

She led him by the hand to a seat on the bed.

“You’re law enforcement,” she stated flatly and plopped down beside him.

“Now there’s something I’ve been accused of,” he said, disappointed, mainly with himself. He rubbed his unshaven face with his hands. “Texas Ranger.”

“Working undercover?”

“Wish I was under the covers—right now.”

She laughed, that squeaky titter softening his guilt, deepening his interest. “I could help you with that,” she said.

He fished his pocket for the cell phone and sighed in resignation. “I’m sure you could, and I’d let you, but I’ve got to return a call, sic a hound dog on a trail, and then I’ll have to leave.” The slim device vibrated in his hand. “See?” he said. “I’m wanted right now.”

“Outlaw,” she whispered.

**Just
Blaine
Horney**

Kris Karrel

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*To Randy, Stacy, Tanya,
Lynna, Dave, and
the rest of the “J” gang—
the best partners in “crime”
I’ve ever done time with.*

Until you’re better paid...

Chapter 1

LILA STARNOLD SHUDDERED in the chilly dark, her cheek resting on her fiancé's chest, his heart thumping steady in her ear.

"Don't worry," Derry whispered. "My brother'll find us."

"What if my dad doesn't call him?"

"He will—he's a Texan."

"But we've been in Wyoming for—"

"Born in Texas, forever Texan."

A humming motor neared to quit, vehicle doors slammed, a brief silence gave way to heavy footsteps overhead. She raised her head at the opening of the trapdoor and bright light poked her eyes to squint.

A hulky silhouette squatted at the opening. "Big smile now, big smile." A blinding flash followed by a harsh laugh. "Go on and kiss her, boy."

"Fuck you," Derry said and tightened his arms around her. Lila buried her face in his chest.

The clicking shutter too loud, she opened her eyes in time for a second and third flash to close them once again.

"Show us your face there, little lady," the photographer said.

"You got what you need," Derry said.

"Never get enough, shithead."

"Aw, just hurry up," a second man said, his reedy voice familiar, too familiar.

"Boy needs a lesson in respect," the photographer said.

"What'd I tell you about him? Smart-ass, ain't he?"

Lila turned her head to peek anew at the square opening. The right face might trigger her balky memory, whatever good the knowing would do. She regretted not getting more than a glimpse of her kidnappers, jumped from behind like she was, pinned face-down to the big rock by the stream.

Hands bound behind her back just that quick, blindfolded even quicker, she'd screamed until choked into unconsciousness only to wake up here, wherever *here* was, with Derry. But who'd freed them, and why? Unless it was for show, for the photographs that would most likely be shared with her father.

The photographer grunted, twisting as he rose out of his crouch to show only his backside. "Lucky we ain't killed either one of 'em," he chuckled and added, "yet."

"You won't either," Derry retorted.

God, how she wished he'd just keep his mouth shut.

The photographer sniggered, but never turned around. "Don't be so sure, shit-for-brains. Gonna make your little bitch watch, too."

Unexpectedly, a third man spoke, his bass drawl colored mean. "Just close that fucking thing."

The trapdoor whomped shut and returned the crushing darkness. Numerous footsteps scuffled overhead, vehicle doors slammed, a motor gunned to life that quickly faded away.

Lila exhaled in relief. "Derry, please don't talk to them like that."

"No one's gonna hurt you," he said.

"Please. If they get mad—."

"Ok, ok." His arms fell away from her. "I'll try, but no one's gonna do anything to you, sweetheart. Not as long as I live."

She hated wondering how long that might actually be—for the both of them.

* * *

He made eye contact right off the elevator with a pleasant gray-haired woman manning a cluttered reception desk.

Snatching the black Stetson from his head, he smiled his best.

“Hi, I’m Horney,” he said.

In a sharp breath, the thin lady wearing a crisp, white shirt tucked into blue jeans had a scowl on her face and the phone in her ear.

“Security,” she said, a keen eye on her intended prey.

Blaine gave her a one-handed cease and desist. “Whoa, ma’am, whoa there. Blaine Horney. Got an appointment with—.”

She slammed the receiver to the cradle and eyeballed a letter-sized register lying atop a low mound of paperwork.

“Harney,” she said, gazing up at him with marked suspicion.

“No, ma’am, not Harney. Horney, Blaine Horney. My brother, Derry, he works for—.”

“Another one?” she said, wrinkling her nose as if she found the very idea of more than one Horney male skulking this Earth utterly repulsive. Before he could do so much as nod, she pressed a button on the phone and said, “Horney to see you, sir,” in an efficient, professional manner.

Chuckling preceded the drawl from the speaker. “Why, Maggie, I believe that’s the nicest offer you’ve ever tendered.”

Cheeks redder than any florist’s rose, Maggie fairly spit into the intercom, “Blaine Horney to see you.”

He shifted his feet, chortling softly behind his hat, mildly annoyed that he wasn’t enjoying this nearly as much as he had in times past.

A guffaw over the little speaker. “Well, send him in then.”

A frowning Maggie hooked a thumb over her shoulder at a closed door a few short steps behind her desk. “Right through there.”

“Why, thank you, ma’am.” Blaine loitered long enough to say, “Wasn’t our fault, you know. Our daddy named us.”

“Practical joker, huh?” she said, her gaze on her desk. Halfway to the office door, she muttered behind him, “Some sick people in this world, really sick.”

The Texas Ranger just couldn’t agree more. Especially today.

* * *

“You have any idea where we are?” Lila said.

“Nope,” Derry replied. “Wish’d I’d stuck a knife in my boot instead of that stupid cell. Don’t work half the time anyway.” He shifted his hips and bent his right leg, reaching around her to fish out the slim phone. The green LED display lent a ghoulish caste to his battered face. “See?” he said. “No signal. Piece of shit.”

“Why’d they cut us loose? Why didn’t they search us?”

“Do I look like a mind reader to you?” He bowed his head. “Sorry, sweetheart, I just...aw, hell.”

“Never mind. Just put it away,” she said. “Save the battery.”

“For what?” he said, although he did as she asked. “Can’t get a signal over half this country on the best day.”

She gently touched his chest, working her fingers up his neck to his chin in seeking his mouth. He met her lips with his own, tensed suddenly and averted his head, his arms rigid around her once again.

“You hurt bad?” Lila whispered.

“I’ll live.” He drew a breath and said, “You know if I had something to stand on, I could get that door open.”

She ignored that to lay her head against his chest once more. “Why’d they do this?”

“Guessing someone wants a chunk of your daddy’s change.”

Lila sniffled, tasting salt on her wet lips. “I recognized one of them, his voice anyway.”

“Me, too. Name escapes me though. Wished I’d got a better look at ‘em when they—.”

A full-blown sob escaped her throat.

“Sssshhhh,” he said. “My brother’ll find us.”

Her voice wavered. “You’re awfully sure of that.”

