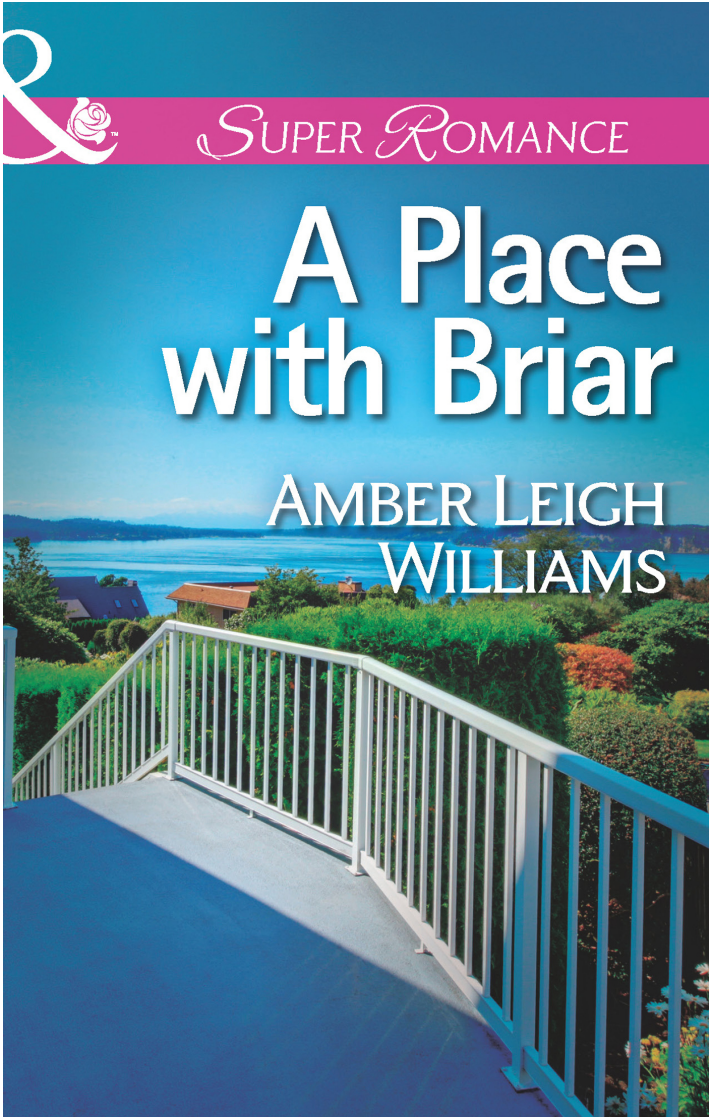
SUPER ROMANCE
A Place with Briar
AMBER LEIGH WILLIAMS

Amber Leigh Williams
A Place with Briar

Аннотация

He's in some serious trouble Cole Savitt does not want to deceive Briar Browning. But if he hopes to see his son again, he has to find the weaknesses in her charming bed-and-breakfast, then get out of town fast! But the quaint inn isn't the only thing charming him….Cole's straightforward plan becomes anything but when he begins to fall for the beautiful innkeeper. Suddenly everything's on the line–his future with his son, a chance at happiness and the love of a good woman. Cole must rethink his priorities…and the stakes have never been higher.

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Cole Savitt does not want to deceive Briar Browning. But if he hopes to see his son again, he has to find the weaknesses in her charming bed-and-breakfast, then get out of town fast! But the quaint inn isn't the only thing charming him….

Cole's straightforward plan becomes anything but when he begins to fall for the beautiful innkeeper. Suddenly everything's on the line—his future with his son, a chance at happiness and the love of a good woman. Cole must rethink his priorities…and the stakes have never been higher.

"There's something you need to know…."

Cole's lips curved as he turned back to the bike. "I know."

"You do?" Briar asked, sounding astounded.

"You've never ridden a bike before."

"Is it that obvious?" she asked, rubbing her palms on her jeans.

"A little," he said wryly. "Just lean with me into the turns. And hold on."

Hell, if he didn't coax her on now, she'd probably run for her life. And while that might have been better for the both of them under the circumstances, he found himself jerking his thumb behind him, motioning for her to get on.

After a brief pause, Briar dropped down her visor and stepped to the bike. Gripping his offered hand for balance, she climbed on behind him and placed her feet on the small passenger pegs.

Just this once, he was going to give Briar Browning the ride of her life. God help them both.

Dear Reader,

For fourteen years, Fairhope, Alabama, was the place I called home. While brainstorming A Place with Briar, I often found myself in my car driving toward the Eastern Shore of the Mobile Bay, where my hometown rests, snug on a sweeping, green bluff. I drove the scenic route that still makes my heart soar…maybe because I was retracing my first motorcycle ride, which a cute nineteen-year-old boy who would someday be my husband took me on.

I'm proud of the place I once called home. I love the pace of life in Fairhope, the view of the bay from the scenic bluffs along the shore…. It's a dreamer's paradise. As a girl, it was where I discovered my love of reading and writing. From the sailboats gliding across the bay, to the grand homes lining the streets, to the couples strolling hand in hand, growing up on the Eastern Shore jump-started my imagination. My mind has not stopped painting stories since. I had little doubt that one day I would share the stories I conjured there with the world.

I'm thrilled I finally get to share A Place with Briar with you, readers! This story is close to my heart in so many ways. Like Briar and Cole, I fell in love on the Eastern Shore. (I might even somewhat re-create my first motorcycle ride within its pages!) It was such a pleasure bringing in a haunted outsider like Cole, who needed a good dose of healing, and giving him the home and love he never knew his heart needed.

I hope you enjoy Briar and Cole's story. I always love

to hear from readers! You can find me on the web at www.amberleighwilliams.com or contact me via email at amber@amberleighwilliams.com!

Happy reading!

Amber Leigh Williams

A Place with Briar

Amber Leigh Williams

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AMBER LEIGH WILLIAMS lives on the Gulf Coast. A Southern girl at heart, she loves beach days, the smell of real books, relaxing at her family's lakehouse and spending time with her husband, Jacob, and their sweet blue-eyed boy. When she's not running after her young son and three large dogs, she can usually be found reading a good romance or cooking up a new dish in her kitchen. Readers can find her on the web at www.amberleighwilliams.com!

First and foremost, I dedicate this book to my sister, H.P.W.

As always, here's to reading 'til midnight, eating too much ice cream, and living like there's no tomorrow. Life wouldn't be the same without you…. (Olivia is for you, Boo!)

I would also like to thank my father and mother, who moved the family to Fairhope in the early '90s and were full of encouragement when I began writing shortly after….

To my husband, J.J.S.—there's a lot of us in this book, babe. Thank you for being the inspiration I needed to tell this story….

And finally to the brave volunteers of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill cleanup. Endless gratitude for making our coastline beautiful once more.

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CHAPTER ONE

COLE SAVITT HAD MADE a deal with the devil. He did so willingly because the prize far outweighed the cost.

That is, if the devil stuck to her end of the deal.

The devil, in this case, happened to be his ex-wife. If the past three years had taught him anything, it was that Tiffany could be the most manipulative person he'd ever met. He didn't at all like that his fate was in her hands—or that he'd been the one to lay it there all over again.

But if she did stand by her end of the bargain, not only would his life be his own again, he would also no longer be barred from seeing his son.

Though it had been months since he had seen six-year-old Gavin inside a courtroom as an unsympathetic judge gifted Tiffany with full custody, stripping Cole of any visitation rights, he didn't need a picture to remember his son's face. The young visage so like his own was stamped across his temporal lobe—memory of all that had been, all that there was, and reminder of what could be.

The Fairhope pier was calm and deserted but for the early fishermen reclining in beach chairs. Their lines drooped over the railing into the shallow bay below. The only sounds that penetrated the peaceful lull of silence and the foggy gloom of the morning were the pelicans doing their far-from-graceful dive for breakfast and the heavy splash of crab nets hitting the water.

The bells of buoys trilled over the quiet, and water lapped against the hulls of boats tethered off the restaurant that some clever individual had christened Yardarm. Part of Fairhope's most enduring residential park, the pier had survived hurricane forces and modern industrialization. Along with the adjacent park and the scenic bluff that crested far atop the shoreline, it was an Eastern Shore trademark. One of Alabama's best-kept secrets.

As Cole sat drinking coffee inside the restaurant, his eyes didn't stray to the seagulls that swooped into view, the pelicans dozing on isolated posts or the sailboats that well-to-do hobbyists had taken out early. His eyes were trained on the strip of land half a mile away, waiting for the clouds to part so he could get his first look at the target, a bayside bed-and-breakfast called Hanna's Inn.

Why Tiffany wanted to buy the place so badly was beyond Cole. He knew her family hailed from Fairhope and the coastal cities surrounding it. He also knew that her hard-hitting, real-estate tycoon father had done his best to get his hands on as much land along the Eastern Shore over the course of his business life

—and Hanna's Inn had always eluded him. The old man had bitten the dust three years ago, leaving Tiffany in control of his legacy.

That her transformation from loving wife to manipulative bitch had occurred around the same time she came into family fortune and her own business didn't strike Cole as a coincidence. Though looking back, he had to admit there'd been earlier signs of her ruthless ambition that he'd chosen to ignore at the time.

The phone call from his ex-wife that had led him to Fairhope had come at an odd time. He hadn't spoken to Tiffany since that day in court and had planned on putting as much distance between himself and Huntsville, where they had built their so-called life together, as he could. He expected the usual threats and criticism.

Instead, Tiffany offered him an opportunity to make everything right. She apparently couldn't get into Hanna's Inn to do her own legwork without being recognized and blowing the sale altogether. She needed someone to do her dirty work for her by getting her a copy of the inn's financial records. And who better than the ex-husband who had nothing to lose?

The coffee on the table in front of him had gone cold and would've tasted as bitter as his mood if he'd taken another sip. Cole scooted the mug away from him. He had no love for Tiffany, and if she hadn't offered him the one thing he wanted more than anything else in the world, he would have refused her.

There was no price too high that could make him walk away

from this one chance to be with his son. Even if Tiffany wasn't planning on upholding her end, he had to try.

The fog and clouds started to break apart, letting the first golden rays of sunlight shine through and unveiling the sandy, green length of the Eastern Shore, one breathtaking sweep at a time. High on a grassy ridge, Hanna's Inn rose like a waterside Tara, triumphant and glorious, distinctive among other houses around her with white wooden walls and tall columns gracing the bayside facade. It reminded Cole of a regal, antebellum bride from another era.

It looked as charming as it was striking, one of many early twentieth-century dwellings that travelers came to admire along this shore. From a distance, it was all that its promotional brochure promised: a serene getaway. Forget the world, the glossy trifold had suggested.

Weeks ago, he might have been tempted to do just that. Now he could only think of Gavin and what he had to do to get back his son.

The waitress approached his table. When he glanced up, she asked, "More coffee?"

"No, thank you," he replied. "Just the check, please." He reached for the billfold in his back pocket as she walked back to the counter. He paid for his meal, left a tip and checked his watch as he left Yardarm and began to walk the length of the pier.

Nearly time for check-in.

The air was soft with a briny tinge. Early summer weather

this far south wasn't quite as humid or heavy as he'd imagined, though if he lingered he would soon experience lower Alabama's blistering clime.

For now, the wind felt cool on his shaven face, a subtle hint of evening showers. A round fountain slumbered at the park entrance, its still, clear, blue pool and the coins at its base mirroring the sheen of the sun. The labyrinth of roses around it thrived. Their dewy, open petals trumpeted heady, passionate perfume.

Trapping the sultry scent in his lungs, he strapped on his helmet and mounted his Harley. He gunned the machine to life. It roared into the quiet, turning the heads of the few people who'd come to admire the morning's hushed splendor. He didn't cast them much of a glance as he coaxed the bike up the towering slope onto South Mobile Street.

The road wrapped around the Eastern Shore, stretching as far as Pelican Point, which joined the bay with another then reached for Fort Morgan and the cool waters of the blue-green Gulf beyond.

However, he didn't have nearly that far to go.

A white clapboard sign marked the turn for Hanna's Inn. He pulled into the gravel drive and parked in the shade of a magnolia tree. The wide, fragrant blossoms grinned down at him from limbs of glossy green leaves. The sweet, woodsy, quintessentially Southern scent he associated with childhood bliss...and home.

His chest tightened, and he rolled his shoulder to ease the

ready ache. Dwelling on home only made him hurt more.

He tucked his helmet under his arm and left his sunglasses in place as he walked into the inn. The bells over the door jangled, and the homey scent of cinnamon tickled his nostrils.

He scanned the empty lobby, admiring the long, painted aerial of old Fairhope spanning the opposite wall. The glass covering the painting was so clean he saw his reflection clearly. The sharp-cut jawline that framed a tan, narrow face; his hair dark and hanging straight. Black shades hid dark, tired eyes. Still, he could see the wear of travel around the wary crease above the bridge of his nose and the lines bracketing his mouth.

