RISKING HER HEART

THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

At the airport, Ben guided the car to the terminal entrance. The driver got out and strode around the car. Charisse was still stuffing scripts into her briefcase when the back door opened. Then the door shut.

Charisse glanced through the window. A man wearing a skycap spoke to her driver. He pointed down the drive lane and then made a motion as if they needed to follow his direction and turn to the right. She pressed the power window switch.

She placed her fingers on top of the glass as if that would make the window slide quickly into the shaft.

“Ben, is everything all right?” she asked.

Ben bent his tall frame to look through the opening. “It seems the studio has sent a private jet to fly you back to California.”

“Which studio is that?”

Ben spoke softly to the skycap. The other man shrugged his shoulders. Ben looked through the window. “Our contact here doesn’t have a name. He’ll work on getting that.”

“No one told me about a studio sending a plane to fly me back to California. I need to call Marilyn and find out what she knows about that.” She pulled her phone out of her purse.

Ben rounded of the car and slid into the driver’s seat. He started the engine.

“You can’t leave yet.” The tightness in Charisse’s chest cinched around her lungs.

“He’s going to call me with the name of the studio.

“Where’re you staying?” JT asked Trent.

“My connecting flight leaves in a few hours. I’ll wait in the terminal.”

“Naw. You’re not waiting here.” He turned to the terminal. With a wave of his head, he beckoned them to follow. “There’s plenty of room at the ranch. We’ll get you back in time to catch your flight.”

“I appreciate the offer - .”

“We’ve got a colt.

She waved. Her heart leaped at  the sight of him, even though it had been less than two weeks since she’d last seen him. Too much had happened. It felt like a year had passed since she’d left the ranch. She walked down the stairs.

“Hey, Char, welcome back.” JT gave her a one armed hug when she reached the tarmac. “You’re looking good.”

“Can’t’ve changed too much. We saw each other a few days ago,” she said with a laugh.

His gaze flicked to something behind her.

She turned and saw Trent descend the stairs. He watched Charisse. He never looked away.

Blackness was a narrowing tunnel on Trent’s face.

“Stand back.” Trent’s voice shot through the darkness.

She felt his iron grip again.

She wanted to fall through the ground. Leo murdered? That couldn’t’ve been what the deputy had said. Leo was vacationing with the two line actress on some deserted island. Barbara had said so. Barbara knew everything about Leo, including his affairs. She protected him. Helped him. If he were dead, murdered, she would know.

But she didn’t know.

Someone moved her, Trent maybe. She had that swirl in her stomach you get when you move but can’t see the movement, when you don’t know if you’ve moved left, right, up, down, backward, forward, and set her on something hard.

“Ms. Whitloch, are you all right?”

She looked at the voice. She thought it came from the man who had told her Leo had been murdered, but now she couldn’t see the deputy’s face, only an outline of a deputy’s hat anchored over a smooth jaw.

“You just told me my former fiancé is dead, murdered, I’d have to say the answer is no.”

“My apologies, ma’am.”

“If it’s all the same to you, Deputy, I’ll escort Ms. Whitloch back to her home. As you can understand, this has been quite an ordeal for her. I’ll take it from here.”

“Because of Ms. Whitloch’s relationship with Mr. Vasilios, we’d like for her to come with us to the county sheriff’s office and answer a few questions.”

“What sort of questions?” Charisse looked past the shroud of darkness to the light that focused on the deputy’s face.

“Don’t say anything, Charisse.” Trent’s voice was low and firm. “Deputy, Ms. Whitloch will consult with her attorney. On advice of counsel, she will decide if it’s necessary for her to meet with you and answer any questions.”

“Is that your decision, Ms. Whitloch?”

“I don’t know what to think.” She murmured. A swirl of thoughts spun in her head. Leo dead. Leo murdered. She hadn’t seen Leo in over a week. Why would law enforcement want to question her? Unless they thought she knew something about his murder.

Leo murdered. Who could do such a thing? Many people were jealous of Leo, but he had no enemies. He was charming, charismatic. Everyone loved him.

Charisse felt a shudder in her chest. She stiffened. She couldn’t let the fear swelling inside of her penetrate through her bones and through her skin. She wouldn’t let them know the fear rising within her.

Inhaling a slow, steady breath, she anchored her lungs to keep them from expanding, to keep her chest from rising. She wouldn’t let them know she was trying to calm herself. She wouldn’t let them know she was trying to smother her fear.

“Yes, it’s my decision. Thank you, gentlemen, for telling me about Leo.” She pushed her hands against the seat and struggled to wobbly knees.

“Ms. Whitloch, if the need arises, we’ll visit you at Crystal Creek.” The deputy’s words hung in the chill of the forest. A stillness fell over them.

Trent glanced over his shoulder at him. “As Ms. Whitloch told you, she’ll be discussing this with her lawyer. All further contact will be with him.”

Trent wrapped his arm around Charisse’s waist and guided her to the horses. Her scent aroused him. She smelled of springtime, but he didn’t miss the underlying scent of fear. He focused on Leo and what his death could mean to Charisse. They had to find out what really happened to the box office star.

The silence between Trent and Charisse and the deputies pulsed with suspicion and skepticism. The deputies didn’t believe her.

The click of motors starting and revving boomed through the trees. Motors whined and moved away with an occasional sputter whenever they bounced over a bump or rock. The distance swallowed the sound. Silence shrouded the forest.

“Are you up to riding back?” Trent looked into Charisse’s pale face, made more colorless by the chill nipping her flawless complexion. An abrupt hunger covered him, a hunger so powerful he ached.

“I have to be,” Charisse said. “I have to find out what happened to Leo.”

“Or I can phone for help,” Trent said, “and have someone, one of the ranch hands maybe, drive a snowmobile and take you back to the ranch on the snowmobile.”

“I’ll ride the horse.” She pulled herself into the saddle.

Trent watched her settle into the saddle, saw her slip her fingers between the reins. He wouldn’t mount his horse until she was steady. “Ready to ride back to the ranch?”

“Am I ready? I’ll know the truth when we return to the ranch. I can’t stand the thought of knowing Leo suffered.” Her throat tightened blocking the swallow she desperately needed. “Do you think it’s true, Trent? Do you think he was murdered?” She shuddered.

If she were responsible for his death, she made a good show of hiding her guilt. She was pale and trembling. What murderer would turn pale and tremble?

A murderer who was also an actress?

Trent stiffened, searing blood rushing through his veins. He fixed his attention on the lovely face looking up at him. She was impeccably shaped, trim yet curvaceous. Her hair was wild curls about her face, a face he knew loomed in minds of men throughout the world. She had such a fresh, clean wholesomeness about her. Who wouldn’t fantasize about this lovely girl-next-door?

“Let’s head back. I’ll follow you.” Trent’s voice was flat and cold.

The ride back to the ranch took forever and passed in a blink of an eye. Charisse didn’t notice the gray jays flitting from branch to branch or a fox weighted by her winter coat pad down the path near the frontage road.

A couple of ranch hands dragged open the barn entrance when Charisse and Trent rounded a knoll. A hand wearing a dark brown hat took Raja’s reins and told Charisse he’d curry the horse and give her some oats. The other hand took Excalibur’s reins.

Trent was already standing by Charisse’s horse when she slid from the saddle. She felt numb when her boots touched the packed snow. She wanted to offer him a smile, discuss the location, make a plan after Rose made a decision about the shoot.

If Rose was in any condition to make that decision.

They trudged up the path to the house, snow crunching beneath their boots.

“We have this discussion once a week, and afterwards you always realize that acting is in your blood. You couldn’t walk away from your career even if you wanted to."

"I have these thoughts even though I’m talking to you. I know you’re trying to change my mind, but it’s not working. I want to cancel my audition with Trent Parker tomorrow. Crystal Creek is where I really want to be."

“Let’s think through this calmly, Charisse.” Marilyn’s voice vibrated with the anxiety of a Type A personality. “Take a sedative and go to bed. You’ll think more clearly about this in the morning.”

