endless Love was playing. Alex sat back for a minute. "After all this time, he still loves that song," she smiled. She tried to change the tracks on the CD, but the song was on every single track. She turned it off and turned on the radio.

She drove out of the parking lot and toward Afton. Before she knew it, she was pulling into the Farmers Insurance Company. She got out of the truck and walked into the building.

The receptionist was sitting at her desk. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm looking for Randy Harrison. He should be in with Rodney."

She smiled. "Oh, yeah, he is here. Hold on a second, I'll page Rodney," she picked up a phone receiver.

Randy and Rodney soon appeared in the doorway. "I brought the CDs," Alex said, as she held them up.

"Follow me," Randy said.

Rodney stood over them as they inserted the CD into the computer and started the installation. Once it finished, Randy smiled. "Let's check it out and make sure it did what it was supposed to. Rodney, why don't you take a look and make sure it's OK with you."

Rodney sat down at the computer and clicked on a few things and then sat back and smiled. "Randy, you're my favorite tech. With the exception of you, of course, Alex."

"Of course," Alex smiled. "Randy, are you finished here?"

"Yeah, I have one more stop today, but that's not scheduled until two o'clock."

"Well, it's noon. Do you want to get a bite to eat? There's a little diner around the corner. I've eaten there before and the food's pretty good."

"Sure."

"Mind if we walk to the diner? it's not very far and that way we don't need to take two vehicles," Alex suggested, as they walked out the front doors of the building.

"Sounds good," Randy said. "What a beautiful day."

"Yes, it is," Alex tried so hard not to flirt with Randy and keep her attraction to him all to herself. She couldn't help but admire his looks and soft deep voice.

When they got to the diner, the server seated them at a table. "Hmm, what looks good to you?" Randy asked as he thumbed through the menu.

"I think I'll just have the French dip sandwich," she said.

"I'll have the same."

The server came over and took their order. A few minutes later, she brought over their drinks. There was a peaceful silence for a few minutes. Alex tried to keep her feelings in check and compose her thoughts carefully. Then she started rubbing her forehead back and forth with her hand. She looked up at Randy. "So, I see that you're married," she pointed to the wedding ring on his finger.

"Uh," he looked down at the ring on his hand. "I guess you could call it that."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry," she put her head down. "I just notice things like that."

Randy looked at her and lifted her head. "You don't need to apologize. I'm married, sort of. However, my wife and I are hardly ever together. You see, she only comes home on the weekends and even then, it's not a real marriage."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"It's OK. I barely know what I mean sometimes," he laughed nervously. "It's more of a convenience than anything else"

Alex thought for a second. "Oh, I understand now."

"It's been that way for about five years now. We have been married for almost 15 years. It's just how things turned out. She has her life and I have my life. We just have too much going on in our lives to get a divorce. Besides, I never, well, I haven't found a reason to get one ... yet."

"You mean there's no one in your life besides your wife?"

"Well, there's Nikita, but she's a Persian cat," he smiled. The light shined brightly in his eyes as he spoke. He never once, took his eyes away from her face. "How about you? Is there someone special in your life?"

"Not now there isn't. Someone thinks he's special, but he's just a good friend. But, other than that, it's just me. I live in an apartment not far from the office. I walk to work. Other than stopping for groceries, I don't go out much."

"Sounds interesting. Is that your truck you drove? Stalker? That's cute."

"No, my car is in the shop. I borrowed Greg's truck. He's the stalker ... well, a friend I was talking about. He seems to be wherever I go. I knew him years ago and now he turns up again. And, of all places, at Solutions," Alex got distant. The server brought the food over and set it down in front of them. "Thank you."

Randy started eating his lunch. "Alex, are you OK?"

"What? Oh, yeah. No one at the office knows that Greg and I knew each other. I can't even believe that I told you. You're an easy person to talk to," Alex took a bite of her sandwich.

Randy laughed and began eating again. There was silence while they ate. Afterward, Alex got up and paid the check. "Don't worry, this will get reimbursed, so it doesn't matter who picks it up."

Randy and Alex walked back to the Farmers Insurance Company to pick up their vehicles. Alex started getting in the truck when she turned around. "So, I'll see you in the office tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I'll be there," Randy got in his car and drove away.

Alex got in the truck and headed back to the office. She couldn't stop thinking about Randy. What is it about him? I need to stop this. He works for me and that's it. There's nothing I can do about it.

When she got back to the office, Greg was standing outside. "Where have you been?"

"What are you? My father?" Alex snapped back.

"That's not what I meant. Besides, you did have my truck."

"Sorry. I dropped the upgrade off to Randy, made sure it worked, and then I got something to eat."

"Oh. Not a problem"

"So, what are you doing outside?"

"Having a smoke."

"I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't. Well, I didn't, but I picked it up. Want one?"

Alex looked at him for a minute. "Yeah. It's been a while since I had one. But, I think I could use one," Greg handed her a cigarette. Alex lit it and took a deep inhale.

"You seem different," Greg said. "You just don't seem so sad today."

"I guess I'm not. I wasn't fine last night, but at this moment, I think I'm doing, well, OK," she took another puff on the cigarette. "Tomorrow, we'll have a team lunch. Randy will be back and I'm sure that Karrie has already hired the last two people."

"Don't change the subject. Something is going on with you. What is it?"

"It's nothing. I just had a nice quiet lunch and enjoyed the drive. It's been a while since I have gone anywhere besides work and the store," she paused. "I can't wait until my car is out of the shop."

"When will that be?"

"Not really sure. I'll have to call them and see what's taking so long," Alex finished her cigarette, put it in the outside ashtray, and headed back into the office. "See you inside," she hurried so that he wouldn't follow directly behind her.

When she walked into her office, Karrie followed behind her with two people.

"Hey," Karrie said. "How was Afton?"

Alex turned around and smiled. "Not too bad, gave Randy the upgrade and then we went to lunch. He's on his way to Markston for his final upgrade."

"I wanted to introduce you to our two newest employees. This is James O'Roark, and this is Treena Niddlehouse."

Alex shook both their hands. "Hi. Good to have you here. Your cubicles are set up across the hall," Alex pointed out. "I'll bring you over and have you meet Helen and Greg. Randy will be coming back tomorrow."

Alex walked across the hall and Karrie, Treena, and James followed. "Treena, James, you'll be sharing this cubicle. James, you'll sit over here and Treena, right there. Feel free to make it like home. There are keys for each drawer and overhead shelf. I see that your paperwork is already on your desk. Your logins will automatically clock you in, so you don't need to worry about that. The rest of the paperwork needs to be filled out by you and then put on my desk by the end of the day."

"Not a problem," Treena said, as she sat down.

"Alex?"

"Yes, James?"

"You can call me Jim and thanks so much. I can't wait to get started," his smile was so brilliant and strong.

"You're welcome. Tomorrow, we'll be having a team lunch. I want everyone to meet each other in a casual manner and I have some things to go over that I want you all to hear," Alex said. "If you need me, I'll be in my office. My door is always opened, except when it's closed," she smiled.

Alex and Karrie went back to Alex's office. "So, will they have a probationary period?" Alex asked Karrie.

"No, they're more for front-end calls. The calls will come to them first and they will do the minor troubleshooting. If they can't fix it, they will enter a ticket and Randy, Helen, or Greg will get the call."

"Sounds good. That will save a lot of time."

"And money!" The two of them laughed.

Alex stopped at the grocery store on her way home from work and bought a pack of cigarettes. "I need to have one vice, I guess ... or two," she smiled.

As she was walking up her apartment building steps, she noticed Greg's truck pulling into the parking lot. She hurried up the stairs. When she got inside, she looked out the window. He was just sitting in his truck. "Hmmm, so, that's what he does with his time. Just follow me around." She sat down at the kitchen table. "He can't just keep doing this," she said aloud as she lit a cigarette. "I need to find a way to get through to him." She thought about it for a minute, I'm hungry. So, she stood up and made herself a salad to eat for dinner. After she ate her dinner, she sat down in front of the television to watch the news.

She looked around the room. "This is my life. Work, eat, sleep, and watch news. Not good," she picked up the telephone that was on the end table and dialed the number for the garage. "Yes, this is Alex Garrison. Can

you tell me when my car will be ready? I need it sooner than I thought."

"Yes, Ms. Garrison. Your BMW is ready now."

"What's the cost on that? Do you accept checks?"

"There's no charge."

"What? it's been there for two weeks. There needs to be a charge."

"It was paid for this morning. A man walked into and paid cash for it. He said you would pick it up."

"A large man with black hair?"

"I'm not sure. The receipt on this paper says his name was Greg Shapone."

"Thanks, I'll be in later to pick it up," she hung up the phone. She sat back on the couch. "I wish he wouldn't do things like that. I need to talk to him, right away."

She grabbed her keys and went out the door. When she exited the building, she looked around for Greg's truck. He was now parked across the street from the apartment building. She walked over to the truck, there was Greg, eating a sandwich and reading the paper. She banged on his window. "So, this is how you protect me?" she said.

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently.

"I could be dead upstairs and all you're doing is eating your sandwich!" Alex exclaimed.

"Calm down. I'll always protect you," he smiled.

"I was just kidding. Why are you even here? I don't need your protection. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself, you know."

"I know."

"Well, if you knew that, then why did you pay for my car to be fixed?"

"It's no big deal. I have the money from the settlement."

"You sued my estate, remember? There would have been no money if it hadn't been for me. Besides, I've been able to support myself a long time. If there's one thing I don't need, it's money. Hey, I thought you said you needed a job."

"I do. I need a job, just not the money. I just wanted to help. I love you, Alex, and I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"Greg, I know you love me, but please stop saying that. I don't want to hurt you, but I don't want you ... stalking ... I mean, protecting me anymore."

"I can't help it, Alex."

"If you want to continue our friendship, you need to just be my friend. Not my stalker. I'm serious here."

"I'm sorry, Alex," tears swelled up in Greg's eyes.

"Just stop apologizing. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to get your hopes up. I just want my best friend back."

"I'll be your best friend again. I promise."

"If it will make you happier, you can drive me over to pick up my car," Alex smiled

"Of course. I'll do any ..."

"Greg, a simple yes would suffice."

"Yes. I'll take you to pick up your car," Greg started up his truck and drove about five miles to the garage where Alex's car was.

"Thanks," Alex said, as she got out of the truck. "I'll see you tomorrow and not in front of my building,

right?"

"Yeah, I'll see you at work," Greg said solemnly as he pulled out of the parking lot.

Alex went into the garage and a few minutes later got into her silver BMW that was parked outside. She started it up. "That's my girl," she said, as she patted the dashboard. "It feels so good to be behind the wheel again," Alex pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward home.

As she was driving, she decided to take a little detour home. It was such a nice night and it's been forever since She's been out. She drove toward the town of Middleburg. It was only twenty minutes away from Sars Springs, where she lived. As she was driving down this deserted road, she failed to notice that she was speeding. Suddenly, she saw a single flashing red light come up behind her.

"Oh, great," she said, as she pulled over. "Just what I need now."

A motorcycle cop came up to her window and knocked on it. "License and registration please."

Alex fumbled through the glove box. "Crap. I have my registration, but I seem to have left my license at home"

"Please step out of the car, Ma'am," he said in a strained deep voice.

Alex got out of the car and looked at the police officer, who was still wearing his helmet. "Um, sir? That helmet makes me a little nervous. Can you remove it, so I know who I'm talking to?"

He carefully removed his helmet. "Is that better?" he smiled.

Alex looked at him. "Randy?"

"Yeah, this is my night job. I work for the Middleburg/Sars Springs Police department. I do this a few nights a week."

"Middleburg/Sars Springs Police department?"

"Well, yeah. Sars Springs is so small. They combined the two departments to cover both areas."

"You never mentioned you were a cop."

"Well, I guess lunch wasn't long enough for all of this to come out. Where are you going anyway?"

"I was just headed to Middleburg. I need to get out of the house. I got my car back today and wanted to take a long drive."

"Oh, you wouldn't happen to want company later, would you?"

"Randy, what are you asking? We hardly know each other," Alex said flirtatiously.

"I really want to get to know you. I've been thinking about you since lunch," he leaned over and started to kiss her. His kisses were so passionate that she just melted into his arms.

She backed away slowly. "I don't normally do this, but I would love your company," she took his notebook out of his shirt pocket and wrote down her address. "Here's my address. When do you get off shift?"

"In a half an hour," he put his arms around her and held her tightly. "See you in 35 minutes."

"My apartment is at least 15, 20 minutes from here," she said.

"Lest you forget, that's what lights and sirens are for," Randy said. He pulled her into a kiss again and held her as if he never wanted to let her go. "I'll see you soon."

"Wear the uniform," she said flirtatiously.

Alex got back in her car and leaned back. Her knees were very weak, and her heart was beating so fast that it was pounding out of her chest. She started rubbing her forehead nervously. When she caught her breath, she started her car and drove home. When she got back to her apartment, she looked around to make sure that Greg wasn't parked nearby. She went inside and ran quickly up the three flights of stairs. She looked around the

apartment. "Not like it would be dirty," she laughed. She went into the kitchen and got out a bottle of wine. She poured herself a glass and started to drink it. Before she knew it, there was a knock at the door.

There stood Randy, in his uniform. "May I come in?"

Alex grabbed him by the hand and gently pulled him into the apartment and closed the door. She started kissing him tenderly on the mouth and before she knew it, he was kissing her all around her neck. He started to undress her. Once her clothes dropped to the floor, he scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom. He placed her on the bed, lay on top of her, and began kissing her all over.

She ran her hands all over his uniform and caressed his badge. "There's something about this badge," she whispered. One by one, she unbuttoned his shirt. She took off his shirt and tossed it on the floor. She kissed his chest.

Randy leaned up for a moment, removed his duty belt, and threw it on the floor. Alex sat up and unzipped Randy's pants, slowly she pulled them down and pulled him toward her. Randy wriggled out of his pants the rest of the way and lay down next to her. He started kissing her on the mouth again, making her long for more. Slowly and carefully, he made love to her. Alex wanted this feeling to never end, her body longed for more and more.

Randy held her close. "It's been so long, and it felt so right."

"It's been a while for me, too," Alex said, as she snuggled deeply into his chest.

He held her tightly and whispered. "Not to be too personal, but why do you have the scar on your back?"

"Someday, I may be able to tell you everything about me, just not yet," she whispered.

"OK," he kissed her cheek.

After they lay there for a while, they went into the kitchen. Alex looked at the clock. "It's 5:30. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Just coffee."

Alex made a pot of coffee and they both just sat there at the kitchen table in silence. When the coffee was finished, she poured them both a cup.

"Randy, are you sorry?" Alex asked quietly.

"Sorry about what?" he responded distantly.

"Um ... pulling me over? Coming here? I don't know. You're very quiet."

"Oh, no. It's nothing like that. I'm sorry if I made you think anything like that. I'm just thinking. That's all."

"You just seemed so distant. I thought that maybe I was a mistake."

"Definitely not," he took her hand and looked into her eyes. "It wasn't a mistake to come here and I'm so glad that I did. I don't want this to be just a one-night thing but ..."

"I know about butts. It's the job, isn't it?"

"Most of it."

"I don't want it to be a one-night thing either. I really want to get to know you ... in other ways, we just need to keep it quiet and between us. I, especially, don't want Greg to find out."

"I agree. What is it with you and Greg, anyway?"

"Long story short, Greg and I knew each other a long time ago and during that time, he says he fell in love with me. He does love me, and I know it. I'm trying to rebuild just a friendship with him, so we'll see how long that lasts."

"You'll need to tell me the long version."

"Someday, when I'm ready," she leaned over and kissed him.

A little while later, he stood up. "I better get home and get changed for work."

"I'll see you at work. Oh, yeah, our team lunch is today," she smiled.

"I'll try not to look at you very much. My eyes would give away our night together," he headed for the door. "Bye."

Alex sat back in the chair and smiled. She closed her eyes and remembered the night that just passed. A cop? Funny, never thought I'd be with another cop. Now that's something. She sat there for a while and sipped her coffee.

After about an hour, she got up and went to go make her bed. As she was shaking out the blankets, she noticed something shiny fly to the floor. She bent over and picked it up. It was Randy's badge. She gently rubbed her finger over the star impression on the badge. She held it in her hand against her chest. She remembered the night before. She hadn't been with anyone in a very long time, and it felt so good to be wanted and needed. "He may need this," she smiled. She placed the badge on the dresser and finished making the bed. She took a shower and got dressed for work.

She was about to head out the door, when she remembered Randy's badge. She grabbed it off the dresser, put it in her pocket, and headed off to work.

Chapter Four

Alex walked slowly to work. She kept thinking about her night with Randy and how it felt so good to be in someone's arms again. She hadn't felt that way since Matthew and he was gone. She smiled, she hadn't thought of Matthew in so long, but it didn't seem to hurt as bad. "I hope you understand, Matthew. I need this," she whispered to herself.

Before she knew it, she was outside Solutions Computer Systems. Jim and Greg were standing outside the building, having a cigarette.

"Good morning," Alex said, smiling.

"Good morning. Are you OK?" Greg asked

"I'm totally fine. Thanks for asking," Alex said cheerfully as she kept walking.

"Something is different about her today," Greg said to Jim.

"What do you mean? She looks really, really great," Jim said.

"Yes, she certainly does. Just the way she's smiling. It looks good on her."

"Yes, it does," Jim said.

Alex went up into her office and sat down at her desk. She booted up her computer and shuffled through the papers on her desk. Once her computer turned on, she sent out an email to all the staff members to remind them of the team lunch. "Please meet in the conference room off the cafeteria for our team lunch at 12:30 PM today-Alex," then she clicked send.

Voices from the hall caused her to look up from her desk. It was just Greg and Jim returning to their cubes. A little while later, she heard Randy speaking with Karrie. Then Randy walked right passed her office.

Her heart jumped, but he just kept walking right into the office across the hall. A few minutes later, Karrie knocked at the door. "Got a few minutes?"

"Um, sure, what's up?"

"It's Randy."

Alex's heart stopped for a minute. "W—what do you mean?"

"Joe wants him on his team. I don't want to take him away from you. What do you think we should do?"

"Did you talk to Randy about it?"

"I haven't mentioned it yet. I talked with him a few minutes ago, but just about his expenses. I thought I'd talk with you first."

"Well, I'd hate to lose him on our team, but it should be up to him to decide."

"Well, maybe you should talk to him."

"I don't mind," then she noticed Joe talking to Randy outside. "I guess it's too late for that," she pointed outside the door.

Karrie turned around. "Hold on a second," she went outside. "Randy, Joe, would you come into Alex's office for a minute?"

Randy and Joe followed Karrie back into the office. Randy focused his eyes on Joe.

"What do you need?" Joe asked.

Alex spoke. "It seems, Joe, you want to hire Randy and steal him from my department."

"Yeah, so?" Joe said.

"Well, technically, he works for me," Alex said.

"Yeah, so?" Joe said again.

"OK, this is going nowhere. Randy, what do you want?" Alex asked

"I'm not sure. He just sprung this on me," Randy said, still looking at Joe.

"Take some time to think about it," she then looked at Joe. "Joe, let him think it over. In the meantime, he still works for me."

"OK. I'll let him think about it," Joe said in a huff and then he walked out the door.

Randy headed toward his cubicle without saying another word.

Karrie looked at Alex. "So, what do you think he'll do?"

"My guess, he'll take Joe's offer. We all know it pays a little more and it's probably the kind of work that he'd prefer. Nothing like being tied to a phone all day."

"Yeah, not much anyone can do about it," Karrie said, as she left the office.

Alex sat back in her chair. She stared out the door for a few minutes and then got back to work. She wondered why Randy didn't look at her at all, then she remembered what he had said, that his eyes would give it away. Somehow, she knew it was more than that.

Around 11:30, she called down to the cafeteria to make sure that the luncheon was all set to go at 12:30 for the team lunch.

At noon, she went down to the conference room to help set up for the lunch. Karrie walked into a few minutes later. "Alex, you don't need to do all of this."

"Yes, I do. I want everyone to get to know each other and I want it to be perfect."

Everything was perfect. The table was set, and the food was being brought in and placed on the table in the corner to be used as a buffet style lunch.

Soon, Greg and Helen walked into with Jim and Treena following behind them. "Have a seat anywhere you feel comfortable," Alex said. Jim sat next to Alex and Treena and Greg sat directly across from her.

Karrie took her seat. A little while later, Randy walked into the room. He headed for the empty seat at the opposite end of the table. Alex looked at him, but he wouldn't return the eye contact.

"I wanted to take this time to have everyone on our team get to know each other," she said. "We don't need to know each other's life story, but we can see who we'll be working with. Being part of a team means to work as a team and learn how to trust each other."

"I agree," Karrie said. "I'm Karrie. Joe and Alex both report to me. You work directly for Alex and should report everything to Alex first."

"What do you do?" Greg asked.

"Sometimes I wonder," Karrie laughed. "I do the hiring and firing for both departments. Alex and Joe can make recommendations to me," she stopped for a minute and looked around the room. "I must sound like I'm bragging or something."

"No, Karrie. We all know you're not," Alex looked at the faces around the table. "The other thing that you need to know is that soon, there will be a district manager. He'll arrive in a few weeks. He'll oversee all the managers that work in this building. They're looking to expand the company into other states, such as Nevada, California, and some more offices here in Arizona, and the district manager will oversee that construction," Her tone was so professional and sterile, that it even made her nervous.

Karrie jumped in. "His name is William Weaver. He's from New Jersey or someplace like that."

"Well, let's eat. Please take this time to get to know each other," Alex said. She wanted to say something else, something profound so that she could show everyone that she knew what she was doing, but she couldn't

think of the words.

Everyone got up from their chairs and went over to dish out their food. They sat back down and started eating.

Alex noticed that Randy was just twirling his fork around his food, but she couldn't say anything, and how she wanted to say something.

Greg looked at Alex and then at Randy and just shook his head. "Randy, aren't you hungry?" asked Greg.

"Um," he looked around the room. "Not really." Then without another word, he got up and left.

Alex heart grew heavy. She knew now that something was wrong. She couldn't follow him, as she so longed to do. She finished eating her lunch. While everyone was eating, there was silence in the room.

Once they all finished, they threw out their plates and chatter filled the conference room. Alex broke through the chatter and said. "Before you leave for each day, make sure your areas are neat, we aren't quite sure when Mr. Weaver will arrive. He likes to surprise people," she laughed. "I have a lot of filing to do. Enjoy the last 15 minutes of your lunch. I'll see everyone upstairs," she got up and headed to her office.

As she approached her office, she decided that she had to talk with Randy. Everyone was downstairs now, so it was the best time to do it. She dreaded what he may say. She went into the Tech room and walked up to Randy's cubicle. His back was toward her, and he was banging away on the keyboard. "Uh, Randy?" he didn't turn around. "Please, Randy. Will you come into my office? We really need to talk," he got up without saying a word and followed Alex into her office.

Alex sat down on her desk and looked at him. "Will you close the door please?"

Randy shut the door. Then he spoke. "So, what do you need?"

"Me? You haven't said two words to me all day. You haven't looked at me and now you want to know what I need? I want to know what you want. I want to know what's going on. Are you angry with me? What is it?"

"It's been a long morning," he said.

"A lot longer than you think," she spat back. "I'm sorry, but I didn't know that you were going to treat me as if I didn't exist today."

"I HAVE A LOT ON MY MIND AND YOU'RE MAKING IT WORSE!" He raised his voice.

Alex felt her heart crumble. "I didn't realize ... I honestly thought ...," she stopped.

Randy's eyes looked back at her. Finally, he looked at her. "Your answer to everything is someday. I don't know what you want from me."

"You're right. All we've had is one lunch together and one night of sex. I guess I don't want anything from you. I thought ... I thought that you and I—I guess I was wrong."

"I don't know what's going on with me. I think I made a mistake."

"Yeah, I think I did, too. I wasn't sorry about last night, up until right this minute," she reached into her pocket and pulled out the badge. "Here you go. You lost this in my ... at my place last night," she said, as she tossed it to him.

He caught it and stood up. "I think I made up my mind. I'll take Joe's offer," he said, as he walked toward the door.

"Wait, Randy," Alex said. "I—I don't want this."

When he turned around, his eyes looked sad, and then he walked out the door and closed it behind him.

She put her face in her hands and started to cry. A little while later, there was a knock on the door. She quickly wiped the tears from her face, and answered the door, she hoped it would be Randy, but it was Jim.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion, but do you have a minute to talk with me?" he asked.

"Of course, come on in and take a seat," she said, still wiping her eyes. She sat in her chair. "What can I do

for you?"

"Well, downstairs, you said you wanted us to all get to know each other, but you didn't mention anything about yourself."

"I'm sorry, was there something you wanted to know?" she looked puzzled.

"Why didn't you let anyone who you really are?" Jim stated frankly.

"I—I don't know what you mean. What are you talking about?" she asked nervously.

"You seem like you're putting on a strong and hard exterior. But, you need to let people know that you have a heart and aren't just about doing the job."

"Where did you ever get that?"

"The way you walked into this morning. You had such a smile on your face, and now here you are, with tears in your eyes. I think people should know that you do care. Alex, excuse me for saying this, but you're a beautiful person."

"Jim, people can believe what they need to about me. When I'm here, I shouldn't do this," she said, as she wiped the last of her tears. "What I need to do is make sure everyone is doing what they're supposed to."

"I'm sorry that I bothered you. If you want Greg and me to be the only ones to know that you aren't cold, then let it be," Jim said and left the room.

Cold and heartless? Alex thought. Maybe I should be just that, and then my heart wouldn't hurt anymore.

Alex tried to concentrate on her work but whenever someone walked by her office, she looked up hoping that it was Randy. It never was.

Toward the end of the day, she walked over to Greg's cube. "Greg?"

He turned around and smiled. "Yes?"

"Before you leave, will you stop by my office? I need the daily call reports."

"Sure thing. I'll run the reports now."

Alex walked slowly back to her office, she noticed that Randy's cube was now empty. "Helen?" she asked, as she entered Helen's cube. "Where's Randy?"

"Oh, he moved over on the other side, where Joe's staff is. I thought you knew," Helen said.

"I knew he accepted Joe's offer, just didn't realize that he'd move today. Thanks," she went outside to have a cigarette.

As she headed back to her office. Greg was just approaching it with the daily report. "Here you go."

"Come in for a minute, will you?" Alex asked.

"Definitely." They walked into the office together. "What's up?" Greg said, as he took a seat.

Alex closed the door. "Um, do you have plans tomorrow night?"

"Nothing that won't wait, why?"

"I thought that we ... um ... you and I ... could go out to dinner, as friends, and just talk."

"Of course, sweetheart. Why not tonight?"

"I have something that I need to do tonight. I've been putting it off for so long, but I need to do it."

"OK. How about I pick you up at your apartment at around five?"

"Sure. I'll see you tomorrow. I'm going to head home now, so tomorrow, then."

Greg got up and left. Alex grabbed a few things and walked out the door, locking it behind her. Walking

down the hall, she saw Randy, but didn't say a word to him. He turned around as if to say something, but then kept walking.

Alex went home and fixed something to eat. When she finished eating, she got out the bottle of wine and opened the desk drawer. Inside was the album, My former life, she pulled it out and sat down on the sofa. She took a deep breath and opened the cover. The first picture was of her and Matthew. They looked and seemed so happy. She ran her finger of the picture of Matthew. "God, how I miss you."

Slowly, she went through the album, page by page, again, pictures of her and Matthew. A few pages in were pictures of Mary and John. Then she came across the picture of Amanda and Greg. She closed her eyes and remembered the day she met Greg. Standing so tall with is large brown eyes and black hair. He was so thin and tall, and he was so great with Amanda. He took such good care of her. Amanda was beautiful with her long brunette hair and green eyes. She smiled all of the time and loved having Greg take care of her. Alex didn't agree that someone should take care of you, but if they seemed happy, she didn't mind.

She turned the page and there was the newspaper clipping of Matthew's obituary. She read the lines survived by his wife, Alexis Garris. "Alexis Garris. It's been so long," she cried.

As she grabbed the tissues to wipe her tears, there was a knock on the door. She put the album back in the desk and answered the door.

"What do you want?" she asked dryly.

"I want to talk to you. Oh, you've been crying?" Randy said softly.

"Not about you. What do you want?"

"Please, Alex, may I come in?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said. "Have a seat."

"This is a nice place that you have," he looked around the apartment.

"You were here last night."

"I didn't really notice it," he cleared his throat. "Anyway, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What? You've come here to tell me that last night was all a mistake and that you want to forget the whole thing. Right? You did that earlier."

"Actually," he paused for a moment. "No, that's not right. Not right at all."

"I don't understand, Randy. You practically told me today that last night meant nothing to you and here you are now, saying ... Saying what? What's going on with you?"

"I'm sorry about today. I've been thinking about you all day and how much I wanted you. I also was thinking about my life and what's going on in it. I know with every ounce of my being, that last night wasn't a mistake and that I want more nights like that. However, I'm also not ready to leave my life as it is. This all happened so fast."

"Randy, I'm not asking you to leave your life or your wife, for that matter. You have your arrangement, which is all well and good. I want you to be happy. I don't know what happened last night, but you have brought out something in me that I haven't had in so long."

He took her hand. "Alex, you don't know how bad I want you right now, but I need to leave. She'll be home soon."

"I understand. But, there's one thing that you need to know. I can't make this all about sex. Not that I don't want to make love to you again. It's just that I need time for us to talk to each other and just enjoy each other's company. If you can't do that, then ..."

"I want the same thing. I have to go now," he kissed her on the cheek and headed for the door. "Will you be here Sunday night?"

"Yes, I don't have plans for Sunday."

"I have the 3 to 11 shift at the police department, do you mind if I came over after work?"

"What about your wife?"

"Don't worry about it," he left out the door.

She stood there staring at the door as he closed it. What's going on? I'm so confused. What am I doing? He's still married. She shifted her eyes to the desk drawer. Then she walked over and opened it. She looked at the album and then closed the drawer again.

She put a movie into the DVD player and started to watch. Before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

She woke up the next morning to static on the TV. She turned off the DVD player and turned on the news. She went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. While the coffee brewed, she went and took a shower.

"I can't believe how tired I was," she said, as she drank her coffee after her shower.

She decided to go out for a long drive. She got dressed, grabbed her license and her keys, and went downstairs. On the windshield of her car was an envelope. She pulled out the note and out dropped a plastic shiny badge. She picked the badge up off the ground and read the note. "Sorry, I can't give you my real one, but this is to remind you of our first night together. I hope there will be more. I'm sorry. R."

She smiled as she got in the car. She placed the letter and badge into her pocket. She started the car and drove away. She drove around on the back roads for a while and then she headed toward Middleburg. She made a turn at the light and stopped in front of the cemetery.

She parked her car on the road and then walked into the cemetery. She walked all the way to the back toward the woods until she came upon Matthew's headstone. Matthew L. Garris, beloved husband was etched into the headstone.

She kneeled and softly spoke. "Matthew, I hope you like this new place. I had to bring you home. I know it's not Florence, but I wanted you close to me. I miss you." Tears filled her eyes as she ran her hands over the headstone. "I love you, Matthew, and that will never change. I like it here, a lot. I see why you talked so much about this area. I have so much I want to tell you. God, I wish you were here. I feel so lost. I want to move on with my life. I'm so afraid of getting hurt and I don't want anyone else to get hurt on my account ever again. Matthew, will you ever forgive me? I don't know how to move on. I don't want to forget us, but I need to do something with my life. I'm so lonely. I'm so, so lonely. I don't want to be alone. What should I do?" she stayed at the gravesite a little while longer, she was hoping for the answers, but nothing came to her. She got up and walked back to the car. She looked back once toward the cemetery and then got in the car.

She drove to a small diner that was around the corner and went inside to have a cup of coffee. As she sat there drinking her coffee, she just stared out the window. She remembered the day that she married Matthew. Oh, how much we were in love. It seemed like nothing could break us apart. I never thought I'd be here 10 years later without you. How do I go on? I don't even know how I got to this point in my life. Familiar laughter interrupted her thoughts. She turned around and noticed Randy sitting at a booth, with a lovely dark-haired woman, not far from hers. They were sitting at the table holding hands and laughing, as he gazed into her eyes. Must be his wife, she thought. Do I dare walk over and say hello? No. She then got a better idea.

She got up from the table and walked slowly passed the table where Randy was sitting with his wife. Inconspicuously, she allowed the badge to drop out of her pocket in front of the table, where she could pick it

up. She just looked at Randy and their eyes met. He turned away and looked at the woman again. She smiled and then kept walking.

Randy continued his conversation with his wife and Alex walked into to the ladies' room. She washed her hands in the sink and then went back to her table. This time she didn't even look at Randy.

She paid for her coffee and left the diner. She looked around the small town. She noticed that across the street was a florist shop. She decided to go in. The florist shop had such a wonderful scent. Alex picked out some flowers for her home and some specific for Matthew. He always loved gladiolas, so she picked out a dozen and a cemetery vase. She also picked up some candles that would suit her apartment. After she paid for the items, she headed back to her car and drove back to the cemetery. This time she drove right in the cemetery on the dirt road that led up to Matthew's grave.

She looked at Matthew's grave. "Here, Baby, I brought you your favorite flowers," she placed the vase in the ground and arranged each flower carefully. "I promise. I'll be back soon. I love you, Matthew," she stood up and headed back to her car.

It had been a long morning and she wanted to relax before her dinner with Greg. As she drove home, she turned on the radio and found herself singing along. For the first time, in a long time, she felt a sense of peace. Her visit to Matthew was long overdue and she was so happy that she visited him.

Chapter Five

When Alex arrived home, she had an impulse to watch some old videos that she had put away. She went into the closet and on the top shelf took down a box that contained videotapes. She riffled through it until she found the one she wanted. It was labeled Matthew's Birthday. She brought it out to the living room and put the tape in the video player. She sat down on the couch with the remote and turned it on.

"Come on, love. Are you going to follow me all day with that thing?" asked Matthew.

"But, you're so handsome, I love you and I want to cherish this day forever," Alex's voice came from behind the camera.

A knock came from the door and the camera followed Matthew to answer it. There was Mary and John.

"Are we late?" they asked.

"You're never late," Matthew said with a laugh.

"Well, I see we beat Greg and Amanda. They're the ones that are always late," John said.

"It's for the grand entrance, I expect," Alex said. The camera followed behind Mary, John, and Matthew as they walked down a hall to the door that led to the backyard.

"Alexis, will you put that camera down," Matthew started walking closer to the camera.

"Not now. I'll put it down once Greg and Amanda get here," she said.

"Oh, all right," he laughed, as he walked over toward the barbecue grill. Alex focused the camera on his rear end.

He turned around quickly. "Now you've gone and done it," he smiled as he ran toward her. He grabbed her and started to kiss her. Suddenly, the camera pointed to the ground for a few seconds and all that was heard was laughter from the four of them.

In the background the doorbell rang, the camera went back to opening the door. "Greg, Amanda, it's about time," Alex laughed.

"It's not my fault, it's his!" Amanda sputtered.

"Don't mind her, she's in a mood," Greg said.

"Come on, Mandy, let's get you a glass of wine," Alex said, as she led Greg and Amanda out to the backyard and the camera followed.

Matthew went up, hugged Amanda, and shook Greg's hand. "OK, Alexis, you can put the camera down now."

Alex put the camera down on the table, as it continued to record the six of them sat around the table drinking wine. Matthew got up a few times to tend to the grill.

Alex got up from the table to get more wine and Greg followed her into the house. Amanda got up from the table and went out of video range.

Alex paused the video. She remembered what happened in the kitchen with Greg. She leaned back into the sofa, closed her eyes, as she could see it all over again.

Greg walked into behind her. "Alexis, I need to tell you something and I want to tell you now, before

anyone comes in."

"You can tell me anything, what is it?"

"I—I—I am ... in love with you."

"Yeah, right. You love Amanda. Is this one of your jokes? Because it's not very funny. If Matthew were to walk in right now, he'd ..."

"It's not a joke. Alexis, I loved you since the day I laid eyes on you. How I have wanted to touch you."

"Greg, I'm going to pretend that you didn't say that."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'WHY'? Amanda is your wife and not to mention that I'm truly and deeply in love with my husband."

"I know. I love Amanda, but she's not you. I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have told you this way. But, I know how you are with honesty."

"Greg, you're one of my closest friends and that will never stop. If you love me, just love me from a far and don't bring this up again. I don't want to lose our friendship ... or anyone else over this."

His eyes became sad. "If that's what you want, but I'm glad that I told you."

Alex remembered Greg leaving the kitchen. She needed a few moments to compose herself. Alex hit play on the video player.

Alex entered with a bottle of wine and filled up everyone's glasses. "To our friendship. May it last forever."

She didn't notice it at the time, but there was something different in the way Amanda looked on the tape.

Everyone raised a glass to the toast. They talked for a while, and then Amanda spoke. "So, what time are we leaving on Saturday?"

"I was thinking about five," Matthew said

"Five AM?" Alex exclaimed

"Yes, babe. Five AM." They all laughed.

"Then it's settled," Greg spoke up. "I'll pack up my camper and pick you all up around five."

"This camping trip is going to be great," Amanda muttered. "Totally unforgettable."

Alex shut off the videotape and ejected it from the player. "Yeah, it was unforgettable, all right," she muttered.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. "It's only four, it can't be Greg already," she said aloud, as she opened the door. Sure enough, there stood Greg. "You're never on time, and today you're early," she said. "Come in."

"It's never too late to change," he said with a smile.

"Have a seat. I was just watching some old home movies," she explained. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Sure, whatever you're having is fine," he sat down on the sofa. She went into the kitchen and brought out a bottle of wine.

"I guess this is what I've been drinking all afternoon," she looked down at her full glass on the coffee table. "Actually, I don't think I took more than a sip a couple hours ago," she brought her glass into the kitchen and dumped it out. She poured them both a glass of red wine. "So, what are you doing here an hour early?"

"Well, I had some errands that I had to run today. I didn't feel like driving back home, just to turn around and come back. I didn't want to risk being late. So, here I am. I hope you don't mind," he explained.

"No, don't worry about it. Did you want to go out or stay in? I'm not much of a cook, as you know, but we could order in."

"Staying in sounds good. What do you want to eat?"

"Well, Italian sounds OK. There's a little Italian takeout place around the corner. We could order and have the food delivered."

"OK," Greg looked around the room. "It smells really nice in here."

"Thanks. I stopped at a flower shop today and thought my place could use some color and nice scent. I also got a few candles."

"Alex, are you OK?" Greg asked.

"Yeah, sure, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"Because you're talking to me like I'm a stranger you just met."

"I didn't realize it. I'm sorry," Alex looked away.

"Alexis," Greg took her hand. "Look at me."

Alex looked at him and stared into his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Alexis, I know that something is wrong, very wrong with you. Please tell me what it is so that I can help you," Greg pleaded.

Tears swelled in her eyes. "Please, don't call me that anymore. There's only one person I let call me that and that's Emily," she paused. "I watched the videotape from Matthew's last birthday party."

"Oh?"

"Watching that gave me some hindsight. I think that I know what set Amanda off."

"What do you mean?"

"Here, I'll show you," she put the tape back into the player and hit rewind. After a couple of seconds, she hit play.

Alex got up from the table to get more wine and Greg followed her into the house. Amanda got up from the table, but it didn't record where she went.

"See right there," Alex hit pause on the tape. "When you and I got up and went into the kitchen, you told me that you loved me."

"Yeah, I remember," Greg smiled.

"But Amanda also got up from the table. My guess is that she was listening to us outside of the kitchen"

"But you can't see where she went," Greg said.

Alex hit play again on the video. "Watch the rest of the tape and keep an eye on Amanda when she comes back."

Amanda sat down at the table and A little while later Greg walked into and sat down. Amanda just glared at him. Then Alex entered with a bottle of wine and filled up everyone's glasses. "To our friendship. May it last forever?"

Everyone raised a glass to the toast. They talked for a while, and then Amanda spoke. "So, what time are we leaving on Saturday?"

"I was thinking about five," Matthew said

"Five AM?" Alex exclaimed

"Yes, babe. Five AM." They all laughed.

"Then it's settled," Greg spoke up. "I'll pack up my camper and pick you all up around five."

"This camping trip is going to be great," Amanda muttered. "Totally unforgettable."

Alex stopped the videotape. "See, what I mean? Look at her face."

"Alex, I guess you're right. I do see it now. I just wish I saw it then."

"You know, you and I never talked about it after it happened. I guess it just hurt us so badly," Alex said quietly.

"You're right, and it still hurts. I feel like it's all my fault and this tape just proves it."

"No, it's not your fault. None of us saw that coming. That wasn't what was written for us."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe that life is written out for you, it maps out your life to make you happy, but what I've been living for the past four years is my unwritten life. This wasn't planned for me. It just happened. Matthew, John, and Mary's life ended and, in a way, mine did, too. I haven't been happy. I want to be past the unwritten life and live my life the way it was meant to be. Sounds stupid, doesn't it?"

"No. Maybe the only way to get back on track to the life you were meant to live is finally talk about the pain."

Alex eyes started to swell up with tears. "I can barely say the words sometimes, but I'll try."

Greg picked up his glass of wine and took a large sip, and then he lit up a cigarette.

Alex lit a cigarette and took a deep inhale. "You start."

"Well," Greg leaned back into the sofa and closed his eyes. "Amanda and I had that fight. We went for a walk and all we did was fight. She said that I loved you more than her. I didn't know what to do or what to say. Then she just stormed off and I didn't even try to go after her. I just sat down on the ground and tried to figure out how to keep my marriage from failing even though I loved you," he said sadly. Greg wrapped his arm around her. "It wasn't your fault, Alex. You had no choice but to kill her. I watched you do it. After you finished hitting her, you crawled over to Matthew and passed out. I checked on you to see if you were OK, and then I called the police."

"Why didn't you stop me? Why didn't you ever tell me? You told the police that you walked into after she was already dead."

"It was too late. You had already started hitting her. I just wanted to protect you."

"It hurts so much. I still have nightmares of the screams. Why would she do this and how could I do it to her? I have never been violent my entire life. But, in one moment, I changed. My life changed, forever. Matthew and I had such plans for the future. Our life was mapped out for us and then she took it all away."

"It's going to be OK now. I'll help you."

"Not everyone would understand that I just lost it and killed someone. You sat through my trial but never spoke to me. I thought you hated me, especially after you sued my estate for wrongful death. I never blamed you but suddenly you disappeared."

"I know and I'm truly sorry. My lawyer told me that I needed to sue your estate, or the police would look at me in some way. I told you I would always protect you. I was never gone. I just remained out of sight. Once you were found not guilty, I knew I did the right thing. So, I just watched out for you. Wherever you went, I followed. Every state, every city you went through, I was only right behind you. I love you and even if you never return those feelings, I'll be a happier man for telling you the truth."

Alex looked into Greg's eyes. She touched his face gently with her hand. "It just hurts. I want the pain to go away," she cried. "I do love you, just not the way you need me to. I want so bad to move on and forget, but I know that I'll never be able to forget. I want to have some fun and be able to be myself. But, it's so hard."

Greg looked back at her and whispered. "Please don't hate me, but ..." then he pulled her into a soft, tender kiss.

She didn't pull away. She just let it happen. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly. She continued to kiss him back. Her heart felt heavy, she knew in her mind, that this should not happen. He ran his hands down her back. I should just back up, she thought, but she didn't. She continued to kiss him. He ran his fingers down her scar on her back and she shuddered for a moment. Gently, she pulled away. "I'm sorry."

Greg smiled. "Don't be. I've wanted to kiss you for so long. I'm sorry that I touched your scar."

She couldn't believe that she was saying this or even feeling this, but she said. "That's not why I'm sorry. I don't want to be alone tonight. This shouldn't happen, but I need to be held right now. I can't have sex with you, but I just need to be held, be held by you."

"It would be a dream come true. All I want to do is hold you," Greg whispered.

She smiled. "I just need to feel safe tonight."

Greg took her in his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He laid her on the bed and helped her get undressed. He carefully covered her up with the blanket and then took off his clothes. He got into bed beside her and pulled her close. She snuggled up against him and fell asleep. He watched her sleep for a while and held her close. Then he fell asleep.

A few hours later, Alex woke up to Greg lying next to her. Oh my god. What did I do? This was a stupid mistake. One I can never make again, she thought. Carefully, she got out of bed as to not wake him. She put on her bathrobe, went into the living room, and looked at the clock. It was only midnight, and she was starving. "That's right. We never did get to eat," she said aloud.

"That's right," Greg said behind her.

She turned around. "Oh, hi."

He smiled. "Before you say anything, I need to say something to you."

"OK, what is it?" she asked

"I know why you let me hold you, but it won't happen again, unless you return my love. That's why I didn't try to make love to you. Not that I didn't want to, but you aren't ready to love me back and it wouldn't be right."

