



DON'T MESS WITH TEXAS COWBOYS



**TEXAS COWBOY'S
PROTECTION**

BARB HAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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Cover Models: Josh Stevens and Phoebe Finazzo

Cover Photo: Katey Finn Photography

Cover Design: Jacob's Cover Designs

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To Ali Williams for another fantastic edit. Thank you.

To Tori for a million things and especially your critical eye. Working with you is such a gift.

To Jacob for all the amazing covers and especially this one. You hit it out of the park every time.

To Josh Stevens, cover model extraordinaire. You are amazing. Thank you for gracing this cover.

To baby Phoebe for your super cuteness. This cover is even better with your sweet face on it.

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Regina Anderson tucked her earbuds in, tied off her running shoes, and pushed off her front porch. She turned up the volume on the heavy metal rock band music she played. Mornings sucked. Running sucked. Loud music sucked. The ritual kept Gina, as everyone but her mother called her, from taking her anger out on the world.

The loose, wet gravel on the drive of the fishing cabin caused her foot to slip as she rounded the corner onto the familiar country road. A couple extra forward steps righted her as she struggled to find her pace. Those first few steps were always the hardest to take, she reminded herself. Nothing in her wanted to do this.

The morning air didn't help matters. With every breath, she felt the crisp edge to the frigid temperature burning her lungs. The simple act of taking in oxygen was the equivalent to painful stabs at her rib cage.

Gina pounded the pavement with her feet. The stress of a major move with a baby, even though she was moving back to the small town where she'd grown up, had given her a tension headache.

It was early. Six a.m. was an ungodly hour.

Head throbbing, what she really wanted was caffeine. Big cup. Quiet room. The quiet room was a fantasy once her daughter, Everly, woke but the coffee was realistic.

The sun beat down on a spot at the crown of Gina's head. April weather in

Gunner, Texas was unpredictable. Today, the sun was out and the temperature was expected to hover around forty-seven degrees. This time of year, days could be swallowed up with thunderstorms and the kind of lightning that raced sideways for miles across a dark sky. Much like the thunderstorm from last night, but Gina didn't mind. That kind of weather matched her mood.

At twenty-seven-years-old, she was a single mom to a little girl who would never know her father, a man who'd been so anxious for his daughter's arrival he'd painted her room pink the day a sonogram revealed her sex. Little did Gina know it would be the last day she'd ever see her husband again. Their daughter, Everly, would never meet her father.

The music matched the level of her anger at losing a decent man who would've been a great father. The things she would go back and do differently if she could. The regret that filled her chest and hardened her heart toward the world, but not towards Everly, was heavier today.

Bright sunny days just soured her. The run gave her a sense of normalcy in a world that had turned upside down. She'd stayed in Dallas for the rest of her pregnancy; bringing her baby home to the house she'd shared with Des had been important to her. After all the work he'd done on the nursery, she wanted baby Everly to spend her first year there. It only seemed right to Gina, a small way to honor Des.

Gina's mother had put up a strong argument for her to move home to Gunner so she would have help with the baby. Gina loved her mother, don't get her wrong; the woman was a saint in many ways. But she just hadn't been ready to love her mother full-time. Mom was a little too free with advice about pretty much every aspect of life and a little too needy when it came to attention.

Growing up, it had only been Gina and her parents. There'd been no siblings or cousins around, no extended family. Gina had always wondered what it would be like to be surrounded by a large family. Big holiday gatherings with all the trimmings. Boisterous laughter around a table brimming with every food a kid could imagine. Kids running around wild and happy. Her parents had been busy with the restaurant, or too tired from it to do anything but relax after work, and so she'd been left to her own devices for much of her childhood.

Mom had been right about one thing, though. Everly needed as much family to surround her as possible, even if it was down to an overbearing mother and her friends.

Thinking about the piles of unopened boxes lining the walls of the family's cabin on the lake, Gina already felt defeated. She would get there, she reminded herself on almost an hourly basis. It had become her mantra.

The boxes would eventually be unpacked. She'd make the two-bedroom cabin feel like home. It might take some time, especially considering she had a little one to care for and was starting right in with the family restaurant tomorrow, but the work would get done. It always did.

It was good to remind herself of her other favorite mantra in moments like these. *Chin up. Smile on. Power through.* God, she was so damn tired from 'powering through' the past year-and-a-half.

Plus, she'd always planned to come back and take over the family business at some point. It's what her mother had done. And her grandmother before that. The restaurant had been operating in Gunner for three generations already. Gina would be number four and she hoped Everly would want to carry on the tradition someday. But only if she wanted to. Gina wouldn't force her daughter into a life she didn't want.

For Gina, the restaurant gave her a connection to family. There was so little of that left. Another benefit now that she was a single mother came in the form of extra time with her daughter. A breakfast-only job would make Gina more available to Everly and after losing Des so suddenly, she was never more aware of just how precious time could be.

Those thoughts were too heavy for this early in the morning. She cranked up the volume but even the loud drum banging and screech of a metal guitar couldn't distract her today. She hated days like this where missing Des was an ache. There were too many days she didn't want to get out of bed. In times like these she felt the dark clouds hanging over her head might never clear.

The sun comes out in every season, even spring. How many times had her mother repeated the mantra? It obviously gave her mother great comfort. For Gina, not so much. The only bright spot in Gina's past year was asleep in a crib

while her new babysitter hovered.

Gina rounded the corner onto a country road and finally hit her stride. At least her run was working for her this morning. The runner's high kicked in, temporarily abating her need for a caffeine IV, although she wouldn't turn one down. The move had brought on plenty of additional stress. Then there was leaving her job—a job that had been her lifeline in recent months.

The heavy metal band, RockSlam, pounded her ears, penetrating her thoughts, numbing her. A half hour into her run and it had finally hit. This was the point that made the whole get-out-of-bed early bit worth it. The point when she took control of her thoughts and could bury the heartbreak. The moment when she believed she'd actually be able to get through the day and maybe somehow be okay.

Her thighs no longer burned and her head stopped hurting for a few glorious minutes that, when she was lucky, turned into hours. It wasn't exactly peace, but her brain was still. And that was the best she could hope for under the circumstances.

Rounding the next bend, she was in top form. She let go of the belief she was crazy for forcing herself out of bed. She let go of all the thoughts that constantly churned in her head. She just let go.

And then something hit her, knocking her out of her rhythm. A pungent smell blasted her nostrils. At the rate she was breathing, it hit hard. She coughed hard enough to break her stride.

The acrid smell could only come from a dead animal. Out at the lake, that wasn't uncommon. Whatever it was, it must've been dead for days. Gina pulled the collar of her cotton T-shirt up and over to cover her nose and mouth. A few more steps in and her gag reflex engaged.

A side cramp stopped her, doubling her over. She took her earbuds out and glanced around, searching for the cause of the stench. She could make a call to animal control if she could figure out where the smell came from.

Checking underbrush, she heard a sound—like a dog whimpering—to her left. She steeled herself for what she might find and headed toward the noise.

Yesterday's rain had everything soaked. Her running shoes were swamped

with mud as she pushed closer to the wounded animal. And then she saw something move under a scrub bush. As she got closer, she saw a black Labrador retriever on his side.

Gina made slow and deliberate movements toward the animal. “You’re okay, buddy.”

The dog cried as he rolled onto his belly and tried to crawl toward her. She could see his tail wagging. He was friendly. Someone’s pet?

Gina had only moved in two days ago. She hadn’t had five minutes to introduce herself to the neighbors. Being on acre lots made privacy even easier and that was part of the reason she’d taken over the family cabin. That, and the fact rent was affordable. The restaurant did okay, but there was just enough money to set her mother up with retirement and give Gina enough of a salary to raise her daughter.

“You’re a good boy.” Gina bent down, making herself as small as possible so the dog wouldn’t see her as a threat. He hadn’t give her any indication that he would bite. At least not so far. Still, a wounded animal could be unpredictable.

Labradors were great dogs, though, and he seemed to know on instinct she was there to help. He moved again and that’s when she saw the blood. A lot of it. Gina moved to his side and smoothed her hand along his body.

And then she found it. Bullet hole. Who in God’s name would hurt such a beautiful animal? And how could she live right down the street and not hear it? The storm. Thunder pounded last night. It must’ve muffled the noise. “Hold on, buddy. We’ll get some help.” Anger raged through her as she pulled out her cell.

Gina took off the jacket tied around her waist and put pressure on the spot where the animal bled. Her first call was to her mother. The woman had half the town on speed dial. She knew everyone. Gina quickly explained where she was and what she’d found. The second call was to her babysitter to let her know she’d be running late.

The dog stirred. He was trying to get up.

Stroking the animal’s fur, tears blinded her. Who could be so cruel?

And then it dawned on her. The acrid smell. It wasn’t coming from the animal. She cursed.

He kept trying to get up. Was he trying to take her to his master?

From out of nowhere, Gina heard a twig snap right behind her. She made a move to whirl around. The strike to the back of her head barely registered. Everything went black.



GINA BLINKED BLURRY EYES OPEN. Her head pounded and she felt an overwhelming urge to vomit. Her stomach roiled as she bounced up and down. Panic gripped her. Her first thought was Everly. If something happened to Gina what would happen to her daughter?

Moving was next to impossible. She struggled to gain her bearings. It didn't take long for her to figure out she was in the back of a vehicle. Some kind of SUV. The driver was speeding, too. A getaway?

Her wrists hurt and so did her ankles. She was bound in some way. The cold metal cutting into her wrists gave her the answer. *Cuffs.*

The dog. Her heart ached for the Labrador she'd been trying to save. Was he just left there to die? That poor animal. A sob escaped against the tape covering her mouth. Gina stuffed her panic down deep. Call it survival instinct. She'd gotten good at denying her emotions in the last eighteen months. Hell, she could go further back than that, but Des was gone. She was a widow. There was no use thinking about the shortcomings in their marriage now.

Right now, all she cared about was getting home to Everly. Determination welled inside her as she took a mental inventory. Hands tied behind her back. On her side. She maneuvered, slipping her hands around her legs and in front of her without drawing attention.

Then she paused, listening for any clues about who was in the vehicle with her. From what she could discern, there was only one person in the car. She didn't want to think about what that meant for the Labrador who'd been left all alone. She *couldn't* think about that right now if she wanted to live. And she needed to live.

Was there anything inside the vehicle she could use as a weapon?

Gina tried to twist out of the metal cuffs. They were generic, the kind anyone could buy off the internet so she doubted the man driving was in law enforcement. She managed to squeeze the left cuff off her wrist and then the right. Her hands immediately flew to her ankles.

No such luck there. Those weren't coming off so easily.

At least her hands were free. She had no idea how long she'd been out of it. The sun was still rising, so she couldn't have been out for long. She flattened her palm on the floorboard and felt around. There had to be something she could use against her assailant.

Cell phone.

She felt around in her pockets and then remembered she'd had it out after calling her mother. Since it wasn't on her person, she figured it was probably back in the mud.

Bouncing around, she did her best not to make a peep. Her skull felt like it had been cracked open. She felt around and winced when her fingers landed on a lump the size of a golf ball.

Where was she? In town? She'd only been back in Gunner for two nights but she'd grown up here and visited often. There wasn't much about the area that could throw her for a loop. Could she risk a glance without giving herself away?

The main thing she had going for her right now was that the driver had no idea she was awake and alert.

The SUV slowed to a stop. A stop sign? A red light?

With her hands in front of her, she could open the emergency hatch. She'd read somewhere a long time ago that if someone was abducting her to make the biggest racket as fast as she could. Lying low was a bad idea. If the person got her to a different location it would be secure and would drastically cut her chances of survival or escape.

The thought of being stuck in a home or building with no escape, no chance to see her daughter hit Gina hard. This was not happening. This could not happen. Everly was not losing both of her parents.

Determination fueled her next bold move. She popped up, saw the dark-eyed man's gaze grow wild in the rearview mirror. She pulled the trunk latch and the

door opened. A beeping sound alerted the driver. He already knew.

Those dark eyes of his burned into her memory as his gaze bore into her. He turned his head to one side and she caught the outline of his profile through the ski mask. She focused on details. Hooked nose. Long chin. Tall forehead.

He stomped the gas pedal. She tucked and rolled out the SUV.

The hard concrete pounded her shoulder. She tucked her chin to her chest to keep her head from slamming the pavement. Sheer luck and good timing had her out the back before he could speed up enough to cause severe damage to her when she exited the vehicle.

Brake lights filled her vision as she looked back.

She heard him shift into reverse.

The SUV came speeding toward Gina in reverse. At the intersection, a blue king cab truck roared through the red light. Pain shot through her left ankle as she pushed to her feet.

Sheer will power kept her upright as she hopped sideways to avoid colliding with the SUV. At the same time, the truck rocketed toward her. The driver swerved before hitting her, using the massive truck to block the SUV from careening into her.

The truck took impact before the driver in the SUV must've jammed the gearshift into Drive. He sped off.

Ankles still cuffed together, Gina tripped and fell. Her left side screamed at her. The pain so great her breath came out in bursts. She'd hit the pavement hard, same side as before. Her head felt like it might split open even though she'd managed to keep it from smacking the ground. She was certain she'd sprang her wrist in the fall while trying to catch herself. But she'd escaped her abductor. She was alive.

The driver shot out of the vehicle. All she could see was a mass of muscle and determination racing toward her. The sun was to his back, making it difficult to make out who he was.

And then his face came into focus. Isaac Quinn? It took a second to register. Last she'd heard he was still overseas, serving his country. Her heart hammered at the sight of him. She chalked it up to the fact he'd just saved her life and not

their past that inconveniently came roaring back. Memories flooded her of the unbreakable bond they'd had as teenagers. The attraction that not one man could measure up to since. And the way he used to look at her, like she'd been the missing piece to his complicated life.

“What happened? Are you hurt?” At six-feet-four-inches, Isaac towered over her. Recognition seemed to dawn as he took a knee beside her. Those serious blue eyes of his felt like they saw right through her. Black irises surrounded by the kind of pale blue that could only be found on a perfect cloudless summer morning. “Jesus, Gina. Is that you?”

She nodded as she brought her hands up to remove the tape covering her mouth. He helped her peel it off.

“What’s going on? What just happened?” It was probably the fact that she’d almost died today but Isaac’s strong male voice wrapped around her. His gaze intensified on her. “Do you know that jerk?”

“No.” Her mouth hurt. Her ankle throbbed. She tried to catch her breath through the sobs. “That man. I don’t know what happened. He came out of nowhere. There was a dog. A Labrador retriever. He’d been shot or stabbed. Then, I heard someone behind me and...”

She had to take a moment to breathe. The urge to cry was a tsunami building in her chest. Let the flood gates open and there’d be no stopping the waterworks. She refocused her attention to slow the wave of emotion building.

Normally, she wouldn’t notice how blue her rescuer’s eyes were or how carved-from-granite his jawline was while she was in the middle of an emergency. But she needed a distraction to stop her emotions from overflowing, and that’s all this was. Nothing else. Besides, it was difficult to ignore those intense blue eyes when they were focused on her no matter what else was going on, especially when they belonged to Isaac Quinn.

“Did you get a good look at him?”

“No.” She tried to sit. Moving hurt. “What time is it?”

“Six forty-five.”

Relief flooded her. Only a few minutes had passed. At least she hadn’t been knocked out for long. She skimmed her body. All her clothes were intact.

Running shoes still on. She shivered at the thought of what her assailant could have done to her and was damn grateful the opportunity had presented itself to escape. Having Isaac show when he did was nothing short of a miracle.

“I’m calling Griff.” Isaac’s soothing timbre washed over her, settling her nerves a notch below panic. His cousin, the sheriff, would need information from her to investigate the case and stop the jerk who’d abducted her from hurting another soul.

“Yes. Call 911. Get help. Please. And a vet. Someone needs to get over to the Labrador.” The words rushed out and she winced in pain as she tried to stand. Moving was a bad idea.

“Jesus. What did that bastard do to you?” Fury radiated from Isaac as his gaze skimmed over her. “Never mind. That’s not important right now. You need medical attention.”

“I’m okay. I just want to go home to my daughter.” Trembling, she hated how shaky her voice sounded. Granted, she’d just been through an ordeal like nothing she’d ever experienced. It would be too easy to give into the terror threatening to overtake her. Being afraid would give that jerk too much power over her. She did her level best to tamp her fear down.

“It’s not a good idea for you to go anywhere until you’ve been medically cleared, and Griff needs to know what just happened.” Isaac’s gaze surveyed her and she could tell he was assessing her injuries.

“What if he comes back?” Saying those words out loud caused her body to shiver.

“I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. He’d be stupid to challenge me.”

She glanced around. They were in plain sight. Helpless against a bullet. “Can I sit inside your truck? I’m not comfortable being out in the open like this.”

“I’ll help you up.” He wrapped his arm around her waist to support her. She leaned some of her weight on him. Warmth shot through her and electricity pinged at contact. Isaac had grown into one hell of a man. He’d filled out, too. She didn’t want to notice how his muscles stretched and released underneath the thin cotton material of his shirt. Or how strong he’d become. Or how much that masculine voice of his affected her.

How long had it been since she'd seen him? More than ten years. *Too long*, an annoying voice in the back of her head chimed in.

A lot had changed since high school. But some events would always stay with her. Her first crush. Her first kiss. Her first rejection.

Cell phone to his ear, Isaac said the words that made this nightmare feel even more real. "This is an emergency. We need an ambulance right away."



ISAAC STOOD, arms folded over his chest, watching as the EMTs worked on Gina. He'd already given his statement to Griff.

Right now, all he could think about was Gina and what had happened to her. Seeing her again, all glittery green eyes and full cherry lips, had him remembering times better left forgotten. Isaac shouldn't have to remind himself she was the widow of one of his friends from high school. And he certainly shouldn't have to remind himself that what she needed right now was him focusing on what had happened to her, as opposed to her lips.

Des Anderson had been a decent-enough guy. Isaac owed it to his high school friend to make sure Gina was okay.

"Did you get a description of the assailant?" Griff asked her as the EMT covered the cuts on her wrists with ointment.

"No. He had on a ski mask that covered most of his face, but I saw his eyes through the rearview. They were brown. And when he turned his head, I saw that his nose was hooked. He had a long face, which probably describes half the male population in the county."

"Everything you can remember helps. What about height or weight?" Griff took a few notes.

"I'm not sure. He was sitting in the driver's seat of the SUV. The chair blocked my view."

Griff asked other routine-sounding questions she didn't seem able to answer. The whole idea a man would come up from behind her while she helped an animal in trouble shot fire through Isaac's veins.

“What about you? What did you see?” Griff asked Isaac.

“I didn’t get the whole license plate. Just the first three letters. B-D-Z.”

“Let me text this to Sherry so she can run it through the database.” Sherry Arnold was his secretary and right hand. According to his brothers, the sixty-eight-year old had been threatening to retire for the past six years. She wasn’t the type though; Sherry got bored taking vacation days.

“Someone needs to get to the dog.” Gina’s wrists were red. Rubbing them made it look worse.

“Your mother called a while ago. Said she spoke to you. I sent someone over to pick up the Labrador.”

“Right. I remember that now. I’d forgotten all about speaking to her.” She blinked. She’d taken a blow to the head, which could cause temporary memory loss. Then again, this had been one helluva traumatic event. She might’ve blocked out events leading up to the attack. Most civilians weren’t prepared for violence. “How bad were his injuries?”

“Michael is assessing him now,” Griff said. Michael Black was the best vet in the county. “Seems whoever did this shot the animal either to stop him from attacking, or to keep him quiet. The person must’ve figured him for dead.”

Isaac had never met an unfriendly Labrador. More of that anger surfaced, igniting sparks in his chest. “Do you know who the dog belonged to?”

Griff tucked his phone in his pocket. Before he could answer the question, his cell buzzed. He locked gazes with Isaac before fishing it out and checking the screen. “We got a hit. An SUV with the first three letters B-D-Z on its license plate was stolen from the Big Mart store parking lot at four p.m. yesterday.”

“That’s plenty of time to make it over here. And then some.” The store was in Tarrytown, two cities over.

Griff studied a spot on the ground before lifting his gaze. “As for the Labrador, his owner was found dead in the cabin.”

Gina covered her gasp. “Oh, no. I can’t remember the name of the couple who owns that cabin.”

“The Trapp’s. It wasn’t one of them.” First, he made eye contact with Gina and then with Isaac. “We knew her. We all went to high school together. It’s

Brittany.”

This time, Gina didn't bother to cover her shock. The next few words came out low and under her breath. She seemed to be talking to herself mostly. “No. How can that be? We're supposed to have lunch later.” Shock widened her eyes. It was easy to see she was trying to process what couldn't be real.

“Brittany Darden from high school?” Isaac needed to make sure he was hearing correctly. Hearing someone had lost their life, especially in a senseless act of violence, never got easier. He'd been in situations overseas where death was all around him. And yet, there was something different, strange about this happening in Gunner.

Griff locked eyes. Isaac saw the pain. Murder in Gunner was difficult enough to comprehend. Add to the fact it was someone they knew, and no one's mind seemed able to go there.

A few choice words came to mind about the bastard who would do something like this but Isaac settled on saying, “Why would someone hurt Brittany?”

“That's a good question. And an answer I intend to find.”

“What about a boyfriend?” Isaac had been around law enforcement enough to know the biggest threat to a woman was the person who was supposed to be closest to her, a boyfriend or spouse.

“She wasn't seeing anyone that I know of. Again, Brittany played her cards close to her chest. I'll interview Mrs. Stanley—”

“Don't you mean Ms. Darden?” Gina corrected.

“Brittany's mom got remarried last year.” Griff kept tabs on the people in Gunner. He took their personal safety to heart.

Gina's brow shot up. “Really? Is he someone from around here?”

“Bo Stanley is his name. The two met when she was visiting relatives in Austin, hit it off and got married six months later. He's a small-time real estate developer who mostly works small commercial properties.”

“We'll check her computer for e-mails and her social media accounts, cell phone records.” Griff was close in height to Isaac. T.J.'s sons had dark hair while his brother's boys were more of the sandy-blond variety. Same chiseled jaws, or

so they'd been told.

"I'm out of the loop." Isaac had a lot of catching up to do in Gunner. Then again, he didn't plan to stick around.

An EMT interrupted. "Ma'am, can I see you for another minute?"

She nodded and followed him a couple of steps away.

Griff returned his gaze to Isaac. "I don't think I gave you a proper welcome, cousin. Good to have you home."

"Thanks, Griff." It had been a strange homecoming so far. He'd landed earlier this morning and had yet to see any of his brothers. He and his identical twin had kept close contact up until about a year ago. Then communication had fallen off. Liam had moved to Colorado and stopped answering calls.

"Thank you for your service." Griff's sincerity hit Isaac in the chest. He could tell his cousin meant every word. It was strange being stateside again but Isaac figured there was a lot he needed to get used to. Wearing jeans and a regular shirt were the tip of the iceberg after spending the past decade and a half in fatigues.

"You're welcome." Isaac meant it. He'd been honored to serve the past fifteen years. He'd entertained a long-term career in the military, then one day, he woke up and knew in his heart he was done. There wasn't one last mission that got to him, one last scene that would replay in his mind and haunt his thoughts. Isaac had always known somewhere deep down that he'd never been able to leave Texas permanently.

He got tired of the constant moves, of never feeling like he had roots. So, when his time to renew had come up, he'd shocked his S.O. and opted out.

Isaac could only hope that coming home to Gunner hadn't been a mistake. There was the issue of his father, T.J., to deal with. Being a grown man should change the father-son relationship. Now, Isaac could fight back.

"Will you keep me posted on what's happening with the case? I need to get Gina home to rest that ankle." He looked over to where she was standing with the EMT. From where he stood, he could already see the swelling in her ankle but what struck him most was the strength in how she was handling what had happened.

Griff nodded. “This one hits close to home. I plan to find this bastard and nail him.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.” Isaac meant every word.

Griff acknowledged with a nod. “Seems like yesterday we were all in high school. Everything’s changed now. People are married. Have kids of their own. Two of our friends are...*gone*.” He glanced toward Gina and Isaac instantly realized the other person his cousin referred to was Des.

“When the hell did we get so grown up?”

Griff half-smiled, breaking some of the tension. “You and me were born older.”

“Can’t argue that point. But then we always had responsibility for the ranch. A Quinn didn’t have time for silly games.” How many times had T.J. said that? Isaac’s father was as old school as they came. The senior Quinn had built a successful ranch from nothing. He’d acquired thousands of acres across three states; the man was one of Texas’s most successful cattle ranchers. Ranching, he was good at. Family, not so much.

T.J. might be one helluva rancher and businessman but he’d been a terrible father. Isaac could remember a time when his father had been happy. The death of Isaac’s mother had broken everything that had been good about their home. She’d been the warmth and love that had held the family together, and grounded their father. In her absence, T.J. had hardened his own heart toward everyone, including his seven children.

Gina was standing now with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and an EMT tending to the last of her wounds. “Can I go home now?”

“Ma’am, my advice is for you to go to the hospital,” the EMT said.

“Sorry. There’s no way. I have a daughter.” She looked like she was winding up for a panic attack so Isaac moved to her side and looped his arm around her waist to hold some of her weight. He chalked the electricity humming underneath his fingertips to residual attraction. The two of them had been a thing a long time ago and he hadn’t seen her in more than a decade and a half. There couldn’t be more to it.

“Be sure to lock your doors day and night.” Griff’s warning caused her

shoulders to tense.

“Are you saying he might come back?”

“Until we know what we’re dealing with I’d like you to be overly cautious. Everything you’ve learned about keeping yourself safe, use.” Griff’s cell buzzed again, drawing his attention toward the screen. He read the message with a frown.

“What’s wrong?” Isaac asked.

