



SUPER ROMANCE

His Brown -Eyed Girl

LIZ TALLEY

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«HarperCollins»

Talley L.

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Lucas Finlay is used to calling the shots. But looking after his two nephews and niece in New Orleans, he's entirely out of his league. Luckily help is next door. With almost no effort Addy Toussant manages to make order from the kid chaos. Lucas is beyond grateful... he's also very attracted to her. Images of an adults-only play date are soon dancing in his head. Yet something in Addy's golden brown eyes tells him not to rush her. It seems that if this romance is to go anywhere, he needs to let her take the lead. Given the promise of what they might have together, Lucas is okay with that.

Содержание

His Brown-Eyed Girl	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	39

She's saving him from...the kids?

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"Thank you for sharing your past with me."

Lucas's expression conveyed his sincerity, and for the first time, Addy did not regret opening up to him. Somehow her confession had broken through that barrier of solitude he'd worn when she first approached.

Addy propped her foot on the bottom step of the porch and gave him a little smile, wanting their solidarity to continue. "Ready to double-team some kids?"

Lucas shook his head. "I'm not cut out for this."

"Who is?"

He walked down the steps and she didn't back away. She'd never been attracted to someone like Lucas before...someone so raw and masculine, so big and Marlboro Man-like.

Stopping in front of her, he reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The gesture was both tender and intimate. She lifted her gaze to his. Those dark eyes were soft, and a flicker of hunger ignited within them.

"You're such a rare beauty, Addy Toussant."

Dear Reader,

I'll never forget one morning while folding clothes, I saw a young woman on a national news program talking about the horror of living with a stalker. Never had I seen such absolute terror on a person's face, and the image haunted me. I'd never contemplated being terrorized by another person set on having power over me. In that moment I wanted to give that sweet woman a happy ending. So the character of Addy Toussant was born.

To help Addy learn to trust and love again would take a special man, and Lucas Finlay fits the bill. A loner rancher/photographer, Lucas is no stranger to heartache—his high school sweetheart and brother betrayed him, leaving a gap in his life...and nephews and a niece who don't know him. Lucas is my take on one of my favorite movies—Uncle Buck. Nothing complicates and demands all hands on deck like being forced to take care of three children, an incontinent dog, a devil cat and two hamsters. Lucas and neighbor Addy must unite, and in the process, they fall in love.

So join me down where the Mississippi is lazy and the food is crazy good for a story of healing and facing the past. As always, I'd love to hear what you think about the story. You can contact me at www.liztalleybooks.com or find me on Facebook at www.facebook.com/liztalleybooks.

Happy reading!

Liz Talley

His Brown-Eyed Girl

Liz Talley



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A 2009 Golden Heart Award finalist in Regency romance, Liz Talley has since found a home writing sassy Southern stories. Her book *Vegas Two-Step* debuted in June 2010 and was quickly followed by four more books in her Oak Stand, Texas series. In her current books, she's visiting one of her favorite cities—New Orleans. Liz lives in north Louisiana with her hero, two beautiful boys and a passel of animals. She enjoys laundry, paying bills and creating masterful dinners for her family. She also lies in her biography to make herself look like the perfect housewife. What she really likes is new shoes, lemon-drop martinis and fishing off the pier at her camp. You can visit her at www.liztalleybooks.com to learn more about the lies she tells herself, and about her upcoming books.

For my dear departed friend Katie Sue Morgan who taught me so much about being a writer.

And a special dedication to the best editor around—Wanda Ottewell.

Her name should be right underneath mine on every book...or maybe before it.

I'm blessed by her guidance and support.

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Excerpt](#)

Chapter One

ADDY TOUSSANT STUDIED the fading bloom of the Pauwela Cloud orchid. Such a shame to snuff out the white-ruffled beauty, but the withered edges of the petal bore the tale. The bloom was off the—snip!—orchid.

Irony didn't escape her as she tucked the petals into the waste bag she wore hooked on her gardening utility belt.

Not that Addy was old. Or unhappy about having her bloom fade. She rather liked the emerging lines around her eyes. Gave her character and all that.

Besides, thirty-two wasn't "old"—it was practically the new twenty-two. Or so a magazine she'd read yesterday in the optometrist waiting room had declared. Still, so many of her high school friends were married and starting families, and though Addy didn't feel empty, something about being so behind the curve made her feel, well, old.

But she shouldn't feel that way. After all, not everyone wanted to be a wife and mother. Some women liked being exactly who they were. She'd always embraced that notion, a lifestyle her aunt Flora had modeled for her.

Addy stood and ignored the cracking of her knees, stretching her back and looking up at the plastic skylight in the greenhouse she'd had built in her yard. Afternoon was giving over to evening. She could see the moon peeking out from behind the pink clouds. Another Tuesday nearing conclusion, but at least it had been filled with sunshine and a warmer breeze.

Then her peace shattered.

A blur of motion rocketed into the structure, rending the heavy plastic sheeting. A scream caught in her throat as she pitched herself to the side, away from the roar. A corner of the greenhouse collapsed under the assault as Addy rolled away. The black rubber tire missed her nose by inches and the reverberation of an engine thundered in her ear. Gasoline fumes choked her and she coughed, raising herself up on an elbow amidst broken pottery. The spinning wheel of the motorbike snagged her sleeve.

"Oh, my sweet Lord," Addy said, her voice drowned by the noise, tugging her loose-sleeved yoga shirt from the grip of the tire and trying to get her bearings. Pushing herself upward, she caught sight of a Converse sneaker and jean-clad leg draped over the seat of the still-rumbling bike.

Addy turned the switch on the handle to the off position. How she knew exactly where the switch was stymied her, but the engine died.

A groan emerged from beneath the wooden shelf that had collapsed onto whoever had driven a small motorcycle into her newly constructed greenhouse.

Addy shoved the splintered wood away to find a small boy. Or—to be more specific—a small boy who'd run through her daylilies on the same motorbike a month ago; a small boy who was the middle child of her irresponsible neighbors; a small boy whose name was Chris.

Or Michael. She got them mixed up.

Okay, so her neighbors weren't necessarily irresponsible, merely overwhelmed with a lot of kids and pets running amuck.

"Chris?"

"What?" he mumbled.

"Are you okay?"

The child moved, pulling his leg to him and lifting himself from the yellowed-grass floor. He blinked and his face crumbled as he realized what had occurred. "Oh, no. My bike."

His bike?

Addy looked at the torn plastic, bent frame, busted shelves and pottery shards. Yeah, she was totally concerned about the stupid bike. Precious, no, valuable, orchids lay scattered on the ground, roots dangling, stems crushed, petals bruised.

Dirt smeared the boy's cheek, and if Addy hadn't been so troubled by the fact the accident-prone child had nearly decapitated himself and destroyed her orchid collection, she might have thought it endearing. But she was upset...and mad...and scared the boy had nearly broken his fool neck.

"My arm hurts," he said, cupping his shoulder. "And my handlebars are all bent."

Addy struggled to her feet, carefully lifting the bike off him and pushing aside. "Let me see."

The boy scooted back, wincing as he cradled his right arm. "Owww."

Addy knelt beside him and gently placed her hand on his forearm. "Can you wiggle your fingers?"

Big tears hovered on his thick lashes. He dashed them away with his other hand. "I don't know."

"Try."

He looked at the arm he held tight against his torso. The grubby little fingers moved. Slowly, he uncurled his fist and wiggled his fingers.

"Good."

He smiled slightly, obviously happy he'd not lost use of his fingers. Carefully, he extended his arm, moving it so his elbow resembled a hinge. "It still hurts a little."

"Well, yeah, you fell on it. Can you stand up?"

He nodded and scrambled to his feet, wincing only slightly as he moved his shoulder.

Addy rose as the new flap in her greenhouse flew open. A huge man stood in the blinding sunlight. She stumbled back, knocking another shelf to the ground. More pottery broke as irrational fear exploded within her. Unable to gain traction, she hit the heavy metal pole supporting the greenhouse and nearly tripped over the discarded bike.

"What in the hell happened here?" the mountain asked, his voice strong as the shoulders filling the space where plastic sheeting had once stretched tight.

Fear rose in Addy's throat as her body prepared to fight. Instinctively, her mind cleared and she noted in mere nanoseconds the exits and the tools around her. She'd been preparing for this day for a long time. But even as her instinct took over, reason clawed its way into her head.

He wasn't a stranger.

She'd seen this man before—he'd been in and out of the Finlay house the past few days, obviously minding the kids. He wasn't there for her. He was here for the boy.

She steadied her breathing, but remained aware...just as she'd practiced.

Chris started crying. "I'm sorry. I really am, Uncle Lucas. I forgot she put this dumb house on my bike path." Tears weren't wiped away. Snot followed. He looked pathetic...and was blaming her for the crash.

She was fairly certain she could build a greenhouse on her own property. Or technically Aunt Flora's property. Addy stared at the kid, wondering if she should say something, wondering how he'd managed to turn into a sobbing mess in a matter of seconds.

The large man jabbed a finger at the boy. "No excuse. I told you to stay off that bike when I wasn't around. I had to wipe your sister, and you disobeyed."

The kid ducked his head, sniffing, tears falling on his New Orleans Saints jersey. "I want my momma. I want my momma."

"Okay, stop yelling at him," Addy said, ungluing herself from the now-sagging plastic and propping her hands on her hips. Remain assertive. Protect the victim. "It's obvious the child is hurt. And scared."

The man flicked dark eyes toward the boy. "Are you hurt, Chris?"

"Mmm-hmm." The boy wiped his face on his sleeve, using the uninjured arm. "I hurt my shoulder."

The man stepped inside, crowding the area, making Addy's heart race...and not in a good way. More in the way large male strangers had been doing for over fifteen years. The fear never went away. She merely had to control it.

Breathing deeply, she stretched out a hand, shifting some of the power. "I'm Addy Toussant. This is my aunt Flora's house, but I live with her."

The man the kid had called Lucas didn't tear his eyes from the boy as he placed a humongous hand on the boy's shoulder. "And I'm Chris's uncle Lucas. I'm taking care of him for a while."

"And Charlotte. And Michael," Chris said, his brown eyes meeting hers as he allowed his uncle to move his arm.

"Yeah, them, too," Lucas muttered, his eyes screwed up in concentration as he poked and prodded the boy. "Stand up so I can get a better look at your shoulder."

Chris allowed Lucas to lift him to his feet. Addy watched for signs of pain in the boy's face, but didn't see anything alarming.

Chris hobbled a little. "My ankle hurts, too."

Lucas stepped back so his shoulder brushed hers. Addy dropped the hand he hadn't shaken and scooted away, ignoring the piece of splintered shelf jabbing into her thigh. "Are you surprised? You drove your bike through this nice lady's, um, house thing."

Chris peered over at her. "Sorry, Miss Abby. Really. I forgot you put this on my trail."

Addy didn't say anything. She probably should say something inane like "It's okay" or "My name's Miss Addy," but she didn't. Mostly because the child had destroyed part of her newly built greenhouse...and plenty of poor, helpless orchids.

"I'm glad you're sorry because you're going to help her rebuild it." This from the tall, dark and somewhat handsome man.

"What? No." Addy turned to the giant glowering at the boy. "It's really not necessary."

"The hell it isn't. I told him to stay off that damn bike while I went in to help his sister. He disobeyed, nearly killed himself and destroyed property in the process. He's helping fix this."

"You're cussing," Chris whined, making a god-awful face. "I don't know nothin' about fixin' stuff."

"Well, that's the way you learn." The man picked up the motorbike as if it were a small toy and rolled it toward the split in the plastic as the older boy arrived on scene.

"Holy shit, Chris, what did you do? Mom's going to freak."

"Watch your mouth," Lucas said, shooting the older boy a stern look, blatantly ignoring his own naughty word moments before.

Michael crossed his arms and gave his uncle a go-to-hell look. "Whatever. Like you don't cuss."

The man ignored him and shoved the bike toward Michael. "Take this to your house."

Michael caught the bike and glowered. "Why do I have to clean up his messes? I always have to—"

"Do what I said," Lucas said, his tone brooking no further argument. "Where's your sister? I left her in the bathroom."

And that was when Charlotte showed up sans pants.

"I'm through," she trilled with a smile, thrusting a wad of toilet paper in the air toward Lucas.

For a moment, all were stunned silent.

"Where are your pants?" Lucas asked as the two older boys started laughing.

"I couldn't put them on. You hadda wipe me." She looked about three or four years old. Old enough to know better than to go outside with a bare behind. Young enough not to care.