He barely recognized himself and wondered if anyone else would at this point.

"Mr. Savitt?"

* * *

THE SOUND OF the bells chiming from the entryway woke Briar Browning. She frowned at the first white strands of sunlight peering through her kitchen window. Raising her head from the tabletop where she'd dozed off hours ago, she winced as rigid neck muscles cried out in protest. Pressing a hand over the nape of her neck, she carefully rolled her head on her shoulders, leaning back against her chair and blinking around the room.

One look at the bills and bank statements spread across the table made her groan. She'd fallen asleep while doing the bookkeeping again. Now there was no time to prep for this week's guest.

Briar straightened and a sharp twinge cruised up her spine. The chair creaked as she pushed to her feet. Her arches were still sore from the day before, but she slipped them into the shoes she'd toed off under the table and ran her hands over her hair, hoping she looked at least half-decent in yesterday's clothes. One look at her reflection in the window over the sink reassured her. She didn't look as fresh as she would have liked, but she wasn't going to scare anyone off.

With her unawares, it had shaped up to be a glorious morning. The bay water was moody gray and choppy under a stiff breeze from the north. The north wind served as a relief to those on the Gulf Coast, buffering dangerous tropical weather.

June marked the first month of hurricane season, and like all other business and home owners, Briar had already checked the inn generator and readied the storm shutters. If El Niño came knocking on Mobile Bay's door, she had little to do except stockpile batteries, gasoline, canned goods and water. Then wait for it to be over.

Hanna's Inn had stood the test of weather and time for over thirty years. Unless any of the tropical waves roiling far out in the Atlantic turned into a storm of Frederic, Ivan or Katrina proportions, Hanna's and Briar would ride it out like any other.

The four guest suites were quiet on the second floor. Briar's stomach knotted, the silence pressing against her eardrums. The local small-business economy had suffered hard over the past few years. She had hoped summer would lure tourists and revenue to

the Eastern Shore as well as Hanna's.

It was June and the guest calendar still looked utterly vacant. The only name on the page was a single man's. Cole Savitt. She rarely booked singles, this time of the year, especially. Fairhope, with its easy proximity to Alabama's white-sand beaches, was the perfect place to bring a family or loved one for a cozy, Southern-style getaway. Unfortunately, it didn't seem as if many people were getting away.

The man was probably in town strictly for business, she thought. And with the weather behaving strangely well for June, wouldn't that be a shame?

As she moved through the swinging door, she shifted her unease to the back of her mind. She couldn't leave her guest waiting any longer, not to change or ruminate over her financial difficulties and all the uncertainties ahead. Her mother might have died a year ago, but that didn't change the fact that Briar now singularly owned and operated the inn Hanna Browning had built from the ground up.

"Mr. Savitt," she called as she walked into the entryway. The room was awash with morning light, and the man who stood with his back to her, backpack slung over one shoulder and motorcycle helmet in hand, slowly turned. There were sunshades over his eyes, but the frown that greeted her stopped her in her tracks.

Her hand fluttered to her stomach and she sucked in a breath. "I...I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

* * *

BEHIND THE SHADES, Cole's eyes locked on the innkeeper like heat-seeking missiles, moving only to rove her fair features. Flushed cheeks, honey-brown eyes, a dainty chin and ripe lips he knew would taste sweet just by looking at them.

His throat went dry and his heart rebounded. Her shoulder-length hair fell in natural streaks of gold, blond and fairest brown. Her slender form was covered in a trim khaki skirt and a pink silk blouse.

There was nothing suggestive or mysterious about her beauty. It was vulnerable and soft, a whisper of wind in a rainless summer. Her eyes beamed sincerity and a touch of timidity.

This was the mark, as Tiffany had described her. The woman whose financial ruin would be his ex-wife's gain.

Cole wanted to touch her. It wasn't a sensual need—instead, a knee-jerk urge, an instinct from another life to protect, shelter and shield.

When she only stared at him, lips slightly parted, he realized he was supposed to respond. "Oh. No problem, ma'am. I was just looking around."

All too quickly, she dropped her gaze and walked around the podium. "Welcome to Hanna's."

He hesitated before crossing the room, his own greeting lodged in his throat.

"If you'll just sign here, please." She shifted the leather-bound sign-in book so he could initial. When he removed his glasses, he watched her lips part again in surprise as she searched his eyes.

He dropped them to the page in front of him, knowing all his secrets lurked there in his eyes—a window to his all-too-haunted soul. Without a word, he scrawled his signature on the line she'd indicated.

"Thank you." She opened the drawer of the cabinet behind her and palmed a set of keys. "These are yours, Mr. Savitt."

He pocketed them. "I paid ahead, didn't I?"

"Yes," she said, a hospitable grin twitching the corners of her mouth. "Your receipt is included in this packet."

"I'm sorry the reservation was made on such short notice. I was going to stay at The Grand, but a family member more familiar with the area recommended your place, instead."

"I think you'll find Hanna's more convenient," she told him. "It's closer to town—a quick walk if the heat isn't oppressive. Your stay is for two weeks, but feel free to extend it if you need to. Just let me know a day or two ahead of your check-out date."

"That's great, thanks." His eyes found hers again. They searched for a moment, clinging to the warmth he saw.

She took a short gulp of air and circled the podium. "I'll show you to your room. May I help with your luggage?"

He shook his head, shouldering the pack he'd dropped at the door. "Thanks, but this is it."

"Follow me, then." She led him into a small sitting room infused with more cinnamon and the soothing aroma of fresh coffee. A small half-moon sofa faced windows that beamed soft, natural light.

"This is where most of my guests like to come in the mornings to socialize, read the paper and check the weather," she explained as she took them past this room and up the staircase to the private suites. "I hope you don't mind being the only one here for the time being."

"I like the quiet." That at least was the truth. He pocketed his hands when they itched to finger the silken hair that fell straight to her shoulders. "I'm not much company."

"Me, either," she admitted with a nervous lilt of a laugh. She glanced back at him. "I try to find as many quiet moments as possible. A guilty pleasure, I reckon."

"I imagine that's difficult, finding time for yourself," he said as they stepped onto the second-floor landing. "Operating a place like this." The antique breakfront standing against the wall opposite the stairs added its own cedar scent to the corridor. The spicy aroma made him feel more at ease than the magnolia at the entrance and the evident polish of the interior. "Do you run it alone?"

"Yes." Her smile slipped out of place for a moment before she recovered from the slight hitch and her eyes shone again. "It's been in the family for some time, but it's just me for now."

He frowned. Seemed a great deal for one person to handle. Tiffany would be relieved, however, that there weren't other owners to contend with. For now, at least. "It's nice," he offered.

"Thank you," she said, leading him to his suite door. "This is yours. I reserved the best bay view for you."

When he stepped into the room, surprise filtered through him.

The wooden floor gleamed under the morning glow just like the bay water visible through the wide window. The sleigh bed looked plush and oh-so inviting under a thick blue quilt, matching pillows plumped at the head.

There was an antique armoire with one door open to reveal a full-length mirror on the inside panel. Complimentary padded hangers dangled on the rack inside. Stems of flowers flowed out of crystal vases on the dresser, the cut glass shooting sunshine into his eyes. Irises and hydrangeas blessed the room with their sweet, earthy scents.

He couldn't remember what he'd expected. Something more feminine. Chintz or pastels, something out of a Pottery Barn catalog...but certainly not this. A sense of comfort came over him —swift, almost foreign. "It's...perfect."

Small dimples dug into her cheeks as she smiled. "I'll let you settle in. When you're ready, I'll give you a tour and explain mealtimes and other activities."

"Thanks."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Savitt," she said as she walked around him to leave.

Instinctively, his hand reached up to brush her arm. At his touch, she froze, her face tipped close underneath his. Inches hovered between his lips and hers.

"Please," he murmured, hardly able to grind the words out. "Call me Cole."

An uncertain grin peaked the corners of her lips. His eyes drifted to them. A long, seductive chain heated and coiled, winding from the center of his torso around his navel.

She closed her eyes, breaking the connection and shaking her head as if to clear it. "Downstairs," she said again. "I'll see you downstairs." And retreated.

When she shut the door behind her, Cole dropped his bag to the floor and blew out the breath he'd unknowingly been holding under her gaze. It wasn't strategy or anything other than the blood he felt humming too closely to the surface that had made him want to lean over and taste that sweet, smiling mouth.

Damned if that was the way he was going to go about this errand. His job was to find out if the owner of Hanna's had any investors and what her financial situation was. He wasn't going to sink to Tiffany's level and use the attraction he felt simmering between himself and Briar to get the information he needed. He'd bring out the detective he'd been before his life had gone to smithereens to get what he needed out of her.

And, no. The detective slumbering inside him didn't think that kissing the innkeeper was a wise way to initiate his under-the-table investigation of Hanna's Inn. As pretty as Briar Browning was...after Tiffany's complete and utter betrayal, there was no way he'd risk entering even a harmless flirtation.

CHAPTER TWO

BRIAR CAUGHT HERSELF thinking far too deeply about the stranger in the bay suite. Especially after he chose to forgo

lunch in the dining room and took off with a roar on his Harley.

As far as she could tell, Cole Savitt was a middle-aged man with no wedding ring, and apparently he carried all he needed for two weeks in a single backpack.

And when he'd taken off his sunglasses and she got a gander at the pain riddling his dark eyes, her heart reached out to him unequivocally. And...his broad shoulders and trim torso fit his leather riding jacket really well, too.

She cleared her throat and gave herself a mental shake. Damn her heart. It'd always readily reached out to the wounded.

There was no doubt in her mind Cole Savitt was a wounded man. But that kind of information was above and beyond what she needed to know about her guest. All she had to do was make his two weeks at Hanna's as pleasant as possible. In the year she'd worked here, she had never failed to please anyone under the inn's roof.

She hadn't offered more than breakfast in bed to any guests, either, and she wasn't about to start now.

Too much else to worry about.

In addition to Hanna's Inn, Briar owned the adjoining property. At two stories, the building was painted white to match the inn. It held three shop spaces in addition to a roomy apartment on the back half of the second-floor interior. She rented the living space to her cousin, Olivia Lewis, who managed the adjacent first-floor bayside bar, Tavern of the Graces.

Briar leased the street-side shop space to Adrian Carlton,

single mother and proprietor of Flora, Fairhope's finest floral shop. Above it, the third commercial space sat on the second level, overlooking South Mobile Street and had been empty for years. Thankfully, someone had finally taken notice.

As Briar stood aside, listening to the clack of heels over tile, a potential investor, Roxie Honeycutt, strolled slowly around the room, doing her final walk-through. The woman had been eager to sign the lease and institute Belle Brides—a bridal boutique that would house the woman's own line of bridal couture. But Briar had insisted on the final formality.

Roxie sighed, whirling to face her. She looked utterly chic in a strapless summer dress the color of money and matching peep-toe pumps. "I said it once, I'll say it again. It's absolutely perfect."

Briar held back a sigh of her own, one of immense relief. "I had an exterminator give it a once-over. No termites or other pest problems. Though I wish I'd had the time to give it a fresh coat of paint."

"Oh, the color will change, anyway," Roxie explained, waving a hand. "I'm thinking pink. With vintage white mirrored accessories. Typical, maybe. But I advertise my gowns on a red-based pink backdrop and it really makes the designs pop."

"I'm sure you'll make the space look fabulous." She shook Roxie's hand. "Welcome to the building."

Roxie beamed, her commercial-straight teeth as perfect as her Victoria Beckham coif and cornflower-blue eyes. "You've just made me the happiest woman this side of the Mississippi.

Opening my own shop has been a dream for so long, I can hardly believe I'm finally doing it."

Dreams, Briar thought. It had been so long since she'd contemplated her own, she could hardly remember them. They had slipped through her fingers so quickly, she was no longer sure what she wanted. "When will you get started?"

"I'm hoping to open before July, just in time for the big holiday rush. So as soon as possible."

"Well, if you need any assistance at all the other girls and I will be more than happy to help you settle in," Briar said. "Shall we sign and make it official?"

As they stepped out, Briar locked the dead bolt while Roxie stood back, eyeing the shop face. "I had a bit of a brainstorm last night. I never sleep when I'm excited. Drives my fiancé, Richard, to insanity, me pacing up and down the halls at all hours. If you're up for it, I think we could come up with a package deal."

Briar leaned against the rail overlooking the small parking lot. "How so?"

"On top of designing, I'm a licensed wedding coordinator. I plan ceremonies, receptions, book caterers, photographers, venues, florists, etc. What I was thinking is we each shave a percentage off our prices for my couples—offer them my services and attire along with your honeymoon suite at a discounted rate."