“Coroner’s preliminary examination says the style of killing was very personal. Whoever did this had a gun in his possession but decided not to use it on her.” He flashed his eyes at Isaac before continuing. “The victim died of strangulation. There are multiple stab wounds. That’s all we have to go on for now. My deputies and I will be looking into Brittany’s personal life, looking for a trail there.” Griff’s voice was a reverent whisper but he could’ve shouted for the effect his words had on Gina. She sank to her knees like she’d been standing on rubber bands.

“I can’t believe she’s gone.”

“Based on the report, Brittany must’ve known the person who did this to her. Right?”

Gina thought she might be sick. Her mouth felt like she’d licked a glue stick. She swallowed to try to ease the dryness in her throat. Ever since she’d heard the news about Brittany, she battled against losing it. And Brittany had died in such a brutal manner.

“That’s usually the case in a crime of this nature.” Griff’s normally calm demeanor was replaced by deep grooves in his forehead.

“How can that be? We were supposed to have lunch tomorrow.” A life cut short so young...Gina couldn’t go there in her mind. There was something about someone suddenly passing that hit her in a dark place. Yes, she’d lost Des way too young. They’d grown up on the same street and had known each other for most of their lives. They’d been close when they were younger, but he changed over the years and became more distant. It became harder to break through his walls and get him to talk about anything real.

“When did the two of you make plans for lunch?” Griff asked.

“About a week ago. The past few weeks of getting ready to move have been hectic. The baby is teething and learning to walk. So, I don’t ever get to sit down. Forget about a warm meal.” She wouldn’t trade any of that for Everly, don’t get her wrong. But sleep and a hot meal would be a nice change of pace. None of which mattered after hearing the news about Brittany. First Des and

now Brittany. Gina was reminded even more how precious life was.

In that moment, her mind snapped to her daughter. Her arms ached to hold her precious little girl.

She glanced at her watch and realized it was already past eleven. Everly would go down for a nap soon and she wanted to be the one to put her daughter to bed.

“I’ll be in touch. Let me know if you remember anything else, okay?” Griff asked.

“I will.” Isaac helped her to his truck.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done today, Isaac. I can’t even think what would’ve happened if you hadn’t come along when you did.”

“Don’t mention it.” He waved his hand like it was nothing but it was everything. She wouldn’t be going home to her daughter right now without him.

“I didn’t know you were visiting Gunner. When did you get here?” Gina pinched the bridge of her nose to stem off a headache as she asked the question. She’d had a few humdingers lately and they nearly knocked her out when they came. It was all she could do to take care of Everly when a headache struck. Specialists couldn’t find the cause. After running more tests than she could afford, the consensus was the same. The pain was stress-related. Turned out, losing her husband and being suddenly faced with bringing up a child on her own was bad for her health.

Isaac glanced at the clock on the dashboard and smiled. “Now.”

“Today? Or like, right this minute?”

“I was on my way home when I saw you, so I’m here now.”

“Oh, no. Your family must be worried sick. When was the last time you saw them?”

“It’s been a hot minute.” She saw the duffel covering the backseat of the king cab truck for the first time since getting inside the vehicle.

“This is awful.” Tears welled and she had to fight them back. “I’m keeping you from—”

“No, you’re not. I didn’t even realize it was you at first. Your face was blocked and you’re the last person I expected to see in Gunner.”

“I could say the same thing about you. Wasn’t it you who said hell would freeze over before you’d live here again? I’m guessing that’s your plan. Right?” The unexpected hit to Gina’s solar plexus struck out of nowhere. This whole morning had her off balance and seeing Isaac out of what felt like nowhere had tipped her world on its axis. Not that she’d had her footing yet anyway. She was pretty certain she was still in shock and all she wanted to do was hold her baby in her arms, make sure her little girl was okay.

“I haven’t decided my next move.” Isaac white-knuckled the steering wheel. “Sorry about Des. I meant to call.”

“Why didn’t you?” She surprised herself with the question.

“For one, I was overseas and didn’t always have access to a phone.” Of course.

Gina leaned her head back against the headrest. “I didn’t expect to hear from you. Honestly, we were friends a long time ago.” Friends was a light word for what she’d felt back then. High school. Everything had felt more dramatic back then.

“How often did you talk to Brittany?” The change in subject was a welcome break in the sudden tension filling in the cab. Was it from guilt? Des and Isaac had been friends once. Their friendship had ended in a heartbeat and then Isaac had joined the military. Des had refused to talk about it. Based on Des’s reaction when she’d mentioned Isaac’s name, she figured the two had had a fight.

“Never. She reached out to me after my mother told her I was moving back.”

“Did she seem upset or under any kind of pressure?”

“We spoke through texts. Said we’d catch up at lunch. Her texts didn’t seem anything out of the ordinary; it was just like, hey, your mom said you were moving back. We should reconnect.”

“Were you two friends after high school?” He seemed just as confused as she’d been when Brittany had first reached out.

“Not then and not now. I just figured we’re all adults now. People change. Did you know she had a baby?”

“No. I didn’t. I’m the last one to have news from home.” The statement shocked Gina.

“You don’t talk to your brothers? Or your cousins?” She didn’t hide the surprise in her voice.

“Not much. We’re all busy—”

“Not even Liam?” Isaac and his twin had to have kept in touch. Of anyone in the family, Isaac had always been closest to his twin brother.

“We keep in touch. I hate to break the news to you, but men don’t talk about other people. We tease each other about our favorite sports teams, send the occasional text about ranch or family business. That’s the extent of our conversations. And I haven’t spoken to him in a while. Figure we’ll catch up at some point now that I’m state-side.”

His answer was brief, but she knew there was no question any Quinn would be there for another, be it brother or cousin, in a heartbeat. *No questions asked* seemed to be the family motto when it came to backing each other up. She’d witnessed it firsthand for most of her life, before Des decided the two of them needed a fresh start and relocated them to Dallas.

Looking back, she wasn’t sure why she’d let Des make that call for them both. As with most of his decisions, she’d gone along with it. His argument of following his job had made sense at the time. And then, it had seemed easier not to make waves. Des’s career had always come first. She’d reasoned that eventually she’d come back to Gunner and run the restaurant. She could work any job in the meantime, whereas he’d always wanted to work law enforcement in a major city.

Even though Houston and San Antonio were closer, his heart had been set on Dallas.

Now, as a thirty-two-year-old single mother and head of household, Gina couldn’t fathom making those same decisions. Then again, Des had always wanted to be the bread winner of the family. A piece of Gina wondered why she’d ever agreed to those terms. Or had she? His vision for their life had been so strong. She’d often joked he was in the driver’s seat and she was along for the ride.

Not finishing college seemed like a bigger mistake now. Not standing up for herself when she’d hesitated to start a family while she lived so far away, seemed

like too much of a compromise now. Not putting her foot down seemed like living by default to her now.

“Did she say who the father was?”

“Not to me. But, like I said, she and I were supposed to catch up at lunch.”

“Don’t you think it’s odd she reached out to you after all this time?”

She shrugged. “Honestly, I didn’t think much about it at the time. Getting ready to make a major move with my daughter has occupied most of my thoughts. Coming back home. It’s kind of—”

“Strange, right?”

“Good word. I love Gunner and the people here, don’t get me wrong. It’s a great town and part of me didn’t want to leave years ago...”

“Then Dallas became home to you. This feels like returning to a past life.”

“One where I don’t know where or if I fit in anymore. You know?” One look at him said he understood perfectly.

“I’ve been home for the holidays. I’m in and out in a flash.” He snapped his fingers. “I never stuck around after.”

“It’s pretty much the same for me. When Des was alive he usually had to work holidays. When he died, my mom came to visit as often as she could. And then my dad got sick. You know, with Dad gone it’s been hard for her to get away from the restaurant.” Des never had been able to hire on with Dallas P.D. He’d taken a private security job in a wealthy suburb instead.

“What about after he died? Did you spend time in Gunner?”

“I thought if I came here I’d never go to my own home. Des had spent so much time painting our daughter’s bedroom pink. I wanted her to come home to the room he’d prepared for her. He and I didn’t always agree on everything but he would’ve been an amazing dad. Is it weird that I stayed in a city I wasn’t in love with?”

“Not at all. You had to get your bearings. Life dealt you a crap hand and you did the best you could with it. I’d say you dealt with it a hell of a lot better than most would.”

“I felt like she was closer to him in Dallas. I swear the pregnancy caused me to be all hormones and waterworks. I cried at the drop of a pin. Des died early on

in my pregnancy. I was three months along when he went into the neighbor's burning house to save their pet. The fire seemed to overtake the place in seconds. Everything happened so fast I could barely process it. My brain was in a fog for days afterward."

"It happened in a fire? I heard he died of a heart attack."

"A widow maker. Too much smoke inhalation. I wasn't prepared for just how much my life was about to change." Here it was changing again. This time, Gina wanted the changes to be permanent. She wanted to put down roots for her daughter in a town where she could feel safe. It had seemed possible until this morning. Now, she wasn't sure.

"It's strange to lose someone who is in his or her prime. Des was young and healthy. I'm sure not much changed since high school in his fitness routine. The man was a machine back then. He needed to work out every morning before school just so he could sit in the classroom all day."

Gina agreed. She hadn't thought about how Des had been when they were in high school in a long time. That had seemed like a lifetime ago. After a few months of marriage, he'd settled into his own routine. There were times that she wondered if he noticed she was in the room he'd be so into watching a football game. "He kept up with his workout routine."

"I'm not surprised."

"The family was out safely when he went back in. Rhonda and Jermaine had two beautiful daughters, ages four and six. The girls used to bring cookies over for us. They were such a sweet family. Jermaine got called in to work early that night. Rhonda fell asleep on the couch and forgot the iron was still plugged in. The whole house went up so fast. Des helped Rhonda get the kids out as I called 911. Their six-year-old got a kitty for her birthday. She loved that cat. So, Des went back in for it. He found it in the laundry basket hiding inside her room."

"Sounds like something Des would do."

She smiled at the memory. "Lucy, the cat, survived. Des walked out fine, at first. I mean, he was coughing but firemen arrived and pretty soon after he was being wheeled away on a gurney and tucked in the back of the ambulance. The EMTs had me ride in the front seat. I thought it was all precautionary."

“Too much smoke inhalation.”

“On the way to the hospital, everything looked fine. The driver seemed calm, relaxed.” Reliving the memory caused her chest to squeeze. She took a minute to breathe and gather her thoughts. “I didn’t notice the activity when it started behind me. I couldn’t see or hear back there anyway. Next thing I know, the driver picked up the pace. That was my first indication something was going wrong. Even then, I never once thought Des was in real danger...”

“I’ve heard of it happening.” His voice was low, reverent and it was balm to an aching heart.

“I had no idea. It took me by complete surprise. One minute, Des was fine. He had a cough, sure, I thought he’d get better when they gave him oxygen. Next thing I know...” A few rogue tears sprang from her eyes.

A year-and-a-half later, talking about what happened still made the air thin.

“I’m sorry, Gina. I really am. That’s unfair. Life can deal crazy blows at times.” She shouldn’t allow those words to comfort her as much as they did. It was probably her and Isaac’s shared history giving her the first sense of not being alone in longer than she could remember. Even when Des had been alive, she’d felt on her own. He’d worked the late shift. Days off were reserved for football in season or hanging out with friends in his man cave. A few months into their marriage, Gina had joked they were already an old married couple. Separate sleeping schedules. Sometimes separate rooms. Once a month date nights. She’d kept hoping the two of them would find a rhythm together. It never came. Des seemed perfectly happy with setting aside one night a month for her.

“Thank you.” Isaac had the power to make her feel connected again. “Life can be strange. I never expected to do all this on my own. Look where I am.”

He pulled the truck in front of the cabin and parked.

“I’m used to it now, don’t get me wrong. And I love that little girl more than I though could love anyone or anything in my life. Being a single mom is all I’ve ever known with Everly. But when I think about the future, about doing all of it alone, it can be a little overwhelming. This was never the plan.”

“Did your blueprint ever involve moving back to Gunner?”

“Des didn’t want to. He thought our life was in Dallas.” She glanced over at

Isaac and caught a confused look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“You always talked about carrying on the tradition in your family and taking over the restaurant someday. It seemed like a big deal to you when we were kids.”

“I guess life has a way of taking us in new directions.”



ISAAC DIDN'T COMMENT. It wasn't his place to, and the last thing he wanted to do was call out a dead man. Isaac had too much respect for Des's memory. He didn't like the fact she would so willingly give up her family tradition—a tradition that had seemed so important to her at one time—so she didn't make waves in her relationship.

Plus, what kind of spouse would expect the other to walk away from their history?

Figuring it was none of his business, Isaac kept a zip on his lips as he opened the door for Gina. He helped her climb out of the cab and held onto her arm when her ankle gave out.

“Sorry.” She winced.

“For what? Being in pain? It's okay, Gina.” It was past lunch time and she had to be starving by now.

Isaac focused on the two-bedroom cabin that had been in her family for years. He and Gina had created memories there that he had no business thinking about under the circumstances. Being there again felt a little too right. He shouldn't let himself get too comfortable. Isaac had no plans to stick around Gunner after he found out why he'd been summoned in the first place. He was still trying to figure out why he'd shown, considering the poor state of his relationship with T.J.

“Ready?” He turned to Gina.

“As much as I'll ever be.” Isaac helped Gina navigate finding her keys and unlocking the door.

The minute she walked inside, Mrs. Weber rushed over and pulled her into a

hug. “Everly just went down for a nap. I’d ask how you are but that’d be a dumb question.”

“I’m okay. Really.” Gina frowned.

“How could you be? With everything you’ve been through today. And on your first full day home.” The retired seventy-year-old had the spunk and wit of a woman half her age. She also had the fiery red hair to match her temperament. The hair color made Mrs. Weber and Gina look like they could be related even though he knew better.

“I know Everly is perfectly fine and asleep in the next room. Gina stepped back from the hug. “I need to see her with my own eyes anyway.”

The older woman nodded before her blue gaze landed on Isaac. She let out a yelp. “How long has it been since I’ve laid eyes on Isaac Quinn? You’ve grown up, haven’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Isaac smiled. She’d always been able to tell him and Liam apart. In all these years since he’d been gone the woman hadn’t changed. There was at least one constant in Gunner. “But you haven’t aged a day.”

“I’ve certainly grown sideways.” She motioned toward her hips and clucked her tongue.

Gina returned, still favoring her left ankle as she entered the room.

Mrs. Weber turned to Gina, worry lines scored the older woman’s forehead. “Did they catch him?”

Gina shook her head. “Griff said he’d keep us posted.”

“He’s a great sheriff. He’ll put that awful man behind bars by nightfall.” Mrs. Weber made a tsk noise. “I made soup and sandwiches. Thought you might be hungry when you got home. I’ll just heat—”

“You’re a saint. You’ve been so kind already. Go home to your husband. You already missed your show because of me. Weren’t you two binge-watching one of those dramas?”

“It’s no trouble. That’s what people do. They pitch in and help each other out when needed.” Mrs. Weber waved her hand in the air like she was swatting a fly. “I figured it would be best if I stay for a while. My husband doesn’t mind. We agreed it’s best if you’re not alone right now. A baby can wear a person out on a

good day—”

“I appreciate the offer. I do. So, please don’t take this the wrong way. I’m not alone.” Gina’s eyes shot toward Isaac in a plea for help. He nodded.

“That’s right,” Isaac said. “I’ll heat up the soup.” Before Mrs. Weber could put up an argument, he added, “Military taught me a thing or two about being in the kitchen.”

She put her hands up in defeat. “I’ll go. I can see you two have it under control.” She fixed her gaze on Gina. “Call if you need anything. I don’t mind coming back later.”

“I will. Thank you. But I’ll be fine. All I can think about is holding my daughter when she wakes.”

Mrs. Weber smiled. A look passed between them that only a mother would probably understand. Something Isaac had no personal knowledge. His mother had died a long time ago.

But, her neighbor had made a good point. Gina shouldn’t be by herself. Isaac had nieces and nephews but no children of his own. During his trips home on holidays, he’d seen what a handful the little ones could be. He’d been surprised at how something so little could require so much constant care.

And his brothers? Damned if they didn’t look exhausted at the end of a day. He’d marveled at how those tiny carpet crawlers could take a grown man down. All three of his brothers who had kids were hardly recognizable now.

None went out anymore. Okay, that Isaac could give them. But they didn’t go out after dark anymore it seemed. More reason why he’d decided a long time ago kids weren’t his scene. Becoming a father wasn’t high on his list of life goals.

Then again, neither was finally letting his guard down and falling for someone who’d ended up with a terminal diagnosis. Life had a twisted sense of humor.

“I’ll walk you outside.” Isaac followed Mrs. Weber to the door and stood on the porch until she pulled away in her sedan. He walked back inside before closing and locking the door.

“You don’t have to stay.” There was a distant look in Gina’s green eyes that

she seemed eager to cover up. She excused herself to check on her daughter and returned a moment later looking satisfied the little girl was safe in her crib.

“I’ll go if you tell me to. No question there. But if it’s okay with you, I’d like to stick around.” Mrs. Weber was right. Gina didn’t need to be alone right now. She might still be in shock after this morning’s events and she might not want a guy she had a past with as her comfort. If she kicked him out, he’d convince her to let someone come and stay with her. “I understand if you don’t want me here.”

“It’s not that.” She seemed to pick up on him alluding to their past at the cabin. He didn’t want his presence to add to her discomfort. She’d been through enough already. “I don’t want to be a burden to you, Isaac.”

“You couldn’t be.” If that was the case, he wasn’t worried. Rather than debate the merits of him sticking around, he said, “Are you hungry?”

“My stomach feels queasy. I’m not sure I could eat anything to be honest.”

“I’ll heat up the soup. It might help settle things down.” He knew his way around the place. Nothing had changed. He waited for Gina’s approval before making a move toward the kitchen.

“That might work.”

“Let’s see what Mrs. Weber cooked up.” The open concept living room and kitchen made it easy to keep an eye on Gina as she limped over to the couch and settled down on the cushion. He walked past the row of unpacked boxes lined up like soldiers. A TV sat against one wall, unplugged. A tangle of wires next to it. “When did you move in?”

“A couple of days ago. Between caring for Everly and having my phone stuck to my ear while opening and closing accounts, I haven’t had much time to get this place set up.”

“That explains all the boxes.”

“Unpacking has been low on my list of priorities. I’d forgotten how big of a job moving was. Forget trying to move with a little one. But, hey, I might have this place put together in time for her to go college.” The attempt at humor wasn’t lost on him.

He smiled. “While I’m here, I could help out with a few things. At the very least get your TV hooked up.”

“You don’t have to do that. You’ve already done so much.”

“I want to.” Isaac wasn’t avoiding going home exactly, but seeing his old man wasn’t high on his list. He certainly didn’t mind delaying his homecoming a few hours. “Besides, it’ll give me something useful to do.”

He heated up the soup and cut the sandwich in half, figuring he’d be doing well to get her to eat a few bites.

“Is all this for me?” She eyed the plate with the loaded sandwich and the full bowl of soup as he set the food on the coffee table. “I can’t eat all this. You should get some for yourself. Take the other half of the sandwich. The least I can do is feed you.”

This wasn’t the time to think about how many meals they’d shared here in this very spot. Or the fact they’d shared their first kiss right here. “I ate on the plane.”

“At least get something to drink.” She started to get up.

“I got this, Gina. You don’t have to move. You should rest that ankle.” He hoped hospitality was the reason she’d sprung up from her seat so fast and not something else, like he made her uncomfortable in some way. The other possibility worth considering was Des. Had he expected her to jump every time he spoke? Des had a reputation in high school for smothering his girlfriends. A few had complained he’d become too controlling.

Gina had always been so strong-willed, Isaac figured she could handle herself with Des. If Isaac could go back, would he have made the same choice?

Regret was as useful as an ice tray in Alaska. He moved to the fridge. “You want something? Water? Tea?”

“Water sounds good. But, I—”

“Don’t have to lift a finger right now if you don’t want to.” He could appreciate her stubborn nature. He was guilty of the same.

“I *should*. You’re a guest in my home.”

He shot her an offended look. “I’d like to think we’re friends.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Sure.” He dragged out the ‘r’. “It’s fine. Mind if I make coffee? I could use a cup.”

“Go for it. *That* is unpacked. There are supplies right there on the counter.”

He popped a pod into the machine and then brought her a water bottle. Isaac didn't want to notice how much more beautiful Gina had become. Motherhood looked good on her. She'd filled out a little more, had curves she didn't used to in high school. Her new look fit her five-feet-six-inch frame perfectly. He didn't want to notice how creamy her skin was or remember how much he'd liked kissing those cherry-colored lips.

“It's good to see you, Isaac. It's weird because I didn't expect you back in Gunner.” Her voice sounded relaxed for the first time since seeing her this morning. It was probably being here with her daughter and not because of him. Although, part of him wanted to believe he had something to do with it.

“Yeah?” He picked up the fresh mug of coffee and took the first sip. Damn fine brew.

“You were always set on living as far from here as you could get. That's all you ever talked about.”

“I think I accomplished that pretty well.” He chuckled as he claimed a spot on the loveseat in the living room next to the sofa. “A lot has changed since then anyway.”

“You seem so different now. So grown.”

“I could say the same.” She'd been married. Had a child. It didn't get much more grown up than that.

“Nothing stays the same forever. I guess we were bound to become adults at some point. Contrary to what Mr. Henson believed about us junior year.” Their history teacher had given them a stern lecture that ended with a rant on his concern for the future of the country if this group would be in charge one day.

“He gave us quite the pep talk about life. He missed his calling. He should've been a motivational speaker.” Isaac cracked up. He couldn't keep a straight face and listen to those words come out of his own mouth.

Gina laughed. Her face broke into a smile.

Pride swelled in his chest that he could make Gina smile again after the day she'd had. As impossible as it sounded, even to him, she was even more beautiful when she smiled.

“What about you? What made you come back to Gunner?”

“I was summoned.”

“Your father?” Gina stretched her leg out, gingerly placing her bad ankle on the coffee table. She leaned on the arm rest. It felt good to laugh today. It had been a really long time since she’d laughed.

Isaac nodded.

“Does this mean you’re not moving back?”

“Nothing has been decided.” It wasn’t the definitive answer she’d hoped for. Seeing him again, being here in the cabin with Isaac brought a flood of memories. It was probably too much to hope the two of them could be friends again. Deep down, she’d missed him more than she ever let herself own up to.

It was the quiet comfort she felt in his presence that she missed the most. The ease in the way they could talk to each other. Gina could be difficult to get to know. Her personality had a lot of layers and most people never got past the surface. She just never felt comfortable with others enough to let them see the real her.

Did she think they’d judge her harshly? Gina couldn’t answer that one way or the other. She’d been shy growing up. The nose-in-book type. Isaac, although very sharp, had always been athletic and popular like his brothers. He was from a large family that seemed to stick together thicker than thieves.

It was common knowledge the Quinn boys didn’t always see eye-to-eye but mess with one and they all came running. Gina could only imagine what it would be like to have that kind of support.

Looking back, she wondered if Des had become interested in dating her after Isaac had started to notice her. Isaac had been so popular, she'd believed he felt sorry for her since no one else wanted to be her lab partner in biology class. She and Isaac had never made their relationship official, but they had started spending a lot of time together. All signs had pointed toward going together.

And then, much to her disappointment and confusion, Isaac had retreated. Her suspicion had been confirmed, she'd been his pity-partner. The truth had been awful.

Des swooped in right after and asked her to go exclusive with him. She refused at first but he'd persisted. She'd accepted. And the rest, as they said, became history.

“Do you know what your father wants?”

“Not a clue.” Isaac seemed unphased. She liked how he seemed to take life in stride now. A contrast to the intense young person she'd known. Could be from his time in the service. There was a quiet assurance about him now. Gina told herself the only reason she noticed was because of the trauma she'd faced earlier and not because her stomach decided to do Olympic-grade somersaults with him this close again.

Icy fingers gripped her spine thinking about the man, his face, those eyes that would haunt her.

Thankfully, her daughter had been home and was safe in her own bed. She needed to remember to thank her mother later for setting her up with Mrs. Weber. Gina couldn't begin to think what might've happened if she'd put Everly in the runner's stroller and had taken her along.

“I'm guessing your brothers don't know, either.”

“They would tell me if they did. Whatever it is, sounds big.”

“Well, then I feel really bad about you being here instead of the ranch.” She locked gazes with him and that familiar shot to the chest zapped her.

“It's fine. Not everyone's home yet. This is a busy season for those who are.” Did he feel that same current of electricity every time their eyes met? She could've sworn she saw something pass behind his eyes. She was probably seeing what she wanted instead of what was there—more sympathy.

“If you need to go, I’ll be okay.”

“Mrs. Weber was right a few minutes ago. You probably shouldn’t be alone today. And I’m going to get offended if you keep trying to kick me out.” He shot his best cocky grin.

It did the trick. She laughed. It also stirred a few other things up in addition to her sense of humor. “Is that right?”

The sound of a car driving up got him to his feet and to the window in a beat. Gina was standing next to him in the next second. Panic had a way of getting her body moving. The water helped ease her dry mouth, but her head pounded. She’d refused to take any pain relievers earlier because she wanted to be fully aware and capable when she took care of her daughter.

Being a single mother for the past year, she’d learned to depend on herself. There’d been no one else to share the load. Looking back, she’d done the lion’s share of the work during her marriage, which had prepared her more than realized.

Guilt struck thinking about her last conversation with him. They’d fought over him going out with his friends the Friday night before. She’d mentioned it would be nice if, during the pregnancy, he curtailed his guy’s nights. He’d blown up at her, saying the pregnancy was making her too controlling. Des had been so used to getting his way that when she finally spoke up he’d thrown a fit. He’d argued that she was the one changing and that he’d stayed the same.

