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Through Iowa Glass
by Christine W. Murphy
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Suspense/Romance

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This book is dedicated to my mother, a small town girl from Iowa, who traveled far and wide and raised a daughter who enjoys doing the same. Also, I wish to acknowledge the many people in the RWA Outreach International NBM programs who encouraged me and critiqued my work; my family, who while mystified by this entire "writing thing" left me alone to work; and Liz Kading, proofreader and friend.

Chapter One

"WHAT THE HELL!" Alex jerked awake when his car left the road.

A tree branch slammed into the windshield, cracking the glass. He wrestled with the steering wheel. His foot missed the brake, and the car plowed a path through waist-high corn.

He turned the car sharply to the left and cursed the worn-out shocks when his head banged the ceiling. Finally, he found the brake and stomped down hard. The car came to rest at the edge of a corn field beside County Road G29. The perfect homecoming.

His forehead resting on the steering wheel, he willed his pulse to return to normal. The sound of his ragged breaths filled the car. Alex and the '76 Mustang were apparently in one piece. He peered through spider-web fractures in the windshield.

A misty rain veiled a shadowy skyline. Skyline? Hell, Close, Iowa, was too small to have a skyline, just a few lumps on the horizon with the water tower hovering overhead like an alien space craft. From where Alex sat, the town looked the same as it had when he was twelve, almost twenty-five years ago, the night he ran away.

He turned and looked behind him. The road, straight and narrow, disappeared in the distance, obscured by ripening crops.

A quick walk around the car confirmed he wasn't driving anywhere soon. The front end had sunk to the axle in mud. While he contemplated the three-mile walk to town, the rain stopped and dusk passed into evening. The Mustang's headlights glowed brighter in the darkness. He got back in the car and turned them off.

Walking didn't appeal to him and he didn't want to leave the car. If he'd been willing to do that, he would have left it in the garage and flown out. Besides, to pretend he was in a hurry now was ludicrous. He'd spent three weeks driving from San Francisco to Iowa.

When he draped himself over the steering wheel, sleep threatened to drag him under again, but the hard surface dug into his chest and woke him. He

fumbled through Hershey wrappers and Coke cans on the passenger seat for his leather flight jacket. After transforming the steering wheel into a serviceable pillow with the jacket, he forced himself to relax. The stale smell of cigarettes enveloped him when he hugged the worn leather.

"God, what am I going to do?" Returning to Iowa couldn't possibly be the answer.

A telegram informing him of his stepfather's death had summoned him to Iowa, and his coworkers at the hospital encouraged him to leave. They all but threatened to pull his credentials. "It's just what you need. Get away from work. What's there to worry about in Iowa?"

His friends' innocent question brought home just how alone he was in this world. Everyone who understood why he shouldn't go back was dead. How could he pay his respects to the man who had murdered his mother?

He had missed his stepfather's funeral, but according to his stepsister, Lorraine Bettencourt, everyone was waiting for him, waiting for the reading of Miles Bettencourt's will.

Now, Alex admired the glow of distant street lights against the black sky. The windshield broke the glow into a thousand points of light, each one softened by the sheen of rain coating the glass. He brushed away the water that came through the driver's side window and clung to his beard.

That settled it. It was raining and dark. Tomorrow he would face the good people of Close. For now, he planned to shut the car window and get some sleep, but after a few cranks, the window stuck. One of the crotchety Mustang's favorite tricks. A car for a younger man. One looking for adventure, not for transportation.

Cool rain continued to wet Alex's face. Then it stopped.

First, he looked to the front. The rain fell more rapidly now. Light filtered through sheets of water and broken glass, filling the old car with wavering patches of white. Something stood at his left blocking the rain. Something in the dark he had failed to notice until now.

When he tried again to close the window, Alex saw a hand snake through the opening. He had time only to pull the keys from the ignition before fingers gripped his throat.

* * * *

"A CAR! A CAR!" The little girl jumped up and down, and pointed through the storefront window.

Skye left the sink of dirty dishes, and dried her hands on her jeans. After fluffing her hair off her sweaty neck, she joined Christy, her charge for the evening, at the front of the Senior Citizens' Center. Together, they looked out the window.

Tonight, Skye expected to see Sheldon Seabrook making his weekly appearance to pitch his great idea for solving her money woes -- matrimony. The high school graduation ceremony had let out hours ago. Tears threatened at the thought of the senior class filing into the gym. If she hadn't been laid off, she would have directed the band in "Pomp and Circumstance" instead of Sheldon.

The car the little girl pointed at wasn't Sheldon's shiny red Camaro. Red paint did peek through layers of mud, but on a well-dented Mustang attached to Marvin Fullerton's tow truck. Skye took Christy by the hand and stepped onto the sidewalk.

Before she could get out a greeting, Marvin jumped from his truck, surprisingly agile for a man five-foot-six who weighed more than two hundred pounds. He slammed the door on his cab and brushed past her into the Center.

"Damnedest thing I ever seen. Sorry, Missus Devries. Darnedest thing I ever seen. Just like in the movies. Who'd have thought it could happen here in Close. Feet kicking, bodies flying. Just like in some Bruce Lee flick. Got coffee?"

Her heart racing, Skye followed Marvin to the kitchen where he sat and pulled Christy onto his lap. Skye glanced at the ancient wall clock and reminded herself she'd talked to her fourteen-year-old stepson less than an

hour ago. Dirk was safe in bed.

"Well?" Marvin looked at Skye. Like some medieval herald, he required payment before sharing his news, and Skye would have to drag every word out of him. Marvin loved this game.

She slid a cup of coffee across the table along with two donuts, one of which the little girl took. Her prize in hand, Christy shimmied out of Marvin's lap and returned to the window to stare at the battered car.

"All right, Marvin. What's up?" Skye asked. When Marvin didn't answer, she dug another donut out of the box and dangled it in front of him. "Was anyone hurt?"

Marvin took the donut and didn't open his mouth to speak until he'd downed half of it. "Nobody hurt, not in the car anyway. Now the other guys, the guys in the truck -- "

Skye looked out the kitchen pass-through to see if Christy was listening. She had lost interest in the car and sat rocking on the floor clutching her doll. Where was David Ritter? He'd promised to pick up his sister hours ago.

"What guys?" she asked.

"Might have been car jackers like you get in the city, but it seemed kind of personal to me. Close isn't the sort of place you pass through looking for trouble, and this guy's car wasn't much to look at, even before he ran it in the ditch."

"Should I call the sheriff?" Skye cut in. Marvin could ramble for hours if she didn't keep him focused.

"Already done. The driver's going to give his official statement to Sheriff Harley tomorrow. The guys in the truck got away. When I spotted 'em, I thought this guy in the car was done for. If they'd had guns instead of knives -- "

Skye cleared her throat and gave Marvin her best teacher look. "Please, start at the beginning, Marvin."

Marvin folded his hands around his cup and began again. "I was on Route 29, 'bout three miles out, on my way to jump Terlouw's Ford. Must still be waiting. His missus left the lights on. Happens every time it rains. I've told him a thousand times -- "

Skye eased the donut box out of his reach.

Marvin looked as resentful as a man could with a mouth coated in powdered sugar. "I spotted this pick-up stopped on the side without lights. Dangerous with this rain. Then, I saw this beat-up Mustang half-in, half-out of Terlouw's corn field." He jerked his head to indicate the car behind his tow truck.

"That's when I saw these two guys. Didn't notice me, even when my headlights caught 'em. Must have been on something. Wired, you know? Then I saw the driver, the guy attached to this here Mustang. Couldn't hear everything said, but one of the wired guys yelled at the driver to get on his hands and knees. All hell broke loose after that. Kung Fu stuff. Just like in the movies."

Christy appeared at the table and reached for the last of Marvin's donut. He directed the rest of his story to the girl. "The nice man fought off the bad men and sent them running for their truck. I wrote down the license number -- Illinois plates -- and gave it to Sheriff Harley."

Marvin puffed out his chest at his part in the excitement. By tomorrow, he would have embellished the story with a hundred details. "Just think, it all happened here in Close."

"Not really here," Skye protested. Close was safe. It had to be. "You were three miles outside of town, and you said the truck was from out-of-state."

Marvin shrugged and stood. He took Christy with him to rummage through the donut box.

"So, where's he staying?" Skye asked.

"Who?" Marvin mumbled through a mouthful of the last Boston cream.

"The driver, Marvin. Where is the driver?"

"Motel's full. Graduation, you know. This guy -- Alex, he said -- is from California if you go by the car plates. He sounds sort of funny, though, like he's foreign, and looks a bit down on his luck. Must have everything he owns in that car. I'm taking it to the shop. Front axle's broke. Windshield's busted. Hope he's got some money, or friends."

Marvin could be such a fool. He'd left the poor man on the street while he scarfed donuts and coffee. "Watch Christy for me. I'll check on him."

Marvin called after her. "He was asleep, Mrs. Devries. Didn't have the heart to wake him."

Skye looked down Main Street, all three blocks of it. Except for her blue pick-up and Marvin's tow truck and its load, the rain-slicked street was empty.

Circling Marvin's truck and the muddy Mustang, she noted California plates and an expired registration sticker. The back seat was stuffed with boxes of papers and books, thrown together as if the driver had left in a hurry. Candy wrappers and soda cans filled the front passenger seat.

At least she could scrape together dinner for the man. She hadn't cleaned out the pots left over from spaghetti night.

She stood on the running board to reach through the half-open window of Marvin's cab and gently shook Alex's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

He turned his head toward her, but didn't open his eyes. He looked young. No, not exactly young. Fine lines around the eyes and mouth, an occasional gray hair amid the dull black, made him at least thirty.

Not young, but innocent, even with several days' growth of beard on his pale face. He'd carelessly secured his shoulder-length hair with a rubber band, as if it had suddenly grown too long and he hadn't the time or the money to cut it.

This wasn't the big city, even if some out-of-town hooligans had attacked him. People in Close didn't sleep on the street, not even in their cars. "Hey. You can't sleep here. Wake up."

No response.

She brushed a lock of hair from his cheek.

His lashes fluttered, revealing eyes bloodshot and bruised from lack of sleep, and he stretched his arms overhead.

When he opened his eyes fully, she realized she'd been holding her breath, trying to guess their color. "Brown," she murmured.

"Brown what?" He yawned. Brown eyes, deep and dark, came alive when he looked her up and down.

Skye stepped back. Blatant appraisals weren't new to her, but they usually came from gangly teenage boys. Coming from a full-grown man, the lingering gaze that flicked from her head to her feet and slowly rose to settle on her breasts sent sparks careening down her back.

When he continued to stare, she crossed her arms over her chest. "I said town. You can't sleep in your car here in town. Come in and I'll get you a cup of coffee. It is Alex, isn't it?"

"That's what I told Marvin."

Deep and rich, his voice sent a new batch of shivers down her spine. She stepped away when he opened the door. Standing close to a stranger set off silent alarms. Skye swallowed hard as she rounded the front of the tow truck and stepped onto the curb.

"Your Marvin's an excitable man."

She couldn't place his accent, but he didn't sound like he came from Iowa or from California. Wherever he was from, she could stand here and listen to him all night. "He's not my Marvin. I'm sure he told you he runs the garage."

Almost a foot taller than her five-foot-three-inches, Alex stood slightly hunched over, thumbs hooked on his belt. He looked up and down the deserted street with a disdainful air of mild curiosity and dry amusement.

The stranger's dress hardly qualified him to turn up his nose at Close.

He wore a white, long-sleeved shirt, expensive from the detailing on the collar, but dirty, ruffled, and wet with sleeves shoved to the elbows. The shirt clung to his chest, barely staying tucked into his pants. His blue jeans were worn white above the knees where the steering wheel rubbed. Alex from California had been on the road a long time.

He retrieved his jacket and grabbed a small duffel bag from the back seat of his car. When he straightened, he winced and pulled the jacket against his side. "And what's your function in this delightful little town? Are you the Welcome Wagon?"

"The closest thing we've got. Would you like some hot food? It's no bother. We had a dinner here at the Senior Center before the graduation ceremony at the high school and there's some food left. It never fails, we either make too much or not enough. The weather was a bit unsettled. It kept some people away." Skye glanced again at the debris that covered the Mustang's front seat and wondered if she was talking too much.

Alex followed her into the Center and stopped a moment to watch Christy, who ignored them and continued coloring. "Well, if it's already made... Is there some place I can wash?"

After Alex disappeared down the hall, Skye slipped into the chair across from Marvin. "Where are you taking him?"

"Me? I take care of cars, not people. Besides, Sheriff Harley said you'd know what to do with him."

Skye's jaw dropped. What was Harley thinking asking her to take in a stranger? She had known Harley her entire life. During high school, he'd practically lived at her grandparents' house. He'd been best man at her wedding and gave the eulogy at her husband's funeral, but this was a lot to ask.

Marvin dug into his pocket and slid a crumpled bit of paper across the table. "Sheriff Harley said you'd take Alex to the Old Jackson place. You're still keeping an eye on it for Miss Lorraine, ain't you?"

She nodded, her mouth still open.

"Alex was real friendly with the Sheriff. From the way they were talking, they must know each other pretty well."

She moved to stand where she could see Christy, and pressed the wrinkled paper smooth against the side of the open door.

"Skye, I would take Alex home with me, but I'll be working all night and don't want to bother Jenna. If you'll take him to the old Jackson place, I'll send someone for him in the morning. Harley."

Not much of a note considering he wanted her to put up a stranger in a house she didn't own, but she understood Harley's reluctance to bring company home. His wife was seven months pregnant with their first child, and as everyone at the senior center agreed, she was much too old to have a baby. Harley treated his wife as if she were a window on display at the Iowa Glass Window Factory, with great care and more than a little awe.

Skye slipped the paper into her pocket and looked for Alex. He stood in the front room watching Christy color her picture of Santa Claus, torn from an out-of-date coloring book.

"Alex seems a nice enough guy," Marvin continued, "and you've got all that room at the Jackson place. You know Harley wouldn't ask if this guy wasn't safe."

Skye agreed Alex looked harmless. Sweet even, despite his disheveled clothes. Maybe Harley knew Alex from the service; although, with his shoulder-length hair, Alex didn't look like an ex-marine.

"I can take Christy to her grandma for you. She should be home from work about now. That way you won't have no excuse."

Skye shrugged agreement. She couldn't escape being imposed upon. The people of Close knew her like they'd known her husband Ben and her grandparents. If something needed doing, you went to the Devries or the Bergens.

When she walked to the store front to stand beside Alex, he was

humming. The sound rumbled deep and rich in his chest. His hands looked well scrubbed -- strong hands with swirls of dark hair on the backs. Manicured nails. A surprise, considering his generally unkempt state. Her heart thudded oddly when she noticed his ornate silver wedding band.

She smelled pine soap, and damp leather and old cigarettes from the jacket slung over his shoulder. A wide band of lighter skin circled one wrist. Had he lost his watch in the attack or had he sold it for gasoline and candy bars? He stopped humming before she recognized the tune.

"Are you ready to go home, Christy?" Skye asked.

Sleepily, the girl nodded.

"Your daughter looks like she's ready for bed," Alex said.

Their eyes met over Christy's blond curls. Skye detected rebuke in his eyes. She understood his mistake. Christy had inherited from her father the same fair, blond Swedish looks Skye got from her mother. Besides, Alex's concern for a child he didn't know made her feel strangely warm inside.

"I sure wish Christy was mine," Skye teased, tickling the sleepy girl as she gathered her into her arms. "But she has a grandma who's waiting for her, don't you, peanut?"

The girl was almost asleep when Skye handed her to Marvin. Alex stood with her and watched the tow truck driver walk down the street. When Marvin rounded the corner, Alex leaned against the door frame as if too tired to stand unaided.

She watched while he rested, his eyes closed. Dark where Ben was fair, hair long where Ben's was short, but Alex reminded her of her late husband -- concerned about children, evidently careless with money. She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. "You seem to like children, Alex. Do you have any of your own?"

He ran his hands over his face. "You said something about coffee."

"Sorry." Skye led the way to the kitchen, her face hot with embarrassment.

Alex hung his jacket on the back of Marvin's chair and brushed aside donut crumbs before he sat.

"I'm unofficial director of the Close Senior Citizen's Center, for the moment," she said, searching for a neutral topic.

"I'm temporarily without employment and marooned here, it looks like." Alex stood and looked at his car, still hooked to Marvin's tow truck.

Skye poured the last of the coffee into two Styrofoam cups and pushed one across the table. "No one's going to take your car. Close is a pretty safe town."

"Can't prove it by me. My reception wasn't too friendly."

"Marvin told me. I'm sorry."

The fine lines around his eyes deepened when he smiled, and his brown eyes seemed to call to her. The warm feeling in her middle spread to her toes. She grabbed a cup to keep her hands busy.

"No reason for you to apologize," he said. "Or are you responsible for law enforcement as well as the Senior Center?"

"My grandfather used to be the sheriff here, and my husband worked for the department part-time. When you live in a small town, you can't help wanting to make a good impression." She took in the damp shirt that clung to his arms and chest. "Even the weather isn't cooperating. Do you have dry clothes?"

Alex pulled his shirt away from his chest and waved it briefly. "I think they're all dirty."

From what she could see through the wet cotton, his chest was broad, muscular, and judging from the dark swirls on his naked forearms, covered with black hair. It had been much too long since she'd rested her head on such a chest, much too long since hands like his had teased her awake in the middle of the night.

He cradled the coffee cup, not moving it toward his mouth. She tried not to stare, and he kept his eyes focused on his coffee. The silence felt

uncomfortably long to her, but didn't seem to bother him.

"Would you like that hot meal now?" Skye asked.

"Not really. I'm more tired than hungry."

Before Skye could think of a polite response, Marvin banged open the door. "Why are you guys still here?"

Alex took his jacket from the back of his chair. The only sign of distress was his tensing jaw when he eased his arms through the sleeves. He zipped the jacket to his neck. "I'll catch a ride back to the shop with my car."

After throwing Skye a dirty look, Marvin reached for the money jar she kept for non seniors who mooched coffee. He dug two coins out of his pocket and pushed them through the slot in the lid. Alex pulled out his wallet, turning away before he opened it.

Skye's cheeks glowed red. Darn Marvin. He had the man digging for his last dime to shame her into living up to her family's example of hospitality. "You don't have to do that."

Alex tucked his offering into the jar. "I can afford coffee."

Her face grew even hotter. "Of course, you can. I only meant you're a friend of Harley's and he asked me to put you up at my place. If you don't mind taking the sofa." Skye expected Alex to decline.

Instead, he smiled. "Great."

* * * *

ALEX DIDN'T WATCH Marvin haul away the Mustang. The car rolled slowly down the street behind the truck, reminding him of a funeral procession. He wasn't up to another one of those.

Even if the car were road worthy, Harley wouldn't have let him drive it. Backwater sheriffs were such sticklers for little details like car registration. And Harley had surprised him by connecting the name on his driver's license with his identity as Clayton Jackson. For most of his life, he had answered to Alexander Casale, using Clayton Alexander Jackson, III, only for legal documents.

Thankfully, the sheriff kept that information to himself. If he had told Marvin, all of Close would know of Alex's arrival before noon tomorrow. He hoped to attend the reading of his stepfather's will, dispose of his share of the family business, and leave town unnoticed.

His hostess for the evening didn't strike him as the gossiping type, but according to the sheriff she was best buddies with his stepsister Lorraine. Alex could think of no better reason to keep his distance from a pretty woman. If she knew who he was, she would no doubt call his stepsister the first chance she got. Alex wanted to put off seeing Lorraine as long as he could.

Besides, the unofficial director of the Close Senior Citizen's Center was not his type -- a cheerleader in blue jeans. Tight blue jeans. Bright, brown eyes that revealed every thought. Short, blond hair so curly it bounced when she walked. And she couldn't stop blushing. The girl next door in a neighborhood he'd seen only in the movies. Little Miss Innocent. Not his type at all. She deserved better.

A light across the street caught his eye and Alex found himself staring at block lettering -- Jacob Van Wyk, Attorney-at-Law. His eyes watered before he blinked. He remembered the name. Jacob had sent the telegram informing him of Bettencourt's death and the reading of his will. Jacob was his late-father's lawyer, and the last man to see Alex the night he left Close twenty-five years ago.

* * * *

SKYE CLEARED HER throat. As if waking from a trance, Alex turned.

He looked past her to the lone vehicle on the street. "Is this yours?" Alex sounded amused.

Skye didn't bother replying. Aside from her dilapidated pickup, the street was empty. She kicked the passenger-side door at the hinge and the door popped open. By the time she climbed behind the wheel, Alex sat inside with

his duffel at his feet. He rolled down the window and reached inside his jacket.

Squaring her shoulders, Skye braced herself. "I don't allow smoking in my truck."

"Calm down. It's just a reflex. My supply of cigarettes ran out last month."

Grateful for a harmless topic to pursue, she asked, "When did you quit smoking?"

"Three weeks ago. Four years before that. Ten before that -- "

"Sounds like you've had a hard time of it."

"It's not easy when you start at twelve. By the way, I don't think we got around to introductions. My friends call me Alex."

She took his hand. "I'm Skye Devries."

He didn't shake her hand, but held it a moment. His grip was firm and dry, and his fingers sent sparks up her arm before he released her. "Skye. That's an unusual name."

"Not really." She couldn't stop staring at his mouth, wondering if his lips felt as soft as they looked, if the ragged growth of hair would tickle when they kissed.

When they kissed?

Skye broke away from his hypnotic smile. "Skye is Dutch. It means sheltering. Most of the original settlers around here were from Holland, including my father's family. My mother's from Sweden. We have a tulip festival here every spring." God, she was babbling again.

"Now that I do remember."

"You're from around here?" Skye started the truck to hide her surprise. Although she couldn't place his accent, Alex sounded distinctly foreign.

When she pulled onto the street, he rolled up the window and closed his eyes before answering. "I left when I was a kid. I don't have blood relatives here now, but I know someone in town if you don't want to take me to your place. You can drop me off at a pay phone -- "

"But if I drop you off, you won't call anyone, will you? You'll end up sleeping in your car."

"It is after midnight. I wouldn't want to wake Jacob."

Skye felt the last of her apprehension drain away. "Jacob Van Wyk? You know him?"

Alex nodded and stifled a yawn. "He's a friend of the family. My father served with him in Nam. I called him uncle when I was boy, but we're not related."

"You're right. We wouldn't want to bother Jacob. I installed his new computer system this month. The lights in his office must be from his secretary. She never seems to go home, but I don't think Jacob's stayed up after ten in years."

Alex nodded and hid another yawn, but when she turned off the main road, he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

When she left the well-lit streets of Close, she felt vulnerable again. "I take care of a place a couple miles out. I live there with my husband."

"You mean the husband who milks the cows by hand for the fun of it?" A smile lit his voice. "The one with arms as big as pigs? The insanely jealous one?"

Skye glanced at him as she left the county road. He pointed to her ringless left hand and chuckled.

She couldn't keep from smiling. "All right, my brother. My large, overprotective brother."

His infectious laugh convinced her she was being paranoid. Too many people knew they were together -- Marvin, Harley. Besides, Alex knew Jacob. There wasn't a more respected citizen in Close than Jacob Van Wyk. "I also have an enormous dog," she warned, teasing now.

"In that case, I'll sleep in your truck. Brothers I can handle, but I'm a cat person. We cat people avoid confrontation."

"Marvin says you're pretty good at kung fu."

"Tae kwon do."

"Tie what?"

Alex repeated the words. "Tae kwon do is Korean. We non-confrontational types like to know how to defend ourselves. Unfortunately, it doesn't work on dogs."

While they talked, Skye relaxed. She found the foreign lilt of his voice soothing. By the time they reached the private road to the Old Jackson house and the Bettencourt estate, she realized she'd done most of the talking, answering his questions about how things had changed during the twenty-some years since he'd left.

When she pulled up to the house she took care of for her friend Lorraine Bettencourt, Alex straightened. Floodlights mounted on the four-car garage lit the stone facade. He appeared mesmerized by the sight.

"This is home." He sounded hoarse and coughed at the end, changing his question into a statement.

Skye smiled. Her ancient Ford looked out of place parked in the formal, stone drive. "I've been house sitting for over a year now. It's some style, I forget -- "

Alex cleared his throat before murmuring, "French Country."

"That's it. In front anyway. From the back it looks like an Italian villa. Whoever designed this place was schizophrenic or just plain crazy."

She expected Alex to answer with some joke; instead, he frowned and reached for his duffel. When he opened the truck door, Dirk's dog barked. Alex got out slowly and joined her on the front walk. He stopped a few steps from the truck.

"The dog belongs to my son Dirk. He has an Old English sheepdog. Harmless puppies, all of them. The woman who owns this house breeds them."

Still not moving, Alex stood black and featureless against the glare of the yard lights.

"You really are a cat person, aren't you," she said. "I'll go first and lock up Henry. Give me a minute."

She didn't wait to see if Alex followed. After coaxing Henry upstairs and checking on Dirk, she returned with sheets, a blanket and pillow. She had stored the good furniture in rooms they didn't use, and put an old sofa downstairs for Dirk to sit on when he watched TV. Alex would find popcorn between the cushions, but it would serve for one night.

Something about the silence when she entered, set her on tiptoe. Alex stood in the middle of the dark anteroom. Unaware of her, he spun slowly on his heel. When he came to rest, he lowered his duffel to the floor and unzipped his jacket. With his arms outspread, he turned again in the darkened room.

Skye felt as if she were witness to some ancient ritual. She slipped the bed linens onto the sofa. Before she turned to go, she saw tears form in his eyes. When she walked away, his voice whispered behind her.

"Welcome home, Alex."

Chapter Two

A MALE VOICE called from halfway up the stairs. "Skye! Breakfast is ready."

Skye stretched and tried to pull herself awake. Why couldn't the man let her sleep? She smiled as she pictured Ben at the stove, burning her breakfast.

The voice called again. "Hurry up, Skye. You know how you hate cold eggs."

She mumbled "coming." When she heard footsteps retreat to the kitchen, she burrowed under the blankets.

Then it hit her. The voice pulling her from her dreams wasn't her stepson Dirk's adolescent croak. A man had called her.

A quick look at the clock before she brushed her teeth, elicited a

groan. After eight. A stranger in her house, David due to drop off his little sister Christy, Sheldon expected for coffee. What a morning to oversleep!

By the time she tucked her tee-shirt into her jeans and ran downstairs, the kitchen was empty. Or almost empty. Christy sat perched on a stool, devouring a plate of pancakes.

Skye looked for fast-food containers. She found a pile of dirty dishes instead. "Where did you get those, sweetie?"

"Alex made them just for me, and he didn't make any for you." Christy stuck out her tongue and giggled.

So Alex had made a friend. Skye stuck out her tongue in return.

"You get the yukky eggs," Christy said, pointing across the table.

Skye found a covered dish at her usual place and a piece of paper folded under her fork -- elegant pen strokes formed her name. She uncovered her breakfast. Everything was just the way she liked it. Mug of hot coffee. Chilled tomato juice. Lightly browned toast, no butter. Spanish omelet.

Someone had transformed her meager leftovers into a meal worthy of a four-star restaurant, and dirtied every dish in the house to do it. She looked at the kitchen sink and groaned.

They used the good china, too. The dishes she'd promised Lorraine she wouldn't touch. Watching Christy gleefully stab away at her pancakes spurred Skye into action.

She transferred Christy's breakfast from the irreplaceable dinnerware to a plastic plate, and while Christy continued to eat, Skye poured the girl's orange juice from the crystal goblet into a recycled peanut butter jar.

Skye read while she ate.

Thank you for the night's lodging. Please accept this meal as partial payment for your hospitality. I will see that you are fully compensated at a later date. Catching a ride into town with David and Dirk. Respectfully, Alex

What an odd note, she thought, tracing her finger over the beautifully formed letter A in Alex. More formal than she expected from a man who drove a broken down Mustang.

After she refolded the paper, she realized what was really odd about the note. He had written it on Iowa Glass stationery.

Skye rushed to the back door and opened the key rack. The hook marked "STUDY" was empty. She wouldn't blame Lorraine if she threw them out of the house. Lorraine was doing her a favor letting her house-sit, and she'd let a stranger run amok in the place. What had Dirk done while all this was going on? Had he just sat there while a stranger opened a locked room?

The doorbell stopped Skye's silent ranting. Most likely Christy's older sister to pick her up. Skye yelled "Coming" while she wiped syrup from the little girl's face and fingers. When she led Christy to the front door, Skye found it already open.

Christy's sister waited patiently outside. Sheldon Seabrook waited in the foyer, not so patiently.

Sheldon raised his lecture finger and pointed it at Skye. "Would you care to explain what's been going on around here?"

The last thing she wanted was a confrontation with Sheldon. She'd never seriously considered marrying him, but she didn't want him as an enemy. The town might find the funds to restore her job at the school. That would mean working with him again.

"Hold that thought, Shelley." Skye brushed past him and walked Christy to her sister's car. Just as quickly, she breezed back through the open door. "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken in front of the kids."

She looked over her shoulder relieved to see his color had returned to normal. He stood rocking on his heels, hands in his pockets. Even dressed to run his summer business, lawn care and minor house repairs, he looked too perfect -- his reddish blond hair slicked to one side, his wrinkle-free Dockers creased, his boots polished. Steady, stable -- she really should like Sheldon more.

She handed him a cup of the coffee Alex had brewed.

Sheldon's eyebrows arched after his first swallow, and he straightened in his chair, as if to shake off the surprise of finding drinkable coffee at her table. "This is serious, Skye. Inviting a man to spend the night -- "

"He slept on the sofa, Shelley."

"I can see that. He got mud all over the floor."

"He was in a car accident last night, and too tired to worry about mud on his shoes. Alex just needed a place to sleep."

"Oh, it's Alex is it? Did you bother to get the last name of your overnight guest?" Sheldon looked like he wanted to say more, but drank his coffee instead.

"What's the problem? He didn't murder us in our sleep. Alex is from around here. Harley knows him. Everything's fine."

Sheldon banged his cup on the table. "Fine? Everything's fine? How can you say that?"

Drops of spilt coffee wet her arm, making her jump in surprise. She had never known Sheldon to get so worked up about anything.

"How can you say everything is fine when I rang your doorbell this morning and a half-naked man with hair practically to his waist answered?"

Skye wished she could ignore the question. She almost giggled. He made long hair sound like a dangerous weapon. But Sheldon had no right to question her actions. No, Skye thought, shaking her head, she definitely didn't want to argue this morning. She wanted to take her saxophone to the lake and exchange honks with the ducks, not sit here listening to a man who had no reason and no right to be jealous.

What would it be like? she wondered, to have two men fighting for her. She had never dated anyone but Ben, and they'd gone from childhood friends to husband and wife almost overnight. Now she imagined Alex standing here -- half-naked -- serving her breakfast. Sheldon's rattling cup returned her to reality.

"Look, Shelley," she said. "Not everyone is from Iowa. Lots of respectable men wear their hair long."

"That is not the point, Skye."

"What is the point?"

He spoke to her as if she were a slow student. "Someone else could have knocked on your door this morning. What then?"

What did he mean? Lorraine would have congratulated her on luring a man to her bed. Christy thought Alex made great pancakes. After growing up with his father, Dirk was used to waking to find strangers asleep on the sofa.

Sheldon stood. "An incident like this could ruin your reputation in this town. Decent, single women don't do things like this."

She swallowed hard when she realized what he was saying. He wasn't jealous. He wasn't concerned about her safety. He was worried about her reputation, and by association, his. Anger curled her fingers into fists as he continued.

"What if someone from the school board came to see you? They don't know you the way I do. They wouldn't understand."

"And you do understand?" she demanded.

"Of course, I do. You wouldn't sleep with some stranger. It's that damned Devries hospitality that gets you in trouble. But your husband's not around any more. It doesn't look right."

Skye left the kitchen table to get away from Sheldon only to confront the sink of dirty dishes. She threw a dish towel over the mess and walked out the back door to let Henry off his leash.

Sheldon stalked after her.

Maybe if she made reassuring sounds, he'd go away. "I don't get many visitors, except for Lorraine. I think the chances of anyone from the school board paying me a call are slim."

"Not that slim. I did some talking for you last night."

"Oh?" Only half listening, Skye busied herself calming Henry, the Old

English sheepdog Miles Bettencourt had given to Dirk when his father died. Henry was difficult to handle, which made finding a place to rent almost impossible, but the dog had pulled Dirk through rough times.

When Henry licked her feet, she unhooked his leash and shaded her eyes to watch him bound off to the Bettencourt house, where he spent his mornings with his litter mates on the Bettencourt estate. She never tired of the view. The mansion Miles Bettencourt had built for his bride, Widow Aletta Jackson, looked like a scaled-down version of Monticello surrounded by Iowa corn.

Sheldon moved in front of her, blocking the view. "Don't you want to hear what I've been doing for you?"

She walked toward the lake through knee-high grass, hoping the distant sound of mowers covered her sigh.

"I've got good news," he continued, undeterred by her silence. "Vander Kamp is leaving. Her husband got a job in Chicago."

Elementary school music teacher wasn't Skye's dream job but it would give her a steady paycheck. Before she could thank him, he hurried on. "They're not replacing her."

Skye spun around to face him and walked backward toward the lake. How could he be so insensitive? Another family -- descended from founders of the community -- was leaving town and he smiled. "So that's your good news?"

"You know I didn't want to take over the band. I'm a chorus man, myself. I can handle percussion, I don't mind lower brass, but I'm lost when it comes to woodwinds. This fall they want me to take over as assistant basketball coach. I just won't have enough time."

The tall grass of the empty pasture gave way to the beach, once sand, now mostly gravel. Skye ran the last twenty feet to the lake, ignoring the rocks that stung the soles of her feet.

While she tested the water with her toes, Sheldon squatted beside her on the dock. "Ted, that is, Mr. Nikkel, will bring it to a vote next month."

She rolled her jeans to her knees and plunged her feet into the cold water. Maybe she shouldn't suspect Sheldon's motives. He had a lot invested in this town. He was as concerned as she about the future of Close. "Vote on what?"

"Your position, of course, giving music lessons at the school. Nothing definite yet, you understand, and the job will be temporary and part-time, but the board can't commit to anything long-term with Iowa Glass laying off workers. I know people expect it of you, but you've got to stop all this volunteer work. It's wearing you out."

She was only dimly aware of Sheldon slipping off his jacket and draping it over her shoulders. The June air had suddenly felt cold; she pulled the jacket tight around her.

"I've heard of some openings near Chicago. Let me make some calls. If you insist on raising Dirk alone, you need a real job." He stood and pulled her with him. "I won't embarrass us both by proposing again, but I want to look for a school system where we can both apply."

Screeching brakes and wheels skidding on gravel saved Skye from answering. Lorraine Bettencourt extended a shapely leg through the open door of her red Corvette.

Seeing her friend, Skye's mood lightened. Lorraine's "to hell with what people think" attitude was half the reason Skye adored her best friend. The other half was a too easily bruised heart Lorraine showed only to Skye.

Lorraine tottered over the gravel on spiked, black heels. Her legs went on forever, disappearing under an impossibly tight, short black dress.

Skye tried not to giggle when Sheldon's eyes narrowed. Lorraine's fancy clothes, shamelessly dyed red hair, and fake Southern accent shocked and offended most people in Close.

"Get in the car, Skye," Lorraine ordered. Her accent vanished when she was upset.

Too relieved to bother with questions, Skye threw Sheldon a quick, "Have to go" and ran. She had barely time to fasten her seat belt before

Lorraine floored the Corvette, the tires scattering gravel.

"He's here," Lorraine said as she fishtailed out of the drive.

"Who's here?" A foolish question, Skye realized. Who was all of Close waiting for? Lorraine's stepbrother, Clayton Jackson, and the reading of Miles Bettencourt's will.

* * * *

SKYE HELD AN ancient copy of National Geographic in her lap while Lorraine paced in front of Jacob Van Wyk's office.

"Why isn't Clay here?" Lorraine demanded.

Jacob's secretary continued typing.

Skye looked out the front window toward the senior center. After a night of celebrating, members wouldn't arrive until late afternoon. Good thing, too. Coffee supplies were low, and it looked like she wouldn't finish here any time soon. She hoped she had enough cash in the money jar. She couldn't afford to spend any of her own.

The usual lunch crowd drifted in and out of the combination drug store and diner next to the center. After a look at her watch, Skye wrapped her arms around her stomach. She was hungry and tired of holding Lorraine's hand.

Lorraine moved to pace the front of the waiting room, blocking Skye's view of the street. "When did you say Clayton was coming?"

Jacob's secretary didn't look up. "I really wouldn't know."

To listen to her talk, Mrs. Shutts was blind and deaf, but after working in the office for two weeks on Jacob's new computer system, Skye knew better. Jacob's secretary might be new in town, but she knew everything that went on in the lawyer's office and most of what went on in Close.

When Lorraine returned to wear a hole in the carpet in front of Jacob's office, Skye looked out the window again. Her breath caught at the sight of the next person who left the Close diner.

Once on the sidewalk, Alex zipped his well-worn flight jacket halfway up his chest. He jaywalked across the street, his hands dug deep in his pockets and his shoulders hunched. His long black hair hung loose over his shoulders.

Skye wasn't surprised to see him walk toward her. Sheriff Harley didn't have an office in Close, so he used Jacob's for official interviews.

Less than ten feet from her, Alex's jeans and shoes no longer appeared muddy. Skye suspected he'd washed rather than replaced them. The worn marks on the denim above his knees were the same.

The night's rest had done him good. The bruises under his eyes had faded, and he no longer walked with his arm hugged to his side. He'd also shaved. The ragged stubble of the night before had masked his high cheek bones and aristocratic features.

He kept his eyes to the ground and didn't see her, even after he swung open the door. He stared at Lorraine.

Lorraine stopped pacing and smiled. Her mouth curved slowly downward when his expression didn't change.

After saying good morning, Mrs. Shutts, the normally staid secretary, shocked Skye, jumping from her chair to give Alex what could only be described as a bear hug. "It's so good to see you again, Clayton. I've never stopped praying for your happiness."

Tears filled her eyes when she spoke. After accepting Alex's reserved peck on the cheek, she retreated to her desk to look through her handbag for a handkerchief.

When Alex turned to face her, Skye said nothing as she puzzled over what she'd seen. She wasn't used to being in the dark about who knew who in Close.

"Oh, Skye dear, I'm so sorry," Mrs. Shutts said, still sniffing. "I don't suppose you've met Lorraine's brother, Clayton Alexander Jackson, the Third."

Skye stared in shocked silence. The drifter who had spent the night downstairs was the grandson of the founder of Iowa Glass? Her generous gesture

now embarrassed her. She'd forced him to spend the night on a lumpy sofa in his own mother's house. Why hadn't he told her who he was?

Alex seemed to enjoy her embarrassment, smiling to acknowledge her stiff nod. "Good morning, Skye. I want to apologize for the mess in the kitchen. If you haven't gotten around to it, I can drop by later and finish cleaning up."

Before she could think of an angry retort, he turned and nodded to his stepsister. "Hi, Lori."

Her anger at Alex's deception forgotten, Skye's cheeks flamed red. How would she explain this to Lorraine? Skye hadn't mentioned her overnight guest.

Lorraine stood with feet planted far apart, dress stretched taut over her thighs, clenched fists on hips. "Clayton." Her warm drawl belied the hard look she gave them both. "You two know each other?"

Skye said no, Alex yes. They looked at each other and reversed their answers. Alex's warm brown eyes and his conspiratorial wink set Skye blushing again. Lorraine stared at them as if they were mad.

Alex answered for them both. "Mrs. Devries was kind enough to offer me coffee when I arrived in town last night."

Skye was no longer angry, but still puzzled. Why hadn't he told her he was Lorraine's brother? Why hadn't he walked the quarter mile up the hill to the Bettencourt estate where he could have slept in one of a half dozen guest rooms?

Her questions died on her lips. Skye recognized the look that sparked Lorraine's eyes. She'd recovered from her shock and would make Alex pay for his deception. Skye wouldn't have to say a word.

Lorraine pouted and slithered to Alex's side. "You must consult with me before you start tom-cattin' around town, Clay. You'll get yourself in trouble. This isn't San Francisco, you know. We have rules here."

Alex stepped away from Lorraine. When she grabbed his arm, he cringed. "I go by Alex now."

While she continued to cling to his arm, Lorraine pouted again. "Running away changed a lot of things, but it didn't change your name. Nobody's called me Lori for ages, but while you're here, we'll just have to put up with each other."

This was the first Skye heard about anyone running away. She'd understood Lorraine's stepbrother left home after his mother's death when he was twelve to attend a private boarding school out East. Lorraine didn't talk about him much. The last time she mentioned Clayton was a few years ago to say his wife had died.

Alex untangled himself from Lorraine's embrace. His voice sounded flat and cold. "You won't have to put up with me for long, Lori. My stay will be brief."

"You know, Clayton," Lorraine continued to emphasize his name and wrapped her arms around his again, "Daddy wanted his will read in his study. You could respect his wishes now he's dead. You were so beastly to him when he was alive."

Skye felt as if she'd walked into a boxing match. Who would throw the next punch?

Alex deliberately withdrew his arm from Lorraine's. "You're not getting me back in that man's house."

"Why are you being so mean?" Lorraine's pout transformed into a genuine frown.

Alex's expression softened slightly. "I don't want to hurt you, Lori. I just want this over with so I can leave."

"But what about Iowa Glass?" Lorraine asked.

Yes, thought Skye, what about Iowa Glass? If layoffs continued at the window factory, soon there would be no town. She would have no choice but to leave. Her throat threatened to close.

"You can buy out my share," Alex answered. "I have no interest in holding onto it."

"But we're having problems. Now Daddy's not ... I thought you could help."

"I'm no business man. You know that."

"But Mr. Perkins, the man Daddy put in charge, I don't trust him. I don't think Daddy did either, not toward the end anyway. He was so sick and you wouldn't answer his letters -- "

"Jacob can help." Alex's voice was edged with impatience.

"But if we don't do something, Perkins says we'll have to sell the plant or close it, and then everyone will lose their job."

Alex threw his arms wide. "Why the hell should I care if this whole town dries up and blows away?"

Mrs. Shutts looked up when Alex raised his voice.

Shocked, Skye stepped back. Alex didn't care about Iowa Glass or about Close. If Mr. Bettencourt left more than tokens to Alex in his will, they would all be in trouble. The plant employed over half the town. If it closed....

Lorraine stamped her foot. "You wouldn't come when Daddy was sick. You returned his letters unopened. He wanted to see you."

Mrs. Shutts stood when Lorraine continued her tirade.

"You wouldn't come for the funeral. I begged and begged. You've kept me and everyone in town waiting to read this stupid will. You could have flown out. It doesn't take three weeks to drive from California." Lorraine burst into tears.

Seemingly unmoved, Alex said nothing.

"What have you been doing? Daddy is dead. I needed you. You can damn well stay in town a few weeks to help sort things out."

Unable to choke out any more words, Lorraine allowed Mrs. Shutts to escort her into Jacob's office.

Silence seemed the wisest course. Skye sat in one of the waiting-room chairs, and Alex stood with his back to her, staring out the window. Mrs. Shutts returned and placed a hand on his shoulder. He jumped at her touch.

Mrs. Shutts took his hand. "I understand this is difficult for you, Clayton. So will Lorraine, eventually. They may not talk about it, but no one has forgotten what happened all those years ago. You have to remember Miles was Lorraine's father and his death was a blow. You're all the family she has left."

Alex stiffened again and drew away. "I am not related to Miss Lorraine Bettencourt in any manner whatsoever."

He murmured, "Excuse me, Mrs. Devries," before he entered the room where Jacob and Lorraine waited. The room where Mr. Bettencourt's will would determine the fate of Iowa Glass, the town of Close, and of Skye Devries.

* * * *

WHEN THE VOICES grew audible behind Jacob's office door, Skye joined Mrs. Shutts across the street for lunch. She knew better than to ask why Alex refused to enter his stepfather's house. Mrs. Shutts guarded secrets like a dragon. How she knew so much after such a short time in town was another mystery.

Skye and Mrs. Shutts slipped out when Marvin arrived to regale the crowd with his account of the evening's events. Skye stopped by the senior center to count the coffee money. Amid the dimes and quarters, she found a hundred-dollar bill.

Alex hadn't lied about being able to afford a cup of coffee.

When she returned to the law office, Pete Handley, editor of the Close Chronicle, was sitting in her chair. He nodded and recrossed his legs, angling away from her. She and Pete had shared a Bunsen burner in chemistry class, but the economic climate in Close had made enemies of old classmates. The Chronicle favored closing the high school and reported favorably on staff cuts that cost her job.

Before Skye could settle into her magazine, the door swung open. Lorraine applied a coat or red lipstick with a steady, practiced hand, then

took Skye's shoulders and whispered, "Do anything the bastard asks. I have to know what he plans to do."

Her purse and hips swinging with self-assurance Skye sensed she no longer felt, Lorraine flounced out the front door.

What did Lorraine expect her to do? Why would Alex ask her, a stranger, to do anything?

Skye moved to leave, but Mrs. Shutts, the phone pressed to her ear, held up a finger. Skye waited by the front door, tapping her foot. She needed to catch up with Lorraine.

When the office door opened again, Jacob emerged and shook Alex's hand. Alex smiled at her, an honest smile that lasted until he noticed Pete Handley. A plastic smile took its place.

Jacob started to leave. "Mrs. Devries, Mr. Jackson would like to have a word. Please, use my office. You'll have more privacy."

Alex flashed Jacob the same artificial smile. "I wouldn't dream of putting you out of your office, Jacob. Besides, I have nothing to say to Mrs. Devries that's all that private."

Before Alex could say more, Pete introduced himself and asked for a statement. Alex directed a permissive nod toward Jacob.

"Simply put," said Jacob, "a prenuptial agreement between Miles Bettencourt and Aletta Jackson stipulates that after the death of both parties, Mrs. Jackson's property held before their marriage be passed to her son, Clayton Alexander Jackson, the Third. The transfer will now take place. The property of most interest to your readers is the Iowa Glass Window Factory, of course." Jacob nodded at Pete.

"Aletta Jackson owned forty percent of Iowa Glass before her marriage to Mr. Bettencourt. Her share now passes to her son. Mr. Bettencourt purchased the remaining sixty percent before his marriage to Mrs. Jackson. He disposed of this sixty percent as follows."

Alex stood with his hands in his pockets, humming the same song he had last night. A song from the seventies someone had revived a few years back. Skye couldn't place it.

"Mr. Bettencourt bequeaths his house and personal property to his daughter Lorraine with several donations made to charities. I will provide the Chronicle with a complete list. Mr. Bettencourt's interest in Iowa Glass he leaves in equal shares to his daughter and to his stepson, Mr. Jackson."

Skye's head snapped up and she found herself looking at Pete. They both aced algebra, and it didn't take more than fourth grade math to figure out who owned Iowa Glass now. Forty percent plus half of sixty made Clayton Jackson's share seventy percent.

No wonder her father's will had upset Lorraine.

When Pete asked Jacob to clarify which properties comprised Mr. Bettencourt's sixty percent, Alex pulled Skye aside.

"I have to get a car. If you'll join me, we can talk on the way." His phony smile remained, and his voice lacked the soothing European lilt of the previous evening.

Before he could usher Skye out, Mrs. Shutts stopped them at the door with a bulging, manila envelope. "Take these with you."

Mrs. Shutts delivered the envelope and her lecture with a smile. "I must have taken a hundred messages for you from both coasts and more than one continent. I expect you to get your own secretary, so I can get my work done."

Once on the street, Alex shoved the envelope into his open jacket. "What do you say, Skye? Would you like a job?"

"Secretary?" Skye's head swam at the thought. She could type, but she hated to talk on the phone and couldn't make coffee.

Alex shrugged. "Secretary isn't the title I had in mind, but close enough. By the way, I need a car. Are we headed in the right direction?"

For the first time since they'd left the office, Skye looked at Alex. Before, she'd failed to notice his visible distress. He was sweating under his leather jacket and a muscle twitched in his tightly clenched jaw. He looked

positively lost standing on the sidewalk.

Unexpectedly inheriting a company was enough to throw anyone. He needed time to adjust. With time and the right sales pitch, Alex would learn to love Close as much as she did.

"If not secretary, is guide dog more the title you had in mind, Mr. Jackson?"

As she'd hoped, his phony smile faded, replaced by an honest one. He walked beside her down Main Street and past the grocery store, one hand in the pocket of his jeans, the other brushing hair out of his eyes. "You might as well call me Clay. Trying to get people in Close to call me anything else is futile."

"Especially since you don't intend to stay long -- "

"Exactly. And when I offered you a job, a guide dog is not what I had in mind. As you may recall, I dislike dogs."

Skye bit back a laugh. "Before we continue, maybe you'd better tell me what you want."

Alex stopped and looked at her, a puzzled smile spreading into an amused grin. "What I want?"

A hot flush spread up Skye's neck and she rushed to explain. "Yes. If you want your car, we're headed for Sully's."

"Marvin won't have the new windshield for days, and he hasn't located a replacement part for some doo-hinky I managed to break."