“I’m not taking a sedative, Marilyn. I promise I will sleep on it. If I still feel the same way in the morning, I’m flying back to Crystal Creek.”

“I’ll see you in the morning. Don’t make breakfast. I’ll stop by the coffee shop and pick up a carton of mochas and a bag of croissants, then I’ll drive you to the audition.”

“I can’t eat that before an audition. I’m nervous enough as it is. I’ll throw up all over the place.”

Marilyn groaned. “Thank you for sharing that little piece of . . . information.”

“I’d rather be on a plane to Colorado.

“I have a better idea,” Charisse said. “I have melons and cantaloupe in the refrigerator. I’ll throw oranges and grapefruit into the juicer. Plan on having breakfast with me in the morning.”

“You know I’m brain dead without coffee first thing in the morning. I’ll bring the coffee. During breakfast, I’ll give you one of my famous pep talks.”

“Your pep talks depress me.”

“This one is different. After we’ve eaten, I’ll drive you to the audition.”

“Marilyn, you’re not driving me. You’re a total basket case even when you’re calm. I’ll drive myself.”

“You need to make sure you actually go.”

“I’m not even sure of that myself. I will take your advice. I’ll get a good night’s sleep. I’ll see you in the morning, Marilyn.”

She closed her eyes, willed that tumble feeling in her mind that let her know her mind was shutting down, ready for sleep to take over.

Scattered driftwood dotted the beach. Some were caught in the tide and drifted out to the sea.

“Not good enough. Are you kidding me? Every producer in Hollywood and outside of Hollywood is bombarding her with scripts. They want -.”

He waved away her protest. “That’s because they don’t know any better. Let’s see what sort of peace offering she sent me. Open it.”

Bambi gave a Marlon Brando grunt and sliced a manicured nail through the paper, dragged it the length of the package, then wrapped her hands through the opening and ripped the paper to the floor.

“That, Trent, is Charisse Whitloch.” Bambi flipped her wrist at the picture as if she were presenting a product on a game show.

“And get me a driver. I need to be at the airport in an hour.”

“You do remember that you sent your jet to Colorado to pick up Charisse Whitloch.”

Trent hesitated a moment. “Yeah.”

“So your plane lands at two fifteen.”

Trent glanced at his watch and then looked at his assistant. “I know that. Tell the driver I want to be at the airport at two fifteen sharp.”

“Two fifteen it is.” She closed the door.

\* \* \*

Trent Parker paced the length of his office, his phone’s Wi-Fi device crammed into his ear. One wall of his office was a barricade of windows that overlooked a courtyard filled with walkways and water fountains. The other wall was filled with photographs of him with famous movie stars and other dignitaries.

An agent’s panicky voice flowed over the phone. Trent only half heard the man’s diatribe. Mostly, he focused on the script he flipped through. He made mental notes of the changes the script needed.

“Jim, he’s bad, and not in a good way,” Trent said to the agent who was trying to negotiate a contract. “Tell him he has six hours to accept the deal or I’m dropping his salary by seven figures.”

“If you counter this offer, I’m telling you, my client will walk,” Jim said.

Trent flipped to the next page of script. “Good. I’ve got a no name that’s perfect for the part. This town needs fresh talent.”

“Wait a minute, Trent.” Jim’s voice crackled through Trent’s earpiece. “My client is in high demand. If you refuse to hire him for this film project, he’ll refuse to ever work for you again.”

“I’m holding you to your word, Jim. Call me when you’ve got somebody with real talent.” Trent disconnected the call.

A knock sounded at his office door. “What?”

The office door opened. A blonde with Marilyn Monroe curves leaned through the doorway. “Trent, what’s going on in here? Accounting can hear you on the next floor.”

“I doubt that.” One corner of his mouth tucked into an annoyed curve. He plopped into the chair behind his desk. With a red pen, he made notes in the margins of the script he’d been studying. “I saw you roll your eyes, Bambi. And you’re not leaving. What else do you have to tell me?

\* \* \*

Trent’s brows hooked above his nose. “Charisse Whitloch. Don’t know  – wait a minute. She auditioned for that dystopian trilogy. She won’t get the part. She’s not good enough.”

“Not good enough. Are you kidding me? Every producer in Hollywood and outside of Hollywood is bombarding her with scripts. They want -.”

He waved away her protest. “That’s because they don’t know any better. Let’s see what sort of peace offering she sent me. Open it.”

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“That, Trent, is Charisse Whitloch.” Bambi flipped her wrist at the picture as if she were presenting a product on a game show.

“No, Whitloch’s eyes aren’t that blue. She doesn’t smile like that.”

“Oh, yes, Trent. That is Charisse Whitloch, blue eyes, dazzling smile and all.”

“I never said her smile was dazzling.”

“But you thought that. You still do.”

Trent’s eyes narrowed. The lines around his mouth deepened. “This photo’s been retouched.”

“You need to look through her portfolio again.” Bambi wadded scraps of wrapping paper into a ball. “That photo has not been retouched. Did you even talk to her when she came in for her screen test?”

“That’s the casting director’s job, not mine.”

“If you’d watched her screen test, you’d know what she looks like.”

“I saw enough. She’s no good.” Something flickered in his eyes. “She needs a better name.”

Bambi jutted her chin and then stretched it an inch farther. “If you keep criticizing her, you might believe all these fables you’re telling yourself.”

“Get that picture out of here.” Trent turned away and stared out the window at a water fountain that pushed arcs of water into the air higher and higher before vanishing. He was hoping if he looked at something else, he’d forget that face staring at him from across the room. It didn’t work. Her face was emblazoned in his mind.

“Give me a few minutes,” Bambi said. “I need to get the guys back in here to take it out. Where do you want me to put it? Or do you me to send it back?”

“Send it back.”

“You got it.” Bambi’s spikey heels clicked across the room to the door.

“Don’t send it back.” Trent shouted after her. He whipped around.

Bambi leaned through the doorway. “You want to keep it?”

“No, but it’s here. It will stay here until I don’t want it here anymore.”

“Okay, it’s staying here.” She started to close the door.

“And get me a driver. I need to be at the airport in an hour.”

“You do remember that you sent your jet to Colorado to pick up Charisse Whitloch.”

Trent hesitated a moment. “Yeah.”

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They were celebrities known for their lavish lifestyles. Her mouth dried and she tried to swallow the dry clot lodged in her throat. These actors and singers wouldn’t even know what outlying parking meant.

\* \* \*

That could take years. Airport employees would be available to help the celebrities in hopes of garnering a generous tip.

\* \* \*

Charisse nodded. She followed him through the crowd and into the path of a man who towered over the passengers milling through the terminal. He spoke to a statuesque blonde whose legs were almost as long as his. The man tipped his hand toward the blonde as if he were ticking off items he needed her to complete.

The man striding toward her was Trent Parker.

Trent and the blonde skirted around Charisse.

She gulped. Her stomach plunged to rest against her engorged bladder.

The fear she’d felt the first time she’d barrel raced at the county fair reached inside her chest with razor sharp tentacles and squeezed.

She needed to introduce herself to Trent. Thank goodness, her assistant Flo had canceled the delivery of the giant sized photograph of Charisse accepting the AFMA award. If he had seen that, meeting the great Trent Parker would feel awkward.

“I’ll be right back,” Charisse said to the skycap and strode across the terminal. She was almost at a run by the time she caught up with Trent. His long strides were easily two of hers.

“Mr. Parker.” Her voice sounded strained and raw and she’d do anything for a retake.

He lifted his head at the sound of her voice and turned. His blond companion pulled out her cell phone and sat in a chair near the departure gate.

Something flickered in Trent’s eyes. For a moment, she thought he’d recognized her. Her lungs tightened. She slowed her pace.

His gaze flicked past her and scanned the celebrities gathered in the concourse. He didn’t recognize her. Her ego dropped a notch. He saw dozens of actors in a day. He’d never be able to place her.