"I just don't want to hurt you and if I did, I'm sorry. You were able to make the pain go away, at least for a little while."

"Don't feel bad. Sweetheart, I've always dreamed of holding you and kissing you. The one thing I've always

wanted was for you to love me. I know right now that I can't make you love me, so I got the next best thing. I got to protect you from the nightmares for one night and hold you."

"Are you sure you aren't hurt?"

"I'm positive."

"Good, because I'm starved. That Italian place is open until two AM. Let's say we order in."

Alex picked up the phone and hit three on the speed dial. She ordered the dinner to be delivered. "They have great lasagna," she said, as she hung up the phone.

She looked at Greg for a minute. "I think you should probably put some clothes on before the food gets here. We don't need to give the driver a surprise."

Greg looked down at himself. "I forgot I was still naked," he laughed, as he went into her bedroom.

Alex walked over to the desk and pulled out the album. She sat on the couch, thumbed through the pictures, and went passed Matthew's obituary. The pages after that were all the clippings surrounding the incident at the campground. The clippings showed pictures of the scene and the most recent picture of each victim. The final clipping had a picture of Amanda on one side and Alex on the other side, the headline read. "HEIRESS FOUND NOT GUILTY, BUT IS SHE?"

Greg came back into the living room. "Why are you looking at that now?"

"I needed to. It's not just about reliving it in my own mind, but I need to see it all over again. Last night, I only got as far as Matthew's obituary, but now I can go further. I need to learn to deal with the fact that I'm capable of killing someone."

"She killed Matthew and she hurt you. If I were you, I wouldn't have even hesitated to kill her. No one can judge you for that."

"Well, 12 jurors did and found that I wasn't guilty. But, they were wrong. I'm guilty. We all know that I did it. They just felt sorry for me. Just because I can't remember everything, doesn't mean that I didn't do it. You've confirmed it for me. I want to thank you for that. I don't have to wonder any more about what happened."

"Matthew was looking out for you and so am I."

Alex smiled. "That's why I brought him home."

"What? Is he in that vase over ...?"

"No, he's not here in the apartment. When I decided to stay here, I had Emily arrange to have his body shipped to Middleburg. I needed him to be near so that I can visit him, but far enough away where I can move on with my life."

"I didn't know they would do that."

"Emily's husband has some pull in City Hall, so she got a court order to do it."

"Oh, I guess it's not much different from what I did with Amanda. I shipped her back to her parents in Florida. I figured they would have better use for her than I did."

"Greg, you need to be honest with me. How do you feel about Amanda and what happened? I know it's been four years, but ..."

"I don't know how to explain it. I've always felt responsible for what she did or at least why she did it. I loved her and sometimes, I miss her. I miss who she was before she fell apart. She was beautiful and kind and let me take care of her. Every now and then, I feel her close to me. When we were together, she wasn't evil, she was good and sweet."

"I'm glad you told me. I knew you loved her and I'm glad that feeling didn't go away. Greg, do you think Matthew will forgive me?"

"Forgive you for what?"

"It's my fault. He was trying to protect me, and it got him killed. It should have been me."

"Alex, don't ever say that. There's only one person at fault and she's dead. Matthew loved you very much and that's why he protected you."

A little while later, there was a knock on the door. The food had arrived. Alex paid the driver and gave him a nice tip. She brought the food out to the kitchen and they both sat down to eat.

Greg began eating. "Alex, why did you change your name?"

She took a bite of the lasagna and chewed it. Once she finished, she said. "A part of me died with Matthew and so I buried it. Also, there's the fact that my name was plastered all over the papers. I'm not Alexis anymore. Besides, the case was nationwide. The media may forget you for a while, but it always comes back. And, the public never forgets. People either are for me or against me," she took another bite of her food.

"Alex suits you. Alexis was beautiful and smart, but Alex seems more powerful and bold and ..."

"Heartless and cold?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Jim came to my office and told me that I should act like I have a heart instead of being cold."

"Don't listen to James. He has the hots for you anyway."

"You've got to be kidding."

"No, quite serious. I'm not worried, though, he is a bit young for you."

"What's that supposed to mean? He's about Matthew's age."

"Alex, I know you like older men."

"Matthew and I loved each other dearly. He's not that much older than I am."

"Well, after Matthew, you've always been attracted to, how should I say it, older men. Or at least men that have gray hair," he laughed. "I may have a chance after all. But, of course, there are a few other older men at work, too. Do I have a little competition?"

"I have no idea what you mean," she said innocently.

"Well, there's Joe, and Randy ... yes, there's Randy. So, what is it with you two?"

"Randy worked for me, for what, two days, and now he works for Joe. That's about it."

"I thought you'd be honest with me. I saw the way you watched him at the team lunch. And, Randy, he was so flustered by you, he had to leave the room."

"I'm being honest. Right now, there's nothing going on between Randy and me. We just work at the same place. And, just for your information, he wasn't flustered, he was just mad. We had a fight and now it's over. Now, let's drop it and finish our food before it gets cold."

"OK. Whatever you want," Greg said. They ate their food in silence. When they finished, Alex cleaned up.

Greg looked at his watch. "Wow, two AM. Where did the time go? I should get going. I really need to get some sleep."

"Yeah, me, too," Alex kissed his cheek. "I'll see you Monday at work."

Greg nodded and headed out the door. He stood in the hallway for a moment and stared at her door. Then he walked to the elevator.

Chapter Six

Alex went into the bedroom and lay down on the bed, before she knew it, it was nine AM. She held her head as she sat up. "I've got to stop having these late nights," she drearily walked into the kitchen and turned on the coffeepot. She opened the front door to get the newspaper. She brought it in to kitchen and started to read it as she drank her coffee.

She got up and grabbed her cigarettes from the living room. She noticed the tape still sticking out of the video player. She pulled it out, grabbed the album on the sofa, and brought them into the bedroom. She placed both the album and the tape back in the box in the closet. "Safe," she said aloud. She went back into the kitchen and lit a cigarette.

She started thinking about her visit with Matthew, yesterday. She smiled gently. Then she remembered seeing Randy and his wife at the diner. She wondered if he would show up today, as he said he would. She then remembered the badge. It was still in her pants pocket. She went into the bedroom and picked her pants up off the floor. She took the badge and note out of her pocket and put it in her jewelry box on her dresser. Before she closed the lid, she couldn't resist running her finger over the shiny piece of plastic.

Alex spent a quiet day at home. She just relaxed and didn't even get dressed. After she showered, she just got back in her bathrobe.

Around two o'clock, she fell asleep on the sofa watching television. A few hours later, she was awakened by a knock on the door. She looked up at the clock. "Five o'clock?" she whispered. She got up and answered the door. There stood Randy.

"Randy? What are you doing here?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"I told you I would stop by," he said.

"I thought that ... here, come in. Excuse me. I decided not to get dressed today. I thought that you had to work tonight," she closed the door.

"I wanted to see you, so, I got Leon to cover for me at work. He's my partner."

"Have a seat," she said, as she folded up the blanket that she was wrapped in. "You'll need to forgive me, I just woke up. I guess I fell asleep watching TV. The next thing that I knew, you were at the door."

Randy sat down on the sofa. "Don't worry about it. At my age, I take a nap whenever I can," he laughed.

Alex smiled. "Can you give me a minute? I have to put on some coffee," she got up and walked toward the kitchen.

"No problem. I'll help," he followed her into the kitchen.

Alex got out the coffee, while Randy put water into the pot. Once the coffee was brewing, they sat down at the kitchen table.

"This feels kinda awkward and I don't know why," he said.

"Yeah, it does. Oh, Randy, I don't know where we are supposed to go from here. I mean, we slept together and then had a fight. I thought we made up, but I don't know if it's really making up. Actually, I don't know what we are to each other."

"Alex, I have feelings for you, and I want to explore those feelings. Since I met you that first time in your office, I dreamed of holding you. Finally, I was able to hold you, kiss you, and feel you. It was fantastic. I've been doing nothing but thinking about you all the time and wishing I could see you again. The thought of being able to see you today was driving me crazy. I don't want to rush things and miss out on the fact that we are just

together. Alex, what do you want?"

She took his hand. "I want us to treasure our time together. You never know how much time you have together. I'm trying to get passed something and move on. I want to be free of my past and start having fun. It's not easy," she said. "I'm not sure what I want out of us, but I can say is that I can't make this just about sex, though the sex the other night was really, really good. But, with no feelings behind it, it was just sex."

"Just sex? So, it was a one-night thing?"

"That's not what I'm saying. I want to have some fun and I'd like us to take things one day at a time. Maybe we could talk to each other. Get to know one another with our clothes on," she smiled.

"I'll do what you want. I want so bad to learn about you. You know, who you are, and where you've been."

"I have things in my past that are right where I want them, in the past. Someday, I may be able to share that part of my life with you, but I'm not ready to."

"To be honest, I don't know if I can live with someday, but I'll at least try. I sometimes get so impatient. I worry that someday may never come."

"I understand that more than you know. I lost my husband, Matthew, four years ago. It still hurts but I need to move on with my life. So, that's what I've been working on for the past six months, moving on with my life. To be honest, it hasn't been going very well."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"No one can ever replace him, but I don't want anyone to, either. I'll always love him, but there's always room in my heart for another."

The coffeemaker made a slurping sound, which indicated that it was finished filling the pot. Alex got up and poured them both a cup of coffee. "Let's go in the other room, where it's more comfortable."

They went into the living room and sat down on the sofa. Alex laid her bare legs across Randy's lap. "I hope you don't mind," she smiled.

"Not at all," he gently rubbed her legs. "You've got great legs. But, Alex, you're confusing me."

"I'm a little confused myself. I can go on instinct," she blushed. "OK, I see where this could go. I hope you don't mind, but for tonight, I'd just like to talk."

He cleared his throat. "It will be hard, and I mean very hard, but if that's what you want, I can do it," he pulled her face toward him and kissed her passionately.

She gently pulled away, but not before she took a deep breath to breathe him in. The smell of his cologne just made her bones melt. "That's definitely acceptable," she paused to catch her breath. "Well, I was wondering. Was that your wife that I saw you with at the Middleburg diner?" There. She asked. She couldn't believe it, but she had to.

"Yes. That was Joanna. We were having lunch together."

"You don't need to explain. She's your wife. You two seemed to be getting along very well. I saw the way you looked at her."

"Talking and laughing was never our problem. The intimacy that we once shared disappeared about five years ago. We share a little part of our lives and then she's off to Phoenix for the week. We eat together, laugh, and have a nice time, but that's it."

"Do you still love her?"

"Yes, I think that I do. I think the love I felt for her in the beginning has changed into a different kind of love. I can't really explain it."

"Does she love you?"

"I think so. She hasn't said it in so long, but I think she does."

"I don't know how you do it, but whatever works for you two."

"Well, it works and then it doesn't. It just is the way it is and has been for a long time. By the way, why were you at the diner?"

"Well, I didn't make it to Middleburg on Thursday," she smiled. "So, I went there yesterday. I had to visit Matthew. I just had his body moved to that cemetery."

"Oh, where was he before?"

"We used to live in Pennsylvania. After he died, I traveled around for a while and then decided to settle here. He grew up in Florence and I wanted to bring him close to home, where he belongs. He's in Middleburg because I don't want him too far or too close."

"What do you mean by too close?"

"I need him just far enough away to where I don't live my life sitting at his grave, but close enough to where I can visit him and tell him about my life. Florence is over two hours from here. When I first moved here, I drove around the different areas and the Middleburg Cemetery is so beautiful. I have him in the back by the trees and bushes. He always loved the woods and that was the best I could do."

"It must be hard on you, being a widow. I can't imagine."

"I hope you never need to deal with that kind of loss. I treasure every minute of my life that I spent with him. He taught me how to love and make the most out of life. He loved life and me. It doesn't hurt as bad as it used to, but it still hurts," she rubbed her forehead anxiously.

Randy reached over and ran his fingers through her hair. "I'm glad that you find that you can share this with me."

Alex got up off the sofa for a minute. "Um, excuse me. I need another cup of coffee," she quickly went into the kitchen. After she poured her cup, she turned around and Randy was standing in the doorway.

"Are you running from me or just need more caffeine?" he smiled.

"A little bit of both. I'm trying so hard to stick to our agreement," she smiled nervously as she began rubbing her forehead back and forth.

"Nervous habit? I've seen you do that a few times since I been here," he said pointing to her hand.

She quickly dropped her hand. "Yeah, I guess. It's the only thing that's a giveaway about what I'm feeling."

"Don't worry about it. I'll keep your secret."

"People eventually catch on. I just can't seem to break it. If I'm stressed, anxious, and nervous or ..."

"Excited?" he slowly walked up to her and took her in his arms. "We didn't say anything about not kissing," he said, as he slowly kissed her neck. He moved up to her cheek. She trembled with excitement as he reached her mouth. He ran his fingers through her long blonde hair, and she ran her hands over his muscular biceps.

How she wanted him so bad. How she longed to take him inside her, but she knew she needed to stay grounded. She pulled away slowly. "No, we never said we wouldn't do that," she breathed heavily. "Let's go in the other room," she grabbed her cup of coffee and sat on the sofa.

He sat down beside her, this time she didn't put her legs up. "You can put your legs back on my lap. I'd really like it if I could just touch you. I promise, no more ... well ... you know."

"It's not that I don't want to. I just don't think that we should right now. I mean, every time we see each other. Otherwise, our rela ... whatever this turns out to be ... would just be about sex and I think it can be more."

"I know," he said. She set her legs back up on his lap. "OK, tell me something."

"What?"

"Are you hungry? Because I'm starving," he laughed.

"A little, I guess."

"So, do you want to go out and get something to eat?"

"Well, I really don't feel like getting dressed."

"Good point, I don't really want you to get dressed either," he smiled. "Why don't I just cook us something?"

"Well, I don't have much in the cupboards, but if you want to see if you can find something, go ahead. I'm not much of a cook."

He got up and went in to the kitchen. "Hmm, I can see what you mean," he called from the other room. "AHA! Found something."

"What'd you find?"

"It will be a surprise."

"Well, if it was in my cupboard, it will be a surprise," she laughed. She heard pots and pans banging in the kitchen, along with chopping. A little while later, he came out of the kitchen.

"Come on in, dinner is served," his eyes sparkled with delight.

Alex walked into to the kitchen and sat down at the table. Randy placed a plate in front of her. She looked down. "This came from my kitchen. Wow!"

"All it takes is a little ingenuity," he put down a plate for him and then poured them each a glass of white wine. "I see that you love red wine, but white goes better with shrimp."

He had fried up some frozen shrimp with butter and garlic powder and placed it on a bed of romaine lettuce. Alex took a bite. "This is delicious," she took a sip of the wine. "This came from my cabinet?"

"Yeah, it was mixed in with the bottles of Merlot."

"Hmmm, not bad. I wonder where that came from. Oh, well, it's good," Alex took Randy's hand. "This is really nice."

"It feels pretty good, doesn't it?" he placed his hand over hers and squeezed it gently.

They finished eating and Alex started to clean up. "No, let me, Lady. I made the mess. I'll clean it," Randy said, as he started loading the dishes in the dishwasher.

Alex sat back down at that table and finished her glass of wine. As soon as she finished, he poured her another glass. "You're really spoiling me. There's something on your mind that you're just dying to ask me, isn't there?"

"Why would you say that?"

"No man I know would clean up my house."

"I do this all the time at home, I have to. I just want to take care of you tonight."

Alex got stern for a moment. "I can take care of myself. I've done it all my life."

"Lady, I didn't mean that. I know you can take care of yourself. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"No, it's OK. I just don't want to be taken care of. I want an equal partnership, where two people do things for each other. I don't want to be protected or taken care of."

"Was it that way with you and Matthew?"

Alex beamed. "Yes, he was a very good man. He loved me dearly, but the best part was that he respected me."

"Well, he definitely sounds like he was a good man. I won't even try to replace him. I can only just be me."

"No one could replace him, but I don't want anyone to. I've decided that I need to be happy. It's been so long. I've been trying to keep my past behind me and just move forward."

"I hope that being with me makes you happy."

"For the most part," she licked her lips and smiled flirtatiously. She got up from the table. "Do you want to go back into the other room and maybe watch an old movie?"

"Whatever you want," he smiled as he wiped his hands on a nearby towel. She picked up their glasses of wine and he brought in the bottle. She set them on the coffee table. She walked over to the DVD player and put in the movie, *Stalag 17*. Randy stared at her.

"What?"

"Nothing, I guess I was expecting a romantic movie," he replied.

"I like this movie and I know it by heart, so if I miss a part, I know what I missed," she smiled. She sat next to him and curled up on the sofa. She laid her head on his shoulder and then covered them both up with her blanket. "Just sit back and enjoy the movie. I could lie like this forever."

He put his arm around her and kissed her head. "You smell so good," he whispered.

She looked up at him and gazed into his eyes. "I know that this night will end, but I don't want it to," she leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

He pulled her gently on to his lap and held her. He touched her cheek and brought her lips over to his. Slowly, he kissed her. He wanted to savor her taste. He desperately wanted to make love to her, but he knew tonight, it would not happen. He longed to be with her, he constantly thought about their first night together. Her smell brought it all back to him. Thoughts of touching her body filled his mind.

She touched his face and laid her head on his chest. He held her tightly while they watched the movie. He did not want it end, but he knew it had to. When the movie ended, he kissed her again. "I need to go home now. I really should get some sleep. We both have to work tomorrow."

Alex kissed him. "This is going to come out wrong, but I'm just going to say it."

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No, don't worry. This feels so good. I just wanted to know how tomorrow is going to go? The last night you were here, the next day was dreadful. I just don't want to relive that day."

"I know what I want. Why do you think I took that job with Joe?"

"Because it pays more?"

"Well ... that's part of it, but the other part is that I couldn't work for you and be with you. Besides, I don't think I could concentrate if I had to work with you every single day."

"We're still at the same office, it's not like you took another job someplace else."

"I know. But, my cubicle is on the other side of the wall. If I was in the room with Helen and all of them, I'd be looking for excuses to be the one to come to you."

"Well, it will probably be easier for me," she laughed.

He laughed and touched her cheek. "It will be hard, very hard to keep my feelings inside, but I'll do it. I know that my eyes will give it away when I look at you."

"I've been holding it in since I met you. I could smell your cologne before you walked into the door. I'll never forget that scent as long as I live."

"There's something about you, Lady, that I just can't do without," he lifted her up off the sofa and held her in his arms. "I need you and I long for you. Tonight, I'll wait," he kissed her and set her down. "I don't want to, but I better leave. I'll see you tomorrow." He kissed her again and held her close. Then he walked toward the door. He looked back at her one more time. "Until tomorrow," he left and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Seven

A few weeks had passed, and Randy and Alex were starting to get close, really close. It scared her, but at the same time, it excited her. She didn't know what to do about it, as Randy was still married to Joanna. He said that she didn't want him anymore, but how can someone just not want him? She couldn't understand. She was remembering the evening before and how she and Randy just held each other. In the past few weeks, she wanted to make love to him, but she wanted to really spend some time with him. Each evening they spent together, got harder and harder to wait. It was getting comfortable, but she knew that she could only take it day-by-day, for he was still married. She knew in her head that it would never last between them, but she was determined to enjoy him while she could.

It was Monday morning again. Alex sat at her kitchen table and drank her coffee. She wondered what today would be like. She thought about how her life has changed. She finished her coffee and went into take a shower. After her shower, she stood there staring at the clothes in her closet. She never had a problem before deciding what to wear. She touched each piece of fabric from each suit that she owned, she didn't want to look or feel like Karrie. At the back of the closet was her black silk pantsuit. She pulled it out. "I haven't worn this in a long time."

She put on the suit and then decided to wear her hair up today, so she tied it back in a loose bun. She looked in the full-length mirror and smiled. This looks impressive, she thought. She made her bed and headed for the door. "I think I'll drive to work today. I don't want to walk three blocks in these shoes," she said referring to the one-inch black heels she was wearing.

She grabbed her keys, license, and headed out the door. As she walked to her car, she noticed that on her windshield, there was a single white rose. She picked it up and smelled it. "Hmm, I wonder who left this?" she didn't think much of it. She just got in the car and drove to the office.

When she arrived at the office, Greg was standing outside with Jim and Treena. She walked toward them. "Good morning,"

"Wow. You look great!" Jim said. "Really, really great."

"Thanks," she smiled and kept walking. She could feel Greg and Jim's eyes following her up the stairs. As she was about to walk into her office, she heard a familiar "hello" from behind her. She turned around and there was Randy, walking up to her.

He followed her into her office and closed the door behind him. "Good morning, Lady."

She smiled. "Good morning, did you sleep well?"

"After a nice cold shower, I slept well. But, I had hot dreams of you all night," he grinned.

"Oh, I slept like a baby," she teased. "No, I tossed and turned, but then when I dreamed of being in your arms, I was able to relax and get some sleep."

"You know, you look great today. May I have a feel?"

"What?"

"A feel. I just love the feel of silk, and, on you, it has to feel even better."

She sat down in her chair, and he walked over and sat on her desk. She raised her leg, and he gently rubbed his hand up and down her inner leg. "I knew it, this feels great. It's so silky," he leaned over as if to kiss her when there was a knock on the door.

"I better get it," Alex quickly got up and opened the door. There stood Karrie and a tall man with dark hair.

He looked slightly familiar, but she couldn't place him.

"Hi, Alex," Karrie said. "I wanted you to meet William Weaver. I see that you're busy. We can come back."

"Um. No, it's OK. Randy was just here, for, um, some paperwork," she stuttered.

"Yeah," Randy picked up some papers off Alex's desk. Then he extended his hand to William. "Hi, I'm Randy," he looked at Alex. "Well, gotta go," he quickly left out the door.

"Come in and have a seat," Alex said and sat back down at her desk. She looked up at William. He was a tall, husky man with dark hair. His face was freshly shaven, and he had a powerful look in his eyes.

William spoke up. "Um, you look familiar. Have we ever met?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh, my mistake," he sat back in the chair. "Well, let me get started. I want to start meeting with you on a weekly basis. I have already talked with Joe and Karrie, and we'll have weekly individual meetings and a weekly team meeting. I know that you and Joe have been reporting directly to Karrie, but I want to be updated on everything that's going on so that I can get up to speed."

"That sounds good. Do you want me to set something up for us?"

"No, you can have your assistant do that."

"I—I don't have an assistant. I'm just a supervisor. Karrie doesn't even have an assistant."

"Well, then, we are going to have to get you one."

"OK," Alex replied with hesitation.

"Karrie, Alexis, I mean, Alex and I need to speak in private. If you could run those reports that I asked you for and put them on my desk, I'd appreciate it."

Karrie looked stunned but did what he asked. She left the room and closed the door behind her.

William watched as Karrie left the room and then he spoke. "I don't understand why you aren't the manager."

"William," Alex started to explain.

"Please, call me Bill."

"OK, Bill. Karrie hired me. I have only been in this position for a couple of weeks, before that, I worked downstairs in the personnel office."

"I know all about you and that's why I asked."

"What do you know about me, Bill?"

"Alexis ... I mean, Alex."

"OK, who are you and what do you really want from me?" Alex asked anxiously.

"You have nothing to fear from me. I know who you are because I do background checks on everyone who works for me. All I know you changed your name, and you own a gift shop in Pottstown, Pennsylvania."

"What else do you think you know about me?"

"That's it. I just run your Social Security number to see where you've worked. You're a business woman, and you deserve better than a supervisor job."

"Please, call me Alex and don't refer to me as Alexis. I like my job."

"Well, I'm planning on making some changes around here. I want you to manage the Customer Support team and I'll have Joe manage the Hardware support team."

"What about Karrie? If Joe and I are made managers, what will she do?"

"Karrie ... Karrie will be taken care of. As of next week, you and Joe will officially managers."

"I hate to sound petty, but what about my salary?"

"I looked at the salary bases, and you're underpaid even for a supervisor. As of Monday, your pay will be

\$15,000 more."

"Bill, why are you doing this? I mean ... I don't know what I mean."

Bill smiled. "Alex, I believe that this company can grow and the only way that can happen, is if its people grow with it. I read all your call reports and briefly talked with your staff and Joe's staff. They all have wonderful things to say about you."

"Really?" she sounded surprised. "I haven't worked with them that long."

"Well, obviously, you made a great impression. I want you to start thinking about improvements that you feel can be made to the department."

"What kind of improvements?"

"Well, hardware specs, equipment that may be needed or upgraded. Things like that."

"I can do that. I think I'll poll my staff first to get their ideas, since they're the first line of defense here."

"Great idea. Also, I wasn't kidding, you do need an assistant. Someone who can take care of day-to-day scheduling and paperwork. Since you'll be the manager, you'll have to worry about personnel issues and other things like that. I want you to be available for projects and to be involved with your staff more."

"OK, do I post the position internal or external?"

"Post it both places, you never know, we may have the making of a fine assistant here in the office," he stood up. "Well, I need to check on Karrie," he shook her hand. "Glad to be working with you. And, that's what it will be, though you're working for me, we'll be working together, a lot," he smiled at her and winked. Then he left out the door.

Alex sat there stunned for a minute. "So, many changes," she muttered to herself. She got up and walked down to Greg's cubicle. "Hey, can you stop by my office in about a half hour? I need some help with something."

"Sure, but you could've just called me," Greg smiled.

"I need a smoke, there's so much going on here right now, you have no idea," she started to walk away.

"Hey, wait, I'll go with you," Greg stood up and the two of them walked out of the office.

As they were walking down the hall, Randy was coming from the other direction. He just looked at her and smiled.

"Hey, Randy," Greg said with a smirk. "How's it going?"

"Fine, thanks, Greg. Where are you two off to?"

"I need a smoke," Alex said.

"Alex, can I meet with you in like a half hour or so?" Randy asked.

"Umm, Greg and I have a meeting then, but I can call you afterward," Alex kept walking.

"OK," he continued to his office, with a disappointed sigh.

"What's with him?" Greg asked

"I'm sure it's nothing," Alex said, trying to hide her smile. "Don't worry about him, he'll be OK."

When they went outside, Karrie and Jim were already there smoking. Alex lit up her cigarette and looked at Greg. "So, how was your weekend?"

"I took a drive out to Middleburg."

"Oh, visit anyone out there?"

"No, just walked around," he said and then he whispered. "No, I didn't go and see him. I won't disturb him."

She smiled. "Thanks, but it's OK if you do. I think it would be comforting for him to know you're still around, too."

Greg grinned. "Thanks."

She finished her cigarette and went inside. A few minutes later, Greg was at her office door. "I think it's been a half an hour."

She laughed. "Come on in, I really need your help."

He sat down in the chair. "What's up? I saw the new manager guy. He was asking a lot of questions about you."

"Really? Hmmm," she thought a minute. "Well, he is planning on making some changes and one of them is for me to hire myself an assistant."

"What do you need from me?"

"I know that you have done this before, so I figured you could help me write up the position for internal and external postings."

"Not a problem. Tell me about the job."

Alex told him about the expectations of the job and Greg took notes. "I'll take this back to my cube and write something up for you."

"Thanks. I really appreciate it. You'd make a good assistant," she laughed.

"I may just apply," he grinned.

"I need you right where you are but go ahead apply. I'll just say no," she smiled teasingly.

"I'll have these for you after lunch. Helen, Jim, Treena, and I are going out for lunch."

"Have a good time, but be back by one-thirty," she said. Greg left her office. She picked up the phone and dialed Randy's extension and he answered quickly. "You needed to see me?" she asked.

Abruptly, he hung up. "Well, I guess not," Just as she said that, he was standing in her doorway. "Why'd you hang up on me?"

"Sorry, I couldn't wait to see you. I've been dying all day, thinking about you in those silky pants. I couldn't help myself," he panted.

"Could you at least close the door behind you?" she smiled. "Come over here."

Randy closed the door and walked over to Alex at her desk. "Have a seat," he sat on her desk. "Now, where were we?"

He leaned over and kissed her passionately. "I think that's where we left off," he touched her face.

She leaned into his hand. "So, how has your day been going?"

"I've been trying ... trying really hard to get some work done. It's not easy. You had to where that outfit today, didn't you?"

"I wanted to look a professional. I haven't had enough time to even think today. You met William, I mean, Bill. He was in here for over an hour and then he made Karrie leave the room. Something is going on around here."

"Sounds like you've had a long morning. What do you say you join me in the cafeteria for some lunch?"

"Yeah, I guess I'm kinda hungry. But, first, I need to do one more thing."

"What's that?"

She pulled him into a long, hard kiss. "That!"

"I like this job already," he laughed. "Let's go eat." They left Alex's office and headed down stairs to the cafeteria. It was bustling with employees trying to get their lunch. "Let's take our lunch outside on the terrace."

They got in line and ordered their lunch. Alex followed Randy though the doors that led to the picnic tables. They sat their trays on the farthest table from the building. "Now, this is private," she said. They started eating their lunch. "So, do you have to work tonight?"

"No, I would like to come over. Actually, I want to take you some place. Do you have plans tonight?"

"I do now," she said.

"Good, I'll pick you up at six o'clock tonight on my motorcycle. So, dress warm and sexy," he raised his eyebrows and licked his lips. "Yes, warm and sexy."

"Whatever you want," she teased.

They finished their lunch and Alex got up to throw out the garbage. "Be right back."

When she came back, she touched his hand gently. "One thing."

His eyes turned sad. "What is it?"

"You need to concentrate on your work," she smiled softly. "You really do. To be honest, I don't care who knows, but you're married, this would affect you more than anyone."

"I know, I know. I promise, I will," As they were looking into each other's eyes, Bill came over and sat down beside them.

"Mind if I join you?"

"No, looks like you already are," Alex said.

Bill laughed. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything, but I don't know anyone here."

"It's not a problem. You know us," Randy said

"Yeah, I feel like I've known Alexis for years," Bill said.

"Who's Alexis?" Randy asked.

"I'm sorry, I mean, Alex," Bill corrected himself.

Alex got uncomfortable. "YES, it's Alex," she said sternly.

"I apologize. I see I've made you upset."

"Don't worry about it, Bill," she calmed down. "So, what's going on with Karrie?"

"I don't know if I should say anything now," he said looking at Randy.

"Don't worry. Randy won't say anything."

"Karrie is going to be my assistant. She had a choice, stay and be my assistant or head out the door."

"You've got to be kidding," Randy added.

"No, I'm not. I checked her out, too. I don't know how she made it to manager, but she has no technical skills and very little personnel skills. Her last job was as an administrative assistant. How she went from there to manager is beyond me."

"Probably because she was sleeping with Joe," Randy whispered.

"What?" Alex and Bill said at the same time.

"That's what I heard. Joe is Donald's brother and Joe convinced him to hire Karrie about a year ago," Randy explained.

"I knew Joe and Donald were brothers, but I didn't realize ...," Alex said.

"Who's Donald?" Bill asked.

"The Head of Personnel," Alex said.

"Oh, I thought Katrina was."

"No, she's just the only one who's ever around. Donald is her boss."

"Well, that explains a lot," Bill said. "I've bugged you two long enough, carry on," he stood up and walked away.

"He said 'carry on'," Randy took Alex's hand. "I want you to know that I want to kiss you, but I won't."

Alex blushed then she looked at her watch. "Oh, better get back to work." They both stood up and Randy walked her to her office.

"If I don't see you later, I'll be there at six o'clock," he said, as he walked out the door.

A few seconds later, Greg walked in. "OK, now I get it. What's with you and him?"

"I have no idea what you mean," she smiled.

"He'll be there at six? Oh, please, you're sleeping with him, aren't you?"

"Get in here and close that door. What's your problem? For one thing, that's none of your business and another thing, you're my friend, and you PROMISED to be just my friend."

"Why are you mixed up with him? Didn't you know that you're sleeping with a COP?"

"I know he's a cop. Big deal," she sat back and smiled. "Why do you care if he's a cop or not?"

"Because he can easily find out who you really are, and I KNOW you don't want that," Greg said.

"I have bigger problems than that," her smile changed. "Much bigger."

Greg sat down. "What's going on?"

Alex took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "William, our new district manager."

"I think he likes you," Greg said.

"Well, he called me Alexis."

"Does he know everything?"

"I'm not sure," she thought for a moment. "He just promoted me and Joe to managers, made Karrie his assistant and gave me a raise. He told me that he just ran a Social Security work check. I don't know what he has planned but keep your guard up around him. He called me Alexis right in front of Randy."

"Not good," Greg looked very concerned.

"No, not good at all. Randy didn't say anything about it. I guess he just assumed it was a mistake."

"I hope so. We don't need Randy to dig up any dirt."

"What are you so worried about? I'm the one with this hanging over my head for the rest of my life. Besides, I'm not worried about Randy. We are just having some fun. I told him I was married, and that Matthew died, but I didn't tell him how or why."

"You should keep your mouth shut."

"Excuse me? I can tell him anything I want to. I'm just not ready."

"Sorry, there I go trying to protect you again."

"Don't! Protecting me is what got Matthew killed. I'll protect myself. And, I'm damn good at it."

"I'm sorry for coming down on you. I'm just jealous of Randy. He gets to do the things with you that I've always dreamed of."

"Greg, Randy, and I are just becoming friends. We aren't currently sleeping together," In Alex's mind, it wasn't a total lie, at that very moment they weren't sleeping together.

"Well, I know you wouldn't lie to me and, Alex, you don't ever need to lie to me. Don't try to spare my feelings."

"All right, we slept together once. Are you happy I told you? God, Greg. This is my life. I can't change what happened, but I can change how I live my life. I don't need any input from you. I'M HAVING SOME FUN, SO GET OVER IT!"

"Oh," Greg sadly got up and left the office. A few minutes later, he came back with the position postings in his hand. He acted as if nothing happened. "Please read this and let me know if it's OK."

Alex read the two documents "This is great. I really like how you worded it. Thanks for all your help."

"Not a problem. I also emailed you a soft copy."

Alex turned to her computer to retrieve her email and all of a sudden, she got a fatal error. "Oh, great," she said sarcastically. "Can you do me a great big favor?"

"What happened?"

"Looks like my computer just died and I don't have time to look at it myself. Can you open me a problem ticket with the hardware department? I'll take these down to personnel so that they can be posted ASAP."

"No problem. I can do that," he started for the door and turned around. "About before? I'm sorry."

Alex nodded. "I know you're just concerned."

He smiled as he headed to his cube to open the problem ticket.

Alex got up with the postings and headed to Bill's office. She was just about to knock, when she heard his voice on the phone. "Yes, I finally found her. Don't worry, Mom. It will be OK now." She knocked carefully.

"Yes, who is it?"

"It's Alex," she answered.

"I've got to go, she's here now," he whispered quietly and hung up the phone. "Yes, come in."

"I wanted to show you the postings for the assistant job," she handed him the papers. "I would have emailed them to you, but there's something wrong with my computer."

"You wrote these?" he asked.

"No, I had Greg write them up. He's had experience with that kind of stuff."

"Why don't you have Greg work for you?"

"He already does ... as a Customer Support Tech."

"He's not very technical."

"He's kinda technical, but best of all he has great customer service skills."

"A friend of yours, huh?"

"We are friends, but he was hired before I knew he was in town. He is a good man."

"I've already spoken with him a few times today."

"Well, do you want me to post these or just give the job to Greg?"

"What do you think is best?"

"I think posting these would be the better option. If he wants the job, he can just apply for it. I should hire someone who isn't necessarily my friend."

"Good answer. I don't want special favors given around here."

Special favors? She thought, why did that sound so familiar? She still couldn't place him. "I would never do that."

"Not even with Ray or Randy or whatever his name is?"

"It's Randy, and why would you ask that?"

"I saw you two together, I just assumed ..."

"Please don't assume. We were just eating lunch."

"Whatever you say, ALEX," he said her name so carefully that it gave her shivers.

"I'm going to bring these down to personnel now. If you need anything, just give me a call. Probably won't be on email today," she quickly left. Her heart was beating fast. She had to find out who he was, but how?

She brought the papers down to the Personnel department. "Hi, Katrina, can you look these over and then have them posted?"

"Sure, no problem. When do you need these posted by?"

"I would say have them posted this week."

"I can do that," Katrina Williams said. "So, how is it going up there?"

"The job's good, but I don't know how much things will change with Bill here."

"I know. I met him. He seems a little off. I can't figure out why, just a little off."

"I know. He seems to know more about me than I care to."

"Well, he did ask for your file."

"I would assume that was normal."

"Not when he only wanted yours and no one else's."

"Hmmm," Alex thought for a moment. "Katrina, what do you know about him?"

"Just that he came here from the east. He supposedly worked at a Technical manager for a US based Canadian company. I heard that he is a good friend of Solutions' President, Steven Welch."

"Oh, just wondering. Well, if you could keep your ears open for me. I think it's kinda weird that he is fixated on me."

"Well, if he starts giving you problems, just let me know and I'll talk with Donald."

"I will. Don't mention it to Donald yet," Alex left out the door and went back to her office. When she got back to her desk, she noticed something wrapped in a red ribbon with a nice large bow on it. There was a note attached to it. She opened it. "I'll be back to put this in for you soon. Randy." She unraveled the ribbon and smiled. It was a new hard drive for her computer.

She picked up the phone and dialed a long-distance number. The phone rang three times and then a woman answered "A&M Gifts, Emily speaking, how can I help you?"

"Emily, it's Alexis."

"Alexis? Oh my god, what's wrong? You never call unless there's a problem," Emily Martino said.

"No, honey. There isn't anything wrong. I was just thinking about you. I wanted you to know that Matthew is finally home, and everything is OK."

"Oh, thank goodness. I remember Middleburg. It was such a quiet town where everyone knew each other. But, you know, when Matthew got released from the Marines, he wanted to explore. Boy, did that exploring stop the second he met you."

"I know. Well, we explored each other. But, if I can remember, you seemed to want to do the same thing, too."

"Well, after Mom and Dad died, there wasn't much keeping me there. I wanted to be with family."

"I think it was a good decision, you met Tony."

"I know, I found out what it was that you and Matthew have ... had. I'd like to think that Tony and I share what you two did. Oh, by the way, did you get the package I sent you last month?"

"Yes, I looked over the books and everything is looking great. You're doing a great job. Remember, it's not just my business, it's our business."

"I know it is on paper, but it's still your dream."

"Well, things change. Matthew made my dream come true but now life is different. Anyway, I did want to make sure that you got my new bank account information. I faxed the stuff to the bank in Houston a month ago, so they should have the profits transferred to my local bank here, in Sars Springs."

"I talked with them last week and the accounts are set to be transferred. I'll make the monthly deposit next week and then the transfers will be set."

"Good. I don't need the money. I have a lot of cash on hand, and I opened a checking account. That has about \$500,000 in it. I shouldn't have to touch those other accounts for a very long time. My job here is good and I just got promoted to manager, so I'm trying to live off just the paychecks. If I don't need to touch that money, I definitely won't. I need to know that John and Mary's families are well taken care of."

"They are. Don't worry about it. The account in Florida that you set up as the insurance account, will keep them very well off for the next 20 years. I talked to Mary's mother last week. She told me to say hello to you when I heard from you. She misses you. She knows that it wasn't your fault. Oh, by the way, there was a strange man in here about a month ago, he was looking for you."

"What did you tell him?"

"Just that you've been traveling and haven't been here in about three years."

"You don't happen to know his name, do you?"

"I think it started with a W, but I really don't remember."

"Don't worry about it. Em, if you need anything, please feel free to call me."

"I didn't know if it'd be OK."

"Honey, you're family, you can call me whenever you need me. I'm not hiding from you, just everything else."

As she said those last words, Randy walked into the office. "Oh, sorry," he whispered.

She motioned for him to come in. "I need to go now, call me next week when things are finalized."

"I will," Emily hung up.

Alex put the receiver down on the phone. "Sorry about that," she said.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were on the phone," Randy said. "Well, can I put this in for you?"

She smiled. "Go right ahead," she moved her chair out of the way so that Randy could access her computer.

He knelt down on the floor with his back toward her. She couldn't resist not saying something. "Very nice view. You should do this more often."

He turned around and looked at her. She could tell he was a little embarrassed. "Thanks."

"Will you be able to save anything off the old hard drive?"

"I'll try, if I can't, I'll use last night's backups. They run nightly and make images of each person's computer, so nothing will be lost, well at least older than six hours."

"Good. I wasn't sure if Joe had everyone's machine backed up."

"Now he does," Randy laughed.

Alex started going through the papers on her desk. "Um, Randy, those papers you took off my desk this morning ..."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. Let me run and go get them. They're on my desk."

"No, you stay here. I'll go and get them, that is, if you don't mind me invading your cube."

"Go right ahead," Alex got up and headed for Randy's cubicle. Joe stopped her before she reached it.

"Where are you going?" Joe asked.

"Randy has a few of my papers, and I need to get them off his desk," she replied.

"Oh. Did you hear what Mr. Bill did to Karrie?"

"Yeah, I did. There's not much we can do about it. How is Karrie? I haven't seen her since this morning."

"She's OK. Actually, I think she is kinda relieved."

"I'll try and see her before I leave for the day," Alex continued to Randy's cubicle. She saw her papers and picked them up. She thumbed through them to make sure that they were all there. She noticed an envelope on his desk from a local law firm. She was tempted to pick it up, but she didn't. She headed back to her office.

"Found them," she said, as she walked into the room.

Randy looked up. "Almost finished here."

She closed the door. "Um, can I ask you a rhetorical question?"

"You can ask me anything, Lady."

She sat down in her chair and crossed her legs. Randy turned to face her, still kneeling on the floor. He started touching her legs. "What did you need to ask me?"

Alex leaned back with pleasure. "Um," she was so into his touch that she almost forgot her question. "Oh, yeah, right, OK, if I wanted to find out some information about someone, how would I do that?"

"Depends on what you want to find out."

"Oh, I don't know. Previous employers, place of residences," she paused for a moment. "Criminal background."

"Well, there are several search engines on the Internet and the price varies, or I could run a check for you on my police computer."

She thought for a moment. "I'll let you know. You know what. I think I'm going to need to get myself a computer at home. I've been meaning to get one, but there aren't many places around here that sell good computer systems. I'd need to drive to Phoenix or something."

"Well, I build computers at home. It's kinda a hobby of mine. I could build you one. Just tell me what you want."

"OK, I'll make a list later. Just let me know how much you want for it."

"You don't have ..."

"I'm going to pay for it. I'll give you the list when you pick me up tonight."

"Sounds good to me," he looked at his watch. "Almost four-thirty, I've got a couple things to do before I leave."

"Not a problem, I'll see you at my place later."

Alex booted up her computer and found that it was working and everything she needed was there. She finished some work and then got ready to leave.

She walked out to her car and started it up. Warm and Sexy, she thought. I have the warm, but I haven't had anything sexy for the longest time.

She drove around the small town looking for a lingerie shop. She couldn't find one, but she did find a nice woman's clothes shop.

She parked her car and walked into the shop. The clothes were beautiful and there was some nice lingerie on sale. Alex picked up a couple of outfits, some black leather pants and a nice silk top and a new leather jacket. As she was walking out, she noticed some nice calf high boots, so she bought them, too.

She went home and changed. She put on the two-piece lingerie. It was a bra and panty set made completely out of black lace. She put on the silk blouse and black leather pants. She took her hair out of the bun and let her long blonde hair flow down her back. She looked in the full-length mirror. "Now, this is warm and sexy," she said with a smile. She touched her body's form. "I haven't had a need for this until now," she went into the living room and sat down to make the list of items for the computer. When she finished, she put it in her pocket.

Soon, she heard noises in the hallway, so she opened the door slightly. "Oh, someone is moving in," she said aloud. As she was closing the door, she saw Randy walking up to the door. "Come on in."

He walked into and took off his leather jacket. Alex noticed that he was wearing all black, except for a shiny silver badge on his shirt. "That's not your uniform, is it?"

"Well, not my police uniform. I noticed how much you love the badge, so I had this one made for us."

Alex smiled. She walked over to him and touched the badge. "I don't know what it is, but you with that badge, really turns me on," she started to kiss him, and he kissed her back, with a long, hard kiss.

He gently pulled away. "Before we do anything, there's some place I want to take you," he put his coat back on, his eyes focused on her body. "Wow, I would say that's definitely sexy," he touched her again. "And

definitely warm," he kissed her again. "OK, we better go."

He took her hand and they headed out the door. She locked the door behind her. As they were walking down the front steps to the building, she noticed a moving van in the parking lot. She looked around to see if her new neighbor was there, but all she saw was the movers struggling to get a large piece of furniture out of the van.

He got on his motorcycle, and she straddled the bike behind him. They put on the helmets, and she wrapped her arms around him tightly. He pulled out of the parking lot and headed south. They rode for about an hour on this long and deserted street. As the wind blew over their bodies, Alex felt so free.