"Have you thought about adding Flora to the package? Adrian's done weddings, and her bridal arrangements are

divine."

Roxie held up a discerning finger. "And don't forget the Tavern. I love that wide veranda on the back. It's just big enough for a reception space. With the right lighting, trimmings and that amazing natural backdrop of the bay, it'd be breathtaking."

"I like it," Briar admitted. Something buzzed beneath her skin. Something that felt an awful lot like possibilities. Could this be what the inn needed to stay afloat? "You should discuss it with the others."

"We'll all have to sit down for drinks sometime this week," Roxie said as she descended the steps to her waiting Lexus. "Who knows? This could be a lucrative venture for all of us."

The wild roar of an engine snagged their attention. Briar's stomach fluttered as Cole Savitt zoomed in on his motorcycle, coming to an abrupt halt under the magnolia.

As he cut the engine and pulled off his helmet, Roxie raised a brow. "One of your guests?"

"Ah, yes."

"Mmm." She slid Briar a teasing grin. "I might have to pop by sometime while he's here."

Briar laughed as Roxie got into her car. She waved her off then smoothed nervous hands over her skirt. A lucrative venture. The words echoed in her head as she stood alone on the gravel drive. The inn and her mother's lifetime of work were slipping away slowly but surely. She had to find more investors before it was yanked from her hands and the state put it up for sale or

foreclosure.

She owed her mother at least that much.

Loosening a sigh, she began the walk back to the inn. Her eyes fell on the lone vehicle in the drive, Cole Savitt's Harley-Davidson. Where had it taken him? What all had he seen straddling its black leather seat?

Dreams. She pondered them as she passed through the garden her mother—and now she—so lovingly tended. Once upon a time, her dreams had led her to Paris where she had escaped the obligation her father had been trying to press upon her. Back then she hadn't wanted to leave Hanna's—a long time ago, her dream had been to run the inn alongside her mother.

Her father's wishes, however, had carried her off to law school. Her path had been laid before her. All she'd had to do was walk within it.

Instead, she'd taken a detour from law school in the States to Europe with friends and, to her father's consternation, had wound up settling in Paris for a semester. There she had rediscovered her love of cooking and had enrolled in culinary school. And that had become her dream.

But soon after beginning her studies in culinary arts, she fell into some bad luck. Or, more accurately, she had run headlong into it, eyes wide-open. Since then, her dreams had gone down a rocky path and hadn't returned.

She gazed up at the face of the bed-and-breakfast she had once wanted so much to be a part of. Was it still what she wanted?

Guilt swamped her, as it always did when she let her thoughts wander back to Paris, her culinary dreams and the niggling sense of uncertainty she kept locked up inside her. What did it matter what she wanted? What she needed was to keep her mother's dream alive—to make sure Hanna's Inn survived the test of time.

Though judging by the dismal financial outlook in the inn's books and its empty guest calendar, it seemed as if her bad luck was back to haunt her and tear down the solid legacy it had taken decades for her mother to build.

* * *

COLE'S FIRST NIGHT at Hanna's turned out to be surprisingly restful. He sank into the plush bedding with the drugging fragrance of candles and the dim flicker of firelight lulling him into complacency and easy sleep.

He woke the next morning to the pale light of dawn and stepped into a hot shower, unable to remember the last time he'd woken so rested.

It'd certainly been a while since he'd dreamed of a woman's face.

The vivid memory of the pretty innkeeper had lingered all through the night. He rubbed water over his face, trying to get the blood flowing as much as to scrub the vision of Briar Browning from the backs of his eyes.

As he stepped out and looped a towel around his waist, he recalled the way she'd watched him in his dreams. Never saying anything—just watching him with those soft honey-brown eyes.

He'd felt their touch like a skin-on-skin caress.

Damn, the woman was making it difficult to focus.

He rubbed another towel over his dripping hair before he wiped a spot on the mirror clear in order to shave. Before he lifted the razor to his cheek, he heard the knock on the door. He paused, and called, "It's open!" Making sure the towel on his waist was secure, he stepped into the room as Briar opened it.

She took one look at his bare chest, shrieked and whirled away. "I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, gripping the knob. "I'll come back."

"Don't worry about it," he said automatically. "Nothing to see here."

She cast him an easy for you to say glance before her eyes veered politely downward. "You have a phone call. It seems rather urgent. And breakfast is ready."

Amused by the way her eyes averted him, he asked, "What's on the menu?"

"Cinnamon rolls," she explained. "And fruit salad. I'll serve you in the kitchen when you're ready."

He nodded. "Sounds great."

Her lips quirked into a brief smile. "Sorry I barged in on you."

"It's nothing," he said with a shrug. When she shut the door, a wide grin broke over his face, though he couldn't have said why as he reached for the phone on the bedside table. "Savitt," he said, raising it to his ear.

"You didn't call yesterday. I was beginning to think you'd

changed your mind."

The grin vanished quickly along with all the good feelings left over from his early morning encounter with Briar. "Tiff."

"Enjoying your vacation?"

His back teeth ground together in frustration. "I haven't found enjoyment in anything since you began your dirty deeds. But that's exactly what you wanted, isn't it?"

Tiffany's laugh filtered over the line. "Don't whine, Cole. It doesn't suit you. I called to make sure you haven't backed out of our deal. And to remind you what's at stake here."

How could he possibly forget about Gavin? "For you or for me—because I'm not quite clear on the former."

"The less you know, the better," she said. "Isn't that what you used to tell me when you'd come off a crime scene? As if my delicate, feminine sensibilities would swoon just for thinking about what my flatfoot husband had encountered."

"I'm no longer your husband," he reminded her. And he'd learned well that there was nothing delicate about Tiffany. Hard and unyielding, like a hammer, was more like it.

"You've got that right. Though Gavin does seem to miss you, on occasion."

"Don't," he said, the word coming out on a fierce growl as every muscle in his body tightened in defense. "Don't dangle him in front of me any more than you already are." He couldn't stand it.

"All right. Just remember what I said. Get inside her head,

her files, whatever you have to do to find out everything there is to know about the inn, the adjacent property and if she has investors. If she does, I want to know who and how much."

"Are you going to buy them off, too?"

"If necessary. I'll need a progress report every night, Cole."

"So you can keep tabs on me, as usual."

"So I know you're doing your job. I'm not paying for you to stay there so you can lounge under the sun, drink mai tais and work on your tan."

"Yeah, don't worry. Nobody knows that more than me. I'm out." He hung up and took a moment to steady himself. The woman could wind him up quicker than a Matchbox car. It was sickening. Fighting the urge to put his fist through one of Briar's lovely walls, he dug through his backpack until he found something clean to wear.

* * *

BRIAR HAD MADE the mistake of looking at him again as she closed the door to the bay-view suite. And this time, her gaze had taken its time perusing freely. Beads of water had rolled down his chest from the wet, tousled tips of his black hair. The lure felt more than magnetic—it melted her. Turning away from the tempting sight, she had shut the door smartly at her back, hoping her hormones would get the message No!

Her legs wobbled on the stairs. When she made it safely to the kitchen, she managed to sink into one of the breakfast table's chairs before she could shrink to the floor.

She fought to cool her heated cheeks, banishing the image of her guest's sculpted chest from her memory.

It had been a long time since she'd been so drawn to a man—and where had that gotten her? Into a whole heap of trouble. The last thing she needed now was a repeat of what had happened in Paris....

Knuckles rapped against the frame of the screen door. Briar glanced up. Relief swelled at the sight of sure distraction.

"Hey, let me in!" her cousin, Olivia Lewis, called through the door.

"I'm sorry," Briar apologized, springing up. She unbolted the screen and pushed it open with a creak so Olivia could breeze through. "I was distracted."

"Yeah?" Olivia said in her characteristically lurid voice. "You looked it." She held up a large crate. "The wine you ordered."

"Oh," Briar said, remembering. "Right." She took a knife from a drawer to pry the lid open, glad for the activity as Olivia made herself cozy at the table. "Staying for breakfast?"

"Yeah. I thought I'd check up on this new guest of yours."

Briar's hands fumbled at the mere mention of Cole. The bottles in her arms clinked together as she elbowed the door to the liquor cabinet open. "Why?"

"He seems like an interesting character," Olivia mused, picking a ripe purple plum out of the bowl at the center of the table.

"What could you possibly know about him?" Briar asked.

"You haven't even met him."

"I'm not deaf. You've got a biker living under your roof. I just want to make sure he's not eyeing the family silver."

"You're terrible! He's not like that," Briar blurted. Instantly, she wanted to clap her hand over her mouth. Instead, she broke down the crate and tossed it into the disposal behind the pantry door.

"What do you mean?" Olivia raised a knowing brow. "He's hot, isn't he?"

"Would you lower your voice?" Briar said. "He's right upstairs!"

"I knew it," Olivia said. "One look at those crimson cheeks of yours could only mean one thing. Come clean."

"Let's not do this now," Briar begged as she tucked cinnamon rolls into a bread basket and set them on the table beside a small stack of plates. "Please."

Olivia smirked. "Well, I guess if you're not interested, I might as well take a whack at him."

Briar's cheeks were on fire. She turned to the sink. "Do what you want," she muttered and began to scrub furiously at a cooking pan. "You always do. And I'm not interested."

"Yeah, sure." Olivia knew Briar better than anyone. They weren't just cousins. They'd grown up together, Briar's mother managing Hanna's and Olivia's parents turning Tavern of the Graces into a runaway success.

Olivia had long, blond hair that hung halfway down her back

in flyaway curls and her sharp green eyes didn't miss a trick. She stood nearly a head shorter than Briar but made up for it with her boisterous personality, an uproarious, booming laugh and an unchecked streak of righteousness.

Despite their differences, they'd grown as close as sisters over the years. Guilt riddled Briar over the tinge of envy. Olivia could bait the opposite sex with a mere sidelong glance and, by extension, make Briar feel completely inadequate in the men department.

The swinging kitchen door opened behind her and her fingers stiffened around her scrub brush when she got a strong whiff of soap and shampoo. Not quite steady enough to look, she continued to buffer the oven pan.

"Good morning, ladies."

"Hi," Olivia greeted, rising from her chair with a flirty smile.

"Are you staying here, too?" Cole asked.

"Hell, no," Olivia said with a loud cackle. "I couldn't afford a room here if I sold my tavern."

"Tavern?"

"Briar didn't tell you about me? She's certainly forgotten her manners. Olivia Lewis. I own Tavern of the Graces right next door."

"Cole Savitt. You don't look like a bartender."

"Let me tell you something, mister," she said with a roll of her eyes. "I make a margarita Jimmy Buffet would weep over."

He laughed. Briar's insides trembled over the deep sound. She

certainly hadn't made him laugh, had she? "I might have to find out for myself," he replied.

"Then come on by later, if you're not busy. Not much to do around this place."

Briar's back stiffened as Cole hesitated. "I might," he repeated. "Are you joining us for breakfast, Olivia?"

"I wouldn't miss the cinnamon rolls for anything," Olivia drawled. "Tell me about yourself, Mr. Savitt. What brings you to Hanna's?"

He settled on one of the seats at the table. "It's personal."

"Hmm. Well, you can't leave us dangling like that. Can he, Briar?"

Briar lifted a shoulder, drying a coffee mug and setting it in the open cupboard over the counter. "It's his business."

Olivia let out an exasperated huff. "Enough with the Sandra Lee. Would you sit down?"

Briar sighed, drying her hands. She turned to the oven. "I'm waiting for the quiche."

"Quiche, too?" Cole asked, brow quirked in interest. "I think I've died and gone to heaven."

"You better believe it," Olivia advised.

Briar took a pot holder off a hook on the wall and opened the door. "Close enough." She pulled the quiche out and set it on the waiting trivet on the table, moving the bowl of fruit to the counter and replacing it with a server of fruit salad. "What would you like to drink, Cole?"

"Coffee's fine," he said, lifting his mug.

"Liv?"

"OJ for me. So did you bring a wife along, Cole?"

"No," he replied with an edge to his voice. "I don't have a wife."

Olivia pursed her lips, curious. "I've never been married, either."

As Briar brought Olivia's juice to the table and settled into a chair, her eyes met his. "What about you?" he asked.

She paused. "Erm...me?"

"Process of elimination, cuz," Olivia quipped, watching her with a sly grin.

"No. I've never been married," she stammered before dropping her face to hide another flush and piled fruit salad onto her plate.

"Briar hasn't been on a date in years," Olivia blurted. "Needless to say, we all think she seriously needs to get laid."

"Olivia! Honestly, that's enough," Briar squealed as Cole choked on a cinnamon roll.

"What?" Olivia asked. "We're all family. No need to hide the truth. Especially when he might be able to help you out with that. Would you mind loosening her up for us, Cole?"