Something hooked his gaze back to her. The corner of his mouth tipped. He had recognized her. Her heart jumped. He recognized her, or confused her with someone else.

“Ms. Whitloch, it is?”

He hadn’t confused her with someone else.

“Yes, sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“The pleasure is mine.” He said each word slowly, carefully as if wanting her to understand the emphasis.

He extended his hand. She accepted it. It was large and sinewy and could have wrapped around hers twice. Its warmth seeped into places she hadn’t known existed. She pulled away.

“Thank you, sir. I had auditioned for - .”

“I remember.”

“Thank you, sir. I would consider it an honor if I could work with you soon.”

“I believe I sent you an email regarding your audition.”

Charisse felt the color creep into her face. “Yes, sir, you did.”

“You need acting lessons.”

“I appreciate the comment, sir.”

“I don’t think you do.”

Charisse’s brows shot up into her hairline. “Excuse me? Sir?”

Trent pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He swiped his thumb across several screens. He stared at his phone a moment. His smile stretched wide and he gave one short blast of a laugh.

He tilted the phone’s screen for Charisse’s view.

In the center was her face, her smile tremulous, her eyes dewy. In her hands rested the coveted AFMA award. Behind the picture peeked the edges of a floor to ceiling bookcase.

Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would crack her ribs and then fly out of her chest.

The picture she had told Flo not to send had been sent, or else someone had sent him a picture which he now showed her.

She pressed her lips together so hard she staunched the blood flow. “Where did you get that?”

“From you. You sent it to me.”

She shook her head. “I had thought of sending it to you, but then I changed my mind.”

“No, if you had changed your mind it wouldn’t be sitting in my office.”

“Mr. Parker, I am so sorry. You did send me that email about the acting lessons, but I think that email was sent in error. I won the AFMA for best actress last year - .”

“I know that.”

“And I studied acting with Berle Podell.”

“Not the best, but he has his moments. As for the AFMA, it’s a Hollywood ego trip made up for insecure actors to feel good about themselves.”

“If I had won the Oscar, would you have been impressed with that?”

“You won’t win an Oscar. Ms. Whitloch, you’re not that good. I wish you were because I can see in your face you desperately need to hear you’re good. One day you might be right, but for now, you’re not. Call me in a year. Maybe you’ll be good enough then. And put on some weight. You’re too skinny.”

“Skinny? Film adds fifteen pounds.” Her jaw loosened. She snapped it shut

“Fifteen pounds doesn’t add enough weight. You’re still too skinny.”

He strode across the polished tile to the gate she had just exited. Phil stood at the entrance. The corner of his mouth turned as if telling her he felt sorry for her. The tall blonde glanced at her, her lips pressed together in a pitying look.

Charisse felt every eye in terminal on her. She didn’t have to look around to know that each actor, each singer watched her. Now would’ve been a good time for one of those devastating California earthquakes.

Trent was about to board the plane she’d just exited. His private jet he had sent to Colorado just to fly her back to California. Yet he had no desire to work with her. Hated her acting ability. Why?

“Mr. Parker.” Charisse rushed across the terminal.

He stopped at the gate entrance and faced her. His brow arched to a point that seemed to bark the question, “What?”

“If you think I’m such a bad actress, why did send your jet to Colorado to fly me back to California?”

“I never said you were bad. And as for the jet, sometimes I like to do nice things, but don’t get used to it.” He turned away, his broad back filled the ramp leading to his private jet. In two strides, he turned the corner and disappeared.

She stepped into the ramp.

Phil stepped in front of her. “I can’t let you board the plane, Ms. Whitloch.”

“I’ll leave before takeoff. I just have a question for Mr. Parker.”

“Sorry, Ms. Whitloch. Those are my strict orders. No one boards the jet without Mr. Parker’s specific invitation. I have to close the door now.”

Charisse moved back into the terminal. “Sure. I understand.”

Phil closed the door. A moment later, the jet backed away from the gate. She stood in the window and watched the jet take off. She couldn’t turn back to the terminal. She couldn’t bear to receive all those pitying looks from the other travelers in the terminal.

She didn’t have a choice. She had to find transportation to her car in the outlying parking lot.

She inhaled a breath that felt like it would split her lungs, lifted her chin and crossed the terminal to the concierge’s desk.

“I need transportation to the parking lot. Can you page a shuttle bus to meet me in the public transportation lane?”

“We don’t schedule shuttle buses here,” the woman said. She wore square glasses. Her hair had been twisted at the back of her head and anchored with a pencil. “The travelers that use this terminal hire limousines.”

“Then I’ll hire a limousine. Can you help me with that?”

“It’s after hours. The service doesn’t start again until seven o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“How do I get to the parking lot?”

“You’ll have to walk down to the flyover. The shuttle picks up passengers there.”

Charisse glanced out the window. Spatters of rain dashed against the glass.

“It’s raining,” Charisse said.

The woman reached under the desk and pulled out an umbrella. She handed to Charisse. “Compliments of the municipal county airport. We hope you enjoyed your flight.”

Charisse’s jaw slackened. It felt as if had dropped to the countertop. Her gaze switched from the woman to the umbrella. “Thanks,” she murmured

\* \* \*

The skycap drove Charisse to the level where passengers were greeted by the drivers of hired cars. She puzzled that they were able to hire the private cars and she wasn’t. No matter. Soon she’d be sitting in a warm dry shuttle bus. Not the same as a limousine, but it would serve that same purpose.

“This is as far as I can take you,” the skycap said.

She stared out at the rain pummeling the asphalt. “It’s okay.” Her voice was vacant and toneless. She snapped out of the trance and smiled at the him. “I appreciate your taking me this far.”

He hopped out of the cart and set her luggage on the sidewalk. “It’s the least I can do.” He pointed to the gravel road that paralleled the drive lane. “Stay on that road and it will lead you to the stop. The shelter’s gone. Kids tore it down a few years ago. City never rebuilt it. Budget cuts, you know.”

“I’ll be fine. It can’t take that long for the bus to arrive.” She pulled some bills from her purse and handed it to him. “Thanks for taking me this far.”

The man touched his cap and hopped into the cart. The engine whined like a tightly wound rubber band and sped back to the terminal.

\* \* \*

“You left.”

“The terminal? Yes, I’m going home.”

“I had arranged for my driver to give you a ride home.”

She cocked her head and exhaled roughly. “I can’t accept it. I left my car here. I’m going to take the shuttle to the parking lot.”

He waved his head toward the car door. “Get in.”

\* \* \*

“You were on the plane.”

“The flight was delayed due to the rain. Pete saw you walking down the drive lane. He texted me.

\* \* \*

“Princesa?” The question clouded Trent’s eyes.

Charisse’s mind scrambled for an explanation. Her annoyance piqued. She had told Lupe not to call her that, and she’d explained why. “It’s just something -.”

“I’m aware of your ancestry. You’re mother’s a princess. You, your sister and brother are not. Whether you are a princess or not, doesn’t matter to me. The reasons matter even less.”

She didn’t have to explain her family lineage. Better, he didn’t care. Leo did. When they met, he had pumped her for information. When they were with friends, he explained her pedigree as if he were an expert. The raised eyebrows that pivoted to her made her want to slide beneath the restaurant table.

Trent didn’t care. The squeezing ache of alarm rising in Charisse’s chest eased a fraction.

\* \* \*

“You’re leaving?”

“If you need something I’ll stay. If you’re okay, I’ll leave.”

“You can leave. I’m fine.” She sneezed.

“Finish all that soup. You’ll feel fine once you’ve eaten everything.” He strode toward the doorway.

\* \* \*

Barbara’s hands wavered around Charisse’s arms as if knowing she should touch her to console her, but not wanting to do so.

**\* \* \***

His tongue rolled out of his mouth and his teeth bared as if he were smiling.

 **\* \* \***

“I should go with you.”

He shook his head. “I’ll need room for medical personnel.”