“Damn good at what he does, sweetheart. Got a gift.” He stiffened, shifted his hips and slowly relaxed. “Psychic.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“Nuh-uh. Trails thoughts.”

She almost giggled in disbelief, or was it hysteria?

“Told me wherever we go, we all leave a trail like a living thread. Said the entire Earth looked knee-deep in spiderwebs sometimes.”

Lila decided to humor him. “Don’t these webs fade over time?”

“Don’t think so.” His lips upon her hair, his breath warmed her scalp. “That’s how he got to working cold cases.”

“He found someone then?”

“Uh-huh. Lady, dead a long time.”

Dead sounded too close, too real, trapped here in a darkness so complete she didn’t need eyes.

“Happened across an old murder scene near Austin a few years ago,” Derry continued softly. “Told me later, the thoughts were so strong around the remains, he knew exactly how she’d died. Then he trailed the perps’ threads to their car.”

“How’d he follow them if they drove off?”

“They left their plans for him.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Their thoughts, conversation on the way to the car. Blaine said one guy was steady thinking about a girlfriend in Dallas. Damn near drove right to her place and even though other people had been living there over the years, the threads of both men were still there.”

“How’s he tell good from bad if they all look like spiderwebs?”

“Mind turns certain ones to different colors, even he don’t know why. Now these two boys, he run across their threads at another old murder scene in Mesquite where a Jane Doe had been found a few years before. Turns out she was the girlfriend those assholes went to visit. From then on, the investigation was cut-and-dried easy. Even dug up a gun buried in a backyard that tied the suspects to the murders, plus a string of robberies. Them two were executed in Huntsville just a short while back.”

“All that from thoughts?” she asked, thinking too good to be true usually was. Except for Derry.

“Like a hound-dog on a trail my brother is, once he latches onto a thread.”

“And his boss just lets him go chasing these...threads?”

“Captain was skeptical at first, but after Blaine showed him what all he could do, he got promoted to some special Ranger squad that just works cold cases.”

Cold cases. Like the chill of this dank concrete prison.

“Doesn’t he ever get stumped?” she asked, the tiniest hope of survival threatening to stir.

“Sometimes. Runs into a dead end, then he’s gotta hunt the thread. Don’t always work, of course, but he’s managed enough to make it worthwhile to try. Usually, though, bad guys are steady thinking about their next move, what they’re going to do with the body, how they’re gonna hide until the heat’s off, how they’re going to spend the money maybe, where they’re going next. That’s how he usually gets them.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Got some special name for it, place-something or other he called it, showed me an article once. Wanted to keep the whole thing a secret, too, but as I understand it now, more than a few people know. I keep telling him one of these days the CIA’s going to be knocking down his door.”

“I’m surprised the FBI hasn’t already.”

“Offered him a job last year, but he turned them down flat.”

“Why?”

“Think one of the agents might’ve pissed him off or something. Didn’t wanna talk about that too much. Kinda crabby for a while there after he got shot.”

“I remember. That’s when you took off to Montana last year.” Lila felt a little better now, though she didn’t know why. “You know I laughed over your name when I met you.”

“Good thing I got a certain tolerance for pretty Texans raised in Wyoming.” He tickled her ribs, she jostled him trying to stay his hand, and he tensed anew, muttering, “Ow.”

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Forget it. Brung that on myself, I did.”

“Why’d your parents name you Derry?”

“My mom said Very was just too obvious.”

She grinned, the humor a pleasant, albeit brief antidote to her fear. “What’s your dad’s first name?”

“Lane. Middle name’s only a letter.”

“What letter?”

“S. Lane S. Horney.”

She giggled. "Your grandfather named him that?"

"Damn sight better than what my grandma wanted to call him."

"What was that?"

"Always."

"Get out."

"That's what she said. Always Horney and no middle name."

She laughed softly. "God, what a family I'm marrying into."

"Lila and Derry Horney. Got a ring to it, you ask me."

Without warning, her throat thickened, her nose tingled, and new tears stung her eyes.

"He took it, Derry," she whispered. "Right off my finger."

He hugged her tightly, his chin resting on the top of her head. "Get you an even better one next time."

Lila sobbed noiselessly, wishing for one moment to see the assurance she knew would be sparkling in his aquamarine eyes.

* * *

The rotund businessman shot to his feet at Blaine's entry, arm outstretched in greeting, a smile on his jowled face. "That was quick."

Blaine reached across the oversized desk to shake his hand, noting the firm grip, the lack of callus, the manicured nails.

"Got here soon as I could," he said.

From the top floor of the small ten-story office building on the outskirts of Cheyenne, Wyoming, the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows behind Silas offered a panoramic view of wild, rugged country.

Gray-green sagebrush dotted yellowing prairie grass, leading the eye over rolling hills of pastures and deep green forests to the slate-blue shoulders of distant snow-capped peaks.

The desktop neat and orderly, save for a crumpled white handkerchief. A miniature Texas state flag stood next to a flag of these United States at the head of a pen and notepad adjacent to a spare grouping of photos in separate frames.

"Have a seat there, son," Silas Starnold said, gesturing at two overstuffed black chairs before the desk.

Hat in hand, Blaine perched on the edge of the seat and gave up all pretense of humor. “Your Maggie out of the loop?”

Silas’s pleasant demeanor disappeared in a frown. “Everyone’s out,” he said. He fished a stainless-steel ring from the front pocket of his gray slacks, separated a brass key, and sat back down in his office chair to unlock a desk drawer. “Got something here you need to see.”

A short bleep from the phone on Silas’s desk preceded Maggie’s terse announcement that a Liscomb was here, an angry man in the background yelling unintelligibly.

“Shit,” Silas muttered, slapping a manila folder to his desktop.

The office door burst open to roundly smack the wall.

“What the hell’re you thinking, Si?” A lean cowboy in his early forties ducked the doorframe, his white hat gray with dirt and wear, his jeans, boots and long-sleeved blue shirt dusty and well-worn.

“Sorry,” Maggie yelled from her desk, “just wouldn’t wait.”

“Jed, you’re early, way early,” Silas said, a scowl twisting his face.

Blaine got to his feet, stuck his right hand out for the introductions, thinking better of the move when this Jed aimed a fat forefinger at him and said to Silas, “Who’s he?”

Well, not so much said as accused maybe. Man had to be at least four inches taller than Blaine. *At least.*

“Just take a seat, would you?” Silas barked. “And shut that fucking door.”

Jed heaved the innocent door to a loud, snappy close and narrowed one eye, looking even meaner now, like a cornered wildcat.

A six-foot, seven-inch wildcat.

“You here for my job?” he demanded of Blaine.

Silas leapt to his feet. “For God’s sake, he ain’t here for anyone’s job. Just sit down, would you? And take off that goddamn hat.”

“Why? He a preacher or something?”