The man lifted his eyes heavenward and took in a deep breath. Addy wasn't sure if he was praying or trying his best not to bolt toward the huge truck he'd parked in the narrow drive the day before. She didn't know why he'd gotten saddled with the Finlays' three kids, dog, cat and whatever else they sustained in the rambling shotgun house next door, but he was more of a champ than she.

Or was that chump?

“For crying out loud, Lottie. You’re not supposed to leave the bathroom without clothes on. And you can wipe yourself. You know it and I know it,” Chris said looking like a small parent. “Wipe yourself.”

“But not when I go poop,” Charlotte said, twisting cherub lips beneath bright blue eyes, corkscrew blond curls and a bow askew on her snarled ponytail. Tears filled her eyes and that bottom lip trembled.

The man’s mouth moved.

Definitely praying.

“Uh, hi, Charlotte. Remember me? I’m Miss Addy,” she said, darting a look toward Chris so he got the message about what her name actually was. “Why don’t you go with your brother Michael to your house and let him help you find your pants.”

She heard Michael’s bark of protest and shot him a look that said “Shut it” before turning to the darling pantless girl. “When you’re done, you can come back and I’ll give you a homemade chocolate chip cookie Aunt Flora made for her bridge club.”

Charlotte made a little smile adorable enough to melt the sternest of hearts.

Lucas sighed. “Please, Charlotte, go with your brother.”

The little girl looked up, up, up at the big man above her and her body literally shook. “Mmm’kay.”

Michael rolled his eyes, shifted the dirt bike to Chris and took his sister’s hand—not before carefully inspecting it—and tugged her out the hole in the greenhouse. Toilet paper trailed behind the barefoot child.

Lucas gave Addy his full attention for the first time. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Think I’ll just go, too,” Chris said, slinking past his uncle, rolling his bike toward the entrance.

“Wait,” Lucas said.

The boy stopped and looked at his uncle with frightened eyes. Addy watched as the man forced himself to relax.

“You need to help Miss—” He struggled for her name.

“Toussant,” Addy said.

“—Toussant clean up. And then we’ll arrange a time for you to help repair the damage you’ve done.”

“A boy can’t fix this.” Addy’s gaze roved over the rubble. “I have to replace some beams and most of the sheeting. Plus several of the shelves are broken. And pots. And several plants will need replacing...” Her voice faded as the enormity of the task set in.

“I’m going to help, too,” Lucas said, his dark eyes sweeping her from foot to crown, but not in a skeezy way. No hair raised on her neck. The look was appreciative, but not harmful. There was something else—a tingly awareness that made her swallow the misery of the situation and avert her eyes from the broad shoulders and hard jaw. Her thoughts needed to stay away from the overt maleness of Uncle Lucas.

“I’m sure you don’t have the time what with taking care of the children.”

“I need to help.” His eyes relented in hardness, giving her a glimpse of something else within the depths. Was it desperation? “In fact, I’ll get Michael to help, too. We can make short work of the cleanup.”

“He’s not going to like it,” Chris muttered. “He doesn’t like helping with anything. He’s lazy.”

Addy smiled. Most thirteen-year-old boys were lazy when it came to chores. Michael was not lazy, however, when it came to lacrosse. The boy tossed balls all over his yard. And Addy’s and Mr. Linnert’s and every house within a one-hundred-yard radius. “I don’t care what he likes or doesn’t,” Lucas said, toeing a piece of wood hanging haphazardly from the metal framework of the shelves. “He’s helping us rebuild Miss Toussant’s shed.”

“Greenhouse,” Addy said, accepting the fact she’d have three males and a sometimes pantless toddler invading her world...whether she wished it or not. Lucas didn’t seem the sort to take no for an answer, which was somewhat alarming. But Addy couldn’t deny it would be good for Chris to learn how to right the wrong he’d created. And something about the pleading in the man’s voice had her conceding to what would likely be more trouble than aid. “And you might as well call me Addy since we’re embarking upon a project together.”

“And I’m Lucas.”

“Lucas,” she repeated, holding out her hand again.

This time he took hold of her small hand with something roughly the size of a grizzly paw. But his grasp was warm, friendly even, for a man who seemed made of hard corners.

No zaps of attraction.

No weird tingly crap like in all those movies. Just heartfelt and firm. She inhaled slowly and exhaled with a smile.

Something about his handshake allowed for respite, for some measure of conviction. She knew Courtney and Ben Finlay well enough to know they wouldn’t leave their children with anyone who wasn’t trustworthy. She pulled her hand from his. “I don’t have time this week to rebuild the greenhouse, but I work only until noon on Saturdays. Should be home by one o’clock. I’ll make a list of materials, and if you can get them from a home improvement store...”

Lucas’s eyes traveled over her again. “I can and will. I’m sorry this happened to your greenhouse. I should have made sure he didn’t get on the bike. From here on out, until his mother returns he will not be terrorizing the neighborhood because the bike will be in the garage.”

“But I gotta ride in the Nola Classic in a couple of weeks. I gotta practice.”

Lucas gave the boy a look that should have been hard, but somehow looked sympathetic. “Not while I’m here. Take that up with your—”

“Like that’s going to happen. Why won’t Mom come home? Why won’t you tell us where she is?”

“That’s not my call, kid. My job is to make sure you don’t kill yourself before she gets back...something in which I’m obviously close to failing. Take up complaints with her when she calls.”

“All she does is ask how our day was. She don’t say nothin’ about nothin’,” Chris grumbled.

The whole conversation sounded tense and personal, so Addy bent and started stacking shards of pottery in the plastic rolling bin she used for compost. Her action directed the attention of both males to the task at hand.

Chris carefully set down the bike outside the greenhouse while Lucas shifted unbroken pots of delicate blooms to a concentric area in the one sturdy corner of the house. Wordlessly he picked up broken boards and handed them to Chris, jerking his head toward the two empty trash cans sitting behind her house. He moved elegantly for such a large man and the trepidation Addy had felt earlier returned. She didn’t like being penned inside with him.

“Better get moving. Sun’s about to set.” He moved the cans beside the rent plastic and got to work in a businesslike manner that chased away her fear. She pulled a rake from the small cupboard on which part of the damaged greenhouse rested and did as he suggested.

After so many words spoken, silence was welcome, allowing each to his or her own thoughts. They worked easily together to clear away the mess and restore some order to the broken greenhouse.

“Luckily we’re not expecting frost,” Addy commented, placing the final ruffled pink-and-green orchid in the rows sitting shiva over the pile of poor unsalvageable plants.

Lucas agreed, picking up her ring of keys that held the small canister of pepper spray. He eyed it before passing it to her.

“I’m a single woman.” Her declaration wasn’t an invitation. Wasn’t a status update. It was explanation—she protected herself. Lucas was damn lucky she hadn’t had the keys in hand when he’d burst through the plastic earlier.

“Smart,” he said.

Chris sighed, obviously bored with the adult talk. “Can I take my bike home now?”

Lucas nodded. “I’ll take this pile out to the bin.”

A disturbance at the torn entrance drew Addy’s eye. Blond curls followed by one blue-green eye studied her.

“And then we can have chocolate chip cookies.”

“Don’t both—” Lucas turned as he saw Charlotte emerging in the opening. Her big eyes were fastened on Addy and she looked hungry...maybe for more than chocolate chip cookies.

Addy was accustomed to being around kids—she had a dozen nieces and nephews—but she’d hardly said “boo” to the kids next door, though her aunt Flora liked to chat them up occasionally. Charlotte looked a little lost under her uncle’s care, and an invisible string inside her heart plinked at the girl in her juice-stained T-shirt and mismatched pants.

Holding out a hand, Addy beckoned the girl. “You ready for some cookies?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Charlotte nodded, reaching small grubby fingers toward Addy. “I wike cookies.”

The adorable speech impediment cemented the intent in Addy’s heart. Lucas needed help. “I like cookies, too.”

“Uncle Wucas don’t wike cookies. He wikes beer.”

Addy couldn’t stop the smile. She heard Lucas grunt as he bent to scoop the discarded plants into the rolling bin. “Please don’t tell Sister Regina Maria. She already thinks I’m the very devil,” he said, pushing the bin out into the encroaching darkness. Michael stood at the end of Addy’s drive, tapping on his cell phone, but casting glances toward where Lucas tugged the plastic sheeting closed.

“Sister Regina Maria is my principal,” Charlotte said, looking at Addy with eyes the color of sea glass. Clear blue mottled with bottle green. Beautiful and trusting. But not when she looked at Lucas. Something about the big man scared the girl. Normally, Addy would agree. As a former victim of violence, she avoided large men. Even though she knew it was wrong to judge a man on his size, she couldn’t seem to help herself. Lucas was an oak tree.

“Sister Regina Maria sounds like a good principal. Is she nice?”

Michael joined them. “If dragons are nice.”

“She’s not a dragon,” Charlotte admonished, her plump lips straightening in a line, her brow wrinkling into thunderclouds. “You a fart head. Chris said so.”

Michael laughed. “He’d know.”

Charlotte didn’t seem to know what to say. But Lucas did. “Michael, did you finish your schoolwork?”

The boy gave his uncle a withering look.

“Did you?”

The boy still didn’t answer, but instead tugged Charlotte’s hand. “Let’s go home, Lottie.”

“Nooo,” the toddler screeched, pulling away from Michael. “I want cookies.”

“We got cookies.” The boy leaned over and picked his sister up, shooting Lucas a funny look. “If you don’t come with me, I’ll leave you with Uncle Lucas all by yourself.”

The little girl froze and slid her gaze to her towering uncle. “Nooo! He eats little kids’ fingers. Did he eat Mommy?”

Michael’s eyes sparked. “Probably. He hates Mom and Dad.”

Charlotte started crying, but her older brother didn’t seem to care. He charged toward the gap in the camellia bushes, not bothering to listen as his uncle shouted “Stop!”

“That little—” Lucas bit down on the expletive sure to explode from his mouth. He shoved the rolling bin to the side and started toward the gap.

But Addy did something unexpected.

She reached out and laid a hand on his arm.

And Lucas stopped, turned to her and arched a dark eyebrow. “What?”

“Let him go.”

The man shrugged off her touch. “He’s being—”

“Lucas Whatever Your Name Is, I think you need to tell me what’s really going on.”

Chapter Two

LUCAS FINLAY LOOKED at the small woman staring expectantly at him with eyes the color of aged wheat—not quite golden but not wholly brown—and stilled himself.

What was really going on?

How about total incompetency in dealing with kids?

Or helplessness?

Or guilt?

Or all of the above?

All those would likely cover the past forty-eight hours spent in the company of three kids he knew nothing about, a house that creaked and moaned and had weak pipes, and pets that needed constant feeding and walking. He’d encountered more poop in the past two days than in his entire lifetime...and he raised cattle on his ranch.

Not to mention, Michael had been correct.

Not about eating small children. Lucas might be tall, but he’d given up devouring tiny tots long ago...when he’d sold the golden-egg-laying goose. But the boy had been right about him hating his brother and sister-in-law. Unequivocally correct.

“It’s a long story.”

Addy hooked a dramatic eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“I need to go.”

“Where are Ben and Courtney?”

For a moment, he didn’t answer. Was it any of her business? She was a neighbor. Neighbors carried tales and Lucas wasn’t sure what Courtney wanted to reveal about Ben’s injuries...about the fact Lucas’s younger brother lay in a hospital bed miles away, knocking on death’s door. “They’re in Virginia.”

Not a lie. Walter Reed Army Hospital was in Virginia.

“Ben’s deployed to Afghanistan. Was he injured?”

Lucas didn’t move a muscle. “I can’t give out information without their permission.”

“What about your parents? Why aren’t they here instead of you?”

“Mom and Dad are in Europe, trying to get back so they can meet Courtney in Virginia. There was no one else to stay with the kids on such short notice.”

The woman didn’t say anything. Just studied him, which made him uncomfortable. This is what he didn’t like about being back in New Orleans. People lurked around every corner and there were so many things in his way—trees, bushes, grass, lushness. Yes, everything was so damn plush and suffocating.

Not like West Texas where a man could breathe. Where a man could stretch out and see for days what came toward him. There were no corners...and very few people. And those very few people left him the hell alone. Just as he wished.

Here in New Orleans, he drowned in all the stuff surrounding him.

Mostly in dog piss because Kermit the golden retriever had bladder issues. The vet was on the list for tomorrow, but if he had to go to Home Depot...

She cleared her throat.