Then he turned on a dirt road that led in the woods. Soon, he pulled in the driveway of a rustic cabin. He turned off the bike and removed his helmet.

"Is that yours?" she asked pointing to the cabin.

"Well, it was left to me by my parents. But, this isn't where I wanted to take you," he helped her off the bike and took her hand. He led her around the back of the cabin and down a path. They ended up in a wooded cul-de-sac, where there was an area of the greenest grass she had ever seen. Brush, trees, and fragrant flowers surrounded it.

"This is my special place. It's hard to grow anything in Arizona, but for some reason, it's like its own world," he sat down on the blanket that was laid out on the ground.

"It's beautiful," Alex removed her jacket and sat down next to him.

"I set this up this morning before I went to work," he looked at her and took her into his arms. "I can't explain what I'm feeling for you, but I know that I wanted to take you here. No one else knows about this place, not even my wife."

"It smells so wonderful here. I haven't seen anything like it, especially here in Arizona."

"Lady, I want you so bad. I enjoyed our nights together, but I've been dreaming of making love to you again. I know that you want to wait."

She took his face in her hands and gazed into his eyes. "You're becoming very important to me. I want to be with you. I need to be with you," she started kissing his face and then their lips met. She kissed him gently, but hard, she slowly pushed him to lie down. She straddled his body. She started removing her blouse exposing her new lace bra. She fondled herself. "I bought this just for you."

His eyes lit up, he sat up and ran his hands down her shoulders to remove her blouse, and he kissed her tenderly on her neck. He cupped her breasts with his hands and gently ran his fingers over the delicate lace that covered her.

She fumbled to unbutton his shirt so that his muscular chest could be exposed. He grabbed her and rolled over so that he could lie on top of her. He kissed her all over her chest and stomach. He ran his hands over her leather-clad legs. She gently kicked off her boots. He ran his finger up her foot causing her to arch her back. He unbuttoned her pants and removed the leather covering her. "I love the smell of leather," he whispered.

She undid his belt and whipped it off him. She unbuttoned his pants, and then she kissed his waist as she unzipped the pants. She placed her hands on his hips and slowly pushed his pants down while she fondled his legs.

He moved up on top of her and began to make love to her. She moaned with delight as she felt him deep inside her.

Afterward, Randy wrapped the rest of the blanket around them and held her close. "Now that was warm and sexy, wasn't it?" he smiled.

Alex leaned into his chest as deep as she could. "Indeed, it was." They laid there for a while, breathing in

the scent of the flowers and each other.

She looked up into his eyes and gently touched his face. He kissed her fingers and then her hand. He pulled her close to him. "You're so beautiful, Lady," he kissed her lips and ran his hands along her slender body. She kissed him back and held him so tightly. "I never want this moment to end," he whispered.

They watched the sunset through the small space through the trees. He held her so close, that she felt like she was part of him. Before she knew it, she had fallen asleep in his arms.

Randy watched her sleep and ran his fingers through her hair. He kissed her head and squeezed her gently. He closed his eyes.

Alex was dreaming peacefully, but the dream was broken into by screams. Soon, her head filled with terror, causing her to jump out of her sleep. "Noooooooooooooooooooo!" she screamed.

Her scream woke Randy up. "What's wrong?"

Her whole body was shaking. She started to get up and get dressed. She didn't say a word. She couldn't even look at Randy. She struggled to get her boots on. "Damn it!" Her boots didn't seem to want to cooperate with her.

"Alex, what's going on?" Randy asked, as he put his pants on.

She didn't say a word. She put her boots on and started to run. Randy ran after her. After a minute, he caught up to her and grabbed her arm. "Please, stop. Tell me what's wrong."

She turned and looked at him. "They're all dead," she cried.

"I don't understand. Who's dead?"

She looked around and then looked down at her hands. She realized that it was just a dream. "I felt it happening all over again."

"What happened? What's making you so upset?"

"I—I can't tell you."

"Oh, so it's one of those someday kind of things," Randy started getting frustrated.

"If I tell you, you'll never want to see me again. I don't want to lose you."

"Alex, you need to trust someone, sometime. I was hoping that you could trust me."

"I do trust ..."

"No, you don't. You don't trust me. I have waited for this moment for the last few weeks because you weren't ready. God knows you were ready our first night together, but I agreed to wait. You told me that you didn't want this to just be about sex. But, here it is, the sex is over, you're ready to bolt."

"No. No. Randy. You just don't understand. It's not about what happened tonight, it's about what happened ... a long time ago. I can't get it out of my head. Honestly, it has nothing to do with what happened between us."

"Then what is it? I want ... I want to help you, but you need to let me. You're keeping some deep, dark secret and you can't let it go."

"I want to tell you. I just can't, right now. Now here, not after we just ..."

"Had sex?"

"I was going to say, made love, but, yes ... had sex. I just don't want to tell you this way. Can you just take me home?"

"When, Alex? When will you tell me?"

She moved closer to him and touched his face, and he pulled away. "Please, give me the chance to tell you. I just don't want to do it here. It's so perfect here, and I don't want to ruin this place for us by telling you here. Randy, I'm sorry that I'm hurting you right now. You don't owe me anything and I don't owe you anything. We

aren't even really together. I enjoy being with you and I look forward to every moment that we spend together. I do want to tell you. I promise I'll tell you, just not here, please," she tried to touch him again, this time he didn't pull away.

"I don't want to fight with you, Lady. I care for you. I just want to help you," Randy said. He put his arm around her, and they headed toward the cabin.

As they were getting on his bike, she leaned over and kissed him. "Randy, when you can make time to come over? I promise I'll tell you ... everything."

"I can come over Wednesday, if that's OK with you," he was still angry, not necessarily with her, though.

Alex nodded. Randy started up the bike and headed toward Alex's apartment. He pulled in to the parking lot and Alex got off the bike.

He looked at her "I'll see you at work tomorrow," he revved up the engine.

She smiled gently. "Oh, here," she reached into her pocket and pulled out the list she made. "That's if you still want to make the computer for me."

He took the list from her and kissed her cheek. "Alex, I don't know why you're afraid to tell me anything. I do know that you don't owe me anything, but I thought that we were becoming something ... something special."

"We'll talk about it later. It may be a conversation that we never get to have, though," Alex walked up the steps to her building as Randy pulled out of the parking lot.

Chapter Eight

Today was difficult for Alex. She went to work as normal and had so much work to do so she didn't see Randy all day. Bill had put her on a new project, and it took a lot of research. By the time she got home that night, she was exhausted.

She went into her apartment and just dropped on the sofa. She couldn't believe all of the work that Bill had her do. She managed to drag herself off the couch and fix something to eat. She also put on a pot of coffee, she knew she had to stay awake for a while, or she would get up way too early.

While she was eating, there was a knock on the door. She got up and answered it. There stood Greg.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"You didn't say two words to me today. I wanted to make sure you were OK."

"Yes, Greg. I'm fine. Bill just had me do a lot of work today. I'm just exhausted."

"Can I come in?"

"Well, I'm eating right now but I guess so," she let him in. He walked into and followed her into the kitchen. "Do you want something to eat?"

"No, thanks. I already ate."

Alex finished her soup and looked at Greg. "So, why are you really come here?"

"Can't friends just stop by?"

"Yeah, I guess. But, you never just stop by."

He smiled. "I guess you know me too well."

"Spill it, Greg. What's going on in that brain of yours?"

He leaned back in the chair. "You aren't going to like what I need to say."

"Since when do I like what you say?" she asked sarcastically.

"Very funny," he said. "I want to talk to you about Randy."

"I already told you. That's none of your business," she started getting agitated.

"Just let me speak my peace. Then I'll drop it."

"Whatever. Go ahead," she sighed with exhaustion. She got up and poured a cup of coffee, and then she lit a cigarette.

"I can't over the fact that he is a cop."

"How did you know that, anyway?"

"I saw him on Sunday in his uniform."

"No, you didn't."

"Sure, I did."

"Don't lie to me, Gregory! He didn't work on Sunday. Tell me the truth."

"Well, Bill told me."

"Bill who?"

"Bill Weaver."

"How would he ... why would he tell you something like that?"

"I don't know. We were just talking and it kinda came up in the conversation."

"Whatever. Who cares that he's a cop? What is it to you anyway? I like the fact that he is cop. Actually, it's one of the things that make him so attractive."

"Well, when he finds out that you're a murderer, he won't like you so much. And, once he finds out, you know everyone else will, too. Then all you'd be left with is me. Remember, you beat a woman to death! Who will want to be your friend then?"

"Get the hell out of my apartment!" She got up and stormed over to the door. "How dare you! How dare you say that to me after everything we've been through together!"

"Oh, my god, Alex. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it."

Randy approached Alex's door but stopped when he heard Alex and Greg arguing.

"You say you love me and then you say something like that. I can't believe you did that. Just so you know, I intend on telling Randy everything. He can leave or stay, but I'm going to tell him as soon as I can. I won't wait any longer."

"You're so stupid, Alex. All this over some dumb cop who will just turn his back on you. He doesn't love you. He just wants to stay in your pants. And, you, you're no better. You need to grow up and realize what you did."

"I do realize what I did. I need to live with it every single day! I don't need you to throw it up in my face. Do you think that I'll ever really get over it? NO, I won't. But, you're right about one thing, I am stupid. I actually thought that you cared for me and were my friend. I was totally wrong about you. After all these years, I finally found out who you really are. You care only about yourself and what this would do to you. You just don't want anyone to find out you were married to a psycho."

The voices were getting louder and louder, Randy wasn't sure if he should go in or just listen. Then he heard Greg's voice move closer to the door. "Alex, baby."

"Don't you dare touch me!"

"But ... I'm so sorry," Greg started to cry. "I don't want to hurt you. I love you. Come here, let me hold you," he grabbed her face tightly.

"No, let go of me. Get out!"

At that, Randy started to open Alex's door. "Alex, are you OK?" Greg quickly removed his hands from Alex's face.

"What the hell do you want?" Greg asked.

"I could hear you all the way down the hall."

"Greg was just leaving," Alex said.

"I guess I was," he turned to Alex. "This isn't over, and I'll be back. You can count on that," he started walking to the door. He looked at Randy straight in the face and said. "Don't worry, Alex. He won't stick around. I'm the ONLY one who will ever stay by your side."

"GET OUT!" Alex was shaking, and tears streamed down her face.

Greg walked out the door, slamming it behind him. She went over and sat down on the sofa. She buried her face in her hands. She wanted to cry but she was more angry than anything else. "After everything, everything we've been through. He does this. God, I could just kill him right now!" She clenched her fists.

"Alex, what's going on around here?"

"He was telling me to stay away from you because you are a cop."

"Why would that matter? Alex, what's not over?"

"Hey, I thought you were coming over tomorrow," she started to calm down.

"I need to work tomorrow night. They switched my schedule. Wait ... you're trying to change the subject."

"No, I'm trying to get up the courage to tell you ... to tell you something ... something that I was going to tell you tomorrow ... that I have to tell you now," she started rubbing her forehead.

"Just take your time, I'm not going anywhere."

She looked at him, the anger in her eyes subsided, but it turned to sadness. "Don't make promises you may not be able to keep. You may want to bolt right out that door, after you hear what I have to say. Before I tell you," she got up for a minute, went into the kitchen, and came back out a few seconds later with her coffee and cigarettes. She lit up a cigarette. "I need to say something to you first," she sat down next to him on the sofa and took his hand. "I want you to know that I cherish every moment we spent together, and that last night was one of the most beautiful, intense nights of my life. I didn't want to ruin it by having you leave me."

"Alex, I know I'm not a very open person, but I care for you deeply. Whatever you're not telling me is eating you up inside. I want to help you."

She took a puff of her cigarette and then a sip of coffee. "OK. Well, here goes nothing. About four years ago, I killed a woman!"

"Um ... I don't know what to say to that. Is this a test or something? To see if I could still want to be with you?"

"It's not a test. I'm very serious. Let me start from the beginning," she sat back on the sofa and prepared to relive the pain. "I had been married to Matthew Garris for about six years. Our closest friends were John and Mary Reardon and Greg and Amanda Shapone. We met Greg and Amanda about a year or so before this all happened," she paused.

"So, you knew Greg back then?"

"Yes, he is a very good friend, and though it doesn't seem like it now."

"Alex, tell me what happened."

"We had just celebrated Matthew's 40th birthday and had planned on going camping together, all six of us. It was a Saturday. Greg and Amanda picked us all up in his camper. It turned out the John and Mary bought the same tent that Matthew and I did. We all thought it was funny at first," she smiled weakly. "We all had a good time ... until that evening," she took a deep breath. "Greg and Amanda went out for a walk, while the rest of us sat around the fire. We heard their voices getting louder. We wanted to avoid being in the middle of World War three, Greg and Amanda were always fighting, but we all thought they did that because making up was so much fun. John and Mary decided to turn in early and Matthew and I went out in the woods for a walk. If only they went into their own tent," she sobbed.

Randy took her hand and wrapped his arm around her. "Just tell me what happened ..."

She continued. "Matthew and I got back to the campsite and there Amanda was just coming out of our tent, all covered in blood. She had a hunting knife in her hand. It turned out that she had killed Mary and John," she rubbed her forehead back and forth with her hand. "Matthew tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't listen, she kept saying that I was trying to steal Greg. Before I could say anything, she lunged toward me with the knife. Matthew pushed me out of the way ... and ... Amanda stabbed him in the chest," she paused and took a deep breath. "At that moment, I didn't care about myself or Amanda. I ran to his side and cradled him in my arms. I begged him not to leave, but he just looked at me with his dying eyes. He was gasping for air when he told me that he loved me. He reached up and touched my face. Then he was gone," she cried harder.

"Oh, my god. Lady, I had no idea," he held her tightly.

"That's not the end of it," she looked up at him sadly. "I looked up at her and she had this weird look on her face. It was so strange. She waited until he was dead. I don't know why she waited. It was as if she let me say good-bye. She lifted the knife again and, before I could do anything, stabbed me in the back. I guess that I grabbed the nearest thing I could and just swung it at her. I just kept hitting her and hitting her until she died. The next thing I know Greg and the police are there and everyone was dead except me."

"What do you mean by I guess?" Randy asked.

"The police said that I killed her with a cast iron pan. Recently, Greg and I were talking about it. He confirmed what I had wondered about all these years, that I did kill her. I bashed in her skull until she was dead."

"Alex, is this you've been running from?"

"I'm not running from the law or anything. I've been running from the pain, more than anything else. After the trial, I changed my name, and move away from Pottstown. I left my store in Emily's hands."

"Who's Emily?"

"She's Matthew's younger sister. As my wedding present, Matthew bought me the gift shop that I always dreamed up. We were partners in it. He was more of a silent partner," she smiled. "Now, Emily runs it. I just added her name to the deed."

"Alex, why didn't you tell me this?"

"Randy, you're a cop. I'm a murderer. I don't care that I was found not guilty. I still did it."

"Alex, but that's not who you are now."

"How do you know?" she paused for second. "I've been living with this for four years. I have done a lot of things in the past four years, but I've been living with this pain. I loved Matthew so much. He was the better part of me. It took me this long to start rewriting my life and actually living. And, then Greg showed up. But, living with the fact that you've killed another human being, is a lot to deal with. It's so hard to forget the pain. I guess I haven't had enough pain in the present to forget about the past. I try to move on, but my mind keeps sucking me back to that awful place. Sometimes I think the only way to get past it, is to suffer something worse," she sat there in silence and drank some more of her coffee.

"Lady, you don't mean that, do you?"

"I don't know what I mean. I don't even know why I told you all of this. Why did I have to tell you all this?"

"Because I asked you to. I wish that I could help you."

"I don't need help. The pain is in my head. It's not like someone other than me is causing it."

"Lady, I know that you have your life and I have mine, but when we are together, we are lovers and friends. Good friends. I want to be here for you, well, as much as I can."

"I know. This is just so different. I don't know how to act or where to go from here with you."

Randy got quiet for a moment. "Alex, what's your real name?"

She looked up from her coffee cup and smiled. "Alexis. Alexis Garris."

He thought for a moment. "How did William know your name?"

"I—I don't know. He seems so familiar to me, yet he's a stranger."

"Is that who you wanted to do a check on?"

"Yes. It makes me nervous that he knows things about me and that he asks everyone questions about me."

"Are you telling me everything?"

"Um ... yes, of course. Well, it depends on what you mean by everything. I have told you about the important stuff from that night."

"Alex, I'll never hurt you, but I need to know what's going on. It seems like the past is haunting you. If it was just in the past, I could let it go, but it's affecting you, here in the present. It's affecting us."

"Us? What us? I do have to say that you're important to me, but ..."

"Alex, I have a lot to share with you. I don't want to lose you. I like the fact that you're now part of my life. I just need you to be honest with me."

"OK. The night of Matthew's birthday party, Greg told me how he felt about me. He told me that he loved

me and would always love me."

"I can tell that he loves you. I see it in his eyes when he looks at you."

"But we were ... are just friends. I've told him that over and over ... but one night we were talking, and I ended up letting him spend the night."

"WHAT?"

"You have no right, no right at all, to get mad. It's not as we are married or anything. I don't want to hurt you, but you wanted me to be honest. I had visited Matthew's grave and that was also the day that I saw you with your wife. You looked so happy. I wasn't sure if I should be with you. When I went home, I watched some video of Matthew's party. Greg showed up for dinner and we talked. We ended up talking about that night and everything after. We never spoke about it with each other until then. After my trial, Greg just disappeared."

"Alex, what happened with Greg? Did you have sex with him?" Randy panicked.

"No, we didn't have sex. I was so upset, especially when he told me that he saw me kill Amanda. He just reinforced what I already thought of myself. He kissed me, and I didn't pull away. I should have, but I didn't. You can be as angry as you want. I won't give you any excuses, but I didn't know if you and I would ever be together again. Besides, there's no commitment between you and me. I was so hurt. I just wanted the pain and the nightmares to go away at least for one night."

Tears streamed down Randy's face. "I wish I could have been the one to take the pain away. I couldn't hold you without you having a nightmare."

"Don't try to be nice to me. I don't deserve your understanding."

"We made love last night, Alex. You still had the nightmares, and you ran away from me. What am I supposed to think?"

"You didn't know. I can't turn the nightmares on and off. They just happen. Maybe it was because I thought I was getting close to you. I haven't been this close to anyone since I've been with since Matthew. The truth is, Randy, you have made me happy. If you leave now, I'll have one more memory of happiness with me. I'm only taking this ... whatever we have together ... one day at a time. So, you can leave, and I won't be hurt."

"I'm not about to leave you. I'm falling ... falling hard for you, Lady."

"Randy, I care for you, but you still have your life and your wife to think of. You're still married and can't always be with me. I understand how you have lived your life. I still have to live my life without you."

"I don't understand. Are you asking me to leave?"

"No. I just want you to know that I understand your situation. If being with me is going to ruin anything, I'm just saying that you can leave. There would be no hard feelings, especially after what I just told you. If you want to stay, you need to know that when you can be with me, I'll be with you but when you're living your life, I'm going to live mine, too. I'll spend my life and my time with whomever I choose to."

"I didn't plan for this to happen. I didn't plan to find you. I'm sorry my life is like this."

"This is just your unwritten life. You didn't expect it, it just happened," she smiled. "It's OK. I definitely didn't plan on the last four years."

He leaned over and kissed her. "I want to be with you tonight. Is it OK if I stay here tonight?"

"If that's what you really want. I can't guarantee that it will be much fun tonight. I just want to get undressed and curl up on the sofa. I doubt I'll get much sleep tonight."

"Well, if you keep drinking this, you won't sleep," Randy said pointing to her coffee.

"I know. I'm so tired, but I really don't want to go to sleep. I can't handle another nightmare right now."

"I'll just hold you. I just want to be with you."

Alex got up. "I'll be right back. I'm going to get undressed."

Randy leaned back and removed his shoes. "I'm going to get myself a cup of coffee."

"Help yourself," she called from the bedroom.

By the time Randy got back from the kitchen, Alex was already on the sofa, dressed in her robe. She patted the seat next to her. "Come, join me."

He sat down next to her and wrapped the blanket over the two of them. She turned on the television and they just sat in each other's arms.

About an hour later, banging on the door interrupted them. Alex jumped up from being startled. "Who the hell would be here at this hour?" she got up and answered the door. Greg barged in right past her.

"Oh, now I see what's going on here," he pointed at Randy. "You. Get out of here. I need to speak with Alex."

"Randy isn't going anywhere. Why are you here? Didn't you do enough damage earlier?"

"Alex, I LOVE YOU. I'm sorry that I behaved that way. I don't want to ruin anything for us."

"Greg, the only thing you can do right now is just leave," Randy interrupted.

"Stay out of this, old man," Greg sneered.

"Excuse me?" Randy asked in shock.

"Randy, I'll take care of this. Greg, get in the kitchen, now!" Alex walked into the kitchen and Greg followed. Randy listened outside the door. "You dare to come in my home and treat MY guests like this. You're not who I thought you were."

"I love it when you get bossy."

"Shut up! What's your problem? Do you have to go looking for problems that aren't there?"

"I really am sorry."

"Greg, you have followed me all around the country without me even knowing it and now, you have ingratiated yourself in my life. Why did you pick now of all times to get back into my life?"

"You don't know how many times I wanted to. I just couldn't. I thought that you blamed me for what Amanda did. Every time I was just about to walk up to you, you were ready to move somewhere new."

"I needed to leave each time. As soon as people started finding out that I was the murderous heiress, they either hated me or wanted my money. You know how people are when you're rich. That's why I live off my paycheck here. I like it here. I have a lot of friends and I thought you were one of them."

"I am your friend."

"So, you call me a murderer? Who's placing blame now? If we want to place blame, I could say that you should've never told me how you felt ... especially with Amanda three feet away. Or the fact that it was your wife that killed my husband? How's that! Did that hurt?"

"Yes, it did," he lowered his head.

"Good. Now you know how I felt. I sat in jail for six months. Six months, Greg, because my assets were frozen, and I couldn't make bail. You and that stupid lawsuit. The only person who gave a damn was Walter."

"Who the hell is Walter?"

"A guard, Greg. A damn guard. They put a guard on me 24 hours a day for six months. Do you know that that does to a person? To sit in a nine by nine cell for six months."

"I didn't ..."

"Of course not. You didn't even try to give a damn. Without Walter, I wouldn't have survived. He gave me books and let Emily come and see me whenever she wanted. Damn it, Greg! I had to sit in jail on Christmas. It was my first Christmas without Matthew. Do you know how I felt?"

"I'm sorry. I just listened to what my lawyers said."

"I don't care about the money. When have I ever cared about money? Half my profits from the store go to John and Mary's family. Do you remember them? The ones your psycho wife slaughtered because she thought they were me and Matthew."

Greg began to cry. "Don't hate me, Alex. Please I couldn't live with the thought that you hated me."

"I don't hate you. I just want you to know what you put me through. I needed you back then, and you weren't there. You barely sat at the back of the courtroom for the weeks of the trial. You wouldn't even look at me. When the verdict was in, you were nowhere around. I had nothing after the trial, except for unwanted publicity. I put Emily in charge of the store and gave her the bank account information. She takes care of everything. I couldn't do it anymore. It hurt. I couldn't walk into that store and know that Matthew will never be there. All he was trying to do was protect me and he paid the price for that."

"How many times do I have to say it? I'm truly sorry. With all my heart, I'm sorry."

"Then be my friend and let me live my life. I care for Randy, and I don't want you to try to ruin it. You need to learn to be civil to him or you can forget about anything between you and me."

"I promise. I'll behave. I don't want to lose you, Alex."

"I'm sorry, Greg, for all the things I said. But, they needed to be said. Please go home and get some sleep. I'll see you at work tomorrow," she hugged him gently.

"I will," he walked out the kitchen door solemnly. Randy had quickly sat on the sofa. "Um, Randy. I'm sorry. I won't bother you and Alex anymore. I love her and I'll do whatever she wants," he extended his hand out.

Randy stood up and shook it. "I understand how much you care for her. I do, too. I won't hurt her."

Greg nodded and left out the door. Alex walked into the living room. "I'm so sorry about all of this."

"Alex, it seems you left a few things out," Randy said, as he looked up at her. Before she could respond, he said. "I was listening at the door."

"I have nothing to hide anymore. If I did, I would have told you to leave."

"I didn't realize that you had to suffer like that. I didn't know you were all alone."

"With Matthew gone, I only have Emily. She is wonderful. My parents died when I was 16 and she is the only family I have left. Mary, John, and Matthew are all gone now. I sat in that cell day after day. Some days, I was just scared, other days, I just grieved for Matthew, John, and Mary. One day, I got a new guard, Walter. He talked to me. He gave me extra things and let Emily see me whenever she needed to. He was very nice to me. I couldn't have gotten through that time without him. After I was released, I never saw him again. I wish I could thank him."

He hugged her. "I'm sorry that you were alone, but I'm glad that you had someone to look out for you like that. Sounds like a great man."

"He was. He was a real good man. I think he cared deeply for me," she thought for minute and smiled. "Yes, he did."

There was silence for a few minutes as if neither one of them knew what to say. Finally, Randy broke through and asked. "Alex, are you really rich?"

"Oh, you heard that, too, did you?"

"Uh. Yeah, it was kinda hard to miss."

"Well, yes, kind of."

"How can you be kind of rich?"

"My parents left me a large estate. My mother invented those little coasters that furniture sits on as to not leave marks in the carpet. She made a fortune. So, I inherited everything. I'm an only child. Matthew and I own

the gift shop, A&M Gifts, in Pottstown. I added Emily as a partner after Matthew died. So, I get half the profits from that."

"How rich are you? Uh, sorry, that came out wrong."

"You might as well know. About 30 million dollars, but, of course, it spread out into different accounts. One of the accounts is set up for Mary and John's family. They think it's an insurance policy. If they ever knew where it came from, they wouldn't take it."

"They blame you?"

"No, they stood by me at the trial. They just don't like handouts. They aren't rich, but not poor either. I made sure that John and Mary got a proper burial. I needed to make sure their entire family is taken care of."

"Don't you take care of yourself?"

"I'm not suffering, at least not money wise. I live off my paycheck and I do keep some cash on hand for emergencies. I also have a checking account that I use, when I make donations or invest in business opportunities."

"Donations?"

"Yes, most of the money I got, I didn't earn. When I see that there's a need for money, I donate some. I have donated to hospitals and clinics, the places that need it the most. I have also set up woman's shelters and gave a large sum to Habitat for Humanity. Everyone needs a place to live and a place to go when they need help."

"You mentioned business opportunities."

"Well, in the past, I have invested in different companies especially when it came to saving people's jobs. A lot of the companies, I was able to sell my shares to the employees. People work better when they have something invested in the company they work for."

"Wow, you have this planned so well. I have trouble balancing my checkbook, and it doesn't have more than a couple thousand in it at a time."

"This is about the only thing that I can plan. Business is what I'm good at, personal, not so much. The one thing I can control is how my money is spent. But, lately, when some find out where it comes from, they'll take my money, but anonymously only. They don't want a murderer associated with a generous donation," she leaned back into his arms. "So, this has been an interesting night. You learned all about me within a couple of hours. Have I scared you off yet?"

"Are you kidding? No, you haven't scared me off yet. I just really don't know what else to say. My life is boring compared to yours. I live paycheck to paycheck and work two jobs, but you ... you never need to worry about money."

"Randy, I may have money, but that's not who I am, it's only what I have. I never cared about money. I spent the last three years running away from it. Just because my life isn't great, doesn't mean that someone else's can't be. I try to do as much good with it as I can. The last time I spent a substantial amount is when I had Matthew moved to Middleburg. I wanted him close, but not too close."

"I guess out of everything you told me tonight. The money is the part that makes me uneasy."

"You can go, if you want. I'll understand. Most of the time people want to spend my money. That's partly why I changed my name."

"Alex, I don't want to leave. I really want to stay with you tonight. Greg doesn't scare me and neither do you. I'm grateful about how honest you have been with me."

She snuggled in his arms and laid her head on his shoulder. "Well, I guess you don't hate me."

"Never. I could never hate you," he kissed her forehead. "Never."

Chapter Nine

At 5:30 AM, the phone rang. Alex rubbed her eyes and looked at the clock. She answered the phone.
"Hello?"

"Alexis."

"Yes, who is this?" she didn't recognize the deep raspy voice.

"It won't be long now."

"What are you talking about?" Alex started getting nervous.

"I have come to save you."

"Save me from what?"

The caller hung up. Randy woke up and looked at Alex. "Who was that?"

"I have no idea. He said he would save me and then he hung up," Alex replied.

"That's strange, was it Greg?"

"I don't think so. Greg couldn't get his voice to go that deep if he tried," she smiled. "It's probably nothing," she didn't want Randy to know that it kinda freaked her out.

"Yeah, it's probably nothing," Randy said, but he was a little worried about her. "I hate to leave you, but I should go home and change. We both have to work today."

"We don't need to be to work for a couple of hours, can you stay just a little while longer?" she walked over to him as she disrobed and ran her hands over his chest. She started kissing his neck, she moved up to his cheek and then his lips.

"You've convinced me," he whispered. He picked her up and laid her on the sofa. He continued kissing her. He ran his hands down her body. She held him tightly. He sat up and removed his clothes. He lay back on top of her and made love to her. The feelings were so intense. He just couldn't get enough of her. "Lady, I want you more than ever," he whispered.

She kissed him long and hard as they made love. Afterwards, she held him so tightly.

He got off the sofa. "I'll put the coffee on," he went into the kitchen. She put her robe back on and followed him into the kitchen.

She sat down at the table. "You know, this feels pretty good."

"Yes, you certainly did," he looked over to her and smiled.

"That's not what I meant," she blushed. "I mean, waking up next to you in the morning, feels good."

"I know it does. Someday, we may be ready for this, but not now," he said sadly.

"Oh, Randy, I know that. I'm not ready and I gave you way too much to think about. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Don't be sorry. Lady, I have great feelings for you. Everything you told me last night didn't change the way I'm starting to feel for you. I wish I could see you every day, but I can't. You were right when you said that you must live your life and I have mine to live. When our lives collide, all we can do is cherish each and every moment."

"I know. I hate being right sometimes," Randy walked over to her and gave her a cup of coffee. She took a sip. "I wish ... I wish ... never mind."

"Lady, you can tell me anything. You know that. What is it you wish for?"

"I wish that you could tell me more about you. I wish that you could share things with me. I feel like I'm ..."

He sat down with his coffee. "You feel like you're the only one sharing?"

"No, I feel like I'm making this rela ... well, whatever ... all about me and I don't want that. I want it to be about us."

He took her hand. "I'm sorry. It's hard for me to express my feelings."

"You don't have any problem in that area ... expressing your feelings."

"I guess I don't know how to share. This is new to me. I've been married for 15 years, there isn't much to share with her, and so I don't."

"The first time we had lunch together, you told me about you and your wife. That was a step forward."

"I guess so."

"I know so. I just want to learn about you. What do you think about? What kind of things are you interested in? Your favorite color?" she smiled.

He took another sip of his coffee. "I see what you mean. My life is just so boring compared to yours. I don't know what to tell you about myself. Someday, I'll bring you over to my house. You can see for yourself, how I live."

"Wow, you actually want me to come to your house?"

"Yes. I really do. Don't be so surprised," he laughed. "As for my favorite color, it depends on the object. I like red on a car, but it's not necessarily something I would paint my house in. I also like black, when it's on you," he smiled.

"I get it. You're not as simple as you make yourself believe. You're quite complex, Randy Harrison. I like that about you."

Randy blushed. He looked at his watch. "I really should get home now. I have a few things I need to do before I get to work, and I have to leave at four today because I have the six PM to three AM shift tonight at the station."

"That's a strange shift."

"Well, they let me work strange hours since I have a day job. I love my job as a cop, it just doesn't pay as well as the tech jobs, and so I do both," he kissed her. "I'll see you later at work."

"Bye," Alex said, as he left out the door. She finished her coffee and then went to straighten up the sofa. She picked up the blanket off the couch and put it in a laundry basket. "I better do the laundry tonight," she said to herself. She went in the bedroom and gathered her dirty laundry out of the hamper. She placed the basket by the front door. "There. Now I'll remember."

She took a long hot shower and got dressed for work.

When Alex arrived at work, she saw Greg and Jim standing outside talking with Bill. She walked right past them. "Good morning, Jim," she said, intentionally ignoring Greg.

She went to Karrie's office and noticed Karrie was packing boxes. "Karrie, what are you doing?"

"What the hell do you want?"

"Excuse me?" Alex glared at her.

"You stole my job, you bitch. Now, I'm just a paper shuffler," Karrie snapped.

"Um, Karrie, your job no longer exists. So, NO, I didn't steal your job."

"Oh, please, you and Joe managers? Give me a break!"

"Karrie, I didn't come to fight with you. I came to see how you're doing."

Karrie took a deep breath. "Can you see how I'm doing?"

"Sorry, I bothered you," Alex turned to leave.

"Wait," Karrie said. "I'm sorry. You're right. It was bound to come out sometime. I'm not a manager, but with having you and Joe, it was so easy. I could just quit, but I really, really need the money. The only good part is that William's not giving me a pay cut."

"Good. I'm glad for that. Karrie, it won't be so bad if you give it some time."

"I know. But, the thing is ... you and I need to switch offices."

"Why? I like my office."

"William wants you to have the bigger office."

"Bigger?"

"Yeah, I guess mine is bigger by like two feet or something."

"Actually, it's bigger by five feet in all directions," Bill walked into Karrie's office. "Alex, is she giving you a hard time?"

"No, Bill. She was just letting me know that we had to switch offices. I really don't want to. From my office, I can see into the tech room and it's easier for them to come to me."

"Are you sure, Alex? This is totally up to you," Bill said.

"Yes, I'm sure. Actually, I wish my office was directly connected to that room, but across the hall is good enough."

"We can always fix that, come with me," Bill and Alex left Karrie's office. Karrie started unpacking.

Together they walked into the large tech room that was filled with cubicles. "There are eight double cubicles and the large single cube that Greg sits in. If we remove the 4 along this wall, we can have an office built for you, and then we just move Greg to the other side, he can have the fifth one on that wall."

"Well, I think he should still have his own cubicle," Alex said.

"I agree. Are you sure you want to be this close to everyone?"

"Yes, I'd like to have a window, but with a shade for privacy and walls should be sound proof when the door is closed."

"Alex, this is for you. I'll do for you whatever you want."

"Thanks, Bill. If you're sure the company can afford it."

"They probably can't, but it will be done," he smiled.

Greg and Jim walked into behind them. "What's going on?" Jim asked.

"We're building Alex a new office, right here in this room," Bill said.

"Sounds cool," Jim said.

Greg just kept walking to his cubicle. "Um, Greg?" Bill said.

"Yes, sir?" he turned around.

"You'll need to move to the other side. You can have the double cubicle on the end."

"Oh," Greg sounded disappointed.

"Don't worry, you won't need to share," Bill said.

"Oh, thanks. When do you want me to move?"

"Helen comes in at 11 today. After she comes in, you can start moving your personal items and papers over. You'll need to open a problem ticket to get your computer and phone system moved," Alex said.

"Oh, great," Greg said sarcastically.

"Greg, I'm sure you can request the technician if you ask Joe nicely," Alex spat back.

"I will. I'll ask for Charles or Andrea."

"Whatever," Alex turned her back to him. "So, Bill, when do you think we can get this started?"

"Well, I have to make some calls and get a contractor in here, so, you'll need to suffer in your little office

until then," he smiled.

"I've been in smaller places, my office is fine," Alex headed back to her office.

Bill followed behind her. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," Alex sat down behind her desk.

Bill closed the door behind her and sat down. He looked at her for a few seconds and then he spoke. "I think there's something going on between us."

"Excuse me? I don't know what you mean."

"I don't want people to think that I'm giving you extra attention. I don't want it to ruin the work place."

"Are you giving me special attention?"

"Well, kind of."

"Bill, what are you saying? What do you really want?"

"Alex, I want to improve the way this company does business. I think that the first step is to make staff improvements and to make the staff happy. Without a comfortable and capable staff, a company is nothing."

"I totally agree with you."

"That's why I think there's something between us. Professional that is. I think when it comes to this, we are on the same page. We both want the best for ... for the company and our staff."

"I guess you're right. We do seem to want the same thing here."

"I'm also concerned about Greg. There's something about him that's not right."

"Don't worry about him, Bill. He'll get over whatever his problem is."

"Are you sure?"

"I've known him for a long time, he'll be OK."

"If you say so," Bill got up to leave, but then he turned around. "Um, Alex?"

"Yeah, Bill?"

"Um, you seem different today. There's something about you ... never mind. I'll talk to you later."

"Go on, Bill. Just say it," Alex pleaded.

"Well, you just seem, I don't know ... happier isn't the right word. Really, Alex. Never mind about it. But, are you free for lunch? I'd really like to discuss a few more things with you."

"Sure. I haven't made any plans, so just stop down around 12:30," Alex said. Bill left the room and Alex sat back in her chair. "Worrying about nothing," she said to herself.

She booted up her computer, then realized she's been in for over an hour, and never clocked in. She picked up the phone. "Audrey, it's Alex. I didn't turn my computer on until just now, but I've been here since eight-thirty."

"Don't worry, Alex. I'll adjust your time. By the way, you'll be receiving your time badge sometime today."

"Time badge? What's that?"

"It's an ID, security, and time card all in one. Remember when everyone had their pictures taken last week, that's partly what that was for."

"Sounds great."

"Yeah, it is. The minute you use the new security lock to get in the building, it will also clock you in. You just go out the main door in the evening and scan it across the new time clock and it will clock you out. If you forget, you'll automatically be clocked out at seven PM and then any time will need to be adjusted later."

"Thanks. See you later," Alex hung up the phone.

A little while later Randy ran into her office all out of breath. "Alex, you need to tell Joe that I was here this

morning."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I needed to take care of something this morning after I left your house and I'm totally running late."

"I'd love to cover for you, but I was with Bill all morning."

"Oh. Well, thanks."

"I'm sorry. If I were alone, I would. Just tell Joe that you had an emergency. He'll understand. He may not even notice. I haven't seen him at all today."

"Good. Sorry, I asked you that. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Can we do lunch today?"

"Sorry again. I guess I'm batting a thousand. I have lunch plans."

"Already? With who?"

"Not that it matters, but it's Bill. He needs to discuss some things with me, he didn't say what, and he just asked me to lunch."

"Didn't you say that he made you nervous?"

"Well, I don't know what his agenda is, but the only real way to find out is to keep meeting with him. It could be that Bill is just a nice guy who wants to make great improvements or ..."

"Or he could be some psychopath with a fixation of you," Randy offered.

"True. But, I've dealt with my share of psychos, the only way to find out is to keep him happy and meet with him."

"Well, I guess I'll see you later. Let me know if anything big comes out of your lunch together."

"Randy, don't worry about me. I can take care of myself but thanks for worrying about me," she smiled.

"I'll see you later, Lady," he turned around and left the room.

Alex opened her research paper on the computer screen and started working on it. Her mind kept drifting and she couldn't concentrate. She started thinking about the new office that Bill was having built for her. She took out a piece of paper from a nearby notebook and started doodling. She ended up sketching out a floor plan of the office with the surrounding cubicles. On another sheet, she mapped out the office plan, like where the doors, the windows, and the desk were to be placed.

She was still drawing when Jim knocked on her door. "Alex, do you have a minute?"

Alex looked up from her drawing. "Yes, what is it, Jim?"

He looked at her drawing as he sat down. "Nice. Very nice."

"Thanks. What do you need, Jim?"

"It's kinda personal."

"Take your time. I'm not that busy right now."

"First, I wanted to apologize to you," he said, as he sat down.

"For what?"

"The conversation we had after the team lunch," he put his head down.

Alex got up from behind the desk and sat next to him in the chair. "Jim, don't worry about it. That was weeks ago, and you were right. I should show more heart. I'm not as cold as everyone may think I am."

Jim looked up at her and smiled. "I was wondering if you would consider having lunch with me?"

Alex smiled. "That's the third invitation I've had for lunch today. I wish I could, I really do, but I need to have a lunch meeting with Bill."

Jim looked disappointed. "Oh, sorry I bothered you."

"Jim, I'm truly sorry, I really do wish I could."

"That's OK. I understand. It just took me forever to get up the courage to ask you."

"Why? Why did you want to have lunch with me?"

"I—I should go now," he got up and quickly left the room.

Alex curiously followed him as he went outside and lit up a cigarette. "Jim, is there something you're not telling me?"

He looked around and took a puff of his cigarette. "No, why would you say that?"

"You ran out of my office so quickly," she put her hand on his shoulder. "You can tell me anything."

"It's that ... I—I'm attracted to you. I shouldn't be. You're my boss. I shouldn't even be telling you this. Oh, god. I can't believe I said that. Please forget that I said anything. I'm so sorry," he turned away from her and took a long puff off his cigarette.

"Jim, come over here and sit down," Alex motioned for Jim to follow her over to the benches. He sat down next to her. "I don't see any problem with what you just told me. If you're worried about me saying anything to anyone, I promise, I won't."

"It's not that. I just can't believe I stood in front of you and told you that I liked you. I've never done that to anyone before. I can't help it. I've been attracted to you since the day I first saw you. But, it's not right. You're my boss."

"Jim, don't worry about me being your boss. You're quite attractive yourself. I think that we should talk about this, but probably not right now. If you want to have lunch with me on Friday, we can do that."

Jim smiled. "Thanks, Alex. I don't feel as stupid now."

"Jim, you aren't stupid. You told me what was on your mind. Actually, I like that. Not many people do that. They lie to either themselves or other people. We can talk about it on Friday at lunch, OK?"

"Yeah, thanks," Jim finished his cigarette and Alex went back to her office.

She sat down in her chair. "I guess Greg was right," she whispered and then smiled. She felt very flattered that Jim showed interest. It had been so long since anyone has showed any interest. She has Randy now, but does she really? What to do about Jim? I'm not sure, but I have to tell him the truth. He was extremely attractive and how am I supposed to go out and meet new people and experience things if I always said no? She thought about this for a while and the next thing she knew, Bill was standing in her doorway.

"It's twenty after twelve, are you ready for lunch?" he asked.

"Oh, I didn't realize the time," she got up from her chair. "So, are we going downstairs?"

"Well, no. I think we should go somewhere where we're not in ear shot of anyone here."

"OK, have any place in mind?"

"Well, there's a great little Italian place around the corner from my apartment building. We can take my truck."

"OK, let's go," Alex followed Bill to his large, black truck. He opened the passenger door for her, and Alex sat down.

He drove to the Amoré Italian Restaurant. It was the same one from where Alex has her food delivered. "This has great food," he said. "I just moved in to one of the apartments at Hillcrest and I've eaten here almost every night."

"Hillcrest?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, why? Do you know the place?"

"Know it, I live there."

"Oh, what a small world," he smiled. "I just moved in on the third floor. It seems like a nice peaceful place, except for last night."

"What do you mean?" she asked, as she got out of the truck.

"There must have been a good fight last night. I could hear a lot of yelling, but it didn't last too long."

"Oh, yeah. I heard that, too. I also live on the third floor," Alex knew he was referring to her fight with Greg.

They walked into the restaurant. "Alex, good to see you out," said the Waiter. "No delivery today?"

"No, we are going to sit down and have lunch, Albert," Alex glared at him.

"Sorry, follow me," Albert brought them over to a table in the corner. "This table, OK?"

"It's fine. Thanks, Albert. Albert, this is Bill. He lives in my building. Be nice to him and he may get delivery, too," Alex said jokingly.

"Ahh, yes. Bill, three days in a row here," Albert handed them the menus and walked away.

Bill and Alex sat down at the table. "That's so funny that we live in the same building," Bill said.

"Yeah, what a coincidence," Alex said. "OK, let's order so that we can get this meeting started."

"What meeting?" Bill asked.

"You wanted to meet with me, so here we are. You said you had some things to discuss with me."

"Oh, yeah right," Bill said. He called Albert over to the table and they placed their order. "Do you want some white wine?"

"No, I'm not a big fan of white wine. I prefer Merlot, but we still have work today," Alex said. "Albert, I'll just have a ginger ale."

"I'll have the same," Bill agreed. Albert left to get their drinks.

There was silence until Albert brought the drinks back. "Thanks," Alex said to Albert. She took a drink and then looked at Bill. "OK, you wanted to meet with me, so what did you want?"

Bill was silent for a moment, and then he cleared his throat. "Well, I think that we can make a good team. We both want good things for the company and our staff."

"Yes, and we agreed to that earlier. I don't see why ..."

"Please let me finish," he paused. "I think the only way that we can make that happen is if we work together as one. The only way we can do that, is to get to know each other."

Oh, great another person who wants to get to know me, Alex thought to herself. Then she spoke. "What is it that you want from me, Bill?"

"I want y— y ...," he stopped. "I want to get to know you."