Briar groaned, pressing a hand over her eyes to ward off Olivia's scheming expression.

"I'd love to."

Briar's hand and jaw dropped simultaneously. Her eyes

widened, her heart leaping with surprise and...something else. Delight? She saw his playful grin then Olivia's. "Oh!" she shrieked, embarrassment trawling through her.

"I'm sorry, Briar," Cole said sincerely. "Couldn't resist."

"You'll fit right in around here," Olivia decided, slapping him companionably on the back.

"I hope so." He smiled as he scooped a forkful of quiche into his mouth. His eyes flared, softened. "Whoa. Holy smokes."

Olivia's conspiratorial twinkle was back, suggestive as ever. "Look, Briar, he even likes your cooking."

"That's an understatement," he amended, swallowing another bite. He gazed at her. "This is incredible."

Briar's lips curved warmly now. "Thank you."

"She's the best cook in L.A." At his dubious look, Olivia laughed. "That's Lower Alabama, newcomer." Olivia's digital watch beeped and she cursed. Dropping her fork to her plate with a sharp clang, she pushed her chair back to rise. "Duty calls."

"You're going to work already?" Briar asked. "You didn't finish your breakfast."

"I'll survive, Mama." She took her plate to the sink to rinse. "The bar doesn't open until noon. I'm helping that new girl move her stuff into the shop upstairs."

Briar gasped. "I forgot all about that!"

"Don't get up. Two pairs of hands will get the job done fine," Olivia assured her as she dried hers. "And Adrian's going to sneak up when she can."

"I'll head over later to see if you need anything," Briar said. She'd fit it in between fixing a leaky sink and weeding flower beds. "Call me if y'all need me before then."

"You just do what you do best first." Olivia leaned over and kissed the top of Briar's head. "Be good." She sent Cole a sidelong grin as she headed out the screen door. "Don't give her any trouble now, ya hear?"

"I wouldn't dare," he assured her. "I'll come by later for that margarita."

"You do that. First one's on me. See you two lovebirds later."

When the door rapped shut, Briar turned to him with a grimace. "I'm sorry about that."

"She's a feisty one."

"Always has been," Briar said with a weary sigh. "Trust me. There's never a dull moment around here."

"You grew up here?"

"Yes. My mother established the inn after she married my father. A short time later, Olivia's parents bought the bar from a couple of retirees and rebuilt from the ground up. They lived in the apartment upstairs. When they retired, they handed it all over to Olivia. Ever since I took over, it seems I'm either over at the tavern yelling at her to turn the music down or she's over here making a fool of me in front of my guests."

"You're right. Never a dull moment. Can I have another one of these?"

Her face lit with a quick smile. "Finish them off, by all means."

She passed the basket of cinnamon rolls across the table and felt the glow spread from her heart to her cheeks when he took two. "I'm glad you like them."

"Mmm. This is all wonderful, Briar. I don't remember the last time I had a fine meal like this."

In an instant, his eyes clouded over again. She wanted to reach across the table and touch his hand, squeeze it reassuringly. Anything to erase that haunted look from his face.

Before she could react or resist, the phone rang. She lifted her napkin to dab the corners of her mouth. "Excuse me."

He raised a hand to show that her departure didn't bother him.

She sprinted into the entryway. Hopefully, it was another customer calling to reserve a suite. Or an investor. Please, let it be one or the other. "Hanna's Inn," she greeted, pulse pumping in her ears.

"Ms. Browning?"

"Yes."

"My name is Jack Fields. I'm with the Baldwin County tax office. I'd like a few minutes of your time."

CHAPTER THREE

ALL THE BLOOD drained from her face down to her toes. She wanted to shrink to the floor. Without a chair, she leaned against the wall as her heart plummeted to the pit of her stomach. "Is there a problem, Mr. Fields?" Her voice trembled. She prayed for control and watched her free hand quiver as it reached for a pen on the podium.

"I'm afraid there is. Is this a convenient time to talk or should we schedule a meeting sometime this week?"

She swallowed. "Now's fine."

"You are the proprietor of Hanna's Inn on South Mobile Street in Fairhope, Alabama?"

"Yes, that's me."

"And you own the adjacent property, as well?"

"I do."

"I'm sorry to say this, Ms. Browning, but you're late on your property tax payment. Are you aware of this?"

Of course she was aware of it. The tax plagued her every thought—along with the inn's other debts. She took a shaky breath. "Mr. Fields, business was very slow this past autumn and winter season. I had to pay an unexpected remodeling charge for one of the shops next door. Plus, there was another hotel established in the downtown area and it took a chunk out of my profits."

"I sympathize, Ms. Browning, but I'm afraid that failure to pay taxes is a serious offense."

She took a minute to gather herself. She had to stand up against this. Had to be strong. "I realize that, Mr. Fields, but surely, there can be an extension on the deadline...."

"We've already offered the extension. Twice. You did receive the notices we sent?"

She'd received them. And she'd scrimped and saved. But then there was the matter of her car breaking down for the final time.

Without a vehicle, she couldn't haul groceries or landscaping materials. The down payment on the used Honda had burned a devastating hole in what was left of her savings. "I received them, yes."

"And you failed to comply."

"It's not a matter of failed compliance, Mr. Fields. It's just a matter of simple finance. I have every intention of paying the tax and I will when I have the resources. At the moment, though, I do not have the payment."

"Ms. Browning, you do know what the penalty for failure to pay your taxes is, don't you?"

Her head started to spin. The wallpaper whirled sickeningly. "I—"

"The county can seize any assets you hold in your name to account for the debt. In this case, we would be forced to take the property."

Now she did shrink to the floor. Curling up, she dropped her brow to her raised knees. She struggled to breathe through the panic that assailed her.

"Ms. Browning?"

She couldn't lose the inn. She just couldn't. In an instant, she was transported back to last winter, watching her mother wither away before her eyes. Staring out at the bay as if the sight of sun dappling on its blue-gray waters would bring healing where nothing else could.

Tears burned her eyes. "Mr. Fields..." She took a deep

breath, doing her best to steady her voice. “My mother, Hanna Browning, a pillar of this community, lost her life last year.”

“Yes, I knew of her illness.” The voice softened. “I’m very sorry, Ms. Browning. I’m also aware of the fact that she was under your care.”

“As you can imagine, the expense of her treatments and everything it took to make her comfortable during her last few months...” Again she had to take a breath. The quaver in her voice had worked its way into her joints and threatened to tear her to pieces. “It was devastating to both my family and the finances we had accumulated over the years.”

“I understand that, ma’am, but—”

“Mr. Fields, please, I need you to understand that I will pay the tax. I always pay my debts. I...I just need more time.”

A long pause followed the waning words. Her heart hammered somewhere between her stomach and spinal cord. The hole it left in her chest throbbed miserably.

“We can give you until mid-July.”

She released the breath she’d held on to as a last resort. “Oh, thank you, Mr. Fields. Thank you so much.”

“Just make sure you get the payment in. Preferably ahead of time.”

“I will. You can be sure of it.” Anything to prevent losing Hanna’s. “Goodbye, Mr. Fields.”

“Have a good day, Ms. Browning.”

She stood to hang the phone back in the cradle. For a long

moment, she leaned her head against the wall and concentrated on steadying herself. Her knees quaked, and she ordered them to stop. She wiped her eyes before turning to walk back into the kitchen.

A gasp launched from her throat when she found Cole standing in the hallway just beyond. She clapped a hand over her heart. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Mr. Savitt. I didn't see you there."

He said nothing, just scanned her face with a frown.

Oh, dear God, her troubles were no doubt written all over her. How much had he heard?

He stepped forward, into the light. The haunted look had vanished from his face, replaced with concern. "Are you all right?"

She swallowed, her insides squirming in embarrassment and cheeks heating all over again. "Is there...anything I can get you?"

He closed the distance between them in three quick strides. Startled, she pressed her back against the podium. Her breath caught as he hovered close, gaze intense now as he searched her eyes, seeing too much. "Are you all right?" he asked again.

She sucked in a long, steadying breath. "I'm fine." When he didn't look convinced, she sighed. "Mr. Savitt, you're my guest. It's my job to see to it that you're all right. Not the other way around."

"And who sees to it that you are?" he blurted.

Her lips parted. No guest had ever asked her such a question. Certainly not one she had ever met before.

Lips firming, he lowered his penetrating stare. “I...apologize, Ms. Browning.”

With a short shake of her head, she fought for words. “It’s forgotten.”

Hesitant, his gaze latched on to her face once more, spanning her features. “You look exhausted, is all.”

Lifting a hand to her hair, she realized she must look a fright. “I—”

“If you need a break, I’ll be happy to—”

“No,” she refused, finding strength buried beneath the shame. “No, that’s out of the question. I thank you, Mr. Savitt, but the last thing I need right now is a break.”

Silence loomed over them both. Then he slid his hands slowly into his pockets in a gesture of acquiescence. “All right.”

Her eyes avoided his as disbelief again crossed his face. “Really, if there’s anything I can do to make your stay more enjoyable...”

His face hardened and for an instant, she thought she saw the muscles in his jaw quake formidably. Finally, he pulled in a long inhale and said, “I told you. Just call me Cole.” Turning away, he walked out, the bells jangling over the door in his wake.

She watched him through the windows until he disappeared from view. Then she shook her head.

The man was unbelievable.

And he’d smelled so good up close—like soap, her cinnamon rolls and that very base note she suspected belonged to him alone.

Setting the pen she still held tightly in her hand on the podium, she dragged her fingers through her hair and made her way back to the kitchen.

She stopped short just inside the door.

The table had been cleared. Three clean plates and forks dried in the sink-side drainer.

Did he...?

Something inside her awakened, unfurling, tingling to life. Something that'd been dead for too long to measure.

If she wasn't careful, she could start feeling things for this man she barely knew. Things she couldn't afford to feel for anyone again—least of all a complete and total stranger.

* * *

COLE NEEDED TIME alone to think. Room enough to pace, to burn off the edge from the confrontation with Briar.

He'd seen women in pain. He'd been a member of the Huntsville police department for ten years. That was more than enough regular calls of domestic violence and trauma vics. Yes, he'd seen too many wounded women to count.

But Briar... She was different. Kind to a fault and yet undeniably capable with what he strongly sensed was an unexpected streak of perseverance. She downright intrigued him.

After the past three hellish years... Well, she was like a breath of fresh air. A fine, cool kiss of morning mist.

A ride around town wouldn't cool the burn in his blood. Wrestling with it, he walked away from the inn. Away from her.

He couldn't keep encountering her on the verge of tears. Finding her that way, close to shattering, had made him forget completely why he was here. Tiffany's wicked errand and all that came with it.

Damn it, for a moment, Gavin's face had been completely wiped away by Briar's frightened features, and he'd wanted nothing more than to enfold her in his arms and...

Nope, don't go there. Don't you dare go there, Savitt. Dangerous. Under the circumstances, it was just too damned dangerous. For the both of them.

How he could even think about being with another woman again after all the grief Tiffany had put him through was beyond him.

As he roamed around the side of the building, the tidiness of the well-loved garden left him little doubt Briar landscaped it herself. The scent of the confederate jasmine clinging to lattices tickled his nostrils. Bright salmon petunia faces popped out of the soil in cheery abundance. At his approach, a hummingbird flitted away from a butterfly bush. Off the gravel path, a vegetable garden flourished. Squash and tomatoes looked seasoned, a bright slash of color against the lush green landscape.

More of her work there. He saw it, too, in the clumps of daffodils trumpeting up from the mulch between sweet olive bushes. Climbing roses laced their way around porch columns. He smelled the gardenia before he spotted it. The soothing fragrance of the open, palm-sized blooms cleared the way for

cool thoughts.

Briar didn't need a man with a past as black as his underlying intentions cozying up to her.

"You son of a bitch!"

Frowning toward the voice that had read his thoughts exactly, he pivoted on his heel to face the long, glass-walled greenhouse between the inn and its neighboring twin structure. Something crashed against the floor and he took several steps toward the paned doors that had been thrown wide-open. More expletives reached his ears as he peered around the jamb.

First he spotted the glass splintered on the damp concrete slab and the long-stemmed crimson roses scattered like blood spatter.

Great. He was likening flowers to something he'd seen at a crime scene. The world-weary detective he'd wanted to bury deeply, forever, was taking over again, little by little.

"Hello?" he called.

Instantly, a brilliant streak of red hair peered over a worktable. "Shop's next door, mister!"

"I heard a commotion," he called back, taking a step farther over the entrance. "Are you okay?"

She emitted a snort before disappearing from view. Something scraped across the floor, followed by the tinkling protest of glass. Dustpan. "What are you, my knight in shining armor?"

He grimaced. "More like a concerned neighbor. Temporarily, at least."