“I’m certified in first aid and CPR. I needed those certifications so I could babysit.”

There was that soft laugh bordering on a snort, the tip of his mouth, the narrowing of his eyes. “Somehow, I can’t see you as a babysitter.”

“Neither could my mother, but that didn’t stop me from taking the classes.”

“Now that I believe, but if the helicopter gets too crowded, I’m leaving you behind, no arguments.”

“Absolutely none.”

“Knowing you, there’s a qualifier in that declaration.” He strode down the beach.

“How are we getting to the airport?” Charisse hurried after him.

A tweaking pain shot up her ankle. She clenched her teeth against the throb. She wished she hadn’t been so aggressive in trekking up and down the beach to hand out water and juice.

“Charisse, I- .”

“You need a navigator.”

“What about Gatsby?”

“My neighbor’s home didn’t suffer any damage,” she said, referring to the family next door who were descendants of the silent film star, Clyde Stout. “I’ll see if they can watch him. They’ve done it before when I’ve had to travel and Lupe wasn’t available.”

**\* \* \***

Already the media had forgotten their speculation about her and Leo’s breakup with the pictures of Trent carrying Charisse across the beach.

**\* \* \***

This was the phone number that only his closest friends and his agent had. He answered every call. Or he forwarded the calls to Barbara. But even then he would call Barbara immediately and demand to know who had called and why.

**\* \* \***

He dipped a noodle server into the pasta and laid a serving on Charisse’s plate. “Is that enough or do you want more?”

“More than enough. You don’t have to serve me.”

“Comes with being in the restaurant industry. How much shrimp do you want?”

**\* \* \***

“Then his movie studio wasn’t damaged during the earthquake.”

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

**\* \* \***

She glided across the floor. It felt as if her feet didn’t touch the slate tile.

**\* \* \***

“You have nothing to do until then. Come to New Zealand and scout the location. We’ll go to Colorado and compare. If not, the decision will be made without you.” His threat was on shaky ground. She could easily say she didn’t care.

“Remember our agreement. I would supply the capital, but I wouldn’t be a silent partner.”

“I scouted the South Island for the trilogy I completed two years ago. It’s overused.”

“We’ll go there. You haven’t been there in two years. Your film is the last one to use that location. If you still agree, then we’ll scout the Colorado location.”

“But my house - .”

“Which you can do nothing about.”

“Being here will make me feel like I’m doing something.”

“With nothing to do.”

“You’re right. I’ll go. It’s what I need to do to prove you’re wrong about using New Zealand as a location.”

His breath caught at the light glowing in her eyes. She would enjoy proving him wrong. He would contact his front team. They needed to make sure the location they found was perfect. Filming in New Zealand would give him the tax break he sought.

“When do we leave?” she asked.

“Two days.” He pulled his phone from the counter. “I’ll text Bambi now and tell her that tomorrow she can book the flights and the hotel.”

She laid a hand over his. Too late, the heat of his skin radiated through her chasing away the chill she felt from the night air. She couldn’t pull away. She couldn’t let him know how he affected her. “Don’t text her now.”

His brows shot up not in surprise. Shame? When did the great Trent Parker ever do something that brought him embarrassment? That couldn’t be possible. She imagined he’d never felt embarrassment. Not even now.

“Did she escape the damage from the earthquake?” Charisse lifted her hand from his. Cool air rushed in where his skin had warmed hers.

“She was fine. She had offered to come help here. I told her it was too dangerous, that I’d contact her if things changed.”

“It’s true.”

“What?”

“You do have a heart?”

“Why would you think otherwise?”

“Your reputation is legendary.”

“Don’t believe everything you read.”

“I don’t. I read about your foundation for abused and neglected children. I didn’t believe that.”

“Good.”

“Why did you start that foundation?”

Trent picked up the tray and walked through the living room. He flipped on the switch that ignited the gas grill.

Charisse picked up her wineglass and followed him to the deck. She leaned a hip against the rail and looked out at the waves reflecting the light of the full moon. “You’re not going to tell me.”

“No, I’m not. Grab a plate. These skewers cook quickly.”

She picked up a plate from the table and stood beside him.

His hands whipped between the wooden sticks packed with abalone and fruit. The flames licked through meat that slowly turned golden. He snatched the ends of two skewers and whisked them to her plate.

“This looks wonderful.”

“Enjoy it. Starting tomorrow, we switch to planning mode. These past few days will seem like a breather once we get going.”

Dinner conversation was filled with small talk about the reconstruction throughout the city. Malibu had been hardest hit. The tsunami that had been reported to follow didn’t materialize. Charisse exhaled relief knowing that it wouldn’t. Los Angeles had endured enough tragedy with the earthquake.

The conversation had relaxed to the level of comfortable friends. Who was Trent Parker? Why was he a hard driving executive one minute and a joke telling bon vivant the next?

His phone rang. He glanced at the screen then pressed the screen. “Hey, Todd. What’s up?” He picked up the plates that had been empty for nearly an hour. He shouldered open the sliding door and crossed through the house to the kitchen.

Charisse picked up her wineglass and walked to the deck rail.

Trent’s voice carried through the house. Then seemed to drift away. She glanced over her shoulder. He was gone. Probably to his office to discuss whatever business he had with Todd.

She glanced at her own phone screen. Texts from friends and family collected in icons at the top of the screen. She glanced through them. None was from Leo. Probably because Barbara hadn’t given him her message.

Calling Leo was a mistake. She had ended the relationship. Maybe they could maintain a friendship, but date? There wasn’t enough forgiveness in this world for her to forget his liaison. And that was the one she discovered. What about his other trysts? What she had always thought were rumors started by jealous colleagues had to be true.

Still she wanted him to know she was there for him when he made a decision about his house. Whether he rebuilt or sold the property, the decision would be tough. He as she had worked hard to afford his dream home.

She pressed the speed dial for his cell phone.

“Hello.”

Her heart leaped. She hadn’t expected an answer on the first ring. Then logic pressed through her surprise. The voice didn’t belong to Leo.

“Barbara, it’s Charisse.”

“I know. I saw your number on the screen.”

“I’m sorry to bother you so late. Why is Leo’s phone ringing to yours?”

“He forwarded it to me.”

“Is he on location?”

“He’s on his way. My other phone is ringing. Can I help you with anything else?”

“No, let him know if he needs help with his house, I can help him. I’ve done quite a bit with my own. I almost feel like a pro.”

“I’ll tell him. I don’t mean to be rude, but I need to get this other call.”

“Of course, I -.”

The phone went dead.

Charisse rubbed her hands over her arms. She always felt a chill when she spoke with Barbara. She never understood Barbara’s coolness toward her. But that wasn’t quite right. She’d never seen Barbara warm up to anyone, including Leo. She was always aloof and distant, which was probably why she made a good assistant.”

But Flo was Charisse’s assistant. She was friendly and caring and an excellent assistant. No, detached didn’t make Barbara a good assistant. Whatever her personality, she was the assistant who worked best for Leo. As far as Charisse knew, he’d never had another assistant. Barbara seemed to have been by his side since the day he received his first fan letter. Barbara was always at Leo’s side.

Charisse knew of only one day when Barbara hadn’t been at Leo’s side. The day Charisse found Leo in bed with the two line actress from his latest film.

\* \* \*

Charisse wrapped her arms around her shoulders and listened to the waves lap the shoreline. In two days, she and Trent would fly to New Zealand to scout the location for his film, a location she didn’t believe would do the film justice.

Problem. Convincing Trent the Colorado site was a better location for the film.

She had to prove this to him before they spent the next twenty-four hours on the plane headed for New Zealand. Her stomach plunged and her head spin in rhythm with the undulating waves. Twenty-four hours to spend with the man who had no desire to spend time with her.

Now was the time for an alternate plan to kick into gear. She had to have everything in order when she presented her argument for Colorado as a better location. Next problem – convincing her stepmother Rose that as owner of the Crystal Creek Ranch she should welcome the movie production on her property. More difficult – convincing her the staging wouldn’t interfere with the ecological balance Rose had carefully preserved during the last twenty-five years.