Skye smiled at his willingness to acknowledge a weakness most men she knew wouldn't admit. "I take it, you're not into cars."

Alex's smile broadened again, and he took her arm. Warmth from his side spread through her body, and she had to fight the urge to lean against him while they walked.

"I don't fix 'em. I just rent 'em."

"You can lease a car at the Ford place at the other end of Main Street."

After turning and walking another block, Alex stopped in the empty lot across the street from the car dealership. When Skye kept going, he swung her back into his arms.

She caught her breath when she fell against his chest. Her hands slid through his open jacket, her fingers meeting strong, firm muscles beneath his shirt. She could smell the soap he'd used when he showered, the aftershave he'd splashed on, the smoke that clung to his jacket.

His hot breath, strangely labored after the short walk, ruffled her hair. For a moment he seemed to want her to lean against him, then he stepped back and placed his hands on her shoulders. He stared at her through strands of black hair that partially hid his tempting brown eyes.

Under other circumstances, she would have looked for excuses to spend time with Alex, but she didn't know which threatened her more, the situation or the man. Caught between Lorraine and any man was a dangerous predicament, but this was what Skye had prayed for -- a chance to help Close, to help Iowa Glass. What better way than to work with Alex and provide Lorraine with information?

But how could she work with a man who turned her insides to mush just by looking at her? When his firm grasp changed to a stroking caress, her eyes closed and the image of Alex standing half-naked in her kitchen returned.

This was ridiculous. She was hardly a femme fatale. Just thinking about manipulating Alex for her own ends filled her with guilt. She wanted to believe she'd feel the same even if he wasn't so damnably handsome.

When she opened her eyes, she prayed he would assume she'd been looking at the ground. A dangerous man, a dangerous situation, but she would have to face both if she wanted to save Close.

His hands left her shoulders and he tilted her chin up with his forefinger. "Jacob says you know something about computers."

Skye gulped "Yes" past the lump in her throat, and he smiled again. A genuine smile. Now she recognized the difference. When he really smiled, the

lines around his eyes deepened and those on his forehead vanished.

He removed his finger from her chin and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She fought the shiver that ran from her neck to her toes. When he rubbed his thumb over her ear, the sensation shot lower, expectancy pooling between her thighs.

"How about bookkeeping? Accounting?" he asked.

Skye's heart thudded in her throat. Did she want this job or didn't she? She would let fate decide. "Not a thing."

"Great. I don't want anyone in my office who knows more than I do. We can face my accountants united in our total ignorance."

Skye laughed with relief, surprised to find she'd been afraid he might change his mind.

"I promise long, irregular hours, but pleasant working conditions. I won't take up smoking again, at least not in your presence. Dress will be informal. What you have on is fine."

When his grin changed to a light-hearted leer, Skye realized how informally she was dressed. She'd thrown a baggy sweater over her sleeveless tee-shirt and jeans this morning. She wasn't wearing a bra -- a fact he could discern if he bothered looking.

Now she was blushing, again. Sheldon never made her feel like this. She realized with a sudden flash of honesty, neither had Ben. Her face grew hotter. Her husband had died seven years ago. It wasn't as if she was cheating on him.

"Actually, people in the front office do dress for work," she said. "I have work clothes from my last job."

"Jacob mentioned you were a school teacher, but jeans are fine for my office."

Anticipation rippled through her when she pictured Alex in her kitchen again. "We're not working at the factory?"

A rather self-satisfied smile formed on Alex's face. "Before we go into details, can I take that as a yes?"

Skye felt as if she were about to step off a cliff, and she had no idea how far she would drop. "Yes, you can."

Alex took her arm and walked across the street toward the lines of shiny cars. They stopped when they reached the outer row. Flags atop radio antennas snapped in the June breeze, not a customer in sight.

"In answer to your question, we'll work at the house for now."

"The house?" Skye asked. The consequences of Alex's inheritance finally sank in. She was living in his house.

"I plan to stay at my mother's place while I'm here, for the summer, I guess. I can arrange another job for you at Iowa Glass when I leave." He dropped her arm when they stepped onto the sidewalk.

"I'm not looking for a permanent job in business. I plan on returning to teaching music when -- "

He started toward the cars, his hands back in his pockets.

He wasn't interested in her plans, or interested in her. He wanted a secretary, or whatever, for the few weeks he was in town. Skye tried not to feel hurt, but failed miserably. She wanted to stamp her foot like Lorraine had and demand he help.

It suddenly occurred to her she had no idea what Alex did for a living. He said he wasn't a business man. Maybe Lorraine was worried he would bankrupt Iowa Glass.

Alex stopped to tie his shoe, resting it on the nearest fender. "You don't have to move out. It's a big house and I won't be using the upstairs."

Even if she didn't remember what Sheldon had said about appearances, Skye would have declined. Half the ladies in town wouldn't speak to her if they thought she was "living in sin" and the other half would arrive at her door to dispense motherly advice.

No, living with Alex, even on separate floors, would never do. No matter how sensible and convenient, and tempting. "Living with the boss might

be all right in San Francisco, but not in Close."

Alex shrugged and traced the outline of a hood ornament. "I'll be at the Marriott in Des Moines until Monday. You can stay put until then without starting talk. Besides, I have things I want you to do for me there."

Skye tried to concentrate on what he said, but she kept thinking about where she and Dirk would stay. The money she'd earned working for Jacob should have carried her through the summer, but she hadn't budgeted for an apartment. Security deposit, electricity, heat, phone. What would she do if Dirk got sick? When she looked up, Skye realized Alex had been giving her a list of things to do. "What?"

"I'll write everything down for you." Alex reached inside his jacket and pulled out a pen. He jotted notes on the outside of the envelope filled with phone messages. "You'll find my portable computer in the trunk of my car. Connect it to the phone at the house so we can exchange faxes."

Skye perked up at the thought of a new computer to play with.

Alex went on. "Sort out my messages, and phone repeat callers so they don't bother Mrs. Shutts. Tell them I'm fine and I'll return calls next week."

Skye scanned the list with dismay. He'd added several items he hadn't mentioned -- add phone lines, move furniture, buy computer equipment. An arrow streaked across the bottom of the envelope directing her to more instructions on the back. What had she gotten herself into? "Are you sure this is all?"

"I'm certain you'll handle things just fine. Once we're settled, ninety percent of your job will entail making phone calls. I don't mind talking on the phone, but I hate punching the buttons and waiting for someone to answer."

She doubted it would be that easy. She'd trained to teach music not run an office, but she didn't have a choice. Whether she took the job or not, she and Dirk didn't have a place to stay. Whatever Alex planned to pay had to be more than she'd make hustling music lessons in Close.

Alex leaned forward and brushed a curl from her forehead.

She shivered at his touch, her eyes closing when he spoke.

"I've probably forgotten something. I'll call you tonight. We can talk."

A tempting thought. Everything about him was tempting. Or maybe it was her. Seven years was a long time to sleep alone, but if Alex was interested, it would be a summer affair. As Sheldon had pointed out, she couldn't afford the luxury, not if she wanted to work in Close.

When she opened her eyes and glanced at him, he looked puzzled. "That's all for now, unless you want to help me pick out a car."

Still feeling breathless, Skye said, "You should be able to handle that by yourself."

Alex turned to go, then looked back. "Do you have an extra key to the house? The one to the front door will do."

Her fingers shook as she worked the key free from her key chain.

When he took it, he pressed folded bills into her empty palm. "If you're going to move, you'll need an advance. Here's your first week's salary."

When Alex wandered off between the rows of cars, Skye found herself alone at the edge of the lot. After straightening her shoulders, she started down Main Street. When she reached the empty lot, she opened her palm and counted her money. Ten bills, all one hundreds.

Chapter Three

ALEX WATCHED THE road disappear behind him through the rear view mirror. As if sent by the devil, storm clouds followed to hurry him on his way. Jacob Van Wyk sat silently in the passenger seat offering no comfort.

Alex swallowed past his dry throat. Was this how he felt the last time he ran away -- propelled by a nameless panic? Or had his reasons for running been more concrete when he was twelve?

Only one person knew for certain what happened twenty-five years ago when he stole Jacob Van Wyk's car and crashed it in a ditch in Ohio. And Alex

couldn't remember.

When he crested the hill too fast, he left his stomach behind. He remembered Iowa for being much flatter. The road ahead rippled like a roller coaster track. He drifted over the double yellow line, and had to swerve to the right. The Cadillac's wheels kicked up gravel in the breakdown lane. Alex reached for the gear shift that wasn't there.

Jacob's right hand gripped the door handle while his left arm hung limply at his side, as always. "This isn't the grand prix, boy."

Alex took his foot off the gas. When the speed dropped to fifty, he reached again for the nonexistent stick. "Sorry, Mr. Van Wyk -- "

"You used to call me Uncle Jacob."

Alex smiled at the image his words conjured -- Uncle Jacob standing with his good arm draped over his shoulder as they looked out to sea. The villa in Agrigento, most likely.

Dozens of "uncles" visited his mother in Sicily, none of them any blood relation. Jacob stood out for two reasons -- he was the only "uncle" from Iowa and the only one who didn't sleep with his mother. Calling Jacob uncle no longer felt right.

"Sorry, Jacob. After driving a stick shift all these years, I'm having a hell of a time adjusting to an automatic."

"Well, just take it easy. You never were a very good driver." Jacob no longer clutched the door handle. "Or is it unfair of me to bring up past indiscretions?"

Alex's chest tightened. Despite his fragmented memory, he could piece together almost everything -- his mother's death, the hearing, waking up in a New York hotel room, the following two years of hell. But the hours between the judge ordering him returned to Bettencourt's custody and waking up in a strange bed hundreds of miles away, remained a blank. Permanently erased by the trauma of the crash.

Before he could push it away, the memory of a police officer questioning him in the hospital flashed through his mind. He must have stolen Jacob's car. Shortly after he disappeared, state troopers had found a vehicle in Ohio with Alex's prints and blood on the steering wheel.

A tremor rippled through Alex as time collapsed. The day he could not remember threatened to collide with this one -- the day he stole Jacob's car and wrecked it, leaving Close behind, and today, as he drove another unfamiliar car and raced another storm.

Those lost days made Alex feel like a failure.

"Alex? Are you all right?"

"Fine, Jacob. It's just ... I don't remember taking your car. The crash caused minor brain damage. I lost a few days."

"I was there, remember? No need to apologize, not after all these years."

Alex opened his mouth to deny he'd meant to apologize for anything. It wasn't his fault. It was Miles Bettencourt's. No number of years could change that.

Jacob appeared uncomfortable with the silence. "I visited you at the hospital in Boston after they moved you from New York. Do you remember?"

Alex stiffened and his foot grew heavy on the gas pedal. "The amnesia only affected three days. But I don't think about those years."

"Of course you don't," Jacob said. "Better to forget the past and get on with your life. I always admired you for that."

Alex glanced sideways to see Jacob nod solemnly. This was one reason why Alex had stayed away. He didn't want to think about the past, and people in a small town like Close had nothing better to do with their time than remind him of it.

When Alex focused on the road ahead, he realized he'd left the corn and wheat fields behind and now drove past fast food restaurants and car dealerships. More cars had joined them on the road. Alex's knotted shoulder muscles relaxed when he caught sight of the gold Capitol dome ahead. Soon he'd

be in Des Moines, and safe.

But safe from what? Images from the night before rushed forward, temporarily blotting out the road.

He had reacted purely by instinct when one of his attackers shouted, "Get on your hands and knees, boss man. You don't belong in this town." Alex could still hear the words reverberate through the hot, night air. For an instant he was twelve years old again and utterly defenseless.

Now, Alex pounded a fist on the steering wheel to bring the road into focus. Jacob grabbed at the door handle again. Still thinking about the previous evening, Alex barely noticed.

He'd kept his suspicions to himself when talking to the sheriff, but the more Alex thought about the details, the less likely it seemed he'd been a victim of random violence. "Jacob, what's your opinion of Harley Rossendahl?"

"As a sheriff?"

Alex nodded, still deep in thought. Three years of working in the emergency room at San Francisco General had acquainted him with the effects of random violence. It had also acquainted him with its patterns. Something about the attack last night struck him as odd.

Why had they called him boss man if they didn't know who he was? His car and clothing didn't mark him as anyone with authority or wealth. Considering the location of the attack, it wasn't a wild leap of logic to wonder if the title might relate to Iowa Glass. If his attackers were looking for Clayton Alexander Jackson, that ruled out most people Alex knew. He had taken his mother's maiden name when he was fourteen. Only a few business associates knew him as anything other than Dr. Alex Casale.

The citizens of Close knew him as Clayton Alexander Jackson, the Third, but who knew he would soon control Iowa Glass besides Jacob?

Jacob spoke in his usual, thoughtful voice, weighing each word as if standing before a jury. "I haven't heard any complaints concerning Harley's job performance as sheriff. He received excellent training in the Marines, I believe. Served a tour with the Naval Investigative Service. If anyone can discover who attacked you, Harley will."

"Was he working for the sheriff's department when Mother..." Alex's throat caught on the words. Given a choice, he wouldn't discuss his mother with anyone, but he needed to know if he could trust the sheriff. Someone covered up for Miles. Everyone connected with the investigation of his mother's murder was suspect.

"Harley was only a boy, a senior in high school. He left town the next year. He was considered quite an adventurer back then to go to college out East. Now, with things so bad at the plant, most of the kids leave town to find a job."

Alex acknowledged the information with a nod. All those people expected him to breathe life into their dying town, and he wanted to bury it.

When he neared Des Moines, Alex adjusted his driving to the bumper-to-bumper traffic. He'd left California to simplify his life. Two days in Close and things were becoming complicated fast.

Nothing could have surprised him more than learning Miles had given him controlling interest of Iowa Glass, unless he had finally confessed to killing his wife. But Miles Bettencourt remained unrepentant, making no death bed confession and leaving the bulk of his wealth to "my beloved stepson for whom I hold no ill will."

Alex snorted at the sentiment and honked his horn before he swerved into the left lane to pass a truck. Miles had no reason to feel any ill will. He had gotten away with murder.

The only potentially bright spot to a temporary stay in Close was Mrs. Skye Devries. He could see her standing before him -- a scattering of freckles across her upturned nose, one white shoulder bare, face flushing pink as he studied her breasts -- high and firm, nipples coming to life beneath her worn sweater. He had looked into those incredible eyes of hers -- a shade of brown so pale that they looked golden -- and her blush deepened.

When he remembered the feel of her soft, pale skin, Alex released the steering wheel to wipe the sweat from his hands. He hadn't been able resist touching her face and the strand of hair she tried to keep behind her ear.

She'd responded to his touch with the perfect combination of innocence and fire. But becoming involved with Skye was a bad idea. She was probably in the market for a new husband or a summer fling, and he would prove a disappointment in either case. The last thing he needed was a serious relationship, and he'd never mastered the art of casual.

Besides, Lorraine would fill Skye in on his disreputable past. Or maybe Lorraine already had, and instead of being repelled, Skye was intrigued. That could stretch a summer's work into autumn.

A picture of illicit domestic bliss briefly filled his head, but then Alex saw more than the lovely stone house by the lake. Miles Bettencourt's mansion darkened the landscape. Alex shuddered. How could he daydream about lingering in Close with the people who had harbored his mother's killer?

Alex's teeth clenched and his fingers tightened around the steering wheel. No, he would stick to his original plan -- dispose of his property in Close and get out of town. Skye was a means to that end, nothing more. According to Jacob, she was the only person in town, other than Mrs. Shutts, who knew enough about computers to be of any help.

True, he had more property to dispose of now, but basically nothing had changed. He could even consider the added attraction of revenge. As a boy, running away was his only option. Now he could close the plant, just shut it down, and send the workers home.

Hell, considering the number of properties in town owned by Iowa Glass, he could close down the whole town, or leave so little behind only people too old or too stupid to move would remain. A fitting end for the place. Before he left, he would make certain everyone in town knew who was to blame -- Miles Bettencourt.

The only complicating factor, apart from the lovely Mrs. Devries, was the welcoming committee someone had sent to meet him outside Close. If Miles Bettencourt weren't dead and buried, Alex would suspect him of trying to drive him out of town.

"Jacob, do you know why Miles changed his will?"

"What do you mean, changed it?" Jacob sounded puzzled. "Oh, you mean the codicil requiring the reading in Close. Lorraine's idea. She wanted to have the reading at the mansion, but I convinced Miles it wouldn't be a good idea. Unreasonable demands can provide grounds to challenge a will. We decided my office would provide neutral territory."

So Lorraine had a hand in bringing him to Close, but if she had that much influence over her father, why hadn't she inherited everything? "I was wondering about the general terms of the will. I thought Lorraine would inherit her father's estate -- "

"No," Jacob broke in before Alex could finish his thought. "You were always the main beneficiary in Miles and Aletta's wills. Miles took over the plant when your father died, but he always intended for you to have it eventually. After all, your grandfather founded Iowa Glass. Miles didn't want to change things after your mother died. He said it would look like he was punishing you. I want you to know, Alex, Miles Bettencourt did not die a happy man. He lived with the guilt of failing you as a father to the end of his days."

Alex flexed his fingers on the steering wheel before tightening his grip again. He dismissed the possibility his stepfather felt guilt or regret with the shake of his head.

Miles Bettencourt struck his wife and sent her tumbling to her death at her son's feet. A man who would do that and swear on a Bible he hadn't been in the room was capable of anything. Capable of anything except redemption.

Jacob seemed eager to change the subject. "So what plans have you made? This business with Iowa Glass shouldn't take long for you to straighten out. Where will you go next?"

The same questions his friends and colleagues in San Francisco had asked three weeks ago. "I have no plans."

When Jacob took out a cigarette, Alex instinctively reached for his own, then forced himself to count to ten.

"What about returning to your practice in L.A.?"

Alex didn't have to think to respond. He knew the questions, and the safe answers, by heart. "They're doing fine without me. I found someone to take my place when I left three years ago. I'm a silent partner now."

Alex took the cigarette Jacob offered and rolled it between his lips. _I won't light it._

Jacob had to lean awkwardly to bring a match to Alex's face. "Do you still own that biotech firm in Boston? Or the sister plant to Iowa Glass in Georgia would give you a change in weather. I've seen the financial reports. They're doing good business down South. You never did like the winters in Iowa."

After two puffs, Alex stubbed the cigarette out in the ash tray. He picked up the directions to the hotel and squinted at them while Jacob talked.

"Do you have a young lady you're serious about? Lorraine would love to have nieces and nephews to dote on."

Alex's stomach tightened at the mention of Lorraine and her plans for them to be a family. His fingers curled to his mouth in search of the discarded cigarette.

Jacob continued. "After you lost Beth ... I never met her, but she must have been a very special woman. A tragic loss for someone so talented to die so young, and you two just married. But it's been what ... three years?"

Alex's breath caught in his throat. "Four this fall."

The slip of paper with directions slipped from his hand and landed on Jacob's limp arm. Without touching Jacob, Alex picked up the crumpled paper and spread it on the dash. He had to squint to read his own writing and locate the proper turnoff to the hotel.

The whole thing was so damned futile. Why was he going to Des Moines with Jacob to meet with the accountants? What made him think he was any better a business man than he had been a doctor?

Alex took a shuddering breath. He couldn't save his mother, he couldn't save Beth, and for every young life he patched together in the emergency room, he knew he might not be able to save the next one. But he could punish his mother's killer. He could punish Miles Bettencourt, even if he was dead. And he would stay in Close long enough to do it.

After tossing the directions to the hotel onto the back seat, Alex pulled into the fast lane. He didn't know how to find the Marriott Hotel, but he knew where he was headed.

* * * *

SKYE WOKE TO the muted sound of men laughing in her kitchen -- correction, Alex's kitchen. According to people she talked to when she returned his calls, Alex left San Francisco three weeks before arriving in Iowa. How long would it take him to drive from Des Moines? Could he be here now?

After throwing on her bathrobe, she tiptoed halfway down the stairs. Dirk's voice rose above the others as he challenged someone to a game of one-on-one at the basketball hoop he'd rigged over the garage door.

Sheldon spoke next. She tried not to groan. Lorraine must have asked him to do more work on the grounds. Yesterday, he had helped her and Dirk move their things to Lorraine's, but she wished Sheldon would look for a life partner slash music teacher somewhere else.

The draft coming up the stairwell felt cool and she pulled her bathrobe tight against her neck. Before she could retreat up the stairs, a voice with a European lilt came from farther back in the kitchen. Alex had returned.

She pictured him standing on the other side of the closed door -- shoulder length hair hanging in his eyes, shirt sleeves rolled up past his elbows, worn jeans tight against his thighs. By the time she reached the top of the stairs, she felt flushed and her heart was racing.

She had felt like a school girl this week when she curled up on the couch and waited for the phone to ring. Unlike when she'd been a dateless teenager, the phone rang. The intimate way he spoke, his voice seductively lyrical, sent delicious sparks careening up and down her spine. She tucked her feet beneath her and played with her hair while they talked. When he laughed, she felt self-conscious, as if he could see her somehow through the wires.

So far, she hadn't had to decide whether to pass information to Lorraine. Alex didn't discuss Iowa Glass or what he planned to do with the window factory, and he never questioned Skye about the work he'd assigned her. He assumed she was taking care of business. Skye liked that.

He asked about her work at the senior center, what the weather was like, how Dirk was doing. To Skye, Alex sounded lonely and more than a little lost. Two days ago, when his nightly phone calls stopped, she had begun to worry. Maybe he wasn't coming back. More surprising to her, she missed their late night talks.

Now, she returned to her room and dropped her bathrobe on the floor. Her morning routine usually took ten minutes -- a shower, a smattering of make-up, a few strokes of the brush through her hair -- but today picking out her clothes took longer than usual.

Despite what Alex had said about wearing jeans and a T-shirt to work, Skye had decided on formal office protocol. The memory of how he'd stared at her breasts, prompted her to slip on a bra, but she couldn't bring herself to wear panty hose. Much too hot for nylons. She settled on white slacks, a summer sweater, and sandals.

At eight-thirty she walked onto the second floor balcony, which ran the length of the house and provided a view of the grounds. The gardens must have looked spectacular when properly tended. She remembered with a blush her comment to Alex. "Whoever designed this place was schizophrenic or just plain crazy." He had answered with silence.

Aletta Jackson, Alex's mother, designed the house. Everyone in Close knew that.

Eclectic or not, the grounds had potential. Outside the downstairs bedroom, where Alex planned to sleep, was a small, stone patio surrounded by the remains of an English herb garden. A more elaborate garden once stretched past the larger, marble patio, but now only a few hardy plants grew wild between the toppled rocks and weeds.

Looking down, she noticed a sweat shirt on the gray marble and a path of trampled weeds leading to the lake. From this height she could see the dock where she practiced her soprano sax, splashing her feet in the water and playing jazz for the ducks.

A figure moved among the weeds. Clouds cast the area in shadows, but she could make out black hair and bare, masculine shoulders. The man raised his arm overhead, and something glinting in the sunlight flew from his hand. The object followed a graceful arc and dropped into the water.

Then the man jumped up and walked the length of the dock. When he reached the end, the clouds parted, giving Skye a sunlit view. She leaned forward, her upper body extending over the rail.

Alex.

His back and shoulder muscles rippled when he stretched his arms over his head. He obviously kept in shape, but looked too pale for someone who had lived in California all these years. When he shook his head, his hair came free and flowed over his shoulders in an ebony curtain.

Just as she caught herself wondering how the rest of him looked, he shed his pants in one easy motion.

He stood for no more than a second or two, but for her the moment telescoped out of time. It shouldn't seem this momentous, but it was. The sight of his well-conditioned body had the unfortunate effect of making her heart pound in her throat, her mouth dry to dust, and her thighs grow uncomfortably damp. When she licked her lips, Alex dove into the lake.

While he remained underwater, she held her breath. Along with the

relief she felt when he surfaced came the realization she had agreed to work with this man she'd just viewed so gloriously naked in the June sunshine.

They would share an office for the rest of the summer, and unlike the past week when she'd dealt with him over the phone, she would now have to deal with him in person.

The thought didn't displease her, she realized as she left the rail and hurried downstairs in search of breakfast. She could imagine her grandmother scolding her, saying she was acting like a spring chicken, not a respectable widow. For once Skye didn't feel guilty. She was only thirty and Ben wouldn't want her to act as if she wore widow's weeds, not after seven years.

She listened at the kitchen door, and when she didn't hear anything, she entered, whistling a bit of the song she'd been working on this summer. Between caring for Dirk, the senior center, and her new duties for Alex, she didn't have time for anything else. Maybe when Alex stopped for lunch, she could go to the lake and work on her music.

"What are you so happy about?" Dirk entered the kitchen from the front of the house.

Skye jumped and looked over her shoulder. "What were you doing in there?"

Dirk dug his hands deeper into the pockets of his jeans, striking a pose of adolescent indifference. "Just looking around."

"Well, don't. I told you to stay out of Mr. Jackson's office. We don't live here anymore."

"Do we really have to live with that bitch -- "

Skye spun on her heel. "Do you realize how lucky we are to have a friend like Lorraine? She even said you can keep Henry in your room."

Her anger waning, Skye realized she didn't know who she was angry at, Dirk for his unkind words or herself for not being able to provide for her stepson. Lorraine had made an offer Skye couldn't refuse -- she and Dirk could stay rent free for as long as they liked. She didn't even have to worry about the pickup truck. When it broke down, she could walk to work. If only she could shake the impression Lorraine would ask for something in return, something Skye might not want to give.

Dirk stalked to the back door, mumbling as he went. "You said when you got a job, we could buy Grandma's house."

Skye stared at her stepson's back, remembering how it had hurt to tell him she couldn't afford to buy her grandparents' house from the bank. When she married his father, Dirk was four years old and she was eighteen. They had grown up together, Skye's grandmother serving as Mother for them both. Now Skye was the only family Dirk had and sometimes, most of the time, she didn't feel like a mother at all.

"My job with Mr. Jackson is temporary," she said. "Tonight, we are moving in with Miss Bettencourt and that's final."

She ignored Dirk's groaned response and glanced around the room. "Where did everybody go?"

Dirk shrugged, his angry posture replaced by studied indifference. "Shelley Belly went up to Miss Bettencourt's."

Skye tried not to smile at Sheldon's nickname -- Dirk's disrespectful attitude had gotten him suspended from school twice last year. Sheldon wasn't actually fat, but the way he bounced around when he directed accentuated the extra pounds around his middle.

She looked around the kitchen for something to eat, but didn't see any food. It had been too much to expect from Alex, really -- salary and breakfast. Toast spread with peanut butter would have to do. She ate standing over the kitchen sink. "So what do you plan to do today?"

"Nothing."

"You're going to do nothing all day standing on this spot?"

Dirk gave a dramatic sigh and rolled his eyes. "No, I'm doing nothing at Dave's. He's stuck baby-sitting Christy."

Skye frowned. She liked David, he was a good student, but his family

typified what would happen to Close if things didn't turn around at Iowa Glass. David's father, Tom Ritter, a widower, had lost his job almost a year ago. He'd started drinking and disappeared around Christmas. If not for their grandmother, his three children would have no one to care for them.

"Baby-sitting doesn't sound like much fun. Why don't you -- "

"Jeez, Skye, we're going to play computer games, okay? The brat can take care of herself."

Skye gave up with a shrug. With her new job, she didn't have time to supervise Dirk's every move.

Hesitating by the back door, Dirk managed to look scared and angry at the same time. "Alex, ah, Mr. Jackson, said we could shoot some hoops around lunch time."

She hid her surprise, her reply sounding eerily like something her grandmother would say. "Just don't make a pest of yourself." Her voice rose when Dirk slammed the back door shut behind him.

Tonight she would spend time with Dirk. She couldn't leave him at loose ends for the entire summer. Maybe a week at music camp. She could afford that much of a luxury for him. He needed time away from her and they would keep him too busy at camp to get into trouble.

At precisely nine, Skye left the kitchen and entered the office she'd created out of the dining room and study. The two rooms stood at right angles to each other. With the French doors folded open, they merged with the anteroom and formed one large room. The deep green, marble floor set off the oak paneling and doors with etched-glass panels to create a formal office setting.

Her desk stood near the kitchen, at the entrance to what had been the dining room. Alex's desk was at the same position in the study. If they closed the doors of the two rooms, they could have privacy, but the picture Alex faxed had the doors drawn open.

She sat behind her desk and searched for the list of calls Alex wanted to return. A moment later, when she looked across the marble entryway, he sat at his desk -- bare-chested, hair dripping wet and a towel around his neck.

The mass of swirling, black hair on his chest was as thick as she'd imagined. The sight of his distinctively adult male features made her feel uncomfortably warm again, and she fanned herself with the nearest note pad.

You've spent too many years around teenage boys if the sight of fully developed pecs sends you swooning.

Alex looked up and winked, throwing aside the towel. "I warned you office attire would be informal."

The sight of him naked, diving into the lake, still fresh in her mind, she ducked her head and pretended to straighten the few items on her desk.

"As long as you don't stand up, I believe I can cope," she replied, wishing her Swedish complexion didn't reveal every blush.

Alex's smile broadened. Maybe he could concentrate under these conditions. She couldn't.

After sleeping alone for seven years, there was no way she could keep her mind on business with a gorgeous, naked man behind the desk. Especially with his bed less than ten feet away. She had to put their relationship back on a business level. "If you're ready to start, Mr. Jackson, you have some calls you wanted to return this morning and I have another to add to your list."

When he stood, Alex relieved Skye of one anxiety. He was wearing shorts. She tried not to stare when he picked up his towel and crossed the room. A large, yellowed bruise covered his upper left thigh, another stained his ribs on the right side. "I have a few questions first." He stopped halfway between his desk and hers. "Is it always this hot?"

She bit her lip to keep from answering "God, no." Not only was she usually not this hot, she didn't think she ever had been. But Alex obviously wanted a weather forecast. Fortunately, her friends at the senior center considered themselves weather prognosticators. "It's above normal for this

time of year, but you can expect it to get hotter before the summer's over."

"Better get an estimate on air conditioning this place. The computers will melt if it gets much hotter."

"Yes, sir." Skye stopped fanning herself and gleefully noted the request on the pad. This was the best part of her job -- arranging for work on the house. Not only could she give business to people who really needed it, but each improvement Alex ordered indicated to her he intended to stay longer than a few weeks.

While in Des Moines, he had ordered the house scrubbed from top to bottom, the grand piano tuned, a whirlpool added to the downstairs bath, and the shower replaced. He wouldn't spend all this money if he didn't plan to stay longer than a few months. Maybe he would summer here and leave plant operations to Mr. Perkins in the winter.

Alex continued to stand in the middle of the room as if he didn't know where to go. "I forgot to ask how answering all those phone messages went. No problems I trust?"

No problems? Didn't he realize the mess he'd left her with? "The calls went fine once I figured out who Dr. Casale was."

His smile faded. "I should have explained before I left -- "

The last thing Skye wanted was for him to think she was complaining, not on her first day. "Mrs. Shutts knew you practice medicine under a different name, but she didn't mention it to me. You left a lot of people worried about you in San Francisco. They said you walked out in the middle of your shift without a word."

He smoothed the wrinkles from his forehead with his hand. "I had a bad day starting with a funeral, but I was three hours into the next shift before I left. There's always a full house in the emergency room on Saturday night. They knew it was my last day."

"Well, no one was complaining. They were just concerned and relieved to hear you'd arrived in Iowa safely."

Alex buried his face in his towel, muffling his voice. "Well, not exactly safe, but I trust you didn't mention any of the unpleasantness surrounding my arrival."

Suddenly, her fears woke and her hands trembled. She had done so well forgetting the danger that seemed to arrive with Alex. Her hands gripping the edge of her desk, she forced her words out in a calm, professional tone. "No, I said you were fine and would return calls this week, just like you asked. I didn't give any details."

"I don't suppose there's a chance your sheriff figured out who stole my laptop?"

She had hesitated to tell Alex while he was in Des Moines. During his short stay in Close, someone had broken into Marvin's shop and stolen the computer from the trunk of his Mustang. She couldn't gauge his reaction over the phone -- a long silence had followed her after she gave him the news -- but he didn't seem upset now.

He could afford to replace the computer, and he was compulsive about backing up data. The duffel bag he'd carried around was filled with floppy disks. She forced herself to take a deep breath. The attack and the stolen computer were a coincidence. "No word from the sheriff yet. Marvin is awfully sorry about your computer. He can't imagine who took it."

"The computer itself is no great loss, but I may have lost some data. Did you reload everything onto the new machine?"

"All set, sir."

Alex continued to stand in the middle of the floor, a puddle of water at his feet. "One more question before we start. Are you going to call me sir all day?"

He asked his question quite seriously, but she detected a glimmer of humor in his eyes. She was being stubborn, but it didn't pay to let a man set limits to a relationship. This one would be strictly business even if Alex did show up for work undressed and damp.

She groaned at the thought. If she had to see him this way every day, she would show up for work overheated and definitely damp. He was ten feet from his bed, ten feet from the kitchen, and Skye didn't know where she would rather picture him standing naked. Imagining him in either resulted in the most interesting, most erotic daydreams.

Get a grip, girl. This is the boss, the man who can save Iowa Glass.
"I can call you Mr. Jackson if you'd like or Doctor Casale."

Not wanting to see his reaction, she kept her eyes focused on the phone. When she looked up, he had returned to his desk, leaving wet footprints on the marble foyer.

He pulled a T-shirt over his head with a sigh and sat down. "You did a good job, by the way. Everything looks great."

Before she could say thank you, he waved the paper she'd put on his desk. "What's this message about, Mrs. Devries?"

She relaxed, grateful he'd decided to follow her lead and keep to last names, and disappointed just the same. When he said her name, an intimate bond sprung up between them, immediate and inappropriate, and made her feel like a school girl.

If only she could deal with him over the phone instead of having to contend with his overpowering physical presence. While she stroked the cradled receiver, she remembered the frantic call that woke her the night before.

"Someone called last night. They said it could wait till morning, but it sounded urgent. Let me look for the number. I was half-asleep when a Mr. Dickson from Massachusetts called. Techno something."

Alex's self-assured smile vanished, and he straightened in his chair, already punching in a number on the phone. She watched the button on her phone light up, signaling his open line. So much for needing her to make phone calls.

"Technolites is a bioengineering firm I own," he said, drumming his fingers while he waited for his call to go through. "Chet Dickson is the president. He wouldn't bother me unless it was important. When did he call?"

Before she could answer, Alex pushed the speaker button and put down the receiver. One of many messages Alex had sent her -- this one labeled "Office Procedure" -- warned he used a speaker phone for most of his calls. He suggested she ignore him, or close her office doors if she needed quiet.

Skye decided to keep her doors open. As a secretary, she didn't expect he would tell her about his decisions until after he'd made them, but she might overhear something useful. Her behavior wasn't exactly deceitful, not like she was snooping, but why did she feel like she should leave the room?

No, Skye decided, as she lined up pencils on her desk. Her reaction was ridiculous. After all, Alex had arrived on the scene only a few days ago. She and Lorraine had lived here for years. They knew what was good for Iowa Glass. Besides, he was a doctor, not a businessman, and as he kept pointing out, he planned to spend the summer here, nothing more.

Shortly after Alex and Mr. Dickson exchanged hellos, the fax machine started to print and Skye couldn't hear a thing. She tried to gauge Alex's reaction by watching his face. The last thing she needed was to have him distracted by an out-of-town emergency.

By the time the noise stopped, Alex was wrapping up the conversation. He spoke into the air, his heels resting on his desk. "Hang in there. With luck, we can salvage most of the work and only lose a month."

"A month! Do you realize how much that will cost -- "

"I'll let my accountants give me the bad news. Insurance should cover most of the loss. I'll worry about the money. It's time we can't recover. Concentrate on securing our system and getting our people back to work."

"Thanks. I was hoping you'd have a solution."

"What I've got is a possible solution. I'll get back to you, or Mrs. Devries will, in a few hours. Everyone's still asleep on the West Coast."

"I'm sorry I had to bother you now. I don't know if you got the telegram I sent. I was very sorry to hear about Tristan -- "

The voice stopped abruptly.

Skye looked at her phone. The line was still open.

Suddenly looking older, Alex ran the fingers of one hand through his hair and lifted the receiver to his ear with the other. When he finally hung up, she busied herself with a fax machine.

She sensed him standing behind her. He smelled fresh and clean, like the lake in which he'd just swum. She took refuge behind her desk. When she looked up, Alex sat inches from her, his bare thighs spread on the polished teak surface.

"Close isn't the only place with a crime problem," he said.

"What's happened?"

"Technolites is developing several products -- artificial blood, cancer vaccines. We're close to making breakthroughs on a couple of fronts. Yesterday, someone hacked into our computer system."

"You can do something?"

Alex nodded, ignoring she'd listened to his phone conversation. Maybe he expected her to listen, maybe he thought it would make his office run more smoothly.

"The break-in was remote, over phone lines, so data stored long-term on tape wasn't affected, which leaves six weeks of lost data. I downloaded our most recent files to my computer in San Francisco a month ago. No one can access that computer; I disconnected it before I left. We need someone to retrieve those files."

Alex picked up the phone list from her desk. He looked all business now, or at least as businesslike as a man could look wearing nothing but lake water, T-shirt and shorts. "Get on the phone to number five here." He circled a California number.

"Fred's got a key to my house. He's supposed to be looking for a buyer. Tell him I left my computer in the bedroom closet. He's the most computer-illiterate person I know, so have him ship the whole thing to Boston. I don't want him trying to retrieve the data himself."

Alex jumped down so she could reach the phone, but he remained standing by her desk. "Look through the backup disks you loaded on my new computer. You'll find files on the artificial blood project current up to ten days ago. Send every file that starts with l-i-t-e to Boston."

She started to reach for the phone, then stopped. She was no lawman, but she'd been around them all her life. Someone should be putting the pieces together. Danger arrived the day Clayton Alexander Jackson the Third drove into town. There hadn't been any attempted car jackings in Close until he showed up or any stolen computers. Now, someone sabotaged a company he owned in Boston.

Her voice sounded small and strangled when she spoke. "We need to tell the Sheriff about this."

Alex looked down at her, startled. "Boston is a little out of his jurisdiction, don't you think?"

"The responsible party could have broken into your system from anywhere. Your computer was stolen in Close and you were attacked just outside of town. If they had taken your car, they would not only have your computer but your backup disks as well." Skye felt strangely calm after she voiced her fears. If the criminals responsible for this were in Close, Harley would find them.

Alex drummed his fingers on her desk. "Whatever happened in Boston was industrial sabotage or a hacker prank gone bad. Who would take the trouble to come all the way to Iowa just to get -- "

"Someone from California? Someone from your past?" This mess has nothing at all to do with Close, she prayed, nothing to do with Iowa Glass. The people who attacked Alex and stole his computer had already left town. Close was too small a place for anyone to hide.

Alex said nothing. Had he thought of someone?

He left her desk and picked up the towel he'd dropped in the middle of

the room, his brow deeply furrowed. "When you talk to Fred about getting the computer, tell him someone might have broken into the house. I don't want him stumbling into anything alone. When you've finished with all that, call the car dealership. I want a different car. One with a stick shift."

Skye made a note on her pad, feeling slightly stunned by the shift in topic. How could he think about mundane details like whether a car has a manual or automatic transmission? Didn't he care someone might be out to get him?

Alex returned to his desk, and propped his feet in an open drawer. His leather chair tilted at a dangerous angle as he switched on the CD player. Before he plugged in the headphones, the introduction to the last scene of Puccini's Madame Butterfly filled the room. Alex liked his opera played at full volume.

They really had nothing in common. She liked dogs; he liked cats. She preferred cool jazz; he liked his music, whether opera or rock, loud and hot. Would he notice she'd slipped the best jazz recordings she could find into the collection of classical and hard rock he'd requested?

He closed his eyes and began to hum. While he listened to Madam Butterfly, he hummed that seventies tune she still couldn't place. Just when she thought he'd fallen asleep, he asked, "Is there anything else, Mrs. Devries?"

"I still think I should contact the sheriff."

Alex slipped his headphones off and opened his eyes. "Have you made arrangements with local officials to keep them informed about my business dealings?"

Her face flushed hot. He suspected she'd taken this job with a hidden agenda. In a sense she had. Lorraine expected her to tell all. "Of course not, but I've known Harley Rossendahl most of my life, and I think he'd like to be informed about -- "

"I'm sorry, I forgot. You mentioned someone in your family is connected with the sheriff's department." He said it with a sneer, like her family had mob connections, or something.

"My grandfather was the sheriff, but that was over thirty years ago. He worked part-time until he died in 1977." Skye realized she was babbling, but she couldn't stop.

Alex's disapproving frown deepened as she continued.

"Ben and I weren't married then, of course. I was only ten. He took over my grandfather's part-time job with the sheriff's department, mostly nights and weekends. Ben's full time job was in accounting at Iowa Glass. About the time he died, seven years ago, the sheriff retired and Harley took over full time."

Suddenly, she ran out of words. She didn't usually discuss Ben as if he were another name in the history of Close. In some ways, she had recovered from Ben's death more quickly than anyone. Harley still felt that he, not Ben, should have been on duty the night Ben's life ended on a rain-slicked road.

Her throat felt hot and tight when she remembered her late husband in his uniform.

Alex straightened in his chair and rested his chin on the temple he formed with his hands. "I understand family loyalty and I respect yours, but I suggest you decide where your loyalties lie now. This mess with Technolites means I may have to stay in Close longer than planned."

Longer? Why? Skye's hopes rose and her stomach sank at the same time. She wanted him to stay, but should she? Everyone would be safer, including her, when Alex left town.

Lorraine had hinted at her stepbrother's wild and wicked past. Who knew how many enemies he'd made since he'd left Close? Skye would feel more secure if Harley knew all the facts.

Without thinking she reached for the telephone.

Alex slipped his headphones back into place and closed his eyes. "If we're going to work together, Mrs. Devries, you'll have to learn to trust me."

Wrong, Mr. Jackson. You are going to have to learn to trust me.

Chapter Four

ALEX WOKE WITH a start, his heart pounding. It took several heart beats before he realized he was kneeling on the floor next to his bed. Then, he recognized the sound that woke him -- someone was dragging a chair across the patio outside his room.

Skye would arrive promptly at nine and come through the kitchen. Was it that late already? He smiled as he pictured her, luminous eyes and tempting body he faced each morning.

The scraping noise came from the patio again. He stood and pulled aside the curtain. The small garden outside his room was empty, but he recognized the man sitting on the marble patio to the right. The sheriff had come to call.

After slipping into the sweat suit he found on the floor, Alex walked onto the patio.

Harley jumped to his feet. "You've got a great view here," he said, pointing to the lake. "Hope I didn't wake you."

The sight of an officer of the law still made Alex nervous after all these years, but he detected nothing sinister about the six-foot man who stood in his garden, hat in hand. Alex decided against a polite lie. Details of the previous evening were returning to his groggy brain. He'd fought with Lorraine and didn't have patience for polite conversation. "What time is it?"

"Eight fifteen. I said I would be by at eight. When you didn't answer the door -- "

Being rude required too much effort. Alex offered Harley a chair and sat, not bothering to hide his yawn. "I had a late night. That blasted stepsister of mine kept me up."

Harley smiled sympathetically. "I know how Lorraine is, on a professional basis, of course."

"Oh? I didn't realize Lorraine had been having trouble with the law."

"Nothing that's not a matter of public record," Harley said, shifting in his seat. "Traffic violations mostly. Nothing serious."

Alex nodded, not wanting to think about Lorraine just yet. He could still hear her shrill voice ringing through the house as she demanded to know why he wasn't doing anything about Iowa Glass. When he pointed out she could have bought a controlling share from him if she hadn't spent most of her father's money before he died, her mood did not improve. "Do you have something to report about my stolen computer?"

"No new leads. It was a professional job, no prints."

Not comforting news. Alex hadn't made any enemies he knew about during his time in California, but his time on the run in New York ... no, too long ago. "Do you think a professional job leaves out the locals?"

"Not necessarily. You've been gone for some time. Iowa has changed in the last twenty years. Close isn't as innocent a place as you might expect."

Alex stiffened. The pain of his mother's death returned every day now like an unrelenting ache, draining his strength. It left him resentful of these smug, small town folk who viewed him as some sort of prodigal son. Well, he hadn't returned home for forgiveness and his undeserved inheritance. "I have never suffered under the illusion Close was anything of the sort."

Harley's smile faded. After straightening in his chair, he continued, his voice carefully neutral. "The truck driven by the men who attacked you was found in Elgin, a suburb outside Chicago, stripped for parts. A school teacher in Milwaukee reported it stolen two days before the attack. Not a likely suspect, the school teacher, I mean."

Harley got up and began to pace the length of the patio.

Alex stood, too. A man towering over him made him nervous. "Was that all you came to say?"

"I understand you have information that might be helpful -- "

Suddenly, something about the pacing sheriff brought a flash of memory

-- brief and vivid -- into focus. "Haven't we met before?"

"Yes. The night you arrived in town. I was driving the patrol car -- "

Alex held up his hand and stopped him. Why did everyone assume he couldn't remember what happened from one day to the next? Lorraine's propaganda probably, a story concocted to explain why he accused her father of murder.

Well, Lorraine was wrong, the judge at the hearing was wrong, and so was the rest of Close. The only thing Alex couldn't remember was the night he ran away and the following two days. He remembered all the rest -- the man at the top of the stairs with his left arm raised, his mother falling toward him, the room tilting and spinning when she landed at his feet. He remembered it all with sickening clarity and had recited the events to the sheriff and the judge twenty-five years ago.

That Alex chose to forget, that he had to forget to go on with his life, did not change the facts. Now, those memories pulsed behind a thin veil of resistance, threatening to engulf him.

He walked to the patio rail and leaned against the cold marble wall, which felt so very familiar. The marble beneath his feet dropped away as he returned to those days. Even at twelve, the irony wasn't lost on him. His mother's death had resulted, if only temporarily, in what he had wanted for years.

Since the day he'd seen bright orange school busses rumble past the house, he'd begged his mother to let him attend public school instead of staying home with private tutors. The day she died he'd asked again for permission.

Alex heard his own words clearly, but couldn't see the person he addressed. "I'm going to be thirteen my next birthday. I want to go to a real school this fall."

"What's so urgent about today?" A male voice -- solemn and impatient.

"Registration for school is next week. I read it in the Chronicle. I need a copy of my birth certificate and shot records and stuff."

The voice softened slightly. "What did your mother say?"

"What she always says. I'm going to be a great pianist. I don't have time for school."

"What about your stepfather?" The voice began to fade as if the speaker had turned away. "Why don't you ask him?"

Now, the question echoed across the lake. Alex tightened his grip on the stone rail. Was that what happened that day? Had Miles fought with his mother over letting him go to school? Was that what drove to him to push her down the stairs?

Alex shuddered, turned and picked up his conversation with Harley. "I remember you from before, when I attended school in Close. I wouldn't expect you to remember, but you seem familiar."

An easy grin spread across Harley's face. "I sort of hoped you didn't remember that."

Another image popped into Alex's head, complete, and softened by the years. "You pushed me into a sink in the boys' room." Then with a laugh, "I remember I asked for it. Picking on a senior isn't a particularly bright thing for a twelve-year-old to do. I had stitches in my upper lip. I must have left town shortly after that."

Harley's smile faded. "I hope I didn't have anything to do with your going away."

"No, not at all," Alex insisted. Only one man was to blame for his leaving. Alex wouldn't let anyone share the responsibility. "I was in temporary foster care after my mother's death, and they sent me to school. After Bettencourt was cleared, the court ordered me returned to his custody. That's why I left." Alex nodded to himself. Bettencourt had to be why he left, even if he didn't remember the particulars.

Harley stood, nodding solemnly, waiting.

Alex wanted to trust him. Surely not everyone in town had conspired to

clear Bettencourt of murder charges. "You were a senior in high school when my mother died?"

"I never met her, but I do remember her death and the hearing quite clearly. Ben, Skye's husband, was a year older and worked part-time with the Sheriff then. Skye's grandfather recommended him for the job."

Alex filed the information for further consideration. When Skye mentioned her husband working for the sheriff, he hadn't connected Ben with the investigation. This put not only his integrity in doubt, but Skye's as well. "You weren't involved in the investigation yourself?"

"No, I started working for the department seven years ago, but I heard Ben and Skye's grandfather talking about it. Ben and I used to drop by after supper most nights. Skye's grandmother was some cook." Harley looked at his watch. "Skye said you might know something to help my investigation."

So Skye hadn't told Harley. Alex felt more pleased than seemed reasonable. She had followed his wishes and hadn't contacted the sheriff for almost a week. When she finally did, she hadn't divulged any information. She just made it difficult for him to remain silent. "Someone hacked into the computer system at a company I own in Boston at about the same time my computer was stolen in Close. It's probably a coincidence, but the investigation out East hasn't turned up anything, so...."

Harley pulled a note pad out of his back pocket and took notes as Alex revealed the details of his attack he'd left out before. Evidence his attackers knew him sounded flimsy and paranoid when recounted to the sheriff, but as Skye had pointed out, the party responsible for hacking into the computer system in Boston could live anywhere. Even in Close.