He glanced at her again. She hadn’t warmed up to him, but most people didn’t. There was something hard in his demeanor, something off-putting that sent people away from him rather than toward him. Probably his size. He stretched six foot four inches and filled up most doorways with

his breadth. He wasn't fat, but neither was he slim. Solid. Thick. And unlikely to smile. Charm was his antonym.

But he liked the look of her. Petite but not mousy. Brown hair that caught in the waning sunlight. Pleasant heart-shaped face. Very natural—no caked-on makeup or weirdly patterned shirts with spiky high heels. Just simplicity. Yeah, this woman looked simple. His fingers itched to photograph her. He'd use the new Nikon and catch the natural light falling soft against her golden skin.

Then he remembered where he was.

"Look, I don't feel comfortable talking about the situation. Courtney hasn't told the kids what issues she and Ben are facing." Damn. Even that was too much to say. He could tell Addy knew the situation wasn't good, but he couldn't take back his words. Yet, somehow he knew this woman wouldn't spread them around.

She nodded, mink hair falling over slim shoulders. He wondered what she'd do if he reached over and felt it between his thumb and finger. Scream?

Then he remembered the pepper spray on her key ring and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Okay, I'm smart enough to realize it's something bad otherwise you wouldn't be here. I've never seen you before so that means you're not close to your brother. The children seem scared of you, likely perpetuated by Michael who is locked in a power struggle with you. So I'd say—"

"You a counselor?"

She smiled and her face transformed into beauty. Not an overblown, sexy beauty, but the kind a person observes as a swan glides over the water on a still morn, the kind reflected in a pool sitting taciturn beneath a towering mountain pass. Serene beauty. Peaceful beauty. "I'm a floral designer."

His expression must have betrayed the question.

"Fine. It's a fancy way of saying I'm a florist."

At this he gave a rare smile. "So you arrange things. Pull apart, reassemble and create something that makes sense...just as you're doing now?"

She made a face. "I don't think anyone has ever put it in such a way, but I suppose that's accurate."

A scream erupted from the house. Chris or Charlotte? He couldn't tell.

"That's my cue. Need to go, but I'll send over whichever child's not bleeding for your list." His strides ate up the distance between her drive and the gap in the bushes. For some odd reason he didn't want to leave her just yet.

Or maybe he merely tried to avoid the slap of reality awaiting him. He'd learned kids were fantastic at delivering those particular slaps.

Before he disappeared, Lucas turned and held up his hand. "Good to meet you and sorry about —"

Another scream.

Addy jerked her gaze to the blue house. "Go."

So he did.

Of course when he saw what awaited him when he stepped through the front door, he wished he'd stayed awhile longer basking in the serenity that was his brother's next-door neighbor.

Charlotte stood in the living room screeching like a parrot, pointing at a huge puddle of something.

"What?" he shouted, stomping onto the area rug.

Charlotte froze.

"Where are your brothers?"

She didn't say anything. Just looked at him like he had horns. Like he might be looking over the plumpest parts of her for his nighttime meal.

"Michael!" He called up the stairs.

No answer.

Kermit, the ancient golden retriever, slunk past, quickstepping it toward the kitchen and back door.

“Oh, no,” Lucas muttered, glancing at Charlotte. “Is that dog pee?”

She slowly nodded. “I stepped in it. Gross.”

Chris came in holding a large plastic storage bag filled with ice, sank into the leather recliner and propped his ankle up, plunking the ice on his bare foot and grabbing the remote control. “Looks like Kermit the Dog peed again.”

Lucas closed his eyes and counted, throwing in a Hail Mary and the Serenity prayer for good measure. When he opened his eyes, the things he couldn’t change were still there. Dog pee, three-year-old and a ten-year-old watching Cinemax.

“Hey, turn that to a kid’s channel or something,” he said, giving Chris the same eyeball job his father had given him when he sneaked off to watch shoot ’em up movies.

“But it’s PG-13. No sex or nothin’.”

“You’re not thirteen. You’re barely ten. Turn the channel. Now.” Lucas skirted the pond of pee and looked at his niece who balanced on one foot.

“It gotted on me,” she said by way of explanation.

“Of course. It’s nearly time for your bath, so we’ll take one early, okay?”

“Kay. Can I have frooty-ohs for dinner?” she asked, allowing him to lift her. She didn’t even shudder, but she didn’t hold on to him, either. Maybe they were making progress. “You weally ain’t a monster, are you?”

“No. I’m your uncle. Your daddy’s older brother. I’m just big.”

Her blue eyes didn’t blink.

“You’re little. Does that make you a fairy?”

She smiled and something near the rock that was his heart stirred. Felt like gas but not as sharp.

“Like Tinkerbell?”

“Who’s Tinkerbell?”

The little girl relaxed against him as he climbed the stairs. “You don’t even know who Tinkerbell is?”

Music blasted from behind Michael’s closed door. Lucas knocked but got no response, so he kept moving toward the kids’ bathroom. Courtney had obviously taken pains to make it bright and kidlike, but the boys seemed to care little, tossing their socks, undies and wet towels on the floor and leaving streaks of toothpaste in the sink.

“Here. I’ll start your bath then I’ll get Michael to help you while I clean up the mess Kermit made.”

Charlotte balanced on one foot, holding aloft a tiny foot with chipped pink polish on her little toenails. “Kay.”

Lucas banged on Michael’s door.

No answer. Of course.

“Michael!” Lucas raised his fist to pound on the door once more but it jerked open.

Music battered him and an angry thirteen-year-old with sullen brown eyes met him. “What?”

Lucas lowered his fist because the kid’s eyes darted to it and there was a hunted look in them.

“I need you to bathe your sister.”

“That’s not my job. I did my homework and took out the trash. Plus, I already wiped her and put her pants on.”

“Fine. I’ll bathe her. You clean up your dog’s pee. Use the steam cleaner.” Lucas turned toward the bathroom.

“Fine. Whatever. I’ll bathe the flea.” There were equal parts disgust and resignation in Michael’s voice.

Good. Lucas didn't want to bathe Charlotte again. The first night she'd sung songs about spaghetti at the top of her lungs and insisted on using something called Dora the Explorer shampoo...which he could not find. He'd also thought she'd bathe herself, but that didn't seem to be the case. Seems he was supposed to bathe her. And it felt weird because he'd never washed a little girl before. Big girls and a bottle of bath gel? Sign him up. Little girls with Strawberry Shortcake soap and a Mardi Gras party cup to rinse her hair? Not so much.

He'd take dog pee any day of the week.

Chris quickly changed the channel when Lucas entered the room so he tossed him another Father Knows Best stern look and went in search of the paper towels stored in the half bath under the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later he stood in the kitchen looking at the retriever who sat innocently at the back door, tongue loll'd out, happiness pouring out of sweet brown eyes. He sort of wanted to kick it...and he sort of wanted to take it for a walk. Or maybe fishing. He'd always wanted a dog to take fishing.

"Out, Kermit. And don't piss in the house again."

The dog lumbered out into the fenced yard. And the Wicked Cat of the West darted in.

Mittens. Meaner than a two-headed snake.

Lucas sighed and leaned his head against the smooth painted wood of the door.

He needed help.

He didn't know what in the hell he was doing as evidenced by being yelled at in the carpool line while picking up Charlotte from school. Sister Regina Maria had actually scared him...and she was barely five feet tall.

Why did he tell Courtney he would come to New Orleans and watch the kids?

Of course, he knew the answer. But it was complicated...and tied around the fact the brother he'd once loved and now hated was teetering on the precipice of death. Nutshell.

But all the other shit he felt cluttered around that reason made it harder than he'd ever thought to be here in the world he'd left behind.

Long ago.

Courtney's voice. Please, Lucas. I know you hate me, but please. I don't know what else to do. I have to be with Ben. Have to. Please, he's your brother. This is me begging you.

Words he'd longed to hear, but never in such regard. He'd wanted to punish Courtney. Wanted her to grovel. To regret. To know what she'd given up.

But her words hadn't been filled with regret.

They had been for her children, the ones she'd had with his brother. The family she loved more than her pride. So she'd begged him to help her. Begged the man she'd betrayed so she could go to the man she'd cheated on him with—his own brother.

Lucas banged his forehead against the door.

"Uncle Wucas?"

Charlotte stood in the doorway clad in a nightgown with ponies on it. Her wet hair hung nearly to her waist, but he knew now from experience it would curl up to her shoulders when it dried. Her blue eyes looked so much like Courtney's—big and ready to be filled by life. She still looked frightened of him, but he couldn't do anything about it.

He tried to smile but it probably looked as if he were in pain. She took a step back.

"Do you want some cereal?" He walked to the fridge. "Uh, I think your brother must have drank the last of the milk." He looked at her. Would she pitch a fit? He'd seen kids her age in the grocery store lying on the floor, screaming and kicking. Lucas wasn't up for handling that at the moment, not after the dirt bike crash and the dog piss.

Chris hobbled in. "What's for dinner?"

Good question. "How about pizza?"

“Yes!” Chris pumped his fist in the air. Oddly enough, he landed on his “injured” foot without a grimace telling Lucas all he needed to know about a trip to the doctor.

Charlotte didn’t say anything, but several crystalline tears hung on her thick blond lashes.

“You don’t like pizza?” Lucas asked, using the voice he used on his mares when they were foaling.

Charlotte shook her head.

“Shut up, Lottie. You like pizza,” Chris said, hopping to the pantry, grabbing a bag of potato chips and shoving a handful into his mouth. Pieces fell, sprinkling the floor and his T-shirt.

Lucas grabbed the bag and rolled it shut. “If you want pizza, you need to lay off the chips.”

“But—” Chris made a swipe for the bag, but when he realized he had no chance, he dropped his arms and glared at Lucas. “Why are you here anyway? We don’t even know you.”

Good question. Lucas didn’t know the answer. On the drive from West Texas to Louisiana the same question had bounced around in his head. Why was he going to help out a family he knew nothing about?

Well, he knew a little.

His mother had forwarded him Christmas cards of this perfect family year after year. Lucas had watched his nephews and niece grow up in the happy, shiny photos, gummy grins shifting into painful half smiles. But other than a Christmas card and what he gleaned from his parents, Lucas knew nothing about his brother’s family. “Because your mother needed help.”

“But you hate my dad.” Statement. Delivered with anger. From the affable Chris.

Charlotte stopped swinging on the doorknob.

Michael appeared, face dark as a thundercloud, arms crossed. Tension hung like wet flannel. “Yeah, you do. We’re not stupid. So why don’t you clue us all in on why we’ve never seen you before now?”

Another good question.

But the truth was too hard for children.

“Where’s the number for a pizza place nearby?”

Flickering within the dark depths of Michael’s eyes—so similar to Ben’s—was an unspoken line scratched between them. “Find it yourself, Uncle.”

* * *

ADDY STARED at the dregs in her chai tea. She should have had decaffeinated tea or a nice glass of wine. The past few hours had left her unsettled and sucking down caffeine hadn’t been a good idea. She lit the chamomile-and-honey-scented candles on the shelf above the ancient claw-foot tub and tossed some dried lavender in the water pouring from the arched faucet.

Surely a bath would wash her cares away and later she’d get back to reading about the sensual Arabian sheikh and the woman who defied him...only out of bed of course.

“Addy?”

Addy set the empty teacup on the marble vanity and pulled on her worn terry-cloth robe as her aunt Flora burst into the bathroom.

“Oh, there you are,” Aunt Flora said, readjusting a sombrero on her gray locks. “I hollered for you for a good five minutes. Thought you were out for a run.”

“You know I don’t run at night. The faucet must have masked the sound of you calling. What the heck are you wearing?”

“What does it look like?” Aunt Flora asked. “It’s one of those Mexican hats. Doris got it for me for the Zumba class. We’re doing a Latin routine that requires a sombrero.”

“Mexican Hat Dance?” Addy cracked.

Aunt Flora twisted her lips and sent her eyes toward the pressed-tin ceiling. “Well, I don’t know the song, but it’s very sexy. You should come to class with me.”

“I’ll stick to yoga and running. I’m hopeless at sashaying.”

Aunt Flora snorted and sat on the toilet lid. “We don’t sashay. We rumba, salsa and do kicks. But stick to your boring exercise. Zumba is for the young at heart.”

“There’s an insult in there somewhere.”

“Phooey. The insult was right out front.” Aunt Flora smiled, revealing the gold crowns in the back of her mouth. The woman had a Cheshire cat smile and a wicked sense of humor...when she could still find it. “I saw that tall drink of water next door. Who is he? And where can I get one?”