It was true. She had changed. There was no use denying facts. Standing up for herself wasn’t something Gina was used to doing with Des. Her happy place had always been a quiet room with a book. As she got older, add a glass of wine or maybe a bubble bath and she was in heaven.

She hadn’t noticed how night and day she and Des had been until a few years into their marriage. By then, she’d made the commitment to go the long haul and couldn’t see herself going back on that promise. It had been easier to give into his way than to stand up to him and deal with his tantrums.

“What’s my mom doing here so early?” Gina checked the time. Wow. Was it already quarter to three? The restaurant closed after the lunch rush. “Guess it’s not *that* early. Everly will wake up any minute.”

Her mother knocked lightly before trying the door. Gina unlocked and then opened it. She found herself being pulled into a hug before she could get a word out.

“I’m okay, Mom.” Gina’s mother had a baker’s build, a soft round middle, graying hair and the same green eyes as Gina. At sixty-seven, the woman had the energy of a person half her age. Losing her husband had taken a visible toll. A once-bright smile had dulled. Gina kept waiting for her mother to bounce back. She kept busy now but seemed to be reverting back to a child in some of her mannerisms, and especially her need for attention.

“I needed to see with my own eyes.” Devastation and loss cloaked her mother now and her shoulders almost always hung.

Gina knew what it was like to lose a husband. Des had been too young, too alive. His life had ended too suddenly. Even with his faults, he’d been a decent person. A little spoiled and used to getting his way, but at his core he was a good human being. The sudden loss had been shocking.

With her father, he’d become sick. There’d been weeks of medical tests and the realization his health wasn’t improving. Then, he’d received the terminal diagnosis blow. She and her mother had had some time to adjust, not that they would’ve ever been ready for him to go. He’d been the rock of the family and she missed him every day.

Taking on all the responsibilities of the restaurant had kept her mother busy, and there was certainly some grace in that. But it was taking a toll. Mother used to joke that her husband had always been the heartbeat of the family and the soul of the restaurant. With him gone, it was as though someone had sucked all the air out of the room.

“Mom, it’s all right. I’m safe now.” Gina’s mother released her from the hug.

“I can’t lose you, too.” Tears streaming, she seemed to try to compose herself when she straightened her shoulders and refocused her gaze on Isaac. “You saved my daughter’s life.”

Her mother walked over to him and pulled him into an embrace. She wasn’t normally this affectionate and Gina realized how much hearing the news must’ve shaken her mother. She looked as though she was holding on for dear life.

“She saved herself. I’m just happy I showed when I did.” Isaac was being gracious. She didn’t know what she would’ve done without him there. A shiver racked her body thinking about what could’ve happened. The thought of never holding her daughter again nearly buckled her knees. Since going there with her thoughts was as productive as shoveling grass, she redirected her thoughts.

Mother’s hand went over her heart and she paled.

“You’re shaking.” Isaac caught her by the arm to stop her from swaying. He helped her to the sofa.

“Let me get you some tea, mother.”

“I’m fine.” Mother’s color started returning as she took in a few deep breaths. “Tell me what happened.”

Gina had already recounted her story to Griff. Her head ached and all she really wanted to do was curl up on the sofa and take a nap before Everly woke. “Would it be okay if we discussed it later? I’m talked out.”

“Yes. I guess so.” To Gina, the details were no longer important. The fact that she’d survived and was home did the trick for her.

“I can put a pot of water on.” Isaac was sweet to offer.

“You’ve already done too much.”

Mother turned to Isaac. “I’m here now. You don’t have to stay any longer if there’s somewhere you need to be.”

The spot on the left shoulder blade, Gina’s stress spot, twitched. Pain shot down her back and up her neck. “It’s fine with me if he wants to be here.”

“Of course, it is. I was only suggesting he could go if he had to.” The indignation in her mother’s voice poked the already angry muscle.

Isaac looked to Gina. She appreciated his deferring to her more than he could know. “Do you want to stay?”

He nodded and the look on his face said he would dig his heels in for her if necessary. He stood there, arms across a broad chest and feet in an athletic stance. He’d always been good looking and athletic. Seeing him now, how he’d filled out, his confidence, rocketed him into a whole new stratosphere of attractive. It didn’t hurt that he was clearly ripped under that t-shirt. Knowing his personality, his intelligence, his sense of humor made her figure that most

women threw themselves at him. God help her, he stirred something deep inside her. Something she hadn't felt in a very long time.

A little voice told her she should've felt that way about her husband. She'd loved Des. Always would. Granted, it had never been that all-consuming, fireworks kind of love. It was comfortable. It was friends who'd known each other their entire lives. It was a deep sense of caring. And he'd needed her.

Gina turned to her mother. "We've been catching up and it's been nice to have a friend here in Gunner."

Mother stared at a spot on the carpet at the mention of a friend. Her expression dropped, and her body stilled. Gina didn't need to be a mind reader to know her mother was thinking about Brittany. "It's terrible to think what happened. And next door."

The town of Gunner didn't see violent crime. Gina heard about it on the news regularly living in a major city but this was a shock for a small town. She felt it more, too, probably because it hit so close to home.

"It's still so hard to believe." Gina took a seat on the opposite end of the sofa. Isaac followed suit, reclaiming his spot on the loveseat.

"Such a shame. So much loss." Mother exhaled. "Why is it bad news always seems to come in threes?"

Gina didn't feel the need to point out Des had died a year-and-a-half ago. Her father and Brittany were three months apart. Besides, her mother's question was rhetorical.

Everly stirred. Gina hopped to her feet to check on her daughter. The sudden movement caused blood to rush from her head and she almost lost her balance. Hand on the armrest, she steadied herself.

Isaac was at her side in the next beat. The man could move like a panther. His hand on her arm guided her toward the kitchen. "I can check on her if you want."

"She's had so much change lately. Waking up to a stranger might throw her off." She appreciated his offer and wasn't sure if Everly would mind or if it was Gina who would be thrown for a loop.

The shock of seeing her daughter in a man's arms would tip her over on a

day that had already thrown enough at her. She'd never seen Everly being held by a man. Her father had doted on his granddaughter, but he was from a generation of men who didn't carry around their grandchildren, change diapers or otherwise handle hands-on childcare.

He'd been the same with Gina when she was little, or so she'd been told. Even so, there was never a day that went by where she questioned whether her father loved her or Everly.

Peeking in on her daughter, seeing her comfortable and sleeping warmed Gina's heart. A tear escaped. She was being overly emotional and that was okay. As her mother had so kindly said, it had been a day.

Gina didn't have to turn to know Isaac stood behind her. She felt his presence. One step in the wrong direction and she'd be back-to-chest with him. His warm and spicy scent filled her with every breath she took. What should have been strange struck her as the most normal thing ever. She chalked it up to their history and pushed it from her thoughts.

"Beautiful kid." His voice was so low she almost didn't hear him.

Pride ballooned inside Gina. She couldn't agree more. Everly was the best of her and Des.

Knowing her daughter was blissfully asleep and unaware of the day's events, Gina turned to go back into the living room. She stopped herself before she ran into Isaac's chest. She looked up and their eyes locked.

In that split-second before he looked away, it was the most intimate moment of her life.

“How’s the baby?” Worry lines scored Mother’s face the second she got a look at Gina.

Damn. Gina thought she was covering the effects of being too close to Isaac. She’d have to work harder next time. Or, better yet, keep her distance. It was increasingly clear to her being in close proximity would only lead to more heartbreak. Gina had had enough of that to fill a lifetime.

“She’s good. Still asleep. She must’ve had a busy morning or a late nap. I forgot to ask Mrs. Weber what time she put Everly down.”

Isaac moved into the kitchen. The click of the gas stovetop being lit made her realize he put on water for tea. Did he need a minute? She could sure as heck use one.

“It’s not safe for you here at the lake. You and the baby can move in with me. It’ll be easy since you’re not unpacked yet.” Mother was overreacting. Gina certainly understood and even appreciated the concern.

“We’ll be fine here, Mom. We just need to give it a little time.”

“How safe can it be?” Concerned green eyes blinked up at Gina.

“I’ll take precautions.” She hated to point out this could happen in any neighborhood or the fact that Dallas was one of the most dangerous cities in America.

“What did Griffin say about it? About poor Brittany?” More tears streamed. Gina was having a tough time holding it together. Seeing her mother cry wasn’t

helping.

“He and his deputies will get to the bottom of why it happened and who did it.”

“Is it true? Did he...?” Mother made eyes at Gina.

She wasn't sure what her mother was fishing for or how much she already knew thanks to Gunner's tightknit community. She didn't want to provide details that could haunt her mother. It was best to see what her mother had already found out. “What?”

“Strangle her?”

Gina nodded, fighting back tears.

“Does that mean he knew her?”

“Griff thinks so.”

“That shouldn't make me feel safer for you.” Mother took out a tissue and blotted tears.

Gina understood her mother's thinking. If he knew Brittany personally he was only a threat to Brittany.

“Did you know her friends?” Gina asked.

“Brittany didn't have many according to her mother.” She'd been a handful in high school but had never been over-the-top like some kids could be. It also explained why mother had tried to hook her up with Gina. “She kept to herself mostly.”

“But she reached out to me after you told her I was moving back.”

Mother nodded. “I'm not sure I thanked you for setting up lunch with her. Her mother approached me about getting the two of you together. Thought you might be a good influence on Brittany.”

“Was she in some kind of trouble?”

“None that her mother mentioned to me.” Mother put her hands on her knees. “She thought Brittany spent too much time alone and then she popped up pregnant. She never named the father. According to her mother, she never saw a man around.”

Griff would surely check Brittany's phone. If she'd been spending time with someone, his identity was about to be revealed. A thought hit her hard and fast.

Based on the fact Isaac stopped what he was doing and turned around, he must've had the same one.

“No one knew who the baby’s father was?” This was news to Gina. But then she hadn’t kept up with Brittany.

“Brittany never even told her mother.”

“Is there a laptop here?” Isaac turned the stove off.

Gina retrieved it and set it up at the dinette table.

“You have a social media account?” Isaac took a seat after fixing another cup of coffee for himself.

“Yes.” She blinked at him. “You don’t?”

“Didn’t seem important where I’ve been.” He had a point. She couldn’t argue there wouldn’t be much need or time for online surfing where he’d just come from.

“I thought everyone did these days.”

“Call me old school.” His devastating smirk nearly leveled her a second time. It was dangerous to look at Isaac when he had a twinkle in his eyes and a smirk on his lips. His lips, his granite-made jawline and his pale blue eyes were things she had no business focusing on.

Her danger radar went on full tilt with him sitting next to her at the table. Again, she had to remind herself to take a deep breath and keep her bearings.

He pulled up Brittany’s social media account using Gina’s log-in credentials. He scrolled through her posts, searching for pictures of her. There weren’t many.

“That’s odd.”

Isaac was already nodding his head.

“Mom, how old is Brittany’s baby?”

“Let me see. She must be three or four months old by now.”

“There’s not one post made in the past six months. The few before that mention nothing about a pregnancy. There’s no birth announcement. No newborn pics.” Brittany’s profile pic had a filter that made it nearly impossible to recognize her.

“I’m not big on using this, but her page strikes me as off.” Isaac leaned back and folded his arms.

“Same here. I mean, it’s not that hard to set privacy controls if you don’t want strangers seeing your posts.”

“It was too much to hope we’d see a picture of your attacker.” Wouldn’t that be nice, Gina thought. To wrap the case up by going onto Brittany’s social media page and identifying the jerk.

After having a little time to digest what had happened this morning, Gina wondered why he didn’t kill her right then and there. Why take her to another site when he could’ve strangled her the way he had Brittany?

“That settles it. I’m staying here.” Mother turned to Isaac. “I brought a bag just in case. Would you mind—”

“You have the restaurant to think about.” Gina appreciated the gesture. Her mother didn’t do well sleeping away from home and to be honest wouldn’t be much help in an emergency. Gina already had Everly to think about. She wouldn’t be able to handle a baby and a senior if they needed to get out of the house fast.

“*You* are more important than food. We won’t open tomorrow.”

“Mom, you can’t afford to close down the restaurant for a day. Besides, Griff will most likely catch the guy by the time we go to bed tonight.” It was wishful thinking. “Even if he doesn’t, there’s no way the person would come back here. He has to realize at least his partial description is out there and that law enforcement will be watching my house anyway.”

Gina gave her mother a hug. She could feel her bones and figured she hadn’t been taking care of herself. Her mother was the one who needed ‘mothering’. Gina was used to taking care of herself. “I’m shaken up. But I’ll be fine.”

“I already offered to stay overnight,” Isaac interjected. “I’m not due home for a couple of days, so no one will miss me there. I don’t need a lot of sleep, so I’ll keep watch over your daughter and granddaughter until we can get a security system installed here.”

Gina’s mother exhaled. “This place could use an alarm. The windows are so old. I thought Gina and Everly would be more comfortable living with me, but this seemed to suit my daughter better.”

“You look tired, Mom. Are you okay?” Her mother had dark circles cradling

her eyes. Her skin was starting to hang off her bones. Gina made the right call in coming home to help out with the restaurant. The stress of losing her husband combined with taking on full responsibility for the restaurant seemed to be taking a toll.

“Yes, dear. You don’t need to concern yourself with me. Between being worried about you and taking care of the breakfast and lunch rush, I’m beat.”

Gina hugged her well-intentioned mother. “Go home. Put on a pot of tea. Put your feet up. Mr. Marley is probably upset he hasn’t seen you all day.” The woman lived for her sweet cat. “Get to bed early and get a good night’s sleep. Everything will look brighter in the morning.”

“Can I get a peek at my granddaughter first?”

“Of course, you can do anything you want.”

Gina’s mother perked up a little bit as she made a show of tip-toeing through the living room and toward Everly’s room off the kitchen. When her mother was out of earshot, she said, “Thank you for backing me up with her. She means well.”

“My offer stands. I’d like to stay overnight on the couch. Make sure you feel safe with someone here to keep watch.”



“THANK YOU, Isaac. If you’re sure it won’t be any trouble or keep you from anything more important—”

“I wasn’t kidding. I’m not due home for a couple of days. I caught an earlier flight than expected.” Isaac had made the offer out of duty to Des. At least, that’s the excuse he tried to sell himself. In truth, he couldn’t deny how damn good it was to see Gina again. It felt better than he wanted to admit. She’d stirred his heart in a manner that he’d thought was long-since dead inside him. He chalked it up to unrequited love and their history.

Whatever the reason, she’d awakened a protective instinct that had been long dormant. That’s as far as he would allow himself to go. He couldn’t let it be more than that drawing him toward her, making him want to stick around.

Those other feelings he'd had a long time ago needed to stay stuffed down deep. And yet, a part of him wondered if him and Gina were being given a second chance at something that had been cut short in its prime more than a decade and a half ago.

All he knew for certain was that he hadn't felt anything close to this in more years than he cared to count.

Gina's daughter cried. The sound nearly broke his heart. There were a rare few times in Isaac's life he felt helpless. This ranked up there.

Gina, on the other hand, hopped into action. She disappeared into the little girl's room in a heartbeat. When she came out, she had the still-sleepy little girl in her arms.

He expected the sight of Gina holding her daughter close to her chest to throw him for a loop. After all, this was Gina. His last memories of her were high school. Instead, seeing her hold her daughter was the most natural-looking image. Apparently, Gina was meant to be a mother.

"Is she hungry?" Gina's mother asked.

"How about cookies and milk?" Gina said quietly to her daughter.

The little girl nodded. Those big tears rolling down chubby cheeks caused his heart to squeeze. Isaac had never seen himself as the family type. Granted, he'd grown up in a big family. He loved his brothers. They were close. With seven strong-minded men, there were bound to be disagreements. His brothers didn't see eye-to-eye on a lot of issues. No one questioned their love for each other. That, was a given with the Quinn brothers.

"I'll help." Gina's mother was to her feet in a snap. It was the fastest he'd seen her move.

Everly held her arms out when her grandmother got close.

A moment of relief seemed to wash over Gina as she handed her daughter over. She joined Isaac in the living room. As she neared, he could see the toll the day had taken on her.

"How's your head?"

She blanched, looking shocked by question.

"It's not a trick," he teased. "I'm asking how you're doing."

A ghost of a smile played with the corners of Gina's mouth. "Guess I'm not used to anyone asking about me." She gave him the most honest look. "My head hurts. My ankles are screaming. I think I could curl up on the couch and nap." She glanced back at her mother and daughter in the kitchen. "But she needs me."

"Between the two of us, we can handle the little munchkin."

Gina shot him a look of doubt.

He chuckled. "Okay, I can't. But your mom is doing all right and I'm here for backup. It's safe for you to lie down here where you can keep an eye on us, and rest."

"I have dinner to think about." She bit back a yawn.

It was his turn to shoot a look.

She put her hands up, palms out in the surrender position. "You got me. I'm beat. I'll just lie here for a minute."

Famous last words.

Within five minutes her steady, even breathing said she was lights out. Curled on the sofa with her hair splayed out on the pillow, she looked peaceful. Gina was beautiful, and time had only improved her looks. So much of which came from inside a person.

The word *angel* came to mind as he glanced over at her. He took a hit square in the chest, so he looked away, not wanting to give away his reaction. Seeing her again, being with her again felt a little too right for a man in his position. He had no idea which direction he was heading or where he'd end up after his meeting with T.J. and his brothers.

Shame he didn't have plans to stick around in Gunner. Get reacquainted with Gina. Get to know her daughter.

Time had marched on after their brief relationship in high school. The two of them had gone down different paths. Gina was a mother. Based on the concern she had for her daughter, she was a damn good one.

By the time Gina opened her eyes again, her mother had whipped up a dinner appropriate for a one-year-old, chicken nuggets and mac-n-cheese. The woman had given Everly a bath and dressed her in her pajamas.

Isaac, on the other hand, had arranged grocery delivery with enough supplies

they could stay put for the next couple of days to let that ankle heal. He didn't want her to leave the house. He didn't want to put more of a scare in Gina, but he didn't agree with her assumption the man wouldn't return. She was the only person who could positively identify him.

"What time is it?" Gina sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Seven-thirty."

"I slept four hours?"

"You looked like you needed it." He had no plans to leave her side until he knew she was safe. "I got a text from Griff. He'd like us to stop by tomorrow morning."

"Does he have news?"

"Nothing he wanted to discuss over the phone."

"I wish there'd been photos or something to go on from our internet search earlier." She jumped straight into the case.

"Hold on a minute. How about a cup of coffee? It wouldn't hurt to give yourself a minute to wake up."

She glanced around, no doubt checking for her daughter.

"She's in her room with your mother. Last I checked, they were on the floor playing with blocks. The room looked like a tornado had rolled through and the two of them couldn't stop laughing."

Gina smiled and her face lit up. Damn if he couldn't get used to being around her again. He thought about missed opportunities. If he could go back and change the past...

Isaac stopped himself right there. He didn't do regret. Regret was counterproductive. Regret would just have him spinning his wheels about things he couldn't change.

Besides, thinking about what might have been with Gina wouldn't get them any closer to figuring out who'd murdered Brittany. Brittany deserved their full attention. Brittany deserved justice.

He poured a cup of coffee and brought it to Gina.

"Thank you." When her green eyes caught hold of his, his damn fool heart clenched. "For everything. And don't say it's nothing. That little girl in the next

room has a mother tonight because of you. And thank you for your service to our country, Isaac. I meant to say those words earlier and got sidetracked.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Would it be weird if I said how proud I am of you? You risked your life for strangers. I can’t imagine anything more noble.”

He acknowledged her compliment with a smile. “I’d say you have some idea about giving your life over for someone else. I saw you with your daughter earlier. It’s easy to see how much you live for her.”

A mix of emotions stirred behind Gina’s eyes that he couldn’t quite pinpoint.

“That might be the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a long time.” This time, she beamed.

“Shame.”

Gina pushed off the sofa. “A shower and clean clothes sound like heaven right now.”

He smirked. The last thing he needed was the image of her in the shower naked. Isaac hadn’t done casual sex since his first year in the military and his last relationship had soured him for dating. He figured that was the reason his hormones were at it again. And it had absolutely nothing to do with the sway of full hips walking in the opposite direction.

While she showered, Isaac cooked up steaks and potatoes for the three of them, a meal he’d perfected in the past year and a half.

When Gina returned wearing warm-ups and smelling clean and fresh like wildflowers, he instructed her to sit. “We can eat in shifts so someone will be available for Everly. The other potatoes are warming in the oven. I figure it’s best to let you and your mother take turns. Everly isn’t familiar with me yet and I don’t want to upset her.”

“How’d you learn to cook like that?” Gina’s mother cleaned her plate. Coming from someone who’d owned a restaurant for the past twenty-five years, hers was quite the compliment.

“There were periods overseas when we had more time on our hands than we knew what to do with. Some guys went out and partied every chance they got, which I did in the beginning. After that got old, I hung back at the barracks and taught myself how to cook. One of my buddies grew up in a family of firemen. He joked that he’d been handed a spatula not long after learning to swing a baseball bat.”

Gina didn’t look him in the eye. “Excuse me. I should put Everly to bed.”

What had he said wrong? He’d skipped the part where his relationship with Brooke had been the reason he’d hung back. Going out and getting drunk with the guys had held little appeal once he and Brooke decided to get exclusive.

“Thank you for a wonderful meal, Isaac.” Gina’s mother picked up her plate and started toward the sink.

“Don’t worry about dishes. Leave your plate on the counter and I’ll take care of it.”

“*You* are an angel.”

“Hard not to end up self-sufficient when you spend months at a time in a tent on foreign soil.” Isaac chuckled. He’d also grown up under the iron fist of T.J. Quinn. His father ran a tight ship. Quinn boys were up by four a.m. every day for

chores before school. Isaac had practically grown up on an ATV, checking fences on his father's cattle ranch. He'd spent enough time on a ranch to know he had no intention of ever running one.

Isaac's cell buzzed. He excused himself and took the call.

"What's up, Griff?"

"Can you bring Gina down to my office tonight? I have a few more questions for her and I'd like her to look at some profiles while everything's fresh in her mind." Isaac glanced up and saw Gina's mother hovering at the door.

"She'll have to get coverage for her daughter." Mrs. Williams set her purse on the loveseat and took off her light jacket.

Gina must've walked into the room because her flowery scent filled his senses when he took in his next breath. He was already in trouble. Spending time one-on-one with her was probably a bad idea. So, it was probably a good thing he needed to get her down to the sheriff's office. Probably.

"What is it?"

He turned around. "Griff asked me to bring you to his office. He wants you to look at some pictures."

Panic darkened her features for a split-second. He could only imagine the fear she felt in the possibility of seeing her abductor's face again.

Mrs. Williams put down her purse and took off her windbreaker. "I can stay. Go do what you need to."

"You have an early morning." The protest wasn't heartfelt.

"True. I'll call my friend Berta."

"Mrs. Weber was here all morning, she—" Gina barely got the words out. Her mother was already digging around in her purse. She pulled out a cell phone and held a finger up to shush her daughter.

"Between myself and Berta we've got this covered. Everly's asleep. It's no trouble. You two go on."

Isaac had no plans to get in the middle of their conversation. So when Mrs. Williams looked to him for reinforcement, he stood down. "It's up to you, Gina. If you're not up to it we can go in the morning."

Him checking with her seemed to catch her off guard, which left him

wondering if what he'd heard about Des was true. Thinking that Des might not have given her the life he'd promised tightened a coil inside Isaac's chest.

"He might go free if you don't do everything you can to lock him away." Mrs. Williams had a point.

"Okay. You're right. It's important." She nodded toward Isaac.

"I'll let Griff know we're on our way." He sent off a text and then fished keys out of his pocket.

"Call me if she wakes."

"How about a text? I'll call if she wakes crying." That seemed to satisfy Gina.

"Thank you, Mom."

Isaac could only imagine what holding his own child would be like. Everly had seemed so small and fragile. Three of his brothers had become fathers in the past couple of years but Isaac hadn't been home long enough to spend much time with any of them. And since he didn't 'do' regret, he wouldn't go there about missing important events in his brothers' lives.

He surveyed the area as he walked Gina to his pickup. He helped her climb into the cab. Skin-to-skin contact wasn't his brightest idea. Electricity fizzed through his fingertips and up his right arm.

Isaac claimed the driver's seat and started the ignition. A question had been bugging him and he wanted to clear the air. "Why'd you get up from the table earlier? Did I say something wrong?"

"It's not you, Isaac."

"Oh. Right. The it's-not-you-it's-me routine. Heard that one before."

"I doubt it."

He chuckled as he navigated onto the country road and then turned toward town. "Well, you're going to have to clue me in because I'm lost here."

"It's none of my business."

"Gina, we go way back. You can say anything to me. You won't throw me for a loop and you can't scare me away."

She sat there in a quiet that stretched on for minutes. Then, she blew out a breath. "There was someone you were serious about once, wasn't there?"



“YES.”

One word shouldn't hit Gina in the chest so hard. She had no designs on Isaac. She'd been married and had had Everly. So, the fact he'd been in love with someone else shouldn't bother her.

Except that he'd probably been in *love*. It felt very different from what she had with Des.

Des was comfort and history. The two had been close. She cared for Des deeply and that was a form of love. Maybe it wasn't the all-consuming, heart-fluttered-every-time-he-walked-into-a-room. She hadn't expected to have it with anyone. Aside from Isaac.

“What happened? Why aren't you married? Or can't you commit?” Settling down to someone with Isaac's lifestyle probably wasn't high on his list.

“Wasn't the problem.” His voice had a quiet reverence.

“Was it her?”

“She died.” If one word was a punch those two stole her breath.