Slipping her phone from her pocket, she scrolled though her contact list. She took a deep breath and pressed the icon for Rose’s phone.

“Hello.” Rose’s voice seemed softer than normal, though the country resonance laced through her greeting.

“Rose, it’s Charisse. I’m sorry I’m calling so late. How are you doing?” The hesitation reached through the phone and pounded in Charisse’s head. “Rose, are you - ?”

“I’m fine, honey. How are you? You’re not hurt, are you? That earthquake didn’t bother you, did it?”

“I’m fine. Unfortunately, my house isn’t well. How’s Anna?”

“She’s managing. She. . .”

“Rose, are you sure everything’s all right?”

“Fine, honey, fine.”

“Rose, I wanted to fly out to the ranch and bring a business partner with me.” Her throat dried. How could she think of Trent as a business partner whenever she thought of him her pulse raced and her body seemed to catch fire.

“Come out anytime. You and you’re guests are always welcome.”

“Thanks, Rose. It wouldn’t be for a visit. We’d like to consider the ranch as a possible location for filming.”

“You want to film a movie on the ranch? I would need more information.”

“I’ll give you whatever you need. If you’re going to be around for the next few days, I’d like to fly to ranch with my partner with a detailed plan of what would be involved.”

“I’ll be here. Let me know when you arrive, and I’ll pick you up at the airport.”

“You don’t have to do that, Rose. We’ll rent a car and come to the house. But I’ll notify you as soon as I know when we’re coming. Is everything all right?”

“Everything is fine, dear. Don’t worry about us. You have enough to think about with the earthquake and your house.”

“I’ll be in touch as soon as I know my arrival date. Please give everyone my love.”

Again there was the long hesitation. “Goodbye, dear.”

There was a clicking sound as if Rose tried to hang up the phone, but hadn’t laid the handset in the cradle. The clicking lasted but a moment. She sounded helpless and confused.

Rose had never been helpless nor confused. A country girl who had never shown fear, she had run the fifteen thousand acre ranch on her own even before Max had left her.

She dialed Anna’s phone number. The odd ring transferred to a recording that chastised her for dialing a nonworking phone number. She flipped through her contact list and pressed the icon for her half-sister Emily’s phone.

“Hi, Charisse.” Emily sounded breathless.

“Hey, Em. How are you?”

“Fine.” Her voice was short and curt – something was not fine. “I tried to call Anna, but her phone’s been disconnected.”

“I’m not sure why. She’s with Rocco right now. I’ll tell her to call you when she gets back.”

“Thanks, Em. I just spoke to your mother. Is everything okay?”

A sniff sounded through the phone.

“Em? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Mom’s fine. Everyone’s gone now. Mom misses not having the entire family here.”

“I’ll be returning to the ranch in a few days.”

“It’s not that bad. You don’t need to come.”

“Actually I’ll be coming for work. I spoke to Rose. We’re scouting locations for the filming project.”

“Really? You’re going to produce a film here at the ranch?”

“We’re still in the preliminary stages. It’s up to the investors. One of them will come with me to the ranch. If it looks like a good location and if Rose approves, then we might film at the ranch. There’re a lot of qualifiers involved before the final decision.”

“Oh.” Emily’s enthusiasm seemed to escape like a deflating balloon. “I hope it works out. That would be exciting to have a movie crew at the ranch.”

“Trust me, Em. It isn’t that exciting. Filming is very boring.”

“It doesn’t look that way to me, but if you say so.”

“I have to go, Em. Please remember to tell Anna to call me.” After wishing her half-sister good night, she hung up.

She stepped into the living room, but her thoughts strayed back to Crystal Creek and her conversation with her stepmother. Rose had sounded so distant, so subdued. Not the Rose she knew. Not the Rose always full of life and energy.

The turmoil of thoughts churned in her mind. It wasn’t until she reached the bottom of the staircase, when she felt something warm and caressing.

“Is everything all right?” Trent’s deep voice penetrated the turmoil churning inside her.

She glanced at the landing.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Her hand gripped the phone. She couldn’t let go. Letting go would be the razor cut that would separate her from her family.

His laugh was soft but the derision wasn’t lost on her. “I heard voices. I wanted to make sure everything was all right.”

“You heard my voice. I was talking on the phone to my family - my stepmother, Rose.”

“I heard a man’s voice.”

“That’s not possible. I’m here. Alone. As you can see.”

He moved down the stairs, past her and to the deck. His hands gripping the rail, he scanned the beach.

Fear so bitingly cold spread through her like blood flowing through her veins. Her chest ached as if ice had lodged in her throat. She moved to the glass door opening.

A breeze teased the curls covering his head. Rumpled from sleep, they were tousled and had that run-fingers-through-them beckoning.

She laced her fingers together and clutched them to her stomach.

He looked over his shoulder at her. “You didn’t hear voices?”

“No. I was on the phone.” She stepped to the rail. Not near him. She made sure as least ten feet separated her from him.

The beach spread before them was quiet and empty. It had been that way since the earthquake. The idle Malibuites no longer strolled the beach at all hours, their time now occupied with rebuilding or selling beachfront property.

Voices rolled from below.

Trent grabbed the rail. Like a gymnast dismounting a pommel horse, he swung over the side. He made a fluid landing then burst into a sprint to the corner of the house.

A string of profanities pierced the air. Two figures burst from beneath the overhang and dashed down the beach as if trying to escape the angel of death. The second figure screeched at the first to wait for him to catch up.

Charisse switched on her phone’s video app and recorded the panicked duo. Her movements were smooth and fluid. Inside her chest, her heart flailed like a trapped animal struggling for freedom.

Trent pulled out his phone. “Need a patrol,” he said and gave the dispatch operator his address.

Charisse leaned over the rail. “Trent, I videotaped those two. Ask dispatch for an email, and I’ll send them the tape.”

His white teeth gleamed against his tanned face. “Clever.” His voice edged on a laugh. He recited the email address to her.

She typed it in and pressed send.

“They got it.” He glanced in the direction the prowlers had fled.

No one could be seen. If the prowlers were still lurking, they were well hidden. They had been so frightened when Trent landed in front of them, he doubted they would hang around to look for another opportunity to ransack abandoned property.

With a heavy exhale, he climbed the stairs two at a time to the landing.

When he reached the deck he was still smiling. “What made you think to tape them?”

“It’s kind of a hobby of mine. Expect the unexpected.”

“How’s this for unexpected? Go to bed. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

“About tomorrow.”

“You’re not having second thoughts.”

She was having second, third and fourth thoughts. “Who else is traveling with us?”

“No one. We can make this decision on our own.”

Her lungs locked up as if she’d inhaled sand. “But I thought - .”

“There’re two opinions weighing on the location decision. We film in New Zealand, mine, or we don’t, yours. The next decision is do we film in Colorado, your opinion.”

“And yours is that we don’t film in Colorado?”

His crooked smile broke across his square jaw. “I never said I was against filming in Colorado. I’m going, am I not?”

The tension building in her muscles seeped out like the ebbing tide. He wanted to see Crystal Creek. He wanted to consider it for a location shot. For that she was grateful. Even if they didn’t locate there, at least she could be with her family before Christmas.

And if Rose decided the project wasn’t right for the ranch? She still had that opportunity to bask in the peace of Crystal Creek, a needed respite after her breakup with Leo and then enduring the earthquake.

It was almost midnight when sleep edged into the turmoil churning in her mind.

When the sun’s rays touched the surf, Charisse was in the shower. She needed to shop before their flight to New Zealand. She hadn’t left Malibu since the earthquake.

After seeing a television report of a possible relationship between her and Trent, she had refused to watch local television news. Occasionally she opened a news app on her phone. The earthquake was two days old - old news for news outlets on the east coast. She didn’t know what the rest of Los Angeles looked like.