“He’s Ben’s brother. I think. At any rate, he’s the kids’ uncle Lucas. And I don’t think he’s for sale.” Addy tamped down the odd feeling stirring inside at the thought of the man who had so recently invaded her world. She felt an attraction toward him, which seemed at odds with the perpetual fear she clung to whenever a large man lumbered into her periphery. That contradiction unsettled her.

Not that she couldn’t use a man in her life.

Again she reminded herself she wasn’t unhappy without a man to stomp bugs and fix the hinge on the laundry room door. Still she wouldn’t mind a date or two...but this man had his hands full enough without worrying with her. And he’d be leaving eventually. Of course she didn’t know where he’d return to, just that he would. So not a good idea to open herself up to the idea of Lucas.

“Pity. I’d take a dozen. I could use some help around here. And he’s a good-lookin’ tall drink of water, if you ask me,” Aunt Flora said, plucking at the tight Lycra covering her thin legs. Honestly, the tight leggings weren’t appropriate on a seventy-five-year-old woman, but when had something like propriety ever stopped her flamboyant aunt?

“I didn’t ask you.” Addy shut off the water and cocked an eyebrow at her aunt.

Flora didn’t budge. “You could use a drink of water.”

“I could use a bath. I’m dirty and the middle Finlay kid destroyed my new greenhouse two hours ago.”

“What?” Aunt Flora rose and jerked the blinds open, peering out in the inky darkness to where Addy’s greenhouse tilted like a drunk.

“Hey! I’m naked under this robe,” Addy said, pulling the collar closed and moving out of line of sight in case anyone peeped out the upper window of the blue house next door. Which never happened. That she knew of.

“Heh.” Flora shook her head and pulled the blinds closed. “Wouldn’t want anyone to see you nekkid, now would we? Might lead to dangerous things.”

“Aunt Flora.” Addy shook her head.

“Just saying.”

“I’m not afraid of it leading to dangerous things. I just don’t want to scar those poor Finlay children for life,” Addy said, trying to deliver her aunt the message she wanted to get on with her bath so the woman needed to skedaddle.

“You have a beautiful body and there’s a thirteen-year-old boy next door. If he should catch sight of a nekkid Addy Toussant, then he’d be set up for failure his entire life, for you, my dearest, are the loveliest of women. It’s a good thing he hasn’t caught sight yet. I don’t need boys with binoculars falling out of trees.”

Addy snorted. “That’s so inappropriate. And you’re too good at flattery.”

“I’m a pro. It’s what I do.” Aunt Flora grabbed Addy under her chin and gave a squeeze. “But I’m not a liar.”

“I left you some soup on the stove. Should still be warm, but if you need it hotter, use the microwave.”

Aunt Flora stilled. “I know very well how to light a fire on that stove. Been doing it since you were knee-high, and I didn’t cause that fire.”

“I know,” Addy said, laying a soothing hand on her aunt’s forearm. “Put that out of your mind. I’m going to take a bath and then we’ll watch that cutie pie Mark Harmon in NCIS, okay?”

Aunt Flora nodded, but the damper remained. Addy wanted to kick herself but knew her role as semicaretaker of her aunt meant she had to step on Flora's toes at times. Her aunt had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease—still in its early stages—and though she functioned well enough to drive familiar distances and conduct her daily living, she had suffered some setbacks, most recently, a small fire when she'd left the oven mitt on the burner. "Yes, that sounds nice. Enjoy your bath, dear."

The door closed and Addy twisted the lock, craving the solitude of fragrant water and her own thoughts. She stepped into the water, settled in the claw-foot tub and allowed the warmth to embrace her. The scent of lavender soothed her and almost made her forget the intensity of Lucas's dark eyes.

Lucas.

Why did the man intrigue her?

Maybe because he looked like a man who needed help. Three kids, a bunch of pets and a chaotic household? She'd likely need a bottle of wine in hand to muddle through, and she'd been raised with four brothers and sisters, along with assorted pets.

But Lucas had never asked outright for assistance.

So maybe it wasn't the fact he looked like a man who needed someone to toss him a lifesaver.

Maybe she was intrigued by those broad shoulders, the jaw hewn from marble, the slightly full bottom lip that pressed into a stern line when he looked troubled...which was frequent in her limited experience. Besides, he'd looked pretty spectacular in those worn Wranglers.

Yeah, she'd noticed the brand of jeans.

Cowboy jeans.

Boots.

Callous hands and—

A knock sounded on the door.

"Yes?" she called out.

"A little boy hobbled over here with a paper and said he wants a list. What am I to do with it?" Aunt Flora's tinny voice asked. "Oh, and...well, dearest, another letter from Angola."

Addy's heart plunged as she shot upright, sloshing water onto the tile floor. Fear's fingers squeezed hard. She sucked in air, closing her eyes and counting slowly as the alarm sounded inside her.

Windows locked? Yes.

Door bolted. Always.

Or maybe not. Aunt Flora had answered the front door, allowing Chris to hand off something. What if she hadn't relocked it? Her fading memory allowed for such gaps in the house's security.

Addy stood, water sluicing down her body, and jerked her robe from the hook.

"Addy?" Aunt Flora called. "You're not answering me, and that little boy is waiting down in the foyer."

The front door was definitely unlocked.

"Just a minute, Aunt Flora," Addy called, scooping up a towel and rubbing at her legs.

Breathe, Addy. Robbie Guidry still sits in a prison cell a hundred miles away. Breathe.

Addy hurried across the bathroom, twisted the bolt and jerked open the door. Aunt Flora chirped a surprised oh and stepped back, holding a yellow legal-size paper that said List at the top. She also held a letter that stuck out to the side. A stamp declared it sent from a prisoner at Angola State Penitentiary. Not Robbie. He wouldn't risk jeopardizing his parole. He used a friend, no doubt.

Addy's heart stopped.

"Sorry," she said, by way of apology when Aunt Flora clasped her free hand to her chest. "Did you lock the front door?"

Aunt Flora blinked. "The front door? Well, I think I did. Chris is standing there, and—"

"You have to always lock the front door, Aunt Flora. You know that," Addy said, sliding past her aunt while tightening the sash of her bathrobe. Normally, she wouldn't venture out in front of

anyone in such a state, but desperate times and desperate measures called for showing the legs she hadn't had time to shave.

She jogged down the stairs so fast Chris jumped when she hit the landing.

"Hey, uh, Addy," the boy said, nervously shifting his eyes around the foyer she'd painted Wedgewood blue last spring. He'd never been in her aunt's house before. Not many people had. "Uncle Lucas sent me over to get your list. I have to get my homework done and everything, uh, soon."

Addy reached over to twist the dead bolt, but just as her hand touched the handle the door opened.

She screamed and stumbled back.

Chris frowned and pulled the door open to reveal Charlotte standing on the porch in a pink nightgown and bare feet. "It's just Charlotte."

Addy's racing heart didn't slow. She clasped her chest and closed her eyes. "Oh, God, you scared me to death, Charlotte."

"You wearing a wobe," Charlotte said, sidling in, damp curls bouncing. "I have one. It's purple."

"Go home." Chris flung out an arm and pointed toward their house. "You're not supposed to go outside without permission. And never out the front door, Lottie."

"I came with you," Charlotte said, looking at her brother with eyes pure as snowbanks at midnight. "I love you. You're my best brother."

Chris hesitated, brown eyes flickering down at his little sister. "Well, I don't care. You still can't leave without telling—"

"Charlotte!" Lucas shouted, taking the porch steps two at a time. "What the hell do you think you're doing running off like that? Do you know what could have happened?"

The man's eyes blazed and even Chris stepped back, bumping into an antique table holding figurines her aunt had bought in Italy.

Charlotte screeched and scampered behind Addy, where she proceeded to crank up a good wail.

Addy curved a hand around the child's shoulder and held her to the back of her thigh. Charlotte wrapped her chubby arms around Addy's leg, causing the terry cloth to part. Addy felt the cool night air on her bare thighs and tried to tug the robe closed. As she jerked the bottom closed, she felt the bodice part. She let go of the child, pulling both parts closed and clutching them as she faced the huge man filling up her doorway. "Stop yelling at her. Please."

Lucas stilled, shifting in his boots, eyeing the exact spot where she held tight to the fabric. His gaze lowered slightly before rising to her face. "I'm sorry, but she scared me. I sent Chris over for your list, and after I paid the pizza guy, I couldn't find Charlotte."

The little girl still cried, holding fast to Addy. "As you can see, your yelling is not helping the situation."

"She's not supposed to leave our house without Momma," Chris said, folding his arms, very adultlike. He was quite the little parent.

"Mommy! I want my mommy!" Charlotte wailed, her little body trembling against Addy's leg.

"Here." Addy bent and scooped the child into her arms, praying she had not just shown her promised land to the two males in her foyer, and strode toward the living room on her left. Making calming noises, she stroked the little girl's back. "Shh, shh, Charlotte. Your mommy will be home soon."

The child hid her face in the curve of Addy's neck and squeezed her tighter. Addy sank onto the flowered couch, carefully tucking her robe around her and glanced at the two men standing silently in the foyer. She jerked her head, indicating they follow her, and tried not to worry about the front door standing wide-open, an invitation to the outside world.

Lucas pulled the door shut and nudged Chris toward where Addy sat.

"What?" Chris pulled back. "No, I wanna go. I'm hungry. Besides, I still gotta do some math."

Lucas nodded. "Go then. Three slices of pizza only. No soda."

“Cool. Later, Addy.” Chris didn’t wait for her response as he slid out the door, closing it with a loud bang.

Addy couldn’t stop herself from eyeing the unlocked dead bolt. A second later she lifted her gaze to Lucas who noticed her preoccupation with the door, but hopefully thought she worried about the force the ten-year-old had used.

He walked into her living room, gaze darting left then right before once again landing on her.

“I’m sorry,” Lucas said, ducking his chin slightly. “I didn’t mean to scare her. Or you.”

The irony was Addy wasn’t scared.

Nervous to be practically naked in the room with a man she felt an uncanny attraction toward? Yes. Scared? No.

And that thought surprised the hell out of her.

She should be terrified of a man storming into the place she felt safest, yelling, disrupting, darting glances at the places that made her very much different from him.

Moments before she had been terrified.

The letter from Angola had been sent to terrorize her, and her heart still thudded from the adrenaline of pounding down the stairs and being startled by Charlotte. But Lucas arriving, filling up the foyer with his strength and somewhat sweet failing at being a caregiver stilled her. So odd, yet so welcome in the face of what she’d experienced earlier.

Lucas quieted her trembling.

“I know you didn’t,” Addy murmured, stroking Charlotte’s back again. “But you are a large man and somewhat frightening to a small girl.”

“I apologized. I don’t know what else to say.”

Addy shook her head and cuddled the little girl who sank into her, snuffling but no longer sobbing. Something sweet and tender toward the child awoke within Addy. Having her mother leave her with someone Charlotte didn’t know had to be traumatic. “I know you don’t know what to say, but you have to try on her shoes. She’s young and missing her mother. She doesn’t understand what’s going on, only that you scare her with your scowls and anger.”

Something in his eyes softened, something different glowing within. “But I don’t scare a big girl like you?”

Chapter Three

LUCAS WATCHED ADDY as she held Charlotte, her elegant fingers stroking the child’s back. Rich hair fell in dark hanks around her serious face, and he had to practice extreme self-discipline not to slide his gaze to her bare thighs. Something about the turn of a calf, the delicacy of a knee and the sleekness of a woman’s thigh got him every time. Total leg man.

And the glimpse of soft curve of breast covered by the child’s golden ringlets wasn’t helping any.

“Should I be afraid of you?” Addy asked, her gaze earnest and steady. Flirty hadn’t worked on her.

“No.”

“But Charlotte is afraid, Chris is out of control and, from what little I’ve seen of the oldest, he’s declared you the enemy,” Addy said.

He chewed on that nugget. Of course she was right, but could he out and out admit he was a failure? “Charlotte has said time and again I’m big...but I’m not much larger than her father.”

“But Ben’s her father. You’re a stranger to her.”

He shoved a hand through hair in need of a trim—he hadn’t had time to pop by the barber before he’d left Rotan. Moment of truth. “Okay. You’ve got me. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

Addy’s lips twitched but her gaze didn’t hold victory. Wasn’t like she hadn’t clued in to his incompetence within seconds of meeting him. “Takes a big man to admit it. No pun intended, of course.”

He allowed his lips to curve upward by a centimeter. “It’s obvious.”

“Pretty much.” The child had stilled in Addy’s lap and lay heavy against her body, seemingly content to have her warmth and calming influence. Again, he was struck by the way Addy soothed those around her even as she herself often looked spooked.