“I'm so sorry.”

He white-knuckled the steering wheel.

“I really am. I had no idea.” Talk about wishing she could take back a conversation. Hurting Isaac was the last thing she wanted to do. “You don't have to talk about her.”

“Maybe I should,” came after a few beats of silence. “I closed up after she died. Something in me died. I stopped coming home.”

“If you don't mind my asking, what happened to her?”

“She got sick. Terminal. Bone cancer. Long, slow death. Not a lot of hope. Stupid thing is I didn't realize how much I loved her until she was gone.” He stopped at a red light.

Gina reached across the seat and touched his arm. No words of comfort came to mind. She didn't try to force any.

“Kept telling myself I'd think about buying a ring and asking her to marry me. At first, it was Christmas. Then, it was New Year's. After that, I thought

Valentine's Day. Those were just excuses because I wanted a guarantee that we wouldn't end up as miserable as my parents had been before she died." He shot a knowing glance at her. "I know how my family looked from the outside. Believe me, it wasn't like that on the inside. Our lives changed drastically after our mother died. T.J. became angry, closed himself off. I learned to hold back my emotions. I could only go so far in relationships."

She wondered if he was explaining his sudden emotional retreat in high school. "Thank you for talking to me Isaac."

"I could say the same to you for listening." The light changed to green and he refocused on the stretch of road ahead. "The whole experience taught me to speak up." He paused a beat. "It's good to see you, Gina. I thought about you over the years more times than I care to admit."

Her heart shouldn't leap at hearing those words. It did.

"It was the same for me, Isaac." How could she not compare what she'd felt with Isaac to her relationship with Des? Isaac had been all heat and butterflies and the feeling of being out of control in the best possible way. Des had been comfort and shared history. She'd wanted to love Des in the same way. Wanting and doing were two different things.

She couldn't help but wonder if Des had felt the same. Comfort instead of uncertainty. Because giving her heart to Isaac had been the scariest feeling. And then the sting of rejection had marked her. She'd been too young, too naïve, too uncertain of herself to confront him.

Would life had turned out differently if she had said something? Gina couldn't regret Everly. Her little girl was the best thing that had ever happened to her. But losing Isaac had been devastating.

Pulling into the parking lot of Griff's office stopped the train of conversation before it could go somewhere that neither of them would know what to do with.

Isaac parked and came around to the passenger side to help her out. Her left ankle burned when she put weight on it and stepping down from the cab, she rolled it and lost her balance. Grabbing at anything to steady herself, she ended up with a chunk of Isaac's shirt in her fist.

"Whoa there." Isaac's steady hand kept her from biting the pavement.

“That’ll need ice later.” The pain was real.

“Griff will have some in the cafeteria. Let’s get you inside and sitting down.”

This is the point where Gina was supposed to let go of his shirt. She didn’t. Couldn’t bring herself to and especially when their gazes locked. For a split second, time stilled. She fisted both hands in his shirt.

His blue eyes darkened with need. His gaze roamed her face, settling on her lips. “I’d like to ask permission to kiss you, Gina.”

She pushed up to her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his. He brought his hands up to cup her face. He tasted like coffee, smelled spicy and male. The scent was intoxicating. Her knees were melting as he slowly deepened the kiss. She parted her lips to provide better access and his tongue darted inside her mouth.

She brought her hands up to his shoulders and dug in with her fingernails as need welled inside her like a squall, sudden and intense. The kiss robbed her breath and her heart pounded against her chest.

His breath quickened, too. And his hands dropped to rest on her shoulders as he pulled back like he needed a minute. “I’ve been wanting to do that all damn day.” His mouth moved against hers when he spoke. He pressed his forehead to hers.

Gina had never experienced so much tenderness, so much heat and so much promise in one kiss with anyone. *But Isaac*, an annoying voice in her head chimed in. His skilled thumbs moved in small circles near her collar bones. His touch sent sparks flying. Sensual shivers skittered across her sensitized skin. She could only imagine what other pleasures those hands could give her.

It was her turn to breathe out a sigh as she did her level best to regain her composure.

“Was that a bad idea?” Isaac asked.

“Only if it’s the last one.”

Isaac managed to get Gina settled in a chair in his cousin's office. Sherry had informed them Griff was busy in the county jail, which stood at the opposite end of the lot.

He tried to keep his mind off the kiss they'd shared. But, damn. Hot didn't even begin to do it justice. The fireworks it had ignited were beyond description.

"I'll run and get ice. Be right back." He left her for a few seconds and returned with a Ziploc full of ice wrapped in a clean dish towel. "Let's get that ankle elevated."

There was swelling. Bruises. He should've taken care of this earlier.

Before he could claim a spot next to her a commotion sounded from down the hallway.

"Thanks for coming down tonight, Gina." Griff shooed away the deputy who'd come in on his heels. "I know it's been a long day."

"Is there news?"

"Brittany's mother received a text from her daughter stating she'd decided to go away for a few days and get her head together. Her boss got one stating she'd had an emergency and needed a week off work. Problem is, according to the coroner those texts came post-mortem."

A stolen vehicle. An empty cabin in what was supposed to be a vacant area. And now texts sent after a murder. "Sounds premeditated."

The Quinn family knew two things, ranches and law enforcement. Isaac's

Uncle Archer had been the sheriff before he'd stepped down and his son made a run for office. His cousin, Griff, had taken over and become a damn fine sheriff. Several of Isaac's cousins were U.S. Marshals. Ranching and law enforcement seemed to run in the blood.

Relationships, the Quinn men weren't so good at.

"It narrows our list of suspects, which until now was every male aged thirty to sixty with brown eyes and a hook nose. The method of killing suggested this was personal. Now, we have proof. We have an initial autopsy report. Based on lividity, Brittany had been dead for at least two hours before those texts were sent."

"And there's no chance those texts were delayed?" Gina asked.

"Even if they were, she was setting the scene to meet someone. The cabin next door to yours is owned by folks who live in Houston. I tracked the owners down this evening and the place was expected to be empty. They don't rent it out. Brittany was most likely set up to meet the perp there." Griff sat on the armrest of the club chair next to the sofa.

"Could be someone from one of those dating sites. Maybe she was lonely and looking to meet someone." Isaac's suggestion was met with a nod of agreement.

"A lot of the houses at the lake aren't lived in full-time. The person Brittany met must have known that." Gina made a good point. "My mind keeps going back to the baby's father. My mother said Brittany never revealed his identity."

"No one knew who he was that I'm aware of."

"Sends up all kinds of red flags if you ask me," Gina said. She mentioned what they'd found on Brittany's social media page. "What about DNA? Can you find out using the baby's genes?"

"The only way we'd find a match is if the father is in the database for some reason. If he decided to kill her to silence her, I doubt we'll find him. A man in that scenario has a lot to lose." Griff tapped his pen on the desk.

"Is there nothing on her cell records to go on?" Isaac couldn't help but think there'd be a trail.

"If the affair was kept under wraps then no. One of my deputies is digging

into that as we speak. Brittany's mother gave permission to search her daughter's cell records so we're able to speed up due diligence. But it still might take days that we don't have." Griff didn't mention the possibility that Brittany's killer might never be identified or caught. "She went to great lengths to conceal his identity, which means she was probably smart enough not to use her main cell phone."

"This is all so hard to believe." Gina rubbed her wrists and Isaac wondered if she was doing it subconsciously. "I have so many questions. Who was close to Brittany? Surely, she had friends. Is there a best friend? Maybe she kept her life separate from her family on purpose. What about her boss or co-workers? Did she have any fights with one of them recently?" Gina certainly understood not sharing details of her life with her mother.

"All good questions. All leads we're following up on."

"My mom was approached by Brittany's mother, who thought it would be good for the two of us to connect. It makes me think her mother knew something. That woman was always in her daughter's business."

"We know her killer is a man. What we don't know is what he planned to do with you and why he fled the scene."

"He had the perfect setup to give himself time to clean up the scene of his crime. I must've thrown a wrench in his plans. He panicked when I showed up. He seems the type to carefully plan and I messed that up for him. He must've been taking me off site to kill me. Maybe he didn't know what to do with me or had some weird code about not killing an innocent person."

Seeing the way she kept touching her wrists when she spoke and the pain in her eyes when she talked about the possibility of dying brought out all of Isaac's protective instincts. He could only imagine what she was going through, the notion that her daughter could be forced to grow up without a parent if anything happened to Gina.

In the world Isaac had come from, he faced life and death routinely on missions. A few of his buddies had wives and children waiting for them. He'd heard the stories of those wives putting up a brave front even though his friends could see through it.

Granted, life had way of throwing all kinds of twists and turns at people. No one was guaranteed to wake up tomorrow. There was no better case in point than Des. But signing up for a high-risk job with a family back home wasn't something Isaac would have considered.

"Based on other evidence, a picture is emerging that says the killer was inexperienced," Griff said.

"She could've threatened to expose his identity. He decided he had to make the 'problem' go away." Gina's face twisted. Isaac figured it was difficult for her to think of a child as a problem. They were just throwing around ideas.

Deputy Sayer knocked on the door. He had a piece of paper in his hand. "Sir. I got a hit on her workplace."

Griff motioned for Sayer to come inside.

He took a couple of steps into the office. "According to the victim's co-workers, she had what they described as a temperamental personality. It wasn't uncommon for her to blow up when a project didn't go the way she wanted it to. They described her as difficult to work with. One person in particular seemed to have conflict with Brittany. She accused her of sleeping with the boss to get a promotion."

"Did anyone else corroborate the accusation?" Griff asked.

Deputy Sayer shook his head. "No one. There was bad blood between the two of them over the promotion. People didn't put a lot of stock into the rumor. Brittany's boss's name is...*was* Benjamin Day." Sayer paused a beat. He'd been a couple of years behind Isaac in school.

"Check into it anyway. Ask for a voluntary DNA sample and see if we can get a match with the child," Griff instructed.

"Yes, sir." Deputy Sayer jotted down a few notes. "Brittany's mother called. Said her husband is out of town. He's been out of cell range until this evening. He's on his way home."

Isaac hadn't met the man yet but couldn't imagine the horror of finding out his step-daughter had been murdered.

Deputy Sayer took a couple more notes before disappearing down the hallway again.

“Is there any chance the perp stole a car, picked a target at random and Brittany ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time?” Isaac figured it was a long shot. He couldn’t fathom anyone in town being responsible for something so horrific.

“The method of killing is personal.” The look Griff gave said he was holding back.

“What is it?”

Griff got up and closed the door. “What I’m about to tell you stays in this room.”

“Goes without saying.”

“Brittany knew her killer. We won’t have to look far.”

“What makes you so certain?” It was the first time Gina spoke up since arriving.

“It was cold and rainy last night. He killed her on the porch, which was exposed to the elements and he put a raincoat over her.”

Jesus.

“Why would he do that?” Gina paled.

“Because he cared about her getting cold.” Isaac moved beside her and took her trembling hand in his. It was a lot to hear.

Griff nodded. “It’s warped. I know. It’s the only thing that explains murdering her and then covering her up. My guess is that he hasn’t done this before. The scenario in my mind is the two met up. For what reason, I don’t know. They picked your neighbor’s house because the owners live out of town. It’s rainy and cold and the middle of the week. There was a high probability no one would be using the place. A male called the owners to ask about the property a couple of days ago.”

“You think the two of them were planning a rendezvous?” Isaac asked.

“She might have been led to believe so. The father of Brittany’s baby could be married or have standing in the community he couldn’t afford to lose.”

“Which is why she’s protected his identity,” Isaac concluded.

“There’s no name on the birth certificate.”

“You’re thinking the two decided to meet up, maybe got into an argument.”

“That’s where the evidence is leading. Although, the stolen vehicle suggests this guy might’ve decided to kill her to keep her quiet. She might’ve been threatening to reveal who he is.”

“And he wasn’t having that.” Isaac squeezed Gina’s hand for reassurance. “He couldn’t afford his wife or the community to uncover the truth?”

“It’s the most logical explanation.”

“What about her laptop or home computer? She could have been on one of those internet dating sites like Isaac mentioned earlier.”

“Brittany had a laptop that was in her room at her mother’s house. My tech guy has been working on it. So far, he isn’t finding anything. Speaking of technology, my deputy found this on the scene.” He opened his desk and pulled out Gina’s cell phone.

“Right. It was still in my hand when…”

Griff handed it to her and she stared at the dried mud spots. Isaac could only imagine what it must feel like to hold her phone in her hand again after what had happened the last time.

Other ideas churned in Isaac’s mind. “Is it possible that Brittany had more than one cell phone? Or social media account? I had a friend once who used to carry two phones. One for work and the other was her private. Same for her social media. There was the account she gave work people and her family and then her ghost account was for her real friends.”

“My guy is looking into it but nothing yet.” Griff double-timed the pen tapping. “Which doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Her office is cooperating fully and if she has one, there’s a good chance we’ll find it. The problem is time. The longer it takes me to figure out who this could be the farther away from Gunner he might get.”

Gina blew out a breath. “I wish I’d spoken to her in person. Maybe she would’ve confided in me.”

“You couldn’t have known.” Isaac leaned forward. “On the co-worker and their argument.”

Griff nodded.

“Have you ruled her out as the perp based on the M.O.? I would think

strangling someone takes a lot of strength,” Isaac continued.”

“No one is completely cleared unless they have an iron-clad alibi. She’s low on the list right now.”

Isaac nodded. “It rained last night. Any footprints leading up to the cabin?”

“There are two sets. The rain also did a good job of making it difficult to measure them.” Spring rain in Texas could certainly do that.

“I keep wondering about the dog. Why bring him? Was she meeting up with the perp in the middle of the night? Did she go in the morning and take the dog as an excuse to leave her child at home? Or did she simply want company?”

“We’re trying to assess when she might’ve been last seen. As far as we can tell so far, her mother said she left to take the dog out after putting her son to bed.”

A knock interrupted the conversation.

“Come in.” Griff was already to his feet when the door opened.

Sherry stuck her head in. “Sir, a man is here claiming to be the father of Brittany’s child. Says his name is Logan Simmons.”

“Did you get a look at the color of his eyes?” Griff asked.

“They’re brown.”

Isaac’s gaze flew to Gina. The look of shock and vulnerability on her face brought out more of his protective instincts.



GINA COVERED her mouth to stifle a gasp. The man who’d abducted her and murdered Brittany could be standing on the other side of the wall.

“Close my door and take him to the interview room. Let me know when he’s there.” Griff’s gaze blazed over the room, landing steady on Gina. “I’d like you to come to the observation room. I’ll have him turn his head so you can see if his profile is a match. He’ll be in a locked room with no way to see you.”

She tried to stop her hand from trembling by sheer force of will as she lowered it onto her lap, nodding. Words escaped her as panic seized her chest. Reminding herself to breathe, Gina closed her fingers around Isaac’s hand even

tighter.

“He can’t hurt you. I won’t let him.” Isaac’s voice came out a low rumble. An oath.

“I know.” Logic said a man who’d committed murder wouldn’t show up at law enforcement’s door. Somehow, she was certain crazier things had happened.

Griff’s cell buzzed. He checked the screen. “He’s secure.” Once again, he looked to Gina. “Ready?”

“As much as I can be.” She stood and followed Griff. Isaac splayed his hand on the hollow of her back. The warm reassurance of his touch kept her knees from buckling. The pain in her ankle had subsided, the icepack having done its job.

The observation room Griff had referred to was dark with a one-way mirror, barely bigger than a walk-in closet.

She studied the man sitting at the table. He would be tall if he was standing. His hands twisted together and he tapped his right heel against the white tile. “The mask covered the details of his face. The nose could be right. I can’t rule him out but I can’t say for certain that’s him, either.”

Logan Simmons would be considered attractive by most women’s standards with his light brown hair and eyes. His runner’s build was suited to the white dress shirt and khaki pants he had on. He had that professional look down pat with short, clean-cut hair and a serious expression.

The suspect twisted a wedding band around his third finger on his left hand. If she had to venture a guess, she’d say he was late thirties, and married with kids.

Griff asked a couple of routine-sounding questions. Gina listened to the sound of the suspect’s voice, wishing he’d said something to her so she could decide if he was the perp.

“What’s your occupation?” Griff asked.

“I work in sales for a tech company in Austin.” Nope. No recognition there at all.

“Does this job require travel?”

“Yes.” The ring twisting intensified.

“Are you married?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a family?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s your wife right now?”

“At home with our children. We have two kids ages four and six.” Tap. Tap. Tap. His heel worked against the floor.

“Does she know you’re here?”

The man’s brown eyes widened. He worked the band more. “No. I was hoping she wouldn’t have to be brought in.”

“Can you account for your whereabouts for the past twenty-four hours?” Griff stood.

“I’ve been on the road, working.”

“I’ll need a list of all the clients you’ve visited.” Griff asked the deputy standing next to him to retrieve a pad of paper and a pencil. He did, returning a moment later.

“What makes you think you’re the father of Brittany Darden’s child?”

Logan Simmons pressed his lips together into a thin line. “That was her claim. We had a physical relationship that matched up with the timing of her pregnancy. I never had a paternity test if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Do you mind if my deputy swabs the inside of your mouth?”

“No. I guess not.” The suspect’s gaze darted around the room. “Hold on a minute. I came here to figure out what will happen to her child—”

“Do you mean *your* child?” Griff was impressive in the interview room. His stance, with his legs apart, and his height made for an intimidating package. Meanwhile, the suspect was starting to resemble a caged animal, eyes darting around seeking an exit.

“I just came to ensure the child was given a good home. If my wife finds out....” He swiped his hands down his pant legs like he was wiping off sweat.

“About your affair? About how you didn’t mind getting someone pregnant and then leaving them alone to care for a child?”

“I didn’t. I wouldn’t.”

“It seems to me like you just told me that you would and you did.”

“She wasn’t supposed to get pregnant.”

The look Griff shot could’ve defrosted a glacier in the middle of an Alaskan winter.

“I know how this must look—”

“Do you?”

“It wasn’t like that. I cared about Brittany. My wife and I were having problems. Then, she came home and said she wanted us to work it out. If she finds out about a child, it’s over. She’ll take the kids, walk out the door and never look back.”

“And then you’ll be all alone?” Griff’s physical size would be intimidating enough. His glare topped it off. “Like Brittany was?”

Using his index fingers and thumbs, Griff pushed the pad of paper with a pencil sitting on top across the table toward the suspect.

“I want to know everything about your relationship with Brittany.”

“But, I—”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll start writing.”

Isaac stared at the man in the one-way mirror. It took all the will power Isaac had not to burst through the door and find a way to punish the man sitting in the chair. At the very least, he had no respect for women. “I need fresh air.”

“I’ll go with you.” Gina became his shadow as he moved down the hallway and then outside. It was dark. He’d lost all track of time.

The night air was heavy and thick. The threat of a thunderstorm hung in the air.

“Sorry, I couldn’t look at that lame bastard another minute without going a little insane.” Isaac rounded the corner and started pacing.

“He’s a class-A jerk.” Gina balanced against the brick wall.

Isaac released a grunt. “That’s putting it lightly. Someone he was supposed to care about enough to have a relationship with is dead. I don’t care what the man’s marital status is he should care more about Brittany than that.”

“At least he came to ensure his son is taken care of.” There was no conviction in her words.

“We both know he most likely came here so no one would show up at his door and ask questions he doesn’t want to answer in front of his wife.” Frustration seethed.

“Isaac. Slow down. You’re going to wear a path in the grass.”

He turned around and stalked over to her. He knew exactly what he needed

to calm down.

Looking into those glittery eyes of hers only caused more tension to pinch his shoulders. Granted, it was a whole different type of tension and he realized the second his mood shifted from anger to awareness. Awareness of how much more beautiful she'd become over the years. Awareness at how every time they were near each other electricity pinged between them, heating the room. Awareness that shock vibrated through him with every touch.

Since doing what he really wanted was out of the question given their location, he settled on, "I'd like permission to kiss you again."

"Why ask? Why not take what you want?"

"Because I don't work that way. You've had one helluva day. You're not used to dealing with murder and the evil inside some people. It can mess with your head. I need to give you a chance to decide. Kiss or no. It's simple." Even though his feelings for her were far from it.

"We got close in high school once. You rejected me. It hurt. What's to stop you from doing it again?" He'd hurt her? That was new.

"Des said you told him you loved him."

"What?" The unadulterated shock widening her eyes made him feel like a fool for believing Des.

"I thought you and I were starting something special. But the two of you had history and I knew I had to get out of town right after graduation or go crazy. So, when Des said you two were back on I stepped aside."

"You should've said something. I never told Des I loved him back then. He told me that he loved me—"

"And he knew he wanted to offer something real. I had nothing to give you."

"The answer is no." She folded her arms over her chest like she was cold and he could tell a wall had just erected between them. "I don't want you to kiss me."

Before he could explain himself further Sherry peeked around the corner and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Your cousin is looking for you, Isaac."

"Be there in a minute, Sherry. Thank you."

Gina caught his gaze and held onto it. "No. We're done talking."

Isaac stood there, figuring what he wanted to say wouldn't go over too well. So, he waited for Gina to make the next move and followed her inside. Tension radiated from her and it dawned on him that she might've been that hurt fifteen years ago.

Questions died on his tongue. If she'd had a good marriage would she still have held onto her pain? If he'd known she cared about him would it have made a difference?

He would've signed on with the military anyway. Getting away from T.J.'s heavy hand had been important to Isaac. He'd come home to see his brothers over the years but never to see T.J.

This wasn't a good time to mull over the past. Isaac pushed those unproductive thoughts aside and refocused on the case.

Sherry led them back to the observation room where Logan Simmons was asking to speak to an attorney. Perspiration marked his shirt. His face had paled.

"You're not under arrest, Mr. Simmons. You're free to go."

"I am?" Simmons stood up.

"That's all for now. We'll be in touch when we have more questions."

He started toward the door and then froze, jabbing his fingers into his brown hair. "What does that mean exactly?"

"I'll send a deputy by your house when we need to ask more questions."

"I-uh—" He seemed to be searching for the right words. "I'm here right now. Ask what you need to now."

"This is an ongoing murder investigation, Mr. Simmons. You gave us a swab so we can verify paternity and we appreciate your cooperation. We expect that to continue as we're certain, considering you were in a personal relationship at one time with the victim, you'll want to do everything within your power to ensure justice is served."

"Of course. Naturally." He took another swipe through his hair. "The bastard should rot in jail for the rest of his life. I just...could I make an appointment to come back and talk?"

The man didn't realize how lucky he was to be walking out of the sheriff's office today.

A deputy walked in and handed Griff a file.

“Thank you.” Griff cracked it open and walked toward the table. He turned his attention to Simmons. “Before you go. If I could have another moment of your time.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you need.”

Griff pulled several eight-by-ten sized pictures out and dropped them on the table where they fanned out. “Take a look at these and tell me what you see.”

Simmons blanched and quickly looked away. Isaac knew instantly what Griff was doing, horrifying Simmons with the photos. So far, the man hadn’t had one iota of emotion for what had happened to Brittany. Griff was shocking Simmons to gauge his reaction to what would be the gruesome reality of what had happened to her.

The man looked truly horrified. Guilt? Remorse? Isaac couldn’t be sure. Simmons turned his face away from the images and took a couple of quick steps backward. He looked like he’d crawl out of his skin in order to get away from what was on the table.



GINA DROPPED her gaze to the tile flooring a second too late. She swayed, and Isaac’s strong hand steadied her. She whispered a thank you and took hold of his arm.

“That’s horrible.” Simmons turned on the tears. It was difficult to know how much was for show or if there truly was any sincerity. Then again, a killer being confronted with his own crime scene might be shock enough, especially if he wasn’t a skilled murderer.

“Mr. Simmons, one more question if I could.” Griff apologized for the photos and gathered them up.

“Ask anything.”

“How’d you and Brittany talk to each other? How’d you arrange to meet up?”

“At first, we used fake e-mail accounts to communicate. Once we got

serious, we used cell phone mostly. Talking via texts.”

“Then your number should show up on her phone.”

“No. And she won’t show on mine, either. I bought pay-as-you-go phones at the convenience store once we decided to hook up.” He seemed relieved the pictures had been tucked away in the folder. “I’m sorry this happened to her. She didn’t deserve it. Sure, she got a little clingy once things got hot and heavy between us. When my wife decided to come home and I broke it off, Brittany flipped out. Said I couldn’t do that to her.”

Was the man trying to build a case that she’d done this to herself? Because strangling herself from behind would be a pretty damn difficult feat to pull off. And, what? Afterward, she managed to cover herself with a raincoat?

The guy was grasping at straws in trying to point the finger away from himself.

“So, about stopping by my house. Is there any way I can come back in a few days instead? Maybe check in on a regular basis?” This guy was an insufferable jerk. But then he’d had an affair. No one looked like they believed the story about his wife leaving him and then returning out of the blue. His explanation for the affair was too convenient. Besides, didn’t Brittany’s mother say her daughter was still seeing the jerk? Wasn’t that one of the many reasons she’d wanted her daughter to get together with Gina? So she could talk some sense into Brittany?

There were stronger words than *slime ball* to describe Logan Simmons. Gina held her tongue. There had to be a special place in hell for a man so callous about someone he’d been in a relationship with and supposedly cared about.

“You’re free to go. We’ll be in touch when we need to talk to you again.”

“Can I give you my business card?”

Griff nodded. He accepted the card and immediately placed it in the file, not bothering to look at it. “Follow my deputy and he’ll show you out.”

Isaac tucked Gina behind him and closed the door to the hallway. She appreciated his protectiveness. She appreciated everything he’d been doing for her. She appreciated the truth he’d shared with her earlier. It had stung to learn that he hadn’t cared about her enough to want to stick around Gunner. She

wasn't sure what was worse. The fact that he'd had to get out of town or that he'd been willing to step aside for Des.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said quietly. He turned around to face her and brought his hands up to cup her cheeks.