From the closet, she pulled leggings, boots and a belted tunic. The outfit skimmed over her form like a second layer of skin. She wondered who Trent’s buyer was that she or he knew exacting how to buy clothes that not only fit well but flattered any figure.

Stepping into the hallway, the aroma of coffee filled her lungs. Her stomach rumbled so loud she was certain it would wake Trent if he wasn’t already awake. He would be awake. She learned one thing – he didn’t sleep much.

In the kitchen, Paola stood at the island and sliced melon and guava onto a platter. A Belgian waffle maker sat next to the cooktop. She looked up when Charisse was halfway down the stairs.

Charisse moved to the coffeemaker and lifted a mug from the tree. “No breakfast for me, Paola. You can save that for Trent when he gets up.”

“Mr. Trent’s been up for a long time.”

“Where is he?” She looked through the glass doors to the deck. The pummeling in her chest at the thought of seeing him, his muscular form pressing against the fabric of a polo shirt, revved like a power motor reaching maximum torque.

The cushions were arranged as in invitation for guests. The pit looked cold and rigid without a flame licking from the burner.

No one stood on the deck. It was vacant.

A dull ache squeezed her throat. She turned away. Why would the empty deck bother her? Yet whenever she had looked out there, he had been standing at the rail or cooking on the brazier. Her gaze skimmed past Paola. The curious flicker in the housekeeper’s eyes was enough to stop Charisse before she forced her stare to focus on the coffeemaker.

“Mr. Trent is gone. To the office.” Paola’s accented English was slow and deliberate and filled with curiosity.

“Does that man ever relax?” Charisse poured coffee into her mug. Her hand shook. The spout of the decanter vibrated the mug. She pushed the decanter onto the warming plate.

“Sí, when he works.”

“How did I know you were going to say that?” Charisse murmured into her mug.

Paola pushed the tray of slide fruit in front of Charisse. “You must eat. I make you waffle.”

Charisse’s stomach growled. The growl was clear. It begged for the fresh taste of the tantalizing fragrance of the melon and cantaloupe. She stepped backwards. “I don’t have time, Paola. We’re leaving tomorrow and I have to shop. I have nothing to take on the trip. In fact, I have nothing at all. I don’t even have luggage. Everything I own was destroyed in the earthquake.”

“Mr. Trent was clear. You don’t need to shop. You have everything you need here.”

“Those clothes don’t belong to me. I’ll call the network transportation and someone can drive me to the shops.”

“The network transportation. For what?” Trent’s voice broke through the discussion.

Charisse gave a small leap and turned around. The coffee in her mug sloshed against the sides and she stretched her arms to prevent a dousing from the heated liquid.

“I didn’t hear you - .”

“No, you and Paola seemed quite engrossed in some subject.” His gaze flicked from her to Paola before returning to her and lingering. His lids lowered a fraction as an invitation to explain the discussion.

Charisse set her mug on the counter. “I have some errands to run.” She made a wide circle around him.

“Mr. Trent, I told her the clothes in the closet were hers.”

“Is that the errand you need to run? Clothes shopping?”

“I appreciate the offer, but I want my own clothes.

“Understandable. You don’t need to call a driver. There are cars in the garage. You’re welcome to drive any of those.”

“I appreciate the offer but because I’m going to have to replace everything anyway, I may as well start now. I’ll start the car.” A car she had no place to park.

“You’re thinking of where you need to park that car.”

“Take one of mine. No strings attached.”

“I never thought there would be.”

“I wanted to confirm in case there was any doubt.” He held out the keys to her.

She slipped her fingers around the keyring. “Paola said you went to the office. I’m surprised to see you here in the middle of the day.”

“The studio lot isn’t in the best shape.” Lines of frustration pressed into his brow. In his eyes reflected something more than the annoyance of a studio damaged by the earthquake. There was concern for employees affected by the earthquake. “I thought is best to telecommute for the afternoon. There may be several people I can’t contact because of the damage they’ve experienced.”

“Is everyone all right?”

“My crew is fine physically, but some have experienced monumental losses. No different than what you’ve gone through.”

Except she accepted his offer to stay in his home a far cry from the motels where many Los Angelenos now lived if they were fortunate enough to find room. Pain at having lost her house and guilt at having an offer to stay in Trent’s plush residence rose within her.

“Don’t.” the word was short and sharp out of his mouth.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t punish yourself for the way you’re working through your misfortune. Bring yourself to the point where you can move past the disaster and put yourself in a position to help others. You’re taking advantage of an opportunity. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Except that it feels wrong.”

“Give me the car keys.” He held out his hand.

She held them above his palm, the surprise at his change of mind weaving through her chest like tangled vine. She opened her mouth to question his second thoughts.

“Get in the car. I’ll drive you to the shopping district.”

“If you have work to do, I’ll hire a driver.”

“Since you’re going to hire a driver, you can hire me.”

“What about your work? You came home to work?”

“Technology is a marvelous thing.”

At the sound of the keys, Gatsby’s claws scratched across the wood flooring. His tail wagging, he sat at Charisse’s feet, his front paws prancing in his typical response to convince her to let him join her.

She stooped next to him. “I’m sorry, Gatsby, but you have to stay. You wouldn’t enjoy this trip.” She looked over Gatsby’s head and into Trent’s eyes fixed hard on her.

Paola wrapped her hand around the dog’s corner. “Come on, Gatsby, you can keep me company today.”

The dog whined but allowed Paola to lead him into the kitchen.

Charisse’s throat went dry. Gatsby’s secure little world had been turned upside down for more than a week.

“He’s resilient.” Trent’s voice penetrated her thoughts. “In two minutes, he will have forgotten everything.”

“I know.” She couldn’t tear her gaze from the animal who loved her unconditionally. Something about dogs. They were devoted.

Not like humans.

Men.

Leo.

Probably Trent. But there was no scuttlebutt about his liaisons.

The swallow in her throat burned. “But it’s hard to watch a helpless animal try to understand why his home’s been lost and his schedule shuffled.”

Trent’s dark eyes looked into hers. They were soft and gentle with a look that seemed to siphon air out of her lungs.

“He has you.” Trent’s deep voice was tender as if talking to a beloved child.

She stilled soaking in the tone. Not something she wanted to do. Something she needed to do. In that moment, she wished she could tear herself away from that desire.

Not possible. That was what she needed.

“That’s all Gatsby cares about,” Trent said. “What are you going to do when you have children, and they don’t want you to leave?”

Charisse have children? The place where her heart used to be felt hollow, scooped out. She wanted children but she wanted something else - someone to share them with. Now that she and Leo had gone their separate ways, having a family didn’t look promising.

In the garage sat four cars. A light covering of earthquake dust had settled over the Ferrari and the Porsche.

“Your sports cars are so clean.” Her gaze scanned the shiny finish of each car that gleamed like mirrors.

“They don’t get driven much. We’ll take the off road vehicle.” He nodded toward an SUV with rust leeching through its silver paint.

“That looks like a prop from a science fiction film.”

“That’s because it is.” When her gaze jerked from the SUV back to him, he said, “I bought at a prop sale.”

He touched the small of her back and guided her toward the vehicle.

The touch was brief, his hand pulling away as soon as he had touched her, but it was enough to seep through her jacket, become a sizzling hot touch that was an unwanted reminder of what his kisses felt like – hot, charged and something she could never let happen again.

It wasn’t until she climbed into the Jeep that her heart slowed and she looked over her shoulder at the fourth car. A black sedan.

Something jerked in her chest. Black sedans were de rigeuer in Hollywood, usually commandeered by a chauffeur. Trent, the man always in charge, wouldn’t have a chauffeur.

But why did this black sedan cause her to take a second look?

Then she remembered. The night she visited Leo to make sure he had survived the earthquake. That car had been leaving. But was it the same car? Leo had never answered the door. The driver of the black sedan had learned what she had discovered afterward. Leo wasn’t at home. He had jetted off for a vacation - a vacation with the two-line actress from his last movie.