Why did she continue to look toward the door? Maybe he made her nervous and she was subconsciously ushering him toward the exit? Yet her words didn’t rush him out, and she’d invited him into the living area.

“I thought I could handle a few kids—maybe not the evil cat that jumps on my legs in the middle of the night. It’s not like the kids are in diapers. I should be able to—”

“You think they’re easier when they can move around independently and back-talk you?”

“Point made.”

“So I’ll see what I can do to help you out a little.”

His gaze jerked to hers. “You’ll help?”

“Sure. As much as I can.”

“How?” Sweet relief blanketed him. Addy seemed capable and sincere—two qualities he appreciated in his fellow man, or rather woman. If there was any lemonade to be had after the lemons Chris had given by crashing into a greenhouse, this was it.

“Well, all the children should help us rebuild the greenhouse for two reasons—first, they can get to know you better with a like purpose in mind and, second, they’ll be easy to keep an eye on. At some point, you and I can sit down and go over their schedules and see where I, or even my Aunt Flora, can help out. For example, Aunt Flora’s an excellent cook and would likely be happy to save you from pizza every night.”

“Who’s Aunt Flora?”

“I’m Aunt Flora.”

Lucas swiveled his head to where an older woman stood wearing a sombrero, a pair of pajama pants and a sweatshirt that read “I may be old but you’re a moron.” She looked a little like an older Lucille Ball, replete with red lipstick...and a little like she might have escaped from an asylum.

“Lucas, this is my aunt, Flora Demarco,” Addy said, nodding toward the woman.

Aunt Flora raked him with a speculative gaze, lingering on particular parts. Like a connoisseur of men, she weighed and measured him...then gave him a smile that might have worried a lesser man. But Lucas was accustomed to such smiles.

He stuck out a hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Demarco. I’m Lucas Finlay, Ben’s brother.”

“Miss Demarco, please. Or rather Flora.” She wiggled a finger at Charlotte who peeked out from her resting spot on Addy’s small breasts. Lucky child.

“I just told Lucas that we would be glad to help him. Courtney and Ben are undergoing some hardship, and Lucas has his hands more than full with the kids and the running of a household.”

“Of course,” Flora said, reaching toward Charlotte. “I’ll start with taking this moppet into the kitchen for some milk and, perhaps, a cookie? I remember chocolate chip is your fav, right?”

Charlotte raised her head and nodded, lifting chubby arms to Flora. Addy shifted the child, trying in vain to cover her thighs, and set the girl on the floor. The little girl took the older woman’s hand and allowed herself to be led from the room. She didn’t look back. Addy cleared her throat and looked at the brass fireplace tools on the hearth.

Taking the child away gave an unsettling intimacy to the situation.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely, trying to pull his mind away from the way her damp hair winged away from her delicate neck and the fact she probably wore not a stitch of clothing beneath the terry cloth.

A fierce hunger bloomed within him when he thought of her taut stomach and uptilted breasts. He could just make out the outline of her nipples and imagined their pliant puffiness growing hard beneath his fingers. Beneath his mouth.

“You’re welcome,” she said, jarring him from the kinky dream world he’d leaped into when thinking about her naked body.

He should be ashamed since the woman volunteered to help him with the kids, but Lucas Finlay rarely felt shame for wanting a woman.

And this one he wanted.

But he’d have to resist.

Something in Addy’s demeanor told him she wasn’t a woman to trifle with a man. Not that she looked beyond hot, fast sex on, say, the very couch on which she sat, but something he quite couldn’t put his finger on warned a tumble with the florist wouldn’t be wise.

“So you’ll help me with the kids?” he asked, refocusing on the reason he was even in the same room with Addy.

“Sure, and if Aunt Flora isn’t tied up for tomorrow evening, we’ll see if she can whip up some dinner for the kids, distracting them, while you and I look over their schedules. We can’t do anything about Charlotte’s fear of you or Michael’s resentment, but we can make the space in which they operate more efficient. Sound good?”

His mind flitted toward alone time with Addy. He’d like that. Would love breathing in her clean soft scent, feeling the accidental brush of her hand and the anticipation of what could happen between them...if he would allow it. “Sounds perfect. I think Michael has something at his church tomorrow night, so it will only be Charlotte and Chris for the evening.”

“See, one occupied. Two to go.” She smiled as she smoothed the fabric over her thighs. He clearly made her uneasy, but not in a fearful way.

Something crackled between them and she held his gaze for a moment, licking those pink lips nervously.

Heat poured into his pelvis and he felt himself harden.

Hell.

“Uh, sorry about being in such a state of undress. I was in the middle—”

“Don’t give me any fodder for my imagination.”

Her face pinkened and Lucas thought it adorable. A blush in a world where women asked men out on dates and carried their own condoms was to be savored. Addy was refreshing and he wanted to breathe her in.

“I don’t know what to say to that other than...okay.” She gave a nervous laugh.

Silence fell between them, prodding him to grab the kid and haul his cookies to the house next door. Well, not his cookies, but if he brought a few of Aunt Flora’s chocolate chip cookies, he’d have some bribery at the ready.

“I’d better go. It’s almost Charlotte’s bedtime and I still have to fight with her to brush her teeth. Plus, Michael has to be at school early for tutoring, and wrestling Chris into bed is somewhere in the middle of all that.”

“Use a timer for Charlotte and see if you can’t make it a game.”

“What?”

Addy stood and gave him another glimpse of thigh.

Thank you, dear Lord, for that small gift.

“Brushing her teeth. I have a funny chicken timer you can use. Set it for a minute and make it a game.”

“That will work?”

Addy shrugged. “Worked for my little sister. She hated brushing her teeth. Now she’s in dental school.”

Lucas followed Addy to the kitchen, trying to control the impulse to grab her, whirl her around and kiss the devil out of her. He craved her mouth. Wanted to touch her, hold her—

“Here,” Addy said, plopping a chicken timer into his hand, totally destroying his visions of kissing her. Chicken timers had a way of curbing horniness.

Or maybe it was Aunt Flora and Charlotte sitting at a retro silver table happily discussing cookies dissolving the desire.

The kitchen was pleasantly old-fashioned with white tile counters and a black-and-white-patterned floor. Touches of red and yellow dotted the palate, giving a homey feel to the slightly industrial stainless steel appliances that were very much of this century. A comfortable place as evident by Charlotte’s swinging legs and chocolate-smeared face.

“I don’t wanna leave,” Charlotte said.

Addy squatted, tucking the terry cloth against her behind. Damn, she was sexy as hell in that raggedy bathrobe.

Lucas had to turn away to contemplate something besides the curvy brunette with her sexy bare feet and delicate wrists. He needed to get a grip...or get laid.

“You must go home so you can come again tomorrow. Uncle Lucas said you can come and play.”

Could he come play, too? He knew of a few games to play with Addy...but she’d have to take off that—

Curb it, bud.

Swallowing hard, he studied the badly painted rooster perched upon the cabinet and focused on withering the erection growing in his jeans.

Okay, Luke ol’ boy, think about the dog piss. Or the overflowing garbage can you forgot to set out at the curb. Or the claws of the Wicked Cat of the West sinking into your balls. Yeah. That works...

“I’ll come tomorrow. For a cookie,” Charlotte said.

Lucas heard the chair scrape against the tile and turned. Charlotte slid from the chair and wrapped her arms around Addy’s neck.

“Good girl,” Addy murmured, catching his gaze and giving him a little smile.

And this time it wasn’t his manhood that stirred.

It was something closer to his heart.

Must be gas from the pizza.

Had to be. Except he hadn’t had any yet.

Because Lucas Finlay was a man who didn’t want to feel little plinks near his ticker. Love or anything near it wasn’t something he wanted cluttering up the clear horizon in his life.

“Let’s go home, Charlotte.”

The little girl looked at him. “It’s not your home, Uncle Wucas.”

Point taken.

* * *

ADDY PLACED the freesia between the Stargazer lilies and squinted. Too much? Or just right?

“About to deliver the bouquets for the Richard wedding. Are there any deliveries you need made downtown? I’m headed that way,” Shelia Guillory asked as she hefted the long box containing the bridal bouquet and walked toward the back door.

“Nope. Slow day for flowers.”

“About time. We’ve been busier than a one-legged man in a butt-kicking contest,” her assistant and sometimes delivery person said with a chuff of relief. “Valentine’s Day nearly did me in.”

“Busy is good.” Addy murmured her standard reply.

“Says the owner,” Shelia said using her droll voice. It was one Addy was well acquainted with because Shelia lived for sarcasm, biting irony and fuzzy kittens. The latter she wasn’t droll about, merely passionate.

“You like eating?”

Shelia indicated her lush figure. “What do you think?”

The topic Shelia had brought up weeks ago about her buying into the business sat fat between them, but Shelia had sworn she wouldn’t leave if Addy didn’t accept her offer. Addy had told her she’d think about it and get back to her later...but she knew she didn’t want to sell part of the shop to Shelia. Fleur de Lis floral was her life, something she’d worked hard to buy from her aunt Flora after she’d retired. Addy had opened the business to a new market with her creative designs and couldn’t imagine letting even a small part of Fleur de Lis go. Luckily, Shelia hadn’t pushed nor said anything more about it.

Addy smiled. “I love the way you look, Shelia. Wish I had some of those dangerous curves. I’m a straight drive.”

“Eh, you do all right. I see the way Tom looks at you when he comes in for deliveries. If there were ranch dressing lying around, he’d dip you in it before he devoured you.”

“Wait, the UPS guy? Ranch dressing?”

“Yeah, Tom. And everything is good dipped in ranch dressing.”

“That’s trite, huh?”

“The dressing or Tom?”

“The cute UPS guy.”

Shelia raised eyebrows she’d penciled to perfection. “He looks pretty damn good in those shorts if you ask me. But I’m too old for him.”

“Bah.” Addy tilted her head. “His knees are nice, now that you mention it.”

Shelia’s robust laugh filled the shop as she scooped up the other boxes for the chapel. “You know what they say about a man with sexy knees, don’t you?”

Addy made a face, bracing herself for the sexual innuendo sure to follow.

“Wears a lot of shorts.”

Addy rolled her eyes and focused on the arrangement.

“I’m outta here. You got that last delivery?”

“Yes, and I can’t wait until Herbert is back. I hate knocking on strangers’ doors.”

“I know you do, baby. You going to the meeting tonight? I’ll be there.” Shelia paused, her dark eyes softening. Shelia wore a caftanlike shirt and jean stretch pants accessorized with three gold chains around her broad neck. Shelia called her look “ghetto funk” and Addy couldn’t imagine her friend and employee without a little bling. But as loud, sarcastic and bossy as Shelia was, Addy knew her to be the kindest of women, as evidenced by the love for the kittens she rescued and helped place in good homes for the past few years.

But Addy wasn’t the type to rescue things. Never felt compelled to pull someone from the fire...most of the time she tended her own fire, struggling to keep the flames of fear from consuming her. She wasn’t selfish, merely protective and cautious. So why had she agreed to help Lucas?

She knew. Something in his tone, his manner, his damned dented pride pulled her toward him rather than away. And there was that weird attraction thing between them.

“Actually I’m having company tonight.” Addy grinned, enjoying stringing her friend along.

Shelia’s thinly drawn eyebrows settled into a straight line as she eyeballed her. “Oh?”

“Yes, a big hunk of a man.”

“You watching 300 again?”

Addy laughed. “No, this one is real.”

“Really?”

Addy swept the stem trimmings into the plastic-lined garbage bin. “No. Well, not really. You know my neighbors?”

“The ones with that cute tabby that has white paws?”

“Yeah, and a proliferation of kids, lawn ornaments and sticky fingers. Ben deployed to Afghanistan but was injured. Courtney went to him in Virginia—I’m assuming Walter Reed—and left the kids in the care of Ben’s brother. Yesterday, the middle kid destroyed my new greenhouse. So—”

“The thing you just had built?” Shelia’s eyebrows made an even tighter line of outrage. Leave it to Shelia to be pissed off for her.

“Yeah, they’re coming over on Saturday to repair it, but tonight I’m sitting down with the hunky uncle to go over the kids’ schedule and see if Flora and I can’t help him out a little.”

“Really? Baby, I like the way you say hunky uncle, and it’s nice you’re helping your neighbor. Just tread careful.” Shelia’s wide, always glossed lips curving into a smile. She wasn’t one to push Addy to date, like some of her other friends, because she knew what it was like to have trust twisted and stomped upon. Shelia had married an abusive man, a man who had beaten her so severely she’d miscarried their child and had been forced to undergo an emergency hysterectomy. After years of enduring the abuse, she left him, only to have him stalk her and torture her for many more years. The abuse and terror had ended when Alfred ran his car into a tree. A bottle of Crown Royal and a wet New Orleans street saved Shelia from the gun the man had in his glove box...the same gun he’d already fired at her once before.