"Same. I don't think I have thanked you enough for spending the day with me and for everything you're doing."

"I wasn't just being nice when I said how much I've missed you, Gina. I had a chance with you once and I blew it. But we'll never be anything, including friends, if we can't talk to each other honestly."

"You're right. I was going to say the same thing." She blinked up at him. The stubble on his chin only added to his rugged good looks. "The past is the past. We can't go back and change it if we wanted to. I got Everly out of the deal and I can't regret anything about my life that brought her to me."

"Does that mean you'll at least consider forgiving me?"

"You're not the only one at fault, Isaac. There were so many times I started to pull you aside and talk to you about us. Ask if you really wanted me to be with Des. I could've been the one to bring it up as easily as you could." He stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb, bringing so much heat to the surface her face flushed.

"We were young and I was stupid."

"Isaac. Will you kiss me now?"

His gaze darkened and his voice became husky when he said, "I thought you'd never ask."

His lips brushed against hers. The taste of coffee still fresh on his tongue. Gina parted her lips to give him better access. This close, she was already awash with his spicy all-Isaac scent and, this time, her knees felt like rubber bands because of a heady mix of his scent filling her and his tongue dancing inside her mouth.

The door handle jiggled and they quickly pulled apart. Out of breath, Gina turned to face the interview room.

Isaac wasn't having any of it as Griff entered the room. Isaac moved behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders protectively. He whispered, "You need

to rest. Let's get you home as soon as this conversation is over."

"He wasn't familiar, was he?" Griff asked. One look at his expression said he knew the answer.

"No. Sorry. For what it's worth, he was a class-A jerk."

"You won't get any arguments from me." Griff held the door open. "There's nothing more either of you can do here tonight."

Isaac had already started guiding her toward the door.

"I'm staying with Gina in case you need to reach me."

Griff's eyebrow shot up but he seemed to know better than to ask about it. "Noah said he'd find you in the morning."

"I'd like to be here when you speak to Brittany's mother and her husband." Gina needed to tell Brittany's mother how sorry she was for not getting there sooner.

Griff showed them down the hall. "Michael called. The Labrador is in bad shape. Said he's a fighter and that he'll do everything he can to save him."

The drive home was silent. Gina wished the vet's office was open even though the day had worn on her to the point her bones ached for sleep. "Can we check on him in the morning before we go back to Griff's office?"

"I was about to suggest the same thing."

Gina rubbed her temples as Isaac pulled up to the cabin and parked. It was impossible to comprehend what had happened not more than a mile away less than twenty-four hours ago. Reality started to sink in as Isaac pulled a handgun from out of his duffel bag in the back seat and then helped her climb out of the truck.

Brittany's killer was out there. Walking free. He could be watching from behind the tree line circling the cabin. Gina glanced around as the wind whipped her hair around. The land she'd loved so much as a kid had been marked with death.

"Let's get you inside." The facts didn't seem to be lost on Isaac as he surveyed the area.

Unlocking and opening the front door took some effort on her part. Her wrists felt the pain of the day.

It dawned on her that she hadn't seen her mother's car out front. The lamp next to the couch was on, the room dimly lit. A note was propped against it. It read:

I took the baby to my house for the night. Couldn't reach you on your cell. Hope it's okay. Mrs. Weber is here. She'll be with Everly until you come by in the morning.

"My battery must've died." Gina didn't have it in her heart to be mad at her mother. She could've called the sheriff's office if she'd really wanted to reach her daughter. It was late and she was doing Gina a favor by keeping Everly.

"I can put it on the charger while you get ready for bed if you hand it to me."

Gina searched her purse and produced the cell.

"You can text your mother from my number. That way she'll have a way to get ahold of you if she needs it. Otherwise, I can't help but think it might not be the worst thing if you don't have your cell turned on right now. News about Brittany has spread and people will want to reach out to you. They'll want to hear your voice to know you're all right or see if there's anything they can do." Gunner was a great town with wonderful people, but the place could be smothering at times, too.

"You're right." Gina took the cell on his palm, ignoring the frissons of heat tingling her fingertips from contact with his skin. She withdrew her hand before turning it off. "It'll charge either way."

Isaac paused long enough for her to realize she just hurt his feelings. To his credit, he didn't say anything or try to make her feel bad. In moments like these, she couldn't help but compare him to her husband, who would've made sure she realized she'd snubbed him.

The two were totally different men. Apples to pears. And she appreciated Isaac's quiet strength, his confidence and the fact he didn't need someone else to stroke his ego. In fact, she was pretty damn certain he'd be offended by it.

After sending the text using his phone, she looked over at him. He was in the kitchen brewing coffee.

"You staying up?"

"I don't need a lot of sleep." He pointed toward his forehead. "A lot of information is rolling around in here. It'll be good for me to take a minute to process while it's all fresh."

"My body is too tired."

“Go on to bed. I’ll be right here when you wake up tomorrow.” Those words shouldn’t comfort her as much as they did. Knowing Isaac would be in her living room calmed her nerves enough to actually think she could fall sleep.

“I’ll get a pillow and blanket for you.”

“Don’t put yourself out. If I need to catch a few zzzs, I’m good with closing my eyes. Mind if I use your bathroom to clean up, though?”

“Go ahead. Extra towel is hanging on the door and I set out a spare toothbrush for you earlier.”

“That’ll do. I’ll grab a quick shower so I don’t wake you.” Thinking of Isaac naked in her shower stirred feelings she thought long dormant until seeing him again. She’d never felt that butterflies-in-the-stomach sensation with anyone but him.

What she and Des had was a strong bond of friendship. The two felt like family and she did her best to take care of him. Isaac seemed more than capable of taking care of himself and everyone else around. There was something incredibly sexy about the independence of the man standing in her kitchen.

Des had never cooked a meal or washed a dish. He’d never objected to take-out and she figured he could live off a dollar menu in a fast food line. Not her, so the majority of the cooking and cleaning had fallen on her.

“I’ll turn on the light for you. Give me a minute to change and you’re welcome to it.”

He thanked her as he took a sip of fresh coffee. She walked into her bedroom, those butterflies flitting around again. She flipped on the light, changed into her PJs and slipped under the covers.

With her back to the bathroom door, the light dimmed and the door clicked closed a second later. Too tired to think anymore, exhaustion claimed her. She surrendered to the current and drifted off in a matter of minutes.

A noise startled her awake. She sat straight up and looked around. Fear seized her. She heard the shower going so she must not have been out for long. She also realized the sound came from in the bathroom.

Gina threw off the covers, snapped up the real estate between her bed and the bathroom in a few quick strides and knocked. “Can I come in?”

“Yes.” Isaac’s voice was husky.

She tiptoed in and sat on the folded towel on top of the commode. “A noise woke me. I guess my nerves are still on edge.”

“Understandable, given the circumstances.” The water turned off and she was suddenly very aware of the naked male presence in the shower.

She didn’t want to focus on today’s events anymore. She’d done that enough. So, she turned the tables. “Mind if I ask a question?”

“Go ahead. Mind handing me a towel first.” She did and he thanked her.

“What do you think T.J. wants? You said he requested for you to come back.”

“Good question. I’ll never figure that man out if I live a hundred years.”

“If he hadn’t asked you to return, would you have?”

“Probably not. Which doesn’t mean I’m not happy to be here. I’ve always believed we make our own destiny. After what I’ve seen and some of the things that have happened to me that saved my life in the nick of time I’m changing. Maybe life isn’t just a whole bunch of coincidences bumping into each other. Maybe some people were meant to be in our lives.”

“Like serendipity?” She liked the thought because it sure as hell felt like Isaac was supposed to be in hers.

“Yeah. Something like that.” He stepped out of the shower with the towel wrapped around his waist. *Damn*. The sight of him bare chested was enough to distract her from her train of thought.

She stood and had to lean against the counter to get around him. She was careful not to focus too much on his tanned skin and ripples of muscles. Was it even possible for muscles to have muscles? If so, Isaac’s muscles had them.

Gina sat on the edge of her bed and hugged a pillow. She desperately needed to get her thoughts back on track. “You’ve kept in touch with your brothers.”

“For the most part. Being overseas didn’t give me a lot of time to stay on top of family news. Noah and Eli have done a great job handling ranch business without needing my input.” It was easy to forget Isaac came from one of the wealthiest cattle ranching families in Texas. He was one of the most down-to-earth people she knew. That, his intelligence and his wicked sense of humor

were the things that had first attracted her to him.

“You said you didn’t plan to come home. Where would you have gone if not here?”

He stood in the doorway, both hands on the doorjamb and she was eclipsed. “I hadn’t figured out my next move. I’d been thinking about Colorado. Liam’s there and I’m starting to worry about him. And I have a buddy who moved there after he was medically boarded out of the military. His name’s Ash Cage. Last I heard he’d adopted a retired military dog. But he fell off the grid, so I thought I’d try to find him.”

“You mean to check on him?”

“Being off the grid in this country is something we dreamed about in Afghanistan.”

“The day I found out you’d signed up with the military I’d never been prouder to be your friend.” The mix of sadness that followed was understandable under the circumstances.

A slow smile spread across straight white teeth. That cocky grin was back. The one that had been so good at drawing her to him. “We were more than friends.”

“Until we weren’t.” She couldn’t resist getting in the dig. Being in the same room with a shirtless, pants-less Isaac made all her defenses melt. All she had left was a snappy comeback.

“You’re welcome.” He referred to her gratitude.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said—”

“It’s okay, Gina. It was a long time ago. I was a different person back then. Too wrapped up in my own shit to be there for anyone else. Because of it, I let the best thing that had happened to my young life get away and probably caused you to marry someone else in the process. Someone it doesn’t seem like deserved you.”

“Those were my choices. None of it rested solely on your shoulders.”

“Which is why it’s good that we can talk to each other now. We’re grown-ass people. We both made mistakes in our past.”

“Some people think that’s the best way to learn.”

“It taught me I never wanted to feel that alone again. I held in my anger back then. Everyone in town thought we lived a charmed life growing up a Quinn. Our lives couldn’t have been further from the image. I realized that I could give up and give in to my anger, or I could do something about it.”

“That why you signed up to serve?”

“It was one of many reasons. I had to get out of here. I would’ve gone crazy if I’d stayed. And, yeah, I had a lot of anger to get out. I was ready to fight the world, figured I’d start with my country’s enemies.”

Gina did her level best to hide the mix of hurt and betrayal that she was sure showed in her eyes at his admission.

“Not because of you. Believe it or not, you were the reason I kept some level of sanity in the mixed-up world of T.J. Quinn I lived in. Being on the ranch became a prison for me. Two of my brothers were able to make peace with it even back then. I’ll never understand how either had the maturity.”

“Eli’s the oldest. He probably felt responsible for you guys. If he took off, where would that have left the others?” Gina’s gaze dipped, following a bead of water as it rolled down his neck toward his chest. This time, she didn’t immediately redirect her eyes. And when she really looked, she saw scars.

“Did he do that to you? Your father?” She walked over to him to get a better view at the damage. She ran her index finger down a scar that ran from the center of his collarbone to the front of his shoulder.

“Not directly. No. But he sent a kid to do a man’s job. I racked up a few scars along the way but I damn sure figured it out.”

“I had no idea.” She caught his gaze. “I’m sorry, Isaac. I had no idea any of this was happening behind closed doors.”



HEARING those words soothed aches that ran deep inside Isaac. Those green eyes took in every mark on his skin, every slash. Some of which had come from a belt or a switch during T.J.’s angry years. He’d expected to look at her and see pity. Instead, he found compassion.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?” Anger darkened her expression. “No child should ever suffer abuse at the hand of a parent.”

Tears welled in her eyes. He brushed them away with the pads of his thumbs.

“It didn’t have to be this bad. I drew a fair amount of his attention so he’d leave the others alone.” Dredging up the past wasn’t normally something Isaac was comfortable with. Talking to Gina was easy and her words of comfort were balm to a wounded soul.

“You were just a kid. That was so brave.”

“When I got old enough to fight back he stopped hitting.” Isaac had stood his ground, spoke his mind to T.J., and told him exactly what he’d do to the man if he lifted another hand to him or his siblings. “It’s all good. It worked out okay.”

“Thank you for telling me.” She pushed up on her tiptoes and surprised him with a kiss.

He pulled back. “You sure this is what you want?”

She responded by bringing her hands to his shoulders and pressing another kiss on his lips.

“I’ve never been more certain of anything.”

Kissing Isaac felt so right, so natural that Gina got lost. Lost in the moment. Lost in time. And lost in the sensation of the world being right again for just a moment.

She pressed her body against his, a thin piece of cotton the only barrier between her breasts and his bare chest. There'd been so much pain in his eyes a few seconds ago and a rare vulnerability. Isaac was the strongest man she'd ever met, inside and out. And he was sexy as hell for allowing her to see this side to him.

He brought his hands up to cup her face, the pad of his thumb ran along her jawline. His lightest touch shot fireworks through her hypersensitized body. Blood rushed from her head. Heat flushed her.

When his tongue delved deeper, her knees weakened. His erection pulsed against her stomach and all rational flew out the window. He'd said he was in Gunner temporarily. He'd most likely move on soon. Even knowing all that, she was defenseless.

Bottom line? She wanted this. Needed this. She needed at least one night with the man her heart had never stopped loving.

Drawing a line from his shoulders to his hands she took them in hers and led him to the bed. He followed. The towel pooled on the floor at some point and she took in his glorious frame.

The man was perfection in every sense of the word. Muscles. Pecs. Hard

planes. Silk over steel. Isaac Quinn had the total package.

Gina brought her hands to his waist and kissed a trail downward from his mouth to his nipple. She traced her tongue toward his belly button, taking in every ripple, every ridge along the way. Part of her needed to memorize everything about him. She'd married her high school sweetheart and Des had been all she'd ever known. He'd never made her feel sexy in the way Isaac did. Des was lights out, missionary style while Isaac seemed ready to take in every curve of her body.

She ran a finger along the stubble on his chin, looked him in the eye, and said, "I've wanted this to happen for a long time."

"You're beautiful, Gina. And I want this, too. But you need to understand if we take the next step it'll change things between us."

Her heart wanted to sing at hearing those words. "It will for me."

He brought his hand up and stroked her cheek. Those serious pale blue eyes focused on her. "I don't know what that means yet. This...*us*...came out of the blue."

"Don't think about it, Isaac." She challenged him. "I'm right here. I want you more than I've ever wanted a man. If we think too hard about what it means we might talk ourselves out of it. I don't want to overanalyze what's happening between us. All I want is for you to make love to me."

Her heart pounded and she could feel tension coiling inside her. Tension that needed the release only Isaac could give her.

His gaze never faltered from hers when he said, "That's all we need to know right now."

And then he dipped his head and claimed her mouth. His lips pressed hard against hers and all she could think was *more*. She teased his tongue inside her mouth, matching his intensity stroke for stroke. She scraped her teeth across his bottom lip before sucking on it.

Breaths came in gasps as his hands roamed her body. She grabbed the hem of her t-shirt and pulled it up and over her head. He aided her efforts and tossed the cotton shirt onto the floor next to his towel. He rolled her nipple in between his thumb and forefinger. Pleasure vibrated through her and the coil tightened

another notch with Isaac's skilled hands.

Anticipation caused need to hum through her. She brought her hands to the waistline of her pajama bottoms, and pushed them down and stepped out of them. Again, Isaac wasted no time helping her. Their movements were fluid, like they were performing a dance they'd trained for all their lives.

"Jesus, Gina. You have an incredible body." Being naked in front of a man she wasn't married to was a first. It should string her nerves tight and cause all her insecurities to surface. But this was Isaac. He made her feel sexy and beautiful as his appraising stare lingered over every curve. His hand followed his gaze and his touch left a fiery trail in its wake.

When he dipped his head this time, he took her nipple in his mouth and ran the tip of his tongue along the crest. The sucking sensation as his lips closed around her caused pleasure to ripple through her. Need built to a dizzying pace.

The man seemed to be as skilled with his tongue as he was with his hands. One had dropped down and moved in circles on her mound.

She moaned and he must've misread the reason because he pulled back. "You're injured. I don't want to do anything to hurt you."

"That didn't hurt. I want to feel you moving inside me, Isaac." She took his hand and tugged him onto the bed.

"Hearing you say my name right now is so damn sexy." His voice was low, gravelly and lit yet another fuse inside her. "I want to hear you say my name as you fly over the edge."

At this rate, that wasn't going to be a problem.

Gina eased onto her back as he nestled in between her thighs. She reached for his tip and guided him inside her slick heat. He bucked a little deeper and more of that insane pleasure rippled at her core. Before she could catch her breath, he wrapped his hands around her thighs and drew her hips toward his erection. He sank into her with a guttural groan that released more of those butterflies in her stomach.

"Are you still okay?" He paused long enough to search her eyes.

"Better than okay."

That cocky grin of his returned, showing off those perfect white teeth. He

took his time pulling out his length before driving himself inside her.

“Isaac...” His name on her lips felt breathless. She wriggled him in a little deeper as need took over.

Pumping his hips harder and faster caused her body to fire electrical impulses left and right. She matched him stride for stride, grinding on his erection. She tightened around him as she felt the urge to let go overtake her.

Balancing his weight on his knees and arms he covered her with his heft without missing a stroke. His mouth found hers as she neared the edge. Rocketing over, she said his name against his lips.

The three words he said in return as he joined her were almost enough to shock her back to reality.

“I love you.”



THE LAST SPASM had drained from Isaac when he realized what he'd said. He'd meant those words, don't get him wrong, but he still hadn't expected them to come out so easily.

He slowly pulled out and rolled onto his side, not wanting to break apart a second before he had to. They should probably talk about his confession. And then he wondered if she'd even heard him when she nestled into the crook of his arm and closed her eyes.

Too much too soon?

Hell if he knew. This whole situation caught him off guard. There'd been only one other woman he'd truly loved and she was gone. He suspected he'd loved Gina most of his life.

The first day he'd spotted her in class freshman year he'd realized she was special. Most of the time, her nose was in a book. When she spoke, her voice was quiet but she always had something intelligent and thoughtful to say. She had a way of putting the people around her at ease, without trying.

Or, at least, she had that effect on him. When she let her guard down and let him in, he'd seen her quick wit and sense of humor. She'd been the total package

and that had scared him.

After his childhood, he'd pretty much sworn off marriage and family. None of it held any appeal for him. Getting too attached to anyone seemed like a death sentence. Brooke had made him see that he was capable of caring for someone again. It wasn't until he'd found out she was sick that he realized how much she meant to him. Being young, he figured everyone lived forever.

Damned if that was the case.

Losing her had hardened an already tough heart. Isaac had become numb. No one could measure up to Brooke since, which he could acknowledge wasn't being totally fair. Who could live up to a ghost? No one.

Except the woman in his arms, a little voice in the back of his head pointed out.

Gina's even breathing said she'd drifted off to sleep. Looking at how perfectly she fit, he realized he wanted her in his life. The trick was finding out if she felt the same. And then figuring out what that meant. There were other considerations, too. Her daughter, for one. She was an important one.

He hadn't come back to Gunner for a reunion with Gina. He hadn't even expected to see her. News that she was moving back to town hadn't traveled to the middle east. And if it had? He'd tucked his feelings for her down so deep they probably never should've surfaced. Hell, he didn't believe they could be resurrected. They'd died the day she married Des. Or so he'd thought.

In some random twist of fate, they were in each other's arms. Both had lost someone they cared about. Both had pasts. And both had complicated lives. He kissed the top of her head and then settled against the pillow, not wanting to consider reasons why the two of them might not be able to fit the puzzle pieces together.

A noise in the next room caused Isaac's eyes to shoot open. He'd barely dozed off but that sound was real. Not wanting to disturb Gina, he eased away from her and slipped out of the covers. His jeans and shirt were still in the bathroom.

With quiet stealth honed by fourteen years of military training, he retrieved them. His fluid movements and ability to surprise a target had kept him alive

through more missions than he cared to count.

This was his comfort zone. This made his blood pump. This made him feel alive. Living in the civilian world would take some adjusting.

Back against the wall with weapon in hand, he eased into the adjacent room. Not so much as a floorboard creaked as he cleared the living room and then the kitchen. The only room left was the baby's.

After clearing Everly's room, he realized the noise must've come from outside. Isaac made his way back through the house. As he neared Gina's room, the light flipped on and she screamed when she saw him.

"It's okay, Gina. It's me." On closer look, he realized she was still half asleep. He held his hands up and repeated the mantra, "It's okay."

Gina shook her head and her eyes came to life. She gasped and then covered her mouth with her hand. "Isaac. I thought you left me again."

Damn. Those words were knife stabs to an already battered chest.

"There was a noise. I left to investigate. That's all. I didn't go anywhere."

"What did you hear?"

"It's probably just an animal outside. Nothing to worry about." He crossed the room to her and pulled her to his chest where she buried her face. Despite putting up a strong front, she wrapped her arms around him tightly and he could feel her body trembling.

"What if he knows where I live?" She'd been through a shocking ordeal and it would take time to recover. From where he stood, she handled everything better than most. Courage was another attribute he found sexy in Gina.

"My truck is parked out front. My presence here will be a deterrent. If he's local, word will get out that I'm staying at your place."

"For how long, Isaac? How long will you be here?"

"As long as it takes until I know you're safe. If you're willing to open your heart to me, longer." He ran his finger along her jawline as she blinked up at him. "I know you've been through a lot. I put you through a lot. If you can take a step on faith and learn to trust me again, we might be able to have something special."

"You don't know how long you're staying in town. You're only here to find

out what T.J. wants and then you'll take off."

"I won't lie. Being here in Gunner brings back a helluva lot of memories I'd damn sure rather forget." He dipped his head down and pressed his lips to hers. "There are good ones, too. Most of those involve being with you here in this cabin."

A smile ghosted her lips. It faded too fast. He wanted to offer reassurance, to tell her everything would magically work out. Isaac wasn't sure if he could live in the same state as T.J. There was too much bad blood. The desert might've been a continent away, hot and miserable but it had trumped being around his so-called father.

"I know you can't make promises, Isaac."

"I'm here now. You can count on me, Gina. I'm not going anywhere right now. We'll see this thing through together. I'd like to be part of giving you a life back. I wish I could say more—"

"Isaac, it's okay. I'm a grown woman. I just had the best sex of my life and I refuse to have any regrets."

He couldn't stop the slow smile from spreading. "Best sex of your life, huh?"

This time, her smile was genuine. "Don't get a big ego. It's not like I have a lot of experience."

"Can we just rewind back to the part where I was the best sex of your life and stop there?" A chuckle rumbled from his chest.

"Fine. Sure. You're the man. Are you satisfied?"

"Oh, sweetheart, I could never get enough of you."

“Bo Stanley has a rap sheet.” Griff’s expression soured as he tapped his fingers on his desk. He motioned to the chairs across from him. “Thanks for coming here first thing this morning. You might want to take a seat.”

“What did he do?” Isaac waited for Gina to settle before claiming the leather club chair next to her. Michael had called first thing and left a message that there’d been no change with the Labrador, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. The dog had stabilized.

“Swindled four women out of their life savings. Claimed he was a psychologist when he had no training or education to back it up. He hung a shingle in Katy, Texas anyway. Doled out advice to people he had no business counseling.” Griff picked up a pen and tossed it on top of a stack of papers on his desk, looking like he wanted to throw it against the wall. “He’s been married six times, including Brittany’s mother. Divorced four of them.”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying he’s still married to two women at the same time?” Gina’s question was valid.

“Yes.”

“This sheds a whole new light on the investigation.” Isaac would like to hear Bo answer a few questions. “If I remember correctly he was supposed to be out of town on the night Brittany was murdered.”

“What color eyes does he have?” Gina’s question came out without hesitation. It was an important question.

“Brown.” Him, and fifty-five percent of the population. Isaac had learned that fact from his law enforcement cousin.

“How old is he?”

“Fifty-seven. And he’s due to stop by at—” Griff stopped midsentence. His gaze locked onto his door, which Isaac knew they’d left open. Griff stood up, so Isaac craned his neck to get a look.

“Uncle T.J., what a surprise.”

“Came to see my son since he hasn’t availed himself to let me know he’s in town.” It was Isaac’s turn to stand.

“We’re in the middle of something here.” Isaac didn’t answer to T.J.

Dark hair, blue eyes, the apple hadn’t fallen far from the tree when it came to T.J. Quinn’s sons. At six-foot-three, T.J. was a hair shorter than Isaac but the man was the same build of muscle and all king-of-the-hill attitude. He wore jeans and a Stetson.

“Can I ask when you plan on stopping by Quinnland?” The family ranch had been on Isaac’s mind but he was damned if he’d let his father order him around.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. Right now, I have urgent business.”

“More important than family?” T.J.’s view of the world came down to the ranch and the family, as long as everything was done his way. Isaac wasn’t sure which came first, family or ranch. To say the man was set in his ways was a lot like saying yogurt was made from milk. It was blindingly obvious to anyone who bothered to look.

Gina stood. “Mr. Quinn, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Regina.” T.J. didn’t have a soft bone in his body. So, it shocked the hell out of Isaac when his father said, “Good to have you back in Gunner. I hear you have a beautiful little girl now.”

“Yes, sir.” The pride in Gina’s voice sent a shot of warmth through Isaac’s icy chest at seeing his father. He reminded himself of the fact his childhood had been a long time ago. Holding onto hurt and pain from the past was as smart as standing in the kitchen and stabbing himself with a steak knife. It would only put holes in him.

Looking into T.J.’s eyes, there was pain. Another emotion flickered behind

the man's gaze. Regret?