When he finished, Alex promised Skye would send Harley the phone numbers needed to coordinate his investigation with Boston. "Mrs. Devries should be coming in any time now."

Harley stood, still looking over his notes. "I'll get back to you if we turn up anything. Skye was right to ask you to tell me about this. Information that seems unimportant to the layman can prove useful in a professional investigation."

Alex bit back a sarcastic remark. He was not in a particularly good mood now he was fully awake. The sheriff's department hadn't solved the crime of his mother's murder even with an eye witness. Alex had no faith they would figure out who attacked him in a corn field on a rainy June night.

When Harley left, Alex stumbled into his bedroom. Lorraine had been there, he realized suddenly. He could smell her perfume in the room. Had she followed him here after he'd ordered her to leave?

His head began to pound when he remembered how vertigo gripped him the night before. Lorraine had stood with her back to the kitchen window, yelling at him. Suddenly, she'd stepped aside and he found himself staring into the glass, turned mirror against the black of night.

His eyes refused to focus on the image of his own face. The room spun, his stomach with it, and blinding pain threatened to tear his head apart. He'd ordered her from the house, and tried to make a dignified exit.

Now, blankets, sheets, and pillows lay in a tangle on the floor. He couldn't remember making his way to the bedroom.

A noise from the front room startled him. Skye?

Alex wanted her to be there.

He would e -- mail friends in San Francisco and ask them to send faxes. It would give him an excuse to walk to the machine behind her desk and smell her hair. She would have him blissfully daydreaming his morning away, Lorraine and Iowa Glass forgotten.

When Skye was here, the gloom that had surrounded him for so long lifted. When Lorraine arrived last night, she brought the gloom with her. Alex had wanted to slip out the back door rather than face her when he saw her storm down the hill toward the house. This morning a trip to almost anywhere was preferable to staying in the same state with her.

No, he would stay until he'd disposed of Iowa Glass. No matter how much

he might enjoy seeing Close turned into a ghost town, that happy result no longer appeared to be the prudent choice. With money problems at Technolites, making the prudent choice had become vital. He needed cash to keep the medical research going and couldn't afford a hasty decision.

That meant staying in Close a while longer. If his accountants determined that closing Iowa Glass wasn't the most financially rewarding option, he might have to stay even longer. To improve conditions at Iowa Glass, he would have to figure out what had gone wrong in the first place. A more complicated proposition might require leaving the house, visiting the factory, or even going to Bettencourt's house. Such a degree of personal involvement was beyond him today.

He looked out the window to study the ruins of his mother's garden. Anger pulled him to his feet. When he reached the open French doors, he swayed on legs left unsteady by too little sleep. His arm brushed the wall as he reached for support. He cringed when the glass shattered, his shoulder muscles pulling painfully tight. He looked at the broken picture frame on the floor and into the eyes of his mother.

He couldn't have been more than nine when he took the picture. Aletta's raven black hair driven by a stiff spring breeze off the Ionian Sea partially obscured her face, but he had captured one fiery brown eye and a full-lipped smile. She stood on the grounds of their villa in Sicily pointing to something far out to sea.

For a moment he felt the breeze, smelled the salt air. Most of all, he heard his mother singing. Aletta's voice could fill every inch of La Scala, and her call to supper reach her son in the farthest orange grove in Sicily.

Alex stepped around the broken glass and reentered the garden. He would find someone to put things right. Sheldon would know who could restore the garden. Alex bent to pull a dandelion from the stone walk. His mother's garden wasn't the only thing he would put right before leaving town. He would prove Miles Bettencourt killed his mother, and he wouldn't leave town until he did.

* * * *

THREE WEEKS AFTER becoming Alex's assistant, Skye entered her place of business with trepidation. She expected to be fired.

The night before Lorraine had grilled her, as usual, about what her stepbrother was doing to save Iowa Glass from ruin. As usual, Skye told Lorraine she'd worked on the Technolites' problem or answered letters of condolences concerning Alex's friend Tristan. Alex barely looked at the financial records from Iowa Glass before forwarding them to his accountants in New York.

After hearing how Skye had spent her day, Lorraine stormed down the hill to confront her brother. What could Alex think but that Skye had taken the job to spy on him? Lorraine must have mentioned something of the sort, or at least implied it was true.

When Lorraine returned home two hours later, she didn't say a word but went to her room, leaving Skye to wonder and worry. What would Alex think her part was in all this?

This morning she let herself in through the kitchen door and glanced at the clock. She would have the house to herself for a half hour before Alex walked through the back patio doors, dripping wet. Without an excuse to stand on the second floor balcony, she couldn't watch him strip for his daily swim. She told herself she didn't position her chair to get a good view of his bare chest when he walked through the patio door, but she'd never been a good liar.

An open box lay on its side next to Alex's desk. He usually kept the office free of clutter. She crossed the room, her tennis shoes squeaking on the marble floor. The box was full of coffee-table art books. She opened one and read the inscription. To Bethy with bunches of love, Alex.

A slamming door startled her and she looked up to find Alex scowling at her, two more boxes balanced in his arms.

"You're early," he said, his voice flat. He dumped his load on the desk. Half the contents ended up on the floor.

"I can always leave, and come back later, Mr. Jackson." She braced for a sarcastic remark.

Alex didn't disappoint her. "Did you find what you're looking for?"

Skye blushed at the implication she'd been snooping, but didn't reply. She doubted he would be receptive to protests of innocence this morning. Instead, she stacked books on his desk.

For the past week, she had returned his friends' queries with the reassuring words Alex had arrived safely in Iowa and was feeling fine. Now, she wasn't certain she'd told the truth.

Black stubble covered his face. Until today, he'd always shaved before his morning swim. He usually kept the kitchen immaculately clean; this morning she'd tripped over an empty pizza box.

Alex took a hammer and nail from one of the boxes and attacked the nearest wall.

She winced when he carelessly banged a nail into the wood paneling. She'd threatened to put Dirk on restriction for a month if he so much as scuffed it. "What are you doing?"

"Making things homey," he snarled. He hung a framed, ten by twelve photograph. He didn't seem to notice the picture leaned to one side by several degrees.

While she straightened it, he sat on the floor in front of his desk. None of the three people in the picture bore the slightest resemblance to Alex. "Is this you?"

Alex didn't look up. "I'm the fat one down front."

"Really?" She laughed, relieved to see his first smile of the day.

"You shouldn't make fun. I was cursed with low metabolism and a love of Italian pastry. If I'd stayed in Boston, I'd still look like that."

Skye ran her finger around the cheap frame while she examined the photograph. A boy and a girl posed behind Alex. Both looked a couple of years older than him. The playful way they stood struck Skye as protective. The girl rested her hand on Alex' head as if she'd just mussed his hair, which hung over his shoulders.

"Did you go to school in Boston?"

"The boarding school was an hour outside of town. Beth was from Boston. We had dinner at her cousins' house most Sundays. The boy is Tristan. We all went to prep school together, and then to Yale a year after that picture was taken."

Talk of school brought Skye's thoughts back to Dirk. If he didn't start taking school seriously, he'd never make it to college. Heck, if he didn't straighten out his act at home, he'd never make it through the summer. She didn't realize she'd sighed until Alex looked up.

He appeared genuinely concerned when he stopped what he was doing to look at her. "What's wrong?"

"Dirk."

"What's wrong with Dirk, besides an interfering stepmother who insists he spend an entire week out of his carefree summer at music camp?"

The smirk on Alex's face was too infuriating. Lorraine was right. He was too self-absorbed to take anyone else's problems seriously. "If you think handling a teenage male is easy, you've forgotten what it's like to be one. Dirk makes the problems at Iowa Glass look like -- "

"If you find handling your son so much work, why don't we trade?"

Skye could only gape. What was the man talking about?

"You handle my stepsister, and I'll see to your stepson. I can't have you worrying about Dirk on company time."

No doubt Alex considered the trade a fair deal, which meant he hadn't the experience with young people she had. It might be interesting to see how he handled the problems of a restless adolescent through a long, hot summer. Amusing even, as long as she kept a close eye on them. Dirk could use a good male role model. Skye just wasn't certain that Alex fit the bill.

She thrust out her hand and he leaned forward from his place on the

floor to take it. "You have a deal, Mr. Jackson."

Stubbornly remaining on the floor, he pulled her toward him. Instead of shaking her hand, he lifted it to his mouth. He closed his eyes when he turned her hand and pressed his lips against her palm. The stubble on his face sent shivers careening down her back and her arm began to shake.

Abruptly, he dropped her hand and asked her to pass him the Scotch tape.

She had to hold the dispenser with both hands to keep the tape steady. He took it from her without looking up, his shoulders heaving as if with a sigh. Looking down on him, she had an almost overpowering urge to stroke his hair.

He kept his eyes carefully focused on his job when he spoke again. "What's the problem with Dirk?"

Skye took a deep breath. Could she trust her voice to come out in something other than an undignified squeak? She'd almost forgotten the fight she'd had with her son this morning. "Today's problem is pierced ears. Dirk's right ear, to be exact. It's red and swollen, and he won't let me near it."

Alex looked up again. "Some peroxide should fix that up. I'll let you know if he needs an antibiotic. Do you want me to give him the safety lecture that goes with tattoos after I deliver the one on the dangers of body piercing?"

"Tattoos?" Skye gasped.

"It's been several years, but I believe tattoos still follow getting your ears pierced." From his place on the floor, Alex grabbed another box to search. "After instructions on how to avoid hepatitis and HIV from dirty needles, I'll advise against permanently imbedding someone's name on his body until he's at least twenty-one. How does that sound?"

"Dirk wouldn't get a tattoo. He's only fourteen -- "

"I think you underestimate the boy's ingenuity. He's fourteen and out of your control before you know it. Besides, growing up these days is more dangerous than when you were young. But then, I can see by your virgin ear lobes you were always a cautious young lady."

Skye tugged on her ear. Lorraine had tried to talk her into having her ears done a dozen times. Skye had always backed out.

"So, when did you get a tattoo?" she asked, to turn the attention away from her ears. "And where are you hiding it?" Skye blushed more furiously when she realized what she'd asked. She'd seen the man almost naked every morning when he came to work wearing nothing but shorts and a towel. Few places remained unrevealed.

"I got a tattoo when I was twelve."

Seeing him smile was almost worth her embarrassment. He'd evidently forgotten whatever had been bothering him.

She wanted to continue his cheerful mood. "That was a busy year for you. First a tattoo, then taking up smoking -- "

"I lied. I started smoking when I was eight. But twelve is a particularly difficult time to make rational decisions. The least I can do is share my sage advice with Dirk. The chest, for instance, is a good place for a tattoo. You can wear sleeveless shirts in the summer, and unlike some boys from Iowa, you can sit down after you've had your indiscretions removed." Alex gave an exaggerated wince as he rubbed his backside.

"Oh, dear," was all Skye could think to say about such intimate information -- a tattoo on his right hip. She didn't know if he'd been the most brave or the most foolish twelve-year-old she'd ever heard of. Then she remembered he'd turned twelve the year his mother died. The year he ran away. Skye circled his desk and joined him on the floor.

She took the tape dispenser from him and tore off a piece while he unrolled a banner he'd taken from the box. When she moved closer to help, their knees met and the heat from his body radiated through her. This time she didn't pull away. "What would you suggest I do to keep Dirk out of trouble this summer?"

"Well, don't send him to music camp. He doesn't want to go, you know."

Skye scooted to put a foot a space between them. How could Dirk not want to go? Music camp in Bemidji was the only place she'd stayed overnight since coming to town, the only place she'd felt safe outside of Close. Each summer during high school, she'd spent one glorious week in Minnesota doing nothing but play her saxophone. "He didn't complain when I sent in the money, and it's too late to get it back now. Besides, it's educational, and will get him out of town, and out of my hair, for a week."

Alex closed the gap between them and placed his hand on her knee. "I agree he should get away with kids his own age. In case you haven't noticed, your son doesn't have appropriate friends in Close."

She pushed his hand away, not caring if she offended him, not caring if he fired her. Alex was calling her a bad mother, and the sinking feeling in her stomach told her he was right. "He and David -- " she managed to choke out.

"David is older -- "

"By four years."

Alex took her hand again. This time he didn't let go when she pulled away. Skye rapidly blinked to check the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. When he raised her chin with his forefinger, she tried not to look at him but he ducked his head, forcing her to meet his gaze. Instantly, she became lost in his bottomless, brown eyes.

When the moment lengthened, they straightened, sitting more stiffly. Alex looked away first, but continued to hold her hand. "If you'd let me finish, most of David's friends are out of school and in their twenties. They drop by to shoot baskets here on weekends. They drink and I've smelled smoke on their clothes, and I don't mean smoke from regular cigarettes. They also talk about women in a way Dirk is too young for. Besides, twenty-year-old males can seem intimidating to a teenager whose voice hasn't changed yet. The urge to imitate their actions can be quite overwhelming. He could get led into something he can't handle."

Totally out of her element, Skye could only nod dumbly. Dirk was going to be a young man soon and she had no idea how to help him make all those decisions he would face during the next few years. Dating? Women? What could she tell her son? She had never really dated, never slept with a man other than Ben, and had never wanted to.

Until now.

Alex started to unroll his banner again. "How about if I find another camp for Dirk? One just as educational, but more in line with his interests."

"But the money -- "

He took the cut pieces of tape from between her fingers. "I'll get you a refund from music camp and make up any difference. How's that?"

"There's no way they'll refund my money this late in -- "

He reached across her legs to get tape from the dispenser and her mouth went dry.

"If I get your money back, can Dirk go to another camp?"

Skye shrugged her agreement. She didn't trust herself to speak.

He looked especially earnest while he taped up his sign. "I'll discuss it with Dirk this evening."

When he turned to face her, he looked innocent again, like the first time they met, and she knew she could trust him with Dirk.

"It's a deal, Mr. Jackson, but there are two sides to this. How can I help you with your sister? Her ear lobes are fine, and she's not unhappy with her summer plans."

Alex no longer looked quite so innocent. "I haven't decided how you can best return the favor, Mrs. Devries. Let's leave it open for now, shall we?"

Great, not only could Alex fire her and Lorraine throw her and Dirk out onto the street, but now she owed them both favors. With her luck they'd ask for something mutually exclusive and she'd be up a creek.

Skye sat studying her shoes while she contemplated her uncomfortable

position.

Alex leaned back on his hands, surveying his work. To the front of his desk, he'd taped a crudely lettered sign -- COMFORT CARE ONLY with the word "ONLY" crossed out in red.

"What's this?"

He delayed answering for so long Skye decided he wasn't going to say anything. She got on her knees and gathered the books he'd dropped.

When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and flat. "It's a phrase they use in hospitals for people who have living wills. It means they don't want the hospital staff to resuscitate them."

Was he ready to talk at last? Skye sank to the floor. She could tell by the way he ducked calls from friends, he hadn't dealt with Tristan's death. She'd felt much the same after Ben died. Grandma and Lorraine had forced her to talk. She'd had to be strong for Dirk.

She was tempted to take his hand as he had taken hers, but she didn't dare. His fingers curled into a fist.

"What are you doing with the sign?"

"It's a joke."

She knew he wasn't telling the truth, not the entire truth. For one thing, he wasn't laughing. She reached for the book between them and found his hand already there. * *When his fingers tightened around her hand, she looked into his eyes, still afraid but wanting to offer comfort.

"My friend Tris had a strange sense of humor." Alex hesitated before continuing. "I think he knew this trip to the hospital would be his last. He contracted HIV in the eighties and developed AIDS about four years ago. He didn't tell me right away. Beth was sick at the time."

Skye took the books from him, peeking at the inside covers before returning them to the boxes. They were art books, all inscribed to Beth. "Lorraine told me your wife died of cancer. It must have been very hard to lose...."

Alex returned to his desk, and ran his hand across the top of the banner. "I found the sign in my car after the funeral with the word only crossed off. Maybe Tris set it up before -- "

The phone rang, startling them both. The likely suspects popped into Skye's head. Chuck Cross, Director of Plant Operations, calling to make his pitch for how to expand business at Iowa Glass. Mr. Perkins, acting head of Iowa Glass, demanding Mr. Jackson answer his memos. Even worse, considering last night, Lorraine looking for a blow-by-blow description of her stepbrother's morning.

Alex ignored the ringing and picked up his headphones. To hide in his music again. The lines on his face smoothed as he tapped his foot in time to music she couldn't hear. In less than a minute, he'd lost himself in Puccini.

Reluctant to start her business day, Skye let the phone ring six times before she answered.

Chapter Five

SKYE WATCHED her truck, Alex at the wheel, tear down the road toward the house. She turned and shot another basket.

Alex would think she'd spent the morning playing, but she refused to defend herself. After all, from what she could tell, he spent most of his time playing computer games over the Internet.

This job was getting too crazy. She'd spent the morning taking phone messages and sorting faxes for a man whose unpredictability surpassed any eighth grader she'd ever hauled to the principal's office. And he still hadn't done anything to save Iowa Glass.

Alex parked her ancient truck beside the shiny, red Thunderbird the man from the car dealership had delivered earlier. "Had lunch?"

She took one more shot, hitting the rim. "Not yet."

He caught the ball one handed and bounced it back to her. "Good. I picked up some fast food. Hope you like chicken."

Summer picnics with fried chicken and Ben and Dirk. Skye smiled at the memory. "My favorite. Dirk's favorite too, but he's at David's today."

Alex frowned and preceded her into the house, walking through his office and onto the patio with the bags of food.

Despite her resolve not to feel she had to answer for her decisions, she found herself explaining. "I know you think David is too old for Dirk, but the boys are painting the garage for David's dad. Mr. Ritter came back to town. He plans to sell their house and move the family in with the kids' grandma permanently. Tomorrow, Dirk is helping Lorraine at a dog show in Minneapolis."

Skye had been skeptical when Alex prompted Dirk to offer his services as assistant dog handler. Skye would have never guessed those two could get along. Surprisingly, Lorraine and Dirk were happy with the arrangement.

Alex didn't comment on her explanation of Dirk's activities. He moved two patio chairs to opposite ends of the table, facing the lake, and set out the food. "I ran into Sheldon Seabrook in Newton today."

"And -- " Skye prompted.

"I wanted to warn you. He saw me leaving Doctor Dieleman's office. He'll probably ask you about it next time he drops by."

Skye fought to repress a hopeful thought. Even Lorraine had kept her promise and not told anyone in town her brother was a doctor. Jacob, Mrs. Shutts, and Skye were the only other people in town who knew. Dieleman had been threatening to retire for years. Alex could take over his practice and be close at hand if Phil Perkins needed him at Iowa Glass.

Skye kept her voice neutral. "I don't gossip about your business."

"I know you don't, or I would have fired you before now."

Alex had a way of ending a conversation. Skye waited until they were halfway through lunch before she brought up business. "Philip Perkins called."

Not a flicker of recognition marred Alex's features.

Skye tried again. "Philip Perkins is acting president at Iowa Glass. He wants to know when you'd like to tour the plant."

Stretched out on the wrought iron chair, his sweatshirt sleeves shoved up to his elbows, Alex continued to eat. The muscles in his forearms tightened at the mention of Iowa Glass. "Why should I do that?"

"You haven't set foot in the plant since you got here. It makes people wonder. With so much speculation about what you're going to do with the company -- "

"What are people saying?"

Skye tried to remain calm, but she kept returning to the choices she would have to face if the factory closed and she had to move. No, she wouldn't even consider it. Close was her home. "With business off and so many layoffs the last few years, some people think you might sell or close the plant."

Alex put down his food, throwing his half-eaten meal into an empty bag. "Who do they think I should sell to?"

Skye didn't feel like eating any more either. She had hoped he would see the factory as a potential source of income to help Technolites. The window factory made profits in the past. It just needed someone to take an interest and figure out what had gone wrong.

Obviously, Alex didn't think he was that someone.

"Lorraine," she said, stating the obvious.

"She doesn't have the capital. Besides, considering how she and her father ran the place into the ground -- "

Skye wouldn't let him sidetrack her with another tirade of the Bettencourts' incompetence. "People here are worried. Most depend on the plant for their paycheck, directly or indirectly. You haven't lived here for so long... well, people are afraid you have some secret agenda that doesn't include what's best for the town."

Skye prayed she was mistaken. She had to be right. Alex's jaw didn't tighten every time she mentioned the plant. He wouldn't rather hang old pictures and tape morbid signs to his desk, anything to avoid thinking about

Iowa Glass.

Alex's face flushed under the thick stubble of his one-day beard. "Maybe they should worry. Unless they have awful short memories, they know exactly why I don't care what happens to this place. If I wasn't at loose ends, I would have left the minute Jacob finished reading Bettencourt's will. And you can tell my sister -- as I'm certain she'll ask -- I'm gone as soon as I get my money out of the place."

Skye noted, then ignored, the fearsome ache in her stomach. If only she could make him see it was a good company. The people were loyal and hardworking. She had said the words so many times the past three weeks, but he never listened.

Another tactic might work better. "If you don't respect Lorraine's opinion, is it wise to accept her assessment of the plant? Maybe you can do something to make it more profitable? Chuck Cross has ideas for a new product line. Shouldn't you see for yourself how things are run?"

Skye gathered the remains of her lunch into an empty bag. When Alex stood and bent to take it from her, she caught the telltale scent of smoke in his hair.

He stood with his back to her, his hands bunched into fists around the trash. "Is there some special reason why you want me at the plant? Did Lorraine ask you to get me there?"

Did he think they were all in on some conspiracy against him? Maybe he really was crazy. "No special reason. But you've read the faxes from your accounting firm. They don't believe Perkins is cooperating with their audit. You could gather on-site information to go along with the cold hard facts. Is there some reason why you don't want to see the plant?"

Alex whirled around to face her. His jaw clenched. "No!" The word burst from his mouth with ill-concealed fury.

Instead of stepping back, Skye found herself moving toward him. When he backed away, she extended her hand. How could she tell he was lying? Instinct? It didn't matter. Alex was lying, and because of his lie, she knew how to get him to visit Iowa Glass.

She planted herself firmly in front of him. "Your father died when you were five. There's a plaque at the plant with the date. Perhaps you don't want to see his office, see reminders. Or does it have something to do with Mr. Bettencourt? Was some issue left unresolved between you?"

Alex shook his head, denying her every word, even as he groped the space behind him for support.

"Lorraine said you ran away when you were twelve. That would have been when your mother died, wasn't it? I know she died in an accident. Lorraine told me. But that was before I moved to Close. Did your mother die at the plant?"

Alex backed into a chair and sat, staring at her as if she spouted words too terrible to hear. She almost missed his reply. He whispered, barely moving his lips. "Just shut up."

Suddenly, he was on his feet and Skye knew she'd gone too far. She followed him through the office, through the kitchen, and into the side yard where he threw the empty food containers into the outside can.

You've got yourself fired. Fired, and Alex so angry, he'll get in his fancy rent-a-car, head it East, and keep driving. Why do I always talk so much?

He turned, his plastic smile in place. "I underestimated you, Mrs. Devries. You are suited to life in the business world. Your talents are clearly wasted teaching children."

She stood frozen while his words sank in, then she stomped through the kitchen to her desk. If that's how he felt about her chosen profession, she wasn't going to worry about hurting the feelings of Clayton Alexander Jackson, the Third.

She sensed him behind her. Following. His breath rapid and harsh.

When she realized he wasn't going to fire her on the spot, she began to

shake. She put her hand on the phone to steady it. "Shall I call Mr. Perkins and inform him you do not wish to be disturbed?"

She expected another angry outburst. The smooth facade of Alex's features wavered enough to let her know he kept his feelings buried deep, but they were there.

"No, Mrs. Devries, you're correct. A visit to the plant would be prudent. I can't afford to make rash decisions. Not with the mess at Technolites."

Skye flipped through his empty appointment book. "When would you like to go?"

"Today," he said, surprising her again. "No reason to give too much advanced warning. Meet me out front in an hour."

* * * *

AN HOUR LATER, Skye was driving toward Close in the rented Thunderbird, Alex strapped in beside her and apparently asleep. She felt overdressed in the white linen suit she'd borrowed from Lorraine. And overexposed.

Lorraine was a few inches taller, so the skirt came to a decent length, but the jacket was cut to reveal more cleavage than Skye possessed. She pulled the lapels of the suit jacket together to cover the lacy camisole Lorraine swore was supposed to show.

On the walk down from Lorraine's house, Skye had tried to adjust to the high heels her friend insisted she had to wear. She hadn't worn heels in years. Her ankles ached by the time she teetered down the drive from the Bettencourt place.

After waiting a full two minutes, tapping her foot on the gravel drive, she sensed someone watching her. Alex leaned against the garage door, admiring the view, Lorraine would say. A telltale wisp of smoke curled at his feet, a smoldering cigarette he'd failed to snuff out. He tossed her the car keys, settled into the passenger seat, and closed his eyes.

Alex had evidently spent his hour in the shower. His hair was still damp. He'd shaved, but his dress did not shout competent executive, serious business man.

According to Marvin, Alex had made the trip from San Francisco with a single change of clothing. Marvin had gone through Alex's belongings in the Mustang, "In case something else was missing."

At first, she thought Alex bought his clothes when he was in Des Moines. When the bills started coming from a company in Texas, it became clear Mr. Jackson used a buyer to handle his wardrobe. Searching faxes he'd sent, she found one that stated he was spending the summer in Iowa, would dress informally, and had lost ten pounds.

Today, he wore black jeans, a baggy white sweater, and white sneakers. Despite the heat, he wore his leather flight jacket.

When she pulled into Mr. Bettencourt's old parking spot in front of the administration building, she expected to see Mr. Perkins pacing the floor of the glass entrance to the administrative offices. Instead Chuck Cross waited outside the door.

Chuck pulled her out of earshot before he whispered, "How's the madman today?"

Skye hid her smile and ignored the question while she waited for Alex to get out. Lorraine must have talked Chuck's ear off the last few weeks, complaining about her impossible brother.

Hand extended in greeting, Chuck circled the car. "Hello, Mr. Jackson. I'm Chuck Cross, Director of Plant Operations. Nice to finally meet you."

When the two men shook hands, Skye sighed with relief. What had she, and Chuck, expected Alex to do? Despite some slightly erratic behavior, he was perfectly sane. Lorraine's predictions of doom and gloom had led everyone to expect the worst.

Chuck ushered them into the air-conditioned lobby. "Mr. Perkins sends his apologies. He's dealing with an emergency in personnel. He'll join us later."

Skye followed Chuck toward the familiar display of mirrors and windows. She, along with every other student in Close, had taken the tour starting in kindergarten. The items dated back to the first windows produced by Alex's great-grandfather. Alex stood frozen in front of the display.

An odd sensation struck Skye. Alex didn't see what she saw in the fractured images in the mirrors. She saw herself teetering on too-high heels between two handsome men. What Alex saw made him turn away and rub his temples as if in pain.

He walked toward the main door to the factory. "Let's see the plant first, shall we?"

"Whatever you want, Mr. Jackson," Chuck replied.

Skye admired how her old classmate handled a visit from the new owner. Always unpretentious, Chuck hadn't let his promotions, starting from night janitor and ending with Director of Operations, change him. He dressed much like Alex, in jeans and a white shirt. She imagined someone had lent him the tie.

More wiry than Alex, Chuck still turned heads with his light brown hair and Paul-Newman-blue eyes. Even in high school he'd had eyes only for Lorraine. She never acknowledged his existence until two years ago when her father became too ill to visit the plant, and she came to keep an eye on things for him.

Skye had always loved Iowa Glass, starting with visits to the plant during summer vacations when she was a girl. Mr. Bettencourt and Lorraine invited her to lunch on the picnic benches that lined the lake behind the plant. Years later, she and Ben shared the lunch her grandmother packed, and they watched Dirk play hide-and-seek with squirrels. After Ben returned to work in the accounting department, she and Dirk would sit in a corner of the factory, fascinated by the rhythmic sound of saws cutting the wooden frames.

Fluffs of sawdust stuck to her in the summer heat, then and now. Then she'd slapped at her jeans to remove the dust before she got home. Now, she stood beside Alex, sweating in Lorraine's expensive suit.

Before they'd reached the glazing stations, Alex sneezed. His scowl let her know she was wrong. Whatever he feared, whatever he wished to avoid, was not at Iowa Glass. Alex was just plain annoyed.

Chuck obviously got the same message. "Mr. Jackson, I'm going to check with personnel and see what's keeping Mr. Perkins."

After Chuck left, Alex walked to the nearest exit and opened the door. He leaned against the door frame, a breeze ruffling his hair, which he'd tied back from his face. The fresh air didn't seem to improve his disposition, neither did the view of the picnic grounds.

"Maybe Mr. Perkins is in his office," he said.

Skye started to say she would call and check, but decided Alex wanted to be alone. With a nod she hurried away, weaving through the workstations toward the administration wing.

This visit was not turning out the way she'd planned. Whatever was keeping Phil Perkins had better be a matter of life or death.

* * * *

ALEX WATCHED SKYE hurry from the room, her image distorted through layers of glass. Her white suit fractured as she rounded the turn and bounded up the stairs. Hundreds of Skyes ran from him.

He turned to stare at the frenzy before him. Even the whine of the buzz saws couldn't distract him from his growing anger. Where the hell was Perkins?

Alex thought he had controlled his temper rather well until now. After being nagged for days to visit the plant, he showed up only to receive the tourist tour from the number two man. The president couldn't be bothered to break away for a hand shake. Lorraine had given his blood pressure enough of a workout last night, and the mirrors in the front lobby had given him a headache.

Mirrors always had that effect on him. He rubbed his forehead when the remembered disorientation returned. Pivoting away, he faced the outdoors,

peaceful compared to the dusty commotion inside. No wonder he didn't remember coming here. His mother would never have risked her voice in this place, too many contaminants.

He could barely picture her in Close let alone in the window factory. She had always seemed so out of place in Iowa, awkward, so unlike her commanding presence on stage. When he closed his eyes, he saw her again -- white makeup, dramatic red cheeks, stylized wig covering her raven hair. On stage at La Scala, she wore a kaleidoscope of colors. To her son and to millions of opera lovers, Aletta Casale would always be Madame Butterfly.

As for Alex's father, he had died when Alex was five. He couldn't remember the man whose name he carried. Skye was wrong about Iowa Glass. Nothing had happened here to frighten him. He sneezed again. Would Skye believe him if he said he was allergic to the place? Something in the factory had his respiratory system irritated. He was wheezing.

Alex didn't notice the commotion behind him at first. When he heard Skye's name, he snapped to attention.

The urgency in the men's voices sent dread coursing through him. Alex took by the shoulders the man who seemed to know what was going on. "Start over. Slowly, this time."

"Tom's got a gun. He says he's going to shoot somebody."

"Who's Tom?"

"Tom Ritter. He used to work here. Perkins laid him off last year and his wife died a while back."

Feeling ice water and dread seep into his bones, Alex stepped back. The name sounded dreadfully familiar. "He has some kids -- "

"Yah," the man replied. "His oldest is David, and he has a couple of girls."

The hypnotic hum of the saws grew threatening. Dirk and David were painting Mr. Ritter's garage. Alex's mouth went dry. "Where is Ritter now?"

"In Mr. Perkin's office."

His heart thudding in his chest, Alex knew Skye was in danger. And he had put her there.

He should have paid attention to business instead of hiding. He knew things like this could happen. He knew losing a job could drive a man to desperate acts, knew first hand the devastation of losing a loved-one.

"Call 9-1-1. I'm going up." Alex shook off the hand of someone who tried to hold him. Iowa Glass was his company, just as it had been his father's. If someone was going to get shot around here, it was going to be a Jackson.

Me, please, he prayed. _Not Skye. Not Dirk. Please, not Skye._

* * * *

HIS CHILDREN AND Dirk were home and unharmed. The madness in Tom Ritter's eyes when he told her tempered the relief Skye felt. Tom leveled the gun and pointed it at her head.

Since Skye last saw him at his wife's funeral, Tom had aged. His hair and beard were shot through with gray, his faded jeans and plaid shirt splattered with white paint.

Mr. Perkins and his secretary, Mrs. Fuller, stood behind the desk, silhouetted against the windows, which gave the president of Iowa Glass a landlord's view of Close.

Skye followed the gunman's orders and walked slowly backward. When she stumbled into the wall, it felt cool against her back. Her feet continued to move as if she could somehow force the office to expand and increase the distance between her and the gun, which wavered between her head and Mr. Perkins.

She stood a few feet from the open door, which led to the hallway. Office smells, well-polished mahogany and fresh-brewed coffee, ruled here. She could only imagine the scent of sawdust downstairs, and wondered if Alex would hear the shot that killed her.

When the gun swung in his direction, Mr. Perkins began to babble.

"I'm...I'm not responsible. It wasn't me. Mr. Jackson owns the company. Talk to him."

Now, Skye was grateful Alex hadn't come to Perkins' office. Tom was in no shape to remember he'd received his pink-slip almost a year before Alex arrived in Close.

"It wasn't me -- " Perkins' pleadings ended the same moment a sharp concussion jarred the room.

Skye screamed, dropping to a crouch.

The following silence more than the harsh bark of the revolver threatened Skye's control. God, Tom had really done it. He'd fired the gun. She waited, eyes closed, while Mrs. Fuller screamed.

"Shut up," Tom ordered. He looked as stunned as the rest of them to see Mr. Perkins on the floor. The acting president of Iowa Glass didn't move. An expanding circle of red radiated from his left shirt pocket.

Skye glanced out the door and into the hallway. Chuck stood near the threshold. His eyebrows rose and he took a step forward. She motioned him to stay put. Perkins appeared beyond medical help, and Tom had only two people to point his gun at now. No reason to give him more targets.

"Shut up!" Tom yelled and fired his gun into the air.

Skye flinched, then wondered if anyone had thought to clear the floor above.

The warning shot did not have the desired effect. The secretary's wails rose several decibels as she cradled Mr. Perkins lifeless head in her lap. "You've killed him, you've killed him."

With Tom's attention centered on the two behind the desk, Skye inched toward the open door. Chuck Cross never looked as good as he did now. He crouched out of sight, peeking through an office blind to keep an eye on Tom while he motioned her toward the door.

Skye jumped, then screamed before she identified the sound. Another gun shot. She froze mid-step.

This time the bullet broke the window behind Perkins' desk and sent a shower of glass over his body.

"Shut up," Tom demanded again.

This time Mrs. Fuller did as she was told. Then the woman stood.

Skye sidestepped toward Chuck.

The fifty-something secretary, her yellow linen suit covered with blood and broken glass, faced her boss's murderer with calm fury. "You've killed my Philip."

Tom looked stunned by this turn, prepared for fear and cowering, not for anger.

Skye froze, this time less than a foot from the open door. How could she leave this brave woman alone? No more than five-feet tall with gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses, she faced the gunman.

Tom traced a wild circle in the air with his gun. "You sit down, lady. Sit down and shut up, or I'm going to shoot you, too. I swear I will."

Before Skye could think what to do, Alex stumbled through the door.

Mrs. Fuller pointed a finger at Alex. "Mr. Jackson's the one. He's the one you want. Not my Philip."

Recognition dawned slowly in Tom's eyes. Skye could almost see him make the connection between the photograph the Close Chronicle had printed of the new owner of Iowa Glass and Alex's pale, unsmiling face.

When Skye gasped, Alex half-turned toward her at the sound. What was the idiot trying to do? Get himself killed?

"It's you!" Tom yelled.

"I'm the new owner of Iowa Glass," Alex said. "If you have a complaint, I suggest you take it up with me." * *He took a step toward the desk, as if to come between Mrs. Fuller and the gunman.

Tom pivoted on his heel. To Skye the motion seemed to take forever to complete. He turned from the secretary, and swung the gun in a slow, dipping arc toward Alex.

Alex shifted his weight. Balanced on the balls of his feet, he prepared to.... Prepared to do what? Tom wasn't armed with a knife. Alex couldn't jump out of the way as he had with his attackers on the road.

The outcome of what would happen in a few seconds came to her in a flash of certainty. She didn't wait for Tom to finish his turn. She didn't wait for him to steady the gun on Alex's middle. Before Tom could complete those few simple acts, she threw herself at Alex's back.

While they fell, another shot rocked the room, this one fired so close Skye's ears rang.

Alex lay still beneath her. For one panicked moment she feared Tom had shot him. The thought sent such a shock of pain through her, she wept. Then, her head resting against his back, she heard the beat of his heart and felt the reassuring rise and fall of his warm body.

Tom had missed. Alex was alive. Her tears fell faster as she pressed herself against him.

He pushed himself up on his hands and knees, and grunted when she shoved his head back to the floor and refused to give up her place on top of him. Someone else could play hero today. She couldn't stop her tears from falling on his back or her fists from pounding to keep him safe beneath her.

At the sound of scuffling on her right, she raised her head and watched Chuck and Tom wrestle for control of the gun. Seconds later, Chuck sent the weapon skidding out of reach.

Skye slid off Alex's back and they both watched Mrs. Fuller pick up the weapon.

All motion stopped at the sound of sirens. Now everything was under control, help had arrived. Sheriff Rossendahl and every police car in the county from the sound of it. The screech of tires on the gravel drive, sirens dying, doors slamming -- reassuring sounds came through the broken window.

Even Tom looked relieved. He sat slumped on the floor next to Chuck. Chuck secured Tom's hands behind his back with his belt. Skye let Alex go, and he crawled toward Mr. Perkins.

Before Alex could cover half the distance, Mrs. Fuller stopped him.

"Don't you come any closer." The woman shook as she cried, her hands holding the gun steady -- and trained straight at Alex's heart.

Alex stopped as ordered and sat on the floor. He pressed a palm to his forehead, blood oozing between his fingers.

Skye took a deep breath. She could reason with the woman. Mrs. Fuller was just confused. "Everything's fine. Mr. Ritter isn't going anywhere. The police are here. Don't you hear the sirens? Why don't you let Mr. Cross check on Mr. Perkins? You remember Chuck."

Slowly, Skye stood and took a step toward Mrs. Fuller.

"Phil's dead," Mrs. Fuller said in a flat monotone.

Skye saw Chuck to her right, his hands raised halfway over his head. Circling behind Skye and Alex, Chuck left Tom alone on the floor.

Chuck tried to calm the shaken secretary. "I'm a trained paramedic, Mrs. Fuller. Maybe Mr. Perkins isn't as bad off as you think. Let me have a look at him."

Mrs. Fuller shook her head and tightened her grip on the gun. When she trained the gun first on him, then on Tom, Chuck stopped inching forward. When she turned toward Alex again, Mrs. Fuller no longer aimed for his chest, but his head.

Skye didn't know where she got the strength. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gathered the nerve to leave town. Years ago. Now, she took another step forward, toward the woman holding a gun.

"Mrs. Fuller, listen to me. I know you're upset, but this isn't Mr. Jackson's fault. You have to put the gun down before someone else gets hurt. Please -- "

The sound of booted feet on the stairs interrupted her. Mrs. Fuller lowered the gun a few inches and glanced at the open door. Skye held her breath.

Both women saw Sheriff Rossendahl, his bulletproof vest over his uniform, his revolver drawn. Bad luck and poor timing put Chuck Cross between the sheriff and Mrs. Fuller.

Skye shouted a warning, sending Chuck crashing to the floor.

During the second it took Chuck to fall, Mrs. Fuller took aim at her target and fired.

Chapter Six

THE SOUND OF TWO shots reverberated through the room, but Skye focused on Alex's body. Somehow she had managed to land on top of him again. This time he lay sprawled on his back.

His right hand cupped her bottom, pushing her toward his head. His other arm circled her back and held her firmly against his chest. Her eyes closed, she concentrated on his ragged breath, which warmed her neck.* * His silky hair felt cool against her cheek. For a moment she forgot they weren't alone in the room.

His lips opened on her neck. He couldn't be kissing her, not here, not now. He pulled her closer, his mouth moving to the point of her jaw, while his fingers tangled in her hair. Then he did the most amazing thing. He laughed, too softly for anyone else to hear.

"What are you doing?" he asked. His arms felt strong and steady. He sat up, carrying her with him, and cradled her in his lap.

She was dimly aware she would feel embarrassed eventually. For now she buried her face in his chest and clung to him, her hands clasped firmly behind his neck. "I'm saving your life." Her voice sounded as breathless as she felt.

"A good job you've done of it too, but we're out of danger."

Before she fully understood his words, she began to shake. His body tensed beneath hers when she began to cry, soaking his sweater.

"Skye, you're safe now, truly. Everything's going to be fine." Slowly, he pried her hands from his neck. His fingers stroked her arms, then caressed her face.

She was too close and her tears continued to flow. His face blurred when she looked at him. One thing she could see clearly in his eyes, concern, and something more. Before she could puzzle it out, he kissed her again, this time on the mouth. So brief, so feather light, she might have imagined it, but her lips burned.

At the sound of breaking glass, Alex jerked his head. One of Harley's deputies pushed out what remained of the broken office window.

Skye became aware of other noises around them, and other people. For a few moments more, she wanted to ignore them. "You're all right?"

His deep brown eyes asked her the same question. He shrugged and murmured, "I seem to be in one piece."

He wasn't in one piece. Blood flowed from a cut over his eye and he looked pale, almost gray. She started to shake again. Of their own volition, her hands circled his neck.

He slipped off his leather jacket and draped it over her shoulders

Gently, Alex removed her arms from his neck again, and put enough distance between them to bring his face into focus. "Skye? You're suffering from mild shock, but you're going to be fine. Stay here for a minute. I have to see to the others."

Alex started to stand.

Chuck Cross interrupted. "You don't have to see to anything."

Blood stained Chuck's white shirt and borrowed tie. With a hand on Alex's shoulder, Chuck returned him to the floor. "Perkins and Ritter are dead. Mrs. Fuller has a minor flesh wound. She's on her way to the hospital. There's another stretcher on the way up with your name on it."

"That's not necessary. I'll just go see -- "

"No." Skye and Chuck said together.

Alex looked at them with an odd mix of consternation and relief. "I just clipped my head with the corner of the desk."

"You could have a concussion." Chuck stood, one hand on Alex's shoulder.

"All right. I'll go to the damned hospital."

Satisfied, Chuck left to speak to the Sheriff.

Suddenly Skye remembered why she couldn't stay. "Dirk!" Her son's name flew from her mouth before she jumped to her feet. She had only a madman's word her son was safe. She ran to the door.

Two arms tightly clasped her waist to keep her from leaving. Alex's voice, calm and warm filled her head. "You can't go alone, Skye."

She wanted to fight him, would have fought him, but at that moment his hands began to shake. The enormity of the carnage at their backs hit her full force. Two people dead.

It could have been her. It could have been Alex. She tried to block the image from her mind -- Alex lying dead on the floor.

She steadied his trembling hands with her own, and wrapped his arms more firmly around her, no longer willing to take a step without him. She rested her head against his chest.

Chuck stepped in front of her, one of the sheriff's deputies in tow. "I guess I'm not going to get my patient to cooperate until I get you out of here, Skye. Harley already had someone check out the Ritter place. Dirk is fine. The deputy here will take you to get him."

By the time she sat in the deputy's squad car, she was shaking again. Without Alex's arms around her, the June air felt cold. She hugged his jacket closer and slipped her arms into the sleeves.

* * * *

ALEX TUGGED AT HIS shirt collar, uncomfortably aware he hadn't changed out of his business suit. The Fourth of July wasn't until next week, but the air felt like August. He didn't want to admit he was too anxious about seeing Skye to take time to change.

Chet Dickson from Technolites had tracked him down at the hospital before the stitches in his forehead had stopped stinging. His panicked phone call provided an excuse to be in Boston while the people of Close buried Mr. Perkins and Mr. Ritter, but the more Chet insisted Alex stay, the more restless he became. Four days into his two week visit, Alex flew to Des Moines and rented a car to drive to Close.

Not willing to admit how desperately he needed to see her, he had stopped at the auto repair shop on the way home. Marvin bent his ear for what seemed like hours with stories about how hot it was the summer of '68. By the time Alex left, without his car, he still didn't believe this hot spell was normal.

Five days without Skye. God, he'd come close to losing her. He opened the doors to the patio and settled into his office chair to wait.

Her death would have been his fault, no question, but guilt and responsibility were not the same as love, or foundations for a lasting relationship. Of course, he wasn't looking for one.

Through the open doors, the sad, mellow sound of Skye's soprano sax reverberated across the lake and returned to him after meeting the wall of trees on the other side. Her style of jazz reminded him of Paris with Beth.

Sidewalk cafes, paintings lining the streets, all night talks, all day fights. Passion, drive, desire.

All of those words described Beth. Their marriage had not been about love, family, or commitment, but a bargain. Beth had done her part. For two blissful, exhilarating, painful, and terrifying months, she had been his wife. Now Alex must fulfill his obligation to her.

He had thought time would make the task easier, but waiting for Tristan to die had only made things worse. Now he must truly and finally lay his two friends to rest.

The decision being made, he felt almost lighthearted. Once he disposed of Iowa Glass and settled Beth and Tris's affairs in Europe, he could start over. He had built a new life for himself when he was fourteen. He could do so

again. Skye at his side could make the task more pleasant, maybe even meaningful.

She was proving to be something of a surprise. Jacob had described her as timid to the point of fearful about leaving Close. Alex would have agreed with him, but not after seeing her in action. Skye Devries was no coward. She had clearly been frightened, but she risked her life to save his.

After the last saxophone wail reverberated over the lake, he watched her emerge from the blind of weeds, which surrounded the pond. Alex remained out of sight in his shadowy office.

Obviously, she knew how to handle the heat. She'd taken a dip in the lake. When she stepped onto the patio, Alex smiled, something he hadn't done in days. Her small, firm breasts needed no support. Nipples, erect and brown, showed through her wet tee-top. Her cutoff jeans exposed most of her thighs. If he realized he had this to look forward to, he would have returned sooner.

Skye bent to return her instrument to its case, and thoughts of guns and wills and profit statements vanished. He stared at the smooth curve of her buttocks. * *His mouth twitched at the thought of brushing his fingers against her lean thighs and nipping at her taut breasts through the tightly stretched cotton. How many months had passed since he'd slid his hands across such tempting curves?

The answer came with a corresponding tightening of his groin. Since before Beth's death almost four years ago, he'd had nothing past a few dates arranged by friends, which ended with chaste, closed-mouthed kisses on doorsteps.

Alex stayed in the shadows while Skye opened the patio doors and walked through his office. She stroked the arm of his chair and continued to the kitchen. A towel draped her neck when she returned, guzzling mineral water.

"Taking a long lunch, Mrs. Devries?"

To her credit, she didn't flinch, but acted as if she'd known he was there all along. "A lot shorter than your lunch, Mr. Jackson. It has been five days. How is your head?"

"My head is fine. No permanent damage that I can tell. You may think differently."

Alex waited for Skye's come back -- a snappy retort to his black humor. She couldn't even manage a smile, but sat at her desk with her hands in her lap.

No matter how dark her mood, Skye always returned from her trips to the lake feeling better than when she left. Perhaps, the intrepid Mrs. Devries was not as indestructible as he believed.

Maybe he should stick to business until he knew what was going on with her. Alex sat at his desk. "How is my lawyer doing? Michael something?"

"I put him in the south bedroom upstairs. At the moment he's at the plant. He's using Mr. Perkins' office."

"Really? I thought he would want to keep a low profile. Snoop around, see what he could learn."

"I don't believe Mr. Atly is the type to snoop, and he could hardly maintain a low profile in Close. If that was the intent of your lawyers' firm, they sent the wrong man."

"What's the matter with him? Don't you like him?"

"Oh, I like him." Skye smiled. A weak smile, a weary smile, but a smile.

Alex stretched his arms over his head and reseated his heels higher on his desk. Skye looked like a school girl -- an innocent, trusting school girl. Her short blond hair lightened every day she spent in the sun, her eyes such a pale shade of brown they looked golden. Gold eyes, gold skin.

School girls were a species Alex had no experience with, at least not the innocent, trusting type. By the time he'd enrolled in a real school, his time on the streets had left him unable to appreciate such traits. Now, he found such a woman puzzling, and irresistibly attractive.

"I like him very much," Skye repeated.

Alex had no idea what she was talking about. He'd been too busy trying to decide if she was wearing lipstick or if her lips were naturally that shade of dusty rose. "Who do you like?"

Skye threw him an impatient look. "Michael Atly, the man your law firm sent. He's six-foot three, built like a linebacker, and the only black man in town."

"Does his being black bother you?" he asked, trying to puzzle out what she was talking about.

"No, but he can hardly escape notice or pass as someone's brother or cousin straightening out your records as a summer job."

"Let's get back to this linebacker part. What's that all about?"

"You don't follow football? Dirk will be so disappointed." She was teasing now, the tense lines around her mouth easing.

Alex smiled, and coaxed her to do the same. "I do follow football. Religiously. Brazil is a shoo-in at the next World Cup. It's this weird game with the padding and the oddly shaped ball I don't understand."

"I'll use another analogy then. Mr. Atly is built like a tank, and Lorraine has backed him into a corner twice. He complained to me about it, and wants to know if he's getting paid to entertain your sister. He'd like an answer on that today, by the way."