So, no, Addy’s assistant didn’t trust easily.

But she hadn’t given up on Addy finding love. She pushed gently, but she pushed. Just like Aunt Flora. And Addy’s mother. And her sisters. And...well, Addy could go on and on with the people who wanted to see her with a man and a baby on her hip.

But Addy wouldn’t be moved until she was ready. She’d learned long ago to listen to her instincts and step carefully where men were concerned. It took her a long time before she trusted. Which was why she couldn’t figure out why there was a sort of auto-trust when it came to Lucas.

“He’s hunky, but it’s not a date.”

“You’ve got weekend plans.”

“We’re rebuilding a greenhouse...with three kids.”

“Who knows what can come of some innocent hammering, nailing, screwing...uh-huh.” Shelia bobbed her head and performed the wave...which was hard to do holding a floral box.

“Go.”

Shelia’s laughter trailed behind her as she left. Addy locked the door behind her friend. Shelia had vacuumed the indoor-outdoor carpet and then locked the front door, but Addy scooted out of her back workstation and double-checked.

Like she did every day.

Then she located her purse, cell phone and pepper spray.

Like she did every day.

Fighting against fear wasn’t for the fainthearted. Addy’s nerves shredded every time she saw an unlocked window, a door left cracked or a shadow falling over her when she was alone.

Most people never thought about their personal safety, but ever since the day in November fifteen years ago, Addy had thought of little else.

Being stalked and attacked did that to a gal.

Of course, Addy knew she was likely safe in her corner of the world. Wednesday evenings in St. Denis Shopping Center in Uptown New Orleans was busy enough with shoppers, diners and looky-loos enjoying the early spring weather. No dark alleys or lonely stretches inviting violence. None of that comforted her. After all, danger lurked on the sunniest of days, in what seemed to be the safest of places.

Her safety routine complete, Addy’s mind turned to last night. Her thoughts had been haunted by Lucas and the feelings he stirred in her. Hungry, sweet thoughts claimed by the normal Addy, the woman who wanted to find love and peace with someone who completed her, who made her feel at home.

But the other Addy had pulled her mind from that hopeful thought to the letter she'd received from Angola State Penitentiary. From some random inmate named Jim McDade. Some decoy who likely owed Robbie Guidry a favor and most likely had no clue why he'd been asked to send the missive. Probably didn't even care.

Inside the envelope was a drawing—well done—of a field of brown-eyed Susans. The cheerful yellow flowers with the brown center seemed to dance in the picture, their little faces turned toward the fading sun sinking against a streaked horizon. It had been folded carefully, a crisp tri-fold. Innocuous. Innocent.

But the image had caused Addy's hand to shake so violently she'd dropped the paper to the floor. Brown-eyed Susans.

A favorite flower for a brown-eyed girl.

Her father had sung that song to her when he strummed his guitar, winking at her, making her feel like the safest, most-loved girl in the world. Brown-eyed Addy. Daddy's girl.

And Robbie Guidry, the twenty-five-year-old man who lived across the street from her family, three doors down on the left, had listened, smiling like the rest of their neighbors as he carefully absorbed everything about her life.

So the drawing wasn't innocent.

It was a reminder.

An instrument of terror plied to take her to that sunny afternoon fifteen years ago—the day Addy learned what fear was, the day the darkness settled into her bones and refused to leave her. Before she went home she would drop off this latest drawing with Lieutenant Andre, who had worked her original case. The man kept a file of the "gifts" sent to her over the years, even though no physical evidence could tie the missives to Robbie Guidry. The nutso stalker wasn't stupid and never, never allowed what he sent to be traced to him.

Picking up the bouquet of spring flowers, Addy scooped up her purse, her car keys in hand, her thumb firmly on the fob's alarm, and turned out the lights. Her heartbeat sped up, but she was accustomed to that reaction. She inhaled, exhaled and became hypervigilant to the world around her as she pushed out the door that led to an open parking lot used by the employees of the shops. Open and in sight of a half dozen businesses. Safe. The rational part of her brain overrode the irrational.

Addy walked to her blue Volkswagen Bug, parked against the curb, noting her car needed a wash. Maybe she could get the kids next door to wash it. She could pay Michael and Chris fifteen or twenty bucks.

Three steps from her car, she froze.

Tucked beneath the windshield wiper was a single brown-eyed Susan.

The shattering of the glass vase made Addy jump and stumble backward. She hadn't realized she'd dropped the flower arrangement. Instinctively she pressed the alarm on her fob, and the chirping wails bounced around the near-empty lot.

Breathing hard, Addy rifled through her purse for her cell phone. The purse-size canister of pepper spray was already in her hand.

The owner of the monogramming shop stuck her head out the rear door with a questioning look, but Addy ignored her and instead focused on the innocent flower sitting bright against the blue of her car. Another reminder from a man who hated her, a sharp left hook of a message meant to do exactly what it had done—scare her.

Addy sat on the curb, clutching her cell phone, not bothering to stop the car alarm. The world tilted, and she concentrated on taking deep breaths, rather than the short panicked ones sounding in her ears.

Breathe, Addy.

Think, Addy.

Robbie Guidry still sat behind bars, but Addy sat in a safe area. No one was an immediate threat. She stood, and looked around the parking lot.

Safe.

Who could have left the flower on her car? Who, either knowingly or unknowingly, could be aiding such a horrible man? She doubted she would get answers, but she would report it...not that it did much good. Without proof Robbie Guidry instigated the gifts sent her way, she had no leg to stand on in prosecuting him for harassment. It had been almost six months since she'd received anything from him. She'd hoped her lack of response had done its job.

But two things within twenty-four hours?

She shivered despite the sun on her shoulders and turned off her alarm. The woman at the monogram shop closed her door and Addy took out her phone to photograph the flower, sending it immediately to Andre's email along with the date and time of the incident. She'd long since ceased bothering to call the NOPD with the threats—the responding officers made her feel stupid for wasting their time.

Addy tore the flower from beneath the wiper and tossed it onto the pavement where it would wither and be crushed beneath the wheels of the vehicles going in and out of the lot.

If only she could toss her fear the same way.

She looked at the cell phone she still clutched and, for some crazy reason, she wished she had Lucas Finlay's phone number.

Chapter Four

LUCAS LEARNED the hard way that taking three kids to Home Depot was living hell on earth. As soon as they waltzed under the orange sign, Charlotte had to go to the bathroom. At first Lucas panicked. How was he supposed to take a little girl to a public restroom? Thankfully he spied something called a “family bathroom” and sent Chris in with her. Of course, Michael disappeared before he could be nabbed.

After a full ten-minute wait while Charlotte did her business, Lucas met Chris's demand—a sports drink as payment for taking care of his sister's “business” in a place where “any of the hotties from my school could see.” The kid drank three sips then asked Lucas to carry it. Michael remained MIA while Lucas juggled locating the right wood screws with pushing Charlotte in a race-car cart. Charlotte insisted he make engine noises like her father. Lucas found the whole thing embarrassing, but if it kept her from climbing out and playing on the lawn furniture display then he'd gladly rumble like a NASCAR engine.

He needed a drink...and it was only nine-thirty.

Not the ideal way to spend a Saturday morning, especially after Addy had canceled their Wednesday dinner, sending over Aunt Flora's gumbo without a word on why she couldn't meet. Flora had taken Chris to karate on Thursday, and outside of catching a glimpse of Addy wrapping her orchids in what appeared to be wet newspaper, he hadn't seen her.

So much for finding a haven in the chaos. He'd been in survival mode for the past five days and now only wanted to get the damn greenhouse repaired and then get on with keeping the plates spinning, balancing on sticks he knew little about.

At the truck, Michael finally appeared with earbuds in, frown on his face. “Where have you been?” Lucas asked, hefting the lumber into the back.

“I've been sitting on that bench.” Michael pointed toward the front of the store.

“With the smokers?”

“I wasn't smoking.”

Charlotte skipped past the truck and climbed onto the cart return. “Jeez, Chris, pull your sister down. I told you to watch her. Chris?”

“He's over there looking at lawn mowers.” Michael flung an arm toward the side of the store.

“Chris!”

The ten-year-old froze, looked around to make sure no one had witnessed then jogged toward them.

“Why did you yell at me across the parking lot?”

“Because you are supposed to be watching your sister while I load this lumber, and I’m pretty sure there aren’t any ‘hotties’ at Home Depot on a Saturday morning.”

Chris shot him a withering look. “Girls are prisoners just like me. We get dragged everywhere by our parents...even to Bed Bath & Beyond. No one cares what a kid wants. Besides, I’ve already seen Josie Dupont.”

“You’re wasting your breath, plague. She’s too hot for you,” Michael muttered.

Chris rolled his eyes. “This from the biggest social piranha at St. Mark’s.”

“Shut the hell up.” Michael reached for Chris, but Lucas caught his arm.

“Okay, I’ve had enough. Chris, fetch your sister and stop calling your brother an Amazonian fish.” Lucas heaved another load into the truck.

“What?” Chris asked.

“Look, stupid, if you’re going to insult me, at least use the correct terminology. It’s social pariah.” Michael’s voice dripped with venom...and a shade of hurt.

Lucas turned Chris toward where his sister dangled. “Go.”

Chris sighed and did as bid.

Lucas faced Michael who had fixed his gaze on the cars whizzing down Veterans Boulevard. “What did he mean by that? You having trouble at school?”

His oldest nephew stiffened. “What’s it to you?”

Lucas looked at Michael. Dark hair swooping low across a forehead that bore the hallmark of being thirteen. Acne also marred his cheeks and chin, but not so much that it took away from his handsomeness. He was thin and gawky, but so were many boys that age. He looked like the quintessential young teen but with Ben’s smile and brown eyes. It was as if Lucas saw his own brother twenty-two years ago.

“Just trying to hel—” Lucas bit down on his tongue because that sounded lame even to him. “Never mind. But if you want to talk or if anything is going on that can’t wait until your mother gets home, you know where I am.”

“Yeah, I do. You’re sleeping in my parents’ bed. A virtual stranger who doesn’t know me or anything about my life.”

Lucas nodded. “True, but I’m here.”

“Yes. You’re here.” Without another word, Michael started to unload the cart.

Such anger and frustration was to be expected when going through puberty. Lucas could remember how awkward the age was. One moment he wanted to hit his father, the next crawl into his lap and hide from the cruel world. So Lucas would give Michael space. No doubt he dealt with something at school, but the boy didn’t trust him enough to seek help or advice. Lucas would keep his eye on his nephew...in case he needed to intervene.

After loading the truck, he drove through a doughnut place and picked up a couple dozen to pacify the kids. Screw never rewarding kids with food. This was survival for Lucas and he’d “pick his battles” like the article in the parenting magazine on the back of the toilet had suggested. Ben and Courtney had no hunting, fishing or sports magazines lying around their house, but obviously liked knowing the ten best snacks for their toddler.

The entire way to Uptown, Michael was silent, noshing on doughnuts, earbuds in as Chris and Charlotte quietly worked on a sugar high Lucas knew he’d pay for later. Every time he glanced in his rearview mirror, he caught sight of the three-year-old, who looked like a commercial for everything cute. At one point she caught his eye and smiled, sugary doughnut gumming up her face, looking so like her mother he couldn’t help but soften.

Which was strange since he'd spent years being angry at the woman who had ripped out his heart and left her high heels embedded within its depths.

He remembered the first time he'd seen Courtney. She'd been eleven years old, all legs and glorious blond hair, dangling from a branch of an old oak tree in the front yard of the house her parents had moved into days before. Lucas had been cutting through on his way to his friend Matt's house to shoot hoops when he'd seen her fall from the tree. He'd scrambled over some bushes, hopped the low fence and found her in a tangle, laughing like a loon. She'd looked up, grabbed the book that had also fallen and smiled. "This is exactly how these two met."

"Huh?"

She pointed to the cover of a book that had a Native American woman entwined in a cowboy's arms. "These two, Small Dove and Colt. She fell out of a tree and he caught her. Crazy, huh?"

Lucas took several steps back wondering why a kid was reading a book that seemed to have sex in it. "I just came to see if you were okay."

She beamed at him. "You rescued me. You're my siuleehu. That means soul mate in Cherokee."