The auburn crop appeared again. On second look, her face was

round and pixielike with a button of a nose and unpainted lips, which softened the impact of her pronounced bone structure. The eyes that stared back at him were dark and sharp as a whip.

This was no damsel. From the eyes alone, he could tell nothing got past this lady.

The woman stood slowly, revealing a red apron with the name FLORA embroidered across the front. "I apologize for the outburst. The vase was delivered broken and tried to pick a fight with me."

He tilted his head, eyeing what had once been the vase in question. "Seems you won."

She beamed and propped a gloved fist on her hip. "As a matter of fact, I did." Those sharp eyes narrowed. "Do I know you?"

He scanned her face more closely. After some hesitation, he stepped forward, cautious of the scattered shards. "I'm Cole. Cole Savitt," he said, extending a hand toward her.

Her eyes narrowed as she pried a glove from her hand to grip his firmly. "I don't think I know any Savitts. Are you related to anyone around here?"

He paused. Then decided there wasn't much harm in mentioning Tiffany. "My ex-wife. Tiffany Howard."

"It rings a bell." She nodded, pursing her lips. "I'm Adrian. Adrian Carlton."

"Adrian," he greeted. "Nice to meet you."

"You married?"

He chuckled, unable to help it. "You ladies cut right to the

quick around here."

"So you've met Liv, I take it."

"Yeah." He smiled. He sensed from experience that she was a wary soul, but an inherently good one. His instincts had served him well in the past...unless he counted Tiffany and the viper that had lived unbeknownst to him under her polished veneer. "And I take it you're the Adrian who owns the flower shop next door."

"That's me. Flora, finest flowers in Fairhope. You must be Briar's new guest."

"You heard about me, huh?"

"We don't get many single men around Hanna's," Adrian told him, easing into a smile. "And with somebody like Liv on the loose, nothing stays secret for long. Though since the fact that you have an ex-wife didn't come up in this morning's gossip exchange, I'm guessing I'm the first to know that you're divorced."

He lifted a shoulder, slipping his hands into his pockets in a relaxed stance. "It's not something people like to advertise."

"Don't I know it." At his curious look, she nodded. "We're of the same breed as far as failed marriages are concerned."

"Ah. Sorry."

She shook her head. "Nothing to be sorry about. Especially when your ex is a wife beater hiding behind a badge."

"Please tell me justice was served," he said.

"After long last. Suspension for him and restraining order for me and my son," she said matter-of-factly before tending to some

long-stemmed roses. “So what brings you to Fairhope?”

“Much-needed vacation,” he lied.

“Workaholic?”

“Actually, I’m kind of between jobs.”

“What do you do?”

He hesitated then realized there was no reason to lie, at least about his job. “I was a Huntsville police detective.”

Her brows lifted again. “Seriously?”

“I put ten years on the force.”

“You know, now that I think about it, you look like a cop,” she said with a smug smile.

“Since the wife-beating ex is a cop, too, I’m guessing that isn’t a compliment.”

She smiled. “I’ll trust you and he have little in common other than your chosen careers.”

“And I’ll thank you for that, Ms. Carlton,” he replied.

“Adrian,” she corrected. “Ms. Carlton is my mother, which is why I tend to shudder whenever anyone calls me by that particular name.”

He chuckled again. Yes, he was growing to like Adrian.

“You thinking of transferring south?” she asked. “I’m acquainted with a few of the officers at the local PD. I could introduce you....”

“No, for now I’m just...” He stopped because he saw understanding begin to creep into her eyes. “This seems like a nice enough place to live, I’ll admit. Everyone’s friendly. The

weather's good—not too hot."

She snorted out a laugh. "Wait until mid-July before you start making weather assumptions. I should give you the grand city tour, introduce you to the right people. You might like it enough to stick."

No. It'd be a while before he could stick anywhere. The thought of two weeks in Fairhope already seemed like an eternity. At Hanna's, anyway—close to Briar and other things too far out of his reach. However, if he couldn't be around Briar without thinking straight then her friends might be able to tell him more than he could wean out of her. "What are you doing tonight?"

She considered. "I could ask Briar to babysit."

"You don't have to do that. I don't want to put Briar out." God knew she had enough on her plate already.

"Oh, Kyle loves Briar," she explained. "He helps her out around the place, gives her a much-needed hand, even if it is with the little things."

He hesitated, weighing the situation. "Well, okay, then. I'll meet you at the tavern around seven?"

"Seven it is." She started to walk off. "I have a customer waiting on these roses. It was nice meeting you, Cole."

CHAPTER FOUR

"YOU GOT A date with the new guy?"

Adrian heaved an aggrieved sigh. "It's not a date, Liv. I'm just showing him around."

"I think he might be able to show you a thing or two," Olivia deduced.

Adrian took a bite out of her tuna sandwich, knowing as well as Briar did that a reply would only egg on Olivia. It was no use trying to budge Olivia once she set her mind to something. Especially if that something was in any way, shape or form promiscuous.

Olivia and Adrian were eating lunch at the inn kitchen table while Briar attempted to fix the leaky pipes under the sink. It didn't take long for Olivia to notice that she was having difficulty using the socket wrench. "You need a plumber."

"Plumbers cost money," Briar said. "Unfortunately, I can't afford such a luxury."

"Come on, cuz," Olivia said. "It's not that bad."

Briar frowned as she gave up on the pipes and the wrench, tucking it away with her other tools and cleaning supplies by closing the cabinet doors. She washed her hands then walked to the fridge to pull out the makings for lunch. "I got a call from a county man today. Property taxes are overdue."

Olivia and Adrian exchanged worrisome glances. "Did you ask for an extension?" Adrian asked.

"I've already had two," Briar explained, pulling open a packet of bacon. Strips sizzled as she laid them one by one on a hot skillet. The smooth, practiced motions of her hands were at odds with the slight quaver of her tone. "He said that if I don't pay by the middle of July, they'll seize the property to compensate."

Olivia choked on her sandwich as Adrian gaped in horror. "They can't do that."

The last time Briar had felt this tired, drained, was during her mother's last days. "With the way business is going, I don't know if I can raise it. If I don't nail down one of these potential investors soon, I could lose everything."

"We'll fight for it."

"That's right," Adrian assured her, echoing Olivia's sentiment. "We'll fight for what's ours, Briar. We'll help you."

She shook her head. "I'm already bleeding the both of you for rent. Adrian, you had to replace your greenhouse after the last hurricane and I know it ate a hole in your house budget—you barely had enough left over to send Kyle to soccer camp. And, Liv, you're saving up for an addition to the tavern. I have to do this alone."

"You can't do everything alone," Olivia protested.

"And that's why I have potential investors." She waved her hands in frustration. "Can we not talk about this right now? So, tell me what you think of the new girl."

Defeated, Adrian lowered to her seat, appetite forgotten. "Roxie Honeycutt. She seems nice, really excited about opening shop."

"Though Lord knows we don't need another bridal boutique around here," Olivia said before taking a big bite out of a banana.

"She also has a license for wedding consultation," Briar added.

Olivia made a face. "They give out licenses for just about

anything nowadays."

"Anyway," Briar went on, "she has some interesting ideas—I think she'll do well. And I bet her gowns are gorgeous."

Adrian brightened up. "And she plans on using me for all the floral arrangements she'll need."

"I like her," Briar concluded, placing the bacon onto a plate. She took a knife from the butcher block to slice a tomato. "Why didn't you bring her over for lunch, guys?"

"Said she was eating with her hotshot fiancé," Olivia explained with a dismissing wave of her hand. "Some law professor named Richard Levy."

"He teaches in Mobile," Briar blurted. "At South Alabama."

"You know him?" Adrian asked curiously.

"No," Briar said, frown returning. "Daddy was talking about him the last time I visited."

That left another gray cloud hanging over the room—usually any mention of Briar's father did. Any thought of him, really, had the same effect.

It's unimaginable—you running the business by yourself....

She closed her eyes because the terrible words he'd spoken to her that day not but a year before still echoed clearly through her head—on a constant loop.

Adrian recovered the conversation. "She's coming by the tavern tonight to try one of Olivia's margaritas."

"I guess that'll be around the time you skip off on your hot date."

"It's not a date, Liv."

Briar looked up. "What's this about a date, Adrian?" she asked as she began to shred a head of lettuce.

"Oh, she's got one hell of a date lined up," Olivia groused. "With Cole Savitt."

The lettuce dropped to the floor with a crunch. Briar felt the color drain from her face as she bent to scoop up the mess. "Oh."

Olivia watched her cousin closely as she ran the lettuce under the sink tap. "Yep. She beat us both to the plate."

"That's not true," Adrian protested, clearly alarmed by Briar's reaction.

"Did you get the scoop?" Olivia asked.

"About why he has that wounded air about him? Maybe. And it seems to be a recent development."

"And?"

Taking a sip of her mineral water, Adrian watched Olivia's expectant face with a shred of glee. "It's personal."

Olivia groaned. "Can't you just give me a hint?"

"Nope."

"Spoilsport." Olivia took a hearty bite out of her sandwich, eyeing Adrian with mock loathing before turning her attention to Briar. "Would you just sit down and eat? The man has two hands. He can fix his own lunch."

"You know that I provide meals when they're requested," she reminded Olivia. "He wanted to eat here. I'm going to accommodate him."

"Like a good hostess," Olivia said with some disdain. "Personally, I don't think women should cook for men at all anymore. We've progressed too far for that. Let them fend for themselves."

"It's not as if we're married," Briar said, irritation nipping on her heels. "I've never done anything less for any guest."

"If I were in your shoes, I'd serve him right up in a negligee," Olivia said with a knowing smile.

Briar's color was definitely coming back. "You just stepped on your point."

Olivia met Adrian's curious gaze and said, "She's got the hots for him."

"Olivia—"

The screen door creaked open and Cole walked through. "Good afternoon, ladies."

"Cole," Olivia greeted, offering him a Cheshire-cat grin. She patted the cushion of the seat next to hers. "We were just talking about you." She winked conspiratorially at Adrian.

"Ah, so that's why my ears are burning." He settled in the chair. "Something smells good," he commented, craning his neck toward the stove.

"Briar's slaving away again," Olivia informed him. "I hope you like blood, sweat and tears."

Cole glanced up at Briar who was neatly arranging two BLTs on a plate. "Do you need any help?" he asked.

She turned and met his gaze. She swore she was growing

pinker by the second. Lowering her eyes, she set a plate in front of him. “Of course not. What would you like to drink?”

“I’ll get it,” he said, already on his feet. “You don’t have a fixed plate here. Go ahead and make yourself something.”

“But I’m—”

He smiled and effectively melted the rest of her words away. “I can fix myself a drink, Briar.”

“Cole—” Briar began before Olivia cut her off.

“Let the man do what he wants and fix yourself some food. You work to the bone then starve yourself. Soon you’ll be nothing but a scarecrow.”

“Fine,” Briar resigned. “Cups are in the cupboard.” When his back was turned, she sent Olivia a seething look. Her cousin merely lifted a shoulder and finished off her sandwich.

As if Briar didn’t have enough problems already with her guest getting under her skin and the inn potentially going under. Apparently, Olivia had decided to play the Emma Woodhouse game again.

Since she had returned to Fairhope, Briar had managed to fly under Olivia’s matchmaking radar. Adrian, however, hadn’t faired so lucky and had a short list of dating calamities to prove it.

By the helpless look on Adrian’s face, Briar knew there was little the people involved in Olivia’s matchmaking schemes could do but humor her and hope it didn’t all end in complete disaster.

* * *

TAVERN OF THE Graces was in full swing by seven o’clock.

Regulars lined up at the bar, talking to each other overloud. The room was nearly filled to capacity, and the pool table was in use by after-work players. And above the table in the corner where an arm-wrestling match was taking place was a flat-screen television tuned to ESPN and a Braves game.

When Cole walked through the thick wood-paneled doors he was overwhelmed by a blast of Sheryl Crow's "Winding Road."

Jubilant shouts echoed from the men surrounding the pool table. Cole followed their attention to the television and saw that Chipper had hit a homer.

One of the pool players stalked to the bar and leaned over it, yelling into an open doorway, "Hey, Liv! Your man just hit one out of the park!"

Olivia walked through, carrying a heavy case of beer bottles and beaming. "That means you owe me twenty bucks, Freddie."

"Aw, hell, Liv. I got a family to feed."

"I'll let this one slide—next time be more careful with your bets. Drinks all around, people!"

Hoots and whistles sounded off around the room as she took bottles out of the case and put them into eager hands. Cole stepped up to the bar to take one. When Olivia's face lit on his, she smiled wide and said, "Hey there, cutie!"

Cole raised his voice over the intro to Aerosmith's "Walk This Way." "Hey, Olivia. I'm meeting Adrian. Do you know if she's here yet?"