“Now there’s something I’ll never be accused of,” Blaine said, deciding even the briefest grin out of the question, the air thicker than swamp fog for the tension.

Jed abruptly snatched his head bare, upsetting a raft of unruly brown hair, yet failed to take a step forward or back, much less a seat.

Blaine sat back down, hat on his lap, eyes on that manila folder. Maybe he could just reach over and snag—

Silas reclaimed the chair behind his desk. “Jed, for the last time, sit your ass down or I’ll...” A heavy sigh, a desk drawer whipped open, turned Blaine’s attention to Silas and the big revolver aimed at the glaring wildcat. “Not in the mood for any bullshit today.”

Alarm flashing in his mud brown eyes, Jed opened his mouth as if to speak and chose instead to shuffle to the vacant chair beside Blaine.

“Man’s got a temper,” Silas said casually, as if drawing a gun on an employee was an everyday occurrence.

Blaine exhaled slowly, quietly.

The gun disappeared, the drawer slammed shut.

The wildcat leaned forward and said to Silas, “Heard you was looking to hire somebody.”

“And who the fuck told you that?”

Jed hunkered down, if such a thing was possible for a man his size, rolling his hat brim between hands like bear paws.

Blaine studied the plush white carpet beneath his scuffed black boots. Certainly he’d be kicking Derry’s ass for getting him involved with these two—*after* he found him.

Safe behind the neutral façade he’d honed over ten years in law enforcement, Blaine knew there’d never be an *if*, not in this case. He’d find his brother no matter what—dead or alive—and squinted at the thought of dead. He looked down at himself, annoyed to discover the fingers of his right hand hunting that goddamn scar on his chest beneath his white shirt. *Again*. He grabbed the padded armrest, determined to hold on for all he was worth.

Silas cleared his throat. “Jed, meet Derry’s brother, Blaine.”

“Aw, shit,” Jed muttered, finally sticking out his hand. “Sorry about that.”

“Forget it,” Blaine said, wishing during the handshake that he might forget everything, especially the whole last year.

Life seemed intent on turning to utter shit, no matter what changes for the so-called better he’d made since the shooting in Montana. So what if he’d saved a chunk of money in giving up his finer things in

life? He'd quit Jack Daniels only to learn that beer alone was a poor substitute—all that pissing for such a minor buzz. He couldn't help thinking how nice it would be right now to have a quart bottle and a high dollar working girl to help him commiserate.

He still hadn't gotten completely shed of Peg, his on-again, off-again, semi-permanent bedwarmer down in Texas. Yep, a healthy dose of old Jack would be just the ticket for what ailed him, that and a good cigar. And nary an ashtray in sight. *Dammit, dam—*.

"So, you're Blaine Horney, huh?" Jed said.

"Most of the time."

Silas settled back in his seat, chuckling all the way, Jed's ferocity softening into a wide grin.

"Brother's pretty funny, too," he said. "Nothing but good things to say about you."

The offhand remark punctured Blaine's neutral façade honed over ten goddamn years in fucking law enforcement with the ease of a sharp needle to an overfilled balloon.

Jed turned to Silas. "Why didn't you say something to me?"

"Ain't officially here," Starnold replied.

"What?" Jed glanced between Blaine and Silas, then said, "Breathing, ain't he?"

Blaine grinned, if only to spite the dread threatening to send his right hand on the hunt for that scar much too close to his heart.

"He's a fucking Ranger, for God's sake," Silas said.

"Forest service?" Jed asked.

"You asshole, Texas. Derry didn't say anything to you?"

Jed sat up straight. "You called the law? For what?"

Silas rolled his eyes. "See what I have to work with here?"

The moment Jed dealt his boss a killing glare, Blaine decided any reaction, even the tiniest smirk, was definitely out of the question.

"What's a Texas Ranger want in Wyoming?" Jed asked Silas. "Ain't that outta his territory?"

"Called jurisdiction. Now, just shut up and listen," Silas said. "Blaine's here to help find his brother. Job's just a cover story," he turned a slit-eyed gaze on Jed, "in case expiring minds want to know."

Jed spread a troubled look between Silas and Blaine, then said, “Thought Derry went on vacation.”

Silas shook his head. “Kidnapped.”

“Who? Derry?”

Silas dropped his gaze to the manila folder. “And Lila. They were... together.”

“Derry finally popped the question, huh?” Jed said.

“Planning a bar-b-que to celebrate when...” Silas yanked the white handkerchief from the desktop to mop his sweaty brow. “Shut up, would you?”

Blaine blinked on the off chance one or more threads would show, disappointed for the effort. Hell if he hadn’t been blinking like a dry-eyed idiot from the moment he deplaned in Cheyenne to nothing, nothing at all.

Too close, he thought dismally. *Just too damn close to this. Dammit, dammit, dam—*.

“Huh?” Jed said.

Wincing, Blaine looked up to the keen study of both men. He shrugged, disgusted with himself. “Thinking too hard,” he said.

Silas hesitated, then slid the manila folder across the desktop.

Chapter Two

BLAINE OPENED THE FOLDER, overwhelmed by an unspeakable outrage at a grainy black and white photo of his younger brother seated on the floor of what looked like a tiny basement and holding a pretty young woman in his arms.

Derry had taken one hell of a beating—swollen lips and nose, black circles ringing both eyes. The girl looked unharmed, apart from what appeared to be either bad light or some minor bruising about her neck. The abject terror in her expression, however, was enough to chill even the most seasoned investigator.

“Aw, God,” Jed muttered and bowed his head, his jaw muscles working and working beneath his tanned skin.

Silas leaned back in his chair, leather squeaking in complaint, to stare at the textured ceiling. Blaine said nothing in a failing effort to keep his emotions in check.

A flip to the next photo and the defiance in his younger brother’s eyes was exactly what he’d expected. Lila, huddled in Derry’s lap, had hid her face like a frightened child.

Dammit, dammit, dam—

“What’s that?” Jed asked, leaning closer.

“Nothing. Bad habit.” Blaine grit his teeth and leafed through the remaining photos to the ransom demand.

Graceful letters flowed over a clean sheet of plain copy paper.

*Twenty million cash
No law*

More the handiwork of a woman, Blaine decided. But not a word of threat or further instruction, no *wait for our call*, nothing.

Jed snorted, cleared his throat and Blaine warned him quiet in a stern glance that Silas backed with a scowl in the big man's direction.

Sentiments emanated from the folder like the permeating stench of a landfill. Hate, perverseness, greed capped by a desire for retribution so virulent it circulated like a separate bloodstream through his higher mind. Blaine forced a mental step back from the burgeoning insult over this assault on a member of his immediate family. Not to mention his brother's intended.

Yet, no threads, not so much as a snippet of a color anywhere on his unique mental landscape. Not that he expected to find any with the manila folder or even in this office. In a blink and a swallow, as if his higher mind sought to assuage his self-doubt, he glimpsed ghost-white webbing over the office floor, the ectoplasmic trails past and present of every day people going about their lives. Like Jed. Or Silas...wait...what?