Alex shook his head. "I thought Lorraine was your problem. I get to handle the male hormone crisis. How is Dirk?"

Skye's smile vanished, her body went rigid. "Angry, scared."

"I'll talk to him tonight."

Her shoulders loosened, and she let out a sigh. "Dirk was very young when his father died, but all this must remind him of it. I don't know what to say to him."

"I'm not sure I do either, but maybe he needs another man to talk to."

"Maybe." Skye looked listless and lost. Had someone comforted her while he'd been hiding in Boston, or had she suffered alone, pretending to be brave for Dirk? What had that fool Sheldon Seabrook been doing for the past five days? He made all the noises of a jealous lover, but didn't follow through with the actions to back it up.

Alex left his desk and started toward her. She stiffened when he approached. She obviously didn't want him near, and he couldn't blame her. He'd almost gotten her killed, put Dirk in danger. Alex walked past her desk and into the kitchen. He was a fool to think he could comfort Skye. He had to deal with his own demons.

Living in the house he had shared with his parents brought back old feelings, most of them pleasant. He found comfort in sitting at the kitchen table where his mother taught him how to turn out a perfect tortellini and create caltezone that melted on the tongue.

Those warm feelings and the comforting memories belonged to a boy who no longer existed, a boy who died on the streets of New York City. Alex no longer belonged in this country cottage his father had built.

Something called him, something up the hill in Miles Bettencourt's house. Something powerful that would not wait. * *He had to climb the hill and face the demons he'd run from when he was twelve. If only he remembered what they were. He couldn't ignore them, not if he wanted to start over.

"The Chronicle came out today," Skye said. "You'll want to read what they wrote about the shooting before you talk to Atly."

Alex leaned to scoop a drink of water from the faucet. The Des Moines paper had printed a short blurb, so had the San Francisco daily, but no follow-ups. He expected the Close Chronicle to give the incident more space -- backgrounds on Ritter and Perkins, something about the unfortunate Mrs. Fuller, maybe even a rehash of Bettencourt's illness -- but it was a local weekly. By next issue, the shooting would be old news, replaced by a rehash of the Fourth of July picnic.

Alex preferred they not mention his part in the incident, but he didn't plan to play lord of the manor and dictate what the press could print.

He glanced at the paper on the edge of Skye's desk. Before he could focus on the headline, she tensed again. He shouldn't have left after the shooting. If he'd stayed, they could have talked things over -- the shooting, her trying to protect him, his kiss. Damn, why had he kissed her?

Considering the circumstances, his behavior was inappropriate at best, at worst taking advantage of her. But having her in his arms, clinging to him as if she would never let go had felt so deliciously right.

Now, when he reached for the paper, she pulled on the ends of the towel to covered her breasts. Five days ago those same breasts had pressed against his back and later his chest as she'd fought to keep him on the floor. At least he could make her more comfortable. Forgetting the newspaper, he slipped his fingers beneath her towel and massaged the tight muscles on her back. She relaxed quickly under his fingers. When he drew away the towel to work on her neck, her head fell back against him.

She spoke as if half asleep. "The paper, Mr. Jackson. You really should read the paper."

Until this moment he hadn't realized how very much he wanted to touch her again. His fingers splayed over her shoulders, tantalizingly close to her breasts, tingled with memories. All pretense of giving a friendly massage gone, he bent to kiss her hair, breathing in her fresh scent.

Her head snapped forward, the muscles in her neck tightening again. On her desk, she spread the newspaper he had tried to ignore.

The predictable headlines didn't draw him past the opening paragraphs -- Local Man Kills Acting Head of Iowa Glass and Native of Chicago Held for Murder. * *Plans for the company picnic at Iowa Glass in August still made the front page.

He reached over her shoulder to refold the paper. Skye stopped him.

He stared at her hand for a moment. Her fingers were strong, nails cut professionally short and buffed to a matte finish. This made no sense, but her grip felt threatening. His body coiled in defense. She released his hand.

Opening the paper, she refolded it for him. "You made page three."

She got up and motioned for him to sit. With a sense of growing dread, he read Killer Blames Recently Returned Business Man for Layoffs. _

Ritter fit the profile of an employee turned violent. His work record was sporadic -- worker of the month one day, reprimanded for coming in late the next. His wife's death. Two charges of assault and public drunkenness.

The entire mess was a sad, unfortunate incident. Alex should have listened to Skye and become personally involved in the plant sooner. Maybe then....

Before he could put down the paper, Skye squeezed his shoulder. He hadn't been aware of her standing there. Her hand slid down his arm, sending sparks up its length.

Then she pointed to a smaller headline near the bottom of the page -- Twenty-Five Year Old Murder Investigation Remains Open.

* * * *

SKYE WATCHED ALEX read. His only reaction -- to remove his hand from beneath hers and run his fingers through his hair.

"You've read this?" he asked.

"Most of it." She stepped aside when he stood. He crossed to the kitchen in silence and stared out the window at the house where his mother had died. Or had someone killed her?

Skye didn't know where she found the courage, rediscovered the day she'd thrown herself between Alex and death. Now, something more insidious, more certain than a bullet threatened him. The past. "According to Pete Handley's article, no one will ever know for certain who -- "

"I know." His voice was sharp, and full of hurt.

Skye nodded even though he couldn't see her. She knew how much a child could know, how much pain knowledge could cause. Her parents' indifference had almost caused her death. That knowledge had paralyzed her with anger and fear until she came to terms with it.

Alex had reported hearing loud voices when he entered from the rear of the house. He saw a man standing at the top of the stairs waving his left arm above his mother's head before she fell. At the hearing into her death, Alex described in detail how she landed at his feet.

Now, Alex turned to face her, his back to the sink, his elbows bent to support his weight. "All the men working on the estate that day, the chauffeur, the gardener, had alibis. Jacob Van Wyk had visited earlier in the day, but he couldn't raise his left arm above his head. I was very certain about the raised left hand."

If she could convince Alex he was wrong about Miles, it would solve so many problems. Problems for Lorraine, for Iowa Glass. But what about Alex? What would it do to him if he found out he'd wrongly accused his stepfather and torn apart what was left of his family? "You were certain?"

His eyes flashed a threat, ordering her to back off. "Was? Am? What's the difference?"

Skye ignored the warning. Alex's strong fingers on her back, his gentle, tentative kiss had confirmed what she felt five days ago. As dangerous as it might be, she cared for this man and he needed her help.

She moved toward him. "Do you remember what happened?"

"I don't have to remember," Alex snarled. "Every word I said is on the record. Two years later my story didn't change. The police questioned me quite thoroughly when I showed up in New York. Not something I'm likely to forget."

Confusion stopped Skye. What had happened to Alex after his mother died? Skye was only four at the time, her grandparents careful about what they discussed in front of her, and she was just learning English.

When Lorraine told Skye her brother had run away after their mother's funeral, Skye imagined a young boy unable to come to terms with his mother's death. A child afraid and unhappy at the prospect of living with a stepfather he hardly knew. * *She'd assumed he stayed with a school friend or hid in a nearby barn for a day or two.

Alex appeared more puzzled than angry when he brushed past her on his way to her desk. He picked up the Chronicle and threw it in her direction. "Perhaps you should have finished reading the article."

Skye knelt to read the paper that lay on the floor, open to the back page. At first the words didn't make sense. According to the Close Chronicle, Alex hadn't run away for just a few days. Miles reported Alex missing to state police the same day the court ordered him returned to his stepfather's custody.* *Alex remained missing for almost two years.

A twelve-year-old boy on his own for two years. The thought made Skye shiver. How had he ended up in New York City? How had he survived? She took the paper to her desk.

Alex now sat at his desk, his ear phones firmly in place.

Pete Handley's article read like something for the National Enquirer instead of a small town weekly. He speculated how a teenage boy survived life on the streets, on what charges he'd been arrested, what illness kept him hospitalized for six weeks. All delicately worded, but the innuendoes of sex and drugs were there.

The article ended with Alex entering boarding school near Boston at the age of fourteen, one of his natural father's New York lawyers named legal guardian. She folded the paper in half, and slipped it into the waste paper basket. Why dredge up all this now? Did Pete want Alex to leave? Did she?

After reading the entire article, Skye knew Alex had to stay in Close. Whatever forces, real or imagined -- from New York or California or from right here in Iowa -- tried to drive him out of town, Alex had to stay and fight. Whatever the truth concerning his mother's death, he must face it.

Alex had run from Close before. He gave all indication of having run from San Francisco. If he didn't stop now, he'd be on the run for the rest of his life. As incongruous as it sounded, Skye understood what that meant.

She was trapped inside the same way Alex was trapped out -- one afraid to leave, the other afraid to stay.

The terror she'd felt all those years ago still had the power to paralyze her. She could smell the smoke, feel heat from the flames that threatened to swallow her whole. Just as real was the relief she felt days later when she found herself in her grandmother's arms.

As real as both those experiences had been, she had to move past them. Alex had to move forward, too.

When she decided he'd had enough time to recover, she marched to his desk, and slowly but firmly removed his head phones.

More certain of her course than she ever had been in her life, Skye looked Alex in the eye. "We have to talk."

Alex weighed his choices. She would have given anything to know why he said, "Yes, Skye, I believe we do. How about lunch while we talk? I picked up some food on my way back to town."

Skye followed him into the kitchen and settled onto a stool to watch him pull vegetables out of the refrigerator. Except the elaborate breakfasts he sometimes made, she hadn't seen him eat anything but fast food and frozen dinners.

She watched, fascinated, while he created two chef salads. "You're good at that."

"I would have made someone a very good husband." He answered with a laugh, but something sounded off.

Skye didn't like the way he referred to himself in the past tense, but fixing lunch relaxed him. He almost smiled while he drizzled vinegar over the lettuce.

"No hard boiled eggs?" she asked.

"I've recently been reminded that one's cholesterol level should not be twice that of one's IQ. Not all of us are blessed with that Viking blood of yours."

"I'm only half Swedish, and what's that got to do with eggs?"

"From what I've seen, you can eat anything without ill effect. When I was a boy, our chauffeur was like that, healthy as a horse. Around Christmas he would sneak me off to church on Wednesday nights for Advent services. I still remember the lefsa and krumkaka, lutafisk and a dozen other treats. Every one laden with fat, sugar, or salt. The average age of the parishioners was a hundred, I swear.

"Anyway," he continued, "I'm not blessed with your hearty Scandinavian ancestors. I come from short English, Dutch, and Italian people with clog-prone arteries. If it wasn't for a Frenchman who slunk between the sheets on my mother's side, I'd be five-foot-five, and the same number of inches around."

"Was that the Lutheran church in Newton you used to go to?"

Alex's easy smile faded. He put down his fork and went to the sink.

"Why?"

"Shelley said someone saw you there one Sunday last month."

He pushed his arms against the table and stood. Then he turned his back to her. "I'd forgotten how small town life could be. Being watched. Every action commented on."

He faced her, his voice controlled but filled with anger. "Have the good people of Close concocted some sinister motive for my visiting a church out of town? Do they discuss at the diner what I spend my time doing on my little jaunts to Des Moines? A mistress, perhaps? Or just a decent meal?"

Skye didn't answer. She was tired of offering apologies for everyone in Close. It was just the way small towns were.

"My mother didn't care what they thought about her and neither do I. I'm not going to sit here while they throw in my face everything they did to me twenty-five years ago. If I didn't need the money for Technolites, I'd unload the whole damned mess right now."

They both turned when Henry scratched at the back door.

"That dog stays off my property, or he's dead," Alex snapped. "I don't care if he does belong to your son."

Skye held her lower lip steady between her teeth and slipped past him to the side door. Tears slid down her cheeks as she took Henry by the collar.

Why did Alex hate dogs so much? It wasn't a simple matter of being a dog or a cat person, like he'd said. At one time, he'd liked dogs. She had seen the picture Mr. Bettencourt kept of his stepson. A photo of a smiling, chubby ten-year-old holding the leash of an Old English sheepdog stood on his office desk. From the markings, the dog could have been Henry's twin.

After locking Henry in Lorraine's kennel, Skye decided she would ask him. Maybe Henry reminded Alex of one of Mr. Bettencourt's dogs. If Alex spent time with Henry, maybe he would remember something to convince him he'd been wrong about Miles killing his mother.

Skye knew Miles wasn't guilty, and not just because she was Lorraine's friend. Skye grew up in the town Alex fled. She knew the man, saw his life of mourning over his dead wife. Miles Bettencourt could not have killed her and kept silent.

When she entered Alex's office an hour later, Skye found unexpected relief. Michael Atly had arrived. Her newfound courage dried in the summer heat. She could put off confronting Alex a while longer.

"Mrs. Devries," Alex called when she tried to slip in unnoticed through the side door. "You'll want to hear this. You deserve it after what Perkins put you through."

"Perkins?" she asked.

Michael gave her a reassuring smile. He straddled a straight-backed chair set backward in front of Alex's desk, which was covered with ledgers and spreadsheets.

"Yes," Michael's deep voice rumbled pleasantly through the room. "Your Mr. Perkins not only cooked the books for his own gain, but he worked with your competitors to submit inflated bids in return for money. From the look of things, he hoped to buy Iowa Glass when the value of the plant fell low enough."

Alex looked calm, ready to make rational, businesslike decisions. "Please sit, Mrs. Devries. Mr. Atly has been threatening me with numbers. He can confuse us both at the same time."

Skye joined Alex on the other side of the desk while Michael sorted through his briefcase. Both men wore suits. Skye felt terribly underdressed. She tugged at the hem of her cutoffs and redraped her towel, grateful she had something to cover her revealing, and still damp, tee-shirt. Now she wished she'd stopped to change when she brought Henry to Lorraine's.

Skye thought she caught Alex staring at her lap, but he nudged her aside so he could open the desk drawer. With a notebook and pencil in hand, he gave Michael a nod. "Keep it simple, Mr. Atly. Round everything off to the nearest million."

Michael winked at Skye. "Ah, the famous Jackson humor. I've been warned."

Skye did not wink back. Alex, with or without a sense of humor, would make his decision concerning Iowa Glass soon and so far she had failed at her task. He was no more favorably disposed to the factory or to the people of Close then when she began.

* * * *

SKYE WANTED TO rip the letter into tiny shreds. Instead, she hid it in her top desk drawer. This was the fourth threatening message Alex had received -- two on the phone, one letter yesterday, another one this morning. She didn't want him to stumble across it, not until she had a chance to speak with Sheriff Rossendahl.

Someone wanted Alex out of town and several logical suspects -- Mr. Perkins, Tom Ritter, Mrs. Fuller -- were dead or in the hospital. A prankster with too much time on their hands? A disgruntled employee not as desperate as Tom Ritter? _Please, not another one like Tom. No one that desperate._

Close didn't have that many crack pots, not dangerous ones anyway. The threat had to be from somewhere outside of Close. Who knew what secrets hid in

Alex's rather extensive closet? His friends were certainly widespread. Condolences over Tristan's death had arrived from England, France, Switzerland, Sicily, New York, Georgia, and California.

When Alex didn't respond to their rather pleading expressions of concern, his friends turned to humor. The topic of the week was which car Alex should rent next.

The first car he'd rejected because he preferred a stick shift, the second because the steering didn't feel right. He must have mentioned it to his friends in San Francisco, because for the last few days she'd received nothing but faxes telling him what car he should get. Pictures accompanied several of them, and rather crude suggestions he hire a shapely chauffeur to do the driving.

Skye jumped at the sound of Dirk slamming a basketball against the garage. Close had always felt safe, boring even. The shooting had changed that. The attempted car jacking she could explain away as a freak occurrence. But this shooting and now threats.

The doorbell rang. Skye jumped again.

She ushered the sheriff into the anteroom, giving him a moment to look around. The entrance was quite impressive. "Thanks for coming so soon, Harley."

Harley continued to gawk. "I'd planned to come out anyway. I have some questions for -- "

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Jackson isn't working today. But if it's important...."

After pacing the perimeter of the room, Harley slid his hip onto the edge of her desk and took out a notepad. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you. You called before I got a chance. Why don't you go first?"

Skye opened her desk drawer and took out the letters crudely made with cut out letters from magazines. "They aren't death threats, not exactly, but someone wants Mr. Jackson out of Close. Yesterday, I had two phone calls and the letter. When I got here this morning, I found this slipped under the door. It must have come during the night."

Protecting the paper with a tissue, Harley examined the envelope. "It doesn't look like it went through the regular mail, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave the mail to me from now on. We might get lucky and get some prints. What does your boss say about all this?"

"I haven't told him yet."

"Why not?"

Skye had asked herself that question more than once. Was she afraid he'd panic and run, sell the company to the first buyer he could find? Or would telling him make it all seem real?

Harley slid the threatening letters into the manila envelope she provided and tucked it under his arm.

"He's finally getting down to work on making some decisions about Iowa Glass. I didn't want to distract him."

"Distract him by telling him his life may be in danger?" His question sounded less friendly, more official, now.

She reached for a plausible excuse. "I thought I should tell you first. It's nothing, right? Just some prank?"

Harley looked at his notepad and started to write. "So, when were you last in Chicago?"

Skye's mind went blank for a moment. "Not since I was four years old."

"Do you have many contacts in Illinois?"

"Friends. I have friends, not contacts, Harley."

Harley fired his questions now. His usual Iowa lilt clipped and sharp. "What do you and your friends do there?"

"Some of my friends from college live around Chicago. I haven't been to Illinois since I was very young. Surely, you must know that."

"Would you have any objection to showing me your long-distance phone bill?"

"Don't you need a court order for that?" Alex stood at the kitchen door. He held a small painting, one from the bedroom she had slept in. He crossed the room and opened the doors to his office. After laying the painting on his desk, he leaned against it.

Harley didn't appear ruffled by Alex's arrival. "Just asking some friendly questions, Mr. Jackson."

"Maybe Mrs. Devries should invite Jacob Van Wyk to join in the conversation."

"If that's what Skye wants. I can always invite her downtown and ask the questions there."

From the expressions on the two men's faces, they had forgotten the topic of their conversation was standing between them. "Would you two stop ignoring me and tell me what this is all about?"

Barely missing a beat, Harley spoke again to Alex. "It's your neck, but murders generate a whole lot of paper work. Something I'm not terribly fond of. After three attempts on your life, it starts to look like conspiracy. I wouldn't want anyone to suggest I don't know how to run a proper investigation."

This time Skye planted herself in front of Harley, daring him to ignore her. "What do you mean three attempts?"

"First, the attack outside city limits, and I consider Mr. Ritter and Mrs. Fuller's actions to be independent." Harley held up three fingers.

"You can't think the shooting at the plant was related to the car jacking attempt? Those men didn't even know who Alex was?"

Alex left his desk to stand beside Skye, his hand on her arm as if offering protection. "What does this have to do with Skye having acquaintances in Illinois?"

"Just covering all bases. I can't play favorites because Skye and I are friends." Harley put his note pad away, evidently deciding not to ask more questions.

Alex asked some instead. "The men who attacked me that first night stole a truck from a Chicago suburb, and you have connections there, Skye. Dozens of people in town have similar connections, or could make them. Everyone in Close knew Lorraine expected me."

This was crazy, even Alex didn't seem to know when he would arrive. How could she? How could Harley possibly think she was involved in some conspiracy to hurt Alex? * * "But no one knew which day. Even Lorraine didn't know -- "

Alex interrupted. "I left a message on Jacob's machine two days before. Whoever listened to those messages knew when I would arrive, give or take twenty-four hours. I also sent e-mail to Technolites. Someone could have inferred from my correspondence the approximate time of my arrival in Close. Considering the break in Technolites computer security, anyone could have that information."

She swallowed her panic and tried to think. If only Grandpa were alive. He could sort out the most tangled clues. She kept coming back to one inescapable fact -- danger had infiltrated Close and was somehow related to Alex.

"Jacob and Mrs. Shutts would have known about your phone call," she began. "Conceivably, so would I since I worked with Jacob that week. But they didn't want you to stay away. They'd been waiting for you. We were all waiting for you so Jacob could read the will."

Alex kept his place by her side. "You told me you did some work for Jacob before my arrival. Installed his computers, including everything needed for an experienced operator to break into the Technolites system. I believe that's the direction the Sheriff's questions will take next. The means, but not the motive, I think."

"Do you know of anyone who does have a motive, Mr. Jackson?" Harley asked.

Alex flashed his plastic smile and shrugged his shoulders. "No one at all. As far as I know, everyone holds me in the highest regard."

"How about Lorraine?"

"Well then, there's your suspect. Jealous sibling, disappointed heiress. You should question my sister not my assistant."

"I plan to question your sister this afternoon, Mr. Jackson."

Alex's smile vanished. "I hardly think it appropriate for you to bother Lorraine. She's in mourning for her father." Alex sounded indignant, almost protective. Skye had never seen this side of him before.

Harley walked to the door. "This is usually the time I say don't plan any long trips, but in this case, Mr. Jackson and you, for that matter, Skye, a trip might be a good idea."

"Call me Alex," Alex sounded oddly hollow, as if he were no longer in possession of the graceful body leaning against his desk.

"Alex," Harley amended. "If you were to plan a trip out of town while we complete our investigations here and in Boston, I'd have one less thing to worry about. Just leave a number where I can reach you. I think I can count on Skye to keep you from disappearing permanently."

Alex waited until the door closed behind Harley before he spoke. "He's a cheerful fellow."

"Don't make light of this. I'm worried."

He crossed the room in a few strides. "Skye -- "

"Don't." She held her hand up to keep him away. A defensive reaction, but one she couldn't help making.

He stopped an arm's length away. "Why won't you use my first name? You have earned the right. You've saved my life at least twice."

She gathered the faxes that littered her desk and filled his arms with them. "I prefer to keep it Mr. Jackson."

Alex returned to his desk. "Very well, Mrs. Devries. I don't plan to go to the factory today. There's work we can do from here."

"Good, because I'm not here to manage your love life."

"What love life?"

She pointed to the papers that now littered his desk. "Half your faxes come from women. The other half contain rather crude suggestions on how to get them."

Alex looked at the top messages. One suggested he buy a Spider. The next, a van with a mattress in back.

"Your friends in California don't seem to think much of your ability to fend for yourself. One even called to see if you've been eating your vegetables like a good little boy."

"I was well thought of in San Francisco, Mrs. Devries." Alex replied, grinning now. "I only got shot once in California."

Skye spun on her heel to hide her reaction. For the last five nights, every time she closed her eyes, that's how she saw him. Shot, bleeding, dead. "Since you don't plan to visit the plant, maybe you should take the sheriff's advice and leave town. You can just as easily run things from New York or Boston or the factory in Georgia."

While he shuffled the papers behind her back, she realized she hadn't looked at them all. Faxes couldn't be that hard to trace. Surely no one was foolish enough to send a threat in a fax.

Before she could offer to sort the messages for him, the rustle of papers stopped.

"This one doesn't have a name on it," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "Could it be from you?"

She couldn't see his face. He held the paper in front of it. The warning was printed in large, bold type -- This is your last warning. Leave Close or die.

Chapter Seven

SKYE JUMPED WHEN Sheldon Seabrook slammed his fist on her desk.

"Well, is it true? Are you going with him?"

Skye lowered her head so she couldn't see him, pretending interest in

her computer screen.

No one found gaining her attention particularly easy these days, what with Alex finally taking an active role evaluating Iowa Glass, but she didn't appreciate Shelley's heavy handed tactics.

Final numbers were due on how much the computer sabotage at Technolites had cost, and Michael Atly had arranged an independent audit at Iowa Glass. Skye had enough work to do without enigmatic questions from Shelley.

"Is what true, Shelley?" With a start she realized she'd almost called him Shelley Belly. That wouldn't have improved his disposition.

"Have you become Mr. Jackson's personal traveling companion?"

Skye tore her gaze from the computer screen long enough to look at him. Immaculately dressed, as usual, he tossed aside a strand of misplaced hair. The cold fury in his eyes gave away his feelings.

She sighed. "Where did you get that news bulletin? I drove Mr. Jackson into town twice yesterday in my truck. He hasn't found a rental car he likes yet, and Marvin is still working on his Mustang. You'd think Marvin couldn't bear to part with it."

"You know what I'm talking about."

This time Skye didn't sigh. She was too annoyed. "Tell me what you think I've done so I can get back to work."

"Mr. Jackson is leaving town and you're going with him."

Shelley's delusions really were getting to be too much. She brought up Alex's personal calendar on her computer. He'd made entries last night. A rough itinerary -- Boston, New York, Atlanta. The date -- tomorrow.

Harley had suggested he leave town for a while and the destinations made sense -- the mess in Boston with Technolites, the law firm in New York, the other window factory in Georgia -- but she wasn't going anywhere. Alex might need a ride to the airport, but he didn't need someone to hold his hand on the plane. Besides, Dirk needed her.

"I don't discuss Mr. Jackson's traveling plans, Shelley."

"I can't believe you're going to throw away everything we've planned on some whim."

She pushed at her desk. Her chair rolled against the printer when she stood. Arms crossed over her chest, she began to pace, and to boil. "What exactly is it that you think we've planned?"

He started to speak several times before he completed his sentence. "He won't come back here, Skye, and he won't ask you to stay with him. He'll dump you the minute he finds someone suitable. A man like him doesn't marry girls like you."

Skye forgot maintaining their professional relationship. She'd work scrubbing floors -- heck, she'd even wash dishes -- rather than work with Mr. Sheldon Seabrook again. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"Look at yourself, Skye, look at your family. Then look at this room." Shelley stepped back taking in the marble foyer with the sweep of his arm. "You don't belong here."

Skye's protest died on her lips. She stood on imported Italian marble surrounded by paintings worth more than her grandfather had made in a lifetime of hard work. This house, the house Alex grew up in, reeked money and style. Something her people had never possessed. The contrast wasn't flattering.

Her tennis shoes had split at the toes again, she hadn't taken time for makeup this morning, and the shirt she wore could almost qualify as an antique.

No, she and Alex were not a good match, but money wasn't the problem. Alex was too busy running from the past to live in Close, and Close was where she intended to stay. "I have no interest in marrying Mr. Jackson, and I'm not his traveling companion. I run his office, nothing more. Whatever you heard about us taking a trip together is just talk, Shelley."

Shelley nodded, his complexion returning to normal. "Well, I'm glad --

"

Skye took a deep breath and continued. "I have no interest in marrying

you. If you think we've made plans, you are mistaken. But know this, if Mr. Jackson does ask me to accompany him on a business trip, I will decide whether to go without consulting you or the school board."

Shelley's expression changed from hopeful relief to pure loathing in seconds. Red-faced, he waved his finger in her face. "If you play the whore with that man in front of the entire town, don't expect me to take you back. And you will come back, Skye Devries. You don't have what it takes to survive out there."

Skye stared in disbelief -- disbelief that Shelley hated her so very much, disbelief that he understood her worst fears. When his eyes narrowed and he dropped his arm, Skye knew someone had entered the room.

"Interrupting something interesting, I trust."

Skye recognized Alex's voice immediately. When relaxed, his delightful foreign lilt returned. Alex sounded amused.

He directed a genuine smile at her before a phony one took its place and he crossed the room to shake Shelley's hand. Michael Atly followed. They must have been at the lake. A stray weed clung to Alex's sweater and the hem of his jeans was damp.

"What can I do for you today, Shelley?" Alex's generic, Midwestern clip returned.

Shelley refused to look at her when she silently telegraphed her plea for silence. Surely, Shelley wouldn't continue his ridiculous accusations with Alex.

"I dropped by to let you know I found someone to supervise the restoration of your gardens." Shelley nodded toward the back of the house. "She has a master's degree in botany and some experience in this sort of thing. I can have her and my crew start the work while you're gone if you like."

No one noticed Skye abruptly drop into her chair.

Alex beamed pleasure. "Great, Shelley. Feel free to get started right away. Send Mrs. Devries the bill."

Alex returned his attention to the mountain of spreadsheets on his desk. Shelley, his hat in his hand, backed away like a medieval serf. He glared at Skye one last time before he turned and banged out the front door.

Alex directed his most insincere smile at her. "Not a serious disagreement, I trust, Mrs. Devries."

"Not at all."

"Good. I would hate to think having Mr. Seabrook underfoot will prove a distraction for you, especially since he seems to be on the property every day."

They could afford to have only one deceptive person in the office, and Alex clearly intended to go on a trip. Had he expected her to look at his calendar and discover the facts for herself? * * "Shelley and I weren't discussing your garden. He came to ask if I'm going on your trip. Have you decided to take Harley's advice and leave town for a while?"

Alex propped his wet sneakers on his desk and eyed her speculatively. "A happy coincidence, Mrs. Devries. Happy for your sheriff, in any case. Personally, I don't relish the prospect of traveling. Did too much of it when I was young, I suppose."

"Michael's been telling me that with Technolites and Iowa Glass needing fresh capital, I might want to visit my other properties, decide what I'm willing to sell off or put up as collateral. Also, I have some family matters to attend to. How do you feel about taking a trip, Mrs. Devries?"

How did she feel? Terrified, excited, a million other feelings. "A trip? With you?"

Michael kept his eyes carefully on his work, but Skye sensed he listened to every word.

"Yes, a business trip. My legal advisor assures me it's deductible as long as we don't have any fun." Alex maintained his business facade, but his brown eyes sparkled.

She searched for some reasonable excuse. "Well, if we're not going to have any fun -- "

"Maybe, we can sneak in a sight or two. I won't tell. What do you think, Michael? Besides, I'll need someone to throw me to the floor if another employee decides to take a shot at me."

She had done that, hadn't she? One feeling floated to the surface, blotting out the rest. Determination. Shelley didn't think she could function outside Close. For all she knew Alex didn't think she could either. She would surprise them both.

Only one thing kept her from going. "Dirk -- "

"Taken care of. He's going to camp for two weeks."

Suddenly Skye couldn't swallow, her mouth too dry. She hadn't expected Alex to persuade Dirk to go anywhere. "What about -- "

"I spoke to a very pleasant lady at your music camp. Your refund check is in the mail. I pulled a few strings with a friend at Space Camp in Alabama and got Dirk a two-week spot. Some last minute cancellation. Dirk's read the brochure. He said it sounded like it might be okay. Believe me, that's as positive a reaction as we're going to get from a fourteen-year-old."

Skye glanced at the brochure Alex pushed across his desk. "Space camp sounds educational, but Alabama is so far away."

"I spoke to the director, and filled him in on recent events. Someone will keep an eye on Dirk and contact us if he's having trouble adjusting. Now, if you'll agree to come with me, we can get started on our work. Michael has quite a few chores for us to complete before we leave." Alex stood and moved a chair next to his.

Skye nodded dumbly, not quite believing she had agreed to all this. She was leaving town, but just for a business trip. Just for a few days. Boston, New York, Atlanta. She could handle that. When she sat beside Alex, familiar panic returned. "What exactly do you want me to do on this trip?"

"I need someone to handle the details, make phone calls, things like that."

Wanting someone to dial the phone was hardly a reason to go to the added expense of taking her along. This trip was about saving money, wasn't it? "I mean, why really?"

"Mrs. Devries, why so suspicious? I would think you would consider it your civic duty. Someone should be with me to make certain I return in one piece. What would happen to Iowa Glass if I disappeared? My will lists two dead people as beneficiaries."

Michael wrote "NEW WILL" in large block letters at the top of his notepad.

Squaring her shoulders, Skye decided her course. "I have one condition."

"Oh?" Alex's easy smile faded as he shuffled papers Michael had handed him.

"I want you to have dinner with me."

"We'll have time for eating on the road, Mrs. Devries."

"No," Skye shook her head, pleased with herself for thinking of such an elegant solution to her other problem. "I mean dinner here. Specifically, at Lorraine's. She has agreed to have cocktails here, and then dinner at the house."

Alex glanced toward the kitchen, and the view of the Bettencourt mansion. "When did you become my sister's social director?"

"We have an agreement, remember? You work on my problem with Dirk. I work on yours with Lorraine. Dirk didn't want to go to music camp, so you've arranged for him to go to space camp. Your sister wants to make peace. Sharing a meal is a time-honored tradition in meeting that end. I am arranging for the meal to take place. Mr. Atly is invited, of course."

Michael did not look amused. The prospect of dinner at Lorraine's clearly made him uncomfortable.

"It would have to be tonight," Alex grumbled. "We'll be busy tomorrow."

"Tonight it is. I'll make the arrangements." Skye studied the two men. She couldn't decide who looked more uncomfortable.

Michael cleared his throat as he glanced at his watch. "Isn't it a shame I have to take the next flight."

Within seconds, Michael cleared Alex's desk, the mountain of reports and spreadsheets neatly folded and deposited into his briefcase. "We can finish with the rest of this in New York, Mr. Jackson."

* * * *

WHILE SKYE PLANNED dinner with Lorraine, Alex did Skye's job, or, at least, he tried. Every time he went to make reservations on the computer, former patients swamped him with invitations and challenges. He may have handed over medical care of his special cancer patients to other doctors, but he never relinquished their friendships.

He battled monsters in cyberspace dungeons with kids who needed to forget their real-life battles, and sent messages of encouragement to their parents. When lunch time came and he hadn't made any headway, he called the personnel office at Technolites and had them make travel arrangements. If he asked someone at Iowa Glass to do the job, his itinerary would no doubt appear in the next edition of the Close Chronicle.

Now, as a chorus of crickets announced the approach of evening, Alex paced the floor waiting for Lorraine. More than once he reached for Skye's truck keys. He would head east and keep going. Or he could make up some excuse, like another emergency at Technolites or papers to sign in New York.

Those "family matters" he had so blithely mentioned to Skye were worry enough. Why the hell had he agreed to meet with Lorraine?

The reason prepared hors d'oeuvres in the kitchen. A social evening was what he needed to break the ice with Skye. She had kept her distance since the day she'd read about his past in the Chronicle.

But then the image of going through Miles Bettencourt's front door replaced that of Skye, and Alex's stomach knotted. What was the fuss about anyway -- never setting foot in his house? Alex didn't remember saying it, only remembered being told he had. He'd been twelve, a kid. Besides, it wasn't Miles' house any longer, but Lorraine's. So why did the thought of walking up the hill and into that house make him feel like getting drunk?

Because his mother died there. Because he watched, helpless, as she'd tumbled down the stairs. How many times had he told a young patient's parents time would heal their darling's emotional wounds? What a hypocrite! He was living proof. Time could stand still, frozen in one terrible moment forever.

When he heard Skye in the kitchen, he watched for her return. He preferred her dressed in those tight jeans, or better yet, denim cutoffs. Dressed in anything else, she looked like she was playing dress-up. A man wouldn't have to worry about mussing Skye's hair or breaking one of her nails. She was free, natural, and he would have said innocent if he hadn't heard her wailing on her sax.

She belonged in one of two places -- these Iowa corn fields or a smoke-filled club in Paris. A naive, small town girl but her music revealed her soul. She had experienced life, embraced it, and been hurt by it.

When she returned carrying a tray of food, hips swinging beneath her silk skirt, Alex decided he didn't care what she wore as long as he didn't have to face Lorraine alone. Skye would be there and Chuck Cross, no doubt blackmailed by Lorraine into making an appearance. Or had love so blinded the man that he willingly endured a family scene to be close to Lorraine?

Alex smiled at Chuck's plight while he observed Skye. She looked too exquisite when viewed from behind. I really should help, Alex thought when she returned to the kitchen, but he remained leaning against the opposite wall.

Her movements became awkward, yet seductive, as he stared. Was she aware of him watching her? Self-conscious? Frightened? Caught up in her own concerns?

If she believed what she read in the local newspaper, she should be

frightened. Every damned word Pete Handley had printed, every nasty insinuation, every dirty little innuendo, was true.

Skye came out of the kitchen again, smiling. "Lorraine and Chuck* should be here any minute, Mr. Jackson."

So formal, even after hours. He was going to have to find some way to break through Skye's office procedures, or theirs would be a long, boring trip.

"Let me help you with that." He pulled himself upright and crossed the room. The cork had broken off in the bottle -- a crisis he could handle. Funny how he felt so in control in an emergency room and all thumbs in an office. Maybe that's how Skye felt about leaving Close. Maybe they both needed experiences outside of their normal theater of operations to gain confidence.

He successfully maneuvered the crumbling cork out of the bottle. "Did you pick up the paper while you were in town?"

Skye ducked her head. "I forgot."

He was tempted to confront her, force her to look him straight in the face. Timid did not suit Skye. He could see tension build in her shoulders, and his fingers itched to ease the tightening muscles. What had the local rag printed now?

Instead of walking away, Skye raised her head. Could she read his thoughts? She gave him what he wanted -- a clear view of her golden eyes and full lips. "What are you humming?"

Her question startled him into taking a step back. She stood within arm's reach. He caught a hint of strawberries. Her shampoo or lipstick? Discovering which would prove a pleasant way to pass an hour.

"Alex?"

He couldn't think of anything other than how her lips felt when he had brushed them with his own. Ages ago when he'd held her in his arms amid the carnage at Iowa Glass. "Was I humming? I have no idea. Puccini most likely."

The doorbell saved him from making a more specific answer.

Lorraine rushed in, dragging Chuck behind her. She fairly flounced around the room, twirling her chiffon dress. "So nice of you to invite us, Alex."

Great. Lorraine was playing perky, pretending this was cocktails among friends. Drinks then, on to the big house for dinner. Alex's stomach knotted at the thought of walking up the hill, the house growing larger as he approached.

Chuck explained he was the paramedic on call and set his cellular phone on the table. Skye had closed the doors to both offices, which left them the foyer to stand in. After discretely dumping his wine in the kitchen sink, Alex joined Chuck in a soda. Alex had just finished removing the ham from a slice of melon when Lorraine decided to pounce.

"Food not good enough for you, Alex? Maybe we should have let our men do the cooking, Skye."

With his mouth full of melon, Alex couldn't explain. Skye understood. They had discussed the evils of cholesterol.

Before either of them could say anything, Lorraine continued. "Did you know, Skye, my brother, my stepbrother, sorry Alex, is a real cook? Studied in France. Opened a restaurant there when he was only twenty. Earned two stars its second year in that Michelin guide thing. Do you still own that place?"

With a shrug, Alex decided to be gracious. Lorraine had stopped calling him Clayton, and he didn't want to make the evening any more uncomfortable for Skye and Chuck. "I'm a silent partner. They're down to one star. Millard's wife left him and his second son went to work at EuroDisney. The poor man's too distracted to eat, let alone cook."

"So why don't you sell?" Lorraine asked. "You could use the money to help here at home. Chuck thinks all we need is capital to invest in new equipment. He has this fantastic idea about electronic windows with changeable artwork you program with a computer. Tell him, Chuck."

Lorraine jogged Chuck's elbow, sending his hors d'oeuvres sailing. When

the phone rang, Chuck mumbled "Thank God."

Lorraine grabbed Chuck's arm. "Don't answer that. The machine will pick it up."

By the second ring, it became obvious Chuck's phone was ringing. Lorraine tapped her foot while Chuck stepped into the kitchen. Alex wanted to follow, but stood his ground. What made Lorraine think he wanted to discuss business now? Did she expect him to get drunk and make reckless promises in front of witnesses?

That showed how little Lorraine knew about him. He almost never drank on social occasions. Staying sober in case of a medical emergency was an old habit.

He distracted himself by placing imaginary bets on what would happen first -- Chuck walk through the door or Lorraine explode. Alex lost his bet. Before Lorraine lost control, Chuck entered the room, looking relieved.

Chuck directed his apology to Lorraine. "I'm sorry, but I warned you this might happen. I'll catch up with you when I can."

"But I need you with me tonight." Lorraine hissed in an undertone they all could hear. "You are supposed to tell him about your plans."

Alex interrupted. "I didn't realize this was supposed to be a business meeting, Lorraine. If Chuck has a proposal, he can make an appointment when I come back. Or wait a few months. By then, he may have a more receptive owner to deal with."

Lorraine whirled to face him, fury in her eyes and in her clenched fists. "You know you can't sell Iowa Glass, Clayton. And you know why."

"I can do anything I damn well please, Lori, and I'll make my decisions based on the facts not family loyalty, especially not on a family that doesn't exist."

"You owe Father, damn you. Twenty-five years ago you ruined his life and mine. He never got over you blaming him for Mother's death. You can start making up for that right now."

Alex opened his mouth to reply, but then he noticed Skye. She hadn't moved from her place by the hors d'oeuvres, but drew his attention in some way. A movement of the head? A sigh?

Then it hit him. He hadn't told her he was close to making his decision, and if the numbers didn't change, he would be looking for a buyer.

Lorraine stepped forward to block his view of Skye, breaking the bond that had instantly formed between them. "You promised our mother, Alex. You know you did. You said if she left the plant to you, you would take care of things."

"I have only your word she said that, Lori dear."

The color drained from Lorraine's face. Aletta Jackson's death had hurt Lorraine almost as much as it had hurt him. The promise he remembered making was to always look after his little sister. Instead, he'd run away, leaving her with her murdering father. How could she ever forgive him for that, how could he forgive himself?

"Still having memory problems, brother dear?" Lorraine drawled.

Skye crossed the room to stand close enough for him to see her gold-flecked, pale brown eyes. Close enough to catch the scent of wine in her glass. He had planned to walk with her in the garden tonight -- his reward for enduring a meal with Lorraine.

One kiss before luring her halfway across the world. One kiss, and if she drew away, he would leave her in his mother's abandoned rose garden.

Lorraine refused to be ignored. "Well, Clayton, do you remember your promise to take care of Iowa Glass?"

His faulty memory was not something Alex wanted to discuss, not in front of Skye and not in front of the man he had named to take Mr. Perkin's place as head of Iowa Glass. "Why don't we let Chuck get on his way? There's obviously some emergency. We can have this little dinner or business meeting, whatever you want to call it, when I come back."

If I come back. The plane tickets were round-trip, of course.

Disappearing would be irresponsible, and so very tempting. He knew Skye would love Paris. He would make her love Sicily.

Lorraine continued her phony Southern drawl. "Aren't you going with Chuck on this medical emergency? Didn't you take an oath? Or aren't the people of Close good enough to merit the services of the famous Dr. Casale."

Alex recognized the dripping-honey tone in Lorraine's voice. He'd distracted her with a subject he wished to avoid even more than Iowa Glass. She'd also managed to twist his motives.

What the hell. Skye knew he was a doctor and Chuck wasn't a gossip. Turning to Chuck, Alex said, "Lorraine is referring to the fact that I'm a doctor. I can come if needed."

Chuck's eyes widened and he glanced at Skye, looking for confirmation, no doubt. "Not necessary. Mrs. Terlouw sprained her ankle and their truck's not running. I'm taking her over to Doc Dieleman's office. He's waiting for us."

With that, Chuck escaped through the front door. Skye returned her half-filled glass to the table and opened the door to Alex's office. She opened the patio doors and walked outside.

To hold the image of her waiting for him in the garden, Alex closed his eyes. He opened them to face Lorraine. "Why did you do that? My life's complicated enough at the moment."

"I did it for Skye. If she thinks you're bad for Close, she won't have anything to do with you. Besides," Lorraine looked down at her glass and blushed, "she can only be friends with one of us, and she's falling in love with you."

"Did she say something?" Alex didn't know what he hoped to hear.

A smile transformed Lorraine's face. "Skye doesn't know yet."

Alex resisted returning her smile, he couldn't afford to get close. No matter how much pain they shared, Lorraine was the enemy. She had testified in court that her father was with her at the same moment he pushed his wife down the stairs.

"I can handle my own love life."

"Oh, I have no intention of helping things along. Skye is too vulnerable at the moment. What she needs is a good, meaningless lay. That's not you, big brother. You're a dangerous package with most of your explosives hidden. Skye needs to know who you are, and I'm going to make certain she does."

Alex had the sinking feeling Lorraine was right. Skye acted tough but she didn't seem ready to let another man near. More important, she wasn't prepared to leave Iowa, not for the long term anyway.

Lorraine was also right about him -- he wasn't good at casual when it came to women. He had become obsessed before, and wasn't about to let it happen again.

He turned to look through his study and into the dark garden. No sign of Skye.

Lorraine's hands tightened around her wine glass. "You can't be trusted, Alex. You lie, not little white ones, but about important things."

Alex knew they had stopped talking about him and Skye. They were talking about that terrible summer twenty-five years ago. "What do you think I lied about?"

"Daddy didn't kill Mommy Allie. He wouldn't do that to me."

"Now is not the time to talk about this, Lori. You've had too much to drink. When I get back -- "

Lorraine tossed back the rest of her wine and smashed the glass on the marble floor. "Thank you for reminding me, brother dear. Skye also needs to know that after you tell your lies, when people really need you, you run away."

Her words would have hurt more if he hadn't already told himself the same thing. His self-accusations had numbed his senses.

He followed Lorraine to the door. After she dug her car keys out of her

purse, he took them from her hand. She let loose with a colorful string of expletives, kicked off her heels and started home on foot. Alex turned on the garage lights to help her on her way, while he stood alone in the foyer.

After sweeping up the broken glass, Alex went to the kitchen. Dusk had fallen. He lost Lorraine in the quickly graying light. When he stepped onto the patio, he knew immediately Skye had gone.

She radiated a presence he could not only sense, but could not ignore. Of all the distractions fighting for his attention, only Skye pushed everything else aside. Other concerns returned when she left. His arms wrapped around his middle, he felt a chill despite the warm night air.

He rocked on his heels to count the stars shining overhead. The mental exercise usually cleared his head. Tonight, the trick didn't work. He turned to face his bed not knowing how he could face tomorrow. Tomorrow, the day after that, when he finished his business in England and in France, he still had to prove Miles Bettencourt killed his mother.

He resented the people of Close for that. He even resented Skye. Before he came to Close, it had been enough to know in his heart Miles was responsible for Aletta Casale Jackson's death. Now he had to prove it without question. He had to prove it to Skye. Until he did, he could have no peace.

If he couldn't blame Miles for his mother's death, Alex had no one else to blame. No one except himself.

Chapter Eight

SKYE FELT DELIGHTFULLY smug while she waited for Alex's plane. Despite almost shaking to pieces when she boarded her flight in Des Moines, she was in New York now, and she felt great.

The four of them -- Alex, Dirk, Lorraine and Skye -- had driven to the Des Moines airport together. Dirk and Alex left first, Dirk without a backward glance, protesting he didn't need a baby-sitter. Alex allowed the boy to board alone while he picked up a newspaper.

Alex said he needed to fly to Atlanta anyway, on Iowa Glass business, and would see Dirk on the plane to Huntsville, Alabama, where counselors from Space Camp would meet him. Skye didn't believe his story, but thought Alex was terribly sweet to go out of his way.

After spending the night in Des Moines, she got on the plane for New York with Lorraine and experienced only the briefest of panic attacks. By the time they landed, she felt like a seasoned traveler. When Lorraine said goodbye, catching a cab for a week of shopping in the city, Skye didn't feel a single tremor.

Why hadn't she done this before? This was fun. She watched the passengers from Alex's Delta flight from Atlanta enter the main terminal. She wouldn't have recognized him if he hadn't been one of the last people through the security doors.

She stared for several moments before she convinced herself the gorgeous man she saw was Alex. Not that he didn't always look gorgeous, but he certainly looked different. He was also holding a baby.

Engrossed in conversation with the woman at his side, he walked past Skye. She turned and followed them to a nervous looking man who scurried up with a baby stroller. After setting the young couple on their way, Alex scanned the room. Before he found her, Skye had time to study him.

Alex was dressed to the nines, as her grandmother would say, in a charcoal gray, silk suit. He reminded her of those businessmen featured in men's magazines. Thousand dollar suit, shoes to match. Also, he had cut his hair to above the collar. Skye didn't know how she felt about that. She'd grown accustomed to his shoulder-length hair, blue jeans and baggy sweaters.

With a mental shake, she reminded herself he looked more businesslike this way. That's what she wanted, wasn't it? For him to stick to business?

When Alex saw her, his smile broadened and his eyes ignited. A ripple of excitement passed through her, and she knew it had nothing to do with business.

"How was your flight?" _For once in your life, you will not babble, girl._ She bit her lower lip to keep from saying more.

Alex shrugged as he led her through the concourse. Closeup, he looked tired. "Uneventful, and yours?"

"We had lunch on the plane, and they serve free drinks in first class. Did you know that? They have phones right there at your seats, but I didn't have anyone to call."

Alex's chuckle stopped her, and she realized what she was doing. Babbling. Almost thirty years old and she was babbling on about her first airplane ride. So much for her plan to act sophisticated.

He stopped, ignoring the people who brushed impatiently past them. "I would like to hear about your flight, but we have to keep moving." With his free hand, he took her arm, guiding her through the crowd.

Relieved he didn't think she was a complete idiot, Skye decided to save talk about her flight until later. Besides, she was out of breath from having to run every few steps to keep up. Thank goodness she was wearing flats. She'd have broken a leg by now if she were wearing heels.

"Where are we going in such a hurry? Not to a meeting right away, I hope." After a day of traveling, she wanted to spend her first night in New York City recovering in a quiet hotel room.

"We have just over an hour before our next flight. I made arrangements for your bags to be checked through. They should join us at some point, but if they get lost, my service threw some things into a suitcase for you. Lorraine filled them in on sizes."