"Don't think so," Olivia shouted. She stretched the thin

material of her black tank top over the exposed line of pale skin at her belly. He caught a glimpse of a small, heart-shaped tattoo buried halfway underneath the beltline of her low-rise jeans. "She's probably closing shop and carting Kyle over to Briar's. While you're waiting, though, I'll give you something more potent than this."

She snatched the bottle out of his hand and gave it to one of the regulars, instead. Then she went to work pouring, stirring and blending. In two minutes, she handed him a tall hurricane glass. "This is the best margarita south of the Mason-Dixon. Brace yourself."

As he lifted the glass to his lips, he was aware that several of her patrons watched him closely. He did brace himself and took a sip. The surprising tang of salt and alcohol made a visible shiver worm its way effectively down his spine. "Wow," he choked.

The nearest regular let out a whooping laugh and clapped a hand over Cole's back. "Knocks your socks right off, don't it, man?"

"Yeah," he muttered, braving another sip. "Sure does."

Olivia let out a bellowing laugh that made heads around the room swivel. She patted his cheek, leaning over the bar and exposing ample cleavage over the low scoop of her tank. "I knew you'd fit right in." Shouting over the music, she announced, "Now who wants to buy me my first drink of the night?"

Excited shouts of "Over here, Liv" and "Right here, baby" echoed around him. Men muscled Cole out of the way in their

rush to get to the bar. As he walked backward, he almost toppled over the woman standing close behind him.

"Bit overwhelming, isn't it?" Adrian shouted with a knowing smile.

"Olivia or her customers?"

Adrian laughed and raised herself on tiptoe to brush her lips over his cheek in greeting. "Let's get you another drink."

* * *

BRIAR STEPPED INTO the tavern from the door behind the bar just in time to see Adrian give Cole a smooch. Her stomach plummeted to her toes. Determined not to feel crushed, she went to Olivia's shoulder and waited until her cousin downed the two shots the rugged gentleman in front of her had bought. She wasn't at all surprised when Olivia didn't so much as flinch.

"That's the way to start the night!" she shouted, leaning forward to give the man a hard kiss on the lips. "Whew!" She stumbled around and spotted Briar. "Oh, hey there, cuz! What'd you do with the little one?"

"He's napping on the couch in your office," Briar said, nodding back toward the door she'd closed to block out some of the noise. "Didn't take him long to pass out."

"Being a kid's tough," Olivia said. "What are you doing here?"

"Figured you could use some help since it's Monica's night off."

"Could, yeah," Olivia agreed. "Busier than an ant at a picnic." She looked over Briar's shoulder. "You could start by taking their

orders."

Briar turned toward the end of the bar and met Cole's gaze. She hadn't noticed him and Adrian grabbing two stools. Whirling back to Olivia, she caught sight of the smirk on her face as her own heated. "Liv, I know what you're doing."

"What am I doing?" Olivia asked innocently.

"They're on a date."

"But notice, his eyes are on you," Olivia pointed out. "And I'm the boss 'round these here parts." She gave her cousin a good push in their direction. "Scat."

Briar walked toward them on uncertain legs. She answered Adrian's smile of greeting before leaning over the bar and raising her voice. "Kyle's in the back room sawing logs."

"I know you wouldn't leave him anywhere alone."

"What can I get you two tonight?" Briar asked, putting on her brave face.

"We're not going to be here long," Adrian considered. She turned to Cole. "Crown and Coke suit you?"

"Suits me just fine," he said, his eyes never straying from Briar's face. He took out his wallet. "Let me get it."

"No, this is on me," Adrian protested.

He laid a hand on the one she'd used to open her purse. "You're nice enough to show me around town. Let me pay for the drinks."

When she shrugged acquiescence, he turned back to watch Briar mix the drinks behind the bar, pretending she hadn't heard their exchange. A moment later, she set the glasses on the bar.

"That's three dollars." She smiled at Adrian. "Olivia says you get the official family discount."

"How sweet," Adrian said with a smile and a wave at her friend across the room, tipping her glass to her lips.

Cole took a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it over the bar. "No change."

She took the bill uncertainly, eyeing him in surprise. "Are you sure? That's seven dollars."

"A tip for a good bartender," he said as he raised his glass and drank, watching her over the rim.

"Thank you," she said, heart hammering as she walked away. More blood rushed to her face. She bit her lip to choke it back.

Olivia caught up and muttered in her ear, "Wow, what was that all about?"

Briar sent her an imploring, sidelong look. "It didn't mean anything. He was just being nice."

"A dollar is nice," Olivia pointed out. "Three dollars is generous. Five dollars is damned chivalrous. Anything more than that is just plain love."

Briar glanced back to where Adrian and Cole had been sitting. Something inside her shrank when she saw that they were already gone. She tucked the whopping tip in Olivia's jar before turning back to the bar.

Olivia gestured to the couple sitting on the far side. "There's Roxie and her squeeze. Go introduce yourself while I mix a couple more margaritas."

Briar pushed Cole out of her mind and pasted on another smile.

Roxie lifted a delicate hand when she recognized Briar. “I was hoping we’d see you tonight. This is Richard.”

“Nice to meet you, Richard. I believe you’re acquainted with my father,” Briar said as she shook his hand. “Hudson Browning.”

“Ah, yes,” Richard said. His tall, gangly build towered over his companion’s. Briar gauged him to be in his mid-thirties. With his subtle green eyes and dull brown hair, he looked the part of professor in a pin-striped shirt tucked neatly into pressed khakis. “The defense attorney. I didn’t realize he had a daughter.”

Surprised, Briar’s eyes widened. A barb she was all too familiar with dug in against her heart...where it’d been lodged for some time. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you move into the shop today, Roxie. I wanted to, but—”

“I know you’re busy,” Roxie assured her, sympathy crawling into her eyes. She took Briar’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly. “It’s a tough time. But I’m as willing as Olivia and Adrian to help.”

“Um, thank you,” Briar said, uncomfortable. “Olivia should be done with those drinks in just a second.” Before Roxie could protest, she turned away to escape into the back room. She bypassed the office and surged into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. She splashed cold water on her face as the fear and humiliation built at the back of her throat.

This was not the time to give in to panic again. She took a minute to breathe. In and out. Just breathe.

She looked in the mirror and saw her mother in the eyes staring back at her. The tears came quick, choking her. She covered her face with her hands, shame and regret dragging her under.

The door behind her opened swiftly. “Hey, I thought you were here to help,” Olivia said.

Briar clenched her teeth together. “You really need to get that lock fixed.”

“What the hell’s the matter, Briar?”

Her voice shook. “How dare you?”

Olivia put a hand on her shoulder. “Briar...”

“Don’t touch me!” Briar swatted the hand away and whirled. “How dare you tell her about my problems?”

“She has a right to know,” Olivia said. “She has as much right as I do now that she’s a part of this place. And she’s willing to help.”

“I don’t need her damn help!” Briar shouted in a blinding burst of anger. “Why do you all think I’m some weakling who desperately needs saving?”

“No one thinks that, hon.”

“You and I know everyone thinks that. You, Adrian, Roxie, her fiancé...even Cole Savitt.”

“Cole’s just a nice guy who likes you.”

Briar shook her head as more tears fled down her cheeks. “Cut

that out, Olivia."

"What?"

"I'm not interested in your matchmaking," Briar said bitterly. "All it's ever done is bring Adrian more disappointment. How do you expect it to work out any better for me?"

"You've had your guard up ever since Paris. I would never set you up for a fall like that again."

"Please. I need you to just stop playing games with me and Cole. He's not interested."

"Yes, he is. It's so obvious!"

"I said stop! I don't need anyone in my life. Especially not some stranger who's here for a couple of weeks and then gone. If I get one more stone thrown at me, I don't think I'll be able to stand alone again."

"That's what I'm here for," Olivia assured her. "I just want to help, Briar."

Another wave of anger geysered up, fast and blistering hot. "Well, help yourself. You haven't had a decent relationship any more than I have. Spend your time finding someone you don't have to drive away after a month or less."

Olivia's eyes darkened, her jaw firming. For a moment, she only glared. Then she jerked her chin in a resolute nod and sucked in a breath. "You've made your point. I'll leave you alone."

Briar closed her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm a mess and I'm taking it out on you. I didn't mean that, Liv."

"Yes, you did," Olivia said. "I know you, Briar. You mean

everything you say."

Briar sank to the closed lid of the toilet seat and rocked herself. "Maybe. But your love life isn't the issue. I shouldn't have dragged it into this."

Olivia shrugged as a tense silence carried over them. "Yeah, it was a cheap shot." She leaned against the sink, watching Briar's pained face. "Listen, if you really don't want me around the inn anymore, I'll give you some space."

She shook her head. "You're all I've got left."

Olivia slung an arm around Briar's shoulders. "That's ridiculous. You've got Adrian and Kyle, too. We're family, the four of us. And I mean it when I say I'm here for you, cuz."

Briar sighed. "I know."

Olivia patted her cheek. "Are we better now?"

Briar sniffled, nodded. "I think so."

"Then fix your makeup because we've got a bunch of thirsty people to charm before the night's done."

"Right." Briar squared her shoulders and locked composure into place, a practice she'd mastered long ago. "Back to work." Work would save her, even if nothing else could.

* * *

"SO WE'VE ESTABLISHED that you were a detective," Adrian said as she dipped her fries in ketchup.

"Yeah, in Narcotics, mostly," Cole admitted and instantly felt a tightening in his belly. Adrian's tour so far had revolved around Fairhope and the everyday lives of the people who lived here.

She had shown him the downtown area, the parks and the most notable restaurants, insisting they stop at one—Fly Creek Café. Since the sun had set and a nice, cool breeze was blowing off the bay into the harbor where the restaurant was cozily nestled, they'd chosen a picnic table on the sand outside. There was a live band playing and the atmosphere was almost serene.

If he'd been able to relax, he would have really enjoyed it. All night long, though, he felt that he'd had to step carefully around Adrian. She was sharp. He had a good sense the cunning wisdom he saw in her eyes had been gained from experience. Their conversation hadn't ventured that far into the past, and he was thankful for it. It had been a long time since he'd had dinner with anyone new, but he did know that if she opened up about her past, he would be forced to open up about his.

And that was a whole can of worms he wasn't ready to open.

"I can see you in Narcotics," she said with a nod. "You've got this determined look about you."

He took a bite from his shrimp po'boy to cover the fact that his mouth had fallen open at the observation. He'd been so careful. Had she been reading him the whole time? Swallowing, he raised a brow and said, "Which means?"

"I don't know," she said, tilting her head as she studied his face. It was akin to being under the lens of a high-powered microscope. "It's just this vibe I've been getting. Like a 'wary hunter' sort of thing."

"Weary hunter is more like it," he muttered, picking up the

last of the po'boy and washing it down with the beer in front of him. "How'd you get into the flower business?"

She pursed her lips, knowing he was evading. She took a moment to wipe her hands on her napkin before deciding to answer the inquiry. "My parents own a plant nursery. Since I was little, they made me work there. Taught me how to grow, nurture, care for plants of all varieties. When I got older, I was in charge of the greenhouses with the annual flowers. I grudgingly started to like it. Eventually, I realized I wanted to branch out and make arranging flowers my business. About five years back, I finally saved enough for a start-up. Briar's mother gave me a good deal on the shop space, and the floral business has been keeping me busy ever since. Mom and Dad deliver peace lilies and ferns for me to display and sell."

"So it's a family enterprise?" he ventured to guess.

Her eyes narrowed. "I like to think of the shop as a solitary effort, but they knew all the best suppliers. I probably would've never gotten Flora off the ground if it hadn't been for them. I admit, it helps having parents who know people who know people in the industry."

She didn't like the implication that Flora's success was due to anyone but her, though, Cole noted. "Well, congratulations. You seem to be doing very well."

"Thanks," she said, dipping her head. "Now you again."

"Oh, boy," he said and took another sip of beer.

"Why'd you get out of Narcotics?"

The frown came instantly. He couldn't fight it or the dread that sank into him. He hated to remember how everything had gone downhill. From the divorce to his profession... It was all one big messy blur. But he knew the exact moment things in Narcotics had gone sour. Rarely did he let himself dwell on it.

He took a deep breath, spinning the beer bottle on the tabletop. "You're better off not knowing."

"Did something go wrong?" she asked.

He scanned her face and saw what she was waiting for. "They didn't take my badge, if that's what you're asking."

She nodded and a small relieved light flashed in her eyes. "That's a relief."

"I left for personal reasons," he said. "When you're around cops long enough, you hear a lot about something called 'burnout.'"

"You burned out," she surmised.

"Not completely," he told her. "I could've kept going. But things were unraveling around me. There's a numbness that you have when you're exposed to enough bloodshed. It doesn't completely protect you, but it's usually enough to get you through."

"You stopped feeling numb?"