T.J.'s shoulders dipped forward.

"Any chance I can convince you to come to dinner tonight?" The uncertainty in T.J.'s voice caught Isaac off guard for the second time in this short conversation. Granted, he hadn't been home in the past year, but T.J. couldn't have transformed into a different man overnight.

Isaac wondered if these changes in his father. had anything to do with the announcement he wanted to make. Was he sick? Some men re-examined their lives when faced with a terminal illness.

Taking in T.J.'s skin tone and facial features, Isaac searched for any sign. Yellowing skin? Weight loss? The man seemed fine on the surface. Then again, T.J. had reached out from out of the blue. If he'd gotten a diagnosis, it could be too soon to see the signs.

"Tonight's out of the question." He wanted to know what T.J. was up to, so he didn't shut down all possibilities.

"Let me know a good day for you. Bring Gina along with you if it'll make you feel better." T.J.'s tentative gaze moved from Griff to Isaac. "If you'd like."

"I'll let you know." Isaac should make an effort. T.J. seemed to be trying to find middle ground. Even though the two of them had the kind of history that would make moving forward a slow progress, he was willing to give.

Was it too late to build a bridge between him and his old man? *Old* wasn't exactly the word Isaac would choose when thinking about T.J. The man was iron and steel, and everything else unbendable.

"I'd appreciate it, son. It would mean a lot." T.J. studied the floor. Was he holding back emotion?

Okay. Isaac could give a little. "I'll have to discuss it with Gina first."

"If it's not too forward of me, I'd like to offer up our place for Gina and her daughter. I heard about what happened and I couldn't be sorrier. The ranch hands have all volunteered to work extra shifts patrolling and Elton said he could round up a few more security officers to take patrols. She might feel safer at the ranch until the killer is behind bars."

Gina appeared in the doorway, a hopeful expression on her face. His father

was going out of his way and Isaac didn't have the heart to kick the man.

"Mind if I get back to you on that offer?"

"That'd be all right." T.J. took off his hat and moved it from hand-to-hand. Nervous? "I'll let Marianne know in case she needs to cook up extra—"

"If we come, we'll be fine with food." Isaac rolled his shoulders as tension pinched the nerves in his blades. He glanced at his father's hands—hands that had taken a belt or a switch to him as a child. He'd blame the abuse on alcohol if he could. That might make it easier to accept T.J.'s attempts at reckoning. The man was and probably always would be a sober man. His issue was anger and he'd been angry at the world after his wife's death. Since then, Isaac couldn't remember a time when his father was happy. Damn. When he thought about it like that it put a whole new spin on the situation. How awful would it be to be trapped in rage all the time? To rarely be able to smile?

Based on the near-constant scowl and the slashes scoring T.J.'s forehead, he looked pretty miserable. Studying him now, there was something different about his features. Isaac couldn't put his finger on the change but there was more to this than he originally believed.

T.J. put his hat back on as Gina entered the room with two mugs of coffee in hand. She handed one to Isaac. He thanked her.

"Best be on my way. Busy time at the ranch." T.J. tipped his hat toward Gina.

She smiled and nodded. Damn if one look from her didn't send light to the darkest places inside Isaac's heart.

It would be impossible for Isaac to forget what it was like in spring at Quinnland. This time of year, the cattle took priority to everything else in life. They had to be vaccinated, fly tagged and wormed. Some were branded, and others had to have procedures performed.

After the cattle was worked, they'd be trailed from the corrals to the mesa. Not long after, the process of trailing cattle to the forest pastures would begin. Long days. Little sleep.

Life of a rancher.

Isaac couldn't say working cattle was his forte, but he loved the land. He

loved his home state. There was something about a blue sky that seemed to go on forever that made him feel like he was right where he was supposed to be.

With T.J. gone, he turned to Gina. “He made a good point about security.” He’d checked the property for signs of an intruder last night and found tracks leading to the kitchen window. The shoe size was too large to belong to a female.

“We should consider all options.” Her response caught him off guard. He’d half expected her to put up a fight. She looked at him with those glittery green eyes. “I can’t afford to be stubborn and dig my heels in on this one. I have to do whatever it takes to protect my daughter.”

Sherry knocked on the opened door.

“Come in.” Griff motioned for her to enter.

“There’s a woman here by the name of Tara Ford. Says she’s in a relationship with Logan Simmons and needs to speak to the sheriff.”

“Take her to the interview room. Stall her for a few minutes. Take down her name, address and number. I’ll be right in.” Griff deadpanned Isaac. “Could this case get a little more bizarre?”

“I doubt it.”



BACK IN THE dark room next door to the interview room, Gina was learning to expect just about anything when it came to this investigation. Another mistress might explain why Brittany had been murdered.

Tara Ford couldn’t be more than twenty-two-years-old. She had shoulder-length platinum-blond hair over brown eyes. At five-foot-four-ish, she wouldn’t be considered tall. Her curves were barely contained in blue jeans and a crop top. Her mid-drift was exposed despite the cooler temperatures predicted today. A high of fifty-eight in Texas usually meant sweaters and a coat in The Lone Star State. Texans didn’t *do* cold.

“What’s your full name?” Griff took a seat across from the witness, set down a notebook and clicked a pen.

“Tara Lynn Ford.”

“What do you do for a living, Ms. Ford?”

“I waitress at the Country Crossing BBQ.” The place was a forty-minute drive outside the city limits, only took cash, and served family-style. Country Crossing was some of, if not *the*, best BBQ in the state. It had been featured on a popular food channel twice.

“How do you know Logan Simmons?”

“He’s my boyfriend.” Tara seemed to have no shame in announcing her boyfriend was a married man. Did she know?

“How long have the two of you been seeing each other?” Griff tapped the pen on the pad.

“Six months.” Tara blinked overly made-up eyes at Griff. “I heard what happened to the other woman. That’s why I’m here.” She put a hand over her mouth like she was unable to stay it out loud. “I need police protection.”

Even Griff who’d no doubt heard it all in his line of work looked taken back by the comment. “What makes you think you need protection? Are you afraid of Mr. Simmons?”

Her face screwed up like she’d just sucked on a sour pickle. “Logan? Oh, no. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. His wife would. That woman is crazy.”

“Have you met Mrs. Simmons?”

“Met?” she parroted. “I’ve had an encounter with her. Logan and me were standing in line at the movies last month when she practically ran us over with her minivan.”

“Are you saying that Mr. Simmons and his wife were having marital difficulties?”

“He left her to be with me. Said she wasn’t taking the news well at all.” She looked at Griff like that explained everything. The only problem with her statement was the man who’d been in this office yesterday was going to great lengths to ensure his wife didn’t know he’d had one mistress let alone two.

“Did you report the incident to law enforcement?” Griff didn’t use the term ‘assault’ and she figured he didn’t want to plant ideas in the woman’s head.

“Logan talked me out of it. He said to give her time. After that, we had to meet in motels because he didn’t want to risk my safety if she saw us together

again.”

Gina rolled her eyes. Yeah, sure, he was concerned about his mistress’s safety.

“Isn’t he a giver,” Isaac muttered low and under his breath. The sarcastic remark was spot on.

“How long ago did you say the incident took place?” How Griff kept a poker face was beyond Gina. She figured it was part of what made him a great sheriff. That, and the fact he came across as compassionate even though Gina knew he must want to say what was on his mind.

“Last month. You should have seen her. She looked crazy. Wild eyes. Hair going everywhere.” Tara threw her hands up.

“What time of day did this occur?” Griff took a few notes.

“The show started at ten-fifteen, so we were in line around ten.”

“Day or night.”

“Night.” Tara tapped a long, manicured nail on the table. “She scared her kids half to death.”

“Where were they?”

“Strapped into car seats in the back of the minivan. The woman had obviously lost her mind to bring those babies out past bedtime.”

Griff jotted down a few more remarks. The picture emerging of Logan wasn’t flattering. He was a philanderer. A coward. Was he also a calculating murderer?

Moving his mistress to a motel was a far cry from killing someone. Gina leaned back into Isaac’s chest, turned her head and said, “Griff mentioned strangling was personal.”

“If news got out that Logan had fathered a child his life might’ve unraveled. Brittany was strong willed. She wouldn’t have backed down if he threatened her. It doesn’t get more personal than that, does it?”

“True. The man seemed willing to go to great lengths in order to keep his affairs quiet after his wife caught him red-handed.”

“He didn’t exactly break off his relationships. Just worked harder to hide them.” The disdain in Isaac’s voice was apparent.

“Logan Simmons seems like an ass.” Gina stated the obvious.

“No question there.”

“I wish I could’ve been a fly on the wall in the cabin.” Although, Gina was certain she wouldn’t have been able to handle watching violence. It was impossible to ignore the statistics. A woman’s biggest threat was her boyfriend or spouse. A police officer’s biggest threat was a domestic dispute call. Logan Simmons could’ve lost everything if his wife found out about Brittany and her son. Cheating was one thing. Having a child with a mistress had to be a whole other level of betrayal.

“He came in yesterday and sat in that very chair, saying how concerned he was about where the child would end up. The real reason he showed was transparent after five minutes. He was trying to save his own behind. Even so, something is just not clicking for me with him being the murderer.”

“Brittany deserved so much better from the father of her child, Isaac.” Isaac put his hands on her shoulders from behind. She could feel his presence as he stood close behind her. Taking in his spicy scent, she filled her senses with him. Isaac Quinn lived by a code. What had begun as Cowboy Code had now been honed by more than a decade and a half of military service. He’d always stood up for what was right. It was one of the first things she’d noticed about him, and what had attracted her to him for more than just his easy good-looks. The fact that he had honor.

Granted, it didn’t hurt that he’d been hot as all get out. Even in high school before he’d truly filled out he’d had an athlete’s body.

Gina recalled the minute she’d known she’d fallen for him. She’d been in the science hallway in between second and third period during freshman year. Stuart Whitman, resident genius, had been pushed up against his locker by Derrick Banes, football center.

Isaac had calmly walked over and put his hand on Derrick’s shoulder. The center had Isaac in height and weight at the time. With the most earnest look in Isaac’s eye, he stated, “Touch Stuart again and you’ll answer to me.”

Banes made a move to flick Isaac’s hand off his shoulder and then seemed to think better of it. Gina realized the Quinn brothers and cousins who were in high

school had formed a circle around the two of them.

Banes had taken in the scene, letting his gaze study the face of each Quinn. Walking away, Banes had muttered an apology to Stuart.

And then, later in the lunch room Stuart was invited to sit at their table. It was the first meal she'd seen him eat with a group.

And her teenaged heart had fallen hook, line and sinker for Isaac.

Times were different now. Life was more complicated even though her fool heart wanted to argue against logic.

Sure, Isaac Quinn was a good man. There was no denying the fact. And he'd been a damn amazing lover. There was definitely no denying that.

Opening up and letting him in her heart again when he had no definite plans to stick around could lead to nothing but heartache.

“Do you know of any other women in Logan Simmons’s life besides you and the victim?” Griff tapped the pen on the pad. Isaac figured if there were two mistresses there were most likely others. This investigation just grew legs. Any number of scorned women could have arranged a murder.

He stopped himself right there. Would they kill another mistress or the wife? Again, his thoughts shifted to Ashley Simmons. He couldn’t shake the feeling something was off. A thought struck. The evidence in Brittany’s murder led them to believe the killing was premeditated. A location had to be vetted. A car stolen. A meet-up set. Murders involving a spouse generally occurred in the heat of the moment.

They already knew a man was the killer. Or did they? The M.O. suggested a male. Didn’t mean the show wasn’t being ran by a female.

The best word to describe Tara’s personality was flighty. Isaac doubted she had the presence of mind to orchestrate such a scene. Plus, the windbreaker. The fact someone cared enough to cover her up pointed the finger at Logan. No way would his wife drape a windbreaker over Brittany.

“I didn’t even know he was seeing another woman until I got a text.” Tara motioned toward her purse.

“Who did the text come from?” Griff perked up.

“Logan.”

“Mind if I take a look at your cell phone?”

“Go right ahead.” She fished it out of her purse and held it out to him.

Griff tapped on the screen a couple of times and then studied it.

“I wonder how many women there are in Logan Simmons’s life.” Gina’s was a legitimate question.

“How could he balance two mistresses, a wife and kids?” Other questions rolled around in Isaac’s mind he couldn’t answer.

“I think we both know he can’t be trusted. His job as a salesman has him driving around Texas, probably staying in different motel rooms every week. It wouldn’t be difficult to string women along. Call when he’s in town. Show them a no-strings-attached good time.” Isaac couldn’t imagine Gina would ever go for an arrangement like Logan offered.

“He must have a secret cell phone or e-mail account to be able to get away with communicating with so many women without his wife figuring out.” Isaac knew guys who’d joked about having multiple accounts and he figured there was most likely some truth to it.

“Tara couldn’t have been involved in Brittany’s murder. Could she?” Gina blinked at him.

“The evidence is pointing toward a male.”

“Doesn’t mean she couldn’t have solicited help.” Gina made another valid point.

“True. She could’ve involved another man. She doesn’t strike me as the hire-a-hitman type. But I suppose she could use her considerable...*charms* to get a man to do her dirty work.” If he could see Gina’s face, he’d bet she just rolled her eyes. The thought of flirting with someone or using her body to influence another person wasn’t her style.

He’d seen on more than one occasion how fully capable she was of using her brain to out-think an adversary.

“I guess most men would consider her attractive.” Gina’s shoulders tensed under his fingers.

“Some might. Personally, she’s not my type. But then I can admit to being biased. The only person I can see is you and no one compares your beauty.” He felt the tension release in her body as she leaned into him. If he could see her

face he'd bet that she was smiling.

He wrapped his arms around her and she rested her head against his chest. "I meant what I said, Gina. I love you."

She didn't have to say it back.

Griff asked another couple of routine-sounding questions before thanking the witness. He walked into the hallway and closed the door behind him. Deputy Sayer stopped in front of the opened door of the observation room.

"Have someone pick up Logan Simmons and his wife for questioning," Griff said.

"Yes, sir."

"Let Sherry know where you're headed and what you're doing on your way out in case one or both show up here today. The way this investigation has been going I'm not sure what to expect next." Griff pinched the bridge of his nose like he was staving off a headache.

"How'd it go in there?" Deputy Sayer asked.

"We have a witness asking for police protection. She gave me a little more insight into Logan Simmons's life, what kind of man he is."

"What are you going to do with her?"

"Send her home and then make a call to her local law enforcement to make a request for extra eyes on her. Let her know who to call if she finds herself in danger."

"Yes, sir."

Griff glanced at Isaac and Gina. "You guys want to stick around or take a break and see your daughter?"

Those last two words sounded a little too right to Isaac. He looked to Gina. "I'd like to meet Everly."

Gina's warm smile melted more of the ice in Isaac's chest. He took her hand in his, laced their fingers and started for the door.

The two of them didn't get very far when Mrs. Stanley's voice echoed from down the hall. "Where is he? Where's Griffin?"

An apologetic Sherry filled the doorway a couple of seconds later. She made eyes at the sheriff. "Griff, you have a visitor."

“It’s fine. Send her in.” He’d barely finished speaking when Mrs. Stanley edged her way into the office. In her mid-sixties, she was average height and thick boned. She’d died her hair blond in a short cut and the garishly loud clothes that she wore seemed to be at odds with the genuine grief on her face.

She froze when her gaze landed on Gina. “Oh, honey. I didn’t realize you’d be here. I’m so sorry all of this has happened.” She blotted her eyes. “My Brittany is...”

Before Isaac could deflect, the older woman made a beeline for Gina and brought her into an embrace. Gina stiffened but he doubted Mrs. Stanley even noticed.

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Stanley drew back and searched Gina’s gaze. The older woman’s heavy makeup was streaked with tears. This close, Isaac saw something that caused his hands to fist. The heavier-than-usual makeup seemed to be covering bruises. Had Bo Stanley gotten physical with his wife?

“I’m really sorry about Brittany. Sorry I couldn’t be more help to the investigation,” Gina said.

Isaac stepped closer, wedging between Gina and the grieving mother.

“Good morning, Mrs. Stanley,” Griff interrupted, bringing her attention to him and away from Gina. “Is your husband with you today?”

“No. Why? Is there news?” Mrs. Stanley seemed uncomfortable with the mention of her spouse. Why?

After Griff shook his head she turned to Gina. “Did you get a look at the horrible man who did this, honey?”

“Not a good enough one to make a difference. I’m sorry.”

Mrs. Stanley made a show of pursing her lips and shrugging her shoulders. “You’ve been through too much. How on earth could you be expected to remember any details after what he did to you?” There was another emotion present in the older woman’s eyes. Fear?

“Gina and Isaac were just on their way out.” Griff’s gentle nudge was the opening Isaac needed.

“Call when you have news.” Isaac didn’t waste the opportunity. He nodded toward Mrs. Stanley before placing his hand on the small of Gina’s back and

walking out the door with her.

In the truck, she said, "Seeing Brittany's mother was hard."

"No one should have to lose a child. It's unnatural."

Gina couldn't even go there with her own daughter. She decided to ask another question that had been weighing on her thoughts. "Were you serious about meeting Everly?"



GINA HELD her breath waiting for a response from Isaac. It was the first of many signs that she was starting to fall for him again. Hard. Another word came to mind. Trust. *Damn*. It was necessary for any relationship and especially an intimate one.

A very large part of her did trust Isaac. And then there was the small voice reminding her how much she'd been hurt by him before. She hadn't totally been able to give her heart over to Des and yet losing him still caused the same amount of pain. Could she truly go there again with Isaac? With anyone?

"Yes. I would like very much to meet your daughter, Gina."

Her heart practically started singing. "We can pick her up at my mom's house."

"Let's do that."

The rest of the ride over was spent in companionable silence. It was so easy to slip into a comfortable place with Isaac; a place she felt like she belonged, a place she'd only ever felt with him.

Was she playing her cards right in opening her heart to him again? Only time would tell, an annoying voice said. It also reminded her that sometimes people left her without planning to. And she wasn't the only one who could get hurt.

Gina had to think of her daughter. Everly's needs had to come first. No matter what else happened. The thought of Everly getting attached to a man and then losing him was too much. Her own father was gone, so there was no grandfather in the picture. If a male role model came into Everly's life, Gina needed to be certain he'd stick around for the long haul. And who could promise

that?

“I can run in if you want to stay out here and wait.”

“Whatever you want, Gina. Meeting your daughter is a big deal to me and I want you to be comfortable with how it goes down.” Those words calmed the panic rising in her chest. He accentuated them by covering her hand with his. A trill of awareness shocked her skin at the point of contact.

She smiled at him.

“You are beautiful no matter what you’re doing. But damn, that smile.” He touched the middle of his chest before leaning over to kiss her.

The sound of a vehicle pulling up behind them in the drive broke them apart. Isaac’s hand immediately dropped below the seat where she was certain there’d be a weapon as he craned his neck.

His hand came up, his smile perked up the minute he saw his brother Noah. Noah was the fourth-born of the seven brothers, a similar height and build as Isaac. And, as with all the Quinn brothers, hit that six-foot-three-inch mark.

Isaac hopped out of the truck and embraced his brother as Gina made her way out of the truck and around.

“Welcome back to Gunner, Isaac.” Another bear-hug happened before Noah gave Gina a hug. “I hear you are moving back to help out with your mother’s restaurant.”

“I am.”

“Good to have you home.” Noah had been two years behind Gina in school. She didn’t know him as well as Isaac’s twin, Liam.

“Thank you, Noah.” It seemed like a good time to duck in and check in on Everly. Gina’s nerves were still on edge from the possibility of the killer tracking her down. She couldn’t shake the feeling he’d return. “It’s good to see you again.”

Gina left the pair of brothers outside to talk. They moved onto the front porch as she opened the door and slipped inside the house.

“There’s my girl.” Gina dropped to the floor where Everly was sitting and playing with a few of her favorite toys. Her daughter was dressed in Gina’s favorite outfit, a light green polka dot dress. A piece of her strawberry-blond hair

was clipped on top of her head. The little girl was everything that was good in the world.

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Weber.” Gina wiped the moisture gathering in her eyes.

“Weren’t nothing.” She waved her arm. “She’s an angel.”

Hearing the hum of familiar male voices on the porch reassured Gina in ways she knew better than to allow. The warmth in her chest reminded her of sunny summer days, nights around a campfire at the lake where Isaac had stolen a few kisses. It was that, and about a million other things, she’d missed about Isaac when she and Des had become a couple in high school. Although, to be fair to her boyfriend she’d tried to block out those memories.

Even during her marriage to Des, she’d been the strong one. He’d always needed her help whether it be smoothing things over with one of his co-workers or boss or taking care of the million little tasks required to run a home. Her days had been filled with work, cleaning up around the house, post office runs and more trips to the grocery than she cared to count. She’d been head chef and chief bottle washer. She’d been accountant and nursemaid.

Looking back, it had been exhausting. Being tired had most likely been the reason she and Des had rarely had sex. When they had, she couldn’t say it was great. Of course, then she didn’t have anyone to compare it to. Still, sex with Des had felt perfunctory.

After last night, she was never more aware of just how mind-blowing sex could be. Which, she reasoned, had everything to do with Isaac. The man had skills. Serious skills. She thought about his hands on her. A small smile upturned the corners of her mouth.

“You have my cell if you need me. Call anytime, day or night.” Mrs. Weber was an absolute savior.

“Will do.” Gina thanked her babysitter and helped her collect the baby’s things. Gina shrugged the diaper bag over her shoulder and picked up her sweet girl, a child whose smile had a way of brightening even the darkest days.

The first time Gina had held her daughter, the world had shifted. That little girl had superpowers. She brought hope during a time in Gina’s life when

sadness and loss had been a physical ache. Hopes of siblings and giving her daughter the large family that Gina had never had, had died with Des. Everly had the ability to make Gina believe that maybe, just maybe, life would turn out okay.

Gina picked up her little angel and positioned the baby on her hip. Technically, Everly was a toddler but she'd always be Gina's baby.

"Mam-mam-mama." Everly's first word and sweet voice soothed Gina. Slobber ran down the little girl's chin and she blew raspberries in the air. Two bottom teeth had come in so far. The others were trying to push through, which sometimes made for one cranky kiddo.

"Hey, noodle," Gina said to a smiling angelic face. Now that she really thought about it, she hadn't seen her daughter interact with many men. Her babysitters had always been grandmothers. Gina was curious how her daughter might react to a stranger of the male variety.

She took in a few calming breaths and looked to Mrs. Weber. "All set."

Hushed voices quieted the minute the door opened.

"Morning, gentlemen." Mrs. Weber held the door open and Gina, daughter on her hip, stepped out. For better or worse, Everly was about to meet a pair of Quinn men.

Isaac immediately took the door. She checked his expression...searching for a sign. She wanted to know what he thought of Everly.

He tipped his chin, smiled, and said, "Cute kid."

Everly beamed up at him.

Gina was momentarily stunned but decided to go with the flow. If Everly didn't mind, Gina wouldn't make a big deal out of it.

"Noah Quinn, it's been ages since I've seen you," Mrs. Weber said.

"Good to see you, Mrs. Weber. How's your husband doing?" Gina perked up.

"He's up walking around, doing fine."

"What happened?" Gina felt really bad if she was keeping Mrs. Weber from taking care of her husband.

"He took a spill off the ladder, trying to clean out the gutters." She waved her hands in the air. "But he's fine. Besides, you learn a few things after thirty-four-

years of marriage. It's good for him to be forced to do for himself once in a while. If I'm home, I have a tendency to take over and spoil him. He's a better man for learning to do for himself." Gina couldn't argue those words. She wished Mrs. Weber had been around to teach her a few tricks in the early days of her marriage.

To be fair to Des, Gina had jumped right into those roles without giving it a second thought. Had she made it a little too easy for Des to let her do all the work? An annoying little voice in the back of her head seemed intent on pointing out that she had.

If she took another trip down the aisle someday far away from today, like long after Everly was grown and gone, she'd do things differently.

"Make sure he keeps it elevated," Isaac instructed.

"He's too stubborn to listen to me. If you can get him to follow medical advice you deserve a medal." Mrs. Weber chuckled, clearly having tickled herself. She loaded into her vehicle after giving over the car seat, and then drove off.

Isaac turned to his brother. Gina was keenly aware of how he kept Everly in his peripheral while keeping watch of everything going on around them, which wasn't much at this time of day. Her mother lived on a quiet street, so other than Mrs. Weber driving off there wasn't much activity.

"I mostly wanted to grab you and say hello before I went home today," Noah said.

"Why? Won't I see you there?" Isaac's brows pinched together. She could tell he wasn't happy hearing the news.

"Not likely. I live in the cabin on the far east side of property. I don't interact with T.J."

"How on earth do you accomplish that?"

"Eli does a good job of keeping me and the old man on opposite sides of the property. It's not hard with a million and a half acres." Noah chuckled but there was a serious note to his laugh. "I figure whatever his big announcement is can be told to me through the rest of you."

"He's not my priority, either. I have a few other more important things on my

mind at present.” Isaac glanced around and she could tell he was surveying the area. “Can we go somewhere and talk?”

“I have a little time before I have to be back.” Noah nodded.

“Question first. How’d you know we were here?” Gina had been curious about that, too.

“I just missed you at Griff’s office.”

“Why didn’t you reach out to me on my cell?” Isaac put his hand on Gina’s back and walked with her toward the truck. In the other arm, he carried the car seat.

“Mine’s missing. It’s the darnedest thing. One minute I had it and the next it was gone. Guess I lost it somewhere on the property.”

“When?”

“A week or so ago. Haven’t had time to pick a new one up with spring calve season in full swing. And you already know cell service is hit or miss on the property.” Noah made eyes at his brother before adding, “Mostly miss.”