Gone.

He caught himself before he shook his head. Probably the desperate need to find his brother working against him. Or his balky inner vision barely working at all. Hard to tell which at the moment. Both desire and psychic gift had been more than happy to fuck with him over the course of his life.

Had to be more than one perp, if a woman had, indeed, written the ransom note. The skeptical Ranger in Blaine wouldn't allow him the luxury of believing for even a New York minute, especially in light of the latest statistics coupled with his personal experience, that he would find Derry and Lila alive, even if Silas could meet the ridiculous demand. Couple the smelly obsession for revenge with the vague wording of the ransom note and he once more coldly considered the idea he might never see his brother alive again.

Of course, he had yet to visit the actual scene of the kidnapping and that left far too much room for hope. If only he could summon the strength to remain emotionally detached, to treat this kidnapping as a crime happening to someone else, his inner sight just might show up to work. Possibly.

Always a downside to goddamn everything in life. Like giving up Jack for pissant beer. Or putting up with Peg to keep his dick from bitching. And all because he'd played the John Wayne rookie and got himself shot a trigger pull after Shane Seidel fell down dead.

The last item in the folder was an ordinary manila envelope that had apparently contained the photos and ransom demand. Blaine frowned at his name misspelled below Silas's in generic block letters. No postmark, no address, no face or unique thread. No thoughts pertaining to origin, no clues where the perps might be headed with their prey; the writer of the note, the printer of the address, just perps who knew his name, maybe forced it out of Derry.

Or beat it out of him.

Blaine couldn't discount the possibility, however remote, that a criminal aware of his mental gift might somehow be connected. There were more than a few of those roaming free now, men who should be on death row or executed already, like 26 others he'd put away, but for one reason or another—a good attorney or a technical mishap with the evidence—had managed a lesser conviction, even outright freedom, instead.

He'd heard a shitload of rumors, which he'd never publicly confirmed, read posts about himself on law enforcement forums on the internet, run across various incarnations of his picture numerous times. He'd become a master at avoiding direct questions from informants, past collars, defense attorneys, and had, just last year, turned down that job offer from the great FB of I.

A reporter once asked him about his mental abilities after an interview with a man prior to his lethal injection for a sixteen-year-old murder. *No comment* beat an outright lie, Blaine's thinking at the time that maybe the possibility he could actually do some of what the Texas-large rumors suggested might give a bad guy or two pause prior to breaking the law. Now he wondered, as he had a hundred or a thousand times since taking Silas's phone call yesterday in San Antone, if he hadn't been wrong, way off the mark, that maybe these rumors out of control might turn out to be a curse in the long run—especially for his brother.

Life had, indeed, turned to all kinds of the worst shit possible. He came aware of his fingers fiddling that scar on his chest for the umpteenth time and forced his right hand back down to the folder in his lap.

“Daughter’s hair color,” Blaine said to Silas.

“Strawberry blonde, gray eyes.” He turned a photo on his desk, but not before he’d paused to stare and add, almost breathlessly, “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Blaine noted the quizzical expression shifting across Jed’s face, then asked Silas, “Where’d you find this envelope?”

“Passenger seat of Derry’s truck.” Silas opened his top desk drawer and proffered a white gold band sporting a single small diamond. “This was also inside.”

Blaine took the ring, fingered the smooth metal, and whiffed the fear, before losing his mind to recent memories. The hospital in Montana, the five grand in cash he’d given Derry, a balance due paid in full by one Etta Walker, widow of a Texas Ranger, who’d used Blaine and his abilities without his knowledge or consent to satisfy her own need for revenge.

And Shane Siedel, a good man, shot dead in the bargain.

Without any warning, a pea green string writhed to life over the office floor, wet fresh shimmering over dusty old in tracking behind the desk to Silas. Something seemed off, missing from the thread, though Blaine couldn’t readily identify what.

He turned his focus back to the ring, sensing the sick pleasure of the person responsible for it being here in Silas’s office rather than on his daughter’s finger. A snippet colored to life, hanging there in his mind like a loose end, a bean-turd brown loose end sporting a dirty gold stripe of a spine. The mental landscape dissolved, Blaine clenching his teeth at the abrupt return of his anger.

Without a tighter rein on himself, he’d be no good to anyone, most especially his brother and Lila.

He reached inside his suit coat for a latex glove and stopped short to ask Silas, “You handle these photos, that envelope much?”

The man sighed and studied his desktop.

Disgusted, Blaine clapped the folder shut. Fingerprints, if there’d been any, surely smudged now, useless in any official capacity. Still, the

folder, even the ring, might be worth overnighting to Larry Hanover for a little look-see on the sly. The man owed him a favor or ten as it was.

“Got an envelope?” Blaine asked Silas.

The man cocked his bald head, a puzzling, almost alarmed expression on his face.

“Gonna send all this off to a friend,” Blaine said. “See what he can make of it.”

Silas frowned. “That note said no law.”

The pea green thread flashed and faded. *Pea green, for chrissakes.*

“Not going through official channels,” Blaine said.

Silas took a full minute to answer, as if waiting for Blaine to elaborate. “Well, we can leave it with Maggie...” he shook his head. “Better we send it from town so she don’t get wind of it,” he frowned at Jed, “like you got wind of him.”

“Don’t get mad at her, Si. Just looking out for her nephew.” Jed leaned forward, rolling his hat brim yet again, and said, “You both can count on me. Anything I can do.”

“How about running me out to my brother’s truck?” Blaine asked.

“It’s at the house,” Silas said and Blaine winced before he could catch himself.

“Now what the hell’s wrong with that?” Jed asked.

Beads of sweat glittered anew on Silas’s forehead. “Didn’t feel right, just leaving it there...” He swiveled in his chair to face the windows. “I know I shouldn’t have moved it.”

“Why don’t you show me where you found it then,” Blaine said coolly. *If he knew better, then why...*

Silas got to his feet, taking his revolver from the desk drawer.

Blaine waited for the pea green thread to show again, and grit his teeth in frustration when nothing happened. Something was off about that thread—Silas’s thread—he was sure of it. Father of a kidnapped daughter, a victim in every sense of the word, the only reason Blaine had seen it in the first place. Surely.

He looked down at the carpet between his boots. Shouldn’t he finally, with his own brother gone missing, catch a glimpse of his own thread, too?

Nada.

Jed stood up to announce, "I'm driving," in a tone that wasn't taking no for an answer.

Blaine got to his feet and said, "Always use a good hand, every now and again."

"Crack shot, too, if it comes to that," Jed said and clapped his hat on his head. "Let's hope it don't."

Silas snatched a snow white ten-gallon hat from a hook on the wall adjacent to the office door, then the brown leather belt and holster hanging beneath.

Blaine turned to Jed. "Sure you ain't from Texas?"