He paused for a long moment. Was he really going to relive this again? "Something broke through." Clearing his throat, he shifted on the hard picnic table seat. "My partner and I had been tracking a meth lab into the woods outside the city. We secured

a warrant, but we were a day too late. There was an explosion, and everyone in the house was killed."

He stopped but couldn't quite bring himself to look at her. His mind was back in the woods outside Huntsville, a place he rarely allowed himself to go. "It wasn't the first time I'd investigated a meth lab after an explosion and seen the dead bodies. But this time there was a family living in the house, too, with small children."

She nodded. "I can see how that would affect someone."

The part he didn't reveal to her was that one of the children had been the same age as his own son and that the meth lab investigation had happened around the same time that he realized Gavin could be taken away from him. For weeks, he couldn't sleep. When he'd finally gone back to work, he hadn't been able to focus on anything but the crime scene photos...and the face of that little boy.

With a court battle approaching, it had been the worst time to lose his job. But without focus, he could see himself slipping up in the field just long enough for his partner to be unprotected. One mistake was all it took. And the long hours he'd spent on the job over the past decade hadn't boded well for him in the fight for custody, either. Tiffany had used that very fact as one of her main striking points.

It was a lose-lose situation, whatever he did. He'd given up the job he'd dedicated his life to, and he'd lost his son. All in one horrible year.

"How long ago was that?" Adrian asked, breaking the heavy silence that had fallen over the table.

"A little over a year."

"And you're still drifting."

He lifted a shoulder. "I lost my family and my job. It's hard to start over when there's no center."

"Do you think you'll ever be able to move on?" she asked.

Wasn't that why he was doing this wicked errand for Tiffany, for the promise of a new life? "Maybe. But it won't come without...work."

"Speaking as someone who has hit rock bottom—" she lifted her bottle in toast "—it's not easy, but it can happen."

There was the source of that shrewd judgment he'd seen under the surface. She was a single mother who had obviously been through hell with her ex and had come out on top—and all the better for it. Lifting his own beer bottle, he tapped it against the neck of hers. "Thanks."

"Be careful, though," she added. "Make sure the ends justify the means and you don't end up hurting someone you love in the process."

Someone you love. She was speaking of his son. But he couldn't help thinking of Briar back at the tavern. When had he gone from thinking of her as the pretty innkeeper to someone you love?

Gavin was that someone. Gavin was his only chance at a content life, happiness. He couldn't lose sight of that for one

second, especially where Briar Browning was concerned.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEAR TEN O'CLOCK, Adrian and Cole made it back to the tavern. Standing outside the doors, the jukebox could be heard blaring an old Hank Williams song. Adrian smiled at him. "Pretty rowdy in there."

"Is it always like this?" Cole wondered aloud.

"Liv lives for it," Adrian said. "She's as rowdy as three drunks on a bad night. She's got help, Monica Slayer, most evenings. On others, we try to lend a hand, whoever has less to do. But if she had to, Olivia could hold this place up with one hand and have strength to spare."

Cole hesitated before asking his next question. As far as Briar was concerned, his curiosity wouldn't stop prodding. Though he and Adrian had talked of little else but the inn and the three shops adjacent to it all night long, he'd managed to keep the subject off the innkeeper. Until now. "And Briar?"

Adrian lifted her shoulder. "She's been doing what she does ever since...well, she had to, really. But it's wearing her down. She refuses help, but we can all see the responsibility of the inn weighs on her, heavily. The past year's been especially difficult."

"Her mother," Cole surmised. Yes, he'd heard more of the conversation between Briar and whoever she'd been on the phone with than he'd have liked. The more he learned about Briar and why the inn was in such bad financial straits, the more he was riddled by guilt over what he was doing there.

"Yes," Adrian said and not much more. Solidarity, he knew. Her dark eyes slit, scrutinizing. "Why are you so curious about Briar?"

Shifting, he glanced out over the bay. "She just... It really seems like she... I don't know. Needs someone."

Her lips pursed. "You're interested in her."

Alarm filtered through him swiftly. "I'm not the kind of man she needs." It was the truth—as much for himself as to assure her.

Adrian lifted her chin in a short nod. "Not everyone's brave enough to share the load she has. Or care for her the way she deserves to be cared for."

Words formed on his tongue, but he stopped them before they could spill out. "You're right about that."

Her hand lifted to his arm. "Cole, I like you. And it's because I like you that I'm going to be completely honest with you. Briar's one of my oldest friends, and I don't want to see her hurt again. If you're just passing through, it's best just to leave things be."

He frowned over her shoulder at the bay again. "Adrian, I never had any intention—"

"I know," she said with a small smile. "But I saw the way you were looking at her today."

Avoiding her gaze again, he stuffed his hands in his pockets. "You're looking out for her. I get it. But trust me. The last thing I want is to cause Briar any trouble." Veering around her to the tavern door, he reached for the handle. "And you're right. That's

all I'd ever be to her."

"Cole—"

"Don't worry about it," he said, pushing the door open. "I'll see you around, Adrian." Before she could reply, he shouldered his way in, losing himself in the crowd.

He could use another stiff drink.

The place was twice as crowded as before. Over the heads of the people on the barstools, he caught a glimpse of the two women working there.

Cole edged toward the wall to avoid getting shouldered by any of the people milling about. For a moment, he simply observed.

Briar maneuvered her way through the crowd with two large pints of draft beer in each hand. She took them to a table, set them down and pocketed the patrons' money. The gracious smile she aimed at them sucked Cole in. Made his pulse dance irregularly in that dark place it'd dwelled during the past few years.

Cole watched as a large man with a ruddy face coated with a prickly red goatee cornered Briar, laying beefy hands on her shoulders. She jerked in surprise, spinning around only to find herself locked between his solid, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound bulk and the wall behind her. His booming voice resonated across the tavern. "Careful there, little lady. Don't want you to trip and hurt that sweet face."

"Then you shouldn't stand in my blind spot, Clint." She tried to outmaneuver him by ducking under his arm. "Now if you'll

excuse me, I have orders to fill."

"Why the rush?" he asked, wrapping an arm around her waist and steering her toward a table near the back of the room where lights were dimmer and Olivia didn't have quite so well a view of what transpired between her patrons. Cole saw Briar's eyes flash around the room, looking for an escape. He took several steps forward.

Clint's meaty paws squeezed her shoulders and he leered close as his buddies at the table looked on and sniggered. "Give me some sugar. You know you want to."

She turned her nose up, digging an elbow into the man's ribs in another effort to dislodge his attentions. "You're embarrassing yourself, Clint. Now knock it off so I can get back to work."

He chuckled louder, reaching around to her backside and grabbing a handful.

Cole lunged forward, pushing through the other bystanders, a haze of rage cloaking his vision as he heard Briar shriek in alarm. Before he could reach them and dispense justice in his own way, she hauled back a flat-palmed hand and struck Clint across the face.

Clint staggered back, not from the force of the blow, but in surprise, gripping his chin and eyeing Briar in a new light. "Well, who knew there was something fiery underneath Minnie Mouse's blouse? I like that."

Before Clint could reach out and touch her again, Cole clapped his hands over the giant's shoulders and jerked him

forcibly around to face him.

"Hey, man," Clint protested. Blinking sluggishly, his eyes found Cole's face. Judging by the slow perception and the heavy stench of beer emanating from him, it didn't take a scholar to determine that Clint was well wasted. "What's it to you?" he asked, thumping Cole in the chest with the heel of his hand.

"Leave the lady alone," Cole demanded, his voice low. Someone shut off the music and all eyes tuned in to the action. "Or you'll be answering to me."

"Cole..." Briar began but Clint's mocking "ooooo" broke through her speech.

"What're you gonna do?" Clint asked. "Hit me?"

"If you touch her again, yeah," Cole pledged, his hard gaze never flickering from Clint's face. "I will." His hands were already balled, ready, at his sides.

The man let out an obnoxious laugh, grabbing Briar by the wrist and trying to haul her against him again. "Is this bothering you, pretty boy?"

Briar clawed at the brawny cuff on her arm in a failed attempt to dislodge it. Her fingers were turning white—the nimrod was cutting off her circulation. "Let go of me, Clint! You're hurting me!"

Panic crossed Briar's face. Cole had seen that same expression on too many victims' faces to count. Not Briar. He flexed his fists until the knuckles cracked.

Olivia finally managed to work her way to the center of the

crowd. He turned to her in question. “Permission to make a scene?”

“You had to ask?” she said, eyes bright with indignation. “If you don’t, I will.”

“Come on, mousey.” Clint laughed, now using both hands to plaster Briar against him. “You’ll like it. Trust me.”

“Enough,” Cole said, lunging forward. He put a firm hold on Clint’s arm, twisting until the man was forced to let go. He blustered, swinging wildly with one arm. Briar ducked, but despite Cole’s attempts to shield her, Clint’s arm plowed into her, knocking her back into the vacated table and chairs.

Cole saw her go down hard. It was the last straw. Whirling, he raised a balled fist and nailed Clint in the jaw.

The man reeled back against the wall. Spitting blood, he knuckled his mouth. “Son of a bitch clocked me.” He eyed Cole with the light of challenge strong in his eyes. “You wanna brawl?” He stood up, squaring his shoulders and planting his feet as he raised his fists. “Let’s go.”

Cole snapped his ready fist up again and sent Clint reeling once more, this time into the crowd of regulars to his left. They parted and let him fall like a tree with a deafening clatter to the floor.

Cole leaned over him, grabbing hold of the collar of the man’s shirt. Again, he spoke low in a menacing tone. “If I catch you even looking at her again, much less bothering her, I’ll knock your eyes out. Got me?”

Clint coughed. Blood spittled as he spoke. “She’s not worth the trouble.”

Cole hauled him into a sitting position and jerked his head in Briar’s direction. She sat in a chair with a hand on the back of her head, her expression pained as she eyed the pair of them warily.

Cole twisted Clint’s arm behind his back until he shrieked in pain. “Apologize.”

“No flippin’ way.”

Cole twisted the arm harder, making Clint yelp.

“Okay, okay! You’re gonna snap my damn arm off!”

“So apologize and save me the effort,” Cole warned.

“Fine! Sorry, Ms. Browning. I didn’t mean any harm.”

Cole held on to the arm a moment longer then reluctantly let it go. He looked to Olivia. “What do you do with the trash?”

She smirked, helping Briar to her feet as she looked around for two strong regulars. “Freddie, Ty, get rid of this hunk of junk for me, will ya?”

“Gladly, Liv.” They scooped Clint up by each arm and hustled him out the door.

Cole crossed to Olivia and Briar as the crowd started milling again, everyone murmuring in the hushed wake of commotion. “You’ll let me know if he makes trouble again?”

Olivia nodded. “You did good.” She seemed to realize Briar was still leaning heavily against her side. “Come on, cuz. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“She okay?” Cole asked, trailing them into the back room.

Olivia steered her into the office and lowered her to the only chair. “She’ll be all right, as long as she’s not bleeding anywhere.”

Cole could see the bruises on the white skin of her wrist and a large purple welt on her shoulder where she’d smacked the table or chair. “Briar,” he said, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her. “You all right?”

“My head,” she said, reaching back again for it. “I rapped it on something.” She pulled her fingers away. They were wet with blood. Cole’s heart shrank at the sight.

Olivia parted Briar’s hair to get a closer look at the cut. “Cole, put some cold water on one of those hand towels there and hand it here.”

Without hesitation he went to the sink in the corner, listening to Olivia’s ministrations.

“We’ll find you some aspirin, okay?” she said. “It should help the bump.” She turned to Cole with a sneer when he handed her the wet cloth. “That slimeball.”

“Does this happen often?” he asked.

“Not in my bar.”

Briar groaned when Olivia poked gingerly at the bruise on her shoulder. “That hurts,” she muttered. “And I’m a little dizzy.”

Cole couldn’t help himself. He knelt in front of her, took her free hand and squeezed it. “You might have a concussion.”

“I’m not going to the hospital,” she insisted.

One of the men who’d hauled Clint off walked into the office. “Hey, Liv. Sorry to interrupt, but some of your customers are

getting antsy out here."

"Thanks, Ty. I'll be right out." Olivia went to the sink to wash the trickle of blood off. "Here's a clean towel. Can I trust you to get her to bed, Cole?"

"Go do what you need to. I'll make sure she's all right."

"Thanks. I'll be over to check on her after closing." Olivia patted his shoulder and walked back into the bar.

"Can you stand?" he asked, lifting Briar's head to look at her face.

"Yeah."

He pulled her to her feet slowly. Her knees wobbled, and he tucked an arm around her waist. "Okay?"

"Fine."

He walked her through the narrow hallway to the side door, which opened onto the lawn behind the greenhouse. It was a pretty night. He could smell the jasmine and gardenia of Briar's garden. Moonlight poured down around them, a spectral spotlight.