Shame filled her like great globs of goo dropping into a bucket. She had no reason to be jealous of the actress, who could be very talented. Charisse had once been a two-line actress.

Trent climbed into the driver’s seat. He held the key to the ignition then stopped, his gaze locking into hers. “What is it?”

His voice knocked through the barricade of thoughts encasing her mind with what-if’s. “Nothing.” She pulled the seatbelt tight. “You drive very nice cars.”

“You act as if you don’t like the sedan.”

“Not at all.” Her voice was distant and flat. “I think it’s beautiful.”

He gave a slight shake of his head. That shake men give when something was too complicated, not worth their time, to understand - like women. He pressed the garage door opener and backed out of the garage.

The shopping district wasn’t as crowded as Charisse had expected. The usual clientele either dealing with personal damage or had already escaped to parts of the world that catered to the beautiful people.

Trent swung the SUV into a garage entrance near the district. The garage catered to the beautiful. Charisse remembered when the operator wouldn’t allow her to park her hybrid car in the structure. She hadn’t wanted to shop in the district, but did because the event called for haute couture and she wanted to mingle with the industry’s elite.

Trent was one of the beautiful people. He jumped out of the driver’s side and strode to the passenger door. He whipped it open before Charisse had time to reach for the handle. She didn’t need haute couture for their trip to New Zealand.

“Trent - .” she began.

Two women with tresses coifed by an elite hairstylist and bearing shopping bags with labels from exclusive shops. Their conversation stilled as they glided past Trent. Their gazes locked onto him, they didn’t notice or didn’t care that he was with Charisse. When they passed, they tipped their heads together, their blond locks intertwining, and giggled like the rich women they were.

Jealousy twisted like a knife in her heart. Of course, other women would find him handsome. She found him handsome. But he wasn’t hers to protect him from the draw to other women. Women who were a Hollywood dream with thick blond hair, long legs, shapely figures.

What she found curious was Trent’s disinterest in the women. He had to have noticed their open mouthed gapes at him. Perhaps his attraction such attention bored him and no longer interested him.

She’d be a fool to believe that. Her throat felt pinched and dry.

“Let’s start here.” Trent pulled open the glass entrance door with polished handles.

A sales clerk with polished skin and hair sleeked into a chignon did a slow turn. Her eyes rested on them. The corners of her painted lips turned into a smile as bright as one who greats long lost friends. In her eyes lighted her recognition of Charisse. The woman paced herself toward them. She didn’t rush, but still her gait didn’t hide her eagerness.

Charisse wondered about the clerks who depended on the rich and famous to patronize their shops. Not only could they have experienced loss in their personal lives, but financially they could lose to if the rich couldn’t patronize their shops.

It was hard for Charisse not to like every outfit she tried on.

When they left the shop an hour later, Trent wrapped his well-shaped hands around the bag handles.

“Where to now?” he walked through the door held by doorman.

In front of them, a man stepped from behind a light pole. He swung a camera to his face, adjusted the lens and clicked the button. He turned away and crossed the street. Cars honked and brakes screeched.

“Did that man just take our picture?” Charisse stopped stuttered to a stop.

“What man?” Trent jerked his gaze in the direction she was staring.

“He’s gone now. He stepped from behind that lamppost. After he took a picture of us, he crossed the street. You didn’t see him?”

“No. Keep an eye out.” Trent’s jaw tightened. “If you see him again, tell me. He and I will have a chat about that picture.”

“I’m sure he’s downloaded the photo to some website by now.”

“We’ll ask him.”

They continued their shopping spree zipping in and out of one plush store after another.

“I can’t go another step.” Charisse dropped to a padded chair outside the jeweler famous for loaning extravagant jewelry to the stars who had been nominated for acting awards.

“Then I’d say it’s time for lunch.” Trent stood in front of her and looked down.

They dined al fresco at a trendy bistro with strategically placed heaters to keep the patrons warm.

Charisse ordered a double bacon cheeseburger and fries.

“That’s very unCalifornia of you.” Trent’s gaze skimmed over her.

“I’m not a Californian.” She gave a dismissive wave of her hand and watched the shoppers carry packages, greet friends and sip beverages at the neighboring restaurants.

For a moment, she felt self-conscious, then brushed it aside. She wasn’t filming though when she started, it would mean several hours a day with a trainer to burn off the calories.

“I’ll have the same.” Trent handed his menu to the server.

The young man stood stiff legged and bowed. He floated between the tables to the swinging doors leading to the kitchen.

“Look who isn’t being a Californian.” A smile spread across Charisse’s face. She stirred her ice tea with a long red straw.

“I’m not from here either.”

“Where are you from?” Charisse slowed her stirring and looked at him. “You’re rather an enigma. Not too many people know much about you. Your name never hits the gossip columns.”

“I’m a producer. My name wouldn’t sell the tabloids. They won’t waste print on me.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Where am I from? Nowhere. Anywhere.”

“Your family was in the service.”

“My family consisted of my mother.”

“And?”

His mouth pressed into a firm line. “Just my mother.”

Charisse shifted and watched a blonde strut past the restaurant in high heels and designer jeans. Her toy poodle peered over the edge of the tote bag draped over his mistress’ arm. Her family was a conglomeration of her father’s many marriages. Still, her siblings and half siblings were her world. She wouldn’t know what it was like to be an only child. A pang that felt like a pebbled being dropped into a dry well knocked inside her chest. She wouldn’t want to know what it was like to be an only child.

The skin around Trent’s eyes and mouth pulled tight as if an unpleasant memory had passed through his mind. He hadn’t seemed to have enjoyed being an only child.

“You remain a mystery,” Charisse could tell he wanted that way. He valued his privacy.

“Privacy is hard to come by in this town.” He leaned back in his chair. “But I don’t have to tell you that.”

Her laugh was a short, harsh exhale. “No, you don’t. I was warned, but no warning could have prepared me for the constant invasion.”

Especially after she started dating Leo. Her first shock were the fans camped outside the gate leading to his house. The second were the death threats from young women who claimed it was their destiny to marry the great Leonidas Vasilios.

The first threat had been chilling. Though the police took the threat seriously, they tried to explain to her that such reactions were typical of young women in love with celebrities.

The explanation didn’t ease her fears.

“Where to next?” Trent pressed the tips of his fingers together.

“I’m shopped out. Let’s go. . .” she had almost said home, but she didn’t have a home.

Yet, Trent’s home had almost felt like hers. She wanted to laugh aloud. She’d only been there a couple of days and already she felt comfortable there.

In Trent’s house.

With Trent.

The realization was as if someone had taken her by the shoulders and shook her. She shifted in her seat.

She’d never felt comfortable in Leo’s home. Not with Barbara always appearing. Leo’s assistant was good at meeting his guests’ needs. Charisse was good at meeting her own needs.

“You’ll need a swimsuit.”

“We’ll have time to swim?”

“I’m planning on it. It’s summer in New Zealand. I won’t pass up an opportunity to dip into the ocean.”

 They returned home to find Paola had left a plate of cold cuts in the refrigerator and loaf of freshly baked bread on the counter.

“I need to make some calls,” Trent said. “Make yourself a sandwich. Help yourself to anything else you want.”

He was gone before she could thank him.

She had her own calls to make. She hadn’t heard from her insurance agent and she wanted to find out twin sister and the rest of the family were doing.

She was still on the phone when her stomach rumbled. Trent was still secured in his office, his voice a soothing lapping that spread through the house. His voice seemed to travel as if he paced around the room. He never stayed in one place.

It had been several minutes when she didn’t hear him talking.

In the kitchen, she cut two slabs of bread and layered them with thinly sliced roast beef, Swiss cheese, lettuce and tomato. She slipped a pickle from the large jar standing on the refrigerator shelf. She had thought to grab him a bottle of water, but remembered he had carried one to his office. She opened a bottle of red wine and filled a bulbous goblet

She climbed the short stairway that led directly to his office and knocked on the door. It creaked open.