He grinned. "Got some bitch with Wyoming?"

"Dirt tastes the same," Silas said, arranging his suit coat over the holster on his right hip.

"From Texas to Montana," Blaine said, "all points east and west."

Jed whomped him on the back. "Must be a fucking cowboy."

"Now there's something I've been accused of." He stuck his hat on his head, guessing his back might quit throbbing in the next hour or two.

Silas opened the office door. Blaine hiked a brow at Maggie on his way to the elevator, unable to shake the gut feeling he was leaving something very important behind. Like a clue. Or ten.

Jed brought his fist down on the receptionist's desk, startling everyone into a look his way.

"You have yourself a good day there, Aunt Maggie," he said.

"Where you three headed?" she asked. "The ranch?"

"Gonna show him the place, Maggie," Silas said.

"He's on the payroll then?"

Jed nodded. "Always use a good hand." He glanced sideways at Blaine. "Every now and again."

* * *

"Know what?" Derry said with such enthusiasm Lila raised her head from his chest. "Get on my shoulders, you could push that door open."

“What if it’s locked?” she said.

“You get away, get to a phone, call—.”

“I’m not leaving you here.”

Quiet a moment, Derry said, “Bet there’s something up there you could throw down, a chair, box, something I could stand on to get out.”

Her fledgling hope failed the minute a motor neared to idle outside. Loud footsteps overhead, the trapdoor opened, a wood ladder hit the concrete floor with a dull thud. Derry tightened his arms about her, Lila squinted at the bright light, and a black silhouette flung something like a lifeline her way.

She seized the rough rope in both hands, a hard jerk ripped her from Derry’s grasp. She clawed the binding ligature at her neck, Derry on his feet to yank the line, staggering back against the rough concrete wall when the loose end snapped him in the face. Gasping for air, Lila looked up to an outstretched arm pointing a gun.

She recognized the photographer by his harsh laugh. “Better cool it there, asshole,” he said. “Tie him up, little lady.”

Footsteps overhead turned the photographer’s attention and Derry lunged for the ladder. A sharp report and Derry dropped hard to his butt on the cold floor, right hand gripping his upper left arm. Freed of the noose, she crawled to him, her pinched lungs screaming for air.

“Asshole,” the man she thought she knew cried. “Could’ve killed him.”

“Too good a shot for that, dumbass.”

“Just supposed to tie ‘em up.”

“And just what you gonna do? Nothing.”

“Do plenty for you, dickhead.”

“What the fuck’s going on?” the third man asked, his drawl more menacing for the quiet timbre.

“Shot Derry,” the familiar man replied.

“Ain’t dead, is he?”

“Not even close,” the photographer scoffed. “Just winged the sorry bastard.”

A scuffle overhead ensued, ended by whimpering and low voices that Lila barely registered for the blood trickling bright red between Derry’s fingers and down his left arm.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, surprised when his eyes widened in angry alarm.

Boots hit the floor behind her, Derry making a vain attempt to get to his feet, Lila caught in the act of turning her head by a warm muzzle pressed to her temple. She held her breath, afraid to move.

“Try me, shithead,” the photographer said. “Her brains’ll decorate the wall.”

Derry blazed defiant. “Touch one hair on her head—.”

“And you’ll what?”

“Just shut the fuck up, both of you.” The low growl drew her attention to a giant of a man towering over Derry, his presence filling the small room to claustrophobic proportions.

Derry scrutinized the giant. “Know you from somewhere?”

He frowned. “You come quiet and I’ll see she ain’t hurt.”

“Your word on that?”

“That enough for you?”

Derry grimaced, dropped his gaze.

“You ain’t no fun at all,” the photographer said, garnering a terrifying glare from the big man.

The gun to Lila’s head disappeared. Roughly brought to her feet, her arms yanked behind her back, her wrists were bound securely.

“Man’s an idiot,” the giant said to Derry, cheering Lila for some inexplicable reason. “Gonna hurt a bit here now.”

Derry simply nodded and, once on his feet, met Lila’s gaze, then squinted in pain. A strip of cloth blinded her, knotted tightly behind her head. She winced at Derry’s gasps and a gag split her lips, the dry material cinched at the base of her neck. Grunts and groans accompanied heavy footsteps that climbed away.

“Don’t make me come down there,” the giant called out.

“Go on. She don’t weigh no more than a bale of hay.”

“Warning you, smart-ass...” The giant left the threat to hang and clunking overhead trudged to silence. A hand captured her right breast, squeezing, testing.

Her protest a muffled squeak, she twisted her upper torso free, only to be corralled about her waist by a strong arm. He pressed his

body to her back and thrust his hips, making her aware of the size of his erection, while his free hand worked the zipper of her jeans, fingers mining deep, painfully. She doubled over to stop him, and he laughed, forcing her back upright with a hand to her throat. She stomped her feet to catch his toes with a boot heel and he squeezed her airway.

“Gonna have a fine time with you later,” he whispered, his breath fouling her nose. His tongue raked the back of her neck, his unshaven whiskers scouring her skin, riffling her risen hackles.

“What’s taking so long?” The man whose name and face had so far eluded Lila seemed close now, as if he hovered in the open trap door.

“Damn,” her captor muttered, then yelled, “Coming.”

“He *said* hurry up.”

“And I *said* I’m coming, messenger boy.”

Footsteps retreated.

“I will come, too,” he whispered in Lila ear, “in you.”

She panted through her nose, her blood chilled, her heart racing. He copped one last quick feel and, in a flash, slung her to his shoulder as if she was a sack of feed.

“Fight me, cunt, you’ll be dead before anyone can save you.”

Lila resisted the temptation to kick the filthy, grunting bastard each rung of the ladder.

Common sense insisted the only reasonable way to stay alive was to bide her time, wait for an opportunity to escape. Until that moment arrived, she’d be every bit the good, obedient girl—just like her daddy had taught her.

Chapter Three

SQUEEZED FROM EITHER SIDE by men bigger than he, Nolan Fuery rode the middle of the blue truck cab, his thoughts revolving around three things: money, the separate plans of each brother, and revenge.

“Gotta have him alive,” Jake Larson said in a low drawl.

“Aw, Jake, he rushed the ladder,” his younger brother, Cliff, replied. “Couldn’t let him get away with that now.”

“Don’t need to provoke him.”

“Boy’s got a smart mouth.”

“So do you.”

The truck rocked from excessive speed coupled with the weight of the camper over fairly rough ground.

“Might wanna slow down,” Nolan said. “Could blow a tire.”

Jake jammed the gas pedal. “Shut the fuck up.”

Cliff elbowed Nolan hard in the ribs. “Yeah, shut the fuck up. Beginning to wonder how much we need you at all.”

Nolan pressed his lips together and regretted his involvement for as long as it took dollar signs to resurrect their tango with that mouth-watering carrot—revenge—in his head.