"There's something else that you're not telling me. I'm going to just come right out and ask you this, why are you going around asking questions about me? Everyone has told me what you're doing."

"I just wanted to make sure that you were right for the job."

"Please be honest. If I weren't right for the job, you wouldn't have made me manager. I'm the manager now, and you're still asking questions. You seem to be trying to please me at your every move."

"Alexis, calm down. I'm only here to help you. I need you to know that."

"Please, it's Alex. I want to be called Alex," she looked at him carefully. "Do I know you?"

"Of course, you know me."

"No, that's not what I mean. You said I looked familiar, and you're so familiar to me. How do I know you? I feel like I know you, from somewhere."

"You may have known me in another life or something but, no, you don't know me. I'm sorry, Alex, you just remind me of someone I used to love. You really do. I think that's why I'm drawn to you."

"Are you sure that's it?"

"I'm pretty sure. You're so much stronger than the girl I used to love, but in some ways, she was just like

you. The girl I loved was broken. She was so sad and lonely."

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to trusting people."

"Well, I hope in time you can trust me. I don't expect you to trust me overnight. Alex, I want to be your friend. I want us to get to know each other. I think people work well together when they know each other and can trust each other."

"You're not attracted to me, are you?" she laughed.

"Why would you ask?" Bill smiled.

"Never mind, I was just kidding."

"Well, you're beaut ..."

"I said never mind," Albert came over just in time with their lunch. He sat their plates in front of them and walked away. Alex immediately began eating.

Bill touched her hand. "Alex, are you uncomfortable with yourself?"

She finished chewing her food. "No."

"Then why can't you take a compliment as it was intended?"

"I'm sorry. Thank you. I guess I'm just not good at taking compliments."

"Don't worry about it. As I was saying, you're very beautiful, but not just on the outside," Bill said, as he started eating. "So, have you given any thought to your new office?"

"Actually," she swallowed. "I have. I drew a couple of sketches for that room. I have them back at my office. I can show them to you later if you want."

"You sketched out the room?" Bill asked, as he took a drink.

"Yes. I like to do that. Years ago, I designed the layout for my gift shop. To this day, it works very well. It hasn't changed in 10 years."

"I didn't know you could draw or that you had a designing mind."

She laughed. "There are so many things that you don't know. I have a lot of natural hidden talents."

"I bet you do," he whispered.

They finished their lunch. Alex looked at her watch. "Bill, we are really late. It's two-fifteen."

"Where did the time go?"

"I don't know, but we should get back to the office."

"Yeah, I have to meet with Joe at three o'clock."

They got up from the table and Bill paid the check. They headed back to work. When they pulled in, Bill went around and opened Alex's door. "Thanks, you didn't need to do that," she said.

"I wanted to," then he kissed her on the cheek and ran his hand down her back.

"What was that for?" she stood there stunned.

"That was for lunch. Thanks. I really enjoyed it. It's been a long time since I've been alone with a beautiful woman. I just wanted to show my appreciation. Bring those sketches to me around four o'clock," he closed the door and quickly headed toward the building.

Alex looked around and saw Greg, Jim, and Karrie outside having a cigarette. She knew they had seen the kiss. She tried to walk past them.

"What was that all about?" Karrie asked.

"To be honest, I really don't know," Alex said.

"I knew he was after you," Karrie said.

"I doubt it. We had a nice lunch, a business lunch. He's just a nice guy," Alex said.

"So, are you going to sleep with him, too?" asked Greg.

Alex just stared at him. "Nice to see you, too, Greg," she walked away.

"Greg, what did you mean by that?" asked Jim.

"Oh, it's nothing, Jim. Don't worry about it," Greg replied. He knew that he had hurt her feelings and was sorry, yet very satisfied.

Alex went into her office and stood by the window. She just stared out it. Her window overlooked the parking lot and beyond that, she could see for miles. She was so tired, tired of everything. Her life seemed more complicated now than it has ever been. She watched the breeze move the branches on trees. How she wished she could just be a part of that. She was hurt by Greg but didn't want him to know it. She stood there for a while just staring out the window. Then a hand was placed upon her shoulder. She touched it, assuming it was Randy. He kissed her hand as it lay upon his. She turned around and it was Bill. She quickly pulled away. "Bill, did you need something?"

"I came to apologize for what happened outside. It was totally inappropriate to kiss you and to touch you."

"Yes, it was, especially with my staff outside watching the whole thing."

"Oh, were they? I'm truly sorry. I'll apologize to them as well."

"No, please don't. It will just make things worse. Why, Bill? Why did you kiss me outside and why did you just kiss my hand now?"

"I don't want to discuss it now."

"When? I don't understand you. You tell me you want to be my friend, but then you kiss me."

"Don't friends kiss?" he asked.

She was about to answer no and then she remembered that she kissed Greg and they were just friends. "I guess, but ... but not in front of my staff. Do you know what's going on here? I don't want to keep going around and around with you. Do you know what you're doing to me?"

"Why don't you tell me," he said.

"Don't you have a meeting with Joe?"

"Oh, yeah, you're right. Bring me those sketches at four and we'll talk then," he headed out the door

Alex didn't really want to talk with him anymore today. She looked at the sketches and finished them. As she was working on them, Randy knocked on her door.

"Alex, do you have a minute?"

Alex smiled. "I suppose you heard, too."

"Heard what?"

"Never mind, come in, and close the door," she said.

Randy walked into and sat on her desk in front of her. "The day will end soon, and I'll be out patrolling tonight. I thought I would steal a few moments today, since I won't see you again until tomorrow," he touched her face.

"I'm so glad you stopped by," she pulled him into a kiss. "I missed you all day."

He smiled. "So, is that the same kind of kiss that you gave Bill?"

"What?" Alex was stunned.

"I heard you kissed Bill, what's that all about?" he laughed slightly.

"Who told you that? Never mind. Bill and I went out to lunch. When we got back, he kissed me on the CHEEK, but it happened to be in front of Greg, Jim, and Karrie."

"So, how does that make you feel?"

"What are you my therapist now? It made me feel horrible. Well ... not horrible, actually, it was kinda nice

but ... but it just freaked me out. He shouldn't have kissed me at all. He said he wanted to be friends and have us get to know each other so that we can work well together."

"Lady, I don't trust him," Randy said.

"I don't know what to think, but I really don't trust him either. But, I really like this job, and I don't want ..."

"Don't worry, Lady. Everything will be OK. If it gets out of hand, we'll handle it together."

She smiled. "Thanks," Then she kissed him again. "He may just want to be friends. Maybe he's never had a female friend before. But, he can't just go around kissing me, especially here."

"Yeah, especially here," he kissed her cheek. "And here," he kissed her neck. "And definitely not here," he kissed her mouth tenderly. "Well, I should go. I have a few things to take care of before I leave. I'll see you tomorrow, Lady," he smiled and then left out the door.

She picked up her sketches, brought them up to Bill's office, and slid them under his door. She had enough of talking with him anyway. Whenever she tried to figure out what he wanted or was up to, their conversation just went around in circles.

She went into the tech room. "I need to speak with all of you. Can you come into my office?"

"What about incoming calls?" Treena asked.

"Send them to the hold queue. This is important," Alex walked to her office, and they all filed in behind her.

"Jim, please close the door."

After Jim shut the door, she looked at everyone. "Sorry this office is a little cramped. But, I wanted to talk to you while you were all still here. I have two things I wanted to discuss with you. First, yes, Bill kissed me on the cheek. No big deal. If he does it again, he'll have to deal with Donald. Any questions?"

No one spoke. They were just surprised that she mentioned it at all. "Second and most important. They're going to build me a new office in the front of the room, where those four empty cubicles are. I want to be closer to you all. I want us all to work well together. I don't want me to be just your boss. I want us to all be partners."

"Sounds good," Greg said, as he turned to leave.

"I'm not finished yet."

"Sorry."

"Right now, there are four of you on our team. So, that means we'll have one extra cubicle. I want you all to think about this before you decide. We can give the remaining cube to James and then everyone will have their own, or we can turn the cubicle into a test lab."

"A test lab? We could use one of those," Jim offered.

"Well, I don't want a decision right now. I know that we have the computer lab, but the hardware department mostly uses that. The only time we seem to use it, is to burn our CDs. If you decide to have the computer lab, I'll need input from everyone as to what needs to be added to it. However, this is up to you. Let me know by tomorrow afternoon."

"OK, sounds good," Treena said. They all started walking out the door.

"Um, Jim, can you stay for a minute?"

He smiled. "Sure." After everyone left, he asked. "What do you need?"

"I need you to work on something for me. I want you to gather all the information about each person's workstation, including the hardware department. I want to know everything. I even want the specs from Karrie, Joe, and William's workstations. I know that Bill has a laptop, but I want the all of the specs."

"I can do that."

"If anyone gives you any problem, you let me know right away and I'll deal with them. I want to make sure that we all have comparable equipment and if customer support doesn't, we'll get it."

"Thanks," Jim beamed, as he left the room. "She's looking out for us," he said to himself.

She noticed that it was almost four. She shut down her computer and tried to leave the building before Bill caught up to her. However, just as she got to the parking lot, she saw him standing near her car.

"Why are you leaving early?" he asked.

"Why are you waiting at my car?"

"I knew you'd try to leave without meeting with me."

"I forgot that I—I have an appointment at four-thirty," she lied.

"Well, you have one with me at four. Your four-thirty can wait."

"Bill, I really do need to go. Can't we just talk about it in the morning?" she noticed Randy leaving the building. "Please?"

"I guess so, but, Alex, we need to talk about what happened between us today."

"Bill, please. You said you wanted to be my friend. Please drop it," Alex tried to get into her car, but he put his hand on her arm.

He touched her face and tried to kiss her again, but she turned her head. "Yes, Alex. I want to be your friend."

Randy noticed them in the parking lot together, so he walked over to them. "Hey, what's going on? Alex, are you leaving?"

"Yes, I have a four-thirty appointment. I need to go now."

Bill let go of her arm and she got in the car and drove off. Bill looked over at Randy. "Thanks a lot."

"For what?"

"I was just about to make my next move."

"What move? What are you talking about?"

"Alex. She's certainly the kind of woman that I could get used to," Bill said slyly as he walked away.

Randy really wanted to say something, but he didn't. Randy needed to tell Alex what Bill had said, but he was late. He had to go home, change, and go to work.

Alex drove around for a while. She didn't have an appointment but was worried that Bill would be waiting for her outside the apartment building. At around five, she decided just to go home. She had a lot of laundry to do. As she got the mail, she noticed a note in her box. It was from the office, and they were holding a package for her. She went to the basement floor and knocked on the office door.

"Hi, I'm Alex Garrison. There was a note in my box that said I had a package."

An old woman stood behind a counter. "Yes, Ms. Garrison. I'll have Charlie bring it up for you."

"Thanks," Alex headed to her apartment. A little while later, Charlie Masterson arrived with her package. "Thanks, Charlie."

It was a large, heavy box. Alex read the note, "Made for you, made by me," she opened the box. Inside was a new computer system wrapped in bright red ribbon. She smiled. "He did it. He actually made me a computer."

She pulled the computer out of the box and an envelope dropped to the floor. She picked up the envelope and opened it. Inside it was a bill. "Please pay the amount listed below," she looked at the bottom of the bill. "Amount due: 24 hours with you."

She shook her head and laughed. "Like he'd have 24 hours to spend with me," she sat down on the floor and set up the computer. She looked at it and it had everything that she wanted. He even added a new printer and

flat screen monitor. The monitor fit perfectly on her desk. When she finished, she grabbed the basket of clothes, along with soap and headed to the laundry room. The laundry room was just down the hall from her apartment. Alex put her clothes in the washing machine and then headed back to her apartment, so she could eat while the clothes were being washed. After about a half-hour, she ran down to the room and put the clothes in the dryer.

Meanwhile, Randy was at the police station sitting at this desk. He kept thinking of the conversation with Bill. Something wasn't right about him. He punched in the name William Weaver into the computer to see what he could find out about him. A little while later, information popped up on the screen, William Weaver had died in a plane crash. The plane was headed for Phoenix but crashed in route. He was reading the information aloud to his partner, Leon Towers. "Leon, listen to this. I need to warn Alex. Seventy people were on the plane and there were only ten survivors. This William guy isn't who he says he is."

"Randy, it could be another guy with the same name," Leon said. "Why are you so hung up on this Alex anyway? What about Joanna?"

"I don't know. Joanna and I've been over for a while. We are just going through the motions of being married. Alex is very exciting, and I really like her."

"Are you sure that you just aren't jealous of this William guy?"

"As far as I know, she's not interested in him that way. She has her life and I have mine, but when we are together ... anyway ... there's just something off about him."

"You don't need to explain, buddy. I understand. I'm on your side and you know that. Let's see what we can find out about the William Weaver that's alive," Leon looked over Randy's shoulder. "Let's do a DMV search for William Weaver."

The computer ran a search and came back with over 4,000 hits nationwide. "Where did he come from?" Leon asked.

"New Jersey, I think," Randy narrowed the search to that state. The computer came back with five hits. Randy scrolled through the DMV photos. "This one looks like him, but it's not," he compared the information to the one that came back from the crash. "This is definitely the William Weaver who was heading here for his job at Solutions, but he is dead. So, who is the William Weaver who has a fascination for Alex?"

"The only way to know that's to get his prints somehow and then pray that he is in one of the databases. But, you need to warn Alex. This guy could be dangerous."

"I've got to call her," Randy picked up the phone, but Alex's phone was busy. "She's on the phone. I have to get to her," he was shaking. "I've got to warn her."

"Come on, let's go. I'll take you to her. You're in no condition to ride your bike. We'll take the patrol car," Leon offered. He and Randy left the police station.

"Em, it's so good to talk to you. I don't have many real friends around here and I miss you," Alex said into the phone receiver.

"I miss you, too. I wish you could come home but I know why you can't," Emily said.

"Some days it's so hard, and other days I get by just fine."

"I'm glad. Maybe this summer, Tony and I'll come out and see you."

"I would love that. Oh, Em, before I forget, I just got a new computer that's similar to the one you just bought for the store a few months ago. Can you tell me how much that cost?"

"Yeah, it was about \$2,500, why? Is there a problem?"

"No, I was just curious. Actually, I was thinking about something. If we got that network/computer person

who installed all the software on it to send me copies, we could link the two computers. That way you don't need to send me the monthly packages. It would save us some money."

"Alexis, don't worry about the money."

"I'm not worried about the money. God knows, we both have enough of it. It would save you time and headaches, too."

"Well, I can call Harold tomorrow and see what we can work out."

"Good. I just called my ISP and they're going to hook me up to the Internet on Saturday. I had to pay extra, but I don't want to take any time off work."

"So, how is work going? Are you happy?"

"Work is going well. I really like my job. I guess all those books I read in jail paid off for me," she laughed.

"Alexis!"

"I've been working through the nightmares. I even ... well ... I even met someone."

"You did? That's great. What's he like?"

"Well, he's older, but he is so handsome and sexy, but he's also married."

"Alexis, what are you doing?"

"I don't know. I think I'm just having some fun. He is really interested in me, I told him almost everything, and he still stuck around."

"But he's married."

"I know. It's just fun. I haven't had fun in a long time. I know it's not going to last much longer. But, it was fun. There's also someone else."

"Really?"

"Well, yeah. There's this other guy, who told me that he kinda liked me."

"What's he like?"

"Well," she sat back and thought about Jim. "He has this state-trooper look to him and a great smile. His whole face lights up when he smiles."

"He's not a cop, is he?"

"The married one is, but this one, no, he's not a cop. He's a techie. He actually works for me."

"Two guys, wow. How are you going to handle two guys?"

"I don't know. With Randy, it's hard to say, because he's married. I already told him that there are no strings between us because he is married. With Jim, I just found out that he likes me. He actually came up to me and told me that he thought I was attractive. We are going to have lunch and stuff. So, I'll see how it goes. I didn't realize how complicated my life would get. I thought all of the complications were over. But, I guess that whether you're happy or not, complications will always be there."

"I'll be here and stand by you. No matter what. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. You're the only one I can talk to about anything and everything. Oh yeah, I almost forgot, can you tell me if those private detectives still have their office around the corner from the store? They were good friends of Matthew's."

"Mark and Mike Dix?"

"Yeah, that's their names. They did investigate the whole ... well, you know ... thing four years ago, but never got any further than the police. Would you just find out if they were taking on any new cases? I have someone I need them to look into for me."

"Alexis, everything isn't OK, is it?"

"I'm not sure. That man that came by the store looking for me, what did he look like?"

"Well, he was tall and had dark hair. Not much else I could tell you about him."

"Well, thanks. I should let you go. I need to finish my laundry."

"OK. I'll let you know what I find out. I'll call you tomorrow," Emily hung up the phone.

Alex walked down the hall to get her clothes out of the dryer.

She turned on the television while she folded her clothes. The late news was on, and suddenly Alex dropped the shirt she was folding.

"Our top story tonight, there was an officer involved car accident in Middleburg tonight."

Alex held her breath.

"Two police officers were driving down Main Street when a driver pulled out in front of them causing a crash. The police car overturned several times. One of the officers died at the scene, while the other one is at Middleburg general hospital, where he is still critical."

Oh, a police car, thank god, Alex thought. Randy rides a motorcycle.

"The officers' names have just been released since the families have been notified. The officer who was killed was 38-year-old, Leon Towers of Afton. Forty-nine-year old, Randy Harrison of Middleburg is in critical condition at Middleburg hospital. There has been no other update. Now, for other local news ..."

Alex shut off the television. "I've got to get to him," she grabbed her keys and ran down to her car. She drove as fast as she could to the hospital.

When she arrived, the hallways were filled with police officers. She walked up to the reception desk. "Um, I need to know how Officer Harrison is doing?"

"Are you family?" the receptionist asked.

"No, I'm ... I'm just a good friend of his."

"Please wait in the waiting room over there."

Alex walked to the waiting room. It, too, was filled with police officers. "Has there been any word?" Alex asked.

They just shook their head, but one of them spoke up. "Who are you?"

"I'm Alex, a friend of ..."

They all looked at her and smiled. "We know who you are. No, they haven't told us anything," the officer said.

"Have they called his wife yet?" Alex asked

"Yeah, Joanna's on her way. You probably shouldn't be here when she gets here."

"Why? I'm just a friend of Randy's. I care about what happens to him. I just want to see him and make sure that he is OK," Alex started to get upset.

The officer walked over to her. "I'm Terry. Randy is a good friend to all of us. It seems that you have made him happy. I'll see what I can do," Terry Markum left the room.

A few minutes later, Terry came back with a nurse. "Hettie, this is Alex. She is a very good friend of Randy's. Can she please go in and see him before Joanna arrives?"

Hettie Farmer looked at Alex and smiled. "Come with me. He is in and out of consciousness, but maybe it will help," Alex followed her to Randy's room. "Go on in. When I see Joanna coming, I'll let you know."

"Thanks," Alex looked at Randy. He had bruises and bandages all over his face. His arm and leg were in a cast. His eyes were closed. She took his hand and kissed his forehead. "You're going to be OK. You need to be OK. I need you Randy. I need you to come back to me."

Randy's eyes fluttered, and he whispered. "Joanna?"

"No, Randy. It's me Alex."

He whispered again. "Joanna?"

Hettie walked back into the room. "Um, Alex, Joanna is on her way."

Alex kissed Randy on the forehead and left the room. "Hettie, here is my number, will you please call me if anything changes? I really care for him."

Hettie smiled. "Randy is one of the best officers there is. The past few weeks he has seemed really happy, and I think that's because of you. I'll definitely call you."

Alex walked down the corridor and saw Joanna coming her way. She recognized her from the diner. Joanna rushed right past her and went into Randy's room.

Alex couldn't stand it. Randy asked for Joanna. Of course, he did. It hurt but she knew, Joanna was his wife and he still loved her. He just proved it.

Alex walked back toward Randy's room. The door was slightly opened, and she watched as Joanna held Randy's hand and cried.

Randy woke up again. "Joanna?"

"Yes, my darling. I'm here."

"What happened?"

"Just rest, my love. You'll be OK. I love you, baby."

Alex turned away and left the hospital. She started driving home, but her car veered toward the cemetery. She walked to Matthew's grave and knelt beside it.

"Matthew, what am I doing? He's married. I know I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't let my feelings get in the way of his life. I care for him, what do I do?" she started to cry. In her mind, she could hear Matthew's voice. "Alexis, I want you to be happy. Don't let the pain and hurt get in the way. You have so many opportunities for happiness. Don't let them pass you by. I love you and will always be with you."

Alex wiped the tears from her eyes. "You're right, my love," she got up and drove home.

Alex tossed and turned all night. She just couldn't get to sleep. She kept hearing Matthew's voice. "You'll be fine, my love. I'm always looking out for you. You'll be taken care of, I promise. There will be someone special in your life. Someone you can spend your life happy with, as you deserve, my love."

She got up the next morning, still dragging from her lack of sleep. She thought about what Matthew had told her. "I must be going crazy," she said aloud. "But somehow, I think Matthew wants me to let go and move on," she drank her morning coffee and wondered if it was true. Was it really Matthew talking to her? She knew that the answer wasn't easy, but she had to believe that it was Matthew.

This morning, she walked to work. She had been driving since she got her car back, but she needed to take the walk to clear her head.

She walked up to Greg, Jim, Treena, and Karrie where they were having a cigarette.

"Did you guys hear about what happened to Randy?"

"No, what happened?" they asked together.

"He was in a bad car accident last night. His partner was killed, and he is in critical condition at the hospital."

"How did you hear?" Karrie asked.

"It was on the news last night. He'll be fine, his wife, Joanna, is with him."

"That's really too bad," Greg said.

“Like you care, Greg!” Alex stormed up to her office.

She heard some banging across the hall and decided to look. There were four men taking down the cubes. Bill came up behind her. “So, what do you think?”

“Looks good. When will it be done?” Alex asked, not looking at him.

“By Monday. I’m having them work on it over the weekend. Once they tear these down, they will come back later. I don’t want the noise to interrupt the phones.”

“Good,” she walked back to her office and Bill followed her.

“Hey, I heard about Randy. Is he going to be OK?” Bill asked.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Bill shut Alex’s door behind him. “Alex, we still need to talk.”

“Talk about what?” she sighed with exasperation.

“Alex. You were supposed to meet with me yesterday.”

“I told you that I had an appointment.”

“I know that’s what you said. But, I think you’re avoiding me.”

“Bill. I just want to get my work done. Please leave my office.”

“Alex, we’ll talk about us and soon. Maybe not right now, but we’ll very, very soon.”

“Fine, whatever. Let me get to work please,” Bill left the room and closed the door.

A few seconds later, there was a knock. “NOW WHAT?” Alex yelled, thinking it was Bill.

“Uh, sorry,” Greg said. “I can come back.”

“No, come in. What do you want?”

“I wanted to see if you were OK.”

“No, Greg. I’m not OK. There’s a man that I care about lying in the hospital and I can’t be with him.

There’s another man that I care about who’s treating me like dirt and trying to run my life. So, no, I’m not OK.”

“Alex, I wanted to apologize for being a complete jerk the past few days.”

“You know, Greg. I thought when you left my place the other night, things between us were settled, but then, I realized they weren’t. I don’t care if you like Randy or not, I don’t care if you like the way I dress or do my hair. This is my life and I want to live it. You can’t hold anything over me, ever again. I just want you to be my friend, and you can’t even do that.”

“I’m truly sorry. I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. Don’t look at me with those sad eyes. I know you, Gregory. I don’t want you out of my life. I want you to be a part of it, just not the leader of it.”

Greg sat down. “What can I do?”

“Just be my friend. Listen to me, understand me, and stand by me. If I make a mistake, just let me do it.”

“I’ll try. If I start to fail, please let me know.”

“I will. I promise you that.”

Greg stood up and walked over to Alex, he kissed her cheek. “I’ll see you later,” he left her office.

Alex sat back in her chair. She picked up the phone and called the hospital to see how Randy was doing. She was able to talk to Hettie. “Hettie, how is he doing?”

“He is doing better today. Joanna stayed with him last night, but she went home this morning for a while.”

“Good. Will you please do me a favor?”

“Of course, what is it?”

“When you see him, if she’s not there, please tell him I’m thinking about him.”

“I already did. He is staying awake longer now. He had a lot of head trauma, but he is getting better. I told him you sat with him for a little while and he managed a smile.”

“I wish I could see him, but it’s probably not a good idea.”

“I know. I’ll let him know that you called. Take care of yourself.”

Alex hung up. She spent the day finishing up her research. She didn’t even take time to have lunch. She just wanted to get it done and go home.

She sat home that evening and thought about her life and where she was. The past was still looming around inside her mind. She needed to figure out what she should do next.

She cared about Randy, but he still loved his wife and was still married to her. I don’t know if I can do this. How can I take away a man from his wife? Her feelings for him were so confusing. She wanted to be happy, and he made her happy, really happy. But, did he? Is it all about sex? She wondered. Has my heart mistakenly recognized this as love?

After the sleepless night, Alex decided that she had to take control of her life. She needed to be happy, really happy ... with or without a man.

Chapter Ten

Alex went to work and there was a pile of résumés on her desk. She thumbed through them. “Oh, right. My new assistant may be in this pile,” she remembered. With everything that was going on, she completely forgot about hiring a new assistant.

She sat down at her desk, picked up the phone, and dialed Bill’s extension. “Um, Bill. I completely forgot about hiring my assistant. We didn’t account for that in the office plan.”

“I’ll be right down, and we can discuss it.”

“No, you don’t.” But Bill hung up, a few seconds later he was at her door with her sketches.

He put them on her desk and leaned over her. “Here are your sketches. Where do you think we should put the assistant’s office?”

Alex looked at them. She could feel Bill’s hot breath on her neck. “I’m ... I’m not sure,” she stared at them a few seconds. “Wait, if we remove this section here near this doorway, we can make an open L-shaped desk. There can be two doors to my office, one facing the cubicles and the other right behind the desk. The assistant can sit there,” Alex explained as she sketched the updates.

“That looks great. I’ll go over and talk to the contractor. They started putting up the walls last night,” Bill started to leave the room. “By the way, Alex?”

“Yeah?” she looked up at him.

“Your designs are great. I may want to have you design other areas of the building.”

“Not in my job description, Bill,” Alex smiled.

“I know, but you have such a natural talent. I would love to see it blossom. I already showed these to Donald. You’re one of a kind.”

“Thanks, Bill. I actually wouldn’t mind, but it really isn’t part of my job.”

“Alex, you would get a bonus for every office you design. You’re going to have an assistant, so you can dump your daily work load on to that person.”

“I’ll think about it. I better get through these résumés,” Alex said, picking up the papers.

Bill headed across the hall. “He’s not so bad, I guess,” she mumbled to herself. She looked through the résumés and saw that each one of her staff members applied for the job as her assistant. “Oh, wow,” she thought aloud. She read the résumés. She had never seen them before because Karrie had hired everyone.

After reading all of them, she picked out two that she believed were really good, one was Greg’s and the other, to her surprise, was Jim’s.

She walked across the hall and went up to Jim’s cube. “Jim? I see that you applied for the assistant job.”

“Yes. I’ve done it before.”

“Well, how about I do your interview over lunch?” she smiled.

Jim’s eyes lit up. “I’d really like that.”

“We can also finish our conversation from the other day. I’ll come over and get you when I’m ready for lunch,” she walked over to Greg’s cube.

“Greg?”

“Yeah, what do you need?” he smiled when he looked up at her.

“I was wondering if you had time around two for your interview. I see that you put in your résumé for the assistant’s job.”

“Yeah, I thought I’d give it a try.”

“Well, be in my office at two and we’ll do the interview,” Alex smiled and walked back to her office. She sat down in her chair and noticed some commotion coming from across the hall. She looked up and noticed that her staff was grouped together in a deep discussion. She just smiled and started preparing for the interviews.

A few minutes later, Treena knocked on her door. “Yes, Treena, what is it?”

“Well, we decided that we want to use the extra cubicle as a test lab. Jim and I are fine working together.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s been working so far.”

“Good. The construction will be finished by Monday, hopefully.”

“OK. I’ll see you later. I’m off to lunch,” Treena left her office.

Lunch already? Alex thought. She got up from her chair and went to see Jim. “Are you ready?”

“You bet,” he smiled. He was very handsome. He had this take-charge look about him, crew cut, and a great tan and large biceps. He followed her outside. “Where we going?”

“Well, I thought we’d have lunch in the park. It’s such a nice day. We can stop and pick up our lunch and bring it to the park, if you don’t mind. Besides, I just needed to get away from the office,” she said. “You don’t mind the walk, do you? I left my car at home today.”

“Sounds great to me. There’s a nice little sandwich shop across from the park. My brother and I used to eat there all the time.”

“Then it’s settled,” Alex and Jim walked for a few blocks to the sandwich place to pick up their lunch. They walked across the street to the park and sat down at a picnic table.

They ate their lunch, Alex asked Jim all of the interview questions that she prepared, and then she stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Jim asked.

“Nothing. I have one last question. Why do you want to become my assistant? There’s a lot more work involved than just answering the phones, as you do now.”

Jim thought for a minute. “Well, the truth is, I like that kind of work. I like keeping busy. Another truth is, is that I want to work closer with you. I really like you.”

“Why do you like me? I mean, how do you know? You hardly know me,” Alex said.

“Can I be totally honest with you?”

“I really wish you would. Please go ahead.”

Jim tried to muster up the courage to explain. He looked at her. “Alex, I’m attracted to you. I would like to be able to spend more time with you. You seem like an exciting person. I’m dying to get to know you on a more personal level. Aside from that, though, I think there’s so much that you could teach me and show me, I mean at work. I know there’s more that I could be doing at the company, and I really want the chance to show that I can do it. I’m not just another pretty face,” he smiled.

Alex looked back at him. “I—I still need to interview Greg this afternoon,” she became quiet for a moment. She knew that what was about to come out of her mouth really shouldn’t, but she said it anyway. “I know I shouldn’t be asking you this, but would you like to come over tonight? I mean for dinner, nothing fancy, ‘cause I really can’t cook, but we could just talk over some takeout or something.”

“I would love it. But, what about ...”

“What about what?”

“Randy. I know that you two, well, that something is going on between you two.”

“Jim, are you married?”

“What?”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Good. I live in Hillcrest apartments, on the third floor, apartment 3-C. Stop by around six. Will you keep this between just us?”

“I’ll do that.” They sat in the park a little while in silence. Alex kept thinking, what did I do now? But she knew she had to go out and find happiness, and that it wouldn’t just happen to her.

They left the park and walked back to the office. At 2:00, she interviewed Greg, even though she pretty much knew what his answers would be. After Greg left, Bill walked into her office. “So, any decision yet?”

Alex smiled at him. “Yeah, I think so. But, I’ll let you know on Monday.”

“Alex, are you free for dinner tonight?”

“Actually, Bill. I have plans.”

“Oh, I just thought ...”

“Bill, what did you just think?”

He closed her door. “Alex, I need to tell you the truth.”

“Bill, you have been playing me since you got here. You have done everything you can to give me everything I want. You take me to lunch and kiss me. You lean over my shoulder so close that I could feel your breath. What is it with you? What is it with me?”

“Alex, I can’t tell you here. It wouldn’t be right or appropriate.”

“Bill, you kissed me in front of my staff. What could be more inappropriate?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t tell you right now,” he started to leave but then he turned around. “Remember this?” he grabbed her face, kissed her hard on the mouth, and ran his hands down her back.

She pulled away. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve got to go,” he rushed out of her office.

Remember this? She thought. I don’t know what he is talking about. She picked up her phone and dialed Greg’s extension. “Greg, I need to talk to you right now.”

Greg walked into to her office right away. “What’s wrong? You look upset.”

“I am. Do you know who Mr. Weaver is and why he’s here?”

“You mean Bill Weaver?”

“Yes. Bill. Who is he really?”

“Alex, he is your boss, who probably has a crush on you but who doesn’t?” Greg smiled. “He’s harmless,” Greg left the room.

Alex didn’t think he was so harmless. She knew she had to contact the Dixes right away. She went upstairs and told Bill that she wasn’t feeling well and wanted to go home. Bill just nodded and smiled. He knew he had gotten to her. “Hope you feel better, Alex.”

Alex told her staff that she was leaving but gave them her new cell number in case they needed her. She told Jim that they were still on for six and then she left.

When she got home, she quickly called Emily for Mark and Mike’s number. When she hung up with Emily, she called the office.

“Mark or Mike Dix, please.”

“Who’s calling?” the woman asked.

“My name is Alex, um ... Alexis Garris. Can I speak with one of them, please?”

“Oh, yes. I know who you are,” the woman said. “Please hold for Mr. Dix.”

A few seconds later, a man answered the phone. “Ms. Garris, it’s Mark. How lovely to hear from you.

Emily told me you would be calling.”

“Mark, I really need your help.”

“It’s been, what, three, four years since I heard from you?”

“Yeah, it’s been a while. I know that you couldn’t prove that I did or didn’t kill Amanda, and I don’t blame you for it. I found out the truth. But, what I really need right now, is your services again.”

“Alexis, just tell me what you need. I also want you to know that I haven’t given up on that other thing.”

“It’s been four years. I don’t think anything will ever change on that. What I need now is some information on a William Weaver. He is from New Jersey. He is here in Arizona now and seems to have an uncomfortable thing for me. I think he knows me from somewhere and I don’t know what to do about it. I just want to find out who he is.”

“I can get started on it. I’ll need to have a photograph of him.”

“I can get that to you,” she thought of everyone’s new ID badges. “I can email you one on Monday.”

“Great. I’ll get started on some background information. I hate to ask this, but how will I get paid?”

“Mark, how much is this going to cost?”

“Well, it’s one hundred fifty dollars an hour and there may be extra fees. Is that a problem?”

“No, of course not. Give me your account information and I’ll have the bank transfer ten thousand dollars to you by Monday. If the expenses go beyond that amount, just let me know. I’ll take care of you.”

“Good doing business with you,” he gave her the account information and then they hung up the phone.

After she hung up, she dialed the hospital. “May I speak to Hettie Farmer, please?”

A little while later, Hettie got on the phone. “Yes, this is Hettie?”

“Hi, Hettie, this is Alex Garrison. I was just calling to see if there was any change in Randy’s condition.”

“He is doing much better. He is having a problem speaking clearly. Once the swelling goes down around his throat, his voice and speech should be back to normal.”

“Oh, thank goodness. I really appreciate you telling me. Hettie, why are you telling me all of this?”

“Alex, Randy is my nephew. I love him dearly. I know that things aren’t good with him and Joanna. He has been happy the last few weeks. I think it has to do with you. He has told me all about you, dear.”

“I didn’t realize you were related.”

“Yes, I raised him since he was a baby. I love him as if he were my own son. I told him you have been talking with me on the phone. He touched my hand and smiled. He knows that you care.”

“Well, tell him I’ll see him when it’s possible.”

“I will. Have a good night, dear,” Hettie hung up the phone.

Alex sat back on the sofa and smiled. She looked up at the clock on the wall. It was five o’clock already. She picked up the laundry that still sat on the sofa from last night and put it away. She straightened out the pillows and went through the mail. She called the bank and gave them Mark’s account information for the money transfer.

About an hour later, there was a knock on the door. Alex answered it and there stood Jim.

“Come on in,” Alex said.

Jim walked into the living room and looked around. “This is a great apartment. I like the way you decorated it.”

“Thanks. It only took me six months to unpack,” she laughed. “Please, have a seat.”

“Alex, I know this feels kinda strange to you,” he said.

“No, it really doesn’t. Why? Do you feel weird?”

“Actually, it’s a little strange. Can I be blunt with you?”

“I wish you would. What’s on your mind, Jim?”

“Alex, I think that you’re beautiful, sexy, and very smart. I’ve only fantasized about being alone with you. So, yes, this is very strange.”

Alex reached over and touched his hand. “I hope I didn’t disappoint you in any of the fantasies,” she flirted.

“No, definitely not,” he smiled as he remembered his fantasy.

“It sounds like I have a lot to live up to,” Alex said.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. It came out all wrong. I have dreamed of spending the night with you, of course. But, what I really want it to get to know you.”

“Everyone wants to get to know me for some reason. I don’t know,” Alex said exasperated.

“What I want to know about you is who you are right now. I’m not one to care about the past. In fact, I like leaving my past right where it is. I just want to know you now. I don’t care what you did yesterday or 10 years ago.”

“You’re the first one to ever say that to me. Everyone wants to know what I did since birth,” she laughed slightly.

“I live my life one day at a time. Each day I try to make better than the last one. It doesn’t mean I don’t have dreams or goals, but life is too precious to take for granted.”

Alex found this extremely attractive. “I never met anyone quite like you,” she leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“I know how I feel about you, Alex, but I never let it interfere with my work. I just admired you from afar.”

“Well, one thing, you can’t tell anything to Greg. He told me that you were attracted to me, actually, his words were that you had the ‘hots’ for me,” she smiled.

“What did you think about that?”

“I really didn’t think anything of it. Greg is always saying things like that about people. He is in love with me and can’t seem to get over the fact that the two of us are just friends.”

“Yeah, he told me that I didn’t have a chance with you because you belonged to him.”

“I don’t belong to anyone, and I’ll never be involved with Greg. We have too much history together. I love him because he is my friend and that will be the only feeling I ever have for him.”

“Well, that’s good to know. Alex, are you involved with anyone? I mean really involved.”

“Honestly, Randy and I’ve been together for a few weeks, but it’s not like ‘together, together.’ it’s hard to explain. He is married. When I saw him with his wife at the hospital, I realized that I shouldn’t be with him. He needs to be with his wife, not me. I think the accident is bringing them closer together.”

“So, what do you want?”

“I want to have some fun. Would you like to have some fun with me? I can’t give much more than that right now.”

“I’d like that more than anything. What do you want to do?”

“Eat. I’m starving,” Alex said. “Let’s go out and get something to eat.”

“My bike or your car?”

“You have a bike?”

“Yes. She’s my baby. I take real good care of her.”

“I’d love a ride.” They left the apartment together. Bill was coming up the stairs as they were going down.

“I see you’re feeling better,” Bill said.

“Yes, well, we’ve gotta go,” Alex took Jim’s hand and hurried down the stairs. After they left the building,

Alex turned to Jim. "Oh, by the way, you're my new assistant."

"Really?" he beamed.

"Yes. I'll announce it on Monday morning. I just thought I'd tell you now. If I tell you later, it will sound as if it were dependent on this evening."

Jim smiled. "Thanks. I promise, whatever this evening brings, I'll keep work at work and fun with fun."

"I promise, too," Jim got on his motorcycle and Alex hopped on the back. They decided not to put on the helmets. Alex wanted her hair to blow in the wind. She wanted to feel free.

She worried about Randy, but he was with his wife who could take care of him. She needed to concentrate on herself and have some fun. Jim seemed like he could bring her fun. That's just what she needed. It probably wouldn't go any further than tonight, but any moment of fun is better than sitting at home alone.

Jim drove his bike down this long straight road, Alex held on very tight to his muscular body. She let the wind blow through her hair. They rode for a while down the road. After a while, Jim stopped the bike. He turned and looked at Alex. "I have an idea for dinner."

"You're driving. Whatever you want."

He started the bike back up and drove further down the road. He made a left turn toward the town of Florence. He drove past the Tom Mix Monument and pointed it out to her. He drove a little further and stopped at the beginning of town. He pulled over to the side of the road and parked the bike. "I love this town. It's so full of history. I grew up around here and just a few miles away is the natural garden. This place is just great," he got off the bike and took her hand. "Come with me."

She followed him. She had never been any further than Middleburg. She always wanted to go to Florence, because Matthew was from here, but she was hesitant about seeing Matthew's past. But, this was new and exciting. He took her to a small restaurant at the end of Main Street. "This place has great food. I'm sure you'll love it. Besides, my mom owns it," he laughed.

"Sounds great," Alex said, as she followed him through the doors.

They sat down at a table near the window. A young woman came over to the table. "Hi, Jim," she said. "Who's your friend?"

"Alex, this is my sister, Rose."

Alex shook her hand. "Nice to meet you, Rose."

"Rose, this is Alex. She's my boss and my friend."

Rose O'Roark smiled. "Boss, huh? Must be some cool job. Do you want the usual?"

"Yeah, the usual. See you in a bit." Rose knew that was her cue to leave, so she walked away. "Don't mind her, she's my younger sister and very nosey."

"Don't worry about it. It's just funny that you introduced me like that," she took his hand.

"Well, it was the truth. You're my boss and now, you're my friend," he caressed her cheek. "I want us to be very close friends. Closer than most."

"Are you asking me to sleep ...?" Before Alex could finish her question, Rose came over with two cups of coffee. "Coffee?"

"Yes, coffee. I hope you don't mind," Jim replied.

"No, I have coffee in the evening when I want to stay awake."

"Well, tonight, I want both of us to stay awake."

"Getting back to my original question, are you asking me to ..."

Rose came over again and dropped down two plates of stuffed French toast. "Here's your usual, big brother," she winked at him and left again.

“French toast? For dinner?”

“You have to taste it. Breakfast food is always better at night and anyway, this is a meal in itself.”

Alex took a bite and smiled “This is delicious.”

Jim was proud. “It’s my mom’s special recipe,” he took a bite of his food.

Alex started to eat, she didn’t forget her question, and she just figured she’d get her answer later.

After they finished eating, Rose came over and took their plates away.

“Jim, I’m having a really good time. It’s nice to forget about the day and just concentrate on right now.”

“I know. I’m enjoying myself. See? I knew you weren’t cold and heartless. I’m usually right about people,” he stood up for a moment “I’ll be right back,” he walked into the kitchen, and he came back a few minutes later. “OK, want to go for a walk?”

“Sure, I’d love to,” she stood up. “Where’d you go?”

“I just went to say hi to my mom. She would’ve come out, but she said she didn’t want to scare you away,” he laughed.

They headed out the door and Jim took her hand. They just walked down the main street, talking and having a great time. An hour had past and they were still walking. He led her back to where he parked the bike. “Let me take you home. Even in Arizona, the night air can get chilly.”

They got on the bike, and he took her home. When they arrived at the apartment building, Alex got off the bike. “Jim, do you want to come inside, or do you have to get home?”

“I’d love to come in,” he said a silent ‘yes’ and joined her in her apartment.

They sat down on the sofa together. Jim looked around nervously. He wasn’t sure what he should do next.

Alex touched his face. “Now, back at the restaurant, I was trying to ask you a question.”

“What was your question?”

“Were you asking me to sleep with you?” she asked bluntly.

“If I was, what would your answer be?”

“I really want to be with you, but I don’t think that I’m quite ready.”

“Oh, I’m sorry that I asked.”

“No, you didn’t get the chance to ask,” she looked into his eyes. “I just think that we should wait. To be honest, I slept with Randy the first night we were together and though it was really intense, I probably should have waited.”

He touched her face. “I completely understand. I’m not going anywhere, Alex. I really enjoyed today. I want more from you than just sex. Though the sex would be really, really ...”

She leaned over and kissed him on the mouth. He held her face as they tenderly kissed. “I hope you don’t mind,” she smiled.

“I certainly do not,” he kissed her again. His kisses were unlike any she ever had. They were so soft and tender. He kissed her as he had no inhibitions and all he wanted in the world was her.

She laid her head on his shoulder and he wrapped his arms around her. “Jim, why are you here?” she asked.

“I don’t know what you mean. I like you, Alex, and I want to get to know you. Yes, I have to admit that I was hoping I could be with you tonight.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just that ...”

“You don’t need to explain. When it does happen, I want it to be perfect. I know that you still have feelings for Randy, and I won’t take advantage of you.”

He held her for a little while and then he noticed the time. Jim smiled. “I hate doing this, but I really need

to go. It's quite a drive back to Florence from here."

"You're more than welcome to sleep on the sofa if you want," Alex said. "It's a long drive and it's pretty late."

"You don't mind?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I minded. If you want, you can take a shower and I'll make up the sofa for you. There's an extra robe hanging on the bathroom door."

"Um, Alex, where is the bathroom?"

"Oh, right. Sorry. Straight down the hall on your right, the bedroom is on the left."

Jim headed for the bathroom and started up the shower.

Alex set up the sofa for Jim to sleep on, and suddenly there was a banging on the door. Alex looked down the hall and Jim was still in the bathroom. She opened the door carefully. There stood a man wearing a mask.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want you, Alexis. I came all this way for you, and I can't hold it in anymore."

"Go away," she tried to close the door on him, but he pushed his way in and grabbed her. "Let go of me," she yelled.

"No, not until you remember," he kissed her hard, so hard that his teeth cut her lip and it started to bleed.

"Get off me. I don't know who you are or what you want."

"I have you. I'm not about to let you go again. I'll no longer wait for you," he pulled her to him again so tight, she tried to fight him off, but he was too strong.