“Speaking of which, everything going okay at the ranch other than T.J.’s recent change of heart?”

“You know how it is better than anyone. Busy.” Noah opened the door and then lifted up the seat.

Isaac placed the car seat in the back. “I don’t know how to properly strap one of these in and I don’t want to risk doing it wrong.”

He stepped aside to allow Gina access. Baby on her hip, she couldn’t balance holding her daughter and locking in the seat. But Everly was picky about who could hold her.

And then the strangest thing happened. Everly leaned toward Isaac. He took her in his arms and held her against his chest like the most monumental thing hadn’t just happened. Gina had to fight the tears that bubbled up, threatening to give away just how moved she was by what had just happened.

Her daughter was used to going to her babysitter in similar circumstances, so Everly must not have thought anything about the transaction. But, to Gina, the world had just tipped on its axis once again. She secured the car seat and then turned to take her daughter.

The sight of Isaac holding Everly nearly knocked Gina off her feet. More of those inconvenient tears threatened.

She cleared her throat, took her child and buckled her in for the ride.

“Can I grab a ride with you?”

“Hop in.” Isaac took the driver’s seat and Noah piled in the back next to Everly. Nothing prepared Gina for the shock of a moment like this. She hadn’t even allowed herself to go there mentally that Everly could have the hope of a being part of a large family. This was all too surreal. And she needed to slow down to make sure she made the right decisions. Isaac had made it clear he wanted more than a casual fling but for how long? He hadn’t exactly planned to put down roots in Gunner.

“How about coffee at Gina’s family’s place in town?” Noah interrupted her thoughts.

“Can we go anywhere but the café? Somewhere away from downtown.” Gina figured the three of them wouldn’t be able to really talk there. Everyone would want to welcome Isaac back, and probably her, too. If not that then talk about the investigation or make a fuss over Everly.

By now, the murder would be a main topic of conversation. Crime in Gunner generally consisted of a stolen bike that ended up being borrowed not taken. Brittany’s murder would keep folks concerned and talking for a long time to come. She couldn’t deal with more questions right now, well-intentioned or not.

“Sure. Let’s see.” Noah paused for a few seconds. “There’s a decent coffee place heading out towards Canyon Oaks.”

Gina settled into her seat as the hum of quiet conversation filled the cab.

Everly continued blowing raspberries in the back seat, chatting in the language only another one-year-old could understand.

The café was a simple brick building that had been painted white and had espresso-colored accents. Inside, pictures of beans lined the walls. Leafy green plants dotted the otherwise brown color scheme.

Baby on her hip, Gina moved to grab one of the high chairs lined against the wall leading toward the restroom. Before she could get far, Isaac stepped in with Noah on his heels. Isaac grabbed hold of the nearest one and followed Gina to a table. Both men doted on Everly but Isaac seemed so natural with her daughter.

“I’ll get your coffee. What does Everly drink?”

“Apple juice if they have it.”

Isaac clapped his hands together. “Juice it is.” He and his brother moved to the ordering counter. Seeing him in this role was a complete shock. He was full of surprises.

After placing drinks on the table she’d picked out in the corner, the two men settled into chairs and leaned in toward each other.

“What’s your take on Bo Stanley?” Isaac wasted no time in asking the question that had been on her mind.

“I don’t like him.”

“Have you had any personal run-ins with him?”

“No. He steers clear of me and Eli.” A bully would know when he was outmatched.

Isaac’s gaze shifted to Gina. “Did you see how much makeup Mrs. Stanley had on today?”

“Yes. She had a smudge on her cheek.”

“What you saw was a bruise.”

Gina snapped her fingers. “Now that I think about it, you’re right.”

“How long have they been married, Noah?”

“About a year, year-and-a-half max. There’s something about the man I never liked. Not long after Mrs. Stanley brought him home I saw him berating her in the parking lot at the feed store. I didn’t hear the details but when I walked over to check on the situation he rushed her into their vehicle. If I’d known he

put his hands on her I would've shown him what it was like to go up against someone bigger than him."

The Quinns were too honorable to strike a senior citizen but she knew either Noah or Isaac or both would have no problem putting the fear of God in the man. He'd think twice before he raised a hand toward his wife again.

"He has a rap sheet." Isaac white-knuckled his coffee mug. "He also seemed to have forgotten to get a divorce from his last wife."

Noah's eyes were wide. "Explains a lot."

"Did you see Brittany around much?" Isaac asked.

"You know me. I keep busy at the ranch. Don't get in to town more than I have to." Noah and Eli had always seemed most protective of Quinnland. The other five brothers had moved away after graduation. Those two had stuck around and worked the land.

Gina, who had been listening intently, spoke up. "I don't see Brittany as the type to put up with abuse. Her step-father must've left her alone. It's hard to believe she wouldn't stick up for her mother, though."

"She was pregnant and alone. She might not have felt like she had much choice."

"True." Gina could personally attest to how much those hormones could change a person. And then seeing her child had unlocked a whole new level inside her—one she had no idea was there. "If there were no other options I could see where she might not be able to stick up for herself or her mother." Even so, having Everly had made Gina ready to face a bated bull before she'd back down from someone who might try to hurt her child.

"She shouldn't have had to lose her life no matter what problems she had." Isaac's voice was low, reverent.

Gina and Noah nodded at the same time.

"Bo Stanley is supposed to come in and speak to Griff today," Isaac said.

"Does anyone know where he's been?"

Good question. "Out of town on business according to Mrs. Stanley."

"His step-daughter is murdered, and he can't get home faster than that?" Noah's face twisted in disgust.

“Exactly what I was thinking.” Isaac issued a sharp sigh.

Everly chewed on her toys and pretty much anything she could get her hands on these days. She piped in with very loud baby chatter and flung her plastic keys onto the table.

Isaac immediately laughed—a hoarse, low rumble.

“Well, I guess we know what Everly thinks now,” Noah teased.

“She definitely has a strong will.” Gina could attest to that.

“Good. She’ll know who she is in life and no one will be able to push her around. Just like her mother.” Isaac’s compliment brought more of that campfire-style warmth to life in her chest. Gina would definitely agree with that statement now. Not so much in her late teens and early twenties when she’d still been figuring out who she was and what she wanted.

Looking back, she and Des should’ve stayed friends. Being married to him, and especially at such a young age, made her realize there’d never been fireworks for her and she seriously doubted there’d been Fourth of July going off inside him, either.

Had they settled for friendship instead of love?

“Anyone else need a refill?” Isaac stood and looked to Gina and then his brother. Noah held up his cup and Isaac took it. “I’ll be right back.”

As soon as he was out of earshot, Noah leaned in and said, “It’s good to see my brother with a smile on his face again.”

She nodded even though she wasn’t sure where he was going with this. “Has he been okay?”

“Not since losing the one person he’d loved. He hasn’t been the same since.”

“Right. His fiancé. Wasn’t her name Brooke?”

“Brooke?” Noah’s brows creased. “He cared about her a lot. Not her. I was talking about you.”



ISAAC RETURNED TO THE TABLE. Noah and Gina got suddenly quiet. He looked at Gina. “Don’t believe anything he says about me.”

Noah winked at her before staring at Isaac like he was crazy. “We would never talk about you behind your back.”

Seeing the two of them get along so well as they sat there pretending they weren’t just talking about him warmed his heart. He’d known something was missing from his life for the past couple of years, probably longer. And he was pretty damn certain this was it, a table full of people he loved talking easily to each other. And despite all the craziness going on around them with the investigation, he hadn’t been this good in longer than he cared to remember. Did T.J.’s apparent change of heart have anything to do with Isaac’s mood? Maybe. He wouldn’t let himself get too optimistic about a real change in the man. Time would tell and Isaac was a patient man.

The door opened and Mikayla Rae Johnson walked in. She scanned the room and straightened her back the minute her gaze landed on Noah. Instead of going to the order counter, she did an about-face and exited out of the door she’d just walked in. Her sour expression had Isaac wondering what his brother had said to her.

“That was weird,” Gina noted.

Isaac reclaimed his seat and stared at his brother, trying to get a good read on him. “There something going on between the two of you?”

Noah threw his hand in the air. “I don’t know what her problem is with me. We went out a couple of times. I thought we were getting along fine until one day I saw her in town and she did this. Saw her in the grocery store a few days later and she stormed off then, too. Good luck figuring out what a woman thinks.” He glanced at Gina. “Present company excluded.”

“From being a woman or someone difficult to figure out?” Gina smirked. It made Isaac laugh.

“Both.”

She laughed in earnest that time.

“Try not to frustrate the entire female population in the vicinity,” Isaac teased.

“She likes me.” He pointed to Everly, who was happily smacking her hand on top of her tray.

“To be fair, she isn’t looking at you.” Isaac needled his brother. That was another thing he missed living so far away for so long. His family. The comfort of being around people he’d grown up with who probably knew him better than he knew himself.

Granted, the Quinns kept in touch as best they could but there was nothing like being part of each other’s day-to-day lives. The idea of moving back to Gunner was growing on him. The thought of working alongside his father was not.

“How’s Eli doing?” Their eldest brother was a single father with two young kids. His wife had left him after the birth of their second, saying she couldn’t take ranch life anymore. She’d gone with a good chunk of Eli’s money and never bothered to come back to Gunner to see the kids as far as Isaac knew.

Apparently, the kids had been financial security to her. Eli was smart, so it was a surprise he hadn’t seen that one coming. But then, people let their guards down every once in a while. He’d been smitten with her. They’d only known each other a few weeks before he came home and announced they were getting married.

To her credit, she’d put on a good show. Isaac and several of his brothers had been fooled. She was either the best actress in the world or got herself mixed up in a life she wasn’t cut out for. Living on a ranch wasn’t for everyone. Isaac should know. Eli’s wife had grown up in downtown Dallas; being on the ranch might’ve seemed like a romantic idea. Once the honeymoon phase had ended, she’d ditched her life and hooked it out of Gunner.

“Between the kids and work on the ranch, he stays busy.” Wasn’t the same as telling how he was doing except to say that he must be putting one foot in front of the other. Sometimes, moving forward was all a person could do. It had been that way for Isaac when he’d heard that Gina married Des.

Even though Isaac knew he was the one who’d walked away, it still stung like hell. Des was ready to offer marriage and family to her. Isaac had been a kid, unsure of everything but serving his country. Somehow, even then, he’d known the military would help him get his head on straight. He’d had nothing to offer.

Noah drained the contents of his cup. “Speaking of the ranch, I should

probably head back that way. I need to check on one of the calves I've been keeping an eye on. When are you stopping by?"

"We're staying at the ranch tonight. T.J. suggested it. Gina and I thought it was a good idea. We can use all the extra security we can get until the..." he glanced at the baby before lowering his voice, "*jerk* who hurt Brittany is behind bars." Another word for him had come to mind but Isaac didn't want to use it in front of Gina's daughter. The little girl was innocence wrapped in a pink hairbow.

Noah stared at a spot on the wall for a second. "Damn. Maybe T.J. is turning over a new leaf."

"Crazier things have happened, right?"

Noah made a show of looking at the floor. "And I guess it's possible for hell to freeze over, too. I just didn't think I'd witness it in my lifetime."

Isaac took a sip of fresh brew. He wasn't touching that one.

"You staying at the main house?"

"Figured it would be easier that way what with Marianne around to help with Everly. Gina's been through a lot and she needs to rest if she can."

"Marianne will go crazy with excitement. Not sure how we got so lucky to end up with her in our lives. The way she stood up to T.J. on our behalf I'm surprised he didn't fire her."

"Even he's not dumb enough to pull a move like that." Isaac stood.

Gina did the same and slung her purse over one shoulder and the diaper bag over the other.

"You want help with that?" He motioned toward the diaper bag. His offer was met with a look of confusion. "What? I'm offering to hold the diaper bag. Did I say something wrong?"

Her face muscles relaxed into a tentative smile.

"I'm just not used to having help." The honesty in those words were daggers. He couldn't help but wonder what all that statement covered and how far it went back.

Noah excused himself to go to the bathroom.

"Tell me he was good to you."

“Des?”

“Yes. Based on our conversations so far and some of your reactions, I get the impression he didn’t treat you the way you deserve to be treated.” Isaac didn’t want to accept the fact that he would’ve been better for her than Des. Years ago, Isaac had walked away for exactly that reason. She deserved so much more than he could give. The sacrifice had been worth it. Or, at least, that’s what he’d repeated over and over again when he couldn’t shake her from his thoughts. It had become his mantra on those long hot days in training. To realize she wasn’t better off was a gut punch.

She shrugged. A smile ghosted her lips. “We did okay. Whatever happened in our marriage was just as much my fault as his. He was a decent enough guy but I should’ve expected more from him. He couldn’t fix what he didn’t know was wrong and I never spoke up. We got stuck in a pattern and by the time I brought up the fact that I was unhappy he was confused. He thought I was changing the rules and in a way, I was. It was hard for him to accept.”

Noah returned, interrupting the conversation. Isaac decided to table the discussion. It wasn’t his place to judge another person’s relationship even if his mind wanted to argue this was different.

He slipped the strap of the diaper bag off her shoulder and shrugged it over his. Her smile, all warmth and light, caused a fireworks display to go off in his chest. Damn. Gina was trouble and for the first time in longer than he could remember he was in deep.

“Ready?” Gina asked.

He wasn’t touching that question with a ten-foot pole.

Time flew on the way back to Gina’s mom’s house where Noah’s vehicle was parked. Conversation was easy between the three of them. Everly seemed to have her own party going in the back seat. Noah didn’t seem to mind. The kiddo fit in his family.

Isaac pulled up next to Noah’s Jeep.

Gina gasped. She pointed to the east side of her mother’s two-story red brick home. “There. Do you see him?”

A man wearing a ski mask turned and ran toward the back of the house.

“Stay here with Gina.” Isaac was out of his truck and hoofing it toward Ski Mask in two seconds flat. The head start he had gave him enough advantage to disappear around the house at the end of the street before Isaac could catch up. Damn. Isaac jogged up and down a couple of streets and around half a dozen houses before he gave up.

He walked back to his truck, surveying the area for any signs of Ski Mask. The man had disappeared in a hurry.

“He must’ve had a vehicle stashed somewhere. Once he rounded the corner behind the house I never saw him again.” Isaac climbed in the driver’s seat.

“No sign of him this way, either.” Noah exited the truck.

“My mom can’t stay here. What if he comes back?”

“She can stay at the ranch. The place is plenty big enough,” Isaac offered.

“I’ll let her know what’s going on. Hearing there was someone around the house will probably scare her enough to agree. There’s no way I’d let her sleep here alone knowing he’s been here.” Gina’s skin paled. “He knows where my mother lives.”

“Gives me the impression Brittany wasn’t the only one who knew the—” Isaac glanced in the back seat at Everly before whispering, “jerk.”

“If you need me, get a message to Eli. He keeps pretty good tabs on where I’m at.” Right. Noah had lost his phone.

Isaac glanced in the backseat and then back to Gina. “You okay with

dropping her off at the ranch before we head to Griff's office?"

Gina's lips pinched together.

"The only reason for the suggestion is that I think she'll be safer there than with us." If Ski Mask was targeting Gina's family, he wanted to take every precaution to keep Everly safe.

Gina worked her bottom lip and it looked like she was trying to form an argument. Then, she bit down before saying, "You're right. I know you are. It'll be hard not to be able to keep my eyes on her. I know she'll be well care for and protected."

"I can take her with me. I'm headed back there anyway. It'll save you guys the trip and Griff needs to know what just happened as soon as possible." Noah made good points. This was Gina's call.

Before she could say one way or another, Isaac's phone vibrated. He fished it from his pocket and checked the screen. "It's Griff. He wants us back as soon as we can get there. Logan's wife just showed up and she's demanding to know where her husband is."

The car seat was strapped in the back of Noah's Jeep within minutes. Gina kissed Everly's forehead and the little girl beamed up at her mother. The tender moment chipped away a little bit more of the casing around Isaac's heart. He marveled at how much he'd changed in the past twenty-four hours and how many surprises life could bring if he could hang on another day.

He was also keenly aware of how suddenly people he cared about could be taken away from him. That thought sat heavy on his chest as he thought about his future—a future he couldn't help but think was unfolding before his eyes.



ISAAC PARKED at the sheriff's office. Gina had phoned her mother and arrangements had been made for her to stay at the ranch for a few days. There was no way to check on Everly considering Noah didn't have a cell phone.

He walked around and opened the door for Gina. Her injuries were already starting to heal, so she didn't need his help to walk. He linked their fingers and

tugged her toward him.

Kissing her had been on his mind all morning. So, he did. Her pressed his lips to hers, pinning her against the truck. She melted into him and he kissed her again. She brought her arms up to loop around his neck, and her breasts pressed against his chest. He thought about how good she'd felt skin-to-skin, tangled in the sheets. Need stirred deep inside him.

When both of their hearts pounded their ribs and their breath came out in rasps, he pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. "Damn."

He could feel her smile.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Save more of that for later."

"I hoped you'd say that." He'd never been so aroused from one kiss and a few words. The sound of her voice had a way of striking him in the heart.

Looking into her eyes, he saw home.

When their breathing slowed as normal as it could considering he was standing this close to her, he squeezed her hand. "Are you ready to face what's going on in there?"

"As much as I can be." The hope for answers and for an arrest, for safety, brimmed in her green eyes.

He brushed his fingers across her cheek. "Let's go get some answers."

Isaac took the lead, keeping Gina protected behind him.

Sherry met them in the lobby and they quickly filled her in on what had just happened. "I'll let everyone know what to look for."

"Thank you."

"Ashley Simmons is in the interview room. Griff wanted to let you listen in when he spoke to her, so she's been in there alone with her thoughts for almost half an hour."

"How does she look? Nervous? Guilty?" He wanted to know if she was part of the murder or the attack on Gina in any way, shape or form.

"Mad as hell. Devastated. Like a scorned wife with young children to look after."

"Doesn't sound like someone who would conspire to commit murder."

“Not to me. But, then, some of the worst criminals in history looked like the person next door.” Sherry had a point. No one could be ruled out. He still held onto the thought Logan’s wife might conspire to kill him rather than his mistress. She had to know getting rid of one lover didn’t mean he wouldn’t find someone new. In this case, he seemed to be juggling a few women. And it seemed like there was always an insurance policy to go after when it came to a spouse. It wouldn’t be the first time someone murdered for financial gain and it wouldn’t be the last. Which made going after the mistress in a calculating manner even less likely.

Sherry led them down the hall and into the observation room. “Fresh pot in the break room. Either of you game for a cup of coffee?”

“None for me thanks.” He echoed Gina’s sentiments.

“I’ll let Griff know the two of you are here.” She disappeared down the hallway.

Ashley Simmons’ long russet hair was pulled up in a ponytail, her eyes tired but with the remnants of sparks. Her painted nails drummed against the table in a show of nervous energy and her foot shook at the end of her crossed legs.

Gina stood toward the back of the small room and he could feel tension radiating from her. “I feel so sorry for her. We know so much about what her husband is doing. He fathered a child with at least one other woman. He could have countless other mistresses. Does his wife even know how bad her marriage is?”

The expression, the fear outlined on Ashley’s features said she was aware her world was about to be shattered. There was resolve, too. The trait was admirable.

Griff entered the interview room and she sat ramrod straight.

“How many women are there?” Ashley seemed ready to start right in. Her chin quivered and it was easy to see she was holding back a torrent of emotion.

“That’s probably a question your husband should answer. My deputy can’t seem to locate him. Do you know his whereabouts?”

“I thought he was coming here.” She glanced up at the clock on the wall. “He should’ve beat me.”

Isaac didn’t like the sound of that one bit.



“LOGAN WAS MEETING HIS WIFE *HERE*?” Gina tried to wrap her mind around the thought in the context of everything else she knew.

“Doesn’t exactly sound like someone who is guilty of murder.”

“Then again, maybe he was deterred at my mother’s house. It could be a good alibi that he was on his way here and couldn’t possibly have been in two places at once.” None of it added up in her mind but then she didn’t exactly think like a criminal. Gina always walked a straight line. Maybe it took another criminal or someone trained to think like one to make sense of a case like this.

Deputy Sayer knocked on the interview room door. Griff told him to come in.

“Can I see you for a second, sir?”

Griff didn’t look pleased at the interruption. “It must be important.”

“It is, sir.”

“Excuse me.” Griff left the interview room and brought the deputy into the observation room. “What’s going on?”

“A body believed to be that of Logan Simmons was found shot to death in his vehicle at Breaker’s park. There was a note.” The deputy’s voice was low.

Suicide? The air thinned. Logan Simmons was a cheater and he’d seemed desperate not to let his wife find out about his philandering but suicide? It was the ultimate end. Nothing could be fixed or worked out.

“What did the note say?”

“It was addressed to his wife. He took responsibility for Brittany’s murder.”

“Dammit. We need to get an official ID on the body.” Frustration filled Griff’s tone.

“The vehicle is registered to Simmons. The wallet had an ID belonging to Simmons. Given the nature of the bullet wound, it’s difficult to make a positive ID of the individual.” He motioned toward his temple.

“If he’s in the database his print will show. I can ask Mrs. Simmons if there are any identifying marks on her husband’s body.” Griff excused himself, went into the room and returned a moment later. “She says her husband has a

birthmark on the top of his left foot in the shape of a strawberry. It's an inch in diameter."

"I'll radio and get back to you, sir." Deputy Sayer stepped into the hallway.

Gina knew exactly what Ashley Simmons was about to go through if the birthmark was confirmed. The initial shock that would stretch on for days. The disbelief that her vibrant and very much alive husband was suddenly gone, light extinguished. The denial that any of this could be happening would give way to anger and bargaining. The anger had been the worst for Gina. Eventually, acceptance would arrive. Acceptance that her child's father would never hold his child. Acceptance that her daughter would never know her father. Acceptance that life had altered forever.

The deputy returned with a resigned look. His lips pursed together. "There's a birthmark."

Griff cursed under his breath. Gina didn't envy his job. He was about to deliver news that would change a family. "Let's break. Gina and Isaac, you guys can wait in my office if you'd like." He turned to his deputy once he got a nod of acknowledgement from Gina and Isaac. "Make sure clergy is available. I'll ask about next of kin. I really don't want her to deal with this alone."

"I'll make a few calls, sir."

"Have whoever is on scene send pictures right away. I want every angle covered and I want to know every detail of what the deputy thinks happened." Griff took in a sharp breath. He looked to Gina and Isaac. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Gina followed Isaac into the office where he closed the door behind them.



ONE HOUR and two cups of coffee later, Griff met up with Isaac and Gina. "Sherry told me what happened earlier. My deputies are on the lookout for anyone matching the description. There's no word yet." He paused. "Right now, photos from the crime scene should be in my inbox."

Isaac didn't need to ask how Logan's wife was doing. He could see in the

deep lines etched in his cousin's forehead what his past hour had been like. Griff was a great sheriff because he cared. He couldn't turn that off any more than Isaac could during his service.

Griff took a seat behind his desk. Gina stayed put across from him while Isaac moved behind his cousin.

A knock sounded as Griff opened the first file.

Sherry opened the door. "Bo Stanley is here."

"See him to the interview room." A day late and a dollar short didn't begin to describe Bo Stanley's arrival.

"Good of him to finally show his face in town." Isaac couldn't help but make the sarcastic comment. Based on Griff's reaction, he thought the same thing.

There was something niggling at the back of Isaac's mind, though.

"Does anyone have an estimate of what time Mr. Simmons took his life?" he asked Griff.

"Coroner hasn't given an update just yet. I've asked for his initial findings, so I'm hoping to hear from him at any minute."

The first picture filled the screen. No matter how many times Isaac had seen death in battle, he'd never get used to it. As picture by picture came into view, a story emerged. The note left behind an admission to killing Brittany because of the child. Logan said he couldn't risk allowing his wife to find out about the baby.

"Weird, don't you think?" Isaac asked.

"That a man so hell bent on keeping the truth from his wife would write a note admitting to having a child with another woman during the marriage."

"Exactly. I would've thought there'd be an apology to his wife here and maybe an allusion to the killing but a confession?"

"Guilt does strange things to people. But, I just had the same thought." Griff's admission got the wheels turning.

"Was Logan a lefty?" Isaac asked.

"Hold on a minute." Griff took a picture of the note. "I'll be right back."

He disappeared out the door and down the hall. Isaac continued to flip through the photos.

“What is it, Isaac?”

“The angle of the shot bugs me. It works if Logan is left-handed. It’s probably nothing. Me being overly paranoid.” The suggestion that Logan didn’t do this to himself hung in the air. A second murder.

Ashley Simmons sat in an office. Bo Stanley was in the interview room.

Bustle in the hallway drew Isaac’s attention. Mrs. Stanley’s voice boomed, demanding to see her husband.

Mrs. Stanley and Bo were still in an embrace when Isaac took his position behind Gina in the observation room. Bo would be considered tall by most standards. Isaac had grown up a Quinn, so most men paled by comparison. Sizing him up, Bo had dark hair and eyes. He looked like he knew his way around a gym.

“Mr. Stanley, do you mind answering a few questions as to your whereabouts the past forty-eight hours?” Griff stood in the corner of the room, one arm folded across his chest and the other resting on top with his fist propping up his chin.

“I’ve been traveling for work.” Bo pulled out a chair for Mrs. Stanley. She took a seat and clasped her hands together before placing them on her lap.

“Do you mind providing a list of clients you visited?” Griff set a notebook and pen in front of Bo.

Bo Stanley’s eyes widened before he seemed to catch himself and recover. “Whatever I can do to help. I want to nail the bastard who hurt my precious Brittany.”