Before Skye knew what was happening, they were standing outside the terminal. A few minutes later they boarded a shuttle bus. Now she was sitting and didn't have to take two steps for every one of his, she could talk again.

"So, you and Lorraine are speaking?" she asked.

"Just barely." He looked sideways at her, but didn't try to say anything else. The bus was noisy and filled with passengers.

He carried nothing except a raincoat over his shoulder and a briefcase. They must be going to Boston. She'd watched the Weather Channel; it was raining in Massachusetts. If she hadn't been so busy plotting with Lorraine to get Alex to her house for the dinner that never happened, Skye would know where they were going. Instead, Alex made the reservations, which left her in the dark. Once they settled into a hotel, she would access their schedule and reservations on his laptop.

She raised her voice over the noise around them. "How did the flight go with Dirk?"

"Just fine. We can check on him later, but I'm sure he'll be all right. He's someone else's problem for the next two weeks. Why don't you relax and enjoy yourself?"

Skye surprised herself by doing just that. For the first time since her grandmother died, she didn't feel solely responsible for her stepson. "If we enjoy ourselves, you won't be able to deduct the trip, Mr. Jackson. Or is it Dr. Casale?"

"Now that we're out of the office, can't I persuade you to use my given name? Titles can become tiring over the long haul."

"You can certainly try to persuade me," she teased. The bus glided to a halt, and Alex tried to lead her through the doors in front of them.

British Airways? This couldn't be right. Her knees locked in place "Hey, what are we doing here? Your calendar said we were going to Boston, New York, and Atlanta."

"That's Mike Atley's itinerary. If you're going to snoop around my computer, you must learn not to jump to conclusions. We need to get boarding passes at Connecting Flights." He scanned the signs above the growing lines of passengers.

She remembered something about a passport. Had she gotten one? "I don't have a -- "

Before she could gather her thoughts, Alex took her arm again. "I have

your passport right here. How farsighted of you to keep it current. You and Lorraine planned a trip to London last year. Don't you remember? She said you chickened out."

"I did no such thing! Dirk came down with a cold at the last minute. I couldn't get away."

Alex led her so smoothly through the boarding process she didn't think to protest until the flight attendant ushered them into first class. Somehow she ended up in the window seat, Alex blocking her escape.

Momentarily forgetting her panic, she noticed Alex's eyes were glazed and his face covered with a sheen of perspiration. He looked slightly gray. Sometime while he'd hurried her through the British Airways terminal, he'd removed his suit jacket and tie.

"You don't look well."

He closed his eyes and unbuttoned his shirt collar. "Thanks. I didn't get any sleep last night. You look absolutely delectable, by the way."

The seats, even those in first class, were too close together. How long would she have to sit with him? He would be right there, inches from her. Under his custom-made suit was the body he'd spent the last month parading almost naked before her every morning. Now, he unbuttoned his shirt halfway down, giving her a tantalizing view of his chest.

This promised to be a long flight, but at the moment she wanted it to go on forever.

Then voices sounded behind her -- loud voices, angry and urgent. Her heart froze at the sound. She didn't understand what they were saying. What did they want? What was she supposed to do?

* * * *

ALEX LEANED DEEPLY into his seat, and unbuttoned his shirt another notch. He shouldn't have rushed for the plane, but he didn't want to risk missing the connection. No way did he want to give Skye too much time to think. Considering he was operating on zero sleep, he should have checked into a hotel and taken a flight tomorrow, but the thought of spending the night in New York jerked him upright.

You're getting old. All nighters didn't use to bother you, and after all these years, the idea of sleeping in a New York hotel room shouldn't make you panic. He closed his eyes and began to count, forcing himself to relax. He started with his toes.

A loud passenger jerked him upright again. Alex blinked and rubbed his burning eyes. Suddenly, Skye was in his lap. He circled her waist with his hands before he realized she was trying to climb over him.

"I want off this plane," Skye demanded.

Her words barely registered. She was wearing a summer dress -- cotton, spaghetti straps, white with little swirls of lilac and green -- and very little else. With his fingers splayed across her middle, he could feel the waist band of her panties on her hips. Her legs were bare, and at the moment, the leg thrown over his lap was exposed to mid thigh. He was tempted to assist her slide across his lap, if for no other reason than to see how far up she would let her dress slide.

Aware he was not the only man on the plane ogling her thighs, he eased her into her seat. "Has anyone told you you have the most..."

When he tore his gaze from her now modestly covered legs, he recognized the panic in her eyes.* *Those light brown eyes, golden eyes like a cat. Dangerous eyes for any man to become lost in. Terrified eyes at the moment. "You have the most unusual eyes, Mrs. Devries."

She appeared to relax for a moment, then she looked around anxiously again. "What did those people want?"

"What people?" He glanced at the twenty or so passengers in the first class cabin. The regular business, rich tourist crowd. He had to bend down to hear her whisper.

"The loud ones. I didn't understand what they were saying."

Alex took her hand. He was beginning to understand. Lorraine had warned

him about Skye's panic attacks. According to his stepsister, Skye didn't speak English when she first arrived in Close, having just arrived from Sweden. He could imagine -- no, Alex knew -- the stress of not being able to make people understand your words. That sort of experience could inflict a lot of damage on a five-year-old psyche.

He stroked the back of her hand while her fingers continued to dig into his arm. "I didn't understand everything he was saying either. I don't know much Russian. Some problem with his seat the stewardess seems to have resolved."

Skye nodded, but sat sideways as if to be ready to make another dash for the exit.

Her chin in his hand, he coaxed her to look at him. "I'm not going to leave you alone. When I can't be with you, I will assign someone who speaks English to show you the sights. You don't have to worry about anything."

She nodded again, this time releasing her hold on his arm.

"All better?" he asked, fastening his seat belt.

"No, I'm not all better, darn it."

Alex knew he should feel relieved. She was no longer frightened. She was angry. He didn't know if he had the strength to deal with her. His heart was still pounding from exertion. Dr. Dielman was right. If he wasn't careful, he'd end up popping nitro tablets like his father.

Skye continued, her voice growing stronger. "If you don't answer my questions, honestly for once, I'm going to scream and tell everyone you're taking me out of the country against my will. So if you don't want to spend the night in jail, I suggest you start talking."

Skye couldn't be serious. When he reached for her seat belt, she pushed his hands away. "I mean it, Mr. Jackson. I want to know what you are up to and I want to know now."

"What could there possibly be left for you to know? You've had weeks to go through my computer files and pump my sister for information. My personal history appeared in your delightful local paper just last week." Alex gritted his teeth at the thought. Damn that Pete Handley for dredging up old news. After a good night's sleep, he would think of the perfect solution to Skye's fit of temper, but no ideas came to him now. Besides, they'd be in the air in a few minutes. The takeoff would be easier if he kept Skye distracted.

"If it would make you feel better," he said. "I will answer any three of your questions."

"Answered honestly and with opportunity for cross-examination?"

"You've been hanging around Mike Atly too much, or did you pick up your legalese working with Van Wyk?"

"Do we have an agreement, or do I start screaming?"

Before Alex could react, Skye reached up and pushed the stewardess call button. Suddenly, Alex knew Skye would go through with it. The last thing he needed was a public scene on an international flight, especially with the bank deal not yet signed.

He heard the stewardess make her way toward their seats. "All right, three questions. Like three wishes from the genie in the lamp. But if I see any of this in the Chronicle next month, you're fired."

"Can I help you?" the stewardess asked.

Alex leaned back in his seat and let Skye talk. She asked for a blanket. When she received it, Skye primly tucked it around her legs.

With a wistful glance at her now-covered body, he faced her. "Well, let's have your questions now, Mrs. Devries, before our meal arrives or I fall asleep. I'm not certain which will come first."

"You might as well call me Skye. For the trip, I mean."

Slightly startled, he looked at her again. Now calm and looking smug, she must expect to make the most of her three questions. He shrugged. Anything to keep her distracted. Ultimately her questions didn't matter. He knew what she would ask -- where are we going, what will we do, and when will we return.

Three questions, some barely palatable airline food, and a

transatlantic nap. By the time he woke, they would be at Heathrow. "Skye, then. Fire away."

"Why don't you want anyone in Close to know you're a doctor?"

Alex opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. This was not the way this three questions thing was supposed to work. "What does that have to do with -- "

"Our agreement states you answer my questions. We didn't say anything about you choosing the questions."

Alex looked into her eyes again, finding her catlike gaze absolutely predatory. "All right," he said, trying to think of some way to stall.

A few moments later they held glasses. Alex finished his champagne. Skye's remained untouched.

"Why -- " she began.

"I remember the question, Mrs. -- "

"Skye," she interrupted.

The damned woman had him so confused, he couldn't remember her name. He had wanted to call her Skye again for so long, ever since the day at Iowa Glass when she let him hold her. Then he couldn't tell if the pounding in his chest was the result of almost being shot or the beautiful Mrs. Devries' breasts pressed against his side.

"Skye, I don't want anyone in Close to know I'm a doctor because I don't want people bothering me with questions. People probably pester you at parties and ask which musical instrument is easiest to learn or which one their boy should play to compensate for his buck teeth. I don't like people asking me what they should do about their warts." He sent her his most intimidating scowl.

Her golden eyes didn't waver. "You promised me the truth."

Alex turned in his seat to look for the stewardess and signaled for more champagne.

"Here, take mine." Skye pressed her glass into his hand. "You might as well order a bottle, because this plane doesn't land for six hours and I'm going to get the truth out of you before then."

That sounded like a threat coming from a quite determined Skye. Maybe he'd imagined her earlier fears. She didn't sound afraid of anything. "All right, the truth. My liability insurance expired and I'm not practicing medicine until I reinstate it on the advice of my attorney."

The sound of the jets revving for takeoff interrupted them. Alex gulped the rest of her drink. There. It was done. Soon they would take off, too late for her to get away. So why did he feel like the one trapped?

"Don't think you're off the hook when we leave the ground. I can make a scene in London just as easily as I can in New York. Why don't you start with where you first practiced medicine?"

"I joined several doctors I went to school with in a group practice in Los Angeles."

"What was your specialty?"

Alex leaned back and closed his eyes as he tried to get comfortable. The vibration of the plane, the hum of the ventilation system would put him to sleep. "Pediatrics."

"You're a baby doctor?"

Alex opened his eyes. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised. Why pediatrics?"

Alex sighed and stretched his legs before answering. "Popular opinion is a desire to heal my inner child, but I just like kids. So many of them need looking after. I suppose Chet Dickson, the president of Technolites, had something to do with my decision."

Skye made a prodding sound. Alex sensed her movements in the seat beside her. Evidently, he hadn't finished answering her first question.

"Before I set Chet up as head of Technolites, he was my doctor, back when I was fourteen. Well, you read about that in the Chronicle. When I surfaced in New York, I was in pretty bad shape. He took an interest in me. I

guess I wanted to return the favor to some other kid."

"After you left your practice in Los Angeles?"

Once he started, the words flowed. He wasn't telling her anything a mediocre detective, or a journalist like Pete Handley, couldn't find out. "I moved north and went to work at San Francisco General as an emergency room specialist."

"Why did you move?"

"Are we still on the first question?"

"Yes, and we're staying on the first question until you tell me the truth. Did you move to San Francisco to be near Tristan?"

Alex unbuttoned another button on his shirt, the last one he could reach, before he continued. The stewardess appeared at his side and handed him more champagne. He tried to sip the drink instead of gulp it.

"My partners in L.A. asked me to leave. I know you won't be satisfied with that answer." Alex didn't feel satisfied either. Skye waited quietly while he searched his mind for another. "After Beth, my wife, she -- "

Damn it, why couldn't he say the words? He needed to say them. In a few days he would fulfill his promise to the woman who died four years ago, the woman who agreed to be his wife when she learned she had only weeks to live. He had to find a way to say the words.

The words wouldn't come.

He started again. "With her gone, it was too hard to get up in the morning. They did me a favor kicking me out. I might have done something stupid. Things were different in Frisco. I worked in the emergency room. All my cases, routine or crisis, I turned over to someone else. No emotional attachments, no commitments. And I could be close to Tris. He saw me through rough times in school. It was my turn to take care of him."

"Why did you keep being a doctor secret?" Skye looked like a lioness ready to pounce -- golden eyes and hair -- and nothing less than the truth would satisfy her.

Feeling slightly stunned, he stared at his glass for a long moment before finishing his drink. He hadn't faced the truth until just now. "Because if people knew I was a doctor, the time would come, an emergency, and I would have to act."

"What do you think will happen? What are you afraid of?"

Afraid. He was afraid, and for some reason he didn't mind admitting it to Skye. "Doctors lose patients. It comes with the territory. I'm not ready to lose another one. Not yet."

"Now for question two." Skye refolded her hands over her blanket.

Alex rolled his eyes and pushed back his seat. He buttoned his shirt. When the stewardess returned to stand at his elbow, he heard Skye unbuckle her seat belt. She slid closer to him. He tried not to groan when her folded knees kissed his thighs.

She draped her arm protectively across his chest. "Mr. Jackson would like a blanket, please."

Alex didn't protest when the two women stretched the blanket over him. "I suppose next you're going to ask why I want you on this trip?"

"I can word my questions more carefully than that. I want to know why you're really making this trip. If I know that, my part should become clear."

So far this evening he'd felt annoyed, angry, and amused. A dozen emotions had ebbed and flowed as he struggled with the truth. Why was he making this trip?

He decided to state the obvious. "I want to settle the future of Iowa Glass and get on with my life. Isn't that what you want? For me to somehow, magically, make things right at the plant, and then leave town? Or would just my leaving town do?"

Skye fixed him with her most serious teacher stare, daring him to say anything other than yes, ma'am. "I'm asking the questions here."

He didn't know how much to tell her. How close to the truth would he have to get to satisfy her? How much of the truth did he know? "You know we're

landing at Heathrow."

Her gaze didn't waver.

Perhaps a distraction would do. "My father's people originally came from England. You do know about the Close Colony in Iowa, don't you, Skye?"

When she shook her head, he continued, "I'm not surprised. It's a romantic story, and textbooks leave out the good parts. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, English noblemen from several companies invested in ventures in the States. They invested not only their monies but their sons. In Iowa they established a colony devoted to teaching farming techniques to the sons of British nobles. Supposedly, they would start large, money-making farms of their own. The venture turned out to be a spectacular flop, but for a few years you could find the sons of dukes and earls pulling plows in Iowa fields.

"One of my ancestors, while pulling a plow, fell in love with a local girl, a Dutch settler. They meant to spend their lives in Iowa, but when the young man's older brother succumbed to some illness, he had to return to take over as head of the family. His wife died giving birth to their daughter in England shortly thereafter. When the father tried to force his daughter into an arranged marriage, she returned to her mother's family in Iowa. There, she met and married a Mr. Jackson. They named their son Clayton Alexander Jackson, my grandfather."

"What a sad story." Skye's eyes narrowed. "What does the Close Colony have to do with our going to England?"

Alex yawned and stretched under the blanket as he inched his way toward her. Lack of sleep left him too tired to do anything, and she looked so soft. If she slid next to the window, he could rest his head in her shoulder and try to sleep. "According to my mother, Jackson men are doomed to marry interesting women."

"Was your mother an interesting woman?"

Alex shrugged. How had he gotten on this subject?

"This trip is about your mother isn't it?"

He pulled the blanket more tightly around him. Skye Devries was a perfect witch when it came to guessing at the truth. He removed the blanket and began to fold it. "They'll be serving dinner soon. I want this over with by then. All this questioning is bad for the digestion."

"Is that your medical opinion, Doctor?"

Alex tried to ignore her, but she had guessed this much. Telling her more couldn't hurt. She might be able to help.

"Someone doesn't want me to stay in Close. Heck, I don't want to stay in Close. But someone is going to a lot of trouble to see I get the message. It's gone beyond prank messages and embarrassing articles in the local paper. Yesterday, someone broke into the window factory in Georgia, Bettencourt's old factory. Records were stolen. I haven't figured out if this move was calculated to draw me there and away from Close or if the significance of the act lies in what was taken."

Skye appeared less confident now. No longer covered by the blanket, she curled her legs under her. "That's what he's done, whoever he is. Gotten you away from town. If that's what this person wants, maybe we shouldn't have left Close."

Alex had given that some thought. He hadn't quite figured it out, but it must be significant. Did someone want him out of Close or in Georgia instead of in Europe? He wanted to reassure her. She looked so genuinely distressed. "Leaving town will give Harley some breathing room, and keep you and Dirk out of danger. If I thought this person would follow me across the Atlantic, you wouldn't be here. So relax, Mrs. Devries... Skye. You're safer here with me than in your Iowa."

"What does this trip have to do with your mother?"

"I'm not certain how, but this whole thing connects with her. When I was young, we spent most of our time in Europe visiting family in England, France, and Sicily. We'll start looking there. If I find out why my mother was

killed, I might discover who is behind this campaign to get me to leave town."

"I thought you believed Miles Bettencourt killed your mother."

"But I don't know why, and we're down to your last question."

The stewardess began to serve dinner to the people sitting in front of them. Alex lowered their tray tables, and braced himself for Skye's next question.

"I think I'll save my third question for later."

With that simple statement Skye killed all possibility he would fall asleep.

* * * *

JACOB VAN WYK swung the ax with his good right arm. Seventy-two years old and he could still chop a half cord of wood in an afternoon. He'd outlasted all the bastards -- Jackson, Bettencourt. Even his precious Aletta.

For an instant he saw her as he had that day -- her bright red lips twisted into a scowl, her flashing black eyes angry and accusing. The moment her mouth opened, her lips pursed to form a final cry and she tumbled out of reach.

The ax dropped from Jacob's hand.

He found his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face. He should wait until the cool of the evening to chop wood. He should wait until fall. But today chopping wood was a necessity, the only thing to drive away Aletta's ghost.

Jacob didn't believe in ghosts, which made the chopping of wood all the more imperative. Aletta had left him alone for years, decades. Now his darling had returned with her son, and both were determined to have their revenge.

He bent to retrieve the ax. When he straightened, he saw the boy as he had that day, laying face down in the dirt. Jacob's hand tightened on the wooden handle. As much as he had loved his Aletta, he had always hated the boy. If Alex hadn't left town of his own accord, he might have had to kill him.

If Alex returned to town, in time, he would remember their secret. Only death stopped the mother's mouth and if Alex returned, what happened next would be on his head.

After he counted the remaining logs, Jacob decided to order another cord. Wood was cheap this time of year and if this winter wasn't particularly hard, the next would be. Each year it took more wood to warm his aging bones.

He was glad Miles had buried Aletta in Sicily. She hated the winters in Iowa. Now, she was always warm. Warm in hell where she belonged.

Chapter Nine

AS GRIM AS ALEX'S purpose had sounded on the plane -- solving his mother's murder -- Skye was having a delightful trip. Her suitcases arrived safely at Heathrow, and she spent three days sightseeing. Their first full day in London, Alex left with his leather jacket over his arm to take care of family business. Skye didn't press for details.

Alex acted preoccupied, but not uninterested. After the first day, he switched from expensive suits to his normal jeans and sweater. They played tourist, visiting museums during the day, the theater district at night. He was the perfect host, and Skye found herself denying knowledge of the most simple things so she could listen to his explanations, delivered in his seductively low, European accent.

Each evening ended at her door with him giving her a quick peck on the cheek before he retired to his adjoining room.

In Paris, things were different. In the morning, the hotel delivered breakfast to her room and a congenial gentleman arrived an hour later to serve as guide and translator for her tour of Paris. She felt silly even thinking of complaining. Here she was enjoying a free vacation. The company was pleasant, if official, but she missed Alex.

After four days, she still had no idea what he was doing here. She saw him in the evening when they shared a meal at the hotel. He made an effort,

she had to admit, to keep up his end of the conversation, but each meal ended the same. Stiff and formal in his elegant business suit, he escorted her to her room. A squeeze of her arm replaced the kiss on her cheek, and he managed to look incredibly grim when he wished her sweet dreams.

Within the hour she would hear his door open and then close. After a long day of sightseeing, she never managed to stay awake until he returned.

The evening before their scheduled flight to Rome she decided she would not spend her last night in Paris alone in her room. She used the number her guide had left and an hour later was spending an almost perfect evening in a marvelous club listening to jazz, tapping her foot, and wishing she'd brought her sax. But to have a perfect evening she needed someone to share it with. Someone Alex hadn't paid to keep her company.

Shortly after midnight, she gathered the courage to ask her guide where she might find Alex.

From his reaction, she feared Alex spent his evenings visiting bordellos. After accepting twenty American dollars and the promise of a pair of her blue jeans -- for his daughter, he said -- her French guide led her to a jazz club not far away.

This club was larger than the intimate setting she'd left, but with fewer people. The band was larger and they weren't playing the soulful, old style sound she loved to play. She walked past half empty tables to the middle of the dimly lit, smoky room. Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" charged the air. Too classical for her tastes.

She accepted a glass of wine from her escort and raised her eyebrows to ask where Alex might be. He nodded at the band and retreated to the bar. That's when she noticed the man at the piano.

Dressed in blue jeans and a black T-shirt, Alex sat with his eyes closed, his hands flying over the keys. A glass of wine rested precariously on the baby grand. When the solo switched to another player, he watched the clarinet and trumpet for his cues.

Clearly, all were professionals to pull off such a feat. The scant audience sat entranced. To Skye's ear, and she'd heard the piece dozens of times, Alex played flawlessly -- his solos brilliant, his improvisations to make up for the incomplete ensemble inspired.

When they played the last chords, Skye's tour guide appeared at Alex's elbow. He stood abruptly, ignoring the scattered applause. Like a dark angel in blue jeans, he floated through the smoky air.

He walked like a man used to being on display who no longer took any notice. His movements were graceful and rhythmic, set in time to some melody that sounded in his head.

Alex dismissed the tour guide with a wave. "May I join you?"

Suddenly nervous in the dimly lit room where scattered couples whispered in each other's ears, she nodded.

Alex pulled up a chair and sat. "What do you think?" He nodded toward the band. They were playing a piece she didn't recognize, but it was New Orleans jazz.

"They're very good. So were you. I'm impressed." She hoped after so much teasing he knew she was telling the truth.

He propped his feet on an adjacent chair and took her hand. "I came here for the second-hand smoke. I haven't played in public in years."

His grip was cool and firm, his gaze clear and unwavering. She had grown used to the wide silver band he wore on his left hand. The instant he touched her, she noticed it was gone.

He sat too close, the contact too sudden after four days of keeping his distance. Now, with his ring finger bare, he seemed to expect something of her. He drew her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

She pulled away. "You play the piano very well."

"I have talented fingers." Alex's voice, deep and husky, sent a chill through her.

She wanted to be with him. She had sought him out. Now she felt like a

school girl with cold feet.

When he reached for her hand again, she scooted her chair to the side so they faced each other across the table. He looked slightly annoyed. What was he to think? She'd come to him in the middle of the night, and now she was acting coy.

She tried to lighten the mood. "Did you learn to play at medical school? Or did you specialize in piano later on?"

"My mother insisted I take lessons from an early age. I learned to read music before I learned to read books." Alex reached for her hand again. This time he captured it, squeezing until her fingers began to tingle. He loosened his grip and stroked the inside of her wrist with his thumb.

Instantly, her body came alive as his fingers sent sparks up her arm.

His voice took on a cynical, hard edge, but he continued to stroke her hand with a light touch. "She said I would thank her someday for making me spend all those hours practicing. She didn't consider school important. I used to sneak out of the apartment during siesta and play soccer on the streets of Milan with the local boys.

"She would be pleased to learn she was right. When I ended up in New York, I was smuggled into bars to entertain the customers. I played for my supper and for my companions' drinks. By then it was too late to thank Mother, of course."

Skye shuddered at his bitter words. A quick look around confirmed no one paid any attention to them in the darkened room.

Alex continued. "I learned more about playing in those New York bars and after-hours clubs than I ever did slaving over the grand piano in her studio in Milan."

The thought came unbidden -- not all lessons were conducted at the piano. A flash of heat shot to her face.

As if he could read her mind, Alex looked away. That small gesture, turning as if to hide his shame, thoroughly undid her. She reached for him.

With her hand on his cheek, she turned his face toward her as he had done for her so many times. She wanted to say what he needed to know. He was no longer a hurt, young boy. He was resilient and strong, and very much a man, but she didn't know the words.

His eyes widened when she looked into their brown depths, and they captured her. As if to claim her, he reached under the table and grabbed the rim of her chair. His hand brushed her thigh as he dragged her seat around the table next to his.

She tried not to stiffen when his right arm pulled her close. Hypnotized by his earnest gaze, she relaxed in his embrace. His hot mouth followed the tingling path from her ear to her collar bone, alternately kissing and biting with controlled precision. When he moved his hand to her lap, she covered it with her own, freezing it in place when he tried to stroke her inner thigh.

With his right hand trapped beneath hers, he moved his left to the back of her head, tangling his fingers in her hair. She wanted nothing more than to know how his lips would feel against hers, how he would taste.

With only one hand, he controlled her movements. The strength in those fingers that had danced across the keys now controlled the movement of her head. Strength, and an anger she didn't understand.

When he tried to guide her mouth to his, the room, the band, the people snapped into focus, and she turned away. He kissed her cheek. Waves of pleasure flowed from her neck to pool between her legs.

He whispered in her ear. "I haven't forgotten any of my lessons. I just haven't had much opportunity to practice lately."

The pleasure turned to panic -- unreasoning, unthinking panic. "No, Alex."

She gulped air, her lungs protesting the stale smoke, and stood coughing. What she wanted to say remained unspoken. I'm the one out of practice. I haven't been to bed with a man in more than seven years.

* * * *

BY THE TIME SKYE reached the street, Alex was kicking himself for being so incredibly stupid. The moment he realized she was in the club he should have ducked out the side door. Instead, he'd gone to her for comfort, for the strength he would need to sign the papers to sell Beth's paintings.

Wine had killed his common sense.

Now he was left with the memory of Skye's panic-filled eyes as she ran from him. He'd known from the first time he saw her, from the moment he had looked into her honest, Midwestern eyes. Here was a woman who deserved someone very special. Whatever pain her parents had caused her, she had risen above it and managed to maintain her integrity and innocence.

Alex had no innocence and he didn't remember losing it. He only knew that on the streets of New York City when some man grabbed his fourteen-year-old body from behind and threw him to the ground, he knew the same thing had happened before. Sometime, somewhere, he couldn't remember.

He had made peace with those two years on the run. Made peace with the choices he made and the people who hurt him. Made peace with what he could not change. Meeting Skye had made him believe he could start over. It was possible to look at the world again with hope and maybe even innocent optimism. But he couldn't make peace with what he couldn't remember. He couldn't make peace with Miles Bettencourt and his escape from justice.

* * * *

WHEN SKYE RAN from the smoky club, her tour guide fell into step beside her. Less than twelve hours later she sat in the Paris airport.

After saying Mr. Jackson had made a change in flight plans, her guide left her and her bags in a coffee shop where she sipped French coffee. The coffee, and how it made even hers taste good, reminded her of Shelley. Shelley reminded her of Close. Was Alex sending her home in disgrace?

Funny how the idea bothered her. A week ago she would have guessed she'd be frantic to return. Now, she couldn't imagine going back. Except for Dirk, what did she have there?

What she could imagine was life without Alex, and that life frightened her more than leaving Close ever had. She had panicked when he kissed her in the club. Next time she wouldn't.

Less than half an hour passed before Alex breezed in, dressed for business -- summer-weight silk suit. She heard but couldn't identify the tune that he hummed. "Sorry about last night."

"I understand -- "

He stopped her with a finger on her lips. "No, Skye, I was moving much too fast. I'd been drinking, but that's no excuse. It won't happen again."

Skye found herself encouraging his tentative smile.

When she broke into a full-fledged grin, he asked, "How's your Italian?"

"Poco a poco. Nothing you wouldn't find written on a sheet of music."

"Well, it doesn't matter. They speak mostly Sicilian where we're going."

Skye groaned. "I thought you changed the tickets -- "

"Eager to get back to Iowa, are we? I had planned to fly from here to Rome to Catania and take a cab to Syracuse, but I changed my mind. We'll take a flight directly to Palermo instead. From there I want to drive to Agrigento before we go to the villa in Syracuse."

Alex picked up her suitcase and she followed him through the airport. Unlike the flight in New York, Alex was in no hurry to catch this flight and she was in no hurry to return to Iowa. She floated down the walkway.

"Did you finish your work here in Paris?"

When Alex spoke great sadness invaded his eyes. Every word tore from his throat as if he was loathed to speak but had no choice. "I settled Beth's estate today."

He reached for her hand and didn't let go until they landed in Palermo.

* * * *

WHEN THEY CROSSED the parking lot, Alex steadied Skye with a hand on her elbow, enjoying the way her body molded against him and her arm wrapped around his waist. He waved at the men who stood around the shiny red car that waited for him, pleased Skye didn't back away when they greeted him in Italian.

The sensations, the sounds, the smells -- everything so familiar and yet out of reach. He turned his face to the summer Mediterranean sun. *_I'm home_* -- the thought hit hard and Skye steadied him instead of the other way around. He slid his hand up her arm, and squeezed her close, resting his chin on top of her head and smelling her hair.

Uncle Alberto's foreman tossed him the car keys with a grin and a salute.

Skye's eyes widened when she examined the bright red convertible. "What's this?"

"That, my dear, is a quarter of a million dollars of Italian engineering and my uncle Alberto's idea of a joke. It's also how we're getting to Agrigento."

Alex couldn't tell if she was impressed as she ran her fingers over the hood. He opened the trunk. "We don't have a hell of a lot of room in here. If you pick out one bag, I'll send the rest on ahead to the villa."

Together they each took a bag from the pile next to an ancient Fiat. He also grabbed the bag Lorraine had packed for Skye.

Skye leaned against the car, her face upturned, and seemed to enjoy the sun as much as he. "What's in Agrigento?"

"If this was February, the almond festival."

Skye smiled as she scolded. "You know what I mean. Do I have to start calling you Mr. Jackson again?"

Alex patted the arm she'd thrown around his waist, grateful for her silent support on the plane. Now he must repay, if not her understanding, then her patience. It cost him nothing to answer her questions, even those whose answers he wasn't certain of himself. They had come too far for him to go back to calling her Mrs. Devries.

"I want to understand why Miles did it. If I understand why he killed my mother, maybe I can prove he did. Lorraine remembered a trip right before Mother died. Yesterday in Paris, I spoke to Mother's agent, who arranged these things for her. He said we flew from Paris to Palermo and stopped off in Agrigento before driving on to Mother's villa in Syracuse. I thought we'd spend the night there and check it out. They have quite a lot of ruins there, and it's all very romantic."

"Well, I guess that answers why Miles Bettencourt brought your mother here."

Alex weighed the car keys in his hands. "Why's that?"

"You said it was a very romantic place."

A tightening in his chest warned the thought away. "Romantic or not, a week later he took his bride of two years and their children to Iowa. They'd been home three days when it happened. Something must have triggered his actions. No one's been able to explain his actions to me. I know he murdered her. I need to know why."

Alex jumped when Skye touched him, startled by the contact. Her hand rested on his arm, light and warm, returned his attention to the outside world... and to Skye.

She didn't back away. Standing erect, all five feet three inches of her, she looked into his eyes with a boldness he had not seen there before.* "I'm here to help. We're going to find out what happened, and if the answers aren't here, we'll look somewhere else. For as long as it takes."

The breath went out of him in a whoosh. For the first time someone believed him. The weight of being the only person who knew Miles killed his mother lessened by half. He would go wherever he had to to solve this puzzle and Skye would go with him.

Alex helped her into the red Ferrari.

"So who's Uncle Alberto and what's the joke about the car?" Skye asked.

"I have no idea the biological nature of my relationship with Alberto. I suspect there is none. Considering both my parents are only children, I have an amazing number of aunts and uncles."

After settling into the driver's seat, Alex practiced running through the gears. "The joke is, Alberto wouldn't be caught dead in a Ferrari. Like any good socialist, he considers it a symbol of conspicuous consumption and political scandal. I'm the rich American patron. To ensure I stay in character, he borrows one for me when I visit."

The feel of driving the Ferrari came back to him as if by magic. After jerking the car through the maze out of the airport, he floored it and headed south.

Skye peered at the speedometer. "Aren't we going too fast?"

"That's a hundred and forty kilometers, not miles." He couldn't remember how to convert the numbers. He just knew the wind felt right as it blew his hair. An image flashed and he heard his mother yell to someone to slow down. Before the image faded, Alex caught a glimpse of the speedometer. Mother thought a hundred and sixty was too fast.

"I still don't get the joke about the car."

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. No use trying to keep secrets. If he took her to the villa in Siracusa, Martha would share all his childhood embarrassments.

"I stole a Ferrari when I was ten. Took without permission would be more accurate. The car was a wedding present from my mother to Miles. I didn't get very far before I ran it into a ditch. Everyone thought it was very funny. I don't think my family here in Sicily approved of Miles."

He stole a glance at Skye as he swung onto the highway that circled the island. She didn't look shocked, but amused, and happier than he'd seen her since they'd met. Alex wanted to believe he was in some way responsible. "For someone who didn't want to come on this trip, you're certainly enjoying yourself."

"Oh, I am."

Alex looked again, she positively beamed.

When she yawned and stretched her arms over her head, the sight of her breasts straining against her cotton shirt caught his eye. * *He gripped the steering wheel more firmly. Too much of this kind of sightseeing and they'd end up in the ditch. At more than a hundred kilometers an hour, a crash wouldn't leave the Carbonari much to ship to Iowa.

"You've been asking a lot of questions, Skye. Maybe, you can answer one for me."

"Sure. I have no secrets."

Another quick look in her direction and he lost himself in her eyes for a quiet moment before he returned his attention to the road. Seeing her peaceful expression, he no longer wanted to ask his questions. _What were you so afraid of, Skye? Me, or just leaving Close? If I hadn't come along, would you have stayed in that stifling, little town forever?_

"Do you like fried squid? I seem to remember a restaurant that serves great calamari in Agrigento."

"I'm game to try anything, but you haven't finished your story about the car."

"I'll leave that to Martha, Alberto's wife. She's English. She'll enjoy having someone new to tell embarrassing stories. You know I've never understood how those two get along so well. Alberto so very Sicilian, Martha so very British. What could they have in common? They've been married forever."

"Perhaps, it's the Sicilian air."

"Mother always said the air in Sicily was magic. Anyone could fall in love here." What a silly thing for him to remember when he couldn't clearly remember his mother's face.

While he recounted what his mother told him about Sicilian air and love, he draped his arm on the back of Skye's seat. He felt like a teenager on

his first date. Had he ever felt that uncertain before?

Skye took his hand and drew his arm down to fall across her shoulders. By the time they reached Agrigento, she was leaning against him -- her eyes closed, mouth slightly agape, asleep.

When they reached the hotel, she lay curled against him, her arms around his waist. Last night he hadn't slept. He hadn't even tried. Instead, he'd gone to the gallery and looked at Beth's paintings one more time before signing them away. Now, looking at Skye, Alex realized he was ready to start his new life. Start it with Skye if she would have him.

* * * *

A SLAMMING CAR door woke Skye. She rubbed her eyes, trying to decide if the bower of flowers overhead was real. She was too sleepy to decide.

"I thought you were going to sleep all day." Alex sounded like he needed a nap. He stood beside the car, a bag in each hand, waiting for her to get out. So much for her gallant knight.

Then she laughed. Before Alex asked what she was so happy about, she couldn't put it into words. But it came to this -- she had been wrong, Shelley had been wrong. She wasn't afraid of leaving home.

Well, maybe a little at first, but once she got over the initial hump, her fears evaporated. She still wanted to return to Iowa. Still wanted to do whatever she could to help Close, but she didn't have to anymore. She had Alex to thank for that.

He had forced her to face her fears and she was stronger than she would have thought possible. The difference made her want to shout or sing, and share the news with someone.

She followed Alex into the hotel, where he appeared very much at home. The place didn't feel like a hotel -- small, rustic, and homey, or would be if she spoke the language. She ignored the conversation between Alex and the man at the desk, which she didn't understand, and studied the gardens that surrounded the building. A few minutes later, she followed Alex again, this time up a single flight of stairs.

The proprietor opened two doors before backing away, and Alex directed her through the door on her right.

"We share a bath," Alex explained as he tossed her bag onto the single bed. "I'll have some food sent up now, and come for you at nine for dinner. They eat late here."

Skye followed him to the door. He looked dreadfully tired now and vulnerable. That he had the presence of mind to consider her needs touched her. Lorraine was wrong. Skye didn't need a nameless body in which to forget herself. She needed the loving, caring man she saw the first night Alex arrived in town, the man who scolded her for keeping a little girl up past her bedtime.

Later she would explain. She had the feeling Alex had helped too many people in his life without realizing the good he'd done. "Thank you for everything."

She had to stand on tiptoe to press her lips to his. When she closed the door, she left him with a startled look on his face.

Chapter Ten

THEY ATE IN the small restaurant on the ground floor of the hotel. Sparring, as usual, over little things. Skye spent two hours staring at Alex through candle light. In the end she admitted she liked fried squid, and after denying it several times,* *Alex admitted he, like Lorraine, enjoyed driving fast cars.

When he pulled out her chair, his lips brushed her cheek. She shivered and had to steady herself with a hand on the table.

He had traded his suit for blue jeans and sweater. Too old for a college student on summer break, but that's how he looked after a few hours sleep. She had changed into a sinfully short, black dress she'd found in the bag Lorraine had packed.

Instead of ending this evening like the others -- her on the wrong side of the door -- she hoped they could take a walk.* *Skye continued their discussion as Alex led her from the restaurant. "Why don't you buy a Ferrari when we get home?"

"After teasing Lorraine about her Corvette? I wouldn't dare. Besides, you could buy a couple of houses in Iowa for what a Ferrari costs."

At almost midnight, other guests still came and went. Alex guided her up the stairs with his hand clasped firmly around her waist. Tonight he didn't lead her to her room, but stopped at his own door. When he released her to unlock it, she took a step back.

Why did she hesitate? Since the first time he sat dripping wet at his desk, she had wanted to do more than just look at his gorgeous body. So why hold back now? Nothing more than the suddenness of his change in mood, she decided. In London he had behaved so properly, in Paris so officiously distant until the last night. He said he had too much to drink at the club when he kissed her. This evening he'd sipped his wine, making a single glass last through the meal.

Now, after he pushed open the door to his room, he bent toward her. His lips lightly brushed her forehead, then the bridge of her nose.

She shivered at the contact, her lips parting in anticipation. By the time she opened her mouth, he had already straightened.

Her eyes closed and her face upturned when he spoke. "I want to show you something."

When he drew her into his room and locked the door behind them, she couldn't help laughing. "I haven't heard that line since high school."

He immediately opened the bathroom door and the door opposite, leaving a path open to her room. A means of escape? For whom?

Did Alex want her to leave when she saw this thing he'd brought her here to see? If so, Skye wanted to delay her departure a while longer. "Did you find what you were looking for? About your mother?"

"The proprietor remembers our being here."

"After twenty-five years?"

Alex frowned and rubbed his temple. "Aletta Casale was quite unforgettable. A national monument during her days at La Scala. He says we spent three nights here, but he didn't recall any significant details."

Skye decided to let the subject drop. "What did you want to show me?"

He crossed the room and knelt on his single bed, the mate to hers next door. First, he pulled back the curtain over the high window, then, motioned for her to join him. "I have the view, I'm afraid. If I'd known, I would have taken the other room."

He patted the space on the bed beside him. "You can't see anything from there."

Skye felt silly, but scooted across the bedspread on her knees. His arm circled her waist and he tried to pull her up, but the angle was too awkward. She couldn't see over the window sill.

"This better be something pretty special," she muttered, struggling to her feet. He put his arm around her legs to steady her on the rickety bed. Dimly aware of Alex's cheek against her hip, she gasped at what she saw.

Three ancient ruins, lit by floodlights, stood in a row down the hill from their window.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"The Valley of the Temples in Agrigento."

"They're Greek?"

"In better condition than anything in Athens. Greeks founded Agrigento, one of the richest Greek cities in the classical world, in the sixth century BC. One of these temples is dedicated to Hercules. I can't remember which. Tris was the archeologist."

"Did you and Tris come here often?"

Alex tightened his grip on her knees. "To Agrigento? No. Unrepentant beach bum that I am, I usually stayed in Syracuse. Tris dragged me here once

or twice to fill me with culture. We can look around tomorrow if you like."

Skye stole a glance at him. She had never seen him smile before when talking about Tristan. Maybe Sicily was a magic place, like Alex's mother said. * *The next time she looked, Alex was watching her.

He splayed his fingers across her hips and turned her to face him. Kneeling, his head was level with her waist. Skye tried to control herself, but her hands moved of their own accord, and tangled themselves in his hair to pull him closer.

His fingers circled her legs and stroked the backs of her knees. When he spoke, he didn't look up. "Unless you want to spend the night, you should leave now."

He whispered his warning, but the hot breath of his sigh sent pangs of longing between her legs and begged her to stay.

Sensations sparked as she allowed herself to feel again. The half-forgotten sensations were painful, as if the circulation had been cut off from her body and was coming back after all these years. The sensation promised pleasure, and more.

"I want to stay."

"I have to warn you, Skye. Warn you about me."

She dropped to her knees, wanting to face him, to look into his eyes. She drew his face to hers. With her mouth, she stopped his warning. His lips were hot beneath hers and firmly shut. He circled her waist with his hands and lowered her onto the bed.

The single bed didn't allow for lying side-by-side. He supported himself above her on his arms, her legs tangled in his, her hand over his heart measuring its reassuring rhythm.

"Skye," he murmured. He drew her mouth to his again, this time opening his lips to her.

His shifting weight made the bed creak. Skye imagined the night clerks exchanging winks on the floor below. He knelt beside the bed to leave her the entire width, and removed her shoes. Each one dropped with a thud on the floor. When he returned his attention to her mouth, his mouth teased her -- tasting her lips, nibbling first one then the other.

She slid her hands under his sweater, and pushed against his chest, forcing him back.

"What?" His brow was furrowed, lips wet. The dark shadow of the day's growth of beard made him look like a bandit or a pirate. He would have to be careful or he'd burn her skin when he rubbed his face against her. Skye licked her lips at the thought and shivered.

"You took my shoes off. Now it's my turn."

His face relaxed. "Your wish is my command. I just have one small request."

Skye tugged at his sweater, exasperated he'd kept it on so long.

Alex pulled his sweater back in place. "Not so fast. There are rules, you know, young lady." He smirked at her, drawing a thumb across her lips. Skye pressed forward to force more contact.

"Call me Alex." His eyes sparkled, looking black in the moon light. Then he kissed her, deep and long. His hand trailed from her neck downward, and came to rest at her knees.

"Alex," she whispered and arched her back. He stood and kicked off his shoes, then drew his sweater slowly over his head. She grew damp at the sight of his innocent striptease. He brushed his tousled hair in place with his fingers.

She raised her hand to him. "Come closer."

He stood next to the bed and guided her hands to him, closing his eyes when she ran her fingers through the luxuriant, black hair that covered his chest. She lingered over the hard peaks she found hidden in the curling mass. When he swung a leg over her to straddle her, she had to stretch to bite and lick his nipples. She felt warm and safe with his strong body suspended above her, shielding her from the world.

The bed heaved when he returned to kneeling on the floor. "I should have asked for a matrimonial bed."

"What's that?"

"A double bed. Two beds shoved together at most places. The first time is awkward enough without logistical problems. You look hot with all these clothes."

She tried to make her request sound like an order. "You could do something about that."

"Yes, Skye. Anything you desire." His voice lowered to a whisper as he moved to the foot of the bed. After drawing her dress up slightly, he slid his hands up one of her legs. He easily unfastened her stockings from the lace garter belt.

He lightly snapped the elastic against her upper thigh. "You wore them."

"They took me forever to figure out. Lorraine must have packed them."

"Remind me to thank her when we get back."

His knuckles brushed intimately across her silk panties, fingers lingering on the dampness before stroking the fabric.

Her hips rocked in time with his fingers.

He removed the second stocking more quickly, his breath coming faster now. Solemn, he drew the simple black dress over her head, his eyes widening at the sight of the black lace camisole and half slip she wore underneath. He traced his finger across her breasts, following the line of lace. Each time his fingers traced the path, they pushed the straps to the side, eventually slipping them from her shoulders.

His lips followed the path his fingers had sensitized, and she found herself arching her back again, willing him to free her breasts from their prison of lace. He slid downward to press his mouth against the material molded against her breasts.

With his hands behind her waist, he lifted her to him, drawing her camisole up to lick the skin left bare above her waist. A moan erupted from within her, startling her.

Is this really me? This woman lying on a bed with a man. "Please, Alex," she begged.

His fingers moved to the ribbons that laced the front of the camisole. He fumbled for a moment, then cursed softly. "It must hook in the back."

He helped her roll onto her stomach and unfastened the hooks. She tried to return to her back, but his firm hand against her back stopped her.

She lay still while he removed the pillow from beneath her head and slipped it under her hips.

When she looked at him over her shoulder, Alex brushed the hair from her eyes and kissed her. This wasn't a fantasy, dream lover. This was Alex.

"Say it." His eyes burned into hers.

Her lips trembled when she spoke, but she spoke aloud so he could hear. "Alex."

He ran his hands down the length of her, from her neck to her toes, pulling off her slip as he went. Her camisole fell away, leaving her breasts bare. She wore only the silk panties now. He murmured as if to himself while he stroked the small of her back. "So very beautiful."

Her back still toward him, he circled her waist with one arm and lifted her to her knees. He opened her mouth with his thumb and dipped his fingers into her mouth.

She had never felt so utterly possessed by a man than she did now as he wet his fingers on her tongue. She sensed him rise up to straddle her again. This time he rested lightly against her upturned bottom.

With damp fingers he teased her nipples. The sensation shot from her breasts to the juncture between her thighs as he continued to stroke. She rocked hard against him, realizing as she did he still wore his jeans.

She wanted to feel him, not denim, on her skin. When she pushed against him, more sharply this time, she elicited a groan of pleasure. She smiled, her

face pressed against the white, linen sheet. With his hands on her shoulders, he pressed his pelvis against her.

When he stopped, she expected him to undress. Instead, he left the bed and knelt on the floor. He wrapped his arms around her waist and turned her to face him.

Her eyes closed, she sensed him kneel between her legs, his hot breath warming her. "Skye, my Skye," he whispered, leaving a trail of hot kisses along her inner thigh.

He slipped a finger beneath her panties and began to stroke her mound as his playful bites changed to hard, sucking kisses. His tongue lapped against her as his fingers delved deep within her, stroking her in time with the rhythm that pulsed through her.

Skye floated between the reality of the bed beneath her and the place she longed to go. She concentrated on his hot breath while his stroking fingers worked their magic. His fingers played with the source of her pleasure, entering and retreating. Searching, filling.

He rose when she came, holding his hand tightly against her as she fought to increase the pressure. When she collapsed, he left the bed.

She could see the stars, their bright glow dimmed by the floodlights outside, which lit the temples. Her body cooled and she shivered, bereft to have him standing so far away. She rolled onto her back and opened her arms, inviting him to return. She wanted this night to be perfect for both of them.

Like a deer caught in headlights, he stared out the window, his eyes blank and unseeing. The glare fixed him in place.

She didn't believe he would actually leave until he bent to pick up his sweater. "Where are you going?"

He took her hand into his and drew it to his mouth. "Goodnight, sweet lady."

Alex was walking. Lorraine had always said he would, but why now?

"Why?" The word came from her throat in a croak. She ripped the sweater from his hands. He released it without a fight.

"You stopped me from warning you before, Skye, but I have to tell you. When we get back to Iowa, I can't pretend nothing happened between us."

When she began to shake, she slipped his sweater over her head. He wasn't making any sense. Did he think Lorraine would object? People at the plant? Why would he care?

When he pulled her to her feet, the bed rocked beneath them. He turned her face to look at the Valley of the Temples. "You want a love like those ruins -- built to last a thousand years, beautiful long after everything else has gone."

Tears blurred her vision, making the white columns in the valley below look even more perfect.

Alex spoke from the door to her room. "Tonight you're better off sticking with the view."

* * * *

"SMART MOVE, ALEX," he muttered as he paced Skye's room. How had he managed to end up in her room? He still couldn't believe he'd left. He'd never wanted a woman more than he wanted Skye, and maybe that was the problem. He couldn't bear the thought he might hurt her.

How easily he'd seduced her under the cover of Greek ruins and moonlight. As easily as Miles had seduced his mother? As easily as Beth had seduced him? Neither seduction had anything to do with love. He couldn't do that to Skye.

Love was what Skye deserved. Pure, innocent, uncomplicated love to protect her, not bring her danger and unhappiness. Sheldon Seabrook might be a pompous ass, but at least he didn't have an X-rated past.

When he threw himself on her bed, Alex realized his second mistake. He could smell her on the pillow and the wrinkled sheets. The overnight bag Lorraine had packed stood open on the dresser, a white nightgown spilling out of the top. What had his sister been thinking when she packed that bag?