"Please don't hurt me," she cried.

"I'd never hurt you," he rubbed his hand over her head repeatedly, each time pressing harder.

"You're hurting me."

He licked her face. "You taste so good," he shoved his hand down her shirt. She stomped on his foot, and he let go of her out of reflex. She tried to run down the hall, but he grabbed her and brought her back to the living room.

He punched her in the face and then threw her on the floor and then stomped his foot on her chest to hold her in place. He fumbled with his belt as he tried to remove his pants. Alex screamed. "No, get away from me."

"I'm going to have you one way or another," he said softly, as he whipped his belt off. He whipped it around harder and harder until the belt slashed her face.

"Oh, god no," Alex cried out in pain as she grabbed her face. She tried to push his foot off her, but she couldn't.

Jim came out of the bathroom when he heard Alex scream. He ran up behind the man and jumped on his back, knocking him to the floor. He started hitting him in the head and they struggled on the floor.

"Jim!" Alex yelled. She tried to crawl over to him, but she couldn't move. "Jim, no!"

Jim looked over at Alex and the man hit Jim in the face. He got up quickly ran out the door.

Jim ran to Alex's side. "Are you OK?" he started wiping the blood off her face with his towel.

She clung to him tightly. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry about."

"It's all my fault. You should probably just leave."

"Alex, I'm not leaving you. It's OK. I'm so glad that I was here. Are you OK?"

She looked up at his face as tears streamed down her cheeks. "It's OK? You don't hate me?"

"Why would I hate you?" she cried a little harder. "Angel, it's OK to let people help you. Now, are you all right?"

"I am now. You saved me. Thank god you were here," she was finally able to let herself go.

Jim held her tightly. "I'm so glad I was here," he whispered. "We need to call the police."

"No," Alex said. "No police. I need to take care of this myself."

"Alex, you can't," Jim pleaded. "You need to call the police. You're hurt pretty bad. Please let me."

She tried to get up, but she was in so much pain. "I can barely move, Jim."

"I'm calling the police. No arguments," Jim said sternly.

"OK," she said weakly.

Jim grabbed the phone and called 911. When he got off the phone, he carried her to the sofa and held her. "You're safe now," he kissed her forehead.

"If it hadn't been for you, I don't know what would have happened. I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't need to thank me," he touched her face. "I'm just going to throw my clothes back on. I'll be back in a second."

Alex nodded slightly. Jim came out of the bathroom as the police knocked on the door. Alex recognized one of the officers as Terry, the officer she spoke to at the hospital.

"Alex, can you tell me what happened?" Officer Terry Markum asked, as he knelt down beside her.

"I answered the door and a man wearing a ski mask forced his way through. I tried ... I tried to get away," she started to sob.

"It's OK. Take your time," Terry said.

"He bit me, and then he hit me. He threw me on the ground and stomped on my chest. If Jim ... if Jim hadn't been here, I think he would have raped me. He whipped his belt off and it hit me in the face," she touched her face. "God, it really hurts."

"Can we take her to the hospital now and finish this later?" Jim asked.

Terry looked up at him. "Who are you?"

"Jim O'Roark. I'm a friend of hers."

"Oh, yes, Mr. O'Roark, nice to meet you. Where were you when this all happened?"

"I was in the bathroom. I ran out when I heard her scream. I tackled the person, but he managed to get away. My first concern was Alex."

Terry shook his hand. "It's a good thing that you were here."

The EMTs put Alex on the stretcher. She looked up at Jim. "Please, come with me," Her eyes pleaded.

"I'll be right behind you."

"Take my car. The keys are over there."

Jim grabbed Alex's keys and followed everyone out the door. They drove Alex to Middleburg General Hospital since that was the closest in the area.

When they arrived at the hospital, they took her into the Emergency room. The doctor examined her and ran some x-rays of her chest and face.

Jim sat by her side holding her hand while they waited for the test results. Terry walked into the room while they were waiting.

"Um, Alex, I know he was wearing a mask, but is there anything about him that you can remember?" Terry asked.

"Well, I didn't see his face. He had a strange smell ... kind of like mothballs. It was sickening. He acted like he knew me, but I don't know who he was."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Terry asked.

"No, I'm sorry. I can't," Alex said.

“Alex, I told Randy that you were here. He still can’t talk, but he understood.”

“Terry, why did you do that?”

“Because he loves you. He didn’t tell me, but I know. I’ll see you later,” Terry left the room.

“He’s wrong, you know,” Alex whispered.

“About what?”

“Randy doesn’t love me, we just had some good times together, and now it’s over.”

The doctor walked into a few minutes later. “Ms. Garrison, it appears that nothing is broken, which is good. But, your face and your ribs are severely bruised. That large gash on your face needs about 30 stitches,” he sat down next to her and began stitching up her face. When he tied the final knot in the thread, he covered her face with a bandage. “Here are some prescriptions. There’s one for a painkiller, antibiotic, and some antibiotic cream. Put the cream on the wound before you put on a new bandage. Also, the cream needs to go on that bite on your lip. You’re a lucky lady, Ms. Garrison.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“Take care of her. She shouldn’t be alone for a while,” the doctor said to Jim, as he handed him all of the prescriptions. “You can run down to the pharmacy to fill these.”

“Thanks. I will. I promise,” Jim said, as he shook the doctor’s hand.

“You can take her home now.”

The doctor left the room and Alex tried to sit up, but it hurt too much. “Jim, can you help me get dressed?”

Jim helped her get dressed. He went outside the room for a minute and noticed that there was a police officer outside the door. “Will you just keep an eye on her until I get back?”

“Sure, thing, Mr. O’Roark. I’m not supposed to leave her until she is ready to go home,” the officer explained.

Jim ran down to the pharmacy and filled her prescriptions. He also picked up extra bandages and tape. On the way back, he got a wheelchair so that he could get her to the car.

When he returned to the room, he helped her into the wheelchair. The officer escorted them out the car.

Jim lifted her up carefully and set her in the back seat so that she could lie down. He thanked the officer and then took her home.

When he got to her apartment building, he carried her up the stairs to the elevator and then to her apartment.

He set her on the sofa. “Do you want to go to bed?”

“Actually, I feel so dirty. I’d like to take a shower, but I don’t think I could stand that long.”

“I could help you with a bath. I’ll be right back.”

Jim went down the hall to the bathroom and started the water in the tub. He came back with a glass of water and gave Alex her pills. He picked her up and took her to the bathroom. He carefully helped her get undressed and lowered her into the tub.

The bruises on her chest were starting to form. He took a washcloth and gently washed her. He held her head back as he washed her long blonde hair. She looked so fragile and broken. He felt so sad and angry that he couldn’t stop it before this all happened.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, as he helped her out of the tub.

“Why are you sorry?”

“I didn’t hear you before. I had the water on in the shower. I couldn’t hear. I ran out as soon as I heard you. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You saved my life and I’m forever grateful to you,” she smiled slightly.

He helped her get her robe on. He carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed.

“Get some sleep. I’ll be in the other room.”

“No, please, don’t leave me,” Alex begged.

“I won’t. I’ll be right here next to you,” he took off his clothes, except for his boxer shorts and lay on the bed next to her.

“Thank you,” Alex said, as she drifted off to sleep.

Jim watched her sleep, until he dozed off himself.

Chapter Eleven

A few days went by since the attack. Alex couldn't bring herself to go to work looking like she did. She left messages at work and told them that she wouldn't be in for a few days. She was scared that everyone knew. She didn't want people to think she was weak and vulnerable. Greg and Bill had left several messages, but she wouldn't return the phone calls.

She had her stitches out, and now she just had this long sore scar on her face. Her face was still covered in bruises, she couldn't even look at herself anymore.

Jim went to work in the mornings and then stayed with her in the evenings to make her feel safer. He installed extra locks on the doors for her. She hated having someone to take care of her, but she was scared.

Randy was still in the hospital with no change in his condition. According to phone messages from Hettie, Joanna was still by his side. Alex was glad that he was going to be all right.

Jim stayed that night again, he held her on the sofa, and they watched television in silence. She looked at him and smiled. She laid her head on his shoulder. "I don't know how to thank you. You've been here every night."

"Alex, I care about you. I want you to feel safe again."

"I really appreciate everything you have done for me," she leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

He took her face in his hand and kissed her mouth softly. "I hope I didn't hurt you. Your face still looks sore."

"No, it didn't hurt me," she kissed him back. "You make me feel better. You make me feel safe."

He hugged her tightly. "You know, Angel, not to be rude, I could show you a few self-defense moves. I was in the Marines for a while. It obviously didn't stop his fists, but I'm glad I was here to help you."

She touched his eye. It was still black and blue from where he was punched. "Does it hurt much?"

"No, it's nothing," she leaned up and kissed it softly. "Actually, it feels much better now," he kissed her back softly and tenderly.

She melted in his arms. Her body hurt too much to have any more physical contact, but she wanted to. "My body hurts so much," she said sadly.

"I'm just happy to be able to hold you as I have done the past few nights. You're important to me ... very important to me. When we do make love, it will be very special and perfect," he put his arm around her.

"I don't know," she whispered

"What's wrong?"

"I'm the ugliest person alive. Even when the bruises go away, I'll still have this hideous scar on my face. How could anyone want someone that looks like me?"

"Alex, you're beautiful. When your face is completely healed, we'll have the scar taken care of. My only concern is you."

"I don't know."

"Angel, you're sweet, kind, and loving. I need to admit, you have been my angel. You're my saving grace. I want to be here. You're safe with me. I promise," he held her until she fell asleep.

Three mornings later, the phone ringing awakened them. Alex stumbled to answer it. "Hello?" she asked wearily.

"Alex, it's Hettie."

“Oh, yeah, hi. Sorry, I was just getting up.”

“That’s OK. I wanted you to know that Randy asked for you this morning. He wants to see you. Can you make it?”

“Yes, of course I can. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She hung up the phone. “Randy has asked to see me.”

“I see. Do you want me to leave?”

“No, of course not. I hate to even ask you, but will you drive me to the hospital. He probably just wants to tell me that he’s back with Joanna.”

“Whatever you need. What about your face?”

“There’s not much I can do about it. Besides, you think I’m beautiful, remember?” she smiled.

“That you are, Angel.”

“Let me just take a shower,” she started walking toward, the bathroom. “You’ll probably want one, too.”

He smiled. “I’ll take one when you’re done.”

“You could always join me,” she smiled. She took his hand and led him into the bathroom. They removed their clothes and got into the shower.

Jim couldn’t help but notice the large bruise on her chest from the foot of the masked man. She pulled him close into an embrace as the water splashed over their bodies. She kissed him softly and let him kiss her on her neck. He ran his hands down her back and noticed her scar.

“Alex, what happened?” he whispered.

She didn’t shudder as she used to when it was touched. “It’s just a reminder of the past. It’s over with,” she kept kissing him.

They didn’t make love. They just held each other as the water streamed over their bodies. When they got out of the shower, they dried each other off and then got dressed.

Alex tried to cover her bruises with some make up, but it didn’t work very well. “He may be the only one that thinks I look beautiful,” she said aloud. The bruises were still too dark to be covered. She wore her hair down so that some of it would at least cover her long scar.

Alex stared out the car window, her mind thinking about Jim and Randy. She knew that Randy was about to tell her it was over between them. She tried to prepare herself for the inevitable. She wanted so badly to forget the attack, but the pain in her body was a constant reminder. She had no idea who or why someone would do that to her. How can she remember who he was, when she didn’t know who he was? All these thoughts kept creeping around in her mind, and she couldn’t stop them or control them.

She looked over at Jim, who was driving her car. She smiled and touched his leg with her hand. He looked at her and nodded. What a great man. He saved me, and he doesn’t care about who I was, just who I am now.

Jim pulled into the hospital parking lot. He touched Alex’s face gently. “Do you want me to wait here?”

“No, I know I’ve asked a lot of you already, but will you come in with me?” she asked softly.

“I’ll come with you.” They got out of the car and headed to the front doors of the hospital.

They walked up to the receptionist desk and Alex asked to speak with Hettie. A little while later, Hettie appeared in the doorway. “Hi, Alex. It was nice of you to ... oh, my dear, are you OK? Terry told me what happened.”

Alex touched her face in shame. “I’m getting better. I’m OK.”

“Are you sure you’re OK?”

“Yes. Hettie, this is Jim. He was nice enough to give me a ride over.”

“Well, you two can follow me. Jim, you’ll need to wait outside the room. There’s only one visitor allowed at a time.”

“I’m just here to support Alex. I’ll wait outside.”

They walked down a few corridors and then came upon Randy’s room. Alex walked to the door but hesitated before she opened it.

“It’s OK,” Hettie said. “Go on in. I finally talked Joanna into going home.”

Alex opened the door slowly. Randy was lying there in the hospital bed with tubes and wires attached to him. He turned his head slowly in her direction and smiled, but as she got closer to him, his smile faded. “Oh my, your face. Terry told me what happened,” he spoke slowly.

“We don’t need to talk about that now. How are you feeling? I’ve been worried about you.”

“Much better, now that you’re here. Where were you?”

“Randy, I called every day to see how you were. Joanna was with you, I didn’t think it was right to be here, too.”

“I was coming to see you.”

“What do you mean?”

“The night of the accident, Leon ... oh, god ... Leon,” tears swelled up in his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to talk right now. I’m just glad that you’re OK.”

“I had to come and see you ... to tell you ...” he tried to sit up.

“Randy, just relax. Whatever it is, it can wait. We can talk when you’re better.”

“Alex,” he reached up and touched her bruised face. “Tell me what really happened to you. Did Greg do this to you?”

“No, Greg didn’t touch me,” Alex looked down. “A man attacked me in my apartment. If it hadn’t been,” she looked toward the door. “If it hadn’t been for Jim, I don’t know what would have happened.”

“What do you mean? Jim? Why was he there?”

“You know Jim. He works for me. He and I have gotten to be close ... close friends. We had dinner and went back to my place to talk. When he was in the other room, a man walked in. Jim saved my life.”

“That should have been me there. I should’ve saved you.”

“Randy, don’t get so upset. You have Joanna back. She’s been here every day. I already know that you two are together again. You asked for her the night of the accident. I know that I’m just in the way,” she kissed his forehead. “I won’t stand in your way. It’s over between you and me now. It took me forever to realize that you need to stay with your wife,” she headed for the door. Jim walked in, put his arm around her, and led her out the door.

“No, Alex you don’t understand,” Randy started getting upset. “You need to understand.”

“Bye, Randy,” Alex looked at him with tears streaming down her face. Alex walked out the door, but left the door opened. Tears filled Randy’s eyes as he watched how Jim was comforting her.

Jim lifted her face and kissed her softly on the mouth. “It’ll be OK now. Randy is going to be fine. And, you and I are going to be fine,” he kissed her cheek. “Come on, let me take you home,” Jim looked in Randy’s direction. He knew he had been watching. Jim just nodded to him and smiled.

“Thanks,” she put his head on Jim’s shoulder and they walked to the car together.

When Alex got home, she checked her messages. There were several from Bill and Greg, but there was also one from Mark Dix. He was waiting for the photo.

"I better return this call," she said to Jim.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Only if you want to. I actually like having you here."

"Then I'll stay."

Alex took the phone into the kitchen and called Mark. "Mark, this is Alexis. I'm so sorry. I completely forgot about the photo."

"Don't worry about it. I'm really going to need it, though. I found out some things, but I need a photo to verify. Also, if there's a way to get his fingerprints, please try to get me those, too. I have a feeling his name isn't William Weaver, but I can't prove it yet."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, Alexis. Be careful. He could have just changed his name as you did, or he could be dangerous."

"Thanks, Mark. I had some trouble here a few of days ago. A man attacked me in my apartment. I don't know who he was because he was wearing a mask."

"Are you OK? Were you hurt?"

"I'm OK. Just a little battered and bruised, but nothing serious. I was lucky that a good friend of mine, Jim O'Roark, was here."

"Do you mean James O'Roark, the famous decorated Marine?"

"I guess. I know he was in the Marines for a while. I didn't know he was famous."

"Alexis, you have quite a friend there. I'm glad that you're in good hands. Matthew would be proud."

"Why do you say that?"

"James and Matthew served in the Marines together. That was before Matthew moved to Pennsylvania. Don't you remember all those stories Matthew used to tell? I think he called him 'JC'."

Alex smiled. "Oh, yeah. I remember those. I used to just smile like I was interested," she laughed slightly. "Thanks, Mark, and thank Mike for me, too. I'm starting to feel better already. I'll get you what you need," Alex hung up the phone.

She went into the living room where Jim was watching television. She stood in the doorway and just watched him. He looked up at her. "Is everything OK?"

She sat down next to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Shoot. I have nothing to hide," he laughed nervously.

"Are you the famous James O'Roark?"

He laughed. "Well, I wouldn't call me famous."

She smiled. "I mean, did you ever serve in the Marines with a man named Matthew Garris?"

He leaned back. "Yes, he was a good buddy of mine. My best friend. We grew up around here and served in the Marines for a few years. He moved away soon after we were discharged and then we lost touch. He saved my butt a couple of times. He was a great man. I heard that he was killed a few years ago. Why?"

"Matthew was my husband."

Jim looked surprised. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I didn't even put the pieces together until Mark Dix told me that you served with Matthew. He talked about you all the time, but he called you 'JC'."

"You were married to Matthew?"

"Yes. We were married six years before he was ... he was killed."

"Oh. I read about that whole thing in the paper. It made national news, you know."

"Believe me, I know," she looked at him. "So, if you want to leave, I'll understand."

“Why would I leave?”

“Because, I’m a murderer. I killed that woman for killing Matthew.”

“Alexis? What did they call you? The murderous heiress?”

“Yes, that was me. I’ll totally understand if you want to just walk out that door and never come back.”

“Alex, I told you before that I don’t care about the past. The fact that you were married to Matthew and that you loved him, is wonderful. He was such a great man. I was proud to serve with him. I read the papers. You were just trying to save your own life. The only thing I don’t get is the heiress part, but that doesn’t matter. I’m just that happy that Matthew found you.”

Her eyes started to tear up. “I loved him so much. I know that he would want me to get on with my life, so, I’ve been trying. I haven’t been doing such a very good job.”

“Maybe he sent me to you,” Jim kissed her tenderly. “I’m falling for you, badly. I just want to be here with you and make sure you’re safe.”

She leaned into his chest. “I used to think that I could take care of myself. I guess I was totally wrong.”

“No, you weren’t. I think you have done a great job taking care of yourself. I don’t want to take care of you. I want us to take care of each other. You’re special and now I know why. Matthew wouldn’t just love anyone.”

“I don’t know how you do it, but you always make me feel better. Sometimes I think you know me better than I know myself.”

“Alex, not to scare you, but I think we were meant to be together. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this way. I lost my wife, Janet, about 10 years ago. She was killed in a car accident. After her death, I just kinda roamed around without anything to look forward to. I moved back to Florence to be close to my family about two years ago. I’ve also dated a few too many women, if you asked me, but I never found anyone that was worth waiting for ... like you.”

Alex looked at him. “Jim, I swear, when I’m feeling better we’ll go out and have a really good time.”

“Great, because there’s someplace special that I want to take you,” he kissed her softly.

She turned on the DVD player and put in her favorite movie *Stalag 17*. “Do you mind?”

“Are you kidding? I love this movie,” Jim exclaimed. “Hold on, let me make some popcorn,” he got up and went into the kitchen. A little while later, he came out with a big bowl of popcorn. “Here you go, Angel.”

“Great,” she cuddled up next to him and they watched the movie.

Once the movie was over, Jim got up and took the DVD out of the player. He looked over at Alex lying on the sofa. She was just watching his every move. She couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“What?” Jim asked with a smile.

“Nothing, I just like looking at you. You’re just really ...”

“Really what?” he grinned.

“Sexy. There’s no other word for it. I don’t just mean the way you look, which is totally beautiful, but your whole self is very sexy.”

Jim blushed. “I never thought of myself that way before.”

“Really? You’re one of the sexiest men I know,” Alex indicated with her finger for him to move toward her. She grabbed his hand and pulled him on the sofa. She kissed him. “You’re extremely sexy,” she kissed him again.

As they were kissing, there was a knock on the door. He sat up quickly “Do you want me to get that?”

“Not really,” she smiled. “But, yeah, go ahead.”

Jim looked through the peephole that he installed. "It's Greg," he whispered.

"Go ahead. Let him in. I have nothing to hide, do you?"

Jim shook his head, unlocked the door, and let Greg in.

"Oh, Alex. Are you OK? I've been calling for days. I've been so worried about you," he looked at her face. "Who could have done that to you?"

"Greg, just have a seat. Don't worry about me," Alex said. "I'm perfectly fine. Just a couple bumps and bruises, I'll live."

Greg sat down and then looked at Jim. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been ..." Jim started to say.

"He's been taking care of me. He saved my life. He was here that night."

"Jim, you never mentioned it to me at work."

"That's because it's none of anyone's business," Jim stated. He sat down next to Alex on the sofa.

"Greg, I'm fine. I'll probably be back to work tomorrow. No worries."

"I'm glad that you're all right. I was so worried about you. We haven't really been getting along lately. I'm so sorry for everything bad that I ever said to you. I'm ... I'm glad that Jim was here to save you," he gulped.

Alex touched his leg. "Greg, you are and will always be my friend. I just want you to be my friend. Don't interfere with my life, just let me live it."

"I am. I didn't even say that I thought you two were sleeping together," Greg covered his mouth. "I didn't mean that."

"Greg. We're not sleeping together. But, if we were, it'd be none of your business."

"I'm sorry. I'll go now. I hope to see you at work tomorrow," Greg got up to leave.

"Bye," Jim said. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," Greg left out the door. Jim looked at Alex. "Are you sure you're ready to go back to work?"

"I need to get back to work. You can't become my assistant until I talk with Bill and make the announcement. I have so much that I just let go. I haven't even set up my computer, which reminds me, I have to send a check to Randy for the computer."

"Why?"

"He built it for me. I have to pay him for it."

"I can set it up for you. The day, well, the day after the attack, that Saturday, when you were sleeping, the ISP person was here. All I have to do is plug in to the network card and HUB for you."

"You don't need to do that."

"I know. I want to do that for you." Jim got on the floor and hooked up all the wires. When he was finished, he turned on the computer and was able to access the Internet. "Ta-da!" Jim laughed.

Alex smiled. "Great. I think Emily's package is in the pile of mail. It has some software in it that I'll need to install."

"Emily?"

"Matthew's sister. She runs my gift shop in Pottstown. I had her send me the software package, so I can review the books from here. The network guy, Harold, I think, will help me set it up so I can uplink with the store."

"Oh, yeah. I think I saw it when I was sorting your mail. Well, let me look at the package. I can install it for you," Jim went through the pile of mail and found the package. "Here it is," he opened the box. "Oh, good, the networking instructions are already here," he read the instructions and then installed everything. He tested the connection and was able to view the bookkeeping records from the store. "Looks like you're all set."

“Come here,” Alex said. Jim sat down next to her. “I love having you here, but you don’t need to do everything for me. You’re my assistant at work, not at home.”

“Home?” Jim said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve just enjoyed having you here. It feels almost like home.”

“I know that I can’t stay forever.”

“I know. It wouldn’t be fair to you. You have a life outside of mine. I’m sorry. I’ve been taking advantage of you.”

“Oh, no. That’s not what I mean,” Jim kissed her. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be. I’m so glad that I can be here and help you. I just don’t want you to cloud your feelings for me. I don’t want you to confuse your feelings about how I saved your life, with how you really feel for me.”

“Is that what I’m doing? I’m sorry. I didn’t realize,” Alex said softly. “I care about you. Maybe you’re right.”

“I don’t want to be right. Alex, I want you to love me with all your heart. I want you to love me, for me. Not because I saved or helped you, or because your heart is broken over Randy. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, one thing that I value is honesty. I hate it when people can’t tell the truth about their wants, needs, or feelings. Jim, I know that I really care about you. I had fun with you before this all happened. You have made me feel safe. I don’t know how I feel toward Randy, but I know it’s over with him.”

“Alex, when you’re ready, you’ll know,” Jim hugged her. “In the meantime, I’ll be the one who’s by your side.”

A few moments later, there was a knock on the door. “Who can that be now?” Alex asked.

“It’s probably my mom. She’s bringing us some dinner. I called her when you were in the other room.”

“Always thinking,” Alex said.

Jim got up and answered the door. Sure enough, it was his mother.

“Alex, how are you doing, honey?” His mother said.

“Alex, this is my mom, Carol,” Jim introduced.

“Hello. It’s nice to finally meet you,” she tried to stand.

“Oh, don’t get up, honey. I brought some food over for you two. James told me what happened. I’m glad he is here to help you out,” she smiled at Jim.

Jim took Carol into the kitchen with the food. “Thanks, Mom.”

“She’s pretty. Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Mom, I’m helping out a friend. It feels good to have a friend again.”

“Is that all it is?”

“For right now, yes. If something else becomes of this, I’m welcoming it. If not, then it doesn’t.”

“James, just be careful. I don’t want to see you hurt again.”

“Mom, I’m going to be OK. It’s been 10 years.”

“Ten long years,” she reminded him.

“I know. Alex also lost someone. Do you remember Matthew Garris?”

“Oh, yes. Didn’t he die a few years ago?”

“Yes, Alex was his wife.”

“Oh, the murder ...”

“Mom! If someone had killed Dad in that situation, what would you have done?”

“I know, probably the same thing. Just take care of yourself.”

“I will. Now, let’s dish this out before it gets cold.” They dished out the food. Of course, it was the stuffed

French toast.

Jim went out and helped Alex off the sofa. "Just take it easy."

"I can walk, Jim. I'm feeling much better," Alex said.

"I know. I just like holding you," he beamed. He helped her sit down at the kitchen table.

"How did I know, it would be this," Alex laughed.

"It's James' favorite," Carol said. She gave Jim a kiss on the cheek. "I'll let you two eat. Alex, I hope you feel better."

"Thank you."

Jim walked her to the door. "Bye, Mom. Thanks for everything," Carol left, and Jim went into kitchen to eat.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, Alex woke up, but Jim wasn't there. She got out of bed slowly and walked into the living room. Jim wasn't anywhere to be found. She went into the kitchen to make coffee, but the coffee was already brewing. There was a note on the table. "Be right back."

Alex went into the bathroom to take a shower. A little while later she breathed in the scent of roses. She opened the shower curtain, and there stood Jim with a bouquet of two-dozen red roses.

"It's your first day back to work. These are for you," he smiled.

She stepped out of the shower and put on her robe. "They're absolutely beautiful." They left the bathroom and when she went into the living room, she saw that it was filled with roses. "Wow. You did all this for me?"

"Yes, Alex. I thought you needed a little happiness. I kinda bought out the entire florist shop this morning," he laughed.

"Oh, thank you. The scent is absolutely beautiful. I love roses," she took a minute to smell each bouquet. She took the bouquet from Jim and brought them into the kitchen. She got out a vase and arranged them neatly.

"You're good at that," Jim said.

"Well, part of my gift shop is a florist shop. I love flowers, but red roses are my favorites. This must have cost you a small fortune."

"Money isn't a problem."

"Really?"

"You sound surprised."

"A little. I thought that I was the only one who didn't care much about money."

"It can't buy you happiness, but it can buy things that will make you happy, such as these lovely flowers. Of course, they can't compare to you," he hugged her. "I wanted to do something nice for you."

"You certainly did," Alex poured them both a cup of coffee. She brought the coffee over to the table and they both sat down. She took a sip of her coffee and then looked at Jim. "I've been thinking."

"About what?"

"Well, I've been thinking that I really like it around here. I think I should buy a house."

"A house?"

"Yeah, not a big house or anything, but something that I can just buy outright, and it would be mine."

"Can you afford it?"

"You should see the bank accounts. I haven't really touched my money that sits in the banks. I just live off my paychecks, but I think I really need to do this for myself."

"Bank accounts? What are you rich or something?"

"Well, kind of. My mother invented furniture coasters. I have a large inheritance and there are the profits from the store, Matthew's life insurance policy. It all adds up."

Jim sat stunned. "So, that's what the whole "heiress" thing was about. And, that would also mean that it wouldn't bother you that I also have some money."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's not something I tell people about. You know how some people are, they either want to borrow or get your money."

"Yes, I completely understand."

"I got a large settlement from the wrongful death suit. The man that caused Janet's accident was drunk and

escaped without injury. I don't touch it much. I try to live off my paycheck. But, I did splurge a little today, but it was for you."

"You know, you're really spoiling me," Alex blushed.

"I like doing things for you, Angel. Once you get better, you can take care of me," Jim smiled flirtatiously.

"I would love to take care of you," Alex got silent for a moment.

"Alex, what's wrong?"

"I know that soon you'll be going back to your house. I was just thinking about how much I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you, too. But, I promise, I won't leave you until you're feeling better."

She sat back in her chair and finished her coffee. She looked at the time. "Oh, look at the time, I should get dressed. I don't want to be late my first day back." Jim smiled as he watched her walk out of the room. A few minutes later, she walked into the kitchen. "Another cup of coffee before we leave," she said.

"Did you remember to take your medication?"

"I took the antibiotics, but I'm not taking those painkillers while I'm working. They make me feel droopy," Alex drank her cup of coffee. "We might as well get going. Are you going to ride your bike to work, or do you want to ride with me?"

"You don't mind me riding with you?"

"Why would I mind? I'm giving a very dear friend a lift to work," Alex and Jim left out the door. They took the elevator down to the first floor, since the stairs were still too much for Alex.

Alex drove the two of them to Solutions. When they arrived, there was a large crowd of people outside. Karrie, Greg, Bill, Joe, Treena, and Helen were all outside waiting for Alex.

"Welcome back, Alex!" They shouted.

Mild tears filled Alex's eyes. She couldn't believe what she saw. "Thank you."

"We have a surprise for you," Bill said. "Follow us."

Alex slowly followed the crowd up the stairs and all the way to the Tech room. Jim carefully covered Alex's eyes and led her into the room.

"OK, open your eyes," Greg called.

Jim removed his hands over her eyes. "Surprise!" Everyone shouted. There was Alex's new office. In front of it, the L-shaped desk for her assistant was laid out. Behind the desk was the office door. Alex walked behind the desk and over to the door where Bill was standing. "Thank you, Bill. I really mean it."

"Here are your office keys," he handed her the keys. "Is it OK if I kiss your cheek?" he whispered. Alex nodded. Bill leaned over and kissed her cheek. "We were all very worried about you. We are all so glad that you're back. I know that I am," he laughed.

Alex turned and looked at everyone. "I want to thank all of you for your support. I'm not quite 100 percent, so, please bear with me. And, please, don't ask me about what happened. A man attacked me, and I don't know who he was. But, I'm OK now. A very good friend took care of me," she paused. "Now, let's get back to work."

Bill followed Alex into her office and closed the door. "So, Alex, are you sure you're ready to come back to work?"

"Yes, Bill. I'm fine, just a little sore. I don't look as bad as I did a few days ago."

"I was worried about you, Alex. You didn't return my calls."

Alex looked around the office. It was exactly as she drew in her sketches. "You made my sketches come to life. This is a great office."

Bill looked at her. "Are you changing the subject?"

"Yes," she smiled. "Oh, look I have another access door right next to the cubicles."

"Just like you wanted," Bill said. "Alex, can we have a moment?"

"Yes, sit down. I need to talk to you anyway," Alex sat down behind her desk. She touched the surface of the desk to feel the smooth lacquered wood. "Mahogany? For me?"

"I told you, Alex. Nothing but the best," he leaned back in the chair. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

"I have chosen the person who I want to be my assistant. I want you to know that I have given this a lot of thought. Based on his résumé and the results of the interview, I feel that Jim is best qualified for the job."

"Jim? Really? This doesn't have anything to do with the fact that he is the good friend who took care of you, does it?"

"Actually, Bill, not at all. That Friday, before the attack, I told Jim that I was giving him the job. I also must say, that now that he has helped me out, he has more than proven that he could be a good assistant. He took care of all my mail, set up my home computer. He did things that proved he is the best person for the job."

"If that's what you've decided, I don't have any problem with it," Bill looked at Alex. "Before this all happened, you and I were supposed to talk. Talk about us, and we never got the chance."

"To tell you the truth, I have been avoiding you on that subject. That's part of the reason why I didn't call you back."

"I figured that. That's why I didn't dare come to your apartment to see how you were. Though, I really wanted to."

"Bill, I don't know what you want from me. When you first came here, you told me that our relationship would be professional. You said you wanted to get to know me better so that we could work together well. But, then you kissed me. You're a little too insistent on things. What is it that you want from me?"

"Alex, you're a very attractive woman and any man in their right mind would want to get to know you better. If you know what I mean. With that said, if you want our relationship to be just professional, then that's what it can be. I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"You didn't scare me."

"Oh, I didn't?" Bill thought for a moment. "Well, can we at least be friends and maybe go out for a drink or something? As friends."

"Maybe when I'm feeling better. Right now, it even hurts to laugh," Alex said.

Bill sat there for a moment and looked at Alex. Then he got up quickly. He leaned over the desk and touched her hand. "Well, we better make the announcement so that Jim can get settled at his new desk."

Bill and Alex left the office and stood outside the doorway. "Can I have everyone's attention please?"

Helen, Treena, Greg, and Jim stood up and walked over to Bill and Alex. "I want to announce that Jim will be my new assistant, starting now. I know that you'll all continue to work hard and will support Jim in his new role. I also want to say that just because Jim is my assistant does not mean that he is my secretary."

Helen and Treena congratulated Jim. Greg started to walk away sadly, but then turned around and shook Jim's hand. "Congratulations, buddy."

"Thanks, Greg. I really appreciate it."

"Jim, you can pack up your things and move into your desk now. When you're finished, come into my office," Alex said.

Bill went up to his office and Alex went back in her office and closed her door. She turned on her computer and started reading the many emails that filled her Inbox while she was out.

A little while later, her phone rang. She picked it up. “Yes?”

“Alex, I didn’t think you knew, but all of your calls go to my phone now, and I’ll screen and transfer them to you,” Jim said.

“I didn’t know that.”

“Neither did I, until I read all the paper work on my desk on how to be a good assistant. Are you sure I’m not your secretary?” Jim laughed.

“Very funny. When you’re finished, bring me a copy of that ‘how to be a good assistant package.’ Also, is there one on how to be a good boss?” Alex laughed.

“I don’t see one, but I can always write one.”

“Cute. When you’re finished, come on in. I need your help with something.”

“Not a problem, boss,” Jim and Alex hung up the phone.

Alex laughed carefully. The phone rang again, Alex picked it up. “Jim, you don’t to call me for everything, you do have two legs.”

“Alex, Hettie Farmer is on the phone for you.”

“Oh, OK. Thanks,” Jim transferred the call. “Hettie? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, Alex. Randy told me that you would be back at work, so I called you here. Is that OK?”

“How did he know?”

“I’m not sure. He did have a visitor last night. Greg something,” she said.

“How is he doing?”

“Physically, he is getting better. But, his spirits are really down.”

“Why? I thought he’d be happier. I know that Leon’s death is affecting him, but other than that, he should be happy. He and Joanna can make their marriage work.”

“I don’t know anything about that. Joanna went back to Phoenix yesterday afternoon.”

“He’s probably just lonely. I can understand that. I don’t know what I can do, Hettie.”

“Can you come and see him or even just call him? They moved him to another room. Unfortunately, he needs to share it. The insurance only covers so much.”

“Hettie, can you get Randy moved to a private room?”

“The hospital will never allow it, Randy can’t afford it.”

“Don’t worry about that. Who do I contact about paying for his expenses?”

“That would be the billing department. But, why or how?”

“Don’t worry, Hettie. I can afford it. Just get Randy transferred to a private room. I’ll contact billing and take care of all the expenses that his insurance doesn’t cover. Please don’t tell him I did this. If he asks, it was an anonymous donation.”

“Alex, you’re so wonderful.”

“Even if I can’t be with him, I want to help him out. What good is having the money if you can’t help people you care about? Call me later and let me know when things are taken care of.”

“I will. Good-bye, Alex,” Hettie hung up the phone.

Alex sat back in her chair. There needs to be more that I can do, she thought. She picked up the phone and realize that it was different from her other phone. She just stared at it. “It’s just a damn phone,” But, she couldn’t figure out how to get an outside line.

She went to Jim’s desk to get his help, but he wasn’t there. She looked around and the only one in the tech room was Greg. “Where did everyone go?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged his shoulders.

She started getting frustrated. "They can't all take breaks at the same time!"

"Alex, is there something you need?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she took a breath. "I can't figure out my phone. I need to make a call."

He stood up. "Yeah, we all got new phones. Let me help you," he followed her into her office. She sat down at the desk, and he leaned over her to show her the phone system. "All you need to do is hit these buttons for direct extensions. You program in each extension and then write their names on these tabs and stick them on the appropriate button."

She looked at him. "How do I program the extensions?"

"Here, let me show you," he programmed each button, and she wrote down the person's name. "Do you want me to add Randy's extension?"

"Yeah, add all the hardware people," she said.

"Oh, OK," he continued until the last extension was done. "Now, for outside line, you hit nine and then the number. If you want to call someone interoffice that's not on these buttons, you hit five and then their extension. I put Jim's extension on top since you'll call him the most. These buttons over here are for the speaker phone, conferencing, and transferring of calls."

She looked up at him and he smiled. "Thanks for your help. Um, Greg, I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about Jim getting the job."

"Don't worry about it. Jim's a good person. I really didn't want the job. I like my job. It's kinda fun."

"Greg, have a seat for a minute," she pointed to the chair in front of her desk.

He sat down. "Wow, these chairs are better than the other ones you had."

"I know. Everything is bigger and better than what I had," she paused. "What if I were to offer you a supervisory position? Would you take it?"

"Of course, what would I need to do?"

"Well, I need to get confirmation from Bill first to make sure I can do that. But, I think that we need to hire another person, now that Jim is my assistant. I know the supervisor job that used to be mine is still part of the headcount. You'd be perfect for the job. You could take care of all the problems on the floor that I just don't have time for. Let me talk with Bill and see what I can work out. I didn't want to ask him, if you weren't up for it."

Greg's eyes lit up. "I'm up for anything, Alex. You know that. Alex, why didn't you call me when you got hurt? I had to read about it in the paper."

"I should've, but I was so doped up on the painkillers and in so much pain. Plus, I was just ashamed. It's embarrassing to be almost ..." she stopped.

"Almost what?"

"The man would have raped and probably killed me, if Jim hadn't been there."

"I didn't realize. So, you and Jim, you two are pretty close, aren't you?"

"Jim and I are friends. He was nice enough to put his life on hold to take care of me. I'm not used to letting anyone take care of me, but I know I had to have help."

"I think that's great, Alex."

"You do?"

"Yes, I know that you're surprised, especially after the way I acted with Randy, but I'm truly glad that you have a friend in Jim."

"Speaking of Randy, why did you visit him last night?"

"Oh, you know about that, huh? I heard he was getting better. Joe keeps in contact with the hospital, and I

wanted ...”

“You wanted what? To tell him about me and Jim?”

“Well, that and I wanted to tell him that I was sorry for the way I treated him. Alex, I was terrible to you and to Randy just because he’s a cop.”

“You told him I was back to work?”

“Yeah, he seemed so depressed. I think he blames himself for your attack. He is jealous that Jim saved you and he couldn’t. I don’t know why. He should just be grateful that you’re alive.”

“Well, I’m glad you got the chance to say your peace to him. I’ll see you later. I have so much work to get through today,”

As Greg was leaving, there was a commotion coming close to the door. “We have something for you, Alex.” There was Jim, Helen, and Treena, each holding a plant and bouquet of red roses. “Jim told us these were your favorites.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have. Thank you so much,” she showed them where to put the plants and bouquets. They left the room, but Jim remained. He was holding a thin gift-wrapped package.

“It was their idea. I just told them what you liked,” he beamed.

“They’re a great group, aren’t they?” Alex said. “Do you have a minute?”

“Yes, actually,” he looked at the package. “This is for you,” he handed it to her.

“You didn’t have to.”

“Well, it’s from my mom and me, of course. She just dropped it off.”

Alex carefully unwrapped the package. When she opened the box, she started to cry. “Oh, where did you ...” Inside the box was a gold frame with a photo of a younger Matthew and Jim in their Marine Dress Uniforms. “How? Oh, my god, it’s beautiful. You two look so young,” she sat down in her chair, just staring at the photo.

Jim took the chair in front of her desk. “I told my mother that you were Matthew’s wife. She dug through the attic to see what she could find from my days in the Marines. She found this photo, so, she had it framed. She thought that you would like it.”

“I absolutely love it,” she placed the frame on her desk. She got up, walked around the desk, and hugged him. “Thank you so much and please, thank Carol for me.”

He hugged her back. “I will. Oh, there was something you needed me to help you with?”

“Oh, right. Well, it’s almost lunchtime. Do you want to get some lunch in A little while, and we can discuss it then? it’s really confidential.”

“Sure. Let me finish unpacking,” Jim said, as he stood up.

“Sounds good. I need to make a couple of calls, now that I know how to use the phones,” she laughed.

Jim went out to his desk and Alex picked up the phone. She dialed nine and then the hospital number.

“Billing department, please?”

A few seconds later, a woman answered the phone. “Middleburg General, Billing department?”

“Yes, hi. My name is Alex Garrison. I would like to take care of the medical expenses for a patient, Randy Harrison.”

“Hold on while I bring up his records,” Alex heard keyboard clatter for a few seconds. “Yes, Ms. Garrison. I have his expenses in front of me. How do you want to pay this?”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be in for at least a few more days. I want to pay all the expenses that aren’t covered by his insurance, and I want him to be in a private room.”

“According to the computer, a private room has been ordered. That’s five hundred dollars a day for the

private room. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes, I'm sure. What do I need to do?"

"You can pay in person by check or credit card."

"OK, I'll come in later with a check. Also, if I wanted to make a sizeable donation to the hospital, to whom do I speak to?"

"That would be our Chief of Staff, Steven Welch."

"Steven Welch?"

"Yes. If the name sounds familiar to you, he owns several businesses in the area."

"Thanks for all the information. I'll come in later tonight with a check," Alex hung up the phone. She stood up and walked out to get Jim for lunch. "Ready?"

"Yup," he smiled.

They walked slowly down stairs and out the building. She looked around. "Jim, I haven't had a smoke in several days. Can I get one from you?"

"Sure, here you go," he took a cigarette out of his pocket and handed it to her. When she put it in her mouth, he lit it with his lighter.

She took a deep inhale. "It feels so good. I know it shouldn't, since these will probably kill me some day, but it does," she smiled. She finished her cigarette and then they walked to her car. She noticed that Greg was getting into his truck.

"Do you mind driving?" she asked.

"Not at all, where do you want to go?" he caught her keys as she tossed them to him.

"Let's go to the park. It's always peaceful there this time of day." They got into the car and Jim drove to the park. He ran inside the sandwich shop to get their lunch, while Alex walked over to find a spot in the park for them to sit.

Alex was still walking when he caught up to her. "There are a lot of places available, where are you going?"

"Over there, where it's private," she said. They walked toward an area of the park that surrounded by bushes and in the middle of the bushes was a picnic table.

They sat down at the picnic table. "This is much better," she said, as she took a bite of her sandwich.

Jim started eating. Then he spoke. "Alex, what did you need me to help you with?"

"I need to get into the storage area on the server where the photos for the IDs are kept. I need to get my hands on Bill's photograph. I also need a way to get his fingerprints."

"Alex, it's because I'm your friend that I'm going to ask you. Why?"

"Something isn't quite right about Bill. He comes here, he knows my real name, and he gives me everything I asked for. Look at the office he built for me. He gave me a promotion and a 15 thousand dollar a year raise within 10 minutes of talking to me. Plus ..."

"Plus, what?"

"He acts strangely. First, he tells me that he wants us to get to know each other, as professionals, and then he comes on to me, several times. He is one hard to read person. He doesn't make sense. Something about him bothers me. I hired Mark to check into him."

"Oh, the private detective, from the phone the other day."

"Yeah. Once I get the picture I can email it to him, but the fingerprints are another story."

"Well, you just pick up a pen he used or something like that."

She took another bite of her sandwich. "Not a bad idea. I need to talk to him later, anyway."

He looked at her and touched her hand. "So, how are you feeling? I mean really feeling?"

"Not too bad. A little sore. I can't move as fast as I'm used to. I'll take a hot bath tonight, that's for sure."

"Do you have any other plans for tonight?"

"Well, I need to go to Middleburg General Hospital. I had Randy put in a private room and I've decided to cover his medical expenses."

"Why? I don't understand. Why would you do that?"

"Jim, I still care about Randy, even if we aren't together. He doesn't have an inheritance or any money. He just lost his partner. Hettie told me that though he is healing fine, he is depressed."

"Oh, I'm sorry that I butted in. I didn't mean to get into your business."