A slip? Maybe two? Also, he didn’t seem the type to think of a grown woman as precious. Leaned forward, shoulders hunched, Bo made a show of his grieving. There were folks like that, Isaac guessed. People who thrived on the attention they got from looking distraught. Those folks tended to milk the situation with words like *precious*.

Isaac didn’t like the man on sight. His shoulders hunkered forward, his

expression forlorn, he played the part of the grieving step-dad a little too well? Was it rehearsed?

“When was the last time you saw Brittany, Mr. Stanley?” Griff asked.

He glanced at his wife. “A couple of days ago. Right before I left. When was that, honey? Tuesday?”

“Wednesday. You left on Wednesday, honey.” Mrs. Stanley’s hands were folded together in her lap and Bo gripped hers like he hung on for dear life.

Isaac hadn’t had a chance to discuss his concerns about the photos with Griff but his cousin was a seasoned law enforcement officer and probably picked up on more than Isaac had.

Deputy Sayer walked into the interview room and handed Griff a note. He opened the piece of paper and studied it.

“Can you excuse me for one second?” Griff exited the room and entered the observation area. “He’s a right-hander.”

“Damn.” Isaac knew exactly what this meant. Logan Simmons was murdered.

Bo Stanley stood and started pacing. “I can’t believe this happened and the sheriff is asking where I’ve been.” His anger climbed a little higher with every step. “I mean, what does he want me to say? I wasn’t even in town.”

Mrs. Stanley looked up at him and there was so much vulnerability in her eyes. “You were gone. Right?”

“What kind of question is that?” Bo paced a little faster and stabbed his fingers through his dye job. A man of his age should have some gray. Bo had none.

Mrs. Stanley shrugged. She stared at the table. “You didn’t answer my texts. I got worried about you. And then when you finally did answer something was different.” Her gaze came up, pinning him. “Tell me you were gone. Tell me you were nowhere near my daughter.”

“Why would I hurt Brittany? She was my family.”

“You guys didn’t get along. You argued before you left for the trip. A trip that seemed to come up last minute.”

“The man who killed your daughter is dead.” Bo leveled his gaze at his wife.

Jesus. How would Bo Stanley know that? Information about Logan Simmons's death had not been leaked outside of the department.

Isaac gave the suspect a once-over. Now that he was standing, Isaac had another question. What was up with the mud on his shoes?

A run through the backyards of houses two days after a rain would do the trick.

Isaac elbowed Griff. "Did you get a look at his shoes?"

"Yes."

Bo made a move to leave. He huffed out the door where he stopped cold.

"Hold on there, Mr. Stanley. Where do you think you're going?" Griff and Isaac stood side-by-side, blocking his exit in the hallway.

"I'm done here."

"I don't think so."

"Am I under arrest?" Bo asked.

"Why would you be?" Griff dropped his hand to rest on the butt of his gun.

The first scream that reverberated down the hallway sounded like an animal who'd been caught in an illegal trap. The one that followed nearly ripped Isaac's heart from his chest. From then on, Mrs. Stanley's wails could probably be heard in the parking lot for how loud they were.

Bo pulled an about face and broke out running down the opposite way.

Griff bolted after him, along with Isaac who was followed by Gina. Bo found an exit. Shrill alarms pierced the air as he threw his shoulder into the door to open it enough to blast outside.

A deputy was in the parking lot and saw the scene as it unfolded. He drew his weapon and aimed the business end at Bo. "Stop and put your hands where I can see them."

Bo threw his hands in the air but his gaze gave away his intentions. He was desperately searching for cover and a getaway. He had to know he was going down for Brittany's murder and his past was about to catch up to him with the other women he'd swindled. Had Brittany uncovered the truth? Was that the reason he had to get rid of her?

With her secretive lifestyle, Bo must've figured law enforcement would take

a while to catch up to him. By then, he could've been long gone. He'd never intended to stick around Gunner. Nor had he intended to honor his vows to Mrs. Stanley.

Griff's weapon was now pointed at Bo. The deputy was trained to shoot to kill. Isaac couldn't allow Bo to get off that easily. The man needed to suffer life in prison with no chance of parole.

Law enforcement had to follow protocol. Isaac didn't.

Pushing forward until his thighs burned, Isaac dove into the back of Bo's legs. Bo's knees buckled and his torso flew backward. There was a loud crack and it was most likely one of Bo's bones snapping.

For a split-second, Bo was on top of Isaac. He easily shifted position and rolled until he was in the dominant spot. He squeezed his thighs to crush Bo in the ribs.

"I didn't do anything wrong. You can't prove I did it."

"How'd you know about the suicide?" Griff was there, jerking Bo's arm to put cuffs on him. He wrangled the man's hands behind his back and snapped the other cuff on.

"I-I-I didn't say anything like that. It's your word against mine." The man was grasping at straws.

"It's over, asshole," Gina said. "You're going to jail."

"You have the right to remain silent..." Griff Mirandized Bo.

The walk to the county jail would be short, considering it was on the property. Isaac had never been prouder of Gina when she stood toe-to-toe with the man who'd tried to kill her. She might have been shaken but her resolve was strong.

Isaac stood behind her and looped his arms around her waist as they watched the law serve justice.

Bo screamed and made threats, all the while cursing through the agony of a what looked like a broken ankle. He hobbled off in handcuffs, throwing a wild temper tantrum. There was no way the courts would let him off. This time, he was going down for his crimes.

"That's gonna leave a mark." Isaac laughed.

Gina let herself smile. She leaned against him, back to chest, and he whispered, “I love you.”



GINA WAITED until Bo Stanley was out of sight before she turned and kissed Isaac. “Take me home.”

He smiled, a show of perfect white teeth. “Three of my favorite words.”

Exhaustion wore thin on the drive to the ranch where her mother and Everly waited. It was safe for her mother to go home now but Gina had called ahead and asked her mother to stick around for a little while. She needed to see for herself that everyone was okay.

The ranch was as beautiful as Gina remembered. A long, whitewashed wood fence bordered the front yard.

Otherwise, the yard was massive, improbably green and had a drive that was at least a mile long. The gate guard waved as Isaac drove onto the main house drive. The home was a cream-painted two-story brick with porches for days and an upstairs balcony that practically ran the length of the house. Windows stacked on top of each other on the façade, six on each side. The house itself was grand and beautiful, welcoming and warm. A contrast to how Isaac had described life there. But then, he had said appearances were important to T.J.

Isaac might not realize it, but his expression changed when he mentioned Marianne. Both Noah and Isaac had spoken about her like she was more mother figure than housekeeper.

It was funny how appearances worked. How a person’s life could be so different than expected once a few layers were peeled back. Her thoughts drifted to Brittany, a life that had ended too soon. Brittany had kept a low profile. Did anyone every really know her? Did she ever let anyone get close enough to? Even in a small town like Gunner, there could be so many secrets.

The first thing Gina wanted to do was hold her daughter. It was crazy how easy it was to appreciate the little things after facing her own mortality. And being with Everly and Isaac was more than she could’ve hoped for.

Crazy, she thought, how life could turn on a dime and in such an unexpected way. If someone had told her six months ago that she'd be with Isaac on his ranch, going home to her daughter she would've laughed in their face. Maybe told them they were crazy.

Now? This? It was more than she could fathom.

"What are you thinking about?" Isaac asked as he parked the truck.

"Life in general. How you can think you have it all figured out and then it does an about face in a snap." And how being with Isaac was the most natural thing. She'd keep that part to herself for now.

He reached over and squeezed her hand. "Makes me think of having you in my life again."

She smiled, not wanting to reveal just how much she'd been thinking the same. Isaac cut off the engine. He was out of the truck and around to her side before she could open the door for herself. Opening her door wasn't necessary but she appreciated the gesture.

Marianne met them on the porch, Everly on her hip. Gina's heart nearly burst seeing her daughter so happy and surrounded by so many people who cared about her.

"She's an angel." Marianne beamed and she looked reluctant to let go of Everly. The little girl's arms shot out toward Gina.

"Hello there, angel." Everly's smile had a way of washing away whatever cares Gina had.

"Come on in. I'm making supper."

The house smelled like heaven. Fresh bread baking in the oven. A casserole in the stove. And the scent of cookies filled the air. "Are those chocolate chip?"

"They sure are." Marianne led them into the kitchen. A massive oven covered one wall. The food prep table alone could've filled Gina's entire kitchen. There was a massive wood table off to one side of the room. A long bench seat tucked underneath on the wall side. Five chairs covered the other side with arm chairs on each end. An army of people could fit around that table. With seven boys and five cousins who frequented the ranch, she was pretty damn certain the cook felt like she was cooking for the U.S.O.

Everywhere she looked said big family meals and happy chatter around the table. But then she remembered what Isaac had said about T.J. She'd witnessed the exchange between them, which would best be described as an awkward attempt to extend an olive branch.

What she knew of the head of the Quinn ranch, she doubted there'd been much laughter in these hallways. It was easy to see why the boys had banded together to survive and they were most likely closer for it. And yet, she couldn't help but think what a shame it was to have so much wasted potential in a family.

If T.J. hadn't been so stubborn or stuck in his ways, he could've had what most people dreamed of; a big, loving and happy family.

Eli strolled in the back door. The eldest Quinn brother had the same good looks and athletic build as the others. Put the seven of them together with their five cousins, and they'd make one helluva calendar.

Noah followed suit and Marianne's eyes widened. She clutched her chest dramatically before smiling. "Good to see you in my kitchen."

He smiled and nodded. "Isaac's home. Plus, I couldn't stay away from your cooking any longer."

Isaac and his brothers bear hugged. Two high chairs were lined up against the wall. Isaac pulled one over to the table. "Let's eat."

Everly seemed in her element. She smiled through all the chatter and commotion. A baby's cry filled the room. Gina quickly realized the sound came from the baby monitor on the counter.

"I'll get 'em." Marianne darted from the room and came back a couple of minutes later with a baby on her hip and holding a toddler's hand.

"Meet my niece and nephew. This is Olivia and he's Oliver." Isaac grabbed the other high chair and pulled it up to the table. He put the toddler beside Everly who practically beamed. The little angels took one look at each other and started happily babbling.

"They're beautiful," Gina said to Eli.

"Thank you." Eli smiled like a proud papa. "I'm afraid I'm in a little over my head with the two of them."

"Nonsense," Marianne interrupted. "You do a fine job with those babies."

“Calving season has taught me to live on little sleep. Calving season with a teething child has taught me that I need help. Haven’t had time to hire anyone just yet. Marianne has been a saint as much as she’s pitched in.”

“It’s no trouble with easy babies.”

“You have enough on your plate around here.”

She made a harrumph noise and moved back to the stove.

The front door opening and then closing didn’t get anyone’s attention over the easy chatter going on at the table. But everyone looked up when Griff walked into the kitchen.

“Pull up a seat,” Marianne instructed. She already had a full plate in one hand and silverware in the other before he could protest.

“You should sit down and eat. I could’ve gotten that for myself.” The others agreed but Marianne, like a hostess in her true calling, waved them off.

“It’s no trouble.”

Griff thanked her. “Bo Stanley confessed.”

“I never liked him but would never have believed he was capable of...” Noah glanced around, his gaze landing on the babies in the room. He didn’t seem able to shatter such innocence with a word like *murder*.

“Turns out he propositioned Brittany. He asked her to move to Oklahoma City with him where he had a job lined up. He was put off by how repulsed she’d been at his offer. Said she was going to tell her mother. At which time, he threatened to reveal paternity of her child. She tried to protect Logan, who Bo didn’t think deserved it.”

“Isn’t that a case of the pot calling the kettle black,” Isaac mumbled.

“Bo told Brittany to meet him. He didn’t realize anyone had moved in next door.” Griff looked to Gina. “He knew your family owned the property and your mother rarely went there. He didn’t realize you were moving back so soon.”

“He must’ve thought he had plenty of time to take care of a body.”

“Brittany had decided to move out and he figured she was a loose end that needed tying up. Said he couldn’t live every day with the threat she’d tell on him.”

“Would her mother have believed her?” Isaac’s question was valid.

“After Bo hit on Brittany she did a little investigative work. She uncovered the truth about his background and set out to save her mother. Brittany didn’t want to hurt her mother, so she was trying to find a way to break the news to her without crushing her.”

“That must’ve been when he decided to do it.” The lies and deception hit Gina hard.

“Your neighbors wouldn’t be back to the lake until summer. He would’ve had time to clean the place and dispose of the body. No one would think to look for Brittany at the cabin. She wasn’t a nature girl and no one would’ve been around to notice the smell. But he panicked after you came jogging by. You found her dog that Bo had planned to leave to nature. And he had to act quickly.”

The thought he could’ve gone free if Gina hadn’t moved back when she did and gone jogging that day reminded her how fast life could turn. How one decision could alter life’s course. If Des hadn’t gone back in for the cat. If she hadn’t gone jogging.

Life could be so random.

Another random act came to mind. If Isaac hadn’t been sitting at that light on his way home, she most definitely wouldn’t be here right now.

“What about Brittany’s son?” Gina asked.

“He’ll be in foster care temporarily until custody is settled,” Griff informed.

“I hate the fact he’ll be with strangers. What about Brittany’s mother? Can’t he stay with family?” Gina couldn’t imagine anything like that happening to Everly. The thought of her daughter ending up with strangers was enough to bring Gina to her knees.

“Mrs. Stanley has no interest in caring for the child.”

“There must be something we can do—”

“Ashley Simmons’ father is a lawyer. He’s working his contacts now to see if he can speed up the process. She wants the little boy to grow up with his siblings. She’s requesting custody.” Gina was blown away by Ashley’s kindness. Being a mother herself, she understood setting aside her own feelings in order to take care of her child. Logan might’ve been unfaithful but relationships were complicated.

T.J. walked into the kitchen. His eyes widened at the sight of his family sitting around the table. His gaze froze a second longer on Noah before moving to her and then the children.

The minute T.J. entered a room, the temperature changed. Backs stiffened.

“Any chance I could join you?” T.J. Quinn had always been swagger and masculinity, so the vulnerability in his voice caught her off guard.

Others seemed to pick up on it, too.

“Pull up a chair,” Isaac spoke first. The others nodded. It might be tentative, but they agreed nonetheless.

Marianne shot up but T.J. stopped her with a hand in the air. “I don’t want to be any trouble. I’ll get my own plate.”

Based on the looks the brothers gave each other Gina was certain she was witnessing a first.

Marianne reclaimed her seat, a self-satisfied smile upturned her lips. There was an inside joke there that Gina told herself to ask about later.

T.J. didn’t take a spot at the head of the table. He moved around to the bench and slid in after filling his plate. “I’m aware of the fact I haven’t earned the right to sit with my boys for a meal. So, I want to thank you all for allowing me to. It means more to me than any of you could know.”

“Here’s hoping this is just the beginning.” Isaac raised his coffee mug and the others did the same in salute.

“If I may be so bold,” T.J. continued. The expression on his face said he was touched by the gesture. Maybe the man was turning a new leaf. It was possible, after all. At least for some.

He went on to say, “As you already know, I called everyone home to make an announcement. Phoenix and Cayden are on their way. They’ll be home in the next couple of days. I have some convincing to do with Aiden and Liam to get them under the same roof with me, but I’m hopeful. Would anyone object to waiting for the others to get here so everyone hears my announcement at the same time?”

This might be the first time Isaac heard T.J. ask permission for anything in the man's life. Shock didn't begin to describe his reaction. But if T.J. was willing to make an effort to change, Isaac wouldn't be the one to shoot his father down.

He made eye contact with each brother before answering. "We'll wait."

"I appreciate it." There was something different in T.J.'s voice. Hell, in T.J. It was a little unnerving. Should Isaac let himself hope for a relationship with his father?

Caution dictated he take a wait and see approach. So far, he liked what was happening.

Isaac's cell phone vibrated. He fished it out of his pocket and checked the screen. "It's Michael."

A hush fell across the room. If Isaac was a praying man he'd send up a prayer for good news.

"Let me put you on speaker." Isaac knew everyone here would care about what the vet had to say and especially Gina. "Okay. How is he?"

"He's pulling through. He ate solid food for the first time an hour ago, which is a good sign. Looks like he's on the road to recovery."

Cheers broke out around the table. Gina put her hand on Isaac's thigh. He dropped his hand to cover hers and squeeze reassuringly.

"Thank you for everything you've done, Michael. I'd like to cover his bill."

“This one’s on the house.” Michael was not only an excellent vet, he was a great man. He’d been the Quinn family vet since he’d graduated veterinarian school, taking over his father’s practice more than a decade ago.

“I appreciate you.”

“Least I can do for a sweet dog like him.” Isaac wouldn’t forget Michael’s kindness. Nor would any of the Quinn family.

“You already know this but if you ever need a favor—”

“I know who to ask,” Michael finished the sentence. The two went way back to elementary school. “And, believe me, one of these days I’ll take you up on it.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“There is one question. He won’t be ready for a couple of days but who do I release him to? Mrs. Stanley made it clear she wants nothing to do with him when I called her to give her an update.”

“He belongs here at Quinnland.” T.J. spoke before Isaac could. “That is, if it’s okay with everyone here.”

“It’s more than okay.” Isaac was the first to speak but the others echoed the same sentiment.

“Then, he’ll be in good hands.”

Michael said goodbye and they ended the call.

Isaac locked eyes with his father for a long moment. He couldn’t pinpoint all the emotions in T.J.’s eyes. A couple he recognized. Regret. Sadness. Loneliness?

It was time for a new beginning. Isaac lifted his chin and offered a half-smile. T.J. did the same.

New ground. A fresh start. Isaac could live with that.

The rest of the meal was spent in easy conversation. It didn’t get past Isaac how right it felt to be back at Quinnland. The woman sitting next to him had everything to do with the changes in his heart.

Everyone pitched in to clear the table and clean dishes, much to Marianne’s dismay. Part of being a self-sufficient man was knowing how to make a meal and clean a dish. Isaac figured she’d get used to having help around the house. If he was going to stick around he’d make himself useful.

Gina tugged at his shirt sleeve. "I should probably head home."

"I thought you were staying here tonight." He didn't cover his surprise.

"Bo is locked up. I just figured it's time to get back to a normal life. Whatever that is after everything that's happened." She bit back a yawn.

"Everything is set up here for Everly. You might as well stick around for the night. You won't have to cook breakfast or get up early. You've been through the wringer and there are extra sets of hands here to help out."

"I don't want to be any trouble." The tentative look in her eyes made him wonder if there was more to the story.

"You couldn't be." Nothing in Isaac wanted to drive her home to the fishing cabin. But it was up to her to stay.

"The thought of going home doesn't thrill me if I'm honest. I still can't believe what happened right next door. The place will never feel the same to me again."

"I'd like it if you stayed the night here." More than he was willing to admit to himself.

"It would be nice to get a good night's sleep."

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes." The sound of that word stirred something deep in Isaac.

"Follow me."

Her gaze shifted from Marianne to Everly to him.

"She's fine." The little girl had taken to Eli's kids, especially Oliver, who was close in age. "Shower is this way."

"I can't remember the last time I saw her this happy." Gina followed him up the stairs and down a hallway to what had been his childhood bedroom and was now made up as a guest suite. A portable crib had been set up next to the bed. He'd thank the ranch hands later for the pinch hit on that one.

"Fresh towels are on the counter." He motioned toward the bathroom. "I had pajamas sent over in your size."

"Be careful, Quinn. I could get used to this treatment." He sure as hell hoped so.

Isaac dipped his head and claimed her mouth. He had a question to ask but it

could wait until she was rested and had a clear head.

This time, she linked their fingers. “Seems like Everly is occupied for the time being. Care to take a shower with me?”

“That’s the best suggestion I’ve heard all day.” Isaac walked her to the shower and took his time taking her clothes off. Piece by piece, he appreciated her beautiful body. Every curve was perfection.

It didn’t take long for his clothes to join hers on the floor. Their mouths fused as she looped her arms around his neck. He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his midsection.

Walking her into the shower, he feathered kisses along the tender skin of her neck. With her back against the wall and her hips perfectly positioned near his straining erection, he drove himself home.

Tension strung her muscles taut as her breasts pressed against his chest. Skin to skin contact sent electrical impulses firing through his body.

He bucked himself deeper inside and thrust his tongue in her mouth. She bit his bottom lip and nearly undone him in the process. Every sensitized muscle screamed for release. Faster. Harder. He rode the wave alongside her until both could scarcely breath and every last muscle had spasmed.

And then he heard the three words in a whisper that cracked what was left of the casing around his heart.

“I love you.”



THE NEXT MORNING, the sun shone brightly in a blue sky. Isaac hummed as he put on a fresh pot of coffee. Everly sat in her high chair, babbling. She sure was a happy baby. He’d managed to get her out of the bedroom before she woke Gina. His chest puffed with pride. He’d never seen himself as a family man. But this, Everly and Gina, fit. Why label or question what worked?

“Good morning.” Gina’s voice came from the doorway.

He walked over to her and kissed her thoroughly. “Coffee?”

“Sounds like heaven.” She glanced at her daughter who cooed at the sight of

her mother. “Hey, angel.”

Gina made her way over to her daughter and took a seat at the table next to her. She blinked at Isaac. “I had no idea you were this good with kids.”

“I didn’t, either. Everly makes it easy.” He held out a fresh mug of steaming brew and then bent down on one knee.

Gina covered her gasp with both hands.

“I’d like to make this permanent, Gina. Us, permanent. I’m in love with you and I want to be a family. I know it’s soon in our relationship, but life can turn on a dime and I want to face whatever comes next together. I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. And I never will again. I’d appreciate it if you would at least consider doing me the incredible honor of becoming my wife?”

“You’re my family, Isaac. I love you. I don’t want to wait to make this family official. We belong together and I think I’ve been in love with you since ninth grade. I’ve known you my whole life and I can’t think of a better man to share this crazy world with. So, yes, I’ll marry you.”

Isaac looked at Everly. “What do you think, kiddo? I’d like to be your daddy. Think you’ll be okay with that?”

Everly’s smile ran ear-to-ear. She clapped her hands and they both took that as a sign she approved.

And for the first time in Isaac’s life, Quinnland finally felt like home.

Epilogue

THE WEDDING WAS A LOW-KEY AFFAIR. Only a precious few folks had been invited and the whole shindig took place in the backyard at the family ranch on a surprisingly beautiful Sunday afternoon. The bride wore boots, jeans and a lacy white shirt.

Noah looked at Isaac from across the room, his brother's happiness written in big letters across his face. Had the man ever smiled as much?

No.

Noah was thrilled for his brother, don't get him wrong. Isaac seemed like he'd found the real deal with Gina. It was Noah's own restlessness putting a damper on the celebration. And he'd been plenty restless lately.

There was no reason he could pinpoint. No big ah-ha moment that made him feel like he was missing out on anything in life. He loved the land. Texas was the air in his lungs and the blood in his veins.

So, what was with all the melodrama?

Isaac walked over. Noah gave his brother the biggest bear hug. "I couldn't be happier for you, bro."

That ear-to-ear smile reappeared on Isaac's face. "Who would've thought

that not only would I move back to Quinnland, but that I'd have a beautiful bride and baby girl in my life?"

"A man knows when he's met *the one*." Noah had heard the saying his whole life. Was it true? He couldn't say from personal experience. A piece of him that he'd buried deep down wanted to believe it was.

"The world can be a crazy place sometimes." Isaac's reflection rang true enough. "One minute you're wandering around, lost, maybe searching a little bit. The next, everything clicks into place and you're given an opportunity to be the man you always hoped you could be."

"I can't imagine you with a better family. And I mean every word of that."

"Thank you, Noah. It means a lot coming from you." Isaac glanced toward the barn. "Did you hear the good news about the Labrador?"

"I heard it looks like he's going to pull through."

Isaac nodded and then his gaze surveyed the grouping of tables on the west side of the lawn. "What do you think about him?"

Noah followed his brother's gaze to their father. "Good question."

"Think he's sincere about making a change?"

"If not, he sure is putting on a good show." Part of Noah wanted to buy his father's miraculous turnaround. What man didn't want a real relationship with his father? "I guess time will tell when it comes to T.J."

"True. By any chance, have you heard from Liam?" Isaac's twin had all but fallen off the face of the earth recently.

"No. He's not returning your messages, either?"

Isaac shook his head. The news was troubling. Isaac and Liam had always been close.

"Think I should take a trip out to Colorado to find him?" Noah had been restless lately. A road trip with a research mission might do him some good even though the ranch couldn't spare him this time of year. Hell, the wedding had to be an afternoon affair in order for family on site to attend.

"If Liam doesn't want to be found there's no tracking him. He'll turn up when he's ready." Isaac knew his twin the best. Noah would yield to his brother's judgment.

Speaking of people who'd gone M.I.A., "Did you ever hear back from Mikayla?" He'd add the line, *asking for a friend*, and it would almost be funny. A total lie, but humorous nonetheless. It had been good of his brother to invite her to the small ceremony on Noah's behalf. Ever since she'd given him the cold shoulder she'd avoided him. Considering he'd lost his cell he couldn't exactly call her. He'd stopped by her mother's house once but talked himself out of knocking. Mikayla's two-door sedan wasn't parked out front and he couldn't think of one word to say to her mother.

The few times he'd gone out with Mikayla had been the best dates in longer than he cared to remember. Hell, they'd been right up there with best ever. So, it was probably just his wounded ego that had him wishing she'd felt the same.

Conversation with her had been easy. He'd laughed more than he could remember. Hell, their chemistry had been off the charts, or so he'd thought. Until she'd decided looking at his face made her want to punch something.

Noah thought about the kiss they'd shared more often than he should. He was still trying to figure out what he'd done wrong.

TO CONTINUE READING Noah and Mikayla's story, click [here](#).

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Barb Han is a USA TODAY and Publisher's Weekly Bestselling Author. Reviewers have called her books "heartfelt" and "exciting."

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