“Got my score to settle, same as you,” Nolan said.

Jake shook his head slowly. “Ain’t quite the same there, Nolie.”

Cliff crossed his muscled arms, eyes fixed on the dirt road ahead. “Could take him right there in the back,” he said.

“Then kill him,” Nolan said.

Jake muttered, “Ain’t killing no one ‘til their uses run out.”

Cliff snickered and said, "Jake knows, Nolie."

Nolan cringed inside. "You told him?"

"You started it, moron, remember?"

Nolan remembered all right, hard as he'd tried to forget.

"You both a couple of switch hitters?" Jake said.

"Not you," Cliff said and jabbed Nolan once more in the ribs. "Never had a woman, have you?"

"Shut the fuck up," Nolan retorted and both brothers laughed.

The Larsons were formidable, no doubt about that. Nolan had lived through a dozen bar fights with Cliff, whom he'd run with since high school after the husky boy showed up a new junior in class. Rumor had it that mother and son had left Texas for Wyoming because of a murder by an older brother. The one time Nolan dared ask, Cliff had bloodied his nose in a single punch. Took a year or three to get solidly back in Cliff's good graces, if anyone but Nolan would ever call them that. And everything Nolan had done at Cliff's whim since had served as guideposts throughout his late teens into his early twenties. Especially after Nolan's own mother willingly ate the barrel of a shotgun.

Her seventeen-year-old son had been the one to find her, of course, her brains and bits of skull splattered all over the family photos on the dingy wall above that worn out brown couch. If that wasn't enough, his dad further compounded his only son's misery by losing the ranch, land in the Fuery family for three generations, the following year. Once Nolan dropped out of school to go to work as a ranch hand, his father had simply given up on everything, including his son, and drifted away.

Nolan hadn't seen his father in at least six years and didn't care if he ever saw the worthless sonofabitch again.

When a good-looking tall Texan, wheat-straw blond with eyes two shades past turquoise, showed up to work on the Starnold ranch, Nolan managed to get his drunk ass kicked and fired all in one night less than a month later. Such is the nature of alcohol and lust. He'd learned to keep his hands, and sexual preferences, to himself—the Cowboy way.

With no other options open to him, Nolan moved in with Cliff, sharing a rundown duplex in Ranchettes, a small suburb on the outskirts of Cheyenne. He'd welcomed the late night attention when Cliff failed to score any pussy, in love with the younger Larson for over three years now, and terrified to breathe a word of that to anyone, even himself. Jealous of every girl who showed any interest in Cliff, he harbored a hatred for Derry Horney that grew with each shift he worked as a convenience store clerk. By all rights Nolan should be out on horseback somewhere babysitting cattle or fixing fence. But no rancher ever had any work—at least, not for him.

Nolan tried his hand at dishwashing for the greasy spoon where Cliff was master of the kitchen, but who wanted to be his lackey, not to mention the butt of all his jokes? Best not to know what Cliff did to the food either, just for his own shits and giggles. The convenience store was a better gig, though neither job paid shit.

Jake had shown up at the front door six months ago, a huge man who dwarfed his younger brother by half a foot in height and width. Not an ounce of fat on him either. Even Cliff seemed intimidated by his presence.

His second day in town, Jake surprised Nolan by scoring a job as a bouncer at that first-rate strip club just over the tracks outside of Cheyenne. On his first night off, Jake treated Nolan and Cliff to a good bar-hopping drunk at low-rent watering holes all over town. Cliff and Nolan weren't allowed inside Jake's place of employment—for reasons he preferred not to recall.

Nolan had been sloppy and slit-eyed, talking trash over a pitcher of beer at a greasy little dive near downtown Cheyenne when he spotted Derry just inside the front door, talking to the bartender.

Tongue tangled in knots, he'd tried to get up in time to call the Texan out. But Derry was gone.

"Gonna fuck that prick, six ways from Sunday," Nolan said.

"The guy that was just in here?" Cliff asked. "You know him?"

"Derry Horney." Nolan belched loudly. "Got my ass fired."

Jake cocked his head, a scary narrow-eyed question blatant in his stare, while Cliff hee-hawed like a drunken mule.

“Goddamn, what a fucking name,” he said. “You never told me that.”

“Don’t care who his fucking brother is either,” Nolan said, squirming under Jake’s scrutiny. “Gonna fuck him up good someday.”

“Who’s his brother?” Cliff asked.

Nolan shrugged off the alcoholic haze threatening a sudden lights out. “Pain or train, fuck, can’t think anymore.”

“Blaine,” Jake said suddenly, leaning forward.

“Blaine Horney?” Cliff guffawed until he, too, took notice of Jake’s interest in Nolan, and asked, “What’s up with you now?”

Jake had simply settled back in his chair without saying a word. Two days later, he enlisted Cliff and Nolan’s help with a kidnapping from which he expected to net two million cash to be split three ways. The day after that, Cliff had come to Nolan with a proposition for a lot more money, using Jake to do all the “heavy lifting” as he put it, on the condition Nolan tell Jake nothing.

Naturally, Nolan threw in with Cliff, although the prospect of hiding anything from Jake brought with it a fair amount of bald-faced fear. But for four million dollars cash in his pocket, plus a guaranteed shot at revenge, who wouldn’t go along with Cliff? Jake had left both of them in the dark for the most part, although Cliff hadn’t been any more forthcoming with Nolan. Yet Cliff’s assurances of twice the amount in Nolan’s pocket that Jake planned to split three ways was the clincher that kept Nolan silent as an altar boy during Mass.

He slapped at hands that poked and prodded his hips and thighs to the amusement of both brothers.

“You like it,” Cliff said. “You know you do.”

“Fuck you both,” Nolan said. “Just keep your hands off me.”

“You won’t say that later.”

Jake almost grinned at the rutted road bouncing the truck. “He swallow, Cliff?”

“Easy enough to find out. Bet he don’t say no to you, my brother.”

The big man patted Nolan’s crotch. “I might be inclined.”

Both brothers laughed at Nolan’s sharp intake of breath.

That Cliff was absolutely right about Nolan seemed the saddest fact of all.

Nolan was terrified of Jake and eager to keep him happy, no matter what that might ultimately entail. Thank God, Jake had never asked for anything remotely sexual and showed little interest in Nolan whatsoever, all joking aside.

What Nolan found distressing, however, was that Cliff didn't seem to give a shit—about him or any other human being on the face of the earth, brother included. Nolan doubted he ever would.

But who said either brother had to live? Easy for a trusted lackey to blow both unsuspecting brothers away and keep all the money. If only he could summon the nerve.

Such was the true nature of Nolan's unrequited love.