He had thought he understood Lorraine. She'd stated her position clearly enough. She didn't want him involved with Skye. So why fill the bag with sexy underwear and a knockout black dress? He'd divided his evening between staring into Skye's eyes and at her breasts.

Thinking of her again, he groaned. He could only hope what she felt for him was curiosity. One night would not satisfy him. More than curiosity drove his actions. Lust, certainly. Physical need, after a four-year abstinence, most definitely. Also, the beginnings of obsession. The overpowering need to have for himself something of his own. The irrational desire to fight for it. He couldn't go through that again.

He understood the biochemistry behind his actions, recognized the adrenaline surge that had driven him from the room. Fight or flight. He chose to run.

Before he could get comfortable on Skye's bed, the bathroom door rattled. He threw her nightgown over his shoulder.

Her voice, muffled behind two doors, sounded small and lost. "Please, open the door."

He'd locked her out of the bathroom as well. Two locked doors between them. How frightened was he of the beautiful Widow Devries?

He shook the thought away and opened the door. Her hand slammed into the second door to stop him from closing it behind him.

Her voice no longer sounded small. "Where do you get off telling me what I want?"

She looked particularly appealing when she stamped her foot at him, color high. She wore his sweater, one shoulder bare. He could see the swell of one breast heaving beneath the cabled cotton.

When he took a step back, the bedside lamp rattled. Aware of the length of white lace and satin draped over his shoulder, he dropped her nightgown on the bed. "What's the problem?"

Skye stomped her foot again and crossed the room to jab her finger at his chest. "You seem to be under the impression I'm a fragile half-wit who's unable to make decisions for herself. Well, I'm not some silly, romantic, small town girl you can trifle with and walk away. I know what I want, and I intend to have it."

He was powerless in the face of her honest fury. In the office, she seemed so malleable, so willing to do anything to placate him. Her underlying motivation being the welfare of Iowa Glass, of course, but he'd feared she would be the same in the bedroom.

"I don't want a romantic view. I want you," Skye insisted.

She trembled, revealing the effort she'd expended to face him. No one had done such a thing before -- risked such an intimate rejection -- for him.

Despite the warm night, she shivered and shifted her weight from one bare foot to the next. In the large sweater, she looked like an angry child demanding dessert.

He reached out to straighten the sweater on her shoulders. When he covered one bare shoulder, he revealed the other. The tops of her breasts glowed in the moonlight.

She rose on tiptoe to kiss him. A mistake. For both of them. He didn't hold a demanding child in his arms, but a woman who could draw him toward her with her lips alone.

He cupped her breasts beneath the sweater, feeling their weight. For a moment he tried to convince himself he was only satisfying his curiosity, as she had hers. He would enjoy a few moments in her arms, take a few memories to store against all the lonely nights he faced.

Slowly, he drew the sweater up her body. He tried to linger, to enjoy the moment, but he wanted her naked now, needed to feel her pliant flesh. Before he dropped the sweater on the floor, he planted a dozen kisses down her smooth, white shoulder.

When she kicked the sweater aside and pressed against him, as eagerly as he, he knew he must have her again and again, every night.

Before he could claim her with his mouth, she covered his chest with kisses. Alex abandoned his fight for logic.

She sat on the bed before him and gently teased his legs apart. He closed his eyes and rocked forward on the balls of his feet. After she unzipped his jeans, she pressed her mouth against him.

No right or wrong, no should or shouldn't. Only here and now. Hunger. Need. Fulfillment.

She pulled his jeans, then his shorts, down his legs. Hearing her gasp of pleasure, he waited while she stroked his length and gently cupped him. When she removed her hand, he bent and helped her free his feet from his pants. He caught her mouth with his when they finished.

No decisions. No moral dilemmas.

She pulled him onto the bed, then changed places with him. He closed his eyes again while she knelt before him, anticipating the moment when she touched him. Her arms circled his neck first, and then she climbed onto his lap.

He marveled at how right she felt, clinging to him. Her kisses drowned any objections he might raise with erotic waves of sensations. When she lowered herself onto him, she felt deliciously tight.

Her head lay on his shoulder, her hair smooth against his cheek. He couldn't understand the words she murmured, but her actions spoke volumes as she rose to take him again.

_Please let this last forever, or end now and start again. _

He cradled her hips in his hands and rocked against her. He matched his strokes against her tightly drawn brows and straining mouth to bring her to the brink and back before he allowed her to come again.

Her hot spasms pushed him on. Her nails raked his back and her harsh whisper, "God, Alex," drove him over the edge. His entire body shook with need when she tightened around him.

When he opened his eyes, she was smiling. Grinning, actually.

The thought he'd pleased her set his heart thudding in his chest. Her breasts brushed him and sent spasms of fading pleasure between his thighs.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You were wonderful." He tried to pull her forward to reach her lips or breasts.

She pushed him back on the bed and pulled the bedspread between them. The feel of knobby, well-worn cotton replaced Skye's hot, damp skin against his.

She stroked his bare chest while she protected her own. "What's so funny about that?"

Alex didn't want to explain. He wanted to enjoy and savor the moment. "Not funny. Just unexpected."

Evidently not the reply she wanted. Skye pounded her fists on his chest a few times, her eyes alight with laughter. * *"What did you expect?"

He shrugged. "I don't know." Too much talk. He tried to shift her off his chest and onto the bed, but there wasn't enough room. "I never really thought about it."

"Really?" Amusement played across Skye's lips.

Such a pretty mouth. He traced its borders with his forefinger, and jerked his hand away when she threatened him with her teeth. When he withdrew his hand, she pouted.

A little girl one minute, a passionate woman the next. Alex Casala, what have you gotten yourself into? "I lied. I've imagined you in my bed since the first day I saw you, and every day that's followed. I begin every morning wondering what you're doing and end every night wishing you were doing it with me."

He felt passion rise within him again. "Let's move to the floor."

His mouth over hers to keep her quiet, he rolled her off his chest and onto the floor. Together, they made a bed there. When they finished, they faced each other on their knees. Skye still clutched the bedspread.

He bent to kiss her hair while he considered if she wished to sleep, but her hot tongue lashing at his chest told him otherwise.

With eager fingers she kneaded his flesh. Her hands drifted downward to his waist, and she teased his inner thighs before stroking his engorged flesh.

"You, Mrs. Skye Devries, are in a great deal of trouble," he moaned. "A great deal of trouble."

"I can handle it."

Ignoring the glow of dawn, he dipped his head and kissed her thigh. She would be his for one more day. He refused to think about tomorrow.

Chapter Eleven

SKYE WAS BEGINNING to understand how Alex had taken three weeks to drive from California to Iowa. Unlike most men she knew, he stopped to ask directions often, but when he realized he was going the wrong way, he didn't know how to turn the car around.

For three days they'd zigzagged up the east coast of Sicily, sometimes ending up farther from their destination than when they started. Their first day he insisted on finding her a hat and sunglasses to protect her from the ultraviolet rays. Then flowers for their hostess, "Aunt" Martha. The flowers reminded him of flower pots, which reminded him of Caltagirone. According to Alex, no one left Sicily without shopping in Caltagirone. They spent an afternoon looking at pottery in a crowded marketplace.

When she decided he had no intention of taking her to his villa, he announced that as soon as he bought more flowers, they would join the rest of their luggage in Siracusa.

This morning she'd awakened before him, as usual, and crept out to bathe and dress. Now, she sat cross-legged on the bed and watched him. "Do you always shave like that?"

He stopped pacing and came to rest in front of her. "Do I always shave like what?"

He wore only jeans. When she reached out to touch him, he backed away.

"None of that," he scolded, but the teasing glint in his eyes gave him away. "Not if you want to get an early start today. What's wrong with the way I shave?"

"You're going to miss spots shaving like that. I've got a mirror in here someplace." Skye leaned over to rummage through her bag.

When she pulled out a mirror, he turned away. "I've always shaved like this. I go by touch."

"I wondered about that."

"Hmm." Alex put away his electric shaver and pulled a sweater over his head.

"Mr. Parish, the plumber who did the work on your bathroom, asked me why you didn't want any mirrors."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That you're a vampire, of course, and don't like to be reminded you lack a reflection."

"You didn't! No wonder I'm having public relations problems in Close. My most trusted employee portrays me as a bloodsucking pervert." With that he nipped at her neck with his teeth.

Her breath grew rapid and her heart began to pound when his playful bites changed to playful kisses. Alex's side trips were not the only distraction to slow their progress.

He made an odd sound, almost like a whimper when she unzipped his jeans, but his mouth never left hers. Without protest, he allowed her to undress him and pull him onto the bed.

A half hour later he gathered her into his arms, and she thought he wanted to sleep. Instead, he turned to lie on his back, and lifted her to rest against his broad chest.

His brown eyes looked dull and drowsy, but his arms felt strong as he positioned her over him. It wasn't until she felt him probe between her thighs

she realized he wanted her again.

She watched him through slitted eyes while she rode him, her fingers tangled in his chest hair. Totally absorbed in her, he lovingly stroked her breasts and rolled her nipples gently between wetted fingers.

The sweet torture seemed to go on for hours as he held her suspended above him. Finally, his fingers joined his thrusting organ to tease her, then to drive her in earnest.

He cried out her name, the single syllable echoing like the mournful cry of a bird of prey, offered in protest to some unrecoverable loss. She wanted to weep when she rested on him. Instead, she wiped away the tears that leaked from the corners of his tightly closed eyes.

* * * *

A SULLEN MAN with a shotgun blocked their path.

"Where are you taking me now?" Skye craned her neck to see around the turn in the road.

The armed guard raised the rickety gate and waved them through.

Alex returned the wave. "Home, or the closest thing I've got."

Skye couldn't see his expression beneath his wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. They'd driven directly from the hotel, skipping lunch and the inevitable siesta that would have followed.

"Uncle Alberto and Aunt Martha have taken care of the place for as long as I can remember. Mother was too busy with her career and traveling, but she wanted a place to call home. The lawyers didn't see any reason to change the arrangement after she died, and neither do I now it's mine."

Alex's grip eased on the steering wheel, and he directed her attention to the fields they passed. * * "Most of the land is taken up with orange groves. Alberto devotes some acres to grapes grown for wine, but only for local consumption. Mostly on my property, I suspect. He sends reports, but I don't pay much attention as long as revenue covers taxes and upkeep. The last time I visited was three years ago with Tris."

Shortly after his wife Beth died, Skye thought. She heard the next barrier before she saw it. Dogs. Mean, angry dogs. She pulled in the arm she'd been resting on the open window.

In Iowa Alex had frozen the first time he heard Henry, Dirk's lovable Old English sheepdog, sound a few friendly barks. From what she could tell, a pack of hungry, wild dogs waited up the road to greet them, and Alex didn't flinch.

Instead, he hummed Puccini and kept time with his fingers on the steering wheel. She looked at those fingers differently now she'd seen them stroke the keys of a piano and stroke her with equally satisfying results.

Alex stopped the car in front of a gate that looked more secure than the last -- a single, metal gate with a guard house on the other side. He shouted something and the gate swung open. Within minutes four dogs surrounded the car. These beasts looked to be a cross between a Great Dane and a Doberman. By comparison, Henry looked like a puppy.

Skye shrank into her seat while Alex bounded out of the Ferrari to embrace a young man. The dogs wagged their tails while the men spoke in rapid Italian, or maybe Sicilian. Alex absently scratched the dogs behind their ears and slapped their rumps as they competed for his attention. Why wasn't he afraid of them?

When he got back into the car, Alex looked pleased and flushed. "Just a bit farther. They've been worried. They expected us this morning. Should I tell them why I was delayed?"

He reached over to drop a kiss behind her ear, then put the Ferrari in gear and drove slowly past the barking dogs before he accelerated down the road. The scene repeated itself five minutes later. This gate was smaller, but not the dogs.

An elegant driveway led to the side of a low, white villa. Skye didn't notice the details. She barely noticed Alex get out of the car to greet the people who approached. The ocean captured her attention. Some two hundred feet

down the hill, the Ionian sea pummeled the rocks on the shore.

Alex, the car, the strangers, the dogs -- the wind from the ocean drove them away. She stepped from the car hardly aware of what was beneath her feet. The smell was fresh and salty. Seaweed left in the sun at low tide. Flowers on the grassy slopes beyond the rocks and sand. Everything else faded when she found herself on a flower-filled slope, waves pounding the shore.

The compelling, primal rhythm drew her forward. Alex's hand on her shoulder stopped her. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Beautiful didn't come close.

He slipped his arm around her shoulder. "We should go inside. They're waiting."

When she turned, Skye found the others had retreated a respectful distance. The men restrained the dogs and a half-dozen boys jockeyed for the right to carry the luggage to the house.

"I would introduce you, but I don't know the young ones' names. Martha, Mrs. Proccini, is my mother's age, but she's Alberto's third wife. His grandchildren are our age. I have enough trouble keeping them straight. The great-grandchildren..." Alex shrugged.

Their noisy entourage left them in the foyer of what looked like an enlarged version of Alex's house in Iowa. The same green marble on the floor, a gallery of paintings, French doors with lace curtains. They walked through two enormous rooms -- what looked like a living room and a formal dining room -- before coming to the back patio.

A wizened, old man sat beneath an umbrella, his frail body* *propped with pillows in a much-too-large chair. When they approached, Skye could see he was asleep. Alex walked past and into the arms of the woman who leaned against the patio rail.

If this was Martha, she must be in her early sixties, but she looked younger. The sea breeze molded her white cotton dress to her body, revealing a trim figure. Alex and the woman spoke in hushed tones, turning in unison from time to time to look at the sleeping man.

The woman looked in Skye's direction. "Alex, such a naughty boy, you have forgotten your manners. Introduce me."

When Alex introduced Skye as his business associate, the older woman raised her eyebrows slightly. She waited until Alex disappeared into the house before speaking. "Come, my dear. Alex has things to take care of. We shall have lemonade. The lemons are grown here on the property."

Skye followed Martha to the end of the patio. Her hair was a soft gray, but she had a quick step and a finely freckled face, like a young girl's. Her hands were freckled too, and didn't reveal her age. Sometime in her past, she'd broken her nose -- a crooked monument to an interesting life.

Martha nodded at the girl who followed them with the tray of drinks. "One of Albert's great-granddaughters."

The girl didn't join them, but left the drinks on a table and retreated to the house before Skye could say hello.

She followed Martha past the patio rail and into the garden where they sat on stone benches. Skye faced the ocean, hypnotized by the sight.

They sat in silence for a long time, the scent of flowers rising around them. With a start, Skye realized Alex's mother had tried to duplicate this setting in Iowa, using what she had at hand. She would have found the rich Iowa soil receptive to her roses, but the pond behind the house must have been a poor substitute for the Ionian Sea.

Martha poured the lemonade and passed the sugar separately. Skye found she needed only a touch of sweet to enjoy the drink.

Martha nodded her approval. "Alex has never brought his young ladies home to meet us before."

Skye wasn't certain what to say. "Excuse me?"

Martha continued as if she hadn't heard. "There was Beth, of course, but she was more like a sister."

His wife? Like a sister? "I'm afraid I didn't know Beth. I've only seen

one picture."

"Sister is wrong. Mother. That's what she was. The marriage was a formality, a lawyer's trick. They were his parents, Beth and Tristan, poor boy."

Skye shook her head. "I'm sorry I don't understand. I don't know much about Alex's childhood."

"The boy keeps too much to himself, but he has spoken of you these past weeks. He needs a confidant now he has decided to face it all again. If only we had been there for him the first time. By the first time, of course, I mean when Alex lost his mother. He thought everything had been taken from him and we were so far away. For days no one told us Alex had run away. He had run away so often before. We thought he would come here. Weeks passed before Alberto flew to the States to search for him. Dear Miles searched too, of course, but he had Lorraine to look after and his business. We don't blame Miles. We don't blame Miles...."

Martha's voice faded as she repeated the plaintive phrase. She looked older now, as if remembering Alex's troubled childhood had aged her. She stood, her hand on her hat as the wind tried to take it from her head.

"Alberto is still sleeping," she murmured, before she continued. "By the time they found the boy, he'd changed so. Two years is a long time to live on the streets. We visited him in Boston, of course. His doctors thought seeing us might jog his memory. Poor boy, to remember everything about his ordeal, but not what made him run away. We wanted him to live with us here, but Miles said no. Alex's father, Mr. Jackson, had wanted him educated in the States."

Martha shook herself from her memories and poured more lemonade. "He had to leave his first two schools. He met Tristan and Beth at the third. They became his surrogate parents. Now, he's lost them, too, and he's alone again."

Martha patted Skye's knee. * * "We keep hoping he'll find some nice girl and take a real wife."

Skye sipped her lemonade, not knowing what to say. When she looked over her shoulder for Alex, she wondered if that should be her third question to Alex. How could she phrase it? _Say, Alex, what's the story with you and your late wife? People seem to think you weren't really married._

Alberto sat on the balcony, still dozing. When Skye turned back to Martha, her eyebrows arched in question. "So you work with Alex. Are you a nurse or a doctor?"

Alex had introduced her as a business associate, and she didn't want to contradict him to his friends. Besides, she wasn't exactly certain what their relationship was now. "Alex and I work together at Iowa Glass."

Martha shook her head. "The boy should be practicing medicine. I was Aletta's best friend, but God forgive me, I believe he has grown a better man without her. His mother would have never stood for his being a doctor."

Then, as if suddenly remembering her manners, Martha straightened in her chair. "Such physical work, making windows. Aletta never prepared her son to take over his father's business. She expected him to follow her in the arts. Do you help make the windows, dear?"

"I work in Alex's ... his office," Skye struggled to explain what she did. "Sort of like a secretary."

At that Martha frowned. Before Skye could say more, Martha waved in the direction of the house, and Skye turned to see Alex on the patio pulling off his sweater. A dozen boys stood beside him, all stripped to their shorts.

Dressed only in jeans, Alex followed the boys who ran through the gardens. He paused to squeeze Skye's shoulders and kiss her cheek. "Make yourself at home, love. I'll be right back."

The mob of screaming children pulled him toward the ocean.

Martha refilled Skye's glass with lemonade. "What exactly do your duties entail, my dear?"

* * * *

AFTER ONLY THREE days with Martha, Skye knew how to play the game. She ignored

Alex while Alberto's daughters and granddaughters worked in the kitchen and took the children to bed. Like a queen, Martha never lifted a hand and she kept Skye at her side. The two women watched the men on the patio.

The sexes separated after supper, the men going outside to smoke. Skye found the practice mildly amusing, especially since it appeared to bother Alex more than it did her. He'd taken a baby, a boy no doubt, from one of Alberto's granddaughters, and stood upwind from the smokers, resting the baby on one hip. He glanced through the open doors to catch Skye's eye.

Skye refused to acknowledge him.

"He shows no interest in practicing medicine?" Martha asked.

"He doesn't talk about his plans. He says he'll have things under control at Iowa Glass by the end of the summer. Where he goes after that...." Skye shrugged, suddenly feeling guilty. Since they met, her only concern had been for the factory and how Alex's decisions affected her town. She hadn't stopped to think he had other concerns.

Martha clasped her hands, and looked at Alex now that he was no longer watching them. "He was so happy when Yale accepted him after such a rocky start. He had trouble adjusting to boarding school. But once he set his mind on a goal.... Albert and I were so proud when he graduated from medical school. I would like to say Alex's choice of careers would have pleased his mother, but she had nothing but contempt for doctors. Technicians, she called them." Martha shrugged. "Perhaps she would have accepted Alex's decision not to pursue a career in music if she had lived. Perhaps Aletta would have grown along with her son. At thirty years she was still a child."

Alex gave Skye a surreptitious wave and he shifted the child from his hip to his chest. When she realized she was staring, Skye turned away. She shouldn't let him into her room tonight. He had spent yet another siesta playing with the dozens of children who lived here and in other houses on the estate. He needed a good night's sleep.

To turn away from Alex as he stood with a group of men who spoke rapid-fire Sicilian and flicked cigarette butts onto the ground was one thing. To turn him away when he stood outside her bedroom door, quite another.

Martha refilled Skye's glass with wine. "I do not believe he will return to California. Too many memories to make his heart sad."

But that didn't necessarily mean he would stay in Iowa. In Sicily no one questioned him about what happened twenty-five years ago or sent threatening messages or tried to kill him. Was someone trying to kill him or just drive him out of Close? For almost two weeks she hadn't given it a thought. Would the danger have passed when they returned? "Maybe he'll decide to stay here in Sicily."

"A farmer? Our Alex?" Martha's laughter broke Skye's thoughts.

Skye hadn't thought of it that way. Of course, that's what Alex was. A gentleman farmer, but a farmer, and from what Skye had seen, a good one. He chose skilled tenants and let them do their job without interference.

"My dear," Martha said after she stopped laughing, "Alex returns to his mother's home when he needs rest. He plays with the children, cooks amazing meals, and pretends interest in the orange groves and Alberto's dogs. After a few days he becomes restless. If he stays a week, he becomes impossible and I threaten to leave if he does not go away. This time, with you here, he might last longer, but even with such a pretty distraction, a man must have work."

Skye found herself blushing. She didn't know if it was from being called pretty or the inference everyone knew of Alex's nightly visits to her room.

"What the boy needs," Martha said, "What he wants, is a home and children of his own. That he can have anywhere."

Even in Iowa. Why not in Iowa?

Get real. Lorraine pestered him to admit he lied about his mother's death, a disgruntled employee -- make that two -- had tried to kill him, and persons unknown wanted him out of town. Why would Alex entertain thoughts of returning to Iowa?

Martha turned toward the patio and placed her glass to the table. "Whatever he decides, we will see him next year. Alex has been invited to La Scala as guest of honor to a ceremony honoring his late mother. He must attend or insult her memory. To a performance of Madame Butterfly, of course. Has he told you the story?"

Alberto shuffled into the room, signaling the end to the formal evening. After escorting the elderly man to a chair, Alex joined Skye on the sofa, baby still in his arms. He didn't seem to notice the sleeping bundle, which he shifted to his lap before he threw an arm around Skye.

Once seated he looked at Martha's smiling face and demanded, "What embarrassing stories have you been telling?"

Martha moved to wrap a blanket around her husband's legs. "What story? What does all Milan still talk about? The performance where Butterfly made the right decision for once. Instead of killing herself over a faithless man, she tended to her child."

This was evidently Alex's cue to pick up the story. He handed the baby over to his mother. "I don't really remember what happened, but I've heard the story so many times -- "

"Go on," Martha prompted.

"Well, you know the story, I'm sure. At the end of the opera, Butterfly, my mother in this case, sings a farewell to her son and blindfolds him so he won't witness her suicide, which takes place behind a screen. For some unknown reason, my mother decided I should play the part of her son in her farewell performance."

Alex fell silent, staring through the room and into the night sky. Martha placed her finger to her lips when Skye opened her mouth.

"It was very hot that day. Was it summer?" Alex asked.

"Yes," Martha whispered. Everyone held their breath.

"I wasn't nervous about going on stage, but while I stood in the wings, the words Mother sang right before I went on frightened me. She'd been crying all day. I remember Uncle Jacob. What was he doing there?"

"He flew in from the United States to bring word of your father's, Mr. Jackson's, death."

Alex nodded and continued, his face a mix of curiosity and apprehension. "Maybe I knew what was going to happen next. I must have seen the opera dozens of times. Anyway, I tore off my blindfold and knocked down the screen where Mother, Butterfly, was going to kill herself. I understand I caused quite an uproar. Mother carried me off the stage, and handed me to my nurse, or someone, waiting in the wings."

Alex coughed and broke the spell. He pulled Skye closer. "I believe my actions were credited with saving my mother's career."

Skye wanted to wrap her arms around his strong, broad chest and feel his heart beating. "How's that?"

"According to Martha, she intended to retire, but my ruining her farewell performance so upset her, she continued for another six years."

"You remember?" Martha asked, tears shining in her eyes.

"Yes. You never told me Jacob was there, did you? He came here, to the villa, once too. When Miles was here. Before the wedding."

Martha fairly beamed. "That's right. Having you in Milan with us next year -- "

Alex held up his hand. "That can wait. I did want to ask you something. The last time we came here, all of us -- Mother, Miles, Lorraine and I -- what did Mother and Miles argue about?"

Skye waited with bated breath. She knew he would ask; this was why he had come. She hadn't expected him say anything with her in the room. Martha shook her head and Alberto tried to straighten in his chair.

When Alex stood and began to pace, Skye recognized the tension in his normally fluid movements. "There must have been something. Some disagreement. I'm not a child. You don't have to hide things from me. Maybe one of her old lovers ... did Miles catch her in a compromising position?"

Martha jumped to her feet. "I will not allow you to even think such a terrible thing about your mother. She was not unfaithful to Miles or to your father. She would not have done such a thing."

Alex ran his fingers through his hair, and stared at the woman who confronted him. "She must have done something. Or was it something I did?"

Skye's hand flew to her mouth as she fought to keep from crying out. The pain she saw in Alex's eyes was mirrored in Martha's.

Martha's eyes filled with tears when she looked to her husband. He was shaking his head, but Skye didn't know if he intended some instruction or had momentarily lost control of his movements.

Martha took Alex's hand and led him back to the sofa. She caressed his cheek, her fingers stroking his face as if to ease a little boy's pain. "I do not know why your mother died, dear boy, but Miles loved her very much. She was to have his child. She came to bring us the news."

Skye's stomach knotted. She knew how much Alex loved children. This had to make his mother's death even more tragic.

Alex looked too stunned to speak. When he did, he sounded oddly formal. "Skye, I believe we can return to Iowa now. I'm not going to find what I want here."

Chapter Twelve

THIS IS WHERE he belongs, in Sicily, Skye thought, as she boarded the plane for home.

Surrounded by a loving family, he had blossomed. The Mr. Jackson who sat brooding away the day behind his desk had disappeared, replaced by Alex. An Alex constantly on the run, who took babies' temperatures, planned expeditions to the beach, and cooked meals large enough to feed an army. If she cared for him, she would want him to stay too, she would insist on it.

A sense of obligation was the only thing that compelled him to return with her. Although he didn't discuss it, she knew he felt responsible for Phil Perkins and Tom Ritter's deaths. He wouldn't leave until the future of Iowa Glass was secure.

Alex hadn't said anything, but she had the impression settling his wife's estate had eased his financial situation. Together, they would get the window factory back on its feet. Separately, they would get on with their lives.

Alex belonged in Sicily, she belonged in Iowa.

* * * *

"MR. JACKSON, THE report you wanted arrived."

When Skye spoke, Alex winced, but didn't look up. After two weeks of calling him Alex, she had returned to using titles when they left Sicily. The flight home had been a nightmare unveiled in slow-motion. Skye receded inch by inch, replaced by the proper Mrs. Devries, who forever redirected their conversation to Iowa Glass, her only concern.

Alex missed her smile almost as much as he missed her body writhing against his. He had only to close his eyes to see her mouth. Perfect teeth showing through moist, pouty lips. Deep dimples formed at the edges when she smiled. Her hands on his chest, urging him forward.

All in the past. She had made herself clear on the plane. He'd felt like a character in some 50's movie where the preppy college student tells the coed it was fun, but summer's over. Only in this scenario, it was the girl who let him down -- hard, not easy.

He almost wished she would ask her third question, the one he'd promised her on the plane, to give them something to talk about. Anything to return to the intimacy they had shared. But no matter what he tried, he couldn't crack the shell Skye retreated behind when they boarded the plane for the States.

Now, after almost a week in Iowa, he was further from the goal than ever. The most he could hope for was to see pity in her eyes, and that he couldn't bear.

While he pretended interest in his computer screen, he took the papers she offered. One glance revealed what he feared -- autopsy reports.

"Are those the ah ... the reports?" Skye sounded like a nurse addressing a dying patient.

Alex tore open the manila envelope and spread the familiar forms across his desk. Had it really been almost two months since he'd signed a patient's death certificate? As a doctor, he was used to reading such reports. He tried to ignore Skye as he scanned the documents.

You will get used to having Skye around. You will address her as Mrs. Devries. You will not become obsessed.

His father hadn't suffered as much heart damage as Alex expected. He would have lived for many more years if he'd had the benefit of today's medical advances. From the second set of papers, his mother's, he coolly analyzed the internal damage caused by a fall. Internal bleeding, damaged spleen, ruptured uterus.

Then he saw her name -- Aletta Casale Jackson Bettencourt and his stomach knotted. For a moment he couldn't force himself to take another breath. His mother was four months' pregnant when she died.

How many people had known? Alex hadn't, but twelve-year-old boys didn't pay attention to their mothers' waist lines. Besides, she always wore those flowing dressing gowns as if at any moment the stage director might call to request her presence on stage.

Alex turned to the report on his father's death again, but his vision blurred. Skye's hand on his arm released the breath he held inside.

"Was there something else?" He hoped he managed to sound professional. The papers bunched in his hand when he tried to stuff them into the envelope.

With her usual efficiency, Skye took the forms and straightened them. She looked pale this afternoon. He imagined she hadn't gotten much sleep last night. If they were still in Sicily, he would have coaxed her to bed with the promise of a nap and let her sleep an hour or two.

No doubt Dirk had kept her up until all hours regaling her with stories about Space Camp. The boy had returned from Alabama yesterday and talked to Alex nonstop on the drive from the airport. The experience had obviously boosted the boy's self-confidence.

If only Alex felt as self-confident when dealing with Dirk's mother. From the way her lips parted and her tongue flicked across her upper lip, she was about to ask a question. Knowing Skye, she would ask a question he didn't want to answer.

Time for him to redirect. "Michael's report on Miles Bettencourt arrived this morning while you were out. He didn't find anything incriminating. He must have missed something."

Skye hugged the autopsy reports to her chest as if for protection. "Maybe you're looking for something that isn't there."

"Or someone knows something, and isn't talking. It's all too convenient. The man happens to be in charge of the Georgia plant when my father decides to retire in Iowa due to ill health. Then Miles happens to be in Iowa when my father dies, happens to be married to my mother when...

"Someone here in Close must know something, but they're not likely to tell me. Skye... Mrs. Devries... you know everyone involved. Can you think of anyone who might have kept records, unofficial ones perhaps? Something you heard your grandfather or husband talk about? These small town officials don't always run things by the book, especially when they want to cover up something."

"I'll think about it, Mr. Jackson, and let you know if I think of anything."

That was the most he could hope for. Alex looked at his watch. Almost six. His stomach knotted at the thought of eating. "Is that dinner at Lorraine's tonight?"

"Unless you don't feel up to it." She looked concerned again, like he needed a keeper.

He'd left California to escape those looks. Ones nurses gave him when they caught him smoking in the stairwell, or Tris when he went one too many days without sleep, or Beth....

Alex straightened in his chair. "I feel fine."

When he stood the weight on his feet, the click of his shoes as he walked across the marble floor, reassured him. Company was what he needed, and if he wanted Skye's company this evening, he'd have to put up with Lorraine.

That was how desperate he'd become. To be with Skye, to escape the images that bombarded him now with increasing strength and frequency, he was willing to spend an evening with Lorraine, even if it meant going to Miles Bettencourt's house.

* * * *

SKYE THREW A PILLOW from the sofa at Alex's closed office doors. Damned, infuriating man. He always ignored her questions. When he didn't ignore them, he didn't tell the truth, but he had started her thinking about unofficial files. Something about the phrase -- unofficial files or unsolved crimes -- rang a bell.

If only he didn't cling so stubbornly to his belief Miles Bettencourt killed his mother, they might be able to develop a theory about who did. It didn't help that Alex continually insulted her family, implying the sheriff's department was involved with a cover-up.

She'd barely kept her temper this time, but she had. The last thing she needed was an argument with Alex. She had all she could do being polite and proper when what she wanted to do was rush into his arms every time she saw him.

That would never do. Shelley was right, so was Lorraine. Eventually, Alex would leave, going where Skye couldn't follow. Everyone in Close would learn of their affair. She had made the right decision when she ended it before the plane touched down in New York. She had done her best to convince herself.

Funny how quickly the joy she'd experienced on her trip had faded. In a way, knowing she could leave Iowa made having to stay worse, but she did have to stay. Close needed her, and when she was honest with herself, she could admit she needed Close.

She retrieved the pillow she'd thrown and crossed the room to her desk. By the time she sorted through the mail to make certain Harley hadn't missed any death threats, Alex had returned.

He wore one of his expensive suits from the trip. His slightly gray pallor, which had startled her when they left for London, had returned. Tonight, unlike all those nights in Sicily, he hadn't shaved before he came to collect her for dinner. How could a few thousand miles of ocean have changed things between them?

Alex stopped a few feet from her. "Did Dirk tell you all about Space Camp?"

A safe topic of conversation. Alex had decided to turn on the charm. He was hiding again. Hiding from her specifically or from everyone? Or did Alex want to hide from himself?

Filling him in on everything Dirk had told her carried the conversation from the foyer in Alex's house up the winding path to Lorraine's.

"Is Dirk here?" Alex nodded toward the white mansion. "I'd like to see him."

Skye ducked her head. She knew Alex wouldn't approve. "Dirk is staying at David's. Sleeping over to tell him about camp."

Alex stared at the front door. "With David's Grandmother working nights, there's not much supervision in that house."

"Their aunt, one of Mrs. Ritter's sisters, is staying for a while to help out. She may take the two girls back to Michigan with her. They haven't decided yet."

Alex threw her one of his plastic smiles. "Why don't you go ahead? I'm going to look around. I haven't seen the place up close in years."

Unable to think of a plausible reason to remain, Skye searched the house for their hostess. She found Lorraine and Chuck Cross in the kitchen. Lorraine was bent backward over the butcher block table with Chuck pressed hard against her, his face buried in her hair.

Lorraine noticed Skye before she could retreat. After she pushed Chuck away, Lorraine tugged her skirt to a more modest level. "Skye, you're here. Did you bring him?"

Chuck Cross blushed furiously. He turned his back to both women and faced the window.

Lorraine dismissed him with a wave. "Don't mind Chuck. He didn't think Alex would come. I didn't have any doubts. Alex knows I'll hound him to his death unless he gives in. He'd want to get it over with sooner than later."

Hound him to his death? Why did Lorraine say such things? She didn't hate her brother that much, did she?

Lorraine left the kitchen and paused in the foyer, looking first at the front door and then up the formal stair case to the second floor. "So, where is he?"

"He was right behind me."

Lorraine stormed into the dining room. "Damn it, Clayton, where are you?"

Skye followed in Lorraine's wake. The ebony table, long enough to seat two dozen, was set for four. The black surface gleamed in the sparkling light of the chandelier. Light careened drunkenly off the goblets and silverware. No sign of Alex.

Chuck entered the room, having followed from the kitchen with a plate of hors d'oeuvres. Still slightly red-faced, he mumbled, "Eat up, ladies," and walked to the sideboard.

The usually buoyant Chuck Cross looked taciturn when he poured himself a double scotch and leaned against the fireplace mantel. Skye had not expected this to be a fun evening, but this was ridiculous. Before she could speculate on how it could get worse, the sound of breaking glass startled them.

As one, they wheeled to face the French doors leading to the garden. A hand slid through the broken panel and unlocked the door. Skye held her breath while Alex entered. He had said he would never walk through the front door of the Bettencourt house, and he still hadn't.

Lorraine surprised them by laughing. "Why, Alex, you've inherited your mother's knack for making a grand entrance."

He returned his stepsister's smile and crossed the room to exchange pecks on the cheek with her. As if they hadn't arrived together, Alex greeted Skye.

Instead of kissing her cheek, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. His touch sent sparks shooting up her arm. His plastic smile faded when he continued to stare into her eyes.

Skye silently willed the real smile to return, but no laugh lines appeared around his eyes, which remained a muddy brown despite her desire to make them sparkle.

Lorraine tugged on her brother's arm and pulled him away from Skye. "Do you remember them, Alex?"

To Skye it seemed Alex tore his gaze from hers, and faced his sister with reluctance. "Do I remember what?"

"Mother's grand entrances down the front stairs? She would stall until we were waiting here in the dining room, and then she'd float down the staircase. Do you remember?"

Alex looked around the room, lingering over the closed double doors that led to the foyer and the grand staircase. "My memories of her on stage are clearer than those of her here."

Chuck pulled himself away from the wall. From his posture, he still smarted from the scene in the kitchen and was uncomfortable playing host for Lorraine. "We have wine, champagne, scotch -- "

"Wine." Alex looked from Lorraine to Chuck. "White," he added when

Chuck hesitated, his hand hovering over the display of bottles.

Before Alex could get the glass to his lips, Lorraine began her attack. "You were supposed to come through the front door, Clay. Not sneak in the side like a thief."

He crossed to the sideboard to get a napkin. "My name is Alex."

Skye said nothing when he blotted a streak of blood and wrapped the napkin around his hand.

"Oh, Alex then," Lorraine stamped her foot again.

His hand curled more firmly around his glass, Alex crossed his arms over his chest. "Why is this so important, Lorraine? I can't believe a grown woman is holding on to a childhood dare."

"I may have been a child when I dared you to come through that door, but I had a perfectly good reason and I still do. You might not remember, but the day she died, the day she died...." Lorraine's voice caught on the phrase.

Still clutching his scotch, Chuck went to her side. Lorraine grabbed his arm and began again. "After the sheriff left, Daddy tried to take you back in the house. You scared me so that day. You yelled and screamed. You said you'd never go through our front door again. When Daddy tried to carry you to your room, you passed out cold. He called an ambulance and had you checked out at the hospital. We thought whoever killed Mother might have hurt you. I thought I had lost both of you. I thought you were dead."

After gulping Chuck's scotch, Lorraine continued. "Then you ran away, and I did lose you. But I can have you back. All you have to do is remember what happened, and you'll know Father didn't kill her. You'll know I didn't lie about Daddy. I'm good enough to be your sister."

Skye could no longer hold back. Lorraine voiced Skye's inner most fears. Her parents had abandoned her because she wasn't good enough, not worthy to be their daughter. Only her grandparents' love and later Ben's had convinced her of her worth. Lorraine had not been as lucky. Skye rushed to Lorraine's side where her friend gratefully hugged her.

After crossing to the sideboard, Alex put down his glass. Only Skye watched while he folded his blood-stained napkin and wrapped a fresh one around his hand. She opened her mouth to say something. She wanted to explain she wasn't taking sides. She could be a friend to them both, brother and sister.

Instead, Alex asked the question. "I'm leaving. Are you coming with me, Skye?"

Something in his voice when he held out his uninjured hand let her know he was asking more than to escort her from the room. He would force her to choose. Remain friends with Lorraine and live in her house, or come with him.

Lorraine saved her from making a decision when she opened the large double doors. Skye walked between Alex and Lorraine into the foyer. Before they crossed the distance to the front door, Lorraine put two fingers between her teeth and blew.

Skye heard the dog before she saw it.

Lorraine's favorite bitch, Daisy, ninety-five pounds of playful Old English sheepdog, bounded down the back hallway toward them, her back end wagging. Sliding on the polished wood floor, the dog skidded toward the front door. Once on her feet, Daisy bounced and barked, blocking the way.

Alex reached for Skye's hand. "Get that mutt out of here."

Instead of moving to control her dog, Lorraine stepped back. Alex's grip tightened around Skye's fingers. She bit her lower lip to keep from calling out.

Alex shifted toward the back door. The dog moved, too. Sidestepping to avoid Daisy brought Alex and Skye to the foot of the staircase.

Lorraine ignored Alex's distress. "Do you remember the dog you showed that summer? She looked just like Daisy. You were in the backyard teaching her a new trick. I waved at you out the window. Daddy was in the room with me."

Alex shook his head in denial as he continued to stare at the dog. "I didn't see Miles. If I'd seen him, I would have said so in court."

"But you saw me," Lorraine insisted. "You waved and shouted up you were coming to show me a new trick you'd taught your dog. What was the trick?"

Lorraine made the question sound urgent, and Skye suddenly realized that it was.

Skye had assumed Lorraine wanted Alex to come to dinner to talk about Iowa Glass. Lorraine had something else in mind -- making Alex remember. Only one man believed Lorraine's father killed Aletta Jackson, and Lorraine would prove that one man wrong.

Alex released Skye's hand. He looked calmer, like he had at the villa when he remembered his appearance at La Scala. He patted the sheepdog's hairy head. "It wasn't a trick, really. I had a red pull toy. I held one end while she bit on the other. She'd shake her head and growl when she tried to get it away from me."

"I heard you come through the back door," Lorraine prompted. "Daddy and I waited but you never came up the stairs."

"I came through the back, but something stopped me before I reached the stairs. I remember walking toward the mirror. I looked up and saw -- "

A tremor rocked Alex. He moaned and sank to the stairs. Skye knelt beside him, but Alex pushed her away. "I'll be fine in a minute. Just give me a minute."

Lorraine called Daisy to her side and knelt while she spoke to Alex, her voice calm and soothing. "You weren't afraid of dogs then. You were playing with the dog in the backyard before Mother died. After that afternoon, you screamed whenever you saw -- "

"Her name was Shadow," Alex broke in. "Miles was upset with me. Shadow got off her lead and Uncle Jacob found her in the road on his way up to the house. Miles said, 'If someone kills her, it's your fault.'"

"But you remembered it wrong at first," Lorraine continued. "Daddy talked to the doctors in Boston. They said you got things confused, thought Daddy was blaming you for Aletta's accident. We all know you weren't to blame, but neither was Father."

"Mother wasn't dead when she landed at my feet at the foot of these stairs. Her hand moved. Shadow grabbed it. She pulled on it and growled like I'd taught her with the chew toy. I tried to make her stop, but she was too strong for me. I didn't know you could die taking a simple fall. I thought Shadow killed Mother. I thought it was my fault for teaching her that stupid trick."

"So you blamed Father instead?"

"No." Alex shook his head and looked around, as if startled to realize he wasn't alone. "There was a man. I came through the back door and walked toward the front of the house."

With his finger, Alex pointed to trace his path. He stopped when he reached the large mirror to the right of the front door.

"I saw them there." Alex pointed to the mirror. Then, he stood and faced the staircase. "I mean, there. Mother had her back to me, facing a man who struck her with his raised left arm."

Skye continued to stare at the mirror. The ornate, gilded frame stood in direct line with the back door, but when she looked at it from this angle, ten feet to the right, she didn't see the back door. She saw the top of her own head. The mirror must be tilted.

She tried to pull away from Alex's side to investigate, but his arm tightened around her as he continued. "I told the police I couldn't positively identify the man. Everything looked wavy and out of focus. The sun was in my eyes. It was late afternoon. The sun sets behind the house."

"But you do remember," Lorraine insisted.

"Yes, I remember, the same way I remembered two years later when I was found in New York. Before I only remembered what I'd read, but things have been coming back in bits and pieces since I came home. The only blanks in my memory are those three days after I left town."

"Thank, God," Lorraine sobbed. "I told Daddy this would work. We just

had to get you home."

Alex's body stiffened. He no longer looked serene. "What does Miles Bettencourt have to do with this?"

"Father made an addition to his will. Jacob came to the house just a few days before he died to add the codicil, and he wasn't too happy about it. I wanted to make sure you would have to come to Close to hear the will read in person, not just send one of your New York lawyers. Jacob was supposed to make you come to the house too, but he whimped out and read it in his office."

Alex softened against Skye's side, pulling her close again. All thought of investigating tilted mirrors fled with the realization he needed her.

"It doesn't make any difference, Lorraine," Alex said.

"What do you mean, doesn't make any difference?"

"I'm sorry Lori, really I am, but what I remember now doesn't differ from what I said in court. I wish I had seen someone else standing at the top of those stairs, but I didn't. I wasn't trying to frame your father. Bettencourt was the only man on the premises without an alibi -- "

"I was with him," Lorraine insisted.

"Without an adult alibi, then. Lorraine, something was wrong between them. Our parents had a disagreement about my going to school or something else. It doesn't matter anymore. Mother always did like to make a scene. It didn't look that way to me, but it could have been an accident. Maybe Miles didn't know Mother was standing so close to the top step -- "

"No. If it was an accident, Father would have said. He wouldn't have lied and made you run away. He wouldn't have been that cruel." Lorraine fought to still her sobs.

Alex released Skye as if encouraging her to go to her friend, but Skye remained at his side. The thought of him standing where he had frantically struggled to control the dog he thought was killing his mother, fixed her to the spot.

Alone in the middle of the room, her fists clenched at her sides, Lorraine wiped away tears. "Father didn't kill her," she insisted. "He wouldn't do that to me. He wouldn't."

Alex started toward Lorraine. The doorbell rang.

Chuck reached the door first. Harley Rossendahl entered the house and took in its inhabitants with his sweeping gaze. Skye's heart constricted when he removed his hat. "Sorry to interrupt your party, Mrs. Bettencourt, but I've come on official business."

"Well, I'm just sorry I didn't invite you," Lorraine drawled, her Southern accent snapping into place on cue. She stared pointedly at Chuck. "One of my guests isn't fit company tonight."

Harley gave Chuck Cross a sideways glance but turned to Skye. "Mrs. Devries, do you know where I might find your son?"

Skye started to shake with panic, her knees threatening to buckle. Alex slid his hand under her elbow. "He's staying with a friend. What's happened? Is he all right?"

"Slow down, Skye. Give the Sheriff a chance to talk." Alex crooned in her ear as he stroked her arm. "Maybe you should explain what this official business is you have to discuss with Dirk before you frighten the lady to death."

"I'm sorry, Skye. I have no reason to believe anything untoward has happened to Dirk, but I do have an arrest warrant for David Ritter and your son. I understand they had plans to spend the evening together."

"What are the charges?" Alex asked before Skye could force herself to swallow.

Arrest? Dirk? What could he have possibly done?

"First, Skye, I want you to know the courts will most likely treat Dirk as a juvenile, and if Mr. Jackson doesn't bring charges, the entire matter could be dropped. I suspect David was the instigator. The courts take that sort of thing into consideration."

"What did they do?" Skye's throat was so dry she croaked out the words.

Alex's arm around her waist held her upright.

"For now I have enough evidence to charge them with making threats against the person of Mr. Clayton Alexander Jackson, the Third."

Skye gasped. On one hand she was relieved. No one was trying to kill Alex. The threats against him were only pranks. Dirk wouldn't be involved in anything more serious. Then she realized while she'd been trying to do everything in her power to keep Alex in town and involved in Iowa Glass, Dirk had been working against her. How could he do such a thing to her? To Alex, a person who had shown him nothing but kindness?

Alex pulled her against him, his strong arms almost lifting her off her feet. When he finally spoke, Skye clung all the more tightly to him.

"It will be okay," he whispered as he stroked her hair. "I'll take care of everything."

A shiver passed through her at his words. Alex would take care of everything, but for how long? She rested her cheek against his chest, and counted the days before he would leave.

Chapter Thirteen

BY THE NEXT afternoon Alex had taken care of everything. Dirk was asleep in his room at Lorraine's house, no charges brought for his part in sending the threats. Mike Atly was working with the DA to plea bargain down the charges against David Ritter and arrange for counseling. Alex even established a scholarship fund for the Ritter children through Iowa Glass. When he wanted to, Alex could solve almost any problem.

Then why didn't Skye feel relieved? Maybe because Alex had managed to take total control of her son and now delivered a lecture on parenting. She stood before his desk feeling like an errant school girl.

"Didn't you ever wonder why his grades were so poor?"

"Ben never did that well in school. It didn't surprise me when Dirk didn't either. Then after his father's death -- "

"A year after his father died, Dirk went through a battery of tests. Didn't you read the results?"

Skye clasped her hands to her chest, a futile gesture of defense. "I was eighteen when I married Ben. Dirk was already three years old. I was still going to college when Ben died."

Alex's expression softened. He stood and joined her in front of his desk. "Dirk's IQ is in the hundred and forties. You must know what that means."

Skye remembered something about test scores and phrases like not living up to his potential, but he'd only been in second grade. It hadn't seemed important then, not with everything else going on. "He's very smart and I must be doing something terribly wrong for him to be so unhappy."

Alex took her hand. "This isn't your fault, Skye. Like many bright kids, he has trouble with organizational skills and focusing on tasks. Working with Lorraine this summer will be good for him. She's a stickler about making lists and doing things in the proper order. I can work with him on organizing his work space and his study habits for the fall."

Skye released Alex's hand and returned to her desk. "If he's so smart, why does he feel so miserable all the time?"

"Brains don't ensure happiness, Skye, any more than money can. You know that. Speaking of unhappy..."

When Skye joined him at the kitchen window, she saw Lorraine with Chuck in tow. She stomped a path to the house, looking like a storm cloud about to rain on Alex.

After banging through the back door, she started with no preliminaries. Her hands on her hips, she cornered Alex against the kitchen sink. "So, I hear you made a bundle in Paris?"

"Where did you hear that?" Alex glanced at Skye.

Skye shrugged. Lorraine couldn't have learned anything from her. Alex had kept Skye in the dark about his dealings in Paris. She ignored Chuck's

none too subtle hint to join him in the other room, out of the line of fire, and stayed close enough to listen.

"It's big news in the art world, brother dear. The Internet is buzzing with the news. The entire collection of Elizabeth Melichi's paintings to be sold at auction. How very clever of you to hold on to them so long after her death. Not allowing anyone to see them. Waiting for the anticipation, and the prices, to rise. So very clever."