"Don't worry about it. He needs the help but would never ask for it. I don't want him to know I'm doing this, OK?"

"I won't tell him."

"I'm also going to make a donation to the hospital. I saw the condition of the Emergency room when I was there. They really need some upgrades."

"I know. I made a donation last year to the Heart and Lung ward in memory of my father."

"That's great. I'm going to call Steven Welch this afternoon to talk about a donation."

Jim leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I can't wait until you're feeling better," he said changing the subject.

She smiled. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

She kissed him on the mouth. "You know, you always make me feel better."

He touched her face. "I know you're feeling better, but may I stay again tonight?"

"You can stay as long as you want to. I thought I was preventing you from leaving. Jim, I like having you with me."

"I'll stay for a few more nights, then. After work I need to run to my place and pick up a few more things."

"Not a problem. I need to go to the hospital tonight. First, I have to go to my apartment and pick up my checkbook, so, I can drop you off, so you can get your bike. We'll meet back at my, um, our place at night."

Jim smiled. "Alex? I I-I ... um, I think we should get back. It's getting late."

"You're right," she stood up slowly. "Hmm. Didn't hurt as bad that time."

Jim and Alex joined Greg and Karrie outside having a cigarette.

"How are you doing, Alex?" Karrie asked.

"Oh, I'm doing OK. Actually, I'm feeling a little better. It doesn't hurt so much when I breathe."

"That's good. Your face looks awful," Karrie said bluntly.

"Karrie!" Greg snapped.

"Don't worry about it, Greg. Yes, Karrie I know my face looks horrible, you should have seen it days ago. It's getting better, but face bruises take forever to go away," Alex retorted.

"Well, I didn't mean anything by it. I just meant that it looks like it really hurts. I'm sorry, Alex."

"Karrie, don't worry about it. Bruises go away, fear takes a little longer," Alex said, squeezing Jim's hand. "Jim is my hero," she kissed his cheek.

"Jim, I don't know how to thank you for saving Alex. She's my best friend and I don't know what I would have done if anything ever happened to her," Greg shook Jim's hand.

"I'm just glad I was there," Jim said. "Now, enough of that kind of talk," he led Alex upstairs to her office.

“Thanks. You got me out of there just in time,” Alex said.

“Just doing my job,” he said. “That’s what I do, I assist you,” he laughed.

Alex smiled and went into her office and closed the door behind her. She sat down and stared at the lovely picture of Jim and Matthew. She picked up the phone and dialed the hospital’s number again. “Um, I need Steven Welch’s office.”

The receptionist connected her to Mr. Welch’s assistant. “Steven Welch’s office, how may I help you?”

“Yes, hello. My name is Alex Garrison. I wish to make a donation to the hospital, and I was told by your billing department that I had to meet with Mr. Welch first.”

“Yes, he has an opening next week.”

“Well, you see, I wish to make quite a sizeable donation. I’ll be at the hospital tonight on other business and was hoping that I could see Mr. Welch tonight.”

“Well, he doesn’t usually have meetings in the evening.”

“I understand. I currently work at Solutions Computer Systems. I also have a lot of money at my disposal to make a donation.”

“Let me see if Mr. Welch can take your call. Please hold.”

While Alex waited on hold, Jim knocked on the door. She put the phone on speaker. It played the hold music while she got up and answered the door. “What’s up? I’m on hold right now.”

“These papers need yours and Bill’s signatures,” Jim handed her a stack of papers.

A voice came over the speaker. “Yes, this is Mr. Welch.”

Alex hurried over to the phone and picked it up. “Yes, Mr. Welch. My name is Alex Garrison.”

“Oh, yes, Alex. How are you doing?”

“You know me?”

“Well, I know that you work for me, and I’ve heard really good things about you from Donald and William.”

“Thank you. Oh, I forgot you’re a friend of Bill’s.”

“Actually, no, I’ve never met him, just heard good things about him. What can I do for you, Alex?”

“Mr. Welch, I would like to make a donation to the hospital.”

He chuckled lightly. “What kind of donation, Alex?”

“I was thinking about donating fifty thousand dollars to the emergency room.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, Mr. Welch, I’m not.”

“Please, call me Steven.”

“OK, Steven. I know it sounds funny, considering I work for one of your companies. But, I have an extremely large bank account. But, anyway, I was in the emergency room recently for treatment and I noticed that it needed several upgrades and more doctors.”

“Alex, if you’re serious, I’ll meet with you anytime.”

“Great, I can be at the hospital around six or six-thirty. I have other business there. Oh, please let your assistant know that we’re meeting.”

“I definitely will do,” Steven hung up the phone.

Jim was still standing in the doorway. “Isn’t it funny how money changes things?”

“Yeah, I know,” she sat down in the chair. “Will you let Bill know that I need to see him? Also, I need some fresh pens,” she smiled.

“Will do, boss,” Jim left out the door.

Alex just shook her head and smiled. A few minutes later, Jim and Bill appeared in the doorway. “Um, Boss, Bill Weaver is here to see you,” Jim walked into and set a box of pens on the desk.

She looked up. “You’re taking this job way too seriously. Bill, come in and close the door. Jim, I’ll talk to you later. Please hold my calls,” she laughed.

“Jim told me that we had to sign some papers. What are they for?”

“Yeah, we have to both sign the paper work for Jim’s promotion and some other supplies that I guess you ordered.”

“Yeah, there are a few things we need around here,” Bill took one of the pens out of the box and started signing his name. When he finished, he put the pen on the desk.

Alex signed her name under his with another pen. “Bill, can I talk to you about something?”

“Go ahead,” Bill seemed somewhat distant.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No, I guess I’m just tired. What do you need?” he asked quietly.

“I was wondering about my staff. I think that we need to hire another person to take Jim’s old job and ...”

“And what, Alex?”

“I think we should promote Greg to supervisor.”

“Absolutely not!” He stood up angrily.

“What part?”

“I don’t want Greg to get anything he doesn’t deserve.”

“Bill, while I was out, was there a problem with Greg?”

“Yeah. I honestly think that he’s the man that attacked you. I don’t know how you can pretend he’s not.”

“Greg wouldn’t hurt me like that. I don’t know who it was.”

“Alex,” Bill sat down again. “Are you sure that he didn’t?”

“If you’re asking if I have proof, no. I just don’t think he would ever hurt me physically. Sure, we’ve had our fights, but ...” Then she remembered that he grabbed her the night of their last fight. “But, no, he wouldn’t hurt me.”

“All right, Alex. I’ll grant your requests. Have Greg write up another posting for Jim’s old job and then give it to Jim. He can get it posted,” Bill sighed, as he started to stand.

“Bill, are you sure you’re OK?”

“I guess I’m just not feeling well. I think I’m going to go home and lie down. Will you cover for me? That is, if you’re up to it.”

“Not a problem. Go, go home, and take it easy. If you don’t feel any better tomorrow, just call me. I’ll cover for you as long as you need me to.”

“I’ll always remember this, Alex,” Bill whispered, as he left.

Alex got a shiver down her spine. The word “remember” bothered her, especially the way he said it. “My nerves must be shot. Now I suspect everyone,” she talked herself out of it.

Alex picked up the phone and hit the button for Jim’s extension. “Jim, can you get me a plastic bag out of the supply room. Also, I need the forms for salary and promotions. Thanks.”

Jim walked into the office with a bag and the forms. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” she used a tissue to pick up the pen and put it in the plastic bag. She started to look over the forms that he gave her. “Can you pull up the IDs on my computer?”

Jim walked over to her computer and knelt on the ground in front of it. Alex looked at him. Suddenly, she was reminded of Randy doing the same thing. She shook it off. “Here, take my chair. I’ll sit on the other

side and fill these out.”

She filled in Greg’s information on the form while Jim worked at her computer. “Got it,” Jim said. Alex went over to him and looked at it.

“Good, make a copy of it and paste it on to a floppy disk. I’ll send it to Mark from home. As for this pen, I’m not sure what to do with it,” Alex said.

“Why don’t you ask Randy how to get the print off of it?” Jim suggested.

“I could. I have to go to the hospital tonight anyway,” Alex said.

“I wish I could go with you.”

“Jim, don’t worry about it. I have a few things I have to do at the hospital tonight. I’ll stop by his room and ask him. I’ll tell you all about it later tonight.”

“OK, here you go,” Jim handed her the floppy.

She put the disk in her back pocket. She handed the forms to Jim. “Can you run these up to Bill to sign before he leaves? I need his signature.”

Jim ran up to Bill’s office, but he had already gone home. Jim came back with the forms. “He left already.”

“No problem. He can sign them when he comes back in. He went home sick. I guess he must have been really sick,” she said.

They finished out the afternoon at work and then Alex drove them both back to her apartment. Jim took off on his bike as soon as they got there, and Alex went up to her apartment. As she was unlocking the door, she looked down the hall toward Bill’s apartment. She went in her apartment and sat down at the computer. She started up her email and inserted the floppy disk. She sent an email to Mark and Mike Dix with Bill’s photo as an attachment.

She went into her bedroom and noticed that her bed was all messed up. I swear that I made the bed today, she thought. She started straightening out the bed when she noticed a strange smell. “Mothballs,” she stammered. “Oh, god, he was here. In my home,” she looked around the room, but nothing was out of place. She went to the closet where she kept her safe. She noticed that her boxes were out of order and had been rummaged through. She started to get scared. “I have to get out of here,” she hurried and opened the safe and pulled out some cash and her checkbook, she dropped the bag in that had the pen. She closed the safe and hurried out of the apartment and to the elevator.

She noticed that the elevator also smelled like mothballs. She decided to take the stairs. She struggled through her pain to get down to the first floor. She ran out to her car; her body was shaking.

She looked around the parking lot but didn’t see anything suspicious. She got in her car and started it up. She just sat there with the car running. She was too afraid to move. She started to cry, and then she looked at herself in the rearview mirror. “No, I’m NOT going to let you run my life,” she wiped the tears from her eyes. She put the car in drive and drove toward the hospital.

When she arrived at the hospital, she decided to go to the Billing department first. She went in and wrote a check out to the hospital to pay for his medical expenses. “I’m giving you what I can estimate as the costs if he stays three more days. If it ends up being more than that give me a call. My number is on the check. If it’s less than that, take the remaining and deduct it from someone else’s bill,” she told the billing officer.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” the woman said.

“Can you tell me where Mr. Welch’s office is?”

“Yes, it’s on the third floor, go toward the corporate wing, and his name is on his door.”

“Thank you,” Alex left the billing department and headed for Mr. Welch’s office.

The receptionist led Alex right into his office. “Hi, Mr. Welch. I’m Alex Garrison.”

“Oh, yes. Nice to finally meet you. Are you OK? I see your face is injured.”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m here to issue this hospital a check.”

“Please, come in and sit down,” he pointed to a nearby chair.

“Thank you. I want this money to go toward upgrading the emergency room. I want the donation to be given in the memory of Leon Towers.”

“Oh, yes, the police officer who was killed.”

“Yes. His partner is a friend of mine. I’m willing to double my donation if the repairs start within 30 days.”

“You’re asking a lot, Alex. But, I think we can work something out.”

“Here is a check for fifty thousand dollars. Go ahead and call the bank to confirm it’s good. Once you’ve cashed it, start the renovations. If you can get it started at once, I’ll come back with another check for fifty thousand.”

“Alex, I must say you certainly know what you’re doing. So, why then are you working for my company?”

“I like to work, and I enjoy my job and the people I work with. Oh, one thing, Mr. Welch, um, Steven, why would Donald and Katrina think that you and William were good friends?”

“I don’t know where they got that idea. When I was in Canada a few months ago, I was looking at a company there for a buyout. I heard that they had a US based company. So, instead of doing the buyout, I tried to steal some of the staff. William was just part of that. He arrived kinda late, though. I never met him, but his résumé was very impressive.”

“Oh, just wondering,” Alex stood up. “Thanks, Steven. I appreciate you letting me do this.”

“No, thank you, Alex. I hope to see you on my next visit to Solutions. I have to say that you’re a very impressive woman.”

“Thank you. Well, when you come out to Solutions, you can see the new office that was built for me.”

“New office?”

“Yes.”

“I heard the new office was for William.”

“No, he built me a new office.”

“Oh, I must have heard wrong. Nice to meet you,” Alex left his office and headed slowly to Randy’s room. When she reached the door, she hesitated about going in. She took a deep breath and then knocked on the door. “Who is it?” Randy answered weakly.

“It’s Alex.”

“Alex? Oh, come on in, please,” Alex walked into the door. “Lady, it’s so good to see you,” he spoke slowly.

“You’re looking a lot better. How are you feeling?”

“So, much better, now that you’re here,” Randy smiled slightly.

“Randy, I know that we can’t be together any more, but ...”

“What do you mean? Is that why you haven’t come around? Do you think I don’t love you anymore?”

“Randy, you don’t love me. You belong with Joanna. We had a great time together, but that’s it. You need to work on your marriage.”

“It’s Jim, isn’t it?”

“This has nothing to do with Jim. This is about you and me. Actually, no, this isn’t why I came. I need your advice and police expertise.”

Randy looked at her with sad eyes. "I know that you're with Jim. Once I was broken, I was no good for you."

"You think because you were in an accident that I would leave you. I saw you with your wife. She was the first person you asked for. You still love her, whether you know it or not."

"I won't give up on you, Alex."

"Randy, I didn't come to fight with you. I was just wondering how fingerprints can be removed from an object and then photographed."

"This is about Bill, isn't it?"

"What do you mean? How did you know?"

"Alex, I ran a check on him the night of my accident. The only William Weaver that's from New Jersey is dead. He died in a plane crash on the way to Arizona."

"Then who is Bill?"

"I don't know. I needed to tell you. I tried to call you, but your line was busy, so, Leon decided to drive me in the patrol car. All of a sudden, a large truck hit us. The next thing I know, I'm here, and Leon is dead," Randy's eyes started to tear.

"I'm sorry, Randy," Alex touched his hand.

He wiped his eyes. "If you want to get his prints off of something, get some ink powder and sprinkle it on the object. Take some heavy-duty scotch tape and place it over the powder. Pull it off slowly and then put the tape on some white paper. I can have Terry run the print for you."

"Um, no. I have already hired a private detective. I can do it. Thanks," Alex stood up to leave.

"Alex, please don't go. I need you."

"Randy, I care about you. I really do. But, I realized that I was standing in the way of you and Joanna. I don't want to hurt you, but I don't want to be hurt when you two get back together. She loves you deeply. She stood by your bedside every minute."

"I know. I couldn't get her to leave. Lady, please don't leave me. I do love you. I really do. I know I've never said it to you. Please, don't let it be too late."

Alex started to cry. "Randy, I miss you so much," she leaned over and kissed his mouth, but then she got up. "No, you need to find out what your life has written for you. You and Joanna need to work things out, either decide to be together or be apart, but that's up to you two. I have to worry about someone trying to kill me. As for Jim and me, right now we are close friends."

"Alex, I'll fight for you," Randy said.

"Randy, fight for yourself first. See you soon," Alex pulled a check out of her pocket and placed it on the bed table. "Before I forget, this is for you."

"Twenty-five hundred dollars? What's this for?"

"You built me that computer system. I told you before that I would pay for it," Alex left out the door before he could say another word. She walked out of the hospital to her car. On her windshield was a white rose with a note 'wherever you go, I'll be waiting.' The note was typed.

Alex looked around the parking lot but there was no one around. She threw the rose on the ground and drove home. She was relieved to see that Jim's bike was in the parking lot when she got home.

She opened the door and Jim was sitting on the sofa just staring at the wall. "What's wrong, Jim?"

"Alex, what happened here?"

"When I came home, I noticed that the bed was messed up and my boxes in the closet had been rummaged through."

“Did you see the kitchen?”

“Um, no. I didn’t go in the kitchen.”

“Follow me,” Jim took her into the kitchen. There were six bottles of white wine on the counter. Each bottle had a white rose sticking out of it and there was a note, ‘I’m sorry.’ This note had also been typed.

“Someone is trying to get my attention,” she thought for a moment, and then she remembered the bottle of white wine that Randy found in her cabinet.

“Alex, I know I can’t leave you alone here, anymore.”

“Jim, please hold me right now,” Alex hugged him. He held her tightly. “Tomorrow, we are looking for a new place to live. I don’t care if I buy the first house I see,” she sobbed.

“It will be OK,” Jim tried to reassure her. “Tomorrow, I’ll take you someplace where you won’t need to be afraid.”

He took the bottles of wine and the roses and threw them in a garbage bag. He took it out in the hall to the trash chute and let it slide down to the dumpster. When he came back to the apartment, Alex had already got undressed and changed into her pajamas. He curled up with her on the sofa. She covered them up with the blanket and turned on the television.

“Aside from everything else, how was your visit to the hospital?”

“I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. Tonight, just hold me like this.”

“Yes, boss,” he smiled.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, Jim woke Alex up at about five AM. “Why are you waking me up so early?” she muttered.

“Come on, get up, and get dressed. There’s someplace I need to show you before we go to work.”

“Can’t we wait until later?” she yawned.

“No, we need to do this now,” he said, gently pulling her to a sitting position.

“OK, OK. I’m up now. Can I at least have some coffee?” she said.

“I already got a cup for you,” he handed her the cup of coffee.

“What’s going on, Jim? Where are you taking me and why does it need to be now?”

“It’s a surprise, but I know you’ll love it.”

She drank her coffee slowly and then got up to get dressed. “OK. I’m ready as I’ll ever be at 5:30 in the morning. We are coming back here before we go to work, right?”

“If we have time,” Jim smiled. He took her hand and led her to the elevator. “We’ll take my bike.”

They got on his bike, and he rode out of the parking lot. He sped past Solutions’ building. He turned left down a narrow road. A little while later, he was pulling into the driveway of a small farmhouse.

“What do you think?” Jim asked.

“About the house?” Alex confirmed.

“Yeah, isn’t it great? It has so much history. It just needs a little work and a new security system.”

“It’s very nice. I have a question for you, though. You don’t care about people’s pasts, but you love historical things. What’s with that?”

“A person’s past can only last a lifetime, but history lasts forever. It’s made up of many people’s lifetimes.”

“This house is beautiful. I can already see ways to fix it up.”

“Alex, do you want to buy this house?”

“I would love to buy this house. I just have one question, why did I need to see it this early in the morning?”

“Follow me, I’ll show you,” Jim led her to the backyard. “Look at the sunrise. Isn’t it beautiful? And look,” he pointed to the back of the house. “There’s a beautiful bay window in the kitchen where you can watch it rise in the morning.”

“Can we go in?”

“Yup. Here are the keys. The house sits on four acres of land, and it has the garage and barn,” he led her to the back door that entered into the kitchen.

“This kitchen is beautiful, just needs a few updated appliances, but I love it. Not that I cook or anything.”

“Here, let me show you the rest of the house,” he showed her the family room that had a large fireplace, and there was the large entryway. He took her upstairs and showed her the bathroom, two small bedrooms, and a large master bedroom. “There’s also a lot of closet space.”

“I love it, Jim,” she hugged and kissed him. “What do I need to do to buy it?”

“Just sign here and write out a check.”

“No formal closing or anything?”

“None needed. Angel, I’m selling you this house.”

“This is your house?”

“Well, I inherited this piece of property from my father when he passed away. I, basically, just let it sit and

collect dust. I knew this would be perfect for you.”

“I don’t how to thank you. What do you want for the house?”

“I’d say thirty thousand since it needs some work. The plumbing and electrical boxes are all up to code, but it needs paint, new appliances and you’d probably want to upgrade the bathroom. It has a security system since it’s been sitting here empty, but you probably want that upgraded too.”

“Thirty thousand? Are you sure? That’s pretty cheap.”

“Alex, you need this more than I do. It’s not about the money, as you know. I want you to have something that’s just yours. I’d give it to you, but I know you ... you need to pay for it.”

“Oh, Jim. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Just let me spend your first night here with you, as friends, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” she looked around the house again. “I see definite possibilities. Will you help me fix it up?”

“Definitely. I know some contractors, so, I’ll call them later on and get some estimates. Just let me know what you want done.”

“I wish I had a notebook right now. I could draw it out for you.”

“I think there’s one in the drawer in the kitchen.” They headed downstairs. Jim rifled through the drawers until he found a notebook and pencil. “Here you go. There’s a lot of crap in these drawers that I haven’t gone through yet.”

Alex took the notebook, went in each room, and sketched out the design. Jim watched her as she drew so intently. She identified each paint color and layout of each room. She made notes in the margin as to what furniture she wanted to buy and what she had already that could be placed in the house.

When she finished each room, she showed the notebook to Jim. “What do you think? Do you think this is possible?”

“Alex, these are great sketches. I knew you were talented, but these are really great. I’ll make some calls today and fax these to a few contractors. we’ll make these come to life for you.”

“Well, we better head back to the apartment. I want to write that check out for you, so you can get to the bank before work.” They both headed out to his bike.

“There’s so much that I want to show you here. Once we get the house done for you, I’ll take you on the tour of your new land,” Jim said.

“I don’t know why you were put in my life, but I’m so glad you were. You make me happy. With you, I can just be myself.”

“Alex, I know. I can be myself, and you still like me,” he laughed.

They got on his bike and rode back to the apartment. When they got upstairs, Alex signed all of the paperwork for the house and wrote Jim out a check for thirty thousand dollars. “I’ll drop these off at the lawyer’s office later and then it will be all set. The house is now yours.”

Alex kissed him tenderly. “I’m so excited. I can’t wait to move in and get out of this apartment. I don’t like the fact that somewhere someone is watching me.”

“Alex, I’ll stay with you until you can move into the house. I don’t want you to be alone here.”

“I hate having to live my life this way.”

“I know, Angel, but all I want for you is to be safe. There’s something else that I want for you, too, but ...” he kissed her cheek.

“But what?”

“I want you to be with me,” Jim kissed her. “Well, we better get to work.”

Alex drove them to the bank and Jim deposited the check then they headed to work. During his downtime, Jim faxed Alex's sketches to a few contractors, and they faxed his estimates. He also called the security company and instructed them to upgrade all the equipment on the property.

Alex covered for Bill. He left a message that he was still too sick to come into the office.

Alex ended up covering for Bill for about four days. Since she was taking his place, she didn't need to have his signature for Greg's promotion. Greg's promotion was announced several days later to the entire staff.

While Alex worked at the office, Jim would go back and forth to the farmhouse to check on the contractors that he had hired. He also hired some landscapers for the yard. He wanted Alex's house to be perfect. He wouldn't let her come and see it. He wanted the end result to be a surprise. She was so busy covering for Bill that she didn't really have time anyway.

Randy had called Alex several times, but she wouldn't return any of his calls. Jim wouldn't let Alex be alone at the apartment, so whenever he had to go to his place, he brought her with him. He was afraid that the man would come back and really hurt her. Alex's injuries healed up and she was back to normal, at least physically.

She had to drive to Phoenix to see a plastic surgeon. She was tired of the scar. After the doctor ran some tests, he said that she needed to completely heal. Even though the bruises were gone, and the cut had closed. It was still healing under the skin. The thought of living with this scar bothered her, but she wouldn't let on to Jim. It wasn't just that it was on her face, but every time she saw it in the mirror or touched her face, it was a reminder of what happened to her.

Jim spent this weekend showing Alex some self-defense moves. They were enough so that she could at least fight for herself or get away from an attacker. She was feeling better, so, she could maneuver her body much better.

Then it was Monday morning again. Alex and Jim headed off to work. Bill had finally returned, and Alex could concentrate on her own job.

Today was also the day that Randy returned to work. Joe had planned a welcome back party for Randy, but Alex didn't attend. She told the rest of her staff to go, including Jim.

Alex sat back in her chair and looked out the window. It was to be Christmas soon, though Arizona isn't one for snow, the air had a slight chill. She couldn't wait for the construction to end on her home, so that she could move in. She was going to miss Jim being there, but she knew he had to live his life. It was probably hard for him to be her friend and protector, along with being her assistant. She had confusing feelings for him, but she didn't want to hold him back anymore from living his own life. She was too afraid to ask him what he really wanted, because she thought he would leave. She was trying to get the courage to admit to herself how she felt. But, she needed to clarify her feelings. It wasn't too long ago that she started to care for Randy. She still did care for Randy, but they didn't really have a relationship. She so wanted to be with Jim, and the reasons were scaring her. It was no longer about just having fun. It was about having something more real.

She heard Jim's voice in the outer office. He was talking to Randy. Suddenly, the phone rang. It was Jim. "Um, boss, Randy is here to see you. Are you busy?"

"Actually, I was just thinking about you."

"Do you want to see him, then?" she could tell by Jim's voice that he smiled.

"Send him in," Randy, using a cane, limped carefully into the doorway. She could smell the cologne that she loved so much. "Come on in and close the door behind you."

Randy closed the door. "May I sit?"

“Go ahead. Randy, you don’t have to be so formal. I was hoping that we were still friends.”

“I want to be more than friends with you, Lady. I remember every inch of you and want to feel you all over again.”

“Randy, we already talked about this.”

“Lady, I’m not letting go of you that easy. I’ll fight for you, no matter what it takes.”

“Fight for me? Fight whom? The only one you’d have to fight is me, and I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I’d fight Jim and Greg together, if I had to.”

“Hold on. You have no idea what you’re saying.”

“What about you and Jim?”

“You know what, Randy? I don’t know.”

“You do know. I know you do.”

“No, Randy I don’t know. I’ll be moving into my new house soon.”

“Alex,” Randy stood up and walked over to her slowly. He sat on her desk. “I need you, badly. I have missed you so much,” he leaned over and kissed her softly on the mouth. “Please, don’t leave me.”

Alex pushed him away gently. “Randy, I don’t want to hurt you. That’s the last thing I want to do. But, you’re still married.”

“It didn’t bother you before …” he spat.

“I know, but it should have. Watching you and Joanna while you were in the hospital, I just knew that I had to back off. So, that’s what I’m doing. It isn’t that I don’t want you, because believe me, I still care deeply for you. I still think about how intense we were with each other.”

“Lady, I won’t give up. I just want you to know that. But, I won’t push you either,” Randy left the office and Jim walked in.

“Boss? You OK?” Jim asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Do I have any messages?”

“Bill was looking for you while Randy was in here. He said to call him when you were finished.”

“Thanks. I’ll call him now,” Jim left the room as Alex picked up the phone. “Bill, Jim told me that you needed to talk to me.”

“Yes. Can you come up here please?”

“Be right there,” Alex hung up and headed for Bill’s office. “Jim, I need to go upstairs. Be back soon.”

Alex went upstairs and knocked on Bill’s door. “You needed to see me?” she asked.

“Come and close the door. Have a seat.”

“What do you need?”

“I have another project for you. Your old office and Karrie’s office, I want to knock down the wall and create a new office for me.”

“OK, what do you need from me?”

“I’d like you to help me plan it, just like you did for yourself.”

“What do I get in return?” she smiled.

“Anything you want,” he got up and sat on his desk in front of her.

“OK. Well, I want …”

“Yes? What do you want, Alex?” he smiled gently.

“Actually, I have no idea what I want. But, I’ll do it. When I know exactly what I want, you’ll be the first to know.”

“No problem at all.”

“So, where will Karrie be moved to?”

“Well, I’d like to have it similar to the way you and Jim are. A desk in the front of the office, that kind of thing.”

“I think I can do that. When you have time, we can go look at the two offices. Just tell me what you want, and I can sketch it for you.”

“I knew you’d help me with this.”

“Of course, I will. Besides, I like this kind of thing.”

Bill got out of his chair and walked over to her. He touched her hand. “I’d like to work with you on this if you don’t mind? I’d like to see how your mind works,” he smiled.

“I don’t mind. You’re the boss,” Alex got up to leave.

“Alex, wait,” Bill stopped her.

“Yes?”

“Thank you, very much. I really appreciate it.”

“Not a problem, Bill. Just come and get me when you want to look at the offices.”

Alex left his office. She headed outside for a quick smoke. Greg came up from behind her. “Hey, Alex. How are you doing?”

“Not bad. Just needed some air. How do you really like your new job?”

“I like it, fine. It will be a little easier when we hire a new person.”

“I know. I have the job posted in both the papers and internally. I only got two résumés so far but nothing worth noting.”

“Well, let me know if you get something.”

“I will. I’ll talk to you later,” she headed back to her office.

She finished out her day and she and Jim headed back to her apartment. She dropped down on the sofa. “Boy, am I tired.”

“Too tired to go out for a ride?”

“What did you have in mind?” she asked.

“Well, I thought we’d go out to eat and then I have a surprise for you.”

“Another surprise? You and your surprises,” she smiled. “Let me change my clothes first.”

“Anything you say, boss,” Jim smiled.

She gave him back a look that said, ‘very funny.’ She went into her bedroom and changed her clothes. A little while later, she came out, and Jim had already changed his clothes.

“Wow, you look great. Why so formal?” Alex asked. Jim was dressed in a nice suit and tie. “I guess I need to change again. Be right back.” She walked out of the bedroom, wearing a small black dress.

“You clean up pretty nice,” he said. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. “No, really, you’re beautiful.”

“Thanks. I’m guessing that we are taking my car,” Alex said.

“Not quite,” Jim took her arm and led her down stairs. Out front of the building was a brand new black jaguar. “I got this for myself. It’s getting a little too cold for me to keep riding my bike.”

He opened the car door for her and helped her in. He got behind the wheel and drove out of the parking lot. He headed for Afton. “I wanted to take you some where special,” he pulled in front of a florist shop. “But first, hold on, I’ll be right back,” he got out of the car and went into the florist shop. He came out carrying one single red rose. “For you.”

She took the rose and rubbed it gently under her nose, taking in the wonderful scent that it emitted. “Thank

you so much.”

Jim drove a few more blocks and then pulled into a parking lot of a large building.

“Is this a warehouse?” she asked.

“Just wait. You’ll see,” Jim got out of the car and went around to open her door. He took her hand and led her to the entrance.

When they walked in, she realized this was a warehouse, and inside was an extremely large room. She followed him across the room and into another room.

She smiled when she saw the surprise that was waiting for her. The room was filled with red roses. In the center of the room, was a table that was set up with a tablecloth, candles, and dishes. Jim snapped his fingers and two waiters appeared with carts of food.

Jim took Alex’s hand and brought her over to the table. He held her chair while she sat down. He sat down across from her at the table and touched her hand. “Alex, this is just part one,” he smiled.

Alex’s heart was beating with excitement. “I can’t believe you did this for me. Where are we, anyway?”

“This is just an old warehouse that my father owned. It hasn’t been used in years.”

“It’s actually kind of nice here,” Alex said, looking around.

Jim motioned to the waiters to serve the food. “I hope you like Italian. I may be Irish, but I love Italian food.”

“I love it, too,” Alex took a bite of her chicken Marsala. “This is delicious.”

Jim watched her as they ate their dinner. He poured them each a glass of wine and they sipped it slowly.

When they finished eating, he stood up and took her hand. “Alex, may I have this dance?”

“Yes, you may.” As soon as she stood up, slow music started to play. Jim held her in his arms tightly as they danced together. She could feel his breath on her neck and the warmth made her feel so safe and so loved. She knew that she was falling in love with him, but she was too afraid to tell him. He had been so wonderful to her.

After they danced, Jim kissed her tenderly. “That was part two. Now, on to part three.” He took her hand, and they went back to the car. He drove back toward Sars Springs. Soon, he pulled over to the side of the road. “From this point on, I need you to be blindfolded,” he took out a scarf and wrapped it over her eyes.

“Jim, what are you doing?”

“Alex, trust me.”

“I do trust you.” She was right, she really did trust him.

He drove for a while and then the car stopped. Jim got out of the car and helped Alex out. He slowly removed the scarf from her eyes. There they were, standing in front of her completed, new house.

“It’s finished. I wanted to surprise you,” Jim kissed her cheek.

“Oh, Jim, it’s just beautiful. Is it really my house?”

“Yes, it is. Come on inside. Let me show you your new home,” Jim helped her in the house. She walked around, and each room was exactly like her sketches.

“This is part three,” he said. He led her into the family room. There was a fire already in the fireplace and a blanket on the floor. In the corner of the room, was a bucket with champagne chilling on ice. He took her hand and led her to the blanket on the floor.

They sat down, and Jim poured them each a glass of champagne. “To you, Alex. May you only have happy memories here.” They clicked glasses.

She looked into his eyes and touched his face.

“Alex, this weekend, we’ll move you in here. Then it’ll be all yours,” Jim took a sip from his glass.

“I don’t know how to thank you. When did they finish? This looks great.”

“I got a call at work yesterday. They were finishing up. So, I had a few friends of mine take care of the rest of the stuff and here we are.”

Alex couldn’t get over how quickly everything was done and how it was so perfect. She watched Jim as he watched her. “Jim,” she took his hand. “You’ve been by my side for such a long time. I know that I have taken you away from your regular life. I’m sorry for all of the sacrifices that you’ve made for me.”

“Alex, I did these things because I wanted to. I love that you’re a part of my life. My regular life was full of guilt and regret. Alex,” he paused. “I’m in love with you. I don’t know how you feel about me, but I’m totally and whole-heartedly in love with you.”

“Jim, I’m definitely falling in love with you. I thought at first my feelings for you were blind because of the fact that you saved me, but the more I’m with you, the more I don’t want to be without you.”

He held her face and kissed her tenderly. “I do love you,” he kissed her again.

“Jim, make love to me,” she whispered.

“Are you sure?” he asked softly.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything. Please make love to me,” she whispered.

“You don’t know how long I have wanted to hear those words,” he smiled. He kissed her softly on her mouth. He moved his kisses to her neck, and she melted in his arms. He ran his hands down her shoulders, causing her straps to fall down her arms. He unzipped the back of her dress and slid it off her.

She carefully unbuttoned his shirt and used her hands to slip it off his arms. She caressed his chest and ran her fingers over his tattoo. She kissed his chest and ran her hands down his back.

He lay her down on the blanket and leaned over her. He ran his hand softly over her body, careful not to touch the faded bruise on her chest. He kissed her stomach gently, while running his hands down her inner legs. “You’re so soft,” he whispered.

She reached down and touched his face to bring him up to her mouth. She kissed him long and gently. She rolled him over and lay on top of him. She kissed his neck and moved down to his chest.

She unbuckled his belt and slid it off. Then she unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. She carefully pulled them down off his legs and then tossed them in the corner. She removed his boxers and then lay on top of him again, kissing his face.

He held her tightly and rolled her over. Slowly and tenderly, he made love to her. He was so perfect in every way. He made her feel so loved and she loved him.

Yes, she loved him.

They held each other and watched the flames in the fireplace. “You know, I really meant what I said,” Jim spoke. “I really do love you.”

“I’m falling in love with you. I really don’t want you to leave. I want you to stay with me.”

“I don’t want to leave either, but I want to take this one day at a time. I’m a little afraid of my feelings.”

“I know, I’m afraid, too. It took me a while to admit it to myself that I’m falling in love with you.”

“I want to be with you, Alex. But, I don’t want us to lose what we have right now.”

“I hope that us making love doesn’t change anything. I’ve wanted to do this for so long. But, you know what? You were right. You said that when we made love, it had to be and would be perfect and it was.”

He kissed her. “Yes, it was perfect.”

“Jim, would you consider moving in with me? I mean, you can keep your house, if that’s what you want. I have plenty of room here. You could even have your own room, if you didn’t want to share mine.”

“I would like that. We actually have been living together for a while. I can move my stuff in one of the rooms upstairs. But, Angel, I would love to share your bed with you.”

“I’d like that, too,” she held him tightly. “So, how were we compared to your fantasies?” she laughed a little.

He looked at her and smiled. “Nothing compares to the real thing, and with you, baby, it’s always the real thing.”

She snuggled close to him. “Everything about you is sexy and very intense, but so loving and gentle. I love you.”

“You really are my angel, you know that?” he kissed her softly.

Chapter Fourteen

Alex looked forward to Saturday. She couldn't wait until she had enough time to move her things into her new home. Actually, she knew it as their new home. She was so happy. Even with the fear of the strange man, she was happy and very happy with Jim.

She knew that there was one important thing that she had to do. She had to visit Matthew. On Friday, she told Bill that she was going to leave early because she had something important to do.

"Jim, I need to go see Matthew," she said to him while they ate lunch on the terrace of the office building.

"I understand. Are you going alone?"

"I'd actually like it if you came with me," she said. "If you don't want to, I'd understand."

"I would go with you, but don't you think it's something you should do by yourself?"

"I really would like you to come. I want to show him that we are happy. I know that's what he would have wanted for me."

"I'll go with you. But, if you need time with him by yourself, just let me know and I'll wait in the car."

"OK. I promise. I told Bill that I was leaving at three o'clock today."

"Alex, are you OK with everything?"

"Like what?"

"Well, we haven't, um, well, you know, since Monday night. You've been kinda quiet at home and I was worried about you."

"I'm still a little scared. We haven't had any signs of the stranger in the past few days. I'm also a little nervous because I have all these feelings for you. The last person I loved, truly loved, was Matthew."

He touched her hand. "I know. I haven't loved anyone since Janet. I used to blame myself for her dying, but when I met you, I found something. Not just that I found you, but I found something in myself."

"I tried to start a new life when I first got the supervisor job. I met Randy and it was so quick. And, I knew that he was married, but even he couldn't take the pain away. When Greg showed up out of nowhere, he brought back all the memories of that horrible night ... he brought back the nightmares. I couldn't shake them, but I haven't had one nightmare since I've been with you."

"Alex, we've never talked about either of our pasts very much. I don't like to dredge up all that baggage, but I think if we're going to move forward, we may need to do that."

"I've wanted to tell you everything. I was just afraid. I mean, you know basically what happened, but you really don't know everything I went through."

"I want to really know. I also have some things that I need to share with you."

Alex looked around and noticed that everyone had gone back to work. "We should get back to work but ..."

"But, what?"

"I'd like to finish this conversation tonight, if that's OK?"

"When we get home tonight, we'll sit down and talk," Jim agreed.

"Good, because tomorrow we'll be in our new home and I want us to start fresh and have only happy memories together," she smiled. They both stood up and went upstairs to their office.

An hour later, Bill knocked on Alex's door. "Got a minute?"

"Sure, I'm not leaving for another hour."

He sat down in the chair. Alex suddenly smelled something strange. It smelled like mothballs. She covered her nose.

“Sorry, I took my sweaters out of storage, still smells,” Bill said.

“That’s OK.” The smell made her very uncomfortable. “Did you need something?”

“Yes, the construction is going to start on the offices on Monday and will take about two weeks to finish. Steven Welch is going to be here next week and needs to use my office. Can I bunk in here with you?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, do you mind if we share your office for that week? I’ll just use the table over in the corner and set up my laptop.”

“I guess, as long as you don’t wear that sweater.”

“Thanks, Alex. I knew you’d come through for me,” he quickly got up and left the room.

Alex, suddenly, felt sick to her stomach, she ran out of the office and down the hall to the women’s room. She started throwing up. She cleaned herself up, then went, and got Jim. “Can you get some air freshener for my office? I can’t go in there,” she was shaking. “That smell. That mothball odor. It smelled like him.”

He put his arm around her. “Are you going to be OK?”

“Yes, please get rid of that smell for me,” she cried.

Jim went down the hall to the maintenance closet and got some air freshener out. He quickly sprayed Alex’s office. “Is that better?”

She slowly went near the door. “Yes, it’s much better. Thanks,” Jim followed her into her office and closed the door.

“Alex, what happened?”

“Bill. Bill had that smell on him. He said his sweaters were in storage and that they still smelled ... but that smell. The man, he had that same smell. I even could smell it on the elevator the night the apartment was broken into.”

“Alex, did you ever send the prints to Mike and Mark?”

“No, I didn’t get around to it. Randy told me how to do it, but I don’t know where to get powdered ink.”

“Why don’t you talk to Terry, that cop who helped you? You should’ve called him about what happened at the apartment.”

“I know, I know. Jim, I don’t know what to do. How can we start fresh when we have a mad man looming in the shadows?”

“That’s why I had the new security system put in our house,” he smiled. “You know, I really like the sound of it.”

She smiled. “So, do I. Maybe I’ll call Terry this weekend or something once we get settled into the house. The pen is in the safe that was installed in our new bedroom yesterday.”

“Alex, you’re right. We should get back to figuring out who Bill really is. I want, I mean, I need to make sure that he is safe. If it’s not Bill who wants to hurt you, then we need to find out who it is before it’s too late.”

“I’ll call Terry today.”

“Good,” Jim and Alex went back to work. Alex picked up the phone and called the police department to talk with Terry. Terry told her to bring the pen in and he would take care of everything for her, he’d even send the information to Mike and Mark.

Alex went out to have a smoke after her phone call and Randy was sitting outside. Alex pretended, at first, that he wasn’t there. Randy walked over to her. “Hi, Lady. How have you been?”

“I’m OK. How’s your leg doing?” Alex asked politely.

“Not too bad, I only need to use this thing one more day.”

“I talked with Terry a few minutes ago. I guess I followed your advice. I’m giving him the pen with print on it. I need to find out who Bill really is, and I need to know if he is the one trying to kill me.”

“Alex, I didn’t want to tell you this, but I think that I should. It’s not just you that’s in danger. Anyone that’s close to you is in danger.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“No, I don’t. I was almost killed, and Leon was killed. Don’t you think that’s strange? I mean we were on our way to see you.”

“How would anyone know that? it’s a horrible thing that happened to you and especially Leon, but how would anyone know that you were coming to see me?”

“It’s just speculation.”

“You sound just like a cop.”

“I’m a cop, Lady.”

“Randy, I don’t want to argue with you. Yes, we had a lot of fun together, but now it’s over. You have your life and I have mine.”

“You can think what you want, Alex. I want you to know that your life and probably Jim’s life is in danger.”

“We know that. Boy, do we know that. I thank you for being concerned, but we can take care of ourselves, together.”

“What do you mean together?”

“Jim and I are moving in together. My new house is our new house.”

“You can’t ...”

“Yes, we can. I’ll see you later,” she put her cigarette out and went back to work.

“Alex, wait,” Randy pleaded, but it was too late, Alex had already entered the building.

When Alex got back to her office, she asked Jim to come inside. “Jim, it’s almost two-thirty, will you do me a favor and run over to the house and get that pen?”

“Sure, no problem. Why now, though?”

“I want to drop it off at the police station before we go to the cemetery. I already talked with Terry, and he said he’d take care of it.”

“I’ll be right back. Don’t worry, Alex. It’ll be OK,” Jim left the office.

Alex sat back and started going through some papers. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Alex looked up “Yes?”

Karrie stood in the doorway. “Alex, this package was left downstairs for you, so, I thought I’d bring it up to you.”

“Oh, thanks. Karrie, you can come in if you want,” Alex said.

“I guess I could sit for a moment,” Karrie said hesitantly.

“It’s been a while since we’ve really talked. How are you doing, honestly?”

“I’m OK. This new job is a bit strange, but overall, Bill is treating me just fine. Just not as fine as he treats you.”

“Karrie, are you jealous of me?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

“You have everything going for you and men are just falling at your feet. You’re so pretty and even when

you looked horrible, you were still pretty.”

“Karrie, did I ever do anything to hurt you? If I did, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not what you did. You just seem to have everything.”

“Karrie, let me tell you a secret. Will you close the door first?” Karrie got up and closed the door and Alex continued. “My life is far from perfect. Bill’s whatever for me is very uncomfortable, and someone is trying to kill me. I don’t think that’s perfect.”

“I didn’t realize. I’m sorry, but you also have three great men wanting you, Jim, Randy, and Greg.”

“Karrie, Greg and I are just friends and have been for a very long time. Randy and I just didn’t work out. He’s married, and he needs realize that. Jim and I are together, but we, too, are still learning about each other.”

“Alex, I’m glad that you shared with me.”

“So, am I. I don’t have too many female friends. It’s nice to share. Speaking of sharing, what’s going on with you and Joe?”

“He’s OK, but he’s not very exciting. When we’re alone, all he does is talk about work.”

“You should never need to settle. There are a lot of interesting and exciting men in this world. You just need to find him.”

“I guess, but I don’t really do anything except work.”

“I know. I’m really the same way. I like being at home when I’m not at work. Sometimes I go out for a long drive, but other than that, I’d just assume stay at home. There are men who work here that have to be more interesting than Joe is. All you have to do is talk to them, ask them out for a drink or whatever. You never know what will happen.”

“Is that how it happened for you and Jim?”

“It was strange. I invited him over my house just to talk. Ever since then, we’ve been together. Granted, he did save my life, but the last few weeks together, we’ve really gotten to know each other.”

“That’s good. Oh, wow, I had better get back to work. We should talk more often,” Karrie said, as she got up.

“I agree. I’ll talk to you probably Monday. Oh, by the way, Karrie, Jim and I are moving into our new house this weekend. we’ll probably have a housewarming party; would you like to come?”