* * *

Blaine opened the passenger door of Jed's battered tan-over-brown Ford pickup and stepped outside. Less than an hour northwest of Cheyenne, the foothills of the Rockies seemed worlds away from civilization. How easy to imagine those first outriders, or wagon trains of hardy souls who, for one reason or another, gave in to their desire for adventure or a better life, better land, a future. Surely, the trek across these United States to Wyoming Territory had tested their mettle, tried their resolve, their first view of the Rockies giving rise to the greatest of hopes, the most dismal of fears.

He caught himself fingering his shirt over the scar. *Again.*

Black clouds were building over the Western horizon, the sultry air promising thunderstorms later, a normal weather pattern for the area in early June, or so Silas commented.

As if Blaine wasn't aware of weather patterns outside his little piece of the great state of Texas.

Silas thought it important to note, too, that it had rained heavily the night before, a fact Jed, as ranch manager, happily corroborated. But what ranching man from Texas to Montana and points east and west didn't spend half his working life praying for moisture?

Drawn toward a huge boulder overhanging a wide ribbon of frothy brown water, Blaine stopped first to inspect the remnants of tire tracks

crisscrossing the drying earth. Differing treads indicated at least three vehicles. One set he attributed to his younger brother, two others to someone else. Whether the two were together or not, he didn't know, and his higher mind wasn't helping him sort out the mystery.

God, how difficult to remain detached, to look upon this as just another crime scene.

"How'd you come upon Derry's truck?" Blaine asked, noting the hoof prints of a lone horse.

Silas stood in the open cab door, almost as if he feared to walk the ground. "Just out for a morning ride," he said.

Jed stared at Silas a full minute, as if Silas and a morning ride didn't quite add up to a normal day at the ranch, then started around the tailgate, only to bend over and come right back up.

"Spent shell," Jed said and displayed the brass casing between thumb and forefinger. "Thirty-eight, I think."

Blaine had every intention of looking over Jed's discovery, but a fog of thoughts halted him mid-stride. He instinctively wheeled toward the big rock at his brother's cry of surprise, Lila's scream cut short.

Two shadows on the ground, the humming of a motor—make that two distinct motors. Gagging, choking, sudden darkness, blows to the body...his brother, carried...where? An RV maybe? Aluminum steps clanking, someone posted like a look out, while another carried Lila off into...what? A vehicle of some sort?

The pea green thread abruptly came to life, running loops about the ground as if looking for its owner. Blaine sensed apprehension at Silas's initial discovery of Derry's truck, then tasted a strange feeling, dangerously close to anticipation, utterly lost when his emotions—powerful sentiments of brotherly love and rage, protectiveness and fear—obscured the place memory resident in the environment.

"Dammit," he muttered, fisting both hands. Maybe he'd misread that last part. Couldn't have been anticipation Silas felt, could it? And where was his anger?

"You ok there?" Jed asked.

Blaine nodded glumly and happened to glance at Silas, catching himself just in time to prevent the proverbial double take.

Silas stared as if Blaine was an alien. “Your face,” he said softly. “I saw it all in your face.”

“Saw what?” Jed asked.

The fat man huffed a breath, hitched his slacks. “Then it’s true.”

Blaine narrowed his eyes. “Does that matter? Now?”

Jed jostled his elbow. “What the hell’s he talking about?”

Silas eyed Blaine with a smugness he thought peculiar under the circumstances. In his years of law enforcement, he’d seen plenty of emotion, the expression of such as individual as the victim to a crime, as different night to day as each family member and friend left to mourn. But there was always a righteous anger somewhere in the mix.

“I’d call that a little more definite than no comment,” Silas said. “But I’ll keep it under my hat.”

Blaine shrugged, all sorts of irritational now. Like old Silas over there was doing him some kind of favor. Pictures, the rumors, all over the internet anyway, supposedly behind password protected firewalls, whatever good that did. Hell, might ought to take out a nationwide ad and be done with the whole charade.

“Keep what under your hat?” Jed said. “What the fuck you talking about, Si?”

“Gonna tell him?” Silas asked.

“Have to now, I think,” Blaine replied, not sure if he was as angry with Silas as he was just plain mad that anyone dared snatch his brother the same year he’d quit whiskey and high-class call girls. And this after a bullet an inch from his heart drove home the reality that he was no more immortal than any other human walking the face of this Earth.

“Well, somebody better start talking.” Jed spread his glare between both his boss and Blaine. “Ain’t a big fan of secrets.”

“Can you keep one?” Silas said.

Jed’s spine stiffened, his scowl evidence of his insult. “I know shit about your day-to-day operation you never will.”

Blaine almost grinned at Silas’s wide-eyes. “Think you and me’s gonna have us a little talk here later,” he said.

“Won’t do you a damn bit of good.” Jed pressed the shell casing into Blaine’s hand. “Now, what’s up with you?”

“Don’t say a word, Blaine,” Silas said. “Might need to barter a bit of information here.”

Blaine sought the unemotional place within himself, hoping his mind would cooperate and color at least one new thread to life, but that safe spot was remarkably elusive, to say the least.

“Don’t press me, Si,” Jed said.

Blaine left the two men to bicker and started again toward the big rock, the spent shell casing clutched in his hand. Sweet thoughts greeted him there at water’s edge, lovers expressing themselves without a care in the world, his brother telling Lila she’d marry him instead of asking the poor girl, slipping the ring on her finger before she had a chance to say no, shared plans and whispered dreams dissolving in the abrupt onset of terror.

For a fleeting moment, a blurred image stepped forward of the shadows, a hulk of a man and, at his feet, a dirty gold thread fading just as quickly at Derry’s stout cry, Lila’s screaming. The meaty sounds of fists slugging flesh only sickened Blaine further, driving the place memory firmly beyond his conscious reach. He drew a deep breath, then another, trying once again to regain some self-control.

Two threads surfaced abruptly—dirty gold and bean-turd brown—each sporting a thin spine of the opposite’s color, meaning only one thing: relatives. A third showed up on the perimeter, a charcoal gray so faint as to not fully exist, yet all three intersecting that familiar blue the exact shade of his brother’s eyes as well as a delicate pink thread Blaine could only ascribe to Lila Starnold. The entire scene dissolved in the eruption of a rage so cold, so ruthless, for an instant he questioned his own sanity.

What a test for a man who’d never once fully considered that evil could, or ever would, strike so close to the heart.

His cell phone vibrated in his suit coat’s outer pocket. Interruptions, one after another, goddamn frustrating, to say the least.

“What?” Blaine snapped at the receiver, certain the eyes of the two silent men behind him were boring holes in his back.

His father, of all people. “What’s this leave of absence shit?”

“Working,” Blaine said softly.

“Nother side job, is it?” He could almost see his father’s nod of approval. “Ain’t working on getting shot again, are you? Where the hell you at anyway?”

“Wyoming.”

“Anywhere near your brother?”

Now what? Tell the old man? He’d be on the first flight out of San Antone and what a complicating pain in the ass, although lying had no appeal whatsoever. Lane Horney could sniff a lie from any one of his kids, even through a cell phone on the moon.