Elizabeth Melichi? Skye vaguely remembered the name from a magazine article ten years ago or so. An up and coming Italian-American artist whose works were bringing record prices in Europe. She never connected that Elizabeth with Alex's Beth.

Alex stiffened, then left the kitchen and crossed the room to his desk.

Lorraine followed. "You even sold the wedding ring she made for you. A bit tacky, don't you think? Makes you seem rather mercenary. Didn't you keep anything for yourself? Any mementos of your poor, sweet Bethy?"

Skye stayed in the kitchen with Chuck, and poured herself a cup of coffee. Alex, lips drawn tight and thin, answered, "I kept two paintings."

"Good for you. You should have something to remember the woman by, considering she left you everything she owned. But that shouldn't surprise me. You were clever enough to marry the woman on her death bed."

Married her on her death bed? Could Alex do something so calculating? Skye watched his fists clench and unclench slowly, but he kept his temper in check.

Lorraine seemed determined to make him lose it. "How much did you get for Beth's paintings?"

Devoid of emotion, Alex said, "I can only guess at a final dollar amount. The auction won't take place for several months. Then there are the royalties from catalogue rights and the book deal. Conservative estimates are in the millions."

The news caught Skye midswallow. She choked, narrowly avoiding spitting her drink all over the kitchen. Millions of dollars?

Lorraine didn't sound impressed. "Millions? Please. Tens of millions or more. What are you doing with the ill-gotten gains?"

"Beth expressed interest in my work at Technolites. With the promise of new capital, I can secure a loan -- "

"And not one penny for Iowa Glass," Lorraine interrupted, her color high, her fake Southern lilt gone.

Lorraine was ready to go out of control. Skye looked at Chuck Cross. This was his cue to intervene. Chuck refused to meet her gaze.

Alex remained calm. "It's not that much money, Lorraine. Not when you're talking about basic research. Larger firms have spent as much as a billion dollars over a ten-year span to do similar work. The bank will consider it collateral as long as I invest it conservatively, where I can get my hands on it if things go sour. Iowa Glass is not a conservative investment, and we have some ground to make up at Technolites."

Lorraine crossed the room to jab her finger at Alex's chest. "Well, things aren't too sweet here, buddy. We need new ideas to attract new customers, up-to-date equipment, and someone with enough clout to persuade a bank to invest money. If not, there won't be an Iowa Glass in five years."

Lorraine's voice climbed another octave. "Chuck is the one who has to fire these people when there's no work. Not you. Next time he'll be the one standing in harm's way when some nut who's lost his job because of your indifference comes to work with a shotgun. But the great Clayton Alexander Jackson the Third is too busy making millions to take any notice of all the little people he's hurting along the way. Isn't he?"

Alex didn't back away, but listened to her tirade in silence, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

Skye moved closer and wrapped her arms around his arm. "That's not true, Lorraine."

Lorraine whirled to face Skye. "Not true? Well, I guess you've answered

my question on how your trip went with my brother. Did you make him wait until you got to London, or did you do him right there on the plane?"

Skye's face flushed crimson.

Alex took her hand. "That's enough, Lorraine. I have to ask you and Mr. Cross to leave."

"Don't bother to see me out." The foyer rang with the sound of Lorraine slamming the back door.

Skye sat, not noticing she rested on the edge of Alex's desk. Her surroundings leaked into her consciousness, slowly, as did the ramifications of Lorraine's news of Alex's new wealth.

When she looked to confront him, he stood leaning against the far wall watching her. "Let me guess, you're ready to use your third, and last, question. You want to know why I married Beth."

Their silly agreement over the three questions. It occurred to her he was taking advantage of the situation, Lorraine throwing her off guard with her innuendoes.

"No -- " she started, not willing to give up any advantage she might still have over him. Alex surprised her.

"No need to waste your precious question, Skye. I would have told you eventually if we'd continued on the way we did...." His voice faded to nothing and he crossed the room to touch the familiar picture of Beth, Tris and himself.

"Beth never loved me, not the way I loved her. She always said we'd never be more than friends, but I don't think I stopped chasing her once from the moment we met. Then, four years ago, she told me she wanted to get married. I didn't ask questions. I applied for the marriage license the same day."

Without thinking, she blurted out what she sensed. "She didn't tell you she was sick. She didn't tell you until after the wedding."

He turned to stare at her, and the queasy feeling at her core told her she'd guessed the truth.

Before he spoke again, he turned away. "She said she didn't want to spoil the day with unhappy news. We'd been married two weeks when I learned the truth. She needed a husband, you see. She didn't want her relatives to handle her estate, in particular, her art. The best way to ensure they didn't contest her will was to leave it to her spouse."

He stood ten feet away. Skye raised her hand, an instinctual act to comfort him and to protect herself, as if they shared a common pain. "The marriage wasn't what you expected, was it?"

"No, not what I expected. I thought she'd changed her mind about me. I thought she was ready to settle down, ready to have children. When I learned her true motives, I convinced myself having her for my wife, for whatever time God gave us, would be enough, but I didn't have her love. No ceremony, no piece of paper could give me that."

Nodding agreement, Skye silently acknowledged the same lack in herself. After her grandfather died, she had married Ben for the security he could give her. Never had she felt anything more than a school girl crush when he pledged his undying love.

She dreaded his answer, but needed to know. "You're going to sell Iowa Glass?"

"As soon as I find a buyer, yes."

Expected as it was, the news hit her like a fist. She had assumed from his reassuring words in Sicily that he planned to save Iowa Glass, to use his money in Close. She believed his promise to make everything right. Alex would no doubt keep his promise where Dirk was concerned, but Clayton Alexander Jackson the Third planned to dump Iowa Glass and leave town.

How could she have trusted him? Refusing to shed her welling tears, she stood and turned to face the garden.

He didn't make a sound when he crossed the room and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Iowa Glass needs two things, Skye. A fresh infusion of funds

and someone interested in seeing the business succeed. The funds I might be able to manage, but I can't stay here. I have to leave, Skye, I need to start over somewhere else."

His breath felt hot on her neck, but Skye shivered. _Start over somewhere else_. How many times had her grandmother told her those very words? _Leave Dirk or take him with you, but go find yourself. If you don't start over somewhere else, you'll never be anything more than Ben Devries' widow._

Skye chose to stay and she had become her own woman despite her grandmother's warnings. Hadn't she?

Well, if Alex planned to leave town, she had a few things to say to him. She whirled to face him, ignoring the hands that kneaded her shoulders, the eyes that begged her to understand. "At first I thought you needed to get over Tris's death. He was so young and you couldn't save him. Then I thought it was Beth. You needed more time to get over losing your wife. But I was wrong."

* * * *

ALEX BACKED AWAY as if to sidestep the truth. The inches between them stretched into miles. His fingers continued to burn with her heat, his head to fill with her scent as she walked through his office to the patio doors.

She walked away from him.

The world collapsed around him, all the weight focusing on this one spot, threatening to crush him. Was this how they had felt -- his mother, Lorraine, Skye -- all those times he'd run away?

He spoke to her back, grateful he didn't have to see her hurt-filled eyes. "I did what I could for my friends. Tris wanted to reconcile with his family. His father refused to let him in the house after he announced he was gay. When his father died and his mother wanted to see him, she was too sick to leave England and Tris too sick to leave California. He asked me to make his peace with her in person."

"So you gave her Tris's jacket."

Inexplicably, Alex found himself wanting to explain. "Tris wanted me to have the jacket. It was a symbol. Tris, Beth, they both wanted to protect me. I'm too old for that now. I have to stand on my own. I had to give the jacket to someone who would cherish it. I couldn't hold onto it any longer. The Mustang was his too. I haven't decided what to do with it."

With Skye looking out into the garden, he knew he could tell her anything.

"What did Beth want you to do?"

Alex smiled at the image -- Beth painting in the chaos of her Paris apartment. "She wanted to be immortal, and achieved that on her own. I was just the broker."

Whirling to face him, Skye stamped her foot in a move that reminded him of Lorraine. "It isn't either of them, is it? You've given Tris' mother his jacket, you've shared Beth's paintings with the world. But you're still a twelve-years-old and you haven't gotten over your mother's death."

The truth of what she said froze him in place. He considered denying her words, but when he looked into her eyes, he realized it would do him no good. "How can I get over it, Skye? How can I begin to mourn when her murderer died in his bed with a clean name?"

"I don't expect you to forget her or to forgive Miles for whatever you think he's done."

That thud in his chest again. Skye didn't believe him. The minute they set foot in Iowa -- no, the minute they got on the plane for New York -- she stopped believing him. A few days at home and Lorraine had convinced her of Miles's innocence again.

He hated himself for it, but he couldn't control his anger. "What do you want, Skye? What do you expect?"

Skye's eyes filled with tears. "I expect you to make plans for your life and not just for everyone else before you slink off where the people who care can't find you. Your mother is dead. Beth is dead. Tristan is dead. You

are alive. You can't throw that away because of what someone did to you twenty-five years ago."

Alex felt his anger loosen. He wanted to stop Skye's words. He stepped toward her.

Skye stopped him with a glare and another stomp of her foot. "I also expect you to stop talking about yourself in the past tense and for God's sake, stop singing that blasted song."

"What blasted song are you talking about?"

"You know the song. You were humming it the day we met and you haven't stopped since. If you're telling the truth and really don't realize what you've been singing to yourself all these weeks, it's about time you took some notice."

Alex shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, and turned away. Immediately he started to hum. He stopped, afraid of what he would learn.

"That's my third question, Alex. What's that song? You don't have to sing it to me, just say the words out loud."

"I can't...." he started. At first he thought he was refusing her request. Then he realized he was reciting the words to a tune that repeated endlessly in his head.

He started again, angry at her for making him conscious of the words and the thoughts he'd kept hidden, even from himself. "I can't live if living is without you." The words erupted from him, harsh and tuneless. "I can't live any more."

Her expression suddenly softened. "That's enough."

But it wasn't enough. Not near enough. The world disappeared and he stood alone, cold and unfeeling, and he faced Skye, once saving lover, now threatening adversary.

"If I'm twelve, how old are you, Skye? The little girl who is afraid to leave home. Everyone in this goddamned town knows why you stay here and it has nothing to do with promising your late, sainted husband to raise his son here."

"That's not true. I can leave Close. I don't want to. I owe everything to this town. Everything." Skye turned and ran.

Alex watched her disappear up the hill. "I can't live without you," he whispered.

For once he heard his own thoughts, and he believed them.

* * * *

SKYE STOOD TREMBLING as fear and helplessness washed over her.

When the feelings subsided, she knew Alex was wrong. She wasn't like him at all. She had been very young when her parents deserted her, but her grandparents had made those fears go away, not Close. She was grown now and she would carry the security their love had given her everywhere she went.

Alex still lived in fear of the void of love he'd met when his mother died. He ran from that void, from the familiar to the strange. He ran from Iowa to New York, even if he didn't remember why, and he planned to run again.

What she had to do now was obvious. Why she hadn't seen it before she could only chalk up to overwrought emotions. Alex couldn't get on with his life until he put his mother's death behind him. To do that he had to have someone to blame, someone other than himself.

Someone other than Miles Bettencourt. Skye knew Miles wasn't responsible. Her trip to Sicily with Alex had made her more certain. Alex would never prove Miles guilty of his mother's death because Miles was innocent.

She also needed to prove the people of Close were not responsible for protecting his mother's killer. Once freed from his past to start a new life, Alex wouldn't see the people of Close as the enemy. He wouldn't need to shut down the factory and ruin the town.

All Skye had to do was discover who pushed Aletta Jackson down the stairs twenty-five years ago.

* * * *

FIVE HOURS AFTER she left Alex brooding in his garden, Skye knelt on the floor Harley Rossendahl's garage. She had almost given up when she found it. On the side of a cardboard box, she spied the words "county records" scrawled in red letters. She didn't recognize the handwriting.

After going through a dozen boxes of her grandparents' records, she had stopped examining them page by page. She'd sorted through all of Ben's things years ago, saving only the necessary papers. For some reason she'd never done the same when her grandmother died. Eighty-two years of memories, sixty years of marriage, stood stacked in cardboard boxes in her friends' garage.

Jenna, Harley's wife, leaned heavily against the open garage door, one hand supporting her stomach. Despite Harley's misgivings about Jenna's pregnancy, she looked serenely confident. "How's it going? Need any help?"

Skye tugged on the box and succeeded in ripping the top flap in half. "I think I've got it."

After picking her way through the jungle of boxes, Jenna helped Skye move the other boxes aside. For several minutes they worked, not speaking. When Skye finally held the torn box in her lap, she wasn't certain she wanted to find out if Ben or Grandpa Bergen were involved in the investigation into Aletta Jackson's death. What if Alex was right and someone had plotted to protect his mother's killer?

Jenna plopped herself on the floor. "You're going to have to put up with me for a while. Hope you don't mind. I'm not going anywhere for a few minutes."

Skye tore her attention from the box she still had not opened. "It's awfully nice of you and Harley to let me keep Grandpa and Grandma Bergen's things here. With the baby coming I know you need the room. This fall Dirk and I will be settled someplace -- "

"Don't worry. We're happy to do it. Harley has told me all the stories. Your family was very important to him growing up. So, what are you looking for?"

What was she looking for? Skye wasn't certain. She hoped to find nothing. Nothing to prove Alex right. Nothing to confirm his accusations. Close was not the town she thought, filled with honest, upright citizens.

Aware Jenna was watching, Skye pulled away the torn lid and turned the contents toward the door so she could read the piece of paper directly inside the box. "Unsolved Cases" stood out in bold block letters with the words "Unofficial County Records -- DESTROY" printed beneath.

More quickly than she'd opened it, Skye closed the box the best she could and struggled to her feet. "Found it," she said, in what she hoped was a cheery voice.

After helping Jenna to her feet and sharing the obligatory cup of decaf, Skye carried the box to her truck and shoved it onto the floor of the cab. She hesitated before she closed the door.

She considered going to Harley with what she had, but this required study. First, she had to examine the evidence, then she'd decide where to take it.

Whose records were they? Ben's, grandfather's, or someone else's -- someone in Close who kept detailed records that had ended up stored with her grandparents' things.

Gingerly, she lifted the top sheet and glanced at the individual labels beneath. Unable to wait, she leafed through the titles on the file folders. Unsolved cases the cover sheet had said. She expected to see the name Aletta Jackson on one of the thick bundles of papers.

Someone had ordered the files by year, then by name. The name of a victim or suspect? The divider for 1972, the year of Aletta Jackson's death, was empty. Going farther back in the box, a name next to 1965 stopped her.

Clayton Alexander Jackson, Junior. Seeing the name of Alex's father in hurriedly scrawled letters made her hands shake. She picked up the sealed, manila envelope. Before she could open it, Harley's patrol car pulled up behind her.

Chapter Fourteen

ALEX STRUGGLED TO wake up. Reality surrounded him. Then his nightmare pulled him under again.

"On your hands and knees, boy."

Alex fought to stay upright, but failed. Even knowing he was dreaming couldn't keep his knees from buckling.

The heavy, male voice threatened again. Alex shook his head and screamed a silent "No" even as his palms met the ground.

A blindfold pressed against his eyes. Blackness was all he could see. Moist dirt oozed between his fingers. The heavy aroma of summer roses rolled over him. Cold crept up his legs as the dampness from the soil invaded his jeans at the knees. He remained on his hands and knees, sinking into cold, damp earth that threatened to swallow him. Then, his clothes disappeared. Naked, he shivered.

The voice continued to echo. "Hands and knees, boy. Hands and knees, boy." The voice velvety now and seductive made the threat more acute. Tremors rippled through Alex's body as it anticipated what was to come. Every muscle tightened, prepared to resist.

The harder Alex struggled, the heavier his head became. Something hard struck his side, and he gasped as pain radiated from his ribs to his back. He tasted dirt and choked.

A boot pressed against his neck.

"Alex." The voice wouldn't let him go.

The hard, rough impression of a shoe left his neck and came to rest on his lower back.

"Alex?" A woman's voice jerked him out of his dream.

Someone shook his shoulder.

"Alex?"

The dirt beneath him transformed into the cold marble floor of his mother's house. He ran his hands over his chest and thighs to reassure himself he wore clothes. Sweat soaked his tee-shirt. He'd been naked in his dream. That was all he could remember. Naked and cold.

He looked into Skye's warm, golden eyes.

"You were having a bad dream."

"I...I guess so," he stammered, embarrassed to have her find him this way. "Probably something about showing up for a test with no answers or pants."

Skye's hand rested on his shoulder. "It sounded more serious than that."

Alex extended his hand and allowed her to haul him to his feet. Decidedly unsteady, he sat. "I was taking a nap. Must have fallen off the sofa."

"I got worried when I saw the wrecked car. Lorraine told me about the accident."

Her arm wrapped around his back warmed him. He pulled her against his side and buried his face in her hair before he remembered. They were in Iowa now. She was Mrs. Devries and he, Mr. Jackson again. Since their argument two days ago, they hadn't spoken more than was necessary to conduct business. When he eased away from her, her arm dropped from its place around his waist.

Skye stood "You look dreadful. Have you seen a doctor?"

"I am a doctor, remember. Some bruised ribs, bump on the head. Doc Dieleman phoned in a prescription for the pain. I'm just a little sore, that's all."

Skye looked relieved, and suddenly Alex felt better. Maybe he could get Skye back, once this damned mess with Iowa Glass wasn't standing between them.

"Lorraine says you did this to get out of supper again."

Alex stiffened, then relaxed when he reminded himself they were eating in public instead of at Lorraine's. He took a deep breath, and fought down a groan when he ribs protested. "A rather extreme avoidance reaction, don't you

think? The car did rolled three times."

Concern showed in Skye's eyes again. "What happened?"

He looked around the room to ground himself in reality. He had more faith in Lorraine's version of the accident than in his own. "What did Lorraine say?"

"The two of you engaged in a childish race. You never could drive, and rather than let her beat you to the house you took the curve too fast and wiped out. I don't believe her."

"Well, you should. That's what happened."

"We both know you're a good driver. I just spent a week riding around Sicily with you, remember?"

"Which is exactly why I crashed the car. An Impala is nothing like a Ferrari, believe me. No match for Lorraine's Corvette, anyway."

"Have you called -- "

"After Lorraine finished laughing at me, she called the sheriff. A tow truck is on the way from the car dealer. They'll let me know whatever official reports I need to sign for the insurance company."

"What did Harley say? Is he going to have the car checked out? Someone could have sabotaged it."

Alex wasn't in the mood for Skye's overreactions. Besides, she was too damned perceptive for her own good. The same thought occurred to him when his rental car failed to make the turn and rolled into the ditch. "The car reacted less precisely than I'm used to. The Ferrari spoiled me. Nothing more sinister than that."

Skye had enough on her mind without worrying about mad killers who might not exist. Alex stared until she dropped her gaze and nodded agreement.

"I've decided to wait for Marvin to finish with the Mustang instead of renting another car. He promised to have it done in time for the company picnic day after tomorrow. So if you don't mind chauffeuring me around for a few days -- "

Skye brightened again. "Sure. You better get moving or we'll be late for dinner with Lorraine and Chuck."

Alex blinked, then really looked at Skye for the first time since he woke. She wore the sexy black dress he'd slipped off her in Agrigento. Black heels. No nylons.

Suddenly, he wished he'd drunk wine instead of taking Doctor Dieleman's pain pills. He wanted to drag her into his bedroom, ignoring her protests he would make them late. His fingers warmed as he imagined them tangled in her hair, pinning her head in place while he ravished her mouth and slid his hands up her dress.

The rest of his body failed to respond to the tantalizing image -- the residual effects from his dream? Alex shook off the thought. The pain pills had dulled his senses. He wouldn't take any more. A few carefully spaced glasses of wine would work as well to mute the periodic stabs of pain from his ribs.

Alex looked at his watch. Almost eight. He'd slept the afternoon away. With a shaking hand, he felt his swollen cheek. "When are we supposed to meet them?"

Skye leaned closer, their argument days before apparently forgotten. "In an hour, unless you don't feel up to it. That's quite a shiner you've got."

"A black eye?" Alex probed the tender flesh around his right eye. Lorraine must have left before the bruise began to show, or she would have pointed it out.

"You would know if you bothered to look in a mirror. Have you always avoided...."

No longer able to hear Skye's voice, Alex felt the room tilt as a picture formed. He stood in front of a mirror, expecting to see himself. Instead, he saw his mother and the dark figure of a man towering over her, his left arm raised. The image threatened to pull him out of reality and into its

grasp.

Alex eased off the sofa and headed for his room. "Tonight's perfect for dinner with Lorraine. These pills have me so doped up I won't hear a word she says. Give me few minutes to shower and change."

Skye's sigh stopped him. He turned to see her on the sofa with a pillow clutched to her chest. She patted the cushion beside her. "We have to talk."

* * * *

WHEN ALEX SAT BESIDE her, Skye squeezed the pillow. She needed something to hold, not to keep him at a distance, but to keep from hurting him.

If she held him the way she needed to, she would cause him pain. His ribs were bruised, and his life was in danger. She had to let him go. Staying in Close was no longer an option for him. "First, I want to apologize for the other day -- "

He shook his head. "No, I'm the one who has to apologize. You're the bravest person I know. I had no right to imply anything else."

When he tried to pull the pillow from her arms, she refused to give it up. "I shouldn't have run away the other day. I should have stayed so we could talk it out."

This time when Alex tried to interrupt, she stopped his mouth with her fingers. Instantly, she realized her mistake. His mouth, hot and inviting, opened to her hand. With his right hand, he captured her fingers and refused to allow her to retreat. With his left, he eased the pillow from between them.

If she didn't stop him, they would make love here in the foyer. Hot, passionate love. She would never be able to let him go.

She shook her head as much to clear it as to tell him no. "There's something I have to tell you, something I've found out."

Alex ignored her protest, and continued to press her palm against his open mouth.

She had to do this for Close, for Iowa Glass, and most importantly for Alex. "Someone may have murdered your father."

His lips grew cold and hard on her palm. "What did you say?"

She repeated her statement and launched into her account of finding the files in Harley's garage. "The handwriting on the box and in the files isn't Grandpa's or Ben's. I'd have recognized it if it were. Lots of people have worked in the sheriff's office over the years. When your father died thirty years ago, Grandpa had already retired as sheriff and was working for the department part-time."

Alex rubbed her hand against his cheek. "What makes you think my father didn't die of natural causes?"

"For one thing, the presence of a file with his name in the box. The files are labeled as records from unsolved cases. One of those files carries your father's name."

"And my mother's?"

"No, that is confusing. Why would someone in the sheriff's department -- if in fact that's where they worked -- why would they consider your mother's death as closed but not your father's? How did they get mixed up with Grandma and Grandpa Bergen's things? Don't you see? If someone killed your father _and_ your mother, they may have something against your family. They could be behind these threats. I know the letters have stopped since they arrested David Ritter, but I'm not convinced he's behind all of this. Certainly not stealing your computer or the sabotage in Boston, and if someone tampered with your car -- "

Abruptly, Alex stood and began to pace. "So you agree. Someone has tried to cover-up evidence in Mother's murder investigation."

"Yes, that's why Harley has to see what I've found."

Alex rubbed his forehead as he shook his head. "Maybe you'd better tell me exactly what you found in this file."

"A bottle of pills."

"That's all? No report, no notes."

"A bottle with the prescription label and a dozen or so pills inside."

From the label, your father refilled the prescription two weeks before he died."

"We'll need to have the medication analyzed. You know what this means, don't you?" He didn't stop to gauge her reaction. "I read the report of my father's death. They found his body in his car, within the city limits. The report said nothing about medication found at the scene. This could be evidence of a cover-up by officials in Close."

Alex paused before he began pacing again, as if to give her time to dispute his accusation. When he resumed his rhythmic trek between the sofa and the front door, Skye braced herself for the question she knew he would ask next.

"Where are the pills?"

Skye reached for the pillow to give herself support. It would take more than the threat of his ire to keep her from protecting him.

When she continued to hesitate, he knelt and took her chin in his hands. She found herself staring at his lips, remembering how they felt when they left their fearsome trail of kisses across her breasts.

Fearsome because they had the power to make her risk what she could not afford to lose. Fearsome because she could not risk tasting them again.

He forced her to look into his eyes. "I'm not accusing you, Skye. Even if someone in your family was involved, you had nothing to do with any of this. You were a little girl when Mother was murdered. Hell, you weren't even born when Father died. But something isn't right."

Alex sounded so certain, so sure. "Miles couldn't have pulled off something like this on his own. I know how things operate in small towns like this. Iowa isn't that different from Sicily, believe me. These people stick together. If they believe the truth threatens the community, they leave things unsaid. Someone investigating the crimes suppressed evidence. If whoever is responsible kept a file on my father, they may have kept a similar one on my mother. We need to find it before it's destroyed, if it hasn't been already."

When he moved to join her on the sofa, Alex winced and wrapped an arm around his injured ribs. She fought the urge to embrace him. A sound like a whimper escaped her lips. She didn't want to hurt Alex, but she must.

"You're wrong, Alex." Once she said the words she felt stronger. Had she ever disagreed with Grandpa Bergen, with Ben? Maybe she had never cared enough to stand up to them. She had to take a stand now to save Alex.

"My grandfather was an honest man. No matter what the cost, he would never cover up a murder. Neither would Ben." Skye could feel the warmth leave her side as Alex slipped away from her.

She didn't look up when he stood, but took a deep breath and continued. "Grandpa was disappointed when Harley joined the service. He said Close couldn't afford to lose men like Harley. Harley cares about the people here, really cares. He's dedicated his life to the truth, just like Grandpa and Ben."

His voice harsh and hoarse, Alex asked his question again. "Where are you keeping the files, Skye?"

A moment later the warmth between them vanished. "I gave the evidence to Harley Rossendahl."

* * * *

JACOB HUNCHED HIS shoulders and concentrated on the road ahead. The Minneapolis skyline vanished behind him. A storm was coming. He could feel it in his limp arm and in his dead balls. He had survived other storms in his life; he would survive this one, too.

Whatever it took, whatever needed doing. That's what he would do. He had done with self-sacrifice decades ago in the rice paddies of Viet Nam where he took the shrapnel meant for a friend.

Friend. Jacob sneered at the word. Clayton Alexander Jackson, Junior, had died alone on a country road believing they were friends. Jacob knew better the moment his darling Aletta sashayed to Clayton's side.

Jacob's plan? Simple enough. Aletta wanted children and Jacob could not

give them to her. Clayton, as he so enjoyed bragging, had enough sperm for two. Jacob's plan did not include Aletta marrying Clayton.

Jacob almost missed the exit to I-35 South. He swerved at the last moment, and severed nerves sent frantic messages his left arm could not receive. His eyeglasses slipped down his nose. When the car settled into the right hand lane, he released the steering wheel for a moment to readjust his glasses.

He couldn't afford to make mistakes. His plan didn't leave room for delays or accidents, which made Close the perfect town. Everyone's behavior was so totally predictable. On the day of the company picnic, Jacob would find Skye Devries in only one place -- the Iowa Glass Window Factory. In the early hours, she would work alone, joined by others as noon approached. The Sheriff would make his appearance two hours later. With an eye on the clock, Jacob pushed the car past seventy.

Recent events made Dirk easier to pin down. Skye kept him on a short leash these days, either in back of the school shooting baskets, or, if Jacob was lucky, sneaking down the back road to Silver Lake for a swim.

With a self-satisfied smile, Jacob released the wheel and turned on the radio. Too early for the opera. He'd listened to the broadcasts from the Met every Saturday morning for years. Today he would miss the last act. Today he had other things to do. Important things.

Today, he would make Clayton Alexander Jackson, the Third, pay for his parents' sins. First, with his reputation, then with his life.

Chapter Fifteen

ALEX STOOD IN the middle of Jacob van Wyk's office, and rubbed his temples. He had put off dinner out with Lorraine for three days, deciding to give his ribs more time to heal. Yesterday, he'd given in to Skye's unspoken wishes and rescheduled their night out. The unfortunate combination of wine and Lorraine's chatter last night had left his head buzzing. The drive into town in Skye's rickety truck hadn't helped, especially since Skye wasn't along. At dawn, she and Dirk went to town with Lorraine, and left the truck for him to follow.

Today, Saturday, promised to be a perfect day for the company picnic. A breeze from the north cooled the bright August sun, and a hint of rain that hovered should hold off until evening. Skye had the event planned to the last detail, and, it seemed to Alex, she felt obligated to do all the work herself.

A perfect day for a picnic, not so perfect a day for a hangover. He turned from the open window and peered over his sunglasses to study Jacob's office. Mrs. Shutts, Jacob's secretary, wasn't in today. Alex had the place to himself while he waited for Harley Rossendahl.

How could Jacob practice law for more than thirty years and not collect a single memento? Not a picture or a plaque. Nothing except his diploma and license. Alex thought of the montage of photos that lined his own temporary office. Perhaps Jacob's way was better. Whatever the old man's past held, he'd forgotten, or, at least, carefully hidden it away.

No dirty novel behind the legal tomes, no faded snapshot tucked between the pages of a book. Harley's entry into the outer office roused Alex from his indifferent snooping.

While he watched the doorknob turn, Alex realized he didn't have a picture of Skye. He would leave soon, certainly before the first snow, and he had nothing to remember her by. Alex felt old suddenly, old and alone.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Jackson." The Sheriff didn't look sorry. He looked like a bloodhound following the scent. Harley extended his hand. "I suppose I'll see some action now you're back in town."

Alex shook Harley's hand and sat behind Jacob's desk, ordering himself to stop thinking about Skye. He had dreaded this visit from the moment she revealed she'd turned the evidence over to her old friend. If only she'd trusted him, come to him first.

Harley leaned back in the chair opposite, resting his boots on the desk

before he pulled out his notebook. "Apparently, someone wants you dead, Mr. Jackson."

Alex's fears were finally put into words. With a calm that didn't extend beneath his facade, he shrugged. "Alex, please."

"I'd rather keep this formal if you don't mind, Mr. Jackson. I have some questions for you. You're not being charged with anything, but feel free to consult a lawyer before answering."

Alex shrugged again. Evidently, Harley saw him as more than a victim. Alex couldn't blame Harley for being suspicious. He was doing his job. Alex could blame Skye.

He had tried to justify her actions, explain them away. He was an outsider with a past not easy for people to forget, but Skye knew him, and she didn't trust him.

How could she when the local rag printed rehashed versions of how he'd lived on the streets twenty-five years ago? Next, Pete Handley would vilify his mother, make her death sound like just retribution for a life of sin. Alex swallowed the bitter taste in his throat. A small town's favorite pastime -- looking for someone to blame. Preferably an outsider.

Last night over dinner Lorraine had made clear what the locals thought of him. Some thought the rash of crime and threatening notes was the work of some shadowy figure who sought revenge for a despicable and previously unpunished crime Alex had committed in his youth. Others believed he'd been involved in shady dealings in California. Some, a growing group according to Lorraine, were convinced that whoever wanted Alex out of town wanted to protect the good citizens of Close from a crime Alex had yet to commit.

Skye had looked startled at the suggestion, shrinking in her chair. He had wanted to reassure her. He would never knowingly put her in danger. But he had, hadn't he? By selfishly wanting to remain near her, he'd put her and Dirk and the entire town of Close in danger.

So who was out to get him? What the hell was going on? Alex had no idea, only an increasingly urgent sensation he must find out soon.

While the citizens occupied themselves with conjecture and slinging mud, Harley sat calmly in the middle weighing the facts. Alex could only pray the sheriff was as impartial as he seemed.

"Someone tampered with the car you crashed last week. It looks like a professional job."

The buzz in Alex's head grew louder, blocking an intelligent reply. "I see."

"I'm following several leads in this case. This case being death threats made against you. The incidents don't all appear to be related. Dave Ritter, for instance -- "

"No, I'm certain this has nothing to do with the Ritters."

Harley raised an eyebrow. "I agree David isn't a likely suspect, but his father did try to kill you and some might see you as indirectly responsible for his death. I haven't found any evidence to link him to the break-in in Georgia or tampering with your car. For a job like this, I'm looking for a paid professional. I have suspects, you understand, but nothing I'm ready to go public with. I like to nail things down. Who do you think is behind these actions?"

Alex had to fight not to squirm under the sheriff's examination. The situation felt frighteningly familiar. *In another life time, decades ago.* "Is this why you asked me here? You think I have something to do with this? The answer is no, I don't know who's trying to kill me. Or if someone is."

Harley flipped another page in his notebook. "Something else puzzles me. Mr. Bettencourt's will was read two months ago. You haven't exactly taken a hands-on interest in your holdings here in Close. Living here must be rather uncomfortable for you, what with what's been printed in the paper and all. I'm surprised you've stayed this long."

Alex knew what Harley meant. Innuendo, suspicion, nagging doubt. It wore on a man. Time to get this thing settled. Time to get out. Time to sell

Iowa Glass. Rumors of death threats and sabotage would only lower the price. If only leaving Close didn't mean leaving Skye.

Apparently Harley's questions were rhetorical. He continued, his tone dead even, just as when he questioned Skye. "Your mother's death was never fully explained."

Alex decided he didn't want to know what Harley was hinting at now. "No, it was not."

Harley would know all the details, if not from the Close Chronicle, then from whatever police and court records he'd bothered to read. From what Alex could remember, no one had cared who killed Aletta Jackson, as long as it wasn't Miles Bettencourt, town savior.

Unattainable suspects had abounded. Ex-lovers -- dozens of them, some of them paid, some not, all address unknown. Unknown burglar -- nothing stolen because Alex had interrupted him in the act. Sexual assailant -- same result. Alex had heard it before.

He became aware he sat hunched over the desk, his hands curled into fists. He waited for the sheriff to make his accusations clear.

Harley's gaze shifted from his notes to Alex. Not for the first time, Alex had the unsettling sensation of being observed.

"I hate to criticize my predecessor, but the investigative work into your mother's death was sloppy. Missing evidence, fingerprints recorded as taken at the scene but never analyzed."

Alex straightened in his seat. He hadn't expected Harley to be so forthcoming.

"I might have chalked it up to an aging law official and his rookie assistant. I do recognize the potential for lax law enforcement, especially in a town where politics and popularity play a big role in how things get done. But if that were the case, the pattern would have carried over to other investigations. It doesn't."

A cover-up? Crimes committed by passing drifters or Italian gigolos didn't get covered up. "Who was the sheriff back then?"

"Larry Van Wyk, Jacob's uncle. You made your statement concerning your mother's death to him."

Alex fought to keep his seat and not resume pacing. You don't need to defend yourself, he cautioned silently. "I don't remember. I was only twelve."

Harley leaned deeper in his chair. "You aren't obliged to answer, of course, but do you know who stole records from your factory in Georgia? I understand the plants in Georgia and here in Close are heavily insured."

"Damn," the expletive shot out of Alex's lips before he could stop it. More than twenty years had passed and he could still remember the police in New York, questioning, accusing. Heat rose from his chest and set his face flaming.

Harley continued, his voice carefully neutral, as if he were asking for the time of day. "Do you know who tampered with your rented vehicle to make the accident look like an attempt on your life? Your injuries weren't serious, were they?"

Alex shoved his chair against the bookcase behind him with a dull thud, and stood. The pain from his bruised side and head had faded. He only noticed the remaining dull aches when someone mentioned the accident. An old hurt, one from long ago, caused much more pain. "You're not even trying are you? Not even considering someone in your precious Close might be responsible?"

Harley lowered the front legs of his chair to the floor.

His hands still carved into fists, Alex stopped pacing. "This is exactly what happened twenty-five years ago. No one wanted to believe Miles Bettencourt killed my mother. Why should they? She was some foreign slut who lived on the edge of town, outside your white-bread world. Miles Bettencourt was your savior, dedicated to perpetuating this perverse little excuse for civilization no matter what the cost."

"I'm considering all possibilities, Mr. Jackson. As I said, Larry was sheriff when your mother died, and when your father died. Jacob Van Wyk didn't

keep in touch after his uncle moved, but he did know Larry died four years ago."

Uncle Jacob. An image, dark and ugly, passed in and out of Alex's consciousness too quickly to grasp. Jacob was a trusted, family friend, one of Alex's first visitors when officials found him in New York. Jacob had also visited Mother and Miles at the villa before the wedding, the same time Alex had stolen Miles' Ferrari and drove it into a ditch. Before that, Jacob had come to La Scala to bring Mother the news of Father's death. Uncle Jacob, always there when needed.

Too tired to sustain his anger, Alex felt a wave of exhaustion flow over him. His fists relaxed as he passed them over his face and rubbed his eyes. "What does Larry Van Wyk have to do with what's going on now? What does any of this have to do with my father's death?"

"The files Skye discovered among her grandparents belongings appear to belong to Larry Van Wyk. I'll get the official word on the handwriting samples in a few weeks, but they appear to be a good match. The last dated entry is a few days before Mr. Bergen's, Skye's grandfather's, death in an automobile accident. I'm working under the assumption Larry didn't know where the files were or he believed them destroyed. Otherwise, he would have taken them with him when he moved South or turned them over to his successor. In any case, I've added Mr. Bergen to the list of names of unexplained deaths."

God, it has something to do with me. Skye worshipped her grandfather's memory. Now, it looked like someone had killed him.

Damn. Alex fought to keep his hands relaxed and at his sides. Why did everything come back to him and his mother's murder? Or had this started years earlier, with his father's death?

Alex's chest constricted. Too damned hot in Iowa. No sea breeze to mediate the summer heat. He returned to Jacob's desk. "My father suffered from angina. I read the coroner's report."

Harley also returned to his seat, setting his heels on Jacob's desk. "That was the cause of death," Harley agreed. "But -- "

"But what?" Alex took a pen from the precisely laid out row before him and drew squiggles on Jacob's blotter. The pressure in his chest was just his imagination. The heat. His hangover. The rich food he'd eaten last night.

Alex looked at Harley's shirt breast pocket for a sign of a cigarette pack.

Harley began again. "If someone suppressed evidence in one case, I have to assume the possibility they suppressed it in others. Larry Van Wyk usually did thorough work."

Harley removed his feet from Jacob's desk and stood. An ominous sign? "The box of records Skye brought me contains records Sheriff Van Wyk kept. Personal records of unsolved crimes. Your mother's death wasn't included in those records. Your father's was. It wasn't much of a record, just a file folder with his name and date of death, and a bottle of pills. I had one of my people go through the records, and your father's death is the only incident Van Wyk kept a file on that doesn't correspond to an officially open case. Your mother's death was the only one he didn't keep records on that does correspond to such an open case. We could assume Larry believed he knew who killed your mother, and had doubts concerning your father's death."

Alex listed the alternatives on the blotter before him. His choices stood lined up, waiting for him to pen below each heading, _yes_ or _no_. "Get to the bottom line, Harley."

Sell or not sell. Murder or not murder. Skye or.... Alex crossed out Skye's name and ripped the top page from the blotter. He covered the next with swirling lines.

"The first man at the scene found your father's body in his car. Apparently, he'd pulled over to the side of the road. No sign of an accident. He'd turned off the ignition and put the car in park. Larry's report doesn't include mention of the bottle Skye found with a label from the local pharmacy. Nitroglycerin prescribed to Clayton Alexander Jackson, Jr. Point four

milligram dose. It's too early for official results, but I took a sample to our local druggist for his opinion. Aspirin. Crushed, then pressed into the proper shape. Not a professional job, he said, but good enough to fool the casual observer. Good enough to fool someone until they needed to use the medication."

Alex watched his swirling lines grow heavy enough to tear the paper. "Do you have any suspects?"

"It has been more than thirty years. An investigation this cold will take some time."

"And Skye's Grandfather, Mr. Bergen?"

"The same. After almost two decades, proving anything won't be easy. All I have so far is a reason to reopen the case. When he died, Mr. Bergen had in his possession previously unrevealed evidence in your father's death. Believe me, Mr. Jackson, Mr. Bergen would have made that evidence public if he'd had the chance."

Skye would say the same and Alex was inclined to believe them both.

"What about Miles Bettencourt?"

The sheriff's face remained expressionless, his blue eyes neutral.

"What about him?"

Alex saw a reasonable man behind those eyes, a fair man, as Skye had said. "He's the man with the motive. My father hired Miles to run the plant in Georgia. They must have known each other fairly well. He transferred up here to run Iowa Glass as plant manager a few years later. A year after that, when my father died, Miles became president. Bettencourt certainly profited from my father's death. Two years later he married the man's widow. Once he got rid of her, he owned the business." Alex tried not to snarl the last, but failed. The pen broke when he stabbed it into the blotter.

Looking uncomfortable, Harley cleared his throat. "Which brings us to you. You own Iowa Glass now, or most of it. I'm concerned about this crime wave that seems to follow you. Investigating old murder cases can wait. I want to prevent a new one."

With a start, Alex realized Harley was right. The sheriff might believe he was behind these recent events, but Alex knew better. Evil was loose in Close, had been loose for decades. If it wasn't stopped, Alex could be its next victim. Or Skye.

"I suggest you do that, Sheriff. If I think of anything that might help your investigation, I'll be sure to let you know. For now, unless you have some reason to detain me, I'm going to get back to work." Alex stood and offered his hand to hurry Harley along. Suddenly, getting to the picnic on time was very important. Skye had asked him to come by at one. It was already twelve forty-five.

"You left Skye's truck at the plant. Do you need a ride to the house? Or are you dropping by the shindig at Iowa Glass?"

Alex tried to return the smile, but knowing the sheriff was having him watched didn't make being friendly particularly easy. "No, thanks. It's not far. I plan to walk."

Harley left with a nod. Alone in the office, Alex tore the ruined pages from the desk blotter. The pages still attached to the blotter came loose from the leather corners, and a small piece of faded white flipped onto the desk. Finally, some sign a human being used the office.

Alex held a black-and-white photo with old-fashioned scalloped edges and wide white borders. He stared at the photo a moment before he recognized a much younger Jacob Van Wyk. He sported a grin from ear to ear, and had an arm thrown around the men who stood on either side of him. Alex recognized his father from the picture that hung in the lobby at Iowa Glass. The man on the left, much shorter and stockier, mugged for the camera. All three wore military fatigues.

The photograph slipped between his fingers, loosening a sticky spot that held another picture in place. Alex gently pried the photos apart. He recognized his mother with a jolt.

Aletta Casale stood in the foyer at La Scala, smiling broadly in her Madame Butterfly kimono.

The man at her side was Jacob Van Wyk.

Looking inappropriately serious considering the setting, Jacob stood with his left arm limp at his side and his right wrapped protectively around her shoulder.

Before he returned the picture to its hiding place, Alex looked at the back. A date, printed in perfect block letters -- October 1959. Alex counted back the months from his birthday, ignoring the myth, perpetuated by his mother, that he'd been premature. In October of 1959, Aletta Casale, prima donna and darling of La Scala, was two months pregnant with her only son.

Jacob Van Wyk popped his head through the half-open door. "Ah, so you're still here."

Alex jumped to his feet and slid the photos under the blotter. "You probably want your office back. The sheriff and I have finished our business."

Jacob closed the door and rested his back against it. "No hurry, boy. You don't have to rush off. We haven't had a chance to talk since you got back from your trip."

The room shrank around Alex. Jacob blocked the only exit.

Jacob's smile vanished. "What's the matter, boy? Did I startle you?"

The malevolence in the man's voice made Alex step back. With a shake of his head, he dismissed the feeling. Jacob was an old family friend, nothing more. Aletta had befriended him out of courtesy to her late husband, who was probably the person who took the picture.

"I'm just a little hung over."

"You're getting too old for such nonsense, boy. Time for you to grow up."

"Yes, Uncle Jacob." The phrase felt familiar on his tongue. Alex mouthed the words again. Familiar, but out of reach. He looked down to see his hand resting on the edge of a photograph, which peeked out from beneath the desk blotter.

He fully intended to ask about the picture, to demand to know what Jacob had been to his mother before she married his best friend. Alex opened his mouth to speak.

When Jacob stepped forward, the walls of the room shrank again and brought the roof dangerously close to Alex's head. This room threatened to smother him as had another room far away and years before. Then, he had sat, small and helpless, with his back against the wall while one man held him captive and another jabbed a needle into the vein in his arm.

Now, Alex sidestepped the older man and headed for the door.

"I passed Marvin's garage on the way here," Jacob called.

Alex had his hand on the outside door before he stopped to listen. His heart pounded furiously, while his head told him, over and over -- nothing is wrong, nothing.

"Marvin asked me to tell you your car is ready if you want to pick it up."

Alex opened the door. The early morning breeze had vanished, he stood sweating on the sidewalk. Should he wait for his car at Marvin's or walk to the picnic?

Jacob joined him outside the office door. "Another thing then. I saw Dirk shooting hoops up at the high school. Skye's going to give him heck if he doesn't get to that picnic in time to help her with the games."

Alex's shoulders relaxed. This was so small town. Your mechanic sent word on repairs through the casual passerby and a kid couldn't get away from his mother for a few hours without some busybody thinking they had the right to nose in.

"I'll look him up before I head to the picnic. Don't want Dirk getting into trouble. Skye has enough on her mind today."

Jacob brought a heavy hand down on Alex's shoulder. "Good, boy."

Alex flinched, hating his irrational fear. He walked west down the main

street in search of Dirk, not at all certain he remembered where the high school was.

Chapter Sixteen

WITH ONE EYE on the clouds to the north, Skye ripped open another plastic bag of napkins. The last thing she needed was rain. She could move the tables indoors, but Chuck Cross would have an absolute fit with all the kids playing near the equipment.

The thought of Chuck scrambling to keep several dozen children in line made her smile. Then she thought of Alex. Alex was an absolute Pied Piper with kids. He could easily entertain the entire bunch in the dusty factory while a summer storm passed outside. Martha's words returned to her. _"What he wants is a home and children of his own. That he can have anywhere."_

The image formed too easily in her mind -- Alex at the lake behind his mother's house, teaching a bunch of kids how to swim.

"What are you thinking about with that great big smile on your face?" Lorraine's question caught Skye off guard.

She hefted a box of catsup bottles onto the picnic table and started to loosen their caps. "Just happy to see you, of course. I thought I'd have to do all this work myself."

Skye couldn't help smiling again when Lorraine backed up fast. She was so transparent. Skye decided to let her off the hook. She really couldn't ask someone with inch-long, red fingernails to unpack supplies. "Could you see if you can find Dirk? I haven't seen him for a few hours and he promised to help me set up the games."

"Sure thing, and if I can't find the little scutter, I'll have Chuck give you a hand setting up."

Just like Lorraine to send the plant manager on a simple errand rather than dirty her hands. Maybe Miles knew what he was doing when he left controlling interest in Iowa Glass to Alex instead of to Lorraine.

* * * *

JACOB SLAMMED THE trunk of his car shut with a practiced swing. Sweat drenched his shirt, making his suit coat feel unusually heavy on his shoulders. Parked behind the high school, he wasn't visible from the road, but he paused to look around.

His damp handkerchief was useless against the sweat that beaded on his forehead. "Your getting old, old man," Jacob grumbled, enjoying the sound of his voice as it echoed against the brick building.

"Your getting old, old man," was what Clayton Jackson always said when Jacob couldn't keep up the pace. Well, Jacob had lived to be an old man. That's what counted.

Jacob wiped away the small stain of red he noticed on his hand. Another spot of red stood out on the car's trunk. Jacob rubbed the chrome until it returned his reflection undistorted.

"Damnation," the word tore from his gut too quickly for him to retrieve it. With his good hand he formed a fist and smashed it hard against the car. Damnation, he thought, knowing the sin of thought was not as great as the act. Damn Alex for causing all this trouble.

Jacob slid behind the steering wheel, nodding now, as he understood. None of this was his fault. None of it. This was the boy's fault.

Marvin was still a good soldier after all these years. He had fixed the car, just as Jacob ordered. That would have settled things. When Alex didn't pick up his car, he'd forced Jacob's hand. Alex set these events into motion, just as his father had thirty-six years ago when he stole Aletta and had the gall to fire the man who saved his life.

Jacob wasn't responsible for any of it. He turned on the radio, and pulled out of the high school parking lot. The third act of La Traviata rang through the car.

* * * *

ALEX STOOD IN his father's office with the lord-of-the-manor view of his

employees below. From this height, he could easily imagine closing the plant and ruining the town that had allowed his murdering stepfather to go free.

Then he saw Skye.

He rocked forward to add a fraction of an inch to his height and catch a better view. Sweat plastered the ends of her hair against her neck, and her sleeveless white T-shirt hugged her braless breasts. Her denim shorts had frayed past mid-thigh and she'd lost her shoes sometime during the day, if she'd bothered putting them on at all.

She laughed, her head thrown back just so in response to the crowd waiting for the platter of hotdogs she carried. When she handed her load to someone, she picked up a paper napkin and dabbed the back of her neck.

Skye looked hot and frazzled, and very happy.

Suddenly, the view from his father's window no longer felt right. The distance was very wrong, and he was the one on the wrong end.

If only he could see these people as Skye saw them, people with families and dreams. He'd never even tried. He'd blamed Skye for not trusting him, for going to the Sheriff with her evidence instead of to him. But how could he blame her? He was the outsider. He was the one who needed to trust her, not the other way round.