“I’d love to. Just let me know when and where,” Karrie left the office and Jim walked in.

“What did she want?” Jim asked

“Oh, she had to deliver this package and we just talked for a little while,” Alex stood up and started to open the package. “Did you get the pen?”

“Yeah, here it is,” Jim handed her the plastic bag.

“Good,” she took the bag and set it on the table. She continued opening the package. “Oh, my god!” She stared inside the box.

Jim ran over and looked in the box. “Alex, what is it?”

“It’s my book of sonnets. I keep it on my bookshelf in the apartment,” she picked up the book and carefully leafed through the pages. The picture of her, Matthew, Greg, Amanda, John, and Mary were still in the book, except that there was writing at the bottom of the picture. Printed across the bottom in black marker were the words ALWAYS REMEMBER WHAT BROUGHT US TOGETHER!

Jim looked in the box to see if there was anything else. He riffled through the tissue paper until he found a white rose. He picked it up and looked at Alex. “Alex, what’s the significance of the white rose? These have been everywhere.”

“I’m not sure. The only time before this that I ever got white roses was from Matthew,” she smiled.

“Whenever he was sorry about something, he’d give me a bouquet of red roses, with one white one in the center. That was for apologies. For other occasions, it was just red roses.”

“Alex, I don’t know who this person is, but it’s getting really scary. We should take the book and picture with us to Terry at the police station.”

“I agree. Why don’t we get going now?”

“Let me get my stuff.”

Alex put everything back in the box. She picked up the box and the bag with the pen and headed out of her office. Jim and Alex walked out of the building and to her car. Jim got in the driver’s seat, and they drove off to the Middleburg/Sars Springs police station.

Jim pulled in the parking lot and the two of them headed inside to meet with Terry.

They waited until Terry came out. “Hi, Alex, Jim. How are you doing?”

“Um, Terry, we are still having a problem with this man. I didn’t say anything before, but he got into my apartment and took some of my things. He mailed this package to my office,” she handed the package to him.

“Do you also have the pen?” Terry asked, as he took the package.

“Yes. Oh, Terry, What if there’s other prints on that? I don’t know if anyone else touched it before Bill did,” she handed him the bag.

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll just identify all of them and see what we get,” Terry said.

“Thanks, Terry,” Alex said.

“Not a problem. I can run these tonight and give you a call later. I’ll also send the results to Mike Dix. He’s taking the case from his brother.”

Jim shook Terry’s hand. “We really appreciate this.”

“Alex, just be careful. We don’t know what kind of man this person is. Be very careful,” Terry said, as he walked down the hall.

Alex and Jim headed back to their car. Alex got in the driver’s seat this time and drove to the cemetery. She pulled in front of the cemetery, and they got out of the car.

“Why didn’t you just drive in?” Jim asked.

“I like the walk,” she took his hand and led him to Matthew’s grave. When they arrive, she started to cry. “No. No,” On Matthew’s headstone was a bouquet of red roses with one white rose in the middle of the bouquet. A note was attached to the flowers that said I’m Sorry. “What’s this, some kind of joke? Now, he’s desecrating Matthew’s grave. Who would play such a horrible trick like this? They can’t just leave me alone, they need to disturb Matthew,” Alex picked up the bouquet and threw it.

Jim put his arm around her. “It’s OK, Angel. The flowers are gone. Why don’t you talk to Matthew? I’ll go back to the car and wait for you,” Jim kissed her cheek and headed to the car.

Alex sat down and touched the headstone. “Matthew, I’m sorry. You don’t deserve to be put in this game of his. I wanted to come here to tell you that I’ll never stop loving you and that I have fallen in love with Jim. I really love him, but I’ll never forget you,” tears ran down her face.

“Well, isn’t that touching?” she heard a voice say.

She looked around and Jim was standing by the car watching her. “Who said that?”

“Alexis, Alexis, I’m watching you. It will never be over. I’ll have you. Don’t you know that I’m always here? Your new boy toy will not be around much longer. You belong to me.”

“Where are you?” Alex stood up and looked around, but she couldn’t see anything in the trees.

Jim saw Alex looking around and ran toward her. Suddenly a man, dressed in all black and a ski mask, ran out of the bushes. He pushed Alex and knocked her to the ground. He jumped on top of her and started licking

her face. He tried to force his hands down her pants, but when he heard Jim's running footsteps getting closer, he ran away.

Jim got to Alex and helped her up. "Are you OK?"

"Yes, he didn't hurt me too much. He said, he said that you wouldn't be around much longer. I think he is going to try and kill you."

"Alex, don't worry about me. I'm more worried about you."

"Jim, I do worry about you. Matthew died because he was trying to protect me, and I don't want the same thing to happen to you."

"Let's go home. It's the last night in the apartment. Tomorrow we'll be in our new house with a really great security system," he wrapped his arms around her and led her back to the car. He drove them to the apartment.

When they got in there was a message from Terry to call him and that he already sent the results to Mike, and the Pennsylvania State police.

Alex called Terry at the police station, but he was out on patrol. She just left a message for him to call her back. Jim went in the kitchen and fixed them something to eat, while Alex finished packing the last of the boxes.

Jim came out and let her know that dinner was ready. Alex and Jim went in the kitchen to eat. "This is good, babe," Alex said, as she took a bite of her sandwich.

"Sorry, that it's just sandwiches, but we haven't gone shopping in a while."

"I know. We'll go shopping after the move. This is good."

"Alex, at lunch, we started talking about our pasts. I think that we should continue the conversation. Who knows? When you tell me about it, you may remember something or get an idea of who this monster is."

"I know," she took another bite of her sandwich. "Well, Matthew and I got married 10 years ago," she smiled. "It was on our wedding day that he presented me with the A&M Gift shop. It was always a dream to own a business and he made that come true for me. He was totally my equal partner, in everything. He was still an engineer, but he liked helping me on weekends at the shop," she paused. "A few years later, we met Greg and his wife, Amanda. They were great people. They joined our circle of friends that we had with John and Mary Reardon. I grew up with both of them. I miss them so much," Alex wiped the oncoming tears from her eyes.

Jim reached over and touched her hand. "It's OK, Angel. Take your time."

She took a deep breath. "About four years ago, the six of us went on a camping trip, we had been planning it for a few weeks. Matthew had just turned 40. The first night of camping was when it all happened. Greg and Amanda had a fight in the woods. Matthew and I had gone for a walk and when we got back, Amanda had already killed John and Mary. She tried to stab me, but Matthew ..." She took another deep breath, and then lit a cigarette. "But Matthew pushed me out of the way, and she stabbed him. When I was holding Matthew as he died, she stabbed me in the back. I don't remember anything after Matthew died. He told me that he loved me and then he was gone," she sobbed. "I really don't remember. I was told that I picked up a cast iron pan that was on the fire and kept hitting her until she died."

"Alex, did you kill her?"

"I don't remember. But, the police said and even Greg told me that he watched me kill her. But, no, I don't remember."

"Alex, what happened to you?"

"I was in the hospital for about a week. I had emergency surgery and the doctors were able to repair all of the damage, except that I can never have children."

“Oh, Alex. I didn’t know. I’ve just seen the scar. I didn’t realize.”

“If you ever want to have children, it can’t be with me.”

“Alex, I have nothing against children, but I would rather spend my life with you than anyone else.”

“I love you,” she kissed him and then she continued her story. “At the hospital, I was arrested for Amanda’s murder. They were able to deduce that she killed John, Mary, and Matthew. But, since she was hit so many times, even after she was dead, they arrested me for manslaughter. In the meantime, Greg decided to sue my estate, so, the court froze all my assets. I couldn’t even be bailed out. I just sat in the county jail.”

“Alex, how long were you in jail?”

“Six months. During that time, I was able to add Emily to the partnership of the store. That way it could remain open. She couldn’t touch Matthew’s or my part of the profits, but she could touch her own. She hired Mark and Mike Dix to investigate, but they couldn’t find out any more than the police did. They were hoping for a witness or something.”

“You must have been scared.”

“I went through a lot. I had to grieve for Matthew, John, and Mary in a cell. I spent my first Christmas without Matthew in that cell. The only outside contact I had was with my lawyers, Jason and John Abrams, and of course, Emily. I even had a guard posted at my cell 24 hours a day.”

“Why would they do that to you?”

“My case became national news. I guess you could say I was famous. The heiress to the ‘Carpet Saver Estate’ was arrested for manslaughter. Greg didn’t help much by suing my estate, I just told my attorney to settle. I didn’t care about the money. I didn’t care about much at that point.”

“I don’t know how you survived. You’re so strong.”

“The guard, Walter, they posted on me was very civil to me. He treated me like a person. I read a lot while I was in there. He provided me all types of books to read. He even comforted me when I needed it.”

“What do you mean?”

“It happened just one night. I was in my cell crying, but I tried to not let on. He walked into my cell and put his arm around me. I know that it shouldn’t happen, but it did. We had sex.”

“Alex, did you know that’s considered rape? As a prisoner, you can’t consent to sex, especially from a guard.”

“I know. But, as a woman, I consented. After that, we swore to each other that it would never happen again, and we would not tell anyone about it. A few weeks later, the trial started. It lasted about three weeks. My lawyers were really good. John and Jason presented a really good case and the jury found me not guilty. They considered what I did ... self-defense.”

“But you don’t, do you?”

“I—I, how do you know that?”

“Because, I know you. You blame yourself for everything that happened. From where I sit, I agree with the jury. But, Alex, I don’t think that you killed her. I don’t know how, but I think that if you killed someone, you’d remember.”

“I’m not sure about that. I have never been able to prove otherwise, and Greg, he saw the whole thing. Jim, do you still blame yourself for Janet’s death?”

“I used to. She died 10 years ago, and I blamed myself for sending her to the store for me. I loved her so much. I know that she’d want me to be happy. It’s been so long since I’ve been happy. I’m very happy with you.”

“I’m happy with you, too. I just want to get this madman out of our lives so that we can be together, like we

are supposed to be.”

“So, do I. Alex, are you sure that you have no idea who he is?”

“I wish I did. If I knew who it was, I could try to do something about it. Not knowing makes me feel like a sitting duck.”

“Did you ever think that it could be Bill or Greg?”

“Those thoughts have crossed my mind. Today, when Bill smelled like the mothballs and just the way that Greg has been acting. I don’t know if they would hurt me. I don’t know who Bill really is, but I do know who Greg is. I don’t think he could hurt me.”

“Sometimes when love isn’t returned, it can turn into obsession.”

“Sounds like a voice of experience.”

“I have had my own problems with it, but nothing this bad.”

“What happened, if I may ask?”

“It was really nothing, about five years ago, this woman had a thing for me. She followed me around and left her underwear in my room, on my front porch, even on my bike. You name it, she left it there. She was eventually put in a mental ward, she was psycho.”

“Sounds really weird,” Alex stood up from the kitchen table and took Jim’s hand. “Come with me,” she smiled. She led him into the bedroom. They sat on the bed. “This is our last night here in the apartment and I want to celebrate our new life together,” she touched his face. “I’m sorry that we haven’t made love here before, but our first night together, at the house was perfect and I’m kinda glad that we waited. Will you make love to me, right now?”

“Angel,” Jim said, as he ran his fingers through her hair. “You never need to ask, all you need to do is show me,” he started kissing her and together they lay down on the bed. He started taking her shirt off.

Suddenly, there was a banging on the door. “ALEX! ALEX! LET ME IN,” it was Randy’s voice.

Alex and Jim sat up quickly. “What the hell does he want?” Jim asked.

“We better go find out or he’ll never leave.” They got up off the bed and went to the door. Alex was buttoning her shirt as she opened the door. “Randy, what do you want?”

“It’s all your damn fault. Terry was killed tonight.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I told you. I told you that you would get everyone killed.”

“Randy, come inside. What happened?” Jim said.

Randy looked at Alex buttoning. “Very nice,” he said sarcastically. “You and your new love toy have gotten another one of my friends killed.”

“Just tell us what happened to Terry,” Alex said.

“He was out on patrol. A truck came out of nowhere and hit his squad car. Once the car crashed, whoever it was, got out, and shot Terry with his own gun. His own gun! Can you believe it?”

“Oh, my god. Randy, I’m so sorry.”

“I just thought that you should know. Why don’t you just go back to Pennsylvania! No one is safe with you around. I’m glad that I’m rid of you.”

“Randy, what are you saying? You think this is my fault?”

Randy started to cry. “No, Lady. I don’t. I still love you. I know that it’s not your fault. Someday, when you’re bored with Junior here, you’ll come back to me. You need to be careful. This person, whoever he is, is going around killing cops. Did you see Terry today?”

“Yes, we did,” Jim said. “He was looking into the prints for us.”

“Well, I’m sorry that I bothered you two. Lady, I’ll be waiting for you. I do love you. Oh, by the way, I’m finally getting a divorce.”

“Randy, what do you want? Did you really here to tell us about Terry or did you want to try and get me back?”

“Both,” Randy smiled and walked out the door.

Jim and Alex sat down on the sofa. Alex started to cry. “Maybe he’s right. Someone is killing cops because of me.”

“It’s not your fault, Angel. But, I think that you should call Mike Dix and let him know what’s going on.”

“You’re right. I’ll call him right now,” Alex picked up the phone. “Mike, this is Alexis. Did you get the information sent from the Middleburg PD?”

“Yes, the results aren’t clear though. One of the prints is a match to a murder case, but there’s no more information on that one. I’m waiting to hear back from the state police. The other print doesn’t have a match yet. I can only tell you that neither print matches the William Weaver that’s from New Jersey. I’m going to have it run through a few more databases.”

“Mike, Terry, the officer that sent you that stuff, was killed tonight. I think it was related to that information that he sent you. Please be careful.”

“Are you serious? I’ll be OK, Alexis. I’ll call you when I get more information. You need to take care of yourself.”

“We will. Jim and I are moving to our new place tomorrow. The phone number will be the same, but if you can’t get a hold of me on my home number, I’ll have my cell phone on. So, you can use that number.”

“No, problem. I’ll talk to you soon,” Alex hung up the phone. She sat next to Jim and put her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her.

“Come on, babe. Let’s just get some sleep. We have a long day tomorrow,” Jim picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. They lie down on the bed and fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Chapter Fifteen

At 5:30 AM, the alarm sounded. Jim reached for the clock and hit the button. He rolled over and kissed Alex. "Come on, sleepy head. The movers will be here in an hour."

Alex snuggled deep into her blankets. "Are you sure it's morning?" she yawned.

"Yes, Angel. We should get up and get dressed before they get here."

"Oh, all right. I'm getting up," she said, as she still laid there.

Jim got out of bed and went to the kitchen to put on the coffee. While the coffee was brewing, he went into the bathroom to take a shower. He walked into the bedroom with just his towel on and realized that Alex had fallen back to sleep. He leaned over her and let the water from his body drip on her. She opened one eye.

"You're getting me all wet," she said dreamily.

He started kissing her. "Come on, Angel. We should really get dressed."

She reached up, grabbed his towel, and whipped it off him. "Join me. We have time," she kissed his chest. Jim got under the blankets with her while he continued to kiss her.

"Are you sure we have time?" he whispered, as he kissed her.

"They can wait. I cannot," she said.

He kissed her neck and moved to her chest. Then he started to make love to her. She melted into his arms as he lay on top of her. She kissed him and ran her hands over his wet body.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," Jim said, as he rolled on to his back. "I really do love you and if this is any indication of our future mornings together ..." he smiled.

"You never know. I just couldn't resist your warm, wet body," she smiled. "Now, it's my turn for a shower," she got out of bed and started the water in the bathroom. When she got in the shower, Jim soon joined her.

"I needed another one," he said.

She kissed him as she washed him all over. He then washed her. When they got out of the shower, they put on their robes and went into the kitchen for their coffee.

She looked at Jim sitting across the table from her. She was so in love with him, and the best part was that she could tell him. She just wished that everything else were working out this well.

Jim looked at the clock. "It's 6:15. We better get dressed," he said, as he stood up. "The movers will be here soon."

They went into the bedroom and got dressed. Alex then removed all the bedding from the bed and packed it in boxes. She looked around the room to make sure that she didn't miss packing anything. She took the boxes out of the closet and set them on the floor. Jim had gone into the kitchen to pack the rest the items that were left.

Soon, there was a knock on the door. Jim answered it. "Hi, I'm with Quality Movers. We're here to help you move."

"Yes, right this way. Everything goes; all of the boxes and the furniture. Once you get the van packed up, you can follow me to the house."

"I'll be right back with my partner," the man said, as he walked toward the elevator.

Alex came out of the bedroom. "Was that the moving guy?"

"Yeah, he'll be right back. He went to get his partner. Alex, are you sure you'll be all right when I take them to the house?"

“Yes. I’ll be OK. There are just a few boxes that I want to take in my car. Once everything is out, I’ll do a last sweep of the apartment and then turn in my key downstairs.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Yes, I’ll be OK. I won’t be here alone too long. Don’t worry about me.”

“OK, boss. I won’t argue with you.”

Alex just shook her head. She knew he was teasing her again.

Within a few hours, the movers had everything packed in the moving van. Jim kissed Alex good-bye as he left to take them to the new house. Alex walked around the apartment to do a last sweep. She found a couple odds and ends in the apartment, so, she added them to the boxes she had left. Alex picked up two boxes and headed for the elevator.

Bill was leaving his apartment at the same time. “Need some help?” he asked.

“That would be great. I wanted to take these boxes myself,” she said. “Can you help me with the other six that I have?”

“Sure thing.” They walked back to the apartment and Bill took a few boxes, then they headed down to Alex’s car.

They went back up and grabbed the last of the boxes to bring to the car. Alex went back up to the apartment and Bill followed.

“So, finally getting your own place, huh?” Bill asked.

“It feels really good to own my very own house,” she said.

“I bet it does. Well, Alex, I’m very happy for you. You seemed to have your life under control. There has been something that I’ve wanted to share with you, but it’s not important anymore,” Bill said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I just want you to know everything will work out for the best,” Bill touched her hand. “Alex, you’ll get everything you deserve,” he leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. “Don’t take offense by that, I would never hurt you,” he winked at her and then left the apartment. “See you Monday morning. Don’t forget, this week we’re sharing your office,” he yelled from down the hall.

Alex wiped her mouth off with her hand. She looked around the apartment one more time and then she left out the door. She locked it behind her and headed downstairs to the office.

She turned in her key and gave them a check for next month’s rent. “Here, just in case you don’t rent it by next month,” she said.

She got in her car and drove to her new house. As she was driving, she heard sirens behind her. She looked up in her rearview mirror and saw a police car, so she pulled over to the side of the road. The officer got out and walked over to the passenger side of the car. He opened the door and sat down. It was Terry.

“Terry?” Alex was in shock. “Randy told me that you were killed last night.”

“I don’t know what he was thinking. There was a police officer killed last night, but it wasn’t me. I’m beginning to wonder about Randy lately. Ever since his accident, he has been paranoid. Did you get my message?”

“Yes, but when I called you, I was told that you were on patrol.”

“I had to work a double shift yesterday and one again today.”

“Why would Randy lie to me?”

“I don’t know. But, Alex, you’re in danger.”

“I know, and I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t even know who is after me.”

“All I can tell you is that it’s one of the men whose prints are on the pen. I had the book analyzed and it

matched one of the prints.”

“Which one?”

“The one that matches the unknown print in an old murder case.”

“Terry, you could be in danger, too.”

“I know. That’s why I pulled you over. I watched your apartment last night to make sure that you were OK. Once you left, I figured I’d wait until you were on a deserted road, so I could pull you over. It’s probably not a good idea that we’re seen together.”

“I understand. Where do we go from here?”

“Well, I have already gotten my patrol area switched to your neighborhood. I’ll call you from my cell phone to yours when I have any information. Alex, there were actually three prints on the pen. One of them was identified as Jim’s.”

“Is that significant? He’s the one that got the pens for me.”

“I don’t think so. He knew you were running these, so, I think that he wanted us to run his. Of course, his came up clean.”

“He wanted me to know that I could trust him.”

“I think you’re right. Alex, however, the next time we get together, we should meet alone.”

“Why? I have nothing to hide from Jim.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but we should just meet without him. If you care to share the information with him later, then go ahead and do so. I better get going. I’ll talk to you later,” Terry got out of the car and headed for his patrol car.

Alex pulled on to the road and continued to her new house. She pulled into the driveway and noticed that the moving van was still being unloaded. She walked into the house, but Jim was nowhere to be found.

“Where’s Jim?” Alex asked one of the movers.

“Oh, he said he would be back soon.”

“Oh, thanks,” Alex was wondering why he wasn’t there. Someone should be there while the movers were still there. She went into the living room and noticed that all of the furniture had been set up already. All that was left to do was unpack the boxes.

She walked around and admired her new house. When she went into the family room, there was Randy sitting on the sofa. He looked up when she walked in. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I—I needed to talk to you. So, I stopped by. Jim asked me to stay and keep an eye on the movers so that he could run an errand.”

“Randy, why’d you lie to me about Terry?”

“How did you know?”

“I just talked with Terry. Why did you tell me Terry was killed? It wasn’t Terry at all.”

“I wanted to ...”

“Randy, just tell me the truth, please.”

“OK. I wanted to scare you, scare you into coming back to me.”

“How would Terry dying make me come back to you?”

“You would need more protection than Jim could give you. I know. I didn’t think it all the way through.”

“Randy,” she sat down in the chair. “We have got to talk about this.”

“Lady, I’m sorry. I really am. You’re so important to me. I’ve missed you so much. I love you. You need to know that. I left my wife for you.”

“No, Randy, don’t pull that one on me. If you really left your wife, it had to have been for you, not me. I

still care about you. You and I had had fun together. But, that's all it was."

"The sex was good, too, don't you remember?"

"Yes, Randy the sex was good, but it was just sex. Randy, I don't want to lose you as my friend, but if you can't handle it, then you should just leave. I'm in love with Jim and he loves me. We don't have sex, we make love."

"Thanks, a lot," he said sarcastically and very hurt.

"I don't want to hurt you. I'm sorry if I hurt you. This is just how things are now. Jim and I are starting a new life in this new house. Hopefully, this stalker thing will be over with soon, but I'm not putting my life on hold."

"I'm sorry that I hurt you. I actually did apply for a divorce a long time ago, I was just so afraid of losing my current life."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I should have, maybe I wouldn't have lost you. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I didn't file the papers until I got out of the hospital. They just sat on my desk and were just a reminder of a decision I had to make. There are so many "should haves" but I need to tell you that I won't complicate your life anymore. I love you, but I know that you're really happy with Jim."

"I'm happy. Randy, to be honest, I don't know if anything would have changed between us. But, it could have. I don't think that we were bad together. We were great together, but we couldn't share our life together."

Randy got up from the sofa and walked over to Alex. He took her hand and she stood up. "I'll go peacefully, if you kiss me one last time."

She went to kiss him on the cheek, and he pulled her to his mouth. He grabbed her head, and she gave in to his warm kiss. "Good-bye, Lady. I want you to know that, yes, I do really love you. Unfortunately, I lost you before I could admit it. I'll always be here when you need me," Randy walked out.

Alex sat back down in the chair and buried her face in her hands. "I didn't ever want to hurt you," she whispered to herself.

"Hurt who?" Jim asked.

Alex looked up. "Where did you go?"

"I had some things to take care of. Who were you talking about?"

"Randy. Why did you leave him here?"

"I'm sorry, Alex. He told me that he needed to talk to you and that it was important. I couldn't say no to him. I know what it's like to love you."

"That's OK. We were able to straighten a few things out, like the fact that Terry wasn't killed last night."

"I know. Randy told me that he lied. He is still hung up on the fact that he wasn't there to save you."

"I wish he'd get over it. It's not like I'm worth saving anymore."

"Alex, please don't say that."

"All I am is trouble. I'm trouble to you, Randy, and whomever I speak to. Everyone is in danger because of me."

Jim took her hand and pulled her over to the sofa. He sat down and put her on his lap. "Alex, none of this is your fault. Whoever is after you is a sick man."

"I just want this to all be over. I hate the fact that you could be hurt or worse. You could get killed because of me."

"Alex, come with me." They stood up and she followed him to the living room. Her eyes lit up. Inside the living room stood a seven-foot tall Christmas tree. "All we need to do is decorate it," he smiled.

She hugged him. "It's beautiful. I haven't had a tree or even Christmas since, well, since Matthew was alive."

"I know. I just wanted to make you happy."

"So, this is one of those things you had to take care of?"

"Well, that and a few other things. The movers are just about finished, and then we'll be alone. Finally," he said.

They walked out to the front porch and watched as the last bit of boxes was brought into the house. Jim paid the movers and then they were gone.

"Alone, at last," Jim took her into his arms and kissed her. "Now, let me give you that tour of the land, like I promised," he took her hand and led her to the backyard. They walked around the acres of land and he pointed out each flower that was planted just for her. He showed her inside the barn and then took her for a walk in the woods, which was located about an acre behind her home.

"This is beautiful," Alex said. "And it's all ours."

"Well, there's one more spot that I wanted to show you," he led her down the wooded path. Soon, she could hear water flowing. He brought her over to a ridge that over looked a flowing creek. "See, it has a small waterfall," he put his arms around her.

"I can't believe it, this is wonderful." They stood there for a little while in the silence of the woods. Then they turned around to go home. "I'm worried about one thing."

"What's that?"

"This land is so open, anyone, could sneak on to it."

"I didn't want to put up a fence. It would take away from the charm. I did, however, have cameras set up around the perimeter of the land and off the barn. There are even some hidden in the front and back of the house. When we get back to the house, I'll show you."

When they got back to the house, Jim took Alex down to the basement. "I didn't show you the basement before, because it was a wreck. I did some upgrading of my own here. I want you to be safe. I want both of us to be safe. If something ever happens, you need to try to make it to this room and lock the door behind you," he pointed to an armored door. "That's a panic room. Inside has a satellite telephone, which means even if the phone lines are down, you can make a call on it. It even has a computer which accesses all of the security cameras on the land and inside the house."

"Inside the house?"

"Don't worry, we aren't taping ourselves," he smiled. "They're activated by a sensor. If someone is able to get into the house by force, the sensors are activated. There's also a button on the light switches of each room, which can activate them manually."

"You have thought of everything. I feel safer already."

"Good. Now, I don't want to scare you or anything. No security in the world may prevent something from happening. You remember those self-defense moves I showed you, right?"

"Yes, of course. Jim, why are we going over this now?"

"Alex, let's go upstairs. I need to talk to you." They headed upstairs to the family room.

"Jim, what is it that you're not telling me? Are you leaving me?"

"Well, I'm not leaving you, but I do have to go out of town for a little while."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"It's Janet's father. I went home to pick up a few more of my things and there was a message. Janet's father has passed away and I need to be there for the funeral. They're still family, but I can't take you with me. I won't

be too far away; the funeral is in Phoenix.”

“Of course, you have to go. Don’t worry about me. When do you have to leave?”

“Tomorrow afternoon, I’m going to drive there. I’ll be back on Tuesday. So, I won’t be able to go to work either.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can have Karrie cover for you. Bill and I have to share an office this week, so, Karrie can do double-duty.”

“I hate leaving you, but I do need to be there.”

“I know. You need to be there. I’ll be OK. Besides Terry said he’s going to be patrolling the area. I’ll be OK.”

“Just do me a favor, honey.”

“Yes, anything.”

“Don’t tell anyone that I’m not here. Just tell them that I’m sick or something. I don’t want people knowing that you’re now alone.”

“Jim, I’m not a baby.”

“Alex, just do it for my peace of mind.”

“OK, I don’t want to fight about it. I’ll tell them that you’ve been sick.”

“Good,” he kissed her. “Well, boss, I don’t leave until tomorrow, so what will we do with ourselves until then?” he asked slyly.

“Start unpacking,” she handed him a box.

“Yeah, just what I had in mind,” he said sarcastically.

Together they started unpacking the boxes in the family room. When they finished there, they went into the kitchen to unpack. Jim cooked dinner for them while Alex finished putting the rest of the dishes away.

She looked up at him. “Well, at least two rooms are done. While you finish dinner, I’m going to unpack the master bedroom. We do need some place to sleep.”

“It’s already done.”

“How in the world ... How did you finish it? I mean, without me knowing?”

“I guess I’m full of surprises,” Jim smiled. “Why don’t you make sure it’s up to your standards?”

She went upstairs to the master bedroom. All of the furniture was brand new. The bed was a new king-size bed with a lot of pillows and a beautiful red and gold comforter. Over the bed, sheer curtains were draped from a canopy frame. She had a new dresser with a large mirror and all of her personal items were carefully displayed. There was also a tall dresser in the corner of the room. At the foot of the bed, a large chest sat.

“Oh my, it’s so gorgeous, how in the world did you do all of this?”

“Do you like it?” Jim asked from behind her.

“Oh, yes. I love it. Just one question, where’s my bedroom furniture?”

“Your furniture is in bedroom next door, and I had mine, from my house, put in the other bedroom at the end of the hall. We still have our furniture, but this is one that we can share. This is ours. I thought our bedroom should be more romantic.”

“It definitely is. I love the red and gold.”

“I knew you would. Now, let’s go eat before dinner gets cold. we’ll come back here after dinner.”

“Well, you know,” she moved close into his arms. “We could let dinner wait,” she kissed him.

“If I had to unpack boxes, you’re going to eat first,” he smiled. “Come on, Angel.”

“Oh, all right,” she followed him to the kitchen and sat down at the table.

They sat down and ate their dinner. When they finished, Alex cleaned up and they went into the family

room. Jim started a fire in the fireplace and Alex curled up on the sofa with the blanket.

Jim sat down next to her and held her in his arms. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too."

They sat in silence while they watched the flames from the fire. All of a sudden, Jim clapped his hands together and soft music began to play. "May I have this dance?"

"Yes, you may." They stood up and started to dance. He held her close in his arms.

"I told you that this night would be special. I'm going to miss you so much. I want you to have something to hold on to while I'm gone," he kissed her tenderly.

She gazed into his eyes. "I'm going to miss you."

They danced for a while just holding on to each other, so much not wanting the dance to end. He touched her face lovingly and kissed her cheek. Then he lifted her up and carried her upstairs.

He placed her on the new bed and then lay down beside her. He kissed her mouth softly. "May I make love you now?" he whispered.

She didn't say a word. She returned his soft kisses. Carefully and slowly, he made love to her. She held him so tightly as if that would keep him in her arms forever. "I love you," she whispered, as she fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, Jim decided to let Alex sleep. He quietly went downstairs and fixed breakfast for her. He opened the curtains to the bay window in the kitchen and let the rays from the sunrise shine through the window. He poured a cup of coffee and brought it up to Alex to lure her out of bed.

Carefully, he let the aroma from the coffee wake her up. She stirred. "Is it time to get up already?"

"Yes, Angel. I'm leaving in a few hours and wanted to get you up a little early. Let's watch the sunrise. Our first sunrise in our new home."

Alex smiled as she sat up. She hugged him, kissed him, and then got out of bed. He used the coffee to lure her downstairs. When they got to the kitchen, he handed her the cup and together, they watched the sunrise.

"What a treat, every morning, to watch that," she admired.

"Well, that's only if you decide to get out of bed early enough," he laughed.

"I got out of bed," she tapped him playfully.

"Whatever you say, boss," he smiled and kissed her. "Good morning, how about some breakfast?"

She sat down at the table, and he dished her out a plate of eggs. "What? No French toast?" she laughed.

"French toast is for dinner, not breakfast," he joked.

"That's right, I forgot," she started eating. Jim sat down next to her and started eating.

After breakfast, they got on their robes and sat on the front porch. They took turns reading the different sections of the newspaper. It was such a quiet morning. Alex hoped that all mornings could be this peaceful.

They spent the rest of the morning unpacking. At around 1:00, Jim packed a bag and was getting ready to leave.

"I'm sorry that I have to leave you," Jim said sadly.

"I told you. It's OK. I'll be fine here. Please, just call me when you get there. I worry about you."

"I promise. I'll call you," Jim gave her a long, tender kiss. "Don't forget about me when I'm gone."

"Never," she whispered. "I love you."

Jim walked to his car and put his bag in the backseat. He looked back at Alex. "See ya, boss," he waved and then drove out of the driveway.

Alex went back into the house and locked all of the doors and windows. She turned on the alarm system and then finished her unpacking.

She was curious as to what Jim had brought from his house, so she went into the other bedroom. She looked around the room. It resembled a typical boy's bedroom. There was the bed with a sports comforter on it, a plain dresser, and a desk. Boxes were still scattered all over the room. She was just about to leave when she noticed a pile of photographs on the desk. She thumbed through them. They were mostly pictures of Jim and a woman, probably Janet. Close to the bottom of the pictures were of Matthew and Jim. Alex smiled. The last picture was of Alex and Matthew, on their wedding day. Where in the world did he get this picture? She thought. She looked at the picture closely and laughed. "That doesn't even look like me," she put the pictures down and left the room.

She went to the bedroom where her old furniture was stored and started going through those boxes. Then she remembered that she still had boxes in her car that she didn't bring in yet.

She turned off the alarm and went out to her car. One by one, she set the boxes inside the front door. When the last one was in the house, she closed the door and reset the alarm. She sat on the entryway floor and went through each of the boxes. The first box was full of her home videos that she made when Matthew was alive.

She went through each title and realized that three tapes were missing, including Matthew's birthday party video.

She took the videotapes into the family room and put them on the shelf under the entertainment center. The next few boxes just had some books and knick-knacks. She put everything away that was in the boxes.

She got up and realized that there was one box left. This box had her jewelry box in it. She lifted the lid and there sat the shiny badge. She ran her fingers over the shiny plastic. She remembered the first night with Randy. He smelled so good and made her feel so wanted. She brought her jewelry box up to her bedroom. She put it on the dresser. She removed the false bottom of the jewelry box and took out a broach. The broach's design consisted of 12 red roses and one white rose in the center. There was engraving on the back, it read, I'm Sorry, Love.

She sat down on the bed holding the broach. She remembered the day that Matthew had given it to her. He had taken her car to work with him that day and had to go to a construction site. He parked a little too close and a piece of metal had somehow pierced through the hood of her car. She smiled as she remembered. "He knew flowers couldn't cut it, so, he got me gold instead," she said aloud. She touched the broach gently and then put it back in the box. She locked it up and put the key in her dresser drawer. She finished out the day unpacking the rest of the rooms.

When she finished, she went into the bathroom to take a long, hot bath. Her new garden tub was just what she needed to relax. She filled the tub up with hot water and added some bubble bath. She lit a few candles and got undressed. She got in the tub and let the hot water relax her entire body. As she was soaking in the tub, the phone rang. She noticed that Jim also had a phone installed in the bathroom. She answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, Angel. I made it here, finally."

"Oh, Jim. You've only been gone a few hours and I miss you so much," she moved a little and he could hear the water splashing.

"Enjoying the new tub?"

"Well, you're not here, so, I needed something to keep me warm," she said flirtatiously.

"I miss you. I talked to my mother-in-law and the funeral is tomorrow around noon. So, I'll probably be home sometime Tuesday."

"I'll miss you until then. Get some rest."

"I will. Enjoy your soak. I love you. Oh, is the alarm set?"

"Yeah, everything is OK. I swear. I set the alarm. I'm just going to finish my bath and then watch television for a while. Oh, by the way, all of the unpacking is done, well except for your room. I didn't want to invade your privacy."

"I have nothing to hide."

"I do need to admit that I snooped a little bit."

"Really?"

"Yes. I did. I was curious. I just peeked in. The only things that I looked at were the pictures on the desk. I was wondering where you got the wedding picture of Matthew and me."

"Oh. Matthew sent it to me after you two were married. Janet died a few months after that. I didn't keep in touch because I was going through so much at the time. I should have kept in touch with him. But, it's good that we met now, I may have tried to steal you away," he laughed.

"I'm not the same person I was when I married him. What doesn't kill you just makes you stronger, I guess."

"I know that's true. I'll let you get back to your soak, wish I could be there."

“Well, you’ll still have to unpack your own things. I’ll see you Tuesday. Give me a call in the morning. I love you,” Alex hung up the phone.

She leaned back in the tub and finished her bath. When she was finished, she put on her robe and went downstairs. She double-checked all of the door locks and the security alarm. She sat down in the family room and turned on the television. She watched it until she fell asleep.

The next morning, she got up and realized that she slept on the sofa all night. “Oh, boy. Time to get ready for work,” she said. She staggered into the kitchen and made coffee.

She opened the curtain to the bay window to let the sunlight in. She gazed out the window as the coffee was brewing. Everything was so still outside, but she noticed something strange in the yard. A lawn chair was sitting out in her backyard, yet they didn’t have any outside furniture yet. She tried to shake it off, but something made her nervous. She went down to the basement to check out the cameras. She sat down behind the console of the computer to try to figure out how to get that camera’s tape on.

The phone rang as she tried to figure it out. She ran upstairs to get the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, Angel. Just wanted to say good morning. Why are you out of breath?”

“Sorry, I just ran upstairs to the phone. Jim, we don’t have any lawn furniture, do we?”

“No, I wanted us to pick it out together. Don’t worry, we’ll get some.”

“That’s not what I meant. There’s a lawn chair sitting in the middle of the backyard, directly facing the bay window.”

“Is there anyone out there?”

“I couldn’t see anyone, but I couldn’t figure out the cameras either.”

“Give Terry a call and have him do a walk around. I’ll show you how to view the cameras and rewind the tapes when I get home tomorrow.”

“I don’t need to call Terry. I’m going to get dressed and go to work early. If I keep myself busy, I won’t miss you so much.”

“Well, try to miss me a little. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Alex hung up the phone. She poured herself a cup of coffee and brought it upstairs with her. She got dressed as she drank her coffee.

She turned off the alarm to go outside and then she reset it. She hurried to her car and drove to work. She looked around her land but didn’t see anything unusual. She just shook it off.

She was an hour early for work, so, she sat down at her desk and stared out the window. The next thing she knew, Bill was standing in the doorway. “Alex? Uh, Alex?”

Alex jumped. “Oh, Bill. I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I can still share the office with you, right?”

“Oh, yeah. No problem.”

“Where’s Jim?”

“Oh, he’s, uh, he’s not feeling well. Do you think that Karrie can cover for him? I mean, we are sharing the same office, she could just use his desk, since we’re both here.”

“No problem. No problem at all. She should be in soon. You’re here awfully early, though, Alex.”

“I just had some things I wanted to take care of this morning. You know, before everyone else got here. It’s nice and quiet here this early in the morning. Why are you here early?”

“I wanted to clean up my office before Mr. Welch got here.”

“Well, make yourself at home. You can plug in your laptop over there. Go ahead and use the entire table,

it's OK. I'll have Treena bring in an extra phone for you, when she gets here."

"Thanks, Alex. You're so nice to me."

"You're my boss. I have to be nice."

Alex did her work and tried to pretend that she didn't have to share the office with Bill. Every now and then, she could feel that he was watching her, but when she looked up, his eyes were glued on the laptop screen.

Karrie had come in and set up at Jim's desk. Treena brought in the phone for Bill to use. Everything was all set. They were all expecting the arrival of Steven Welch.

A few hours had gone by when Karrie walked into the office. "Um, Alex, Mr. Welch just called from Bill's office. He wants to see you right away."

Bill watched Alex as she left the office. Alex heard him say. "Karrie, he didn't ask for me?"

"No," Karrie replied. "He just asked for Alex."

Alex knocked on the door to Bill's office. "Come in, Alex," Steven said.

"Hi, Steven. How have you been?" Alex said, as she shook his hand.

"Fine. I'm glad that you have a moment for me. I know that you're busy, but thanks."

"Don't worry about. You're the president, so, I should make some time for you," she smiled.

He laughed. "Have a seat. I have a proposition for you, but first I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Go ahead," Alex started to get nervous. She didn't know what to expect from his questions.

"Alex, recently, you made a sizeable donation to the hospital."

"Yes, and once the construction starts, I'll keep my promise."

"I knew you would, but that's not why I brought it up. I was curious as to your source of money."

"Steven, no offense, but that's really none ..."

"I know, none of my business. What I'm doing so poorly at asking is would you like to buy Solutions?"

"Buy it? I never really thought about it."

"Alex, I have so many businesses and I just can't keep track of everyone. I have decided to concentrate on the hospital. I'm putting up several of my businesses for sale. Unfortunately, some who may buy them may not want existing employees or even the business itself. The reason I asked about your money is because I wanted to know if you could afford to buy the company."

"What type of business is Solutions regulated as?" Alex took on her business form.

"Currently, it's listed as a partnership."

"Who are the named partners?"

"My brother, Paul, and I."

"What are you asking for this business?"

"I'm looking toward five hundred fifty thousand dollars."

"Hmmm, five hundred fifty thousand dollars?" she thought for a moment. "Well, I have a proposal for you."

Steven smiled. "What is it?"

"If you sell me 51 percent of Solutions, and we set up Solutions as a corporation, we could create private stock. This would allow the employees to buy stock. This would help everyone, especially the employees. You have a great group of employees. Once we do that, we could actually afford to pay them more."

Steven leaned back in the chair. "So, all I have to do is sell you 51 percent of the company? That would be, what?"

"Two hundred eighty thousand five hundred."

“That’s a lot less than what I asked for,” Steven said.

“Well, you could keep a percentage for yourself, say 30 percent, and make a killing off of profits and dividends or just take the five hundred fifty thousand dollars as a one-shot deal. You’re the business man, what do you think?”

Steven looked at her. “You’re a very smart and shrewd woman. Alex, you have a deal. I’ll call my lawyers and see what’s needed to get this ball rolling,” he shook her hand.

“Thanks. Once you get the papers, you’ll get my check,” she stood up.

“So, boss, what are you going to do with this place?”

Alex looked at him. “Make it better. Let’s just keep this between you and me until we get everything in order.”

“I’ll see you later. Do you have plans for lunch?”

“No, no plans. But, I think that you had better meet with Bill sometime today. He is driving me nuts,” she laughed and went out the door.

Alex walked into the office, as Bill was about to leave. “What happened up there?”

“Oh, it wasn’t anything major. We just had some business to take care of, such as salary increases, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, good,” Bill nervously went up to see Steven.

Alex sat down at her desk. Karrie walked into the office. “Um, Alex. Randy is here to see you.”

“Thanks, send him in,” Alex said.

“Hi,” Randy walked into the office and closed the door.

“Hi, did you need something?”

“Yeah, Terry just called me. He needs to talk to you right away. He tried your cell phone, but I guess it was off.”

Alex looked at her cell phone sitting on her desk. “Oh, I didn’t even have it with me,” she picked up the phone and called Terry. Randy stayed in the office. “Hi, Terry, it’s Alex. Randy told me that you needed to speak with me.”

“Alex, whose prints are on the pen? Exactly, whose prints?” Terry sounded panicked.

“I know that Bill’s are but I’m not sure whose else are on the pen? Why?”

“As you know, there were three different fingerprints on the pen. One belonged to Jim, which we already knew. One matched to an unknown print of a murder case in Pennsylvania and ...”

“Murder case in Pennsylvania?”

“Yes, and the third print was a match to a corrections officer in a Pennsylvania county jail. Somehow, they’re related, but I need to know whose print was whose?”

“Terry, I’m from Pennsylvania. What murder case is it?”

“Alex, I don’t have all of the details yet. Is there a way you can get me Bill’s print again? So that I know which one is which?”

“Terry, what’s the name of the corrections officer?”

“Walter William Wheeler,” Alex sat there in silence. “Alex? Alex? Are you there?”

“Yes. I’m here. I can get you the print.”

“OK, Alex. I’ll talk to you later.”

Alex hung up the phone and sat there, stunned. Randy just looked at her. “Are you OK?”

“No. I need to get another one of Bill’s prints. The pen I used had someone else’s on it and now we can’t

identify which one is which?"

Randy looked over at the table where Bill had been sitting. "Is there anything over there that only he touched?"

"I don't know. I haven't been paying attention."

"Well, I have an idea," Randy picked up a pen off Alex's desk. He took a tissue and then completely wiped it down. He then set it over by Bill's things. "There, now only his prints will be on it. After he touches it, we just need to get it to Terry."

"Sounds good," Alex was distant. "Once he uses it, I'll get him out of the office somehow. I'll dial your extension once and then you come over and get the pen."

"I'll do anything. Alex, something else is bothering you. What is it?"

"I'm fine. Nothing to worry about. I appreciate you doing this for me. Thanks."

Randy was about to touch her hand when Bill walked in. "Hey, Randy, how are you feeling?"

"Not bad, Thanks for asking. Alex, I'll talk with you later," Randy left out the door.

She looked at Bill. "How'd your meeting go?"

"Not bad. Better than I thought," Bill said, as he sat down.

"Um, Karrie set some papers on your desk for you to sign," Alex said.