“Haven’t caught up with Derry yet,” Blaine said and the pause at the other end of the line deepened his anxiety.

“Well, I can’t find him either,” his father said finally. “Ain’t answering his cell. That heifer manning the phone for that cattle company up there says he’s on vacation. Last I talked to him he was gonna ask his little gal to marry him. Never said a word about any vacation.”

“Well, maybe they eloped. I’ll look him up when I get time.”

“You do that. I’m half a mind to come up there and kick his ass for not staying in touch.”

Blaine couldn’t count the times since the call from Silas he’d tried to raise his brother on that cell phone he’d given him. Voice mail was all he’d received for his trouble so far.

“Dad, gotta go.”

“Start hunting an office for you.”

“What?”

“Every PI needs his own office. Your sister can answer the phone. She needs a better job than the one’s she got now.”

“Don’t start that shit—.”

“Horney Investigations.” A chuckle and his dad said, “Sounds a tad unsavory for the real world, but don’t you worry, we’ll come up with something better.”

Goddamn it, Dad. “Talk about it when I get back.”

Not that Blaine entertained a single notion of leaving the Rangers anytime soon. Steady paycheck beat a shot in dark, so to speak. And what if he hadn’t had health insurance when he went to Montana? *Dammit, dammit, dammit...*

“Quit muttering,” his father said. A crinkle of newspaper came over the line. “Lot of office space for cheap, right here in San Antone.”

“Dad, I really gotta go.”

“Son, your mother loves you.”

A click and dead air.

Blaine turned around to Silas and Jed to ask, “Either of you search Derry’s truck?”

“No,” Silas said before Jed had a chance to react.

And why did the reply strike foul to Blaine’s gut as any bald-faced lie? Trust was earned, true enough, maybe more so for a skeptical Ranger, yet his mistrust of the man who’d lost a daughter and future son-in-law to kidnappers seemed not only excessive, but growing. What if paranoia and suspicion of everyone even remotely connected to his brother was a result of being personally involved? With nothing in the past to compare, how would he ever know?

Blaine speed-dialed Derry’s number, the phone ringing six times before the recording surprised him by stating the voice mailbox was full. Disgusted, he dropped the cell phone into his coat pocket.

Though he had two definite threads to work with now—turd-brown and dirty gold—plus a gray ghost of a third, not a thought remained at the scene to lead Blaine anywhere definite beyond this location. He was, for all intents and purposes, helpless as an infant in a shit-soaked diaper.

“Silas, I’d like a look at my brother’s truck.”

* * *

Rachel Marianas opened the front door to a leering Cliff Larson. Despite the good looks, the dark brown hair and eyes, he had a sadistic streak as wide as his back.

She’d learned that first-hand.

A glance at Nolan, whom she was convinced rode a horse of an altogether different persuasion, her gaze fell on Jake.

“Thought I told you not to bring them here,” she said to him and barred the entry with her trim body. “You, ok. Not them.”

Cliff eyed his older brother, Nolan off to the side of them both, disinterested or so it seemed. She noted the camper piggy-backing a familiar navy blue pickup parked at the far end of the graveled lot.

“See?” Jake said to Cliff. “Nothing’s changed. Now get your asses back to the truck.”

At the titter of the new girl behind her, Cliff’s gaze wandered past Rachel, his smirk both familiar and unnerving. No way was he getting his filthy hands on Anita. She commanded too much money. An hour with Cliff would leave her a broken whore, the freshness, the innocence more respectable clientele found highly desirable carved out of her.

Rachel had barely survived herself.

She resisted the urge to finger the faint scar ringing her neck and slapped Cliff’s arm.

“You’re wasting your time, dipshit,” she said. “Even if you could get past your brother.”

Eyes slitted, his mouth a grim line, the muscles of his right forearm twitched as if he thought to strike her. For an instant the fear haunted that maybe he’d already spilled his guts. He averted his gaze, an almost imperceptible nod accompanying the swift return of his smirk, which eased Rachel’s anxiety. For now, anyway.

Nolan looked at Cliff, scowled and turned away.

Jake scanned the grounds like a wanted man and said, “You two go wait in the truck.”

“We’ll talk, my brother,” Cliff replied, sneering at Rachel. “Later.”

God, he loved to threaten. He wasn’t so stupid as to cut off hands that would enrich him beyond his wildest dreams, but she knew Cliff was madder than a coiled rattler. Served him right, too, but the circumstances refused to let her savor his discomfort, not until this nasty chapter of her life was behind her for good.

Once Cliff and Nolan left the doorway, Rachel brought Jake inside. The newest and youngest addition to her small stable, Anita, made velvet-brown doe eyes at him from a reclining position on the red velvet couch. White T-shirt a size too small over tight blue jeans accentuated her curves. Her olive skin was clear, her face unlined, her

long black hair shimmered blue highlights in the daylight filtering through sheer curtains over the picture window.

Rachel said, "Get out of here."

Anita sat up quickly. "Isn't he a paying customer?"

"He doesn't have to pay."

Jake smiled then, something he rarely did. Rachel had adored him from the moment they met, back when her brother was still alive. Jake was handsome in his own rugged way, risky but unfailingly considerate. Even with her vast experience, the workings of his male mind remained an enigma to her.

"What about those other two?" Anita asked.

"They can't afford you," Rachel said. "And you can't afford them."

"Well," the young girl left her seat, "if you can give it away, so can I."

"That's not how it works around here and you know it."

A snotty look on her face, Anita said, "I'll do what I want, *when* I want."

"Just get out of here," Rachel said. "We'll go back over the rules of this house later."

The young girl flounced from the room.

Rachel skirted the couch to the wet bar between the two windows on the back wall. "Everything going as planned?"

"Don't go there now," Jake said.

She fished a brass door key from a small porcelain bowl. "No one suspects?"

"Rachel."

"A little paranoid, aren't you? Not like anyone's—."

"I know what I'm talking about."

Rachel tucked the key into the front pocket of his jeans and looked up at him. He snatched her to his chest, planted a kiss on her lips, his tongue telegraphing his desires. She yearned for him then, pressed her body against him, sank her fingers in his hair and shuddered when, with one deft move, he loosed the laces of her leather shirt to caress her breasts. He had her panting when he withdrew his hand, breathing hard himself.

"Don't think about nothing but me," he whispered.

“No loose ends,” she replied.

Jake gripped her buttocks and she shimmied against his firm arousal. God, but she wanted him, right now.

He sighed and bent his head to peck her lips.

“Tonight,” he murmured.

“It’ll be midnight or later.”

He was on her again, his mouth hard over hers, bruising her lips, his tongue coaxing, complimenting his busy fingers. Abruptly he left her standing in the middle of the room, hot and wet and aching inside, wishing the whole ordeal was behind them both, buried forevermore under the bright sun shining on a private sugar-sand piece of beach in Cancun.