Briar slumped against his side. He paused, tucked one hand under her knees and scooped her into his arms. "Put your head on my shoulder."

She turned her face into his neck. The touch of her skin against his stirred something warm and hungry in his blood.

Not hungry by Clint's definition. Cole wanted to guard her, protect her from the seedy reality of the world. Her scent filtered through him just as the fragrance of her flowers penetrated the

tepid night air. When she wrapped her arms close around his neck, he realized he had her full trust.

The knowledge was potent.

He mounted the stairs to the third level where he knew her private rooms were. Stepping into the living room lit by a single lamp, the smell of lavender struck him. He toted her past the small kitchen on the right and into the first bedroom. Its pale green drapes were closed tight over the windows. The mauve spread was turned down in invitation.

He set her on the edge and went to his knees to tug off her shoes. "Lay back," he advised.

She lowered to the pillows, curling onto her side to face him. He pressed the cloth to the back of her head. "How do you feel?"

"Mmm," she moaned distantly, her eyes closing. "Sleepy."

"Don't fall asleep yet. I need you to tell me if you blacked out at all."

"I don't think so."

He stroked a hand over her hair. "Do you have any Advil? Ibuprofen?"

"In the bathroom cupboard."

He returned with two pills and a glass of water. "Take these." Relieved to see color filtering back into her cheeks, he said, "You already look better."

She gazed at him as he ran the cold rag over her cheeks and brow. "Liv's right. You're a nice guy."

He didn't feel particularly nice. Protective. A bit shaken. But

with hunger gnawing at his vital hold on control, nice wasn't the word for what he felt.

"What you did to Clint..." She trailed off and swallowed hard. "No one's ever done anything like that for me."

"Assault is something I don't tolerate," he groaned. "No one should."

"It was only a kiss he wanted. He was drunk and things just...escalated."

Cole had seen the greed in Clint's eyes, the way they'd skimmed her torso, the way they lit up when he touched her skin. Fury slunk into Cole and he worked carefully for a moment to contain it. Cole had seen his like too many times to count. The man had wanted more.

"He won't touch me again. Not after you scared him like that." Grinning, she added, "It was sort of funny hearing him scream like a girl."

Relieved to see her smile, he stroked her cheek and watched her eyes flutter closed. Pulling his hand away as if burned, he cleared his throat. "No, he won't touch you again. Not as long as I'm around."

The smile melted from her face and the light in her eyes faded. He knew she was thinking about his check-out date. She cleared her throat and changed the subject, careful not to look at him. "Adrian said you used to be a detective."

"Yeah," he said, his voice surprisingly rusty.

"You'd make a good cop."

Cole dropped the rag from her head, set it aside. “I don’t think you have a concussion.”

She sighed in obvious relief. “Good. I don’t think I could’ve handled the hospital tonight.”

“Still, expect to wake up with a rough headache in the morning. Think you can sleep?”

“Maybe.”

He pulled the spread up and over her, tucking it around her shoulders, and switched off the light. “Good night.”

“Cole.”

As he glanced back, Briar looked too pale in the shadows. Too vulnerable.

“I’d feel better if you stayed a bit.”

Swallowing hard, he hesitated halfway between the bed and the door, both calling to him for reasons that dwelled on opposite poles. “You need your sleep,” he decided, looking away.

She let out a breath. “You’re right. I’m...sorry to have to ask something else of you, but could you lock up downstairs? Liv has a key if she wants to look in on me later.”

“Sure,” he answered, taking several steps toward the door before he could change his mind. “Don’t worry about it. Just get some sleep.”

“Good night, Cole.”

* * *

BRIAR’S ATTACK PROVIDED the perfect opportunity to check out the inn’s records and gain some insight into the

establishment's shaky finances. And Cole seriously doubted that someone as attached to the family business as Briar was would let it go belly-up without tapping all possible resources, such as buyers or investors.

However, as Cole lay in bed fully clothed in the dark with his gaze fixed on the ceiling, the knot in his throat grew larger.

Yes, it was the perfect opportunity—perhaps his only chance to get in and out of Briar's files unseen. But there was something else at work now....

Maybe he'd gone soft since turning in his badge because he couldn't motivate himself to invade her privacy—not after the scare she'd had tonight in the tavern.

But she was okay—probably sleeping. Turning on his side to force his attention away from the ceiling—and Briar somewhere on the other side of that white, orange-peel expanse—he tried not to dwell on the fact that concussion victims could slip into comas if they fell asleep. No, she was fine. It was time to do what he was here to do.

Driving a fist into his pillow, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He stepped lightly to the floor of his suite, careful not to wake the creaky, old footboards beneath him. As he turned the knob of the door, he ignored the knot in the back of his throat and how bad he felt about what he was going to do next.

Gavin, he remembered. All he had to do was think about his son. He pulled the door open and stepped out into the dark hall.

No sooner had he moved onto the landing than he heard the

creak of the stairs in front of him.

He bit back a curse. No time to step back into his room and erase his tracks. The top of Olivia's head came into view and he gripped the banister in as casual a stance as he could manage.

Damn, why hadn't he heard her come in? He was going soft.

"Cole," she said, surprised as she made it to the landing. "You're up late."

"I heard you come in," he lied. Clearing his throat, he jerked his thumb toward the stairs that led to Briar's rooms. "I just wanted you to know I saw her to bed. She seemed fine, but I'm glad you're checking on her."

She smiled at him. "You're worried. That's so sweet."

He was worried about her. No acting involved there. "I guess," he said for lack of anything better. "Anyhow..." He pushed off the banister and backed toward the door of the bay-view suite. "I'll let you go on up."

Olivia patted his arm as she passed him. "Thanks again, Cole —for everything. You're a real hero."

Disguising the knee-jerk, disagreeable sound in his throat with a chuckle, he opened the door and walked back into his room. Frowning at the bed, he balled his hands into fists again.

Sleep wouldn't come as easily tonight as it had previously in the suite's bed. He consoled himself with the thought that tomorrow... Yes, tomorrow he would find a way into Briar's filing system. Then this foul errand, which he already felt tangled in from the neck down, would be over and he could get as far away

from Briar Browning as possible.

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER, Briar beamed as she hung up the phone in the inn entryway. It was just past 10:00 a.m. and already she had two families booked for the week. Her sigh wavered with relief, and she felt elated.

Guests meant she was another foothold closer to rising above the treacherous cliff she and the inn were dangling over. It hadn't occurred to her that at some point she'd begun to look forward to bookings because some part of her still enjoyed preparing for them. As she made her notes on how to prep for each family's specific needs, the urge to get back to work and arrange for a full house was strong enough to make her tap her foot against the side of the check-in podium.

The dull headache that had followed the run-in with one of Olivia's tavern chairs was down to a subtle throb, easily masked by a small dose of painkillers.

With two cups of coffee in her system already, plus the last-minute reservations filling the days of the guest calendar in front of her, Briar's disposition went from cheerful to downright sunny for the first time in weeks.

Lunch. It would be lunchtime soon and Cole would likely be roaring back on that Harley of his. Touching a hand to the center of her chest, her smile faded a bit. Since the night he had gallantly carried her up to bed, even casual thoughts of him were accompanied by the flutter of her heart.

Scrubbing the heel of her hand against her sternum, she closed the guest book and walked to the kitchen. There was no room in her life for feelings like this. Especially since Cole was a temporary fixture in her life. Less than a fixture actually, because for the past couple days she'd seen very little of him.

"Roxie," she said, turning around as the door to the kitchen swung open. "I wasn't expecting you."

Roxie lifted a shoulder. "I had some spare time and thought I'd drop by. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. Have a seat—help yourself to some coffee." Briar went to the sink to busy her hands. She pushed her sleeves up and began to rinse the tomatoes that waited in a basket on the counter. "Roxie, I should apologize for the way I acted the other night in the tavern. There's no excuse for being rude to you and your fiancé."

"You weren't rude at all," Roxie assured her as she joined Briar at the sink. Her eyes widened as she reached over to pick up one of the tomatoes. "These are bigger than my mother's. You should sell them."

"I would if I didn't use them all for cooking," Briar explained. "They get bigger each year. Soon I won't be able to get them through the door."

"That's when you enter them in the county fair and win prizes," Roxie advised. Her warm grin faded after a moment and she put a hand on Briar's arm. "Olivia told me that you're uncomfortable with me knowing about the inn's troubles."

"It's nothing."

"No, I think it is something." Roxie read her well. "And it's worrying you a great deal. I wasn't painting pictures when I said I want to help. I can pay more on the lease if you need me to."

"No," Briar said, shutting off the water and drying her hands. "I already charge you girls enough. It's just...this was my mother's place. She's gone and Hanna's has to continue running, no matter what." She gestured to the table. "If you're not in a hurry, I have some leftover biscuits from breakfast if you want some."

"Sure," Roxie said. "Olivia and Adrian rave about your cooking."

"A year and a half of cooking school," she explained. "Anyway, I want to hear more about the boutique. How's it coming along?"

"Wonderfully—quicker than I anticipated. I'm just thrilled with how things are progressing."

"Have you mentioned the package deal to the others?" Briar asked.

"Oh, yes. Adrian jumped on it and had a proposal and spreadsheets lined up for me the next morning. Olivia seemed happy about the veranda being put to good use. We just need to iron out the details and we can start marketing it as soon as I open Belle Brides for business."

Through the screen door, the sound of an uninhibited engine poured loudly through the quiet of the inn. Roxie's eyes widened in glee. "Ooo, I was hoping I'd get to meet your tavern hero."

Briar frowned. “He’s been gone most of the morning. Most of yesterday, as well. I guess he’s come back for lunch.” Her heart did that inconvenient jump when the kitchen door opened and Cole walked in, his brow wet and the front of his plain white T-shirt damp from perspiration. As he glanced around the kitchen, his dark eyes caught the light and flickered. Briar’s stomach muscles softened, trembled.

“Sorry, ladies. Am I interrupting something?”

“Not at all,” Briar said quickly. Composure, she urged as she opened the refrigerator. “I made some fresh lemonade if you’re thirsty.”

He watched her take down a glass. “Parched, actually.” After a moment, he glanced at Roxie. “Cole Savitt.”

“Pleased to meet you, Cole,” she acknowledged. “Roxie Honeycutt.”

Cole stuck out a hand for her to shake then pulled it back when he saw the grease on his fingers. “Sorry. I’ve been working on my bike for the better part of the morning.”

“Nothing like a little early morning mechanics,” Roxie commented. “I’m opening a bridal shop above Adrian’s florist.”

“Oh, right,” Cole said. “She mentioned you.” Briar handed him the cool glass. “Thanks, this looks great,” he said appreciatively and sipped. “Tastes great, too.”

“Want some lunch?” she asked.

“Actually, I was going to grab a shower before I stink up your kitchen.”

"Do you need fresh towels?" she asked as he turned to go upstairs.

"Just the one will do."

"I'll wash the others," she offered. "Give me a minute to get you a clean stack."

He nodded, lifting the glass. "Thanks again for the drink. It was nice to meet you, Roxie."

"Likewise." As she watched him walk out, Roxie tilted her head to admire the view. "Mmm. Honey, with men like that roaming the earth, global warming is here to stay."

CHAPTER SIX

UPSTAIRS, COLE stripped off his grimy T-shirt and answered the soft knock on the door with, "Come in."

Briar pushed the door open but stopped short when her eyes skimmed over his bare chest. She averted her gaze as she walked in, arms laden with fresh white towels. "I brought three, just in case."

"Thanks."

She set the stack on the edge of the bed then backed away, her eyes still shifting elsewhere. "I'll let you shower."

"Wait," he said quickly, taking a step in her direction. He heard the swift catch of her breath as he closed in. Her eyes caught his and locked. A hand pressed to her stomach and he wondered what was going on under there.

He'd hardly seen her these past couple days. Avoidance. He was avoiding her like the plague. As soon as he'd seen her walk

downstairs for breakfast the morning after her near-concussion, he'd run like the paperboy chased by a pack of neighborhood dogs.

As for his plans for breaking into her filing system? He hadn't yet found a safe moment. She was always there, the subtle but no less devastating scent she carried on her skin leaving him no room for clear thought or instinct.

On impulse, he moved closer. Briar's lips parted and he bit the inside of his, hoping they would stop tingling in anticipation. Focusing on her eyes, he swallowed to quench his throat. His palms had gone damp, and he rubbed them against his jeans. Nerves held the silence.

What was his move here?

He hadn't been able to get into her files so he had to come up with some other way of getting the information he needed, or something close to it at least. Tiffany was hounding him and his dreams were haunted by visions of both Gavin and Briar, each on the verge of being engulfed by the blackness that lurked in his shadow. The closer he got to either of them, the more they disappeared into darkness. He woke in cold sweats throughout the night with the weight of the black pressing on his chest.

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