He hadn't known what to say to that. Or to her every time she boldly rode her bike to his house, stalking him with sunshine and silly smiles, all skinny-legged and browned by the sun. Then one day, she stopped following him. And six months later, he started following a new Courtney. One whose flat planes had developed into curvy wonderfulness, a girl who smelled like a meadow, wore lip gloss and tossed her golden hair over her shoulder. She'd been gorgeous, still funny but not so silly anymore.

For ten years they'd played tag with each other, giving each other their first kiss, accompanying each other to school dances, taking long walks down shady streets, sneaking in kisses, practicing moves on each other and cementing the idea Courtney had offered up that day years before—that they were soul mates.

To be together, build a life with a home, children and successful careers had been the plan...until Ben had come home from college with a hard body and a charming smile. While Lucas had been busy studying for law exams, his brother had been sending out resumes and schooling Courtney around town. Lucas had actually felt gratitude toward his brother for taking care of his soon-to-be fiancée while he studied. After all, they would be family within a few years.

But while he slaved over the intricacies of tax law, Ben and Courtney had been falling madly in love over lattes and late night movies.

Lucas hadn't had a clue until he'd shown Ben the carat-and-a-half square diamond he planned to surprise Courtney with and watched the blood drain from Ben's face. At that moment, he began to suspect the distance between him and Courtney had been because of Ben. A kernel of suspicion had bloomed, only to be confirmed days later when they had come to him, contrite, tears in their eyes as they explained how the impossible had happened, how they'd tried to fight against it, but hadn't been able to stop fate. They were in love...and expecting a baby.

Lucas glanced over at that baby, thirteen now, and disdainful of the man who had stayed away from him because it hurt too damn bad to be in the same room with the two people he'd once loved so well, but who had betrayed him. Made a fool of him.

"You missed the turn," Michael said.

"Sh—" Lucas bit off the curse word. He had to be careful with his language, but minding his tongue when he felt stressed to the limit was hard. "Easy fix. I'll take the next exit. Little sightseeing."

Except it wasn't great sightseeing on the detour—most of the houses were dilapidated and lonely. Like a neighborhood time forgot...or more like politicians forgot after Hurricane Katrina. Lucas's artist eye saw opportunity for some emotional photos. Maybe when the kids were in school, he'd come with his camera and play around with some shots. Wasn't stark landforms against a barren landscape, but the beauty peeking from beneath the cracks and weathering had a rare quality.

Fifteen minutes later, they were on State Street. Ten more and they were in Addy's driveway unloading bags containing the wood screws and other supplies. Michael, without being asked, hefted

a roll of heavy-duty plastic from the bed of the truck and dropped it onto the grass next to the greenhouse.

“Careful,” Lucas said. He wished he’d brought his worn work boots, but the newer, shinier cowboy boots would have to do. “We don’t want to tear that plastic.”

Michael’s mouth flattened into a line. “I don’t know why I have to help do this. I didn’t tear it up.”

“Because it’s Saturday, the sun is out and a neighbor needs help.”

No response came from the kid.

Lucas glanced into the backyard where Chris ignored his younger sister who balanced on her stomach on the swing dangling from the massive wooden play set. His finger swooped across the small screen he held, his concentration centered on the iWhateveritwas in his hand. “Chris, please keep an eye on your sister while we unload everything,” Lucas called.

“Okay,” the boy said, not looking up.

“That means put away that thing you’re tapping on.”

Grumbling, the boy slid the electronic device into his jacket pocket.

“I can watch Lottie.” Michael crossed his arms.

“Chris isn’t strong enough to unload this.”

Michael made a sound that might have been a muttered “whatever” but Lucas chose to ignore it, picking his battle once again.

A small car pulled into the driveway and Lucas glanced at his watch—1:20.

A little late, but that could be expected of a business owner. Things came up and had to be addressed before closing for the day. Besides he hadn’t been counting the minutes until Addy arrived.

Or at least that was what he told himself.

Lucas wasn’t accustomed to keeping shopkeeper’s hours. As a landscape photographer, he didn’t have steady hours. Though his art brought in plenty of money, he never allowed the business to overshadow the passion, so often he worked in spurts, obsessively working days on end then taking weeks off before beginning the artistic cycle again. Usually after working with no rest and little food, his body demanded the restoration. Then at some point he had to meet with Chavez about the running of the ranch. But he liked his world, liked being able to embrace his passion whenever the mood struck him.

Addy parked in the spot sitting kitty-corner from the back door, her posturing proving she’d forgotten they were to reconstruct the greenhouse that day.

How could she have forgotten?

He tried to deny he’d thought about her over the past few days. Heck, that morning while walking Kermit and scooping cat litter, he’d vowed the attraction he’d experienced nights before had been a figment of his imagination.

But he knew he lied to himself. Addy was a cool drink of water after walking a desert...otherwise known as Home Depot with three kids.

Maybe the kids were driving him bonkers, but he suspected the desire to see Addy was more than craving an adult’s company. If he had wanted that, he would have taken Shannon Something-or-other up on her coffee invitation after dropping Charlotte at St. George Day School yesterday morning. Of course, the married and bored Shannon had had more than caffeine on that agenda. Her expression had said, “Let’s have a playdate.”

But he didn’t want to have a playdate with Shannon or any other “single” mother in Charlotte’s preschool class. He wanted a workday with Addy.

“Hey,” Addy said, as she climbed from the cute little Volkswagen that somehow looked too cartoonish for such a serious woman. “I’d forgotten we said we’d work on repairs today.”

Disappointment gave him a little sock. He’d thought she was attracted to him several nights ago. Something had ignited between them...but maybe his lack of sleep from being kicked by Chris,

who had climbed into bed with him that first night—probably forgetting his mother wasn't there—had his mind playing tricks on him.

Addy's shoulders were tight and something in her expression worried him. She looked so different from the way she'd looked before. Sure, she'd seemed guarded—a private woman with a side of mystery.

But today she looked spooked.

What could make a woman look so hunted?

* * *

ADDY PUSHED A few tendrils of hair from her eyes and studied the big man. She hadn't actually forgotten Lucas. She had, however, temporarily forgotten about the greenhouse and repairs. Messages from Robbie Guidry tended to do that. Rattled her so that she forgot to stop for eggs or pay her water bill on time. When she got reminders from the man who had stalked her, attacked her and nearly killed her, it put her off balance for several days. So she'd canceled on Wednesday night and stayed inside. Even taking the letter by Lieutenant Andre's office stirred anxiety and it took time for the reality that Robbie was behind bars and she had control of her life to permeate her brain.

But how much longer would he remain behind bars? She inhaled and exhaled, knowing she had no control over when Robbie Guidry would be released from prison.

Lucas approached her as if she were made of glass. She willed her thoughts to settle.

"You okay?"

"Of course, I am. Busy morning at the shop." She hated lying but didn't want to talk about her life. About how she'd been a victim. That was her past.

"No, I don't think so. Something's wrong."

"Not really. Just have a lot on my mind."

"What do you have on your mind?" His question wasn't soft. He pried into her thoughts and she didn't want him there.

"Nothing you need to worry about. Let me change and then we'll get started." Addy pulled her purse out of the car, pausing to slide the cell phone out of a side pocket. She'd texted her father to let him know she'd talked with Lieutenant Andre yesterday, but he hadn't replied. But then again he didn't check text messages often—they seemed beyond him. She didn't want to call because then her mother would know something was up, and Addy hated when her mother worried. Maybe she would drive out to New Orleans East to corner her father and share what Andre had told her.

Addy's father was her go-to man. When she'd first received an anonymous drawing of a single brown-eyed Susan, she'd reported it, but with no evidence the drawing came from Guidry, there was nothing to be done. Still, Don Toussant kept track of the evidence and haunted the parole hearings making sure Guidry didn't get out until he paid his entire twenty-five-year sentence for assault with a deadly weapon, attempted rape and attempted murder. They were a team...a team who couldn't do much but wait.

Addy dragged her gaze to Lucas, whose dark eyes weighed and measured her.

"Something's off with you, Addy. You seem...scared. Did something happen—"

She pushed by him. "My life is none of your concern. I don't like people shoving their nose in my business. I said I was okay, so leave it."

Lucas raised his eyebrows. "Wow. Defensive."

She yanked her keys from her purse as she turned toward him. The anger pressed beneath the fear slipped out. "Maybe I am defensive, but I didn't invite you to examine me. I didn't even invite you to fix my greenhouse. You're the one who insisted. I said I would help you with the kids because I'm trying to be a good neighbor to Ben and Courtney. That's all I offered and there is no reason for you to think you can dig into my past, looking for a reason I don't want to talk about my day with a stranger."

Lucas didn't say anything. Merely studied her more intently.

Something about the way he looked at her made her want to apologize. He'd tried to help and she'd been a bitch. Then again, guys trying to help, not taking no for an answer and buddying up to a woman who hadn't opened the door either literally or figuratively—all were indicators of a man being potentially harmful. Even so, she knew in her bones, Lucas wasn't harmful to her. At least not in that way.

"Look, I know you're trying to be nice, but I'm good. Okay? I'll change, we'll fix the greenhouse and then we'll talk about how I can help with the kids."

Lucas nodded. "I didn't mean to pry. Guess I thought I was being neighborly."

"But you're not my neighbor."

Something flashed in his eyes and she knew she'd pissed him off a little with that one. "Good point."

Then he walked away from her. Just like she wanted.

Chapter Five

ADDY'S WORDS HAD surprisingly hurt him. They shouldn't have. He didn't know her beyond a couple of hours spent together. But somehow meeting her defensiveness when he'd tried to be helpful, tried to nurture a stable relationship with the only rational nearby adult, made him feel less than what he was.

He was honorable, damn it. And no one had ever called him nosy.

Aunt Flora bumbled out the back door and gathered the children, directing Michael and Chris to unload pots out of Addy's car and giving Charlotte a spoon for worm digging. The three-year-old made a strange face, but allowed the older woman to lead her to the compost pile in the corner of the yard.

For a moment, Lucas fought feeling inferior. What the hell was wrong with him anyway? He was a man who rarely cared what others thought of him, a man who rarely cared if he pleased others.

But he knew one thing—Addy's past had made her fearful.

The phone attached to his belt rang, and Lucas glanced at the screen. He was waiting on his manager at the Manhattan gallery to call about some pieces for a renovation. But it wasn't Gerald. It was Courtney.

Dread knotted in his stomach.

Was she calling merely to check on the kids or had his brother worsened?

"Hey," he said, as Addy reemerged from the house still wearing the dark dress and casting an apologetic glance at him. Something moved within him at that look in her eyes. Something weak. He turned away.

"Hey," Courtney said, her voice weary...almost defeated. "Thought I better call and check on the kids while I had a chance. They're changing Ben's bedding and I'm in the waiting room."

"The kids are fine."

"Are they? I've been worried. I left without saying goodbye."

"Wasn't ideal." He'd arrived early Monday morning. Courtney had taken a cab to the airport minutes later, leaving him with sleeping kids and a page of instructions that didn't cover jack.

"No, it wasn't but it was the best way."

"Not sure about that, but you can smooth things over a bit if you tell the kids about Ben's condition. It would be easier—"

"On you?" Her voice also held anger. "All I asked was for you to be their caretaker. That's it. I'm truly grateful, but I can't tell them their father may be dying over the phone, Luke."

He hadn't been called Luke in many years and the sound of his name on her lips confused him. On one hand it swept him back to a time when he'd loved hearing her say his name, and on the other hand, it caused the anger of betrayal to eat away at any pleasure left in hearing her voice. "And I complied, Courtney, but I'm a stranger. Not knowing what's going on makes it harder on them. Not me. Them."

Michael came around the corner of the house followed by Flora. He caught sight of Lucas on his phone and some kind of internal homing signal went off and the boy started walking toward where Lucas had slipped into the shadows.

“Hey, is that my mom?” Michael asked.

Courtney dropped a curse word. “Tell him no. Please, I’m not ready to talk to him about Ben.”

Lucas pulled the phone from his ear and turned to head off Michael. “This is my call and you’re being rude interrupting it.”

Michael’s chest expanded in outrage. “If that’s my mother, I have a right to talk to her. It’s her, isn’t it? Let me have the phone.”

Lucas shook his head and pointed toward where Chris held a stack of planters. Addy appeared, her forehead crinkled in concern. Chris watched his brother, mouth slightly open, anticipation of the confrontation in his eyes. Charlotte happily dug in the compost heap looking for worms, which she promptly dumped into a can sitting beside her. The girl didn’t seem to know there was anything else in the world except fat, squiggly earthworms that probably both fascinated and repelled her.