He had always kept himself apart, no matter where he lived, substituting acts of charity for commitment and vulnerability. Worst of all, he blamed Skye for what was his fault. Days of love making had ended in abrupt silence and withdrawal, and he couldn't leave things the way they were between them. They had left too much unsaid.

He turned from the window and glanced around the office occupied by the two previous Clayton Jacksons, Miles Bettencourt, and finally, the devious and very dead Mr. Perkins. Alex didn't belong in this room. But, if in the end he found he couldn't live surrounded by all these reminders, he had to let Skye know it wasn't her fault or anyone else's, but his own.

And maybe, just maybe, she could take the best part of Close with her and join him.

* * * *

A CHILL SHOT UP Skye's back as she served up the last of the hotdogs to latecomers. Grandma Bergen called it Skye's sixth sense. Someone was watching her.

First, Skye looked to the row of factory windows that faced the picnic grounds. No one. High above the others, the window to the late Mr. Perkin's office, recently repaired, stood dark. Her heart thudded. She looked for Harley. The sheriff stood with his very pregnant wife, Jenna. He ate hotdogs and chatted with Pete Handley. She couldn't bother Harley with a silly panic attack.

Sheldon moved from group to group and had managed to avoid her all morning. He wasn't watching her. And Michael Atley actually seemed to be enjoying Lorraine's company.

After she shrugged off the uncomfortable sensation someone was watching her, Skye wiped catsup off her hands and walked to where Chuck had now moved to start the traditional company games.

Halfway across the field, Skye saw him. Alex stood on the edge of the parking lot, his hair ruffled and his clothes mussed.

He probably wore a suit earlier in the day, but discarded the jacket. His black pants had lost their crease in the August heat, and he'd shoved the sleeves of his white dress shirt to the elbows, as usual. When he walked toward her, he removed his already loosened tie and stuffed it into his pant's pocket.

Skye noted with relief he waved and smiled. The meeting with Harley must have gone well. Well enough that Alex had forgiven her for handing over the evidence to Harley? She waited where a group of potato sack racers hopped toward the finish line. Maybe he meant his smile for someone else. She glanced left and right.

Before she could convince herself he was happy to see her, he was at

her side. "I'm sorry I couldn't find Dirk."

She looked down to cover her confusion, her face growing red when his grip tightened on her bare shoulder. Maybe Alex and Dirk had arranged to meet last night and hadn't told her, or maybe Lorraine had enlisted him to help her in the search.

Right now, what Alex had done yesterday, last week, last year, or even what he'd done twenty-five years ago, didn't matter. Alex was beside her now, tilting her chin to face the sun.

"Are you okay ... Skye?"

She started to correct him. They shouldn't use first names here. What would people think? Besides, her insides turned to jelly when he said Skye with that delightful accent of his. He made her simple name sound like a prayer. The hesitation in his voice and soft look in his eyes killed her desire to correct him.

Chuck called for competitors in the three-legged race, but Skye didn't turn around. She was only dimly aware of the activity behind her, while she struggled to think of something to say, something normal, inane. Something to disguise how often during the past few days she'd wanted him right where he was now. "I'm fine, Alex. Did Marvin have your car ready?"

Alex took a step closer, his hand raised as if to stroke her hair. Anticipation of what he would do next set off the warm pulse at her core.

He let his hand drop. "I was going to stop by and check, but I got sidetracked looking for Dirk."

"I can drop you off at the garage on the way home. I'm sure Dirk will turn up soon. He'll smell the food. Can I get you something to eat?"

Skye dared look directly at him, and instantly his brown eyes captured her. Someone to her left spoke, but she ignored them, unable to tear her attention from Alex.

From his wistful gaze, she suspected he was remembering the night they met and her offer of food. When his hands curled around her arms to pull her close, she realized a more passionate image gripped him.

He whispered too low for anyone to hear. "I'm not hungry for food."

She wanted to do nothing less than satisfy his hunger, but the memory of Lorraine's words of warning intruded. _"Mark my words, Skye Devries," _Lorraine had shouted as Skye prepared to leave the house this morning_. "I don't care what that man promised you. My brother will leave this town before the end of the month, and don't expect him to bother with good-byes." _

If Skye didn't know Lorraine so well, she'd suspect Lorraine had something to do with the threats against her brother. That was ridiculous, but no more ridiculous than the thought anyone in Close would want to hurt him.

With a start, Skye realized she'd waited too long to answer Alex's question.

"You're obviously busy at the moment. What I have to say to you can wait." He released her and turned to walk away.

A sharp tug at her ankle sent Skye flying. Alex almost landed on her but managed to sit down next to her instead.

"You two aren't doing too well. You should have practiced."

Skye looked up at Harley Rossendahl, then at her feet. Someone had tied her right ankle to Alex's left. A line of people similarly paired stood in a line beside them, all of them staring. They were about to run the three-legged race.

Her face glowing red again, Skye started to untie the knot that bound her to Alex. "There's been a misunderstanding, Harley. I don't think Mr. Jackson -- "

Alex stopped her hand. "Yes, Harley, a dreadful mistake. We thought we'd have time to practice, but we'll just have to make the best of it. Won't we, Skye?"

Skye blushed again when a grin cut across Harley's face. With a strong arm around her back, Alex struggled to his feet, carrying her with him.

They stood hip-to-hip. This felt so right, having Alex's arm around

her. His fingers stroked her arm while he leaned against her.

"Alex?"

He turned toward her, not an easy trick with their ankles bound so tightly together. She didn't lift her head, but instead buried her face in his chest. This did feel right, more right than anything had in her entire life.

"What, Skye?"

She had no idea what she'd planned to say. Some nonsense about not using her first name in public, or this not being appropriate behavior. Something to keep him at a distance. Skye didn't want to keep Alex at a distance any longer.

With a single finger on her chin, Alex raised her head.

"Okay, everybody ready?" Harley called.

Alex waited for her to reply. Something had changed. The fear, the despair she had seen in his eyes so many times, had disappeared. "Are you ready, Skye? I warned you I don't do casual. I don't know how we'll work things out, but I'm willing to try. I'm ready to trust you."

She did feel ready, ready to go with him anywhere, even if it meant never seeing Close again.

"On your mark... get set...."

Skye wrapped her arm around Alex's back and tried to face the starting line. Alex kept her in place, facing him, with both arms around her.

"Go."

At the command, Alex lowered his mouth to hers. His eyes open, he watched her.

Before he could reach her, she closed her eyes and threw herself into his arms. She met his lips harder than she'd planned. When he shifted his weight to compensate, she knew they wouldn't make it.

They were going to fall.

She had thrown herself at the owner of Iowa Glass at the company picnic, and now she landed on top of him. Again.

Alex gently cradled her in his arms. When she giggled, he slowly released his breath. The warm air on her neck sent delicious shivers down her back. "We aren't going to win the race this way, Skye."

Skye pushed herself up on his chest so she could look at him. His eyes flashed with amusement, then passion heated their depths. She could feel the hard length of him beneath her, and he groaned when she lowered herself again to rest against him.

"We won't win, but we might have fun anyway." Skye found herself blushing at saying something so wicked in public.

Alex chuckled.

"Do you two need help getting untied?" Harley was having fun with this. He would no doubt tell Chuck all about it, and Chuck would annoy Lorraine to no end with his report of their public display. Skye didn't look forward to the result.

By the time Harley finished untying their ankles, Skye decided she should stay where she was.

Would anyone believe she'd recently started wearing contact lenses? She could pretend to spend the rest of the day searching the ground for them so she wouldn't have to look at anyone in Close again.

When Alex stood and extended his hand to her, she pretended to finger comb her hair into place. He ruffled her hair with the hand she'd refused.

All at once his words came back to her. _I don't know how we'll work things out, but I'm willing to try. I'm ready to trust you._

What did he mean? Work things out about Iowa Glass, or something more? Ready to trust her about Miles not being guilty, or was he ready to trust her with more? Was Alex willing to trust her with his love?

Before she could ask, Harley came running up. Skye's first thought was something had happened to Dirk. She scrambled to her feet.

"It's Jenna. She's having a baby."

"We know, Harley," Alex said.

Skye grabbed Alex's hand and started after Harley. "Oh, God, you mean now. Where is she?"

Alex didn't move. "Where's Chuck?"

Harley stopped and turned. "The paramedics got a call to help over in Newton. Chuck said to get you if we had an emergency. Doc Dieleman is on the way, but it will take a half hour or more for the ambulance. Jenna says she's not going to make it till then, and I don't want to risk taking her in the car."

"Damn." Alex started across the field, not nearly fast enough for Skye.

With a hand against his back, she tried to hurry him along. "Don't tell me you're worried about people finding out you're a doctor at a time like this? Because if that's the problem, I'll make an announcement right now and tell the whole town."

They stopped at the entrance to the first aid tent. Harley sat behind Jenna, propping her up on blankets. The normally unflappable sheriff, appeared to be hyperventilating as he coached his wife through a contraction. Jenna, her contraction over, gave Harley an encouraging smile.

Alex closed the tent flap in Skye's face, leaving her to pace for what seemed like forever. Lorraine took charge of the festivities and put an early end to the picnic. She also stopped by to tell Skye that Jacob had seen Dirk shooting hoops at the high school with two other boys.

Fifteen minutes later Alex emerged, looking incredibly grim.

"What's wrong, Alex? Is it a breech birth? Is the baby too big?"

Alex shook his head, his face a faint gray.

Skye recalled what he'd said on the plane about not being ready to practice medicine again. Well, if he could talk her into flying halfway around the world, she could talk him into delivering one baby. "You're going to be fine, Alex. You've delivered hundreds of babies."

Alex shook his head again.

"Dozens?" she suggested, hopefully.

"Damn it, Skye, I'm a pediatrician. I stand in the next room, millions of dollars of equipment at hand, waiting for someone to hand me the squirming little tyke."

"But you worked in an emergency room for three years. Surely at some time -- "

"San Francisco General wouldn't let me near a complicated delivery. Their insurance carrier would never stand for it."

Skye looked at Harley and Jenna. Harley braced for the next contraction. Jenna raised her eyebrows in Skye's direction.

"Are you saying you've never delivered a baby?" Skye whispered.

"Of course, I've delivered babies. When I was in training, and a couple times in the ER when the kid popped out before someone from maternity made it down."

Alex took off his dress shirt and started to disinfect his hands and arms with the supplies Lorraine brought.

"So you do know what to do? Nothing is wrong?"

Alex snapped on latex gloves. "Jenna is over forty, she was due a week ago, and the baby weighs nine pounds, at least. Those are complications enough. The baby's presenting breech, and I'm not sure I can do anything about it. Jenna's instincts were right on. This is not a delivery for the back of a moving car."

Alex squared his shoulders. "I want you to join Harley. If he decides to faint on us, I want someone I can trust nearby. Can you handle it?"

Grateful for something to do, Skye nodded and moved to kneel behind Harley. Jenna favored her with a tight smile between puffs as a contraction crested. When Alex knelt between Jenna's legs, Skye had a front row seat to observe his bedside manner.

Almost forty minutes later, with a siren announcing the late arrival of the ambulance, Alex rested a squalling baby on Jenna's stomach. Everyone except Alex whooped and yelled.

Sounding exhausted, Alex whispered, "Congratulations, Sheriff, you have a healthy baby girl."

Chapter Seventeen

ALEX RESTED AGAINST a tree near Skye, feeling exhilarated and calm, at the same time.

Skye babbled, a delightful sound. "Have you ever seen such a beautiful baby? Harley said they were going to name the baby Abby if they had a girl. I expected you to go with them."

"The baby's fine, and Jenna is Doc Dieleman's patient. With Dieleman, Chuck, and Harley along for the ride, there wasn't room for me in the ambulance."

"Well, I'm glad you stayed. Mrs. Shutts told me something strange yesterday that might have something to do with your father's case."

Alex only half listened. He wanted to talk, but not about any crime, past or present. He welcomed her into his arms when she snuggled against his chest. "What's that, Skye?"

"I told you how I installed the new computer system in Jacob's office right before you came to town. At the time, I wondered why Mrs. Shutts didn't do it herself. She knows more about computers than she lets on. I didn't think about it too much at the time, I was happy to have the work, but something she said yesterday struck me as odd."

Skye felt so warm and fragile nestled against him. Things could be right between them again. He knew it. All he had to do was get her away from Iowa. They could winter in Sicily and spend the rest of the year in France. Once Skye got over the language barrier, she would love Paris.

"When I asked Mrs. Shutts if she was coming to the company picnic, she said she didn't attend Iowa Glass functions anymore. As far as I know, she moved to Close nine months ago. Iowa Glass doesn't hold a whole lot of functions during the year."

Skye ticked off the dates on her fingers. "The Fourth of July. Today, Founder's Day. The Christmas party. That's it. She hasn't lived in Close long enough to say she doesn't attend Iowa Glass functions anymore."

Something in Skye's voice made him focus on what she was saying. "Mrs. Shutts? What does she have to do with anything?"

"She knew you were coming into town that day -- "

Alex took Skye by the shoulders to force her to look at him. He didn't like what he saw. "You're not suggesting a sweet, old lady like Mrs. Shutts had anything to do with sabotaging my car, are you? That's too ridiculous, even for you, Skye. I understand she makes an attractive target. Next, you'll point out she's really not from Close -- "

"No, I'm suggesting the opposite. She denied it when I asked, but I think she worked for Iowa Glass when she was younger. She acted like she knew you that first day. Don't you remember?"

Alex tried his best to review his years in Close. "I don't remember a Mrs. Shutts. I assumed she always worked for Jacob, but you know how people are. They act like they know you if they know your friends."

"I know how we can find out. All we have to do is get into Mr. Perkins' office."

Some investigating might be the best thing for Skye, and for them. Until this business was settled, he'd never talk her into leaving Close, and he needed to have her with him when he left. Alex fished a set of keys out of his pocket. He raised his arm, the keys just out of her reach. "Will these do?"

Easily defeated for once, Skye stood before him, her arms crossed over her chest, defiance sparkling in her eyes. "What's the deal?"

"The deal, Skye..." He enjoyed the sound of her name and decided calling her Skye was definitely one of his conditions. "You can have the keys as long as you don't leave my sight for the rest of the day. Deal?"

Skye hesitated. Indecision warred briefly on her face. "Deal. With you

until midnight tonight."

The last thing he wanted was Skye running off at midnight. Especially if someone really was out to get him. Alex planned to keep her safe in his bed till morning, noon if possible. Before he could extend his proposal to sunrise, Skye snatched the keys from his slack fingers and sprinted across the picnic grounds to the side entrance of Iowa Glass.

By the time he caught up with her, she'd spent several seconds tugging at the locked side door.

Alex slipped his arm around her waist. "Let's try around front. I only have keys to the administration wing."

They didn't need a key for the main entrance. The door was open. Once upstairs, Alex stood with his hands in his pockets while she rifled through the filing cabinets in the outer office. He followed her into the president's office, and noticed his crumpled suit jacket draped over the chair.

She knelt on the wood floor in front of a file cabinet. "Darn."

She wanted something from him, but he had no idea what. He'd been so intent on studying her movements. She went up on tiptoe every time she looked on top of a cabinet to add an extra inch to her height. He couldn't take his eyes off her legs as the movement tightened the muscles in her calves, The way her hair bounced when she bent her head had him hypnotized.

"I need to get into these files."

So much bare skin, so few clothes. Such an attractive bundle inches from him. What were they doing here looking through musty old files, anyway?

Alex crouched beside her. "Hand me a paper clip."

He sat cross-legged in front of the locked drawer while she showered his lap with paper clips. With Skye bent over him, her breasts inches from his mouth, it took all of his concentration to unbend the clip to the proper angle.

"Do you know what you're doing?" she asked.

While he worked the metal in the lock, Alex realized jimmying a lock was like riding a bicycle. His fingers knew what to do after all these years. "I have some experience."

He didn't notice Skye had fallen uncharacteristically silent until the lock clicked and he pulled open the drawer.

She made no move to look inside, and stopped his hand when he started to search. "Is that how you made your living in New York? Breaking into places?"

After all she'd read about him, how could she be so terribly naive? Alex's fingers felt heavy and stiff. Naivete might be all right if there were such a thing as a safe, small American town, but Alex knew it to be a myth. Skye needed to know the truth.

"No, Skye, I didn't make a living in New York. I survived there. I didn't willingly sell my body. A man did that for me."

Alex continued in a controlled voice that hid the way his insides quaked. She couldn't help but feel differently about him now. But he had promised to trust her. He had to trust her with the truth. "He shot me up with heroin whenever he thought my being straight threatened to hurt business. When I was close to death from pneumonia, infected with strep and hepatitis, he didn't want to get stuck with an underage corpse, so he dumped me at an uptown emergency room."

Still no visible reaction from Skye. She remained beside him, her hand covering his.

"I was pretty bad off, but I knew I couldn't let them send me to Close. Chet Dickson, the doctor on call that night, tracked down my father's lawyers in New York. They made my natural father's estate available for my care, and Miles agreed to allow them to become my legal guardians."

Skye pulled her hand away. Her voice shook when she spoke. "My parents moved from Sweden to Chicago when I was six. They were both heroin addicts. After we almost died in a fire, they left me in Close with my father's parents."

Alex's stomach tightened. Skye exposed to the type of life he'd led? The idea didn't jibe with his image of her. He had always pictured her living a sheltered life here in Close. "Are they still alive?"

She nodded, her lips trembling slightly. "They were lucky. They got off the stuff. My father lives in Sweden. He sends a Christmas card every year. Mom stayed in the states and sells real estate in Florida. I haven't heard from her since she got remarried fifteen years ago."

After raising her hand to his lips, Alex pulled her into his lap while she talked. "It all happened so long ago, it just isn't relevant anymore. I don't think about, except sometimes, when I don't know what to do with Dirk. Do you think about it much, the past, I mean?"

Alex checked a sigh and held her closer. It seemed he could tell Skye anything. "All too often, I'm afraid. When this mess started, I had Mike Atly call New York to check on the man who left me at the hospital. He followed me to the first two boarding schools I attended. I lost him when I took my mother's maiden name and moved to Massachusetts. I had to make sure he wasn't behind this."

She shifted in his arms, snuggling closer. Skye acted as if she felt safe in his arms. She shouldn't.

"Did Mike track him down?" she asked.

"He wasn't one of the lucky ones. He died ten years ago from an overdose."

Skye wriggled off his lap, then turned to him, her eyes lighting up with interest. "Go back to that thing about your father's lawyers in New York."

Evidently, he needn't have worried about shocking her, or she latched onto the most insignificant detail to avoid the truth. "Father's lawyers? Why?"

"You said Chet found the name of your father's lawyers in New York. Why not Jacob?"

Alex decided to play along. When Skye had one of her hunches, she wasn't easy to distract. "Like I said, I had no intention of returning to Iowa. Far as I knew, Jacob still lived in Close."

"But why did your father use a law firm in New York? I thought Jacob was your natural father's best friend. That's what everyone here seems to think. Why didn't your father hire his best friend to handle all his legal business?"

Alex didn't know the answer. Jacob was the corporate lawyer for Iowa Glass, but the law firm in New York handled all his late father's other holdings, including those Alex inherited from his father when he was only five. Alex had followed suit. Even his mother used the New York firm to administer her overseas property. "What does all this have to do with these files?"

* * * *

MOST OF THE PICNICKERS had left the grounds. Unseen, Jacob turned the key and opened the backdoor to the administration wing. He searched several minutes for the room he wanted. After so many years, he didn't remember the plant layout precisely.

What Jacob could remember, without flaw, was that hot summer night in 1972. He could almost see the boy standing before him, pleading.

"I want to stay with you, Uncle Jacob."

"You're only twelve, boy. You have to go home. It's the law." Jacob stopped the boy from running with a hand on his shoulder. Alex looked so much like his mother.

"Jacob would return him to Miles Bettencourt as agreed, would carry him if necessary. "You have to accept the truth. Your mother is dead, and we may never know who killed her."

"I know who killed her. Miles did. I won't go back." Alex broke free and stumbled toward the back of Jacob's house.

_"When he reached the door, Alex looked into the mirror that hung to the

right. Then he reached for the keys dangling from one of the hooks along its lower edge._

Alex had stolen cars before, in Sicily. Jacob would have none of that nonsense here. When he raised his good right arm to strike, Alex stared at him through the mirror, his expression changing from anger to comprehension. Then to terror.

Fury flashed through Jacob, fury Aletta's death had not quenched. "You don't have to pretend with me, boy. I don't know why you lied at the hearing, but we both know your mother's death was an accident."

Keys clutched in his hand, Alex jerked open the door and ran. Jacob took two steps to catch him.

When Jacob's fingers bit into his right shoulder, Alex cried out. The cry sounded so much like Aletta's, so much like his beloved's. God, how he hated them both. And loved them.

"I want to hear you say it, boy. Say it was an accident."

Alex clawed at the hand that held him suspended.

Jacob threw him to the ground as if he were a doll.

Sprawled on his hands and knees in the dirt, Alex tried to crawl away. Jacob stopped him with a boot on his back.

"Just like your mother. Always causing trouble. Always making a scene. If she'd shut up, none of this would have happened."

Jacob lifted his foot long enough to strike the boy's ribs. "Say it, boy, say it was an accident."

When Alex shook his head, Jacob trapped it with his foot and pushed Alex's face into the dirt.

Two months ago Jacob had watched his beloved Aletta's coffin lowered into the dirt. Now her son would join her.

Voices sounded from the street. Jacob lifted his foot.

By the time Jacob turned back, Alex had crossed the garden, car keys jangling in his hands. A moment later, the boy vaulted over the garden wall.

Twenty-five years ago Alex had escaped. He wouldn't escape again.

* * * *

SKYE NUDGED ALEX aside and started to rummage through the file. "Until ten years ago, the president's secretary entered, by hand, the events of each year at Iowa Glass into a separate green ledger."

She flipped past the book she knew would include some mention of the death of Alex's mother. She came up short of the year Clayton Alexander Jackson, II, died by five volumes.

"You have to open the next drawer."

Alex slid on the floor until he sat in front of the next drawer and held out his hand for another paper clip.

While he worked the lock, she stroked his hair and wondered how long it would take before it grew to brush his shoulders again. Long hair suited Alex, even if it didn't fit Close's unwritten dress code. She rather liked that Alex didn't fit in.

She noted, then ignored, a banging from the factory below. Her hands fairly itched to reach the files she was looking for.

Grandpa Bergen had told her about this feeling. "Just short of the longing you feel for a women," he'd said, as he described the moment before he solved a big case.

Skye was close. She could feel it. Once she cleared up this mess, Alex wouldn't have to leave town. She held her breath until she heard the lock pop open. "This is where they keep the history of Iowa Glass. A year-by-year summary of events, including who was hired and -- "

She hadn't notice Alex move behind her, but she felt his hand on her head.

* * * *

ALEX COULD NO longer resist. He touched her hair. His fingers became tangled in the nest of curls. Why had they left Sicily? Everything had been so perfect there. Kneeling before her, his other hand joined the first in her hair,

positioning her head for his kiss. She didn't back away.

"And who is fired -- "

Ignoring her breathless words, he lowered his mouth to hers. She tasted the way he remembered -- spring and vanilla and innocence. His blood pulsed in rhythm with the beat beneath his fingers on her neck. He shuddered in response to her open-mouthed sigh. Reluctantly, he released her mouth to search her face for a more coherent response.

Her eyes remained closed. Her chin tilted toward him. Her lips were damp and parted. Coherent enough. He lowered his mouth to press against her neck.

He managed to get one foot under him while he prepared to stand and carry her with him. Clear thinking fled moments ago, but he knew the desk would make a more comfortable bed than the plank floor. Then he noticed his discarded jacket.

Her eyes remained firmly shut and her lips parted. Skye waited for him. After smoothing his jacket beneath her, he lay her on the floor. His heart pounded like he'd just run a marathon.

What was he afraid of? Not of Skye, not anymore. He wasn't afraid of what they might become.

They had already become.

Then, Skye was through with waiting. Her eyes still closed, she reached for him. Willingly, he allowed her to draw him down. Willingly, so very willingly, he touched her lips, then traced them with his tongue.

He took in every movement of her lips as she silently begged him to kiss her again. Her hips moved in tiny jerks she tried to check. Her body couldn't lie. She wanted him. His body pressed firmly against hers. The two made one.

* * * *

SKYE THOUGHT SHE would scream if Alex didn't touch her breasts. When he finally tugged her shirt free from her shorts, she sighed.

He chuckled, murmuring "Patience, luv." His hands slid up her sides with equal slowness, retreating when she tried to rush him and put her breasts into his hands before he was ready. When she lay still, his thumbs brushed her nipples with equal pressure.

She had never felt anything this sensuous, this pleasurable before. He pulled her shirt over her head and attacked her with his tongue.

Why had they waited so long to do this again? Skye couldn't think what they could have argued about. She couldn't think at all. All she could do was feel.

Alex nipped her nipples, sending spikes of pleasure rippling through her. She raised her hips to press against him, against the need she felt growing between them.

In answer, Alex rose and slipped a finger beneath the fly of her denim shorts. When he lowered his mouth to join his hand, his breath flooded her with heat.

With a flick of his thumb, he undid the snap. He opened the zipper with his teeth. His tongue pressed hard against her swelling core.

When his arms encircled her waist, she wriggled upward, and slid her shorts down to her ankles. On his hands and knees, he reached for her head. While he kissed her mouth, she undid his belt and pulled his pants down with a tug that left him bare.

He felt smooth and hard in her hand. He grew harder still while she stroked his length. His breath became ragged when he straddled her.

Again, she arched her back, hoping to force his body into direct contact with hers. Inexplicably, he didn't seem to feel the same rushing need that consumed her. He lowered himself into her slowly, supporting most of his weight on his knees and hands. The heat built with every stroke. When they reached the peak together, she stilled her cries against his shoulder.

A sharp vibration shook the floor beneath her head. The next time she heard it. A bang, like hammer or a piece of wood striking something hard

sounded on the floor below. They were not alone.

* * * *

"SKYE, I'M GOING to leave you for a few minutes."

She didn't look up from the open file cabinet. "I thought that was against the rules."

Alex's answering chuckle made her smile. "I won't be long. I want to check out what's going on downstairs. I love you, you know."

A frisson of pure delight ran down the length of her body as Alex continued to caress her hair. "I know."

She would find evidence to make everything clear. Then, after he had made certain no one would interrupt them, he would kiss her again, and again, and.... Skye looked up to find Alex had left, closing the door behind him.

He did love her, and as soon as he came back she would tell him she loved him too. When she found the proof about who killed his parents, they could make plans for the future.

With renewed zeal, she turned dusty pages, reading in detail the events of 1965, the year Alex's father died. She checked the list of new employees and departures twice without any luck. Marvin's name appeared as a departure. He must have left the company to work at the garage. No mention of a Mrs. Shutts.

With a smack to her forehead, she realized thirty years ago Mrs. Shutts may have used a maiden name. The ledger listed the lawyer used by the firm, and Jacob Van Wyk had the job. But why didn't Jacob handle Clayton Jackson's other legal affairs?

Skye's grandfather often said small details revealed the truth, and this small detail didn't add up. After searching another ten minutes, Skye realized contributing events could have occurred the previous year. She might find what she was looking for in the ledger for 1964. Alex's father died in February of 1965.

Before she could find the other book, a clap of thunder startled her. The resonant quake beneath her feet rocked her.

When she looked out the window, she had to shield her eyes from the sun. Rain clouds to the north were too distant to have caused such a loud bang. Then she saw it. A column of black smoke two blocks away.

She hadn't heard thunder, but an explosion.

Harley was out of town, so was Chuck. She grabbed the phone and dialed Lorraine's cell phone.

Lorraine picked up on the third ring. "I'm in my car. I'll be there in less than a minute."

"Dirk," Skye whispered, not aware she spoke her prayer aloud.

"Jacob saw him at the high school not long ago. The explosion was in front of the bank. Oh, shit...."

Skye held her breath until Lorraine came on again. "Skye, do you know where Alex is?"

"He was here a few minutes ago."

"He didn't go to Marvin's to pick up his car?"

"We're here at Iowa Glass. We heard a noise downstairs and he went to investigate. He wouldn't have left without telling me."

"Thank God."

"Lorraine, what's going on!"

"Alex's Mustang is a pile of smoldering metal, and this heap didn't die of natural causes."

Skye felt as if her heart had stopped beating. Alex could have been in that car. How many people had reminded him to pick it up? Marvin, last night by phone. A half hour ago she had offered to take him to the shop.

No more warnings. Someone was trying to kill Alex. Her investigation seemed more urgent now. Lorraine promised to call when she had news.

Skye dropped to her knees before the open drawer, and returned the 1965 ledger to its place. She pulled out the next book -- 1963. The 1964 volume was missing.

Mighty suspicious Grandpa Bergen would say. The plant in Georgia might have a copy. Which files were stolen there last month? Maybe the volume was out of place. Skye knelt up for a better view of the book spines.

"You must be looking for this."

Skye jumped. Then, she sat back, resting her hands on her knees.

Mrs. Shutts, looking older than Skye remembered, handed the ledger to Skye. "I was bringing this to Sheriff Rossendahl. I expected to find him at the picnic, but I guess I'm too late. I've marked the page you're looking for."

Skye turned to the page. "You're Gladys Swensen? You were fired in 1964 'for cause'?"

Skye stood and slid a chair behind her, so the older woman could sit. Mrs. Shutts rubbed her hands together. "It all happened so long ago. Over thirty years."

"That's a long time to hold a secret, but I think it's time it came out, don't you? Alex deserves to know what happened to his parents."

"Mr. Jackson, Alex's father, said it would be all right. I would take the blame to protect Jacob's reputation. A lawyer is only as good as his reputation. And Jacob promised I'd always have a job."

Skye considered calling Alex, he should hear this, but she wanted to keep Mrs. Shutts talking. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"Jacob can't have children. The shrapnel damaged him in Viet Nam. I told him I didn't care. I can't have children either. It was perfect. We could adopt, neither of us having to give up anything. But Jacob called me a freak, said he would never marry a woman who couldn't give him children. I didn't understand, still don't understand. Why would it matter?"

Still not clear about what she was saying, Skye understood one thing. Mrs. Shutts was a victim in this too.

"I don't know why, they used to be best friends, but after Mr. Jackson got married, Jacob absolutely loathed him. Whenever Jacob was in one of his moods, he would start to mutter about 'the boy who should have been mine.' He was jealous, I guess. Because he can't have children of his own. That must be why he did it."

"What did Jacob do, Mrs. Shutts?"

"He... we... the two of us embezzled funds from Iowa Glass." Mrs. Shutts' shoulders sank under her confession. "We got caught. As a favor to Jacob, Mr. Jackson didn't press charges. He didn't want to ruin Jacob, he said. I was fired for a bookkeeping error. Jacob must have thought there wouldn't be any other consequences. When Mr. Jackson retained a law firm in New York to handle his business, I think Jacob went insane."

Jacob? How could this have anything to do with Jacob? But why not? Because she'd known him most of her life? Because he was a big man in Close? Skye's world crumbled at the edges. "Did Jacob kill Alex's father?"

"No, no, Jacob would never do such a thing." The look of outrage lasted a moment before Mrs. Shutts buried her face in her hands. "When we got news of Mr. Jackson's death, Jacob went to see his widow in Milan. That's when I knew. He committed the sin of David. He killed his friend, killed Mr. Jackson, because he lusted after his wife."

"Do you know anything about Mrs. Bettencourt's death?" Skye braced herself for Mrs. Shutts' next revelation.

"When she remarried, Jacob became terribly upset. He called her a whore, all sorts of awful names. We were living together by then, but he refused to marry me. You must think me a shameful woman."

Skye patted the older woman's back. "It sounds to me like you stayed with the man you loved." For much too long. "Why are you going to the Sheriff with this now? This all happened so long ago. What you say can't bring back the dead."

"But maybe I can save the boy."

Skye didn't know how she kept going, how she continued to speak. "The boy?"

"Jacob and I haven't lived together for many years, but I know his moods. He's afraid of Alex. I don't know why. And I'm afraid Jacob will kill him. That's why I sent those messages."

"You sent the death threats to Alex?"

"Not the faxes. Too easy to trace. The boys sent those. The letters were easy to arrange, and the computer damage at his company in Boston. I thought that if I could get Alex to leave, then he would be safe. I never would have hurt him. I never would have hurt anyone. I don't know who attacked Alex that first night, or who broke into the factory in Georgia. You have to believe me, Skye, and tell the sheriff I would never do such a thing."

Skye squeezed Mrs. Shutts' shoulder.

"I did what I had to to keep Jacob from killing again."

Something apart from Mrs. Shutts fought for Skye's attention. She sneezed, then willed the distraction aside. She sneezed again. This time she paused to look around.

Sun filtered through the window. Still early evening, hours till sunset. The light filtered through something besides glass. A light haze. Her next breath sent Skye into a panic.

Smoke.

Chapter Eighteen

WHEN HE DIDN'T FIND anyone, Alex decided the knocking must have come from a water pipe. By the time he left the factory floor and walked past the main entrance, he was wheezing. He was allergic to something at the plant.

Intent on returning to Skye, he rushed past the display of mirrors, averting his eyes. He didn't pause when the noise sounded again.

"What's your game, boy? Going to keep me waiting all day?"

His foot on the bottom step, Alex slowly turned. He recognized the voice, the inflection, the words. Only one person still alive on this earth called him boy.

A dark shadow moved behind the reflected light that bounced between mirrors.

"What do you want, Jacob?"

Silence. Torn between wanting to make certain Skye was safe and figuring out what this was about, Alex moved closer.

Dozens of mirror mounted on moveable partitions, which had previously stood in two neat rows, now faced each other at crazy angles. Alex stepped into the corridor. Reflective sheets of glass stretched fifty feet. His hand over his eyes to shield them from the glare, Alex peered forward.

Suddenly, Jacob Van Wyk appeared near the end of the corridor. Just when he decided where Jacob must be standing, Alex realized he had no idea how many mirrors reflected Jacob's image. Alex stopped again and coughed. Whatever had bothered him in the factory was present in the air here, too.

Jacob's reflection disappeared.

"If you have something to discuss, we should go to my office." Bad idea, Alex realized. If Jacob was up to something, Alex didn't want Skye involved. "Or we could go to your office."

"No reason to pretend, not with me, boy."

The voice switched from Alex's right to his left.

"Chuck Cross was at Bettencourt's house last week when you remembered what happened the night your mother died. This is a small town. You can't keep that sort of thing secret long. I don't know what you hope to gain by not telling the sheriff now. I still haven't figured out why you tried to frame Miles. Don't know why you didn't tell Larry all those years ago. Not that it would have done you any good. Larry had orders to come to me if you said anything incriminating. I would have killed you if you'd told Larry what you saw."

The truth slowly settled into Alex's mind. Programmed so long to think of Jacob as a friend, he was reluctant to admit the truth. "I don't know what this is about, Jacob."

His heart thudding, Alex took two steps into the corridor. He could see the source of contaminated air. The normally closed display room window opened directly onto the factory room. The third floor corridor stood open, exposing a twenty-foot drop.

Nothing but silence from Jacob, then a fizzing sound.

Jacob's reply sounded muffled. "This is your fault. If you'd picked up the car this morning, I wouldn't have to do this. Your car made a nice little fire on Main Street. People will be talking about it for years. Marvin always was a clumsy fool, but he did know how to follow orders."

Have to keep him talking, find where he's standing. "What have you done, Jacob?"

"Won't take Harley long to decide you blew up your own car and poor Marvin with it, not after he finds the evidence I planted at your place. He'll bring murder charges. No doubt about that."

A more troubling thought occurred to Alex, a thought that threatened to double him over. "Where's Dirk?"

Silence. Then the fizzing sound again.

Bright comets of light flew past Alex. When they reached the open window, the reflections consolidated into one real flare, which arced through the opening.

A great whooshing sound followed. The glow from the flames below grew. Alex was running out of time. God, where was Skye? Why hadn't the fire alarms gone off? "Damn it, Jacob. If you hurt Dirk -- "

"Oh, I won't hurt, Dirk. You will, boy."

Alex looked up. The red light on the smoke detector was out. The sprinkler system might be out, too. He had to get Skye out of here, but first, he had to find Dirk. Jacob knew where Dirk was.

Keep Jacob talking. "Everyone knows I'd never hurt Dirk."

A rough laugh sounded on Alex's left. He moved toward it.

"Don't be so sure, boy. They enjoy thinking the worst of you, just like they enjoyed thinking the worst of your mother. The Chronicle laid the ground work by bringing up your past. The people of Close did the rest. I just added a few details."

Alex tried not to listen to the words while he concentrated on finding the source of the voice. Every time he looked into a mirror, his world tilted. The roar of the fire spreading on the floor below vibrated through his feet.

"Everyone knows you've been close to Dirk's mother, and Dirk worked with the Ritter boy to drive you out of town. Couldn't have arranged for better if I'd paid for it."

Just a little farther. A shadow moved again, but on Alex's right this time. The bastard must be using a microphone system to throw his voice.

"Several good citizens of Close saw you walk through town this morning near the high school. They saw Dirk, too. Later, it's true, but witnesses will forget that detail when they find the boy's body. Not burned beyond recognition, of course, but too badly damaged to ascertain if sexual assault was involved. They will suspect, of course. Such a sorry end you've brought your respected family to, boy. The last of your line."

While shielding his eyes against his own reflection, Alex crouched to look beneath the dividers. Two shapes stood some twenty feet ahead. One thin and straight, a leg. Behind it, a shape long and indistinct. The bundle on the floor moved. Dirk!

Jacob continued, madness clear in his voice. "I suggest you run, boy. You might get lucky and find the door I've left unlocked for my escape. That way I won't miss the pleasure of a trial. If you hadn't found me, I could have served as your attorney when you so valiantly defended yourself against the vile charges leveled against you. You against the town, just like all those years ago. Do you remember the hearing, boy? They never believed a word you said about Miles killing your mother, but your testimony was quite effective in turning any suspicion away from me."

Alex gauged the distance between Jacob and Dirk. Too close. "Is this

about money? Iowa Glass? What do you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to pay, boy. Pay for your parents' sins. You know the wages of sin. Even the offspring of a Papist whore knows the wages of sin."

No longer willing to wait, Alex ducked behind a row of mirrors. Instead of a wall, Alex found himself staring into another mirror. He reached out his hand to steady himself, bracing for a wave of vertigo. Instead of his face, he focused on his hand. This time the disorienting jolt didn't hit.

Fascinated, Alex watched his reflection. He was familiar with the phenomena in theory, but had never experienced it as an adult. The reflected image held its left arm extended, the tips of its fingers touching Alex's right hand.

* * * *

SKYE SENT MRS. SHUTTS down the second floor fire escape in back of the building, and headed toward the front door. One of them would run into Alex, who hopefully waited outside.

The instant of decision came when she reached the main floor. Straight ahead stood the double doors to the outside and safety. Her body told her to leave the building. That's what her grandmother told her when she woke with nightmares, haunted by her escape from a burning Chicago tenement slung over the back of a fireman. Don't think of anyone else. Leave the building and run for help.

Voices came from the display room behind her, along with the crackle of the fire. One voice stopped her in her tracks. Alex was still in the building.

Alex is a grown man who knows what he's doing. When her feet refused to budge, she realized what Alex faced. A room full of mirrors.

A glimpse of himself in the rear view mirror set him rubbing his temples to counteract the throbbing pain. Alex needed her. The thought released her feet. From the box in the hall, she grabbed the fire ax and ran.

* * * *

A NOISE BEHIND DREW his gaze up. In the mirror he saw a shadowy figure rush behind him. Then he noticed his own face. The following wave of dizziness sent him to his knees.

The sound of shattering glass drove Alex to struggle to his feet and turn. A partition on the other side of the corridor had fallen. A mirror lay shattered. The reflected shadow he had seen now darted behind the next mirror. Alex squinted through the smoke.

One by one the mirrors fell, each crash followed by a curse as Jacob moved ahead of the broken glass. When the last mirror in the column began to shake, Jacob plunged from the shadows, as if driven from hiding by the righteous clamber. Backlit by the fire's glow, he stood in front of the window, his right fist raised in protest.

"Get Dirk." Skye's cry rang through the room.

Alex pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, breathing through the cloth to filter out the smoke that now entered the room. On hands and knees, he crawled to where he'd last seen Dirk. He didn't look up until the last mirror shattered on the floor.

* * * *

STEPPING BACK TO KEEP both men in sight, Skye held Jacob at bay with the fire ax while Alex ran to the bundle on the floor. Dirk struggled beneath Jacob's coat. After he loosened the belt, Alex threw Dirk over his shoulder, keeping the coat over his head. The smoke curled more thickly around them.

Her back straight and her arms raised, Skye faced Jacob. She couldn't afford to feel the heat of the rapidly spreading fire. If she did, she would run.

Alex joined her. With one arm around her waist and the other steadying Dirk on his shoulder, Alex drew her backward out of the room. Flashes of red from fire trucks joined those of the flames. A siren cried outside.

Jacob cried, too. "You have to tell me, boy. You and your family owe me that much."

They had almost reached the door. Skye dropped the ax and covered her

face to ease her breathing.

Jacob took a step forward. "This is your fault, boy. Your fault I killed your father, your fault your mother fell. Your fault they didn't catch me. Why didn't you tell them you saw me kill her?"

Relief flooded her. She almost dropped the ax. Jacob had killed his parents, not Miles. No argument about him wanting to go to school instead of playing the piano had caused his mother's death. For whatever reason, Jacob had been behind everything. Jacob's question rang through her head -- "_Why didn't you tell them you saw me kill her?"_

Alex wouldn't have lied about the murder. If he'd seen Jacob kill her, he would have said so, wouldn't he?

As if he could hear her thoughts, Alex spoke. "I didn't know Jacob killed her. I must have seen her murder through a mirror, and confused which hand the killer used to hit her."

"I noticed the tilted mirror at Lorraine's," Skye said, "But I didn't put the pieces together until now. Your mother tilted the mirror so she could watch herself descend the staircase. When you look at it straight on, you don't see yourself. You see the top of the stairs instead."

Relief quickly changed to fear. Sparks flew past with a rush of wind. Skye and Alex turned and ran. With a crash of glass, the floor behind them gave way sending the hundred-year-old display of Iowa Glass products onto the factory floor. And Jacob Van Wyk with it.

When the front door refused to open, Skye took Dirk and sank to the floor while Alex pounded with both hands. The door was jammed against a metal bar and chains linked between the outdoor handles.

Holding Dirk to her chest, Skye rocked him, feeling for the first time in her life like a real mother.

* * * *

ALEX PULLED SKYE'S face close to the floor. He didn't know if the squeezing sensation in his chest was from the fumes he'd breathed in the plant earlier, the smoke he now inhaled, or if his on-and-off, two-pack-a-day habit had finally caught up with him.

"Is there another way out of here?"

Skye, her mouth covered by his handkerchief, shook her head.

A glance behind confirmed her assessment. Flames licked up the stairs to the administration wing, and they would never make it outside through the smoke-clogged factory floor. Alex threw his shoulder against the door, putting all his weight against it. Nothing.

With a hand on his back, Skye stopped him. "The bathroom." She pointed to a door near the entrance. "A small window."

So much to tell her, so much he wanted to say. He raised her hand to his mouth and choked out one word, "Go," then turned to Dirk.

Alex pulled the coat from the boy's head. He was unconscious.

Airway is clear.

Remember your training. Follow procedures step-by-step.

Breathing. Victim is breathing.

The air was hazy. In a few minutes, thick, black smoke would engulf them.

Why had he wasted so much precious time with Skye arguing about nothing. What did it matter who killed his mother? Knowing Jacob, not Miles, killed her, didn't make one bit of difference now. Except to Lorraine. Lorraine was right. He had falsely accused her father and torn their family apart.

Circulation. He's got a pulse. Small cut over right eye. No longer bleeding.

Frantic voices outside called for a crowbar.

Disability. Why isn't Dirk moving? Why doesn't he open his eyes? Come on, Alex, damn it. You're missing something.

Skye banged on the door and shouted. Alex felt for the reassurance of Dirk's steady pulse.

The door began to buckle in front of him. Alex could hear Lorraine, berating some poor firefighter. Smoke began to pour from the factory.

_E, damn it, what starts with E? Exposure. _

Alex's vision narrowed and invisible bands tightened around his chest. With a crack of metal, the door flew open and large, gloved hands dragged him out of the burning building.

* * * *

SHELDON HELD SKYE back. No one could stop Lorraine. For that, Skye was grateful. She didn't feel quite so torn when she rushed to Dirk's side, knowing Lorraine hovered over Alex. When Dirk smiled through the plastic oxygen mask, Skye knew he would be all right.

Alex didn't look nearly as well. "Sorry, Lori," he whispered, "I was wrong about Miles, and too damned stubborn to see."

"He's delirious. Why doesn't someone do something?" Lorraine demanded. "Damn it, Chuck Cross, if you let my brother die, I'll kill you."

Skye looked anxiously from Alex to her son. Chuck left Dirk's side, switching places with the paramedic who held the oxygen mask to Alex's face.

Gently, Skye moved Lorraine aside and took her place. "No matter what Jacob said, it wasn't your fault. Jacob killed your mother, not you."

Alex closed his eyes, his brow wrinkling in pain. She had to make him understand. "I don't know if I would have gotten up the courage to leave Close without your confidence and encouragement. I do plan to stay here in Close. It's a good place to raise my son. It's a good place for us. We don't have to stay, but we can. There's a big difference between the two."

Alex smiled weakly. The oxygen hadn't improved his color. "I guess since Lorraine and Shelley rescued us, we'll have to invite them to the wedding."

Chuck, looking worried, called across the field. "We're going to need level two trauma. Get on the phone and see if we can get a chopper."

Distracted by the commotion, she only half listened to Alex. "Wedding?"

Alex spoke in a whisper. "We'll have to get married eventually. It would never do in a small town like Close for the owner of Iowa Glass to get his secretary pregnant and then not marry her."

When Chuck tried to draw her away, Alex stopped him. "Dirk is going to be fine, Skye. Remember that. You're a good mother to Dirk." His chest heaved as he fought to breathe. "I love you."

"I love you too. What's wrong? What do you want me to do, Alex?"

"I think I'm going to have to give up smoking."

Skye started to say something, but Lorraine pulled her away. Alex could no longer hear her words.

Epilogue

SKYE TAPED ANOTHER Christmas card onto the fireplace mantel, and tucked a handwritten note into the letter basket for Alex to read later. Then, she hurried to the kitchen to check on the cookies. Between taking over management of Iowa Glass and giving music lessons, she wouldn't have much time for many holiday preparations next year, but this was their first Christmas together as a family. She wanted everything to be perfect.

A twelve-foot spruce filled the marble foyer with the smell of pine. Hand-blown glass ornaments from Italy sparkled among the wooden ones Skye had painted as a girl.

A year ago the thought of taking on the responsibility of running a company would have never occurred to her. When he recovered his strength and decided to rebuild, Alex had begged her to help. After the wedding he started going to the office at Iowa Glass every morning, but by noon, he'd be at Doctor Dieleman's office to see patients.

Little by little, piece by piece, he turned over responsibility for the plant to her. He'd shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment to her questions and agreed enthusiastically with her suggestions. When Doc Dieleman retired, Alex stopped showing up at Iowa Glass.

When she finished putting the cookies out to cool, she heard two sets of boots descend the back stairs. Alex dangled the baby in front of her.

"What were you doing up there?" she asked. "You've been gone for hours."

"The young lady needed a bath, not just a clean diaper, and she has just discovered mirrors. We've been making faces haven't we, pumpkin?" Alex returned the baby to his chest.

This was Alex's routine. After work, the baby was his. He would give her up with reluctance when she wanted to nurse, but until then, he kept their six-month-old baby girl in his arms.

Too late, she realized Karin was only a distraction. From behind her back, Dirk grabbed fists full of cookies and ran.

"Save some for me," Alex called after him.

Dirk shook his head, taunting as he ate the cookies, evidently paying Alex back for some game they had started earlier. Skye had no idea what those two were up to half the time, but she did know Dirk was happy, and so was Alex.

Skye slapped Alex's hand when he tried to take a cookie. "You know you're not supposed to have those. I called your Aunt Martha today and told her when to expect us."

Alex groaned. "I don't want to go to La Scala. Besides, I can't go all the way to Milan. I've got things to do here. You can represent the Jackson family.

"Take Dirk," Alex added loudly. "Karin and I are homebodies. Aren't we, pumpkin?" Alex kissed their baby on the belly, then turned her in his arms so she had a clear view of the kitchen.

Karin waved her arms at Skye and showed her worried face. Skye could almost hear her say, "I'm hungry, Mom. Make this guy let go of me so I can eat."

Skye smiled indulgently at her child, then at Alex. After all, she had Alex's passport and had arranged for a doctor to cover his practice.

When Alex least expected it, he would find that an innocent drive in the country had turned into a ride to the airport. Skye figured she owed him that much for spirited her away to Europe and changing her life forever.

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