"Oh, thanks," Bill picked up the pen and signed each paper. He set the pen down and turned his attention to his computer. Alex kept staring at the pen and tried to figure out how to get him out of the office.

A few minutes later, Steven was knocking on the door. "Hey, you two, do you want to get some lunch?"

"Sure," Bill said, as he stood up.

"OK, I'll go, too, let me just make one call," Alex picked up the phone and hit Randy's extension button and then she hung up quickly. "Never mind, it can wait. I'm starved."

Alex left the room with Bill and Steven. A few minutes later, Randy arrived and took the pen. He left for lunch and drove it to see Terry.

Alex, Steven, and Bill went to the Amore Italian restaurant for lunch. Albert sat them at a table near the window and took their orders.

"This is a nice place. I've never been here," Steven said.

"The food is good and affordable, not that you need to worry about that," Bill said.

"It's not like I carry around a million dollars in my wallet," Steven joked.

Alex laughed. "I don't even have that much in my safe," she smiled.

"Neither do I," Steven jumped in.

"Are you two in a secret rich club?" Bill asked.

"No, it's nothing like that. Alex, actually, made a small donation to the hospital."

"Really, Alex?"

"It's no big deal. The ER needs some renovations. So, I just gave them some money. And, no, it wasn't a million dollars." They all laughed.

"So, Steven," Bill asked. "How long will you be at the office?"

"Two days. I have a few things to finalize here and then work at the hospital at night. With the new renovations, I need to make sure that everything is in order. So, I'm working double shifts. I try to get a bite to eat when I can," he laughed.

They ate their lunch and then headed back to the office. When Alex got back from lunch, she noticed that Randy and Greg were talking outside. She walked up to them. "I see you two are getting along."

“Yes, we’ve decided to create a fan club. A fan club just about you,” Greg said sarcastically.

“Very funny,” Alex said snidely.

“I was just joking, Alex,” Greg said. “You know I love you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she said.

“I love you, too, Lady,” Randy said.

Alex walked away and went to her office. She finished the day knowing that Bill was just watching her. She knew that it was his print that Terry identified. She knew that he was Walter. She just had to prove it.

When she got home, there was a message on her answering machine. She played it, expecting it to be Jim. “Alexis. Alexis. I’m waiting for you,” the voice was distorted.

She set the alarm and locked all of the doors. When the phone rang again, she let it go to the machine until she knew who it was. “Alex? it’s me, Terry. If you’re there, pick up the phone,” he said.

She picked up the phone quickly. “I’m sorry, Terry, there was a message on my machine from him.”

“Are you OK? Where’s Jim?”

“He had to go to a funeral. He should be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“Alex, maybe I should come over?”

“No, Terry, that’s OK. I have a good security system.”

“The print that matched Walter Wheeler’s is the one that Randy gave me today. Bill Weaver is really Walter Wheeler.”

“Somehow, I figured that. Terry, did you get any more information about that murder case?”

“Alex, I know everything, now. I know who you really are.”

“Does that mean you’re not going to help me anymore?”

“No, Alex, I know the truth about what hap ...” The line was cut off.

“Hello? Hello?”

She noticed that it had started to storm and there was thunder and lightning outside. “Hmmm. Phone lines must be down,” she checked the alarm system, and it was still activated.

Suddenly, the alarm sounded a high-pitched noise. Alex got scared and raced down to the basement. She used the satellite phone to call Terry. He had already left for the evening. She tried to get through to Greg’s house, but there was no answer. She sat down in the panic room and watched the computer monitors. She couldn’t see anyone on the monitors. Suddenly, the satellite phone rang. It was the security company. “I can’t shut off the alarm, I don’t know if anyone is out there, but the alarm is still blaring.”

“We’ll send someone right away.”

A few minutes later, the phone rang again. “Hello?”

“Ms. Garrison, this is the security company. We are outside the front door.”

Alex slowly made her way up to the front door. She looked out the peephole and saw a man with a security uniform standing on the porch. She carefully opened the door. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, ma’am. They only thing I can see out here is this box from a florist shop. I’ll come back in the morning to check out the system, the delivery guy probably set the alarm off.”

Alex looked down at the box on the front porch. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Not a problem. Have a good night, ma’am,” Alex stood on the porch and watched the security van drive away.

She took a deep sigh of relief and bent over to pick up the box. She opened it. It was filled with white rose pedals. When she turned to go in the house, she heard footsteps behind her. “Don’t turn around. Just walk in the house,” the voice was deep and strained.

Alex heart started to beat faster. "What do you want? Why don't you leave me alone?"

"Just get in the house!" The voice said.

Alex walked slowly into the entryway.

"Stop right there!"

She stopped. "Just tell me what you want. Why are you doing this to me?"

She felt his hands on her as he petted the back of her head. "Don't worry, my love. I won't hurt you," he whispered close to her. She shuddered when she felt his hot breath on the back of her neck. She suddenly felt sick. She smelled mothballs again. As he put his hands over her shoulders, she grabbed one of his arms and swung around twisting it behind him.

She stomped on his foot and ran toward the basement, but he dove to the floor and grabbed her ankle. She kicked him in the head and continued down to the basement. She dialed 911 on the satellite phone. When she saw him staggering down the stairs after her, she quickly hid the phone. She tried to see his face, but he was wearing a ski mask.

She looked at the door that she forgot to close, she ran over to try to close it, but he reached in and grabbed her.

He pulled her back up the stairs. She struggled to get away from him, but he was so strong. He tried to force her in the living room, but she hit him. He punched her back and threw her on the floor. She hit her head on the coffee table and it started to bleed.

"I see you have gotten pretty strong in the past few years."

"What do you want? Who the hell are you?" she grabbed her head.

"Alexis. Tsk. Tsk. Tsk," he sucked his teeth. "You know who I am. I'm the ONLY one in this world that gives a damn about you. I have put my life on hold for you. I have even killed for you. You OWE me."

"I don't owe you anything. Get the hell out of my house!"

"Oh, yes, your house. It's our house now. I could get used to it around here. Hell, I already have," he laughed. His voice seemed a bit distorted, she couldn't figure out who it was.

He started coming closer to her, so she kicked at him. He jumped on top of her and held her arms down. He licked her face. "Don't you love me?"

"I don't know you. Get off me! Please stop!"

He kissed her hard, so she bit him. He slapped her across the face. "I see you want to play rough. I can play rough, too," he whipped his belt off and used it to restrain one of her wrists. He tried to get her other hand, but she hit him in the face and then dug her nails deep into the ski mask.

He put more of his weight on her. "You're going to be mine," When he shifted his weight, she lifted up her knee and hit him in the crotch with all of her strength. He yelled out in pain, she tried to push him off her, but he was too heavy.

"Alexis, I didn't want to hurt you, but you've left me no choice," he raised his fist up in the air and swung it down at her, she moved her head just in time, and he hit the floor. "You're going to get it now."

She finally struggled free and ran toward the front door. On her way out of the living room, she touched the panel that activated the inside cameras. She managed to unlock the door, but he caught up to her and pulled her back into the entryway.

He turned her around to face him. "Look into my eyes, you know me. I love you. I don't want to hurt you. I just want to be with you."

She stared at his eyes, but all she saw was darkness. "If you love me, then let me go."

"I can't. I've waited so long to have you. I can't wait anymore. I'm sorry to do this, but I NEED to have

you now.”

“Please, don’t. Tell me who you are.”

“Alexis,” he whispered. Then he pushed her to the floor. He put his foot on top of her to hold her. “Think about it, you do know me,” he started to pull the mask off his face but stopped.

She looked up at him. “Yes. I do know who you are ...”

Just then, Terry and Randy burst in the front door with their guns drawn. “Step away from her,” Terry yelled. “And put your hands up.”

“Alex, are you OK?” Randy asked.

Alex didn’t say a word. Suddenly, the man removed his foot from her chest. “You? I should have killed you when I had the chance. Go ahead and shoot me!” He laughed. He leaned over to Alex. “This is far from over,” she managed to sit up as the man ran toward the two police officers.

Randy fired his gun at the man. The bullet hit him in the leg, but he didn’t stop. He continued to charge them, knocking them to the ground. Without looking back, he ran out the door.

Terry ran after the man and Randy ran to her side. “Alex, are you OK?”

“No. Why would he hurt me?” she cried. Randy put his arm around her while she cried.

Terry came running back in. “He’s gone.”

“Terry, call an ambulance. She’s hurt pretty bad. There’s so much blood. I just can’t tell where it’s coming from.”

“No, I don’t want to go anywhere. I need Jim. Where’s Jim?” she cried.

“I don’t know, Alex. Where is Jim?” Terry said.

“He won’t be back until tomorrow,” she cried even harder. “I don’t want to go anywhere. Please don’t make me.”

“You need to get looked at,” Randy said. “What if I call Hettie? I’m sure she’ll come over and take a look at you.”

“Use the satellite phone in the basement, the LAN lines are down from the storm,” Alex said. Terry helped her stand and took her into the family room and Randy went down to the basement.

“Alex, you said you knew who it was. Who was it?”

“I can’t ... I can’t say.”

“Why not? He almost killed you, again, I might add,” Terry sighed with frustration.

“Terry, please, don’t push this. I need to see him face to face, without that damn mask. I can get through to him, I hope.”

“Alex, you can’t do this on your own.”

“I have to. There are two men keeping secrets from me. One of them tried to hurt me. I’m pretty sure I know which one, but I need to do it on my own. Please understand.”

“I don’t understand, Alex, but I’ll help you anyway I can.”

“How did you know to come? I called the station a while ago and you had already left.”

“Randy and I were at my house when the dispatch came over the radio. I knew you were in trouble.”

“I’m glad you came. Thanks.”

Randy walked back into the room. “Hettie is on her way,” he said, as he sat down next to Alex. “What’s going on? I told you your life was in danger, but you didn’t want to listen.”

“Randy, please stop.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ...” he tried to hug her, but she pushed him away.

“Terry, you said that you knew the truth about me, but then the phone was cut off. What did you mean?”

Jim ran into the room. "Oh, my god, what happened?"

"Jim, what are you doing here? You weren't supposed to be back until tomorrow," she cried.

He ran up to her side and knelt on the floor. "Oh, Angel, what happened to you?"

"I'm OK ... now that you're here."

"I wanted to get home as soon as possible to be with you. I left right after the service."

She tried to hug him, but she could barely move. "I'm so glad that you're here," she said faintly.

Jim looked at Terry and Randy. "What happened to her?"

"A man attacked her, but she managed to call 911. We got here as fast as we could. She put up a really good fight," Terry said.

"But the man escaped, I even shot him, but he still escaped."

"What kind of cops are you? You just let him walk out of here, after what he did to her?" Jim started getting angry.

"Jim, don't worry about it. Oh, god. I have to lie ..." Alex fainted.

"Why didn't you take her to the hospital?"

"She wouldn't let us. She kept asking for you. She didn't want to go. I called my aunt Hettie. She's on her way now," Randy said, as he got up and walked to the front of the house to wait for Hettie.

"Terry, tell me what happened," Jim said, as he touched Alex's forehead.

"She said that she knew who it did, but she wouldn't tell me. Jim, did she tell you about her situation in Pennsylvania?"

"Yes, why?" Jim tried to wake up Alex, but she was unconscious.

"She didn't kill that woman."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"That unknown print was on the murder weapon that killed Amanda Shapone. Alex's weren't on it."

"So, who killed that woman?"

Randy walked into with Hettie. "Let me take a look at her," Hettie said. Jim moved aside so that Hettie could examine her. "I need some fresh towels and warm water."

"I'll get them," Jim left the room.

She took some antiseptic and bandages out of her bag and started taking care of Alex's bruises. She noticed that Alex was bleeding in the shoulder. "Who shot her?"

"What!" Jim exclaimed as he walked back into the room.

"Alex has been shot," Hettie said. "We need to get her to a hospital."

"I only shot once, I swear," Randy said.

"Well, someone shot her," Hettie said. "We need to get her to a hospital ... now."

"Can we move her? We can take her in my patrol car," Terry said.

"Jim, can you carry her to the car? I need to keep pressure on this wound, or she'll bleed to death."

Jim carefully picked her up, while Hettie held the towels to the wound. They brought her out to the car. "Set her in the back seat and I'll sit with her. You'll need to follow in your car."

"I want to be with her," Jim said.

"Jim, I need to be with her right now. I need to take care of her. Take your car and follow us," Hettie said.

Terry and Randy got in the front seat and Hettie sat in the back with Alex. Terry turned on the sirens and they sped off to the hospital. Jim jumped in his car and followed the police car.

When they arrived at the emergency room, Jim ran into the emergency room to get a stretcher. He lifted Alex on the stretcher, and they wheeled her in the hospital.

Jim paced back and forth, while they waited for a doctor to come in and examine her. Jim went to the receptionist desk. “Do you know who she is?”

“Sir, a doctor is on the way. Please wait over there.”

“Excuse me, but she is the woman who donated a whole bunch of money to this damn ER. Now, I want a doctor now.”

“Sir, I said the doctor is on his way.”

“Get me Steven Welch! Now!”

“Mr. Welch? Why?”

“Get him down here now,” Jim demanded. He ran back over to Alex’s room. “Hettie, how is she doing?”

“She needs a doctor to remove this bullet.”

Jim ran out of the room and bumped right into Mr. Welch. “Um, Mr. O’Roark. What can I do for you?”

“Alex Garrison is in that room and needs a doctor. She’s been shot, as well as beat up pretty badly.”

“Oh, my god. What happened?”

“I don’t have time to explain. We need a doctor, right now.”

“I’ll be right back,” Steven walked over the receptionist desk and picked up the phone. “Get me a surgeon down to ER, STAT,” he walked over to Jim. “The surgeon will be here any second.”

Just as he said that, a doctor came running up to Steven. “What’s wrong?”

“Gunshot victim in there. Fix her,” Steven said. The doctor ran into the bay to help Alex.

Hettie came out a few minutes later. “They’re taking her up to surgery now. They have to get that bullet out.”

When Alex was wheeled out, Jim walked over to her and kissed her forehead. “I love you.” The orderlies rolled her down the hall.

Steven followed Jim into the waiting room. “What happened to her?”

“She was attacked in our home. Someone tried to kill her. One of those damn cops shot her ...” Jim started getting upset.

“Mr. O’Roark, who are you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Alex and I are together.”

“Oh, I didn’t know. I was just with her today. I made her a business proposition and she turned around and made me one. She is quite a lady you have there.”

“That’s Alex. Just when you think you have her figured out, she throws you a curve. That’s why I love her so much. I—I don’t want to lose her,” Jim buried his face in his hands.

“Let me go see how she is doing,” Steven said, as he stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Thanks,” he put his head down and stared at the floor.

As Steven left the room, Randy and Terry walked into the waiting room. “How is she?” Randy asked.

“What the hell do you care? You shot her. How can you miss a large man and hit a small woman? it’s beyond me. She could die because of you.”

“It was my fault. I didn’t miss the man. But, he was just coming at us. I’m so sorry. I would never hurt her.”

“That’s what this man keeps saying, yet, look at what he does to her ...” Jim stood up and walked over to the window.

“Jim,” Terry said. “You have to get Alex to tell us who he is?”

“If she EVER wakes up, she’ll tell me who he is. I’m not telling you two, anything, anymore. How do I know that one of you didn’t attack her?” he spat. “I’ll take care of this from now on. Get out of here.”

Terry and Randy left the room. Jim stared out the window for what seemed to be hours. The surgeon walked into the room. "Mr. O'Roark?"

Jim turned around. "Yes? How is she?"

"She's going to be OK. It looks like she was hit by the bullet that went through the attacker's leg."

"Is she conscious?"

"Not yet?"

"Can I go see her?"

"Yes, follow me."

Jim followed the doctor to Alex's recovery room. He noticed two security guards outside the room. "Mr. Welch had these men posted at her door."

"Thank him for me, will you?" Jim said.

"Yes, go on in. No one will be allowed in the room except for you and the nurse."

Jim went and sat by her bedside. He held her hand and cried. Her face was bandaged but the bruises were starting to appear under them. Her arm and shoulder were completely wrapped, and she had an IV in her arm. "I'm so sorry that I wasn't there. I should have been there," he cried.

He sat with her for a while and then the doctor came back in. "We are going to move her to a private room," he said.

"Oh, OK," Jim wiped the tears from his eyes. "I have to take care of something. Can Hettie sit with her until I get back?"

"Not a problem. I'll get her," the doctor left, and Hettie walked into a few minutes later.

"Hettie, I know this is asking a lot. But, I—I need to take care of something. Will you keep sit with her until I get back?"

"Jim, be careful. You'll be no good to her if you get yourself killed."

"I'll be all right," he left out the door. He ran out of the hospital to his car and sped out of the parking lot. He drove all the way to the Hillcrest apartments. He ran up the three flights to Bill's door. He banged on the door. Bill opened the door. "Jim? What are you doing here?"

"You!" Jim punched him square in the face.

"Jim, what are you doing?" Bill asked, as he touched his face.

"You did this to her. Why don't you leave her alone!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Jim looked at Bill up and down. "You attacked Alex."

"No, I wouldn't hurt her."

"That's what you always say, but then you hurt her."

"Jim, I have no idea what you're talking about. Come in here and tell me what happened."

"Take off your pants!" Jim yelled.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"The man who hurt her was shot in the leg. If you didn't do it, take off your pants, and prove it."

"OK, take it easy," Bill pulled his pants down and Jim looked at both legs. "Are you satisfied?"

"Well, who the hell are you anyway? We know that you're NOT William Weaver. Who are you and what do you want with Alex?"

Bill's face turned sad. "I took care of Alexis when she was in jail. My real name is Walter."

Jim was stunned. "Why all of the lies? I don't understand. Alex told me all about you. Why did you lie and how come she didn't know who you were?"

“I used to have a full beard and mustache. There were times when I thought she knew who I was, but she didn’t.”

“Bill, Walter, whatever your name is, someone is trying to kill her. I thought it was you. Why did you lie about yourself?”

“Sorry, Jim, I can’t tell you, but I’ll tell Alex everything. Please tell me what happened to her.”

“She was attacked in our home and then one of those stupid cops shot her while trying to get the attacker. He got away. I thought it was you. I’m sorry.”

“I hope that she is OK. I really do. I promise I’ll talk to her and tell her everything. But, I won’t talk to anyone else. Only she’ll understand.”

“I don’t know if she will, Bill. But, when she is better, I’ll tell her that you need to see her.”

Jim turned around and left Bill’s apartment. He was planning on going straight to the hospital, but he decided to go to the house first.

He walked into the house and looked around. He could see where Alex struggled for her life. He walked down the stairs to the panic room and turned on the computer screens. He rewound the videotapes from the cameras to see if anything showed up. He noticed that the living room and entryway videos were still recording. He stopped those tapes and rewound them. He watched in horror as he saw her attack in the entryway, then he watched as Randy and Terry walked in.

Tears swelled in his eyes as he watched it repeatedly. He tried to figure out who this person was that hurt her. He switched to the outside camera to see where the attacker ran. The camera had a night vision lens, and it taped the man running toward the back of the yard. Jim switched to the backyard camera, and then he saw it, the man stopped in the shadows of the camera and removed his mask. Jim could barely make out his face, but he knew who this man was.

Jim removed the tapes from the players and replaced them with new tapes. He put the tapes into a bag and headed out the door. He set the alarm and drove off in his car. He headed to the hospital to be with Alex.

Jim put the bag in his trunk and ran into the hospital. As he was walking down the corridor that led to her room, he noticed Greg trying to get into her room, but the security guard wouldn’t let him in.

Greg looked down the hall. “Hey, Jim. They won’t let me see her.”

Jim looked at Greg and noticed a large scratch on his face. “Alex needs her rest. She can’t be bothered right now,” he said calmly.

“Oh, I heard she got hurt. I came as soon as I could.”

“Yeah, she was shot,” Jim said, trying to remain calm.

“Shot?” Greg sounded surprised. “Is she going to be OK?”

“I don’t know. She could very well die.”

“Die? She can’t die,” Greg cried.

“Don’t worry yourself about it. That’s why I’m here. I’ll tell her that you were here, now just go.”

Greg limped down the hallway toward the exit. Jim looked at the security guard. “You just saved her life. That’s the man that attacked her,” he said pointing to Greg.

“What should I do?” The guard asked.

“Just stay here. I’ll take care of him. But, not right now,” Jim went in to be with Alex.

Hettie got up from the chair. “Is everything OK?”

“It will be. I’ll sit with her now,” Jim said, as Hettie left the room. Jim took her hand and kissed it. “I’ll never let him hurt you again.”

A few hours later, Steven stopped by to see how she was doing. “Mr. O’Roark, how is she?”

“She hasn’t woken up yet. Please, call me Jim,” Jim said sadly.

Steven walked into and sat down. “Is there anything that I can do?”

“No, but, thank you. Well, actually, is there somewhere I can make a long-distance phone call?”

“You can use my office. It’s on the third floor. Just go toward the corporate offices. My secretary will let you in.”

“Will you sit with her until I get back?”

“Of course,” Jim left the room and Steven sat next to Alex.

Jim headed to Steven’s office. The secretary let him in the office and closed the door behind her. Jim picked up the phone and called Mike Dix. “Mike Dix, Please?”

“Mike Dix here, how can I help you?”

“Mike, this is Jim O’Roark, I’m a friend of Alex’s.”

“OK, tell me what happened to her? Is she OK?”

“No, she was attacked tonight. I know who did it. It was Greg Shapone.”

“You mean her friend, Greg Shapone?”

“Well, I don’t know about him being her friend anymore, but, yeah. He was also that only other person that lived from that awful camping trip.”

“So, do you think he is the unknown print?”

“I would have to bet yes. I need you to contact the Pennsylvania State Police for me. If you could fly out here, I think Alex and I could use your help with this one. Greg is still out there, acting as if he did nothing wrong. I have him on tape, but the video isn’t good. All I can do right now is keep him away from her.”

“I’ll be on the next flight out there.”

“Thanks, Mike. We’re at the Middleburg General Hospital. The airport will be able to give you directions.”

“OK, Jim. I’ll see you two soon. Take care of her until I get there,” Jim and Mike hung up. Jim headed back to Alex’s room.

Steven was sitting by Alex’s bedside. Her eyes fluttered. “W—what happened?” she tried to focus her eyes.

“Jim? Is that you?”

“No, Alex. It’s Steven. Jim will be back any minute,” Steven reassured her. “You’re going to be just fine.”

Alex looked around the room. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital. Everything is all right.”

“I—I told them no hospital. Why didn’t they listen?” Alex asked.

“You were shot, and they had no choice.”

“Shot? What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know all the details. You better wait until Jim gets back.”

Jim walked into the room. “Thanks, Steven. I really appreciate it,” he looked over at Alex. “Oh, thank god, Angel, you’re awake.”

“Jim, what’s going on here? He said I got shot,” she said hysterically. “What happened?”

“Angel, calm down,” he sat on the bed next to her and put his arm around her. “Do you remember anything?”

She leaned back into her pillow. “I remember being hit and trying to escape. I fought as hard as I could, I swear. He was just too strong. I don’t remember being shot, though.”

“You were shot by accident. When Randy shot the attacker, the bullet went through his leg and into your

shoulder. You're going to be OK."

She looked at Steven. "So, much for your new partner, right?"

He smiled. "Alex, you take care of yourself. I still intend to keep my part of the deal," he touched her hand. "I'll come back tomorrow, or should I say later," he left out the door.

"Something you want to tell me about?"

"We'll talk later," Alex managed a smile. "Please just hold me."

"I'm so sorry that I wasn't there. I should have been there. Can you ever forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. I did everything you taught me. I fought him the best I could."

"Alex, your attacker?"

"What about him?"

"It was Greg, wasn't it?"

She put her head down. "Yes, it was. I didn't see his face, but somehow I knew it was him."

"Why didn't you tell Terry or Randy?"

"Because he is my problem, not theirs. Besides, I wanted to tell you first."

"I love you, Angel."

"I love you, too. I'm so tired. Do you mind if I get some sleep?"

"No, go ahead. Rest," Alex dozed off while Jim held her. Soon, he fell asleep, too.

Chapter Seventeen

A nurse walked into the room several hours later and woke up Jim. “Um, excuse me, Mr. O’Roark. There’s a man here to see you. A Mr. Dix.”

“Oh, thank you,” Jim carefully got out the bed without disturbing Alex. “If she wakes up, tell her I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll stay with her, sir. He’s in the waiting room down the hall.”

Jim walked down the hall to the waiting room. “Mr. Dix?”

Mike stood up. “Yes?”

“Hi,” Jim shook his hand. “Jim O’Roark. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“How is Alex?”

“She’s getting better. She finally woke up, but she’s resting now.”

“Is there some place that we can talk?”

“Follow me,” Jim said. He led Mike up to Steven’s office.

“Mr. Welch isn’t in right now,” his secretary told them.

“Is it possible to use his office? it’s important.”

“Of course, Mr. Welch gave me instructions to help you whenever you needed it.”

Jim and Mike went into the office and closed the door. “So, how do we get this guy? I don’t want him getting off on some technicality,” Jim stated.

“I’ve got a plan, are you willing to help?” Mike said with a smile.

Alex woke up and looked around the room. The nurse was checking her vitals. “Where’s Jim?”

“Oh, he’ll be back soon. A man came looking for him, so he is meeting with him now. Don’t worry.”

Suddenly, a commotion sounded from the hallway. “What in the world is going on?” the nurse asked. She opened the door and there was Bill, arguing with the security guard.

“I really need to see her,” Bill was saying.

“I’m sorry. She’s not allowed any visitors,” the guard replied.

“It’s OK, you can let him in,” Alex said to the guard.

“Are you sure? I was given instructions not to let anyone in the room.”

“Yes, it’s OK,” Bill slowly walked into the hospital room.

“Do you want me to stay?” asked the nurse.

“No, he didn’t hurt me. I’ll be OK,” The nurse left the room. “Please have a seat, Walter.”

“How did you ... Did Jim tell you?”

“No, Walter. I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me the truth. Why did you hide who you were? Why did you assume a dead man’s identity?”

Bill sat down. “I’m sorry, Alexis.”

“Don’t apologize, just explain. The least you could do for me is to start explaining this whole thing to me.”

His eyes got sad. “When you were released from jail, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I knew our night together didn’t matter to you, but it mattered to me. I fell in love with you. I tried to forget you, but I couldn’t. We never talked about what happened after that night,” he sighed heavily. “But it affected me more than I wanted you to know at the time. After I got hurt on the job and couldn’t work in corrections anymore, I went looking for you. But, I couldn’t find you.”

“Our night together meant a great deal to me. You helped me get through one of the hardest times in my life. I left town soon after the trial. I wanted to get away from everything and everybody. I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me who you were.”

“I stopped by your gift shop and your sister-in-law told me that you had been gone for three years. So, I did surveillance on the gift shop. I found the address to where she shipped her packages to you and your new name. I shaved my beard and mustache off and bought an airplane ticket to Arizona. I didn’t know what I was going to do or say when I found you. I just missed you.”

“Walter, I’m sorry but I can’t return your feelings.”

“I know that now, Alexis. But, at the time, I thought that I could bring out those feelings in you.”

“Why lie about it? I just don’t understand.”

“I didn’t plan on lying to you. I actually didn’t have a plan at all. The man who sat next to me on the plane was William Weaver. He was a very nice older man. We talked, and he told me how he had this new job and told me all about it. He was reviewing the personnel records on the plane. That’s how I knew you worked for him. I saw your new name on the file. After that, I was just going to meet you through him.”

“What happened, Walter?”

“The next thing I knew, we hit turbulence. It got really bad, and the plane crashed. Only a few people survived, but William did not. I didn’t know what to do, so, I took all of his papers. That’s when I pretended to be him. After I saw you, I know that I wasn’t good at hiding my feelings. If I made you uncomfortable, I’m really sorry.”

“Walter, you didn’t need to lie to me. It hurts me that you felt that you had to lie to me to get me to love you.”

He started to cry. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I did whatever I could to please you. I wanted to tell you several times. I thought that when I kissed you, you would have remembered me. But, I knew it was a long shot. It had been so long. I was trying to get you to remember. But, then I saw that you were happy with Jim, I mean really happy, I just tried to blend into the background. I didn’t think there was a point to tell you. I saw everything you went through. I watched you struggle with Randy, Greg, and then you were just happier or more content with Jim and there were no complications.”

Alex touched his hand. “Walter, you don’t have to pretend anymore. It’s OK. You’re a kind and gentle man, you always have been. You just need to take care of yourself and not worry about me anymore.”

“I don’t know how to. I don’t even know who I am. What kind of man takes another man’s place?”

“I can forgive you, but you have to forgive yourself first. Walter, you actually are doing a great job at work. You have already started a new life for yourself, why don’t you stick with it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it, please. Not for me, but for yourself. You can’t hide your past or even run away from it. I learned that the hard way. But, you can make the most of your life. Only you can decide how to live your life.”

“Thanks, Alexis.”

“Please, Walter, it’s Alex.”

“OK, Alex. Please call me Bill. I’ve gotten used to that and I kinda like it.”

“OK. Bill, I’ll see you later.”

Bill got up. “Alex, this will be the last time, I promise, but may I kiss you good-bye?” she smiled, and he leaned over and kissed her cheek. Then he left the room as Jim was coming in. Bill shook Jim’s hand. “Sorry about all the trouble.”

“No problem, if she forgives you, then I can forgive you.”

Bill smiled and left the room.

“What was that all about?” Jim asked.

“He finally told me the truth. I’ll fill you in later.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been shot. Jim, I just want to go home. When can I go home?”

“Soon, Angel. I’m working on taking you home.”

Jim walked out of Alex’s room with his head hung low. He looked at the security guard. “You don’t need to guard her anymore, she’s dead.”

The security guard just looked at him. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, she was talking to me and all of a sudden she couldn’t breathe. She looked up at me and that was it, she’s gone,” Jim started to cry.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I have to make some calls. You can go home,” Jim walked down the hall to the receptionist desk. “May I use your phone?”

“Sure, are you OK?”

Jim just shook his head and picked up the phone. He called Terry. “Um, Terry, Alex didn’t make it. She’s, um, gone. I can’t deal right now. Is Randy around?”

Terry handed the phone to Randy. “What is it, Jim?”

“She’s dead, Randy.”

“What? No. Are you sure?” he started to cry.

“I was with her. I can’t deal with this right now; can you call Karrie and have her let EVERYONE at work know?”

“Of course. Is there anything you need?” he sniffled.

“No, I’m just going to sit with her for a while,” Jim hung up and went back to her room.

Jim stayed in there for a while and then there was a knock on the door. He covered Alex’s head with the sheet and answered the door. Karrie and Randy were standing there.

“What are you doing here?”

“We wanted to see how you were doing,” Karrie said, as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Is Greg here yet?” Jim asked.

“He’s in the waiting room with Bill. We wanted to say good-bye to her, if that’s all right.”

“You may not need to,” Jim said. Randy and Karrie looked confused. “I’ll explain later. I think that Greg should say good-bye first. After all, he has known her a lot longer than we have.”

“Oh, well, he’s in there,” Karrie, Randy, and Jim went to the waiting room.

Greg stood up. “Can I see her?” Greg’s eyes were all swelled from crying.

“Yes, Greg. I think she would like that,” Jim said. “Come with me,” Greg followed Jim to Alex’s room. “Go on in. I think you two need time alone. I’ll be in the waiting room.”

Greg limped in the doorway slowly and closed the door. “Alexis, how could you leave me?” he sat down next to her bed. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. You were supposed to be with me. It wasn’t my fault that he shot you. How could he be such a terrible aim? I just needed to be with you, but everyone got in our way. Way back when I first met you, I knew that you were the one for me,” he cried a little and then stopped. His voice became harsh. “But, of course, you were with Matthew and Amanda was there, too. Stupid bitch. She couldn’t do anything right. She wasn’t supposed to kill John and Mary. How dumb could she be? She was just supposed

to just get Matthew out of the way.” Greg shook his head and sobbed. “When she stabbed you, I had to do something, so, I killed her. I did it all for you.”

Alex couldn’t take it anymore. She sat up quickly. “You bastard! You made me believe that I killed someone.”

Greg jumped back. “You tricked me!” He raised his hand to hit her.

“Go ahead, hit me. That’s how you solve everything. You lied to me. You hurt me. How could you hurt me like that? You not only hurt me physically, but I spent years thinking I killed someone,” tears streamed down her face.

“Me? Hurt you?” he sounded shock. “You told me you wanted to be just friends. Do you know how that hurt? You were with Matthew and then I got rid of him. You moved on with Randy, a cop. How dumb was that? Do you think it will really last with Jim? I doubt it. He’ll be taken care of. You haven’t even tried to love me.”

“Greg, I thought you were my best friend. I can’t tell you how angry I am right now. You convinced your own wife to kill my husband and then you killed her. And, to top it all off, I sat in jail for six months for doing it. I never was sure if I did it or not, because I couldn’t remember, but you sat in my home and told me that you watched me kill her. How dare you say you love me!”

“She was just supposed to kill him. I told her that she had to prove that she loved me and not him, so, I told her to kill him.”

“She killed my husband so that you could have me? Are you out of your mind?”

“I said I was sorry. Didn’t you get my roses?”

“What? You sent them? Why?”

“I knew that Matthew said he was sorry that way and I thought it would work for me. The six roses were for each month you spent in jail. Alexis, I’ll do anything for you, I love you.”

“GREG! I DON’T LOVE YOU. GET THAT THROUGH YOUR HEAD.”

“No, don’t say that. You’ll get used to it. Sweetheart, you’re going to be mine, whether you want to or not. I’m tired of waiting for you to come to me, so, I’m going to take you,” he got on top of her and held her arms down.

“No, please don’t. Stop! Get off of me!” Alex screamed.

Jim and Mike ran into the room, followed by six police officers. Two of the cops grabbed Greg and pulled him off her. They wrestled him to the ground as Terry walked into and put handcuffs on him.

“Did you get it all?” Alex asked.

“Everything,” Mike said. He walked over and hugged her carefully. “Are you all right?”

“Considering everything, I think it’s going to take me a while to get better,” she said. Jim came over and touched her hand. He kissed her cheek.

The cops stood Greg up and dragged him out of the door. “Hey, watch the leg,” Greg yelled. “This isn’t over. This isn’t over,” he kept yelling.

“What’s going to happen to him?” Alex asked Mike.

“Well, he’ll be arrested and arraigned here for the attempted murder of you, Randy, and the murder of Leon Towers.”

“What?” Jim asked.

“While he was here, his truck was impounded, and his house is currently being searched. It was his truck that rammed the police car, causing the death of officer Towers. We also suspect that he killed that police officer the other night, thinking he was Randy or Terry.”

“Randy was right. He was going to kill anyone that got in his way,” Alex said.

“Then it’s just up to Arizona and Pennsylvania to get together to decide where he’s tried first. He’ll also be arrested for causing the death of Amanda Shapone.”

Jim sat next to Alex. “Did he hurt you again?”

“Just when he jumped on me. I was able to stop him from hitting me. I don’t think my face could take another hit. Jim, I want to go home and sleep in my own bed.”

“Let me see what I can do,” Jim said. “Mike, will you stay with her? I’ll be right back,” Jim left the room.

“I don’t know how to thank you, Mike. It’s so good to see you again.”

“Alex, I just wish that we figured this out four years ago. We could’ve prevented ...”

“We were all fooled, especially me.”

“Well, you have found a good man in Jim.”

“Thanks, I think so, too.”

“No, really. We checked him out.”

“You what?”

“Alex, after everything that has gone on with you in the last few years, I had to. I ran his prints, too. I know that he’ll make you happy,” Mike hugged her carefully.

“Thanks for caring,” Alex leaned back in the bed.

There was a knock on the door. Karrie, Randy, and Bill were standing in the doorway. “Can we come in?” Randy asked.

“Yes, come on in,” Alex said. “Please forgive the way I look. I’ve had a rough couple of days.”

“You look beautiful,” Karrie said with a smile.

“I’m sorry that Jim told you I was dead, but it was the only way ...”

“We know, he already explained it to us,” Bill said. “I’m really glad that you’re OK.”

Alex smiled. “This is a friend of mine from Pennsylvania, Mike Dix. Mike, these are my friends, Karrie, Randy, and Bill.”

Mike looked at Bill and smiled. “Nice to meet all of you. Well, Alex, I had better get to the police station, the report from his house search will be in soon. Tell Jim I’ll call him later.”

She nodded as Mike left the room. “You guys don’t need to stay. You should get back to work.”

“You’re right,” Bill said. “Time is money,” he put his arm around Karrie and the two of them left the room. Randy remained behind.

“Randy, you were so right, and I feel like a total idiot. I must be the most gullible person in the world.”

“No, Lady, you were carrying around guilt, guilt that wasn’t even yours to carry. I’m sorry that I couldn’t help you through it. I know that you belong with Jim. I see the way you two look at each other. I used to think we looked at each other that way, but then I realized that I made us out to be more than we actually were,” he took her hand and kissed it.

“Randy, I’ll always care about you. I loved our time together. That was so important to me. You’re important to me. I’ll always keep the badge as a reminder of how we felt in each other’s arms at that moment. I don’t want you to leave my life. I would still like you in it.”

“Lady, I know that I can’t be more to you, but I want you in my life,” he reached out his hand.

“A handshake?” she smiled. “How about one last kiss, if you’re careful.”

He leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips, so careful not to hurt her. Jim walked into the room. “Oh, sorry.”

“No, that’s OK,” Randy said. “We were just saying good-bye,” Randy looked at Jim. “You’re a very lucky

man,” he shook his hand and left the room.

Jim looked at her. She smiled. “We were saying good-bye to what we once were and now, we are just friends,” she sat up slowly. “Well, for now. He’ll be surprised as will the rest of them when they find out who bought Solutions.”

Jim sat down on the bed and smiled. “So, what exactly was this deal that you and Steven put together?”

“Hey, can I get out of here or what?” Alex said, changing the subject.

“So, you want to go home?” he slyly asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I really do.”

“Good, a wheelchair will be in here soon. I’ll take you home. Hettie has agreed to be your nurse while you’re recovering at home.”

Jim brought her home that afternoon and got her settled in their bed. “Hettie will be here later to change your bandages. She is going to show me how to do it.”

“Good. I’m so tired, but I’m glad that I’m home. I see you had someone clean the house downstairs.”

“Yeah, I had Karrie come over and straighten up before we got here.”

“I love you. I’m so glad that you came home early.”

“So, am I, Angel. Get some sleep.”

Jim tucked her into bed and then went downstairs. Alex barely heard the phone ringing as she drifted to sleep.

A few hours later, Alex woke up calling Jim’s name. He ran upstairs to her. “What’s the matter, Angel?”

“I got scared for a minute. Where were you?”

“Just downstairs. Hettie is here. We didn’t want to wake you.”

“What’s wrong, Jim?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s something that you’re not telling me.”

He sat down on the bed next to her. “Mike called soon after you fell asleep.”

“And?”

“They searched Greg’s house. They found the source of the mothballs.”

“What was it?”

“He had his, um,” he stopped for a minute. “His, um, wife’s body packed in mothballs in the closet of his apartment.”

“Oh, my god. He told me he had her body sent to Florida.”

“No, it was in his closet. He used the mothballs to hide the smell. Obviously, she is just a skeleton. They had to verify with her dental records that it was her.”

“How sick is that?”

“I’m just glad that he can’t hurt you anymore. Oh, and they also found some videotapes, I think they belong to you. You and Matthew are on them. They’ll be returned to you.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it. Pictures and videos are all that I have left of Matthew.”

Jim went to get Hettie. She showed Jim how to take care of the bandages, bruises, and wounds on Alex. She told him to help her with baths, and not to take showers. After a week, Hettie only came by once a day to check her out. She taught Jim how to take care of everything. Jim also took a leave from work so that he could help her. Every afternoon, Karrie would stop by with any paperwork or things that needed Alex’s attention.

Alex didn't want her workload to pile up while she was gone.

Jim didn't allow any other visitors until Alex was doing better.

A few weeks after the attack, Jim brought Alex downstairs to the family room where she could lie down in front of the fireplace. As he was settling her on the sofa, there was a knock on the front door. "Be right back."

He came back a few seconds later. "Angel, I have a surprise for you."

Alex looked up. "Oh, Emily," she cried.

Emily ran over to her and touched her face. "Oh, Alexis. I came as soon as Jim called."

"I'm so glad that you're here. I missed you so much."

"We need to stay together. We are family, remember."

"I know. I love you, Emily," Alex looked up and saw Tony walking in with the suitcases. "Hi, Tony. How are you?"

"I'm just glad that you're OK. How are you feeling?"

"So, much better, now that my family is here," she smiled.

"They will be staying here with us for a few days," Jim said. "I knew how much you missed them, so I had them fly out here."

"Not to be ungrateful, but who's running the store?"

"Mary's mother, Ellen, is watching the store. She runs it on my days off," Emily said.

"Alex, I talked to Emily and Tony already, but I wanted to wait until you were feeling better," Jim said.

"But, I was wondering if you'd be interest in opening a second A&M Gift store around here? I know you miss that place."

"Well, I never thought about it. I love my job at Solutions and don't want to spend my life running businesses."

"Well, I was thinking that Emily and Tony could run the store here, and let Ellen run it in Pennsylvania."

"You guys are going to move here?" Alex's eyes lit up.

"We miss you. We want to be here with you. It's time I came home," Emily said.

"I don't know where we would put the store," Alex looked at Jim and saw his smile. "You're talking about the warehouse, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Angel, I know this is a lot for you right now and you don't need to decide. I want you to be happy, now that this nightmare is finally over."

She looked at everyone's faces and smiled. "I love all of you," she leaned over and hugged Emily. "Let's do it. Oh, there's so much to do," she tried to move, but it hurt.

"Don't worry about anything," Jim said. "Let me show them to their room and we can talk about it later," Jim led Emily and Tony upstairs to the room that had Alex's furniture in it. "Why don't you get settled in? I know you had a long trip. I need to change her bandages anyway."

Emily and Tony started to unpack, and Jim went back downstairs. He got the bandages and medicine out of the bathroom and brought it down to the family room. "Angel, I need to change your bandages now," she removed her pajama top, and he changed the bandage on her shoulder. When he finished, he looked at her. "Looks like everything is healing very well," he lightly touched the scar on her face. "Hopefully, you can take care of that in a few more weeks. That is, if you still want to."

"Yes, I look even worse than I did before."

"Alex, you're beautiful to me. I love you so much. I don't know what I would ever do without you," Tears swelled in his eyes.

“What’s that matter, babe?” Alex asked.

“It’s just that, I don’t want to ever be without you. I want us, I want ...” he struggled for words.

“Jim, you have never been at a loss for words with me before. What are you trying to say?” she took his hand and smiled.

He sat down on the sofa and lifted her carefully on his lap. “I want us. I want us to be together, for always. Alex, my angel, will you marry me?” Jim touched her face and kissed her hand.

Alex looked into his eyes. “Of course, I’ll marry you. I love you so much and I would have never felt that way if it weren’t for you. Yes, oh, yes,” she kissed him tenderly. “James Christopher O’Roark, I would love to be your wife,” she kissed him again.

“Really? You really will marry me?” he asked excitedly. He kissed her and kissed her again. He took her hand and slipped a 2-carat diamond ring on her finger. “Oh, Angel, I love you.”

Chapter Eighteen

Emily and Tony bought Jim's old house and started the process of moving to Arizona. Alex was still confined to her home, so she had Jim take pictures of the warehouse, inside and out, so that she could design the new place for the new A&M Gifts. She spent afternoons sitting out on the front porch sketching out the designs.

Two months after the attack, she was finally feeling good enough to return to work. Only this time, she had a big surprise for everyone who worked at Solutions.

Earlier in the week, she had met with Steven, and they put their proposal into action. Each employee was given a notice that Solutions was changing from a partnership to a corporation.

On Wednesday, all employees reported to the cafeteria before going to work.

Steven spoke to the group. "I know that you're all pretty nervous about the new changes ahead for Solutions. The first thing I want to tell you is that with the company becoming a corporation, you'll all be given the opportunity to purchase stock and be an owner in the company."

Everyone started to clap loudly.

"Yesterday, the final paperwork was signed, and it's official, I own 30 percent of Solutions stock. And, it's my pleasure to announce the name of the majority owner of 51 percent. Her name is Alex Garrison."

The crowd was in shock as Alex walked slowly into the room. She spoke, "Thanks, Steven. I know that you're in shock, as am I. I didn't want this company to be sold to just anyone and have all of you lose your jobs. I think we all will be better employees if we own the company we work for. I'll still do my job, will you all do yours?"

The crowd cheered. Jim walked up to her and started clapping.

"To a new and improved Solutions and a whole new life," Alex said to the crowd as they cheered and clapped.

Jim took Alex in his arms and kissed her. "You did good, boss."