“Go help Addy’s aunt with the wheelbarrow.” When Michael didn’t budge, Lucas added, “Now.”

“This is bullshit. If that’s my mom, I want to talk to her. She won’t text me or call me. Her. Not you.”

Courtney said with a sigh, “Give him the phone.”

Lucas didn’t want to concede to Michael. He’d read in one of the parenting magazines consistency was the solution to many behavior problems in children of all ages. He wanted to stand firm on telling Michael no, but he wasn’t the kid’s parent. Courtney was, and maybe she’d finally tell the boy about his father’s condition.

“Mom, what’s going on? Why did you leave us with him?” Michael said into the receiver. He plodded toward the low screen of bushes lining Addy’s home.

Lucas watched as Michael nodded, made a defiant face then shook his head. Several heated words were exchanged before the boy’s shoulders sank in defeat.

Lucas knew Courtney hadn’t told him about Ben’s injury and complications from the surgery. If anything, Michael swelled even more with resentment as he handed Lucas the phone and stalked away.

“Courtney?”

“What?” She was crying.

“Why won’t you at least tell Michael about Ben? He’s old enough to understand.”

“Shut up, Luke. You don’t understand how vulnerable Michael is. He and his dad are close. If I tell him Ben might die, it will be real. So shut up, feed them, make sure they brush their teeth, but don’t tell them anything about their father. You hear me?”

“Avoiding reality doesn’t help Michael.”

“Ben is going to get better. I have faith. This can’t happen to me again, and I’m not going to put them through what I went through with Mom and Dad. You understand? Just tell them I’m with their father and everything is okay.”

“I know what you went through, Courtney. I was there. Remember?”

“Of course I remember. It was excruciating seeing my mother the way she was, seeing my daddy die. Those memories are in my head, Luke. I can’t get them out, and I don’t want my children to have that same hopelessness.”

“But what if you hadn’t been there? What if you’d been kept in the dark? It’s not pleasant to be lied to.”

He hadn’t intended to throw the extra meaning in, but it was there nevertheless. It would always be between them. Lucas had been in the dark, Courtney and Ben had kept their affair in the shadows, skulking around, betraying him.

No, it did not feel good being lied to.

Courtney's crying grew louder. "Ben's going to get better. I know it, Luke. He's got to. Just give me a little more time, that's all. Time will fix it. The doctors said the antibiotic might be working. His blood work looks better."

"Is he still on the ventilator?"

A choked sob was his only answer.

"Okay, okay. I won't say anything to the kids, but consider it...for Michael's sake. He's hurting with the unknown and somehow that seems worse than knowing the truth about his father."

"The truth is not always best, Luke. Don't you remember how much it can hurt?"

Oh, he remembered. The truth about Ben and Courtney had crushed him, not so much with what he lost in a future with Courtney, but in the loss of faith in his brother, in a girl he'd grown up loving. Yeah, the truth hurt, but it was a hell of a lot better than pretense. "Just think about it."

"I will. How's my girl?"

"Right now she's digging for worms."

"Worms?" The sob ended with a choke of laughter. "Well, I guess there are worse things. Why's she digging for worms?"

"Well, Chris had a little accident a few days ago. Don't worry, he's fine."

"An accident? How?"

"He forgot your neighbor had a greenhouse built in her yard and took the dirt bike for a spin while—"

"He's not supposed to ride the bike without adult supervision."

Lucas started to mutter No shit but bit down on the smart-assed comment. "I went inside to wipe Charlotte."

"Charlotte knows how to wipe herself."

He allowed silence to speak for itself.

"She likes attention." Courtney sighed. "I wish I could have given you a handbook instead of a page."

"Me, too."

"I know it's not easy, but I knew if any single guy could swoop in and take care of three kids, it was you. You've always been so competent, never messing up in life. Really, Luke, I don't know what I would have done. With your parents in Europe, I—"

"I make plenty of mistakes, Courtney, and I don't know shit from shinola about raising kids, but we're all making do."

"What about Flora and Addy? And the greenhouse?"

"We're working together on the repairs now. Chris's dirt bike is in the garage and I've hidden the key. We're good."

"Okay, apologize to Addy for me and keep the receipts for the repairs. I'll make sure you're reimbursed."

Lucas said goodbye and hung up, not feeling at all comfortable with continuing to lie to his brother's children. But he wasn't their parent. He was merely their caretaker, not involved enough in their lives to offer an opinion. He opposed what Courtney was doing, but he understood.

When Courtney had been in high school, her parents had been shot in a convenience store theft. Neither had died in the actual robbery, but they'd been gravely injured. Courtney's father died from his wounds the day after the robbery, but her mother had held on for days, undergoing several surgeries before succumbing. Courtney had lived at the hospital, Lucas with her, bringing her food and comforting her as best an eighteen-year-old kid could. The loss had devastated the sunny Courtney, turning her into a shell of what she'd been, maybe even driving the wedge between them that allowed for the betrayal.

Lucas walked to where Michael sat tapping on his phone. “Guess we better start demoing the damaged parts of the greenhouse. I’ll grab Chris. Can you dig the shears out of the bag so we can cut away the torn plastic?”

Michael looked up. “So you’re finally going to make him do something?”

The kid’s tone was feral.

Courtney’s secrecy had created an angry monster of a boy...one Lucas had to deal with. And he tired of dealing. “Why don’t you watch your tone, Michael?”

“Why don’t you leave?”

“I wish I could.” Lucas shoved his curled fist into his front pocket and walked away. Toward the front of the house. Away from Michael. Away from Chris and Charlotte and the dotty old lady trilling encouraging words to the kids. Away from Addy and her prickly demeanor.

He needed air. And space. And peace. And quiet.

And maybe a shot of bourbon.

* * *

ADDY SET THE ORCHIDS she’d gathered on the newspaper. She wrapped the roots in wet newspaper and tucked them beneath the blooming azalea bushes framing the back stoop. Thankfully, Cal, the guy who made gorgeous pottery along with inexpensive clay pots, had plenty of selection. She liked terra-cotta for the orchids.

For the past few minutes, she’d tried to forget about Lucas and the guilt she felt about being overly defensive. She hadn’t meant to be so forceful, but the fear inside her over the stupid wildflower tucked beneath her windshield wiper had hooked into her gut and seeped into her bones. When fear came knocking, it was hard to not open the door. So she’d lashed out at Lucas, which was ironic considering her first thought at discovering the “gift” was to call Lucas. Something about the man with broad shoulders and a hard jaw struck something within her, something that told her he could help her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Lucas pocketing his phone and approaching Michael who sat sullenly beside the lumber. A few words were exchanged then Lucas walked away, moving to the Finlay house. Toward his truck. Something in the slant of his shoulders had her dumping the orchids and following him.

Surely he wasn’t going to leave?

True, dealing with kids was tough, but he’d made a commitment, right?

He heard the crunching of the gravel beneath her feet as she followed him, but he didn’t slow or turn his head. She nearly breathed a sigh of relief when he passed his truck and hooked around the front of the house. Lucas climbed the porch steps and sank into a rocking chair that needed a new coat of paint.

Hesitating on the steps, she looked at him, not knowing what to say.

Lucas studied the floating clouds beyond her head. “This was a mistake. I’ve got to get out of here. I’m not the right person to take care of these kids.”

Addy started to deliver platitudes but snapped her mouth closed. “Maybe not, but right now you’re all they have.”

“I need clean air and a clear landscape sitting outside my door. I can’t breathe here.”

The longing in his voice touched her. He felt trapped by the world he now occupied. She knew a little about being confined to a smaller world.

A few minutes ticked by as the sounds of the neighborhood waned and an even smaller world was formed on the porch. A line of black ants squiggled across the top step. A spider clung to a web in the camellia bush, and the rocking chair creaked with the slight motion Lucas gave it. Small, closed in. Intimate in a way she hadn’t experienced the other night. Raw emotion pulsed and she knew it was seldom Lucas admitted defeat, admitted any weakness.

He didn't look at her, at where she stood near the line of overgrown bushes that had needed pruning last fall. Addy knew Lucas was mentally picking up the scattered bits of his emotions and trying to tuck them into an airtight box he kept in his soul.

Like recognized like.

Something inside her stirred, then stilled. Certainty of what she needed to say settled in her gut.

"I'm sorry about the way I acted earlier. Something happened on Wednesday that shook me up, and I allowed a remnant of that emotion to spill over into today."

He waved away her apology. "No problem. You were right. I don't have any business prying into your life. We're not friends, not really anything to each other. You're a nice person trying to help me. Bottom line."

The casual dismissal pricked her. She didn't want to be nothing to him, and that surprised her all over again. "I'd like to think we are friends."

His gaze swept to hers. "I suppose we are. In a way."

"Then you should understand something about me. Not even Courtney or any of my other neighbors know this, but somehow, I think you need to know who I am."

She saw the muscles in his neck move as he swallowed, as his eyes softened. She didn't understand the need to tell him about Robbie, about the fear that sometimes ate at her. Just knew it would make things better.

"When I was senior in high school, a neighbor, a man I thought I knew, held a knife to my throat and tried to rape me."

Lucas's hands tightened on the rocker. "What?"

Acid ate at her stomach and her hands trembled. She tucked them behind her and met Lucas's gaze. "I was stupid, a good girl, a quintessential overachiever with a pretty face and a bright future, but I had this need inside me, a little part of myself who wanted to rebel. Down the street lived this older guy. He was in his mid-twenties, cute in a boyish way, rode a Harley and sometimes hung out at my dad's garage. He flirted with me, I flirted back and then one night I snuck out my bedroom window and climbed on his Harley with him."

Lucas's eyes narrowed. "You seem so levelheaded. I can't imagine you sneaking out with an older guy."

"Of course not. I've changed. But we all have some wildness inside us. I just chose to be wild with the totally wrong guy."

Silence sat for a moment.

"Eventually, being a naughty girl got old. I didn't really like him as much as I liked the feeling of being disobedient, of having some say-so in my own life. Eventually, I stopped opening that window. But Robbie wouldn't accept I wasn't into him. I tried to tell him I had prom coming up and college. I told him we had no future together. And it got ugly."

"What did he do?" His voice was soft as the day, like sunlight falling on the emerging green of spring.

"At first he said ugly things. Then he showed up at my high school and watched me with my friends. He slashed my tires, wrote me violent letters and called my cell phone and hung up several times a day. I didn't tell my parents because I knew they'd be so disappointed...and that I'd be grounded for life." She offered him a wry smile.

He didn't smile back.

"Then one day I came home from cheerleading practice. No one was around, and I didn't think twice about taking a shower. That's when he broke in. Luckily my father had left something at the house—a flyer he needed to print for the Rotary Club. Funny how I remember exactly what was on that flyer—seems silly to remember—but I can't forget anything about that day. The soap I'd used in the shower, the way my uniform lay crumpled on the bathroom floor, the way that blade felt at my throat. I ran into the kitchen and grabbed a knife—I'd seen too many B movies and thought I could

protect myself—but Robbie took it from me. The knife cut me here.” She rolled up her right sleeve to reveal the pink line that ran from mid-forearm to her bicep. It had faded, but the memories had not. Then she pulled down the collar of her shirt to show him the scar on her shoulder. “And here.”

“Addy.” Lucas leaned forward, hands clasping the broad wood arms of the chair. He looked as if he might get up, as if he needed to do something.

She tugged her sleeve over the reminder of what Guidry had given her—not just the wound, but fear itself. “My dad saved me. Hit Robbie with the baseball bat my brother left in the corner of the kitchen. My mother must have told Mike a million times to put it up. Thank goodness my brother had selective hearing. All this happened long ago, but it changed me. I’m cautious, and I fight being afraid. I go to group therapy and I function quite well, but the fear is always there. It’s part of who I am.”

“Jesus.”

“I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

His face softened. “Don’t you?”

“Watching you struggle, feeling trapped and very much, I don’t know, alone? Guess I wanted you to understand why I’m private. Why I’m not a girl who can open herself to just any guy.”

Lucas watched her, his hands still clasping the chair. Strong hands with hair sprinkled on his knuckles, hair that caught the sunlight. Lucas’s reaction was odd, almost as if he took it personally. “I assumed something had happened to you by the wariness you displayed, but not...that.”

She pressed her lips together, embarrassment creeping in. Or maybe not embarrassment so much as vulnerability. She hated feeling an eternal victim.

He ran a hand through his dark hair, making it stick up and softening his normally hard look. “So is this guy in prison?”

She nodded, anxiety once again filling her at the thought of Robbie Guidry and the scare tactics he employed from behind bars. Seemed ironic he could still bait her from that locked cell.

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