He stood at the glass door overlooking the beach. At the sound of her knock, he looked over his shoulder at her. It was a full look and it make her heart leap.

Suddenly, she wondered at the wisdom of interrupting him, but if she were hungry, he would have to be also.

“I took the liberty of making you a sandwich.” She looked about the room for a place to set the tray.

A mahogany desk sat in the center of the room and faced the glass doors. It was cluttered with three monitors and two keyboards. An overflowing inbox sat on one corner. A flat screen television was mounted on a side wall.

His mouth split into a smile. “Thanks. Where’s yours?”

“I haven’t made it yet. I thought since I was getting hungry, you might be also.”

“I hadn’t given it much thought.”

“Does that mean if Paola isn’t here to make sure you eat, you skip meals?”

“Guilty as charged.” He picked up the tray. “Eating alone tends to do that to me. Let’s go downstairs and make you a sandwich. We can discuss our itinerary for New Zealand.”

“Let’s show you some of the sitings we’ve seen around Hollywood.” The blond television announcer’s voice boomed from the television. She sat behind a glass table that showcased long tanned legs. Her big-toothed smile spread across her face. She swiveled to the multiscreened monitor built into the wall behind her.

Photos and videos of well-known movie stars, television personalities and star athletes Flashed across the screen. The blonde’s commentary revealed where the photos were taken and what the celebrity was doing at the time.

Charisse ignored the chatter. People’s personal lives had never held interest for her.

“And here we have an interesting item. You remember that photo of America’s sweetheart with producer Trent Parker. My spies have been out there to find out the latest between these two. Rumor has it, Charisse and Leo are no longer an item. She must have really broken his heart. No one has seen him since before the earthquake, though there was a rumor that he had a side interest, but we have yet to find out her, or his, name.”

“His?” Charisse snorted and shook her head.

Leo’s fascination centered strictly on women. But that wouldn’t sell for this tawdry broadcast.

She glanced at the television. The photo of Trent carrying her across the sand flashed next to one of her and Leo dining at a trendy beach restaurant.

“During Leo’s absence, it seems America’s sweetheart has lost no time finding comfort in Trent’s arms.”

The photo of Trent carrying Charisse along the beach segued into one of them dining in the shopping district. The lens focused to their hands resting on the table. It went closer and closer and closer, the final shot showing their hands had almost touched.

Charisse swallowed the hot lump forming in her throat. She shifted her gaze to Trent. His face darkened. His jaw gripped so hard his skin molded to the sinewy muscle lying beneath.

“I’m sorry.” Charisse’s voice was a choked whisper. “I’d forgotten what it’s like to be with someone who isn’t use to the publicity.”

Why was she apologizing? The raw feeling deep inside of her made it important that he understand she never meant to expose him to the life of cameras and videos and the gawking media.

He pulled his gaze from the television. “Don’t apologize. You should know I’m exposed to people who the paparazzi follow.”

Thought it had been awhile since he was linked to celebrity the media was hungry to follow. He’d learned to be careful. Today he’d dropped his guard further than he’d expected.

She couldn’t know, what he didn’t understand, was why seeing a picture of Charisse with Leo Vasilios sent this strange streak through him. Charisse was her own person. She could be with whomever she wished in whatever shape or form.

There was no denying the tightening in his chest. He didn’t like the idea of Charisse being with Leo. For one simple reason. Leo couldn’t be trusted. Trent kept his distance from people he couldn’t trust. He’d been around untrustworthy people when he was growing up. As an adult, he’d learned to stay away from them - even if he were related to them.

She couldn’t know that, nor would he ever let her know.

Trent pressed the remote. The television picture flickered sending the smiling blonde into a black void. He touched the computer monitor. New Zealand’s lush terrain covered the screen. He touched the corner of the monitor and the view zoomed to a map.

“This section of the Hutt River could serve as the Gardens of Olyn. The planet is dry and arid accept for the section by the river, which alludes to the Garden of Eden.”

“Yes, I’ve been there. And you’re right, it fits the scene perfectly.”

“But you have reservations.”

“Not reservations. The area will film well. It doesn’t compare with the section by the Crystal Creek on my stepmother’s ranch.”

“She didn’t give her permission for the location shooting and it’s winter. Even if we did have her permission, we’d have to wait until May or June. I’m aware of Colorado spring and summer snowstorms.”

“There’s no denying that,” she murmured. For now, she would have to hold her Christmas vacation in her heart and accept she may not return to the ranch until next Christmas.

“Here are some other ideas for locations.”

Trent clicked through various satellite shots on all three monitors showing long-shots and close-ups.

Charisse grabbed a tablet sitting in on top of a stack of books and a pen and jotted some notes. His ideas were good and would give the project the visual appeal his films were known for.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the screens. “What do you think?”

“I think these locations will do justice to the film.”

“But?” He tilted his chin, his hard stare felt as if it pressed against her face.

She leaned away. There was nothing Trent didn’t perceive. Her heart beat a little faster. He seemed aware of anyone who tried to hide something from him. As if he expected it.

“You know my vote is for Colorado but for the wrong reasons.”

He touched the monitors. Each one went dark. “I never said your reasons were wrong. I’ll tell you what. I’ll look for a project that can be filmed in Colorado, and you can, too. Just remember, we need your stepmother’s permission before we even start the business plan.”

“If it’s the right project, she’ll approve.”

He was on his feet and striding toward the office door. “Let’s get some dinner.”

“What about you sandwich?”

“I’ve got mine. It’s time you get yours.” He picked up the tray and carried it downstairs.

After slapping together another sandwich, Trent carried the tray and a bottle of red wine onto the deck. Charisse grabbed a couple of wine glasses and followed hm. Outside, Trent turned on the brazier. The conversation continued about their visions for the film. Charisse settled into the corner of the one of the sofas and munched her sandwich. Only vaguely was she aware that her narrowing eyelids framed Trent’s handsome and intelligent face. When he spoke of his films, the hardness dissolved.

“I’m boring you.”

Trent’s voice broke through a fog gathering in her mind.

“I’m sorry.” She sat up. The wine in her glass sloshed against goblet’s sides. “Too much wine. Not enough sleep.”

“You’ve hardly touched your wine. As for sleep, I can agree if the reason you aren’t sleeping is because you’ve been thinking about your house.”

Her house and other things. She couldn’t stop thinking about Leo. Not because she missed him. She was amazed at how much she didn’t miss him. One thought circled through her mind - Where would he have gone that even the paparazzi couldn’t find him? He’d never wanted to be that hidden. He never went anywhere without looking over his shoulder for the paparazzi. Not because he wanted to allude them, but because he wanted to make sure they were nearby to capture his every move, his every smile, his perpetual rise as the up and coming heart throb of adoring fans.

When the paparazzi were nearby, Leo was eager to sign autographs. Without them, he ignored his fans.

Trent slipped the wineglass from Charisse’s fingers. His touch was warm, a contrast to her cold fingers, and set it on a glass end table.

“You’ve been out here too long. You’re cold.”

“The brazier’s kept me warm.” She gaze drifted to the dancing flames.

“Are you too sleepy to feel how cold you are?” his fingers laced through hers. He pulled her to her feet. Into his chest.

Now she was awake. Every cell in her body was surging as if she’d downed a gallon of coffee. Warmth emanated from his body, warmth that seemed to set her ablaze.

She lifted her gaze to his. In his eyes was the same passion she saw when he discussed the film but something was different. In discussing the film, he talked nonstop only occasionally asking for her opinion or input.

Now he said nothing. The film no longer seemed to interest him. His dark eyes narrowed.

Every muscle in her body locked down. No reflex. No breathing. Her fingers longed to push up through his hair and pull his face toward hers.

His hand dropped hers. He stepped away. A muscle moved in his cheek.

“It’s late. We have an early flight. You should get to bed.” His voice was solid and even and breathless.

Her lungs gasped for air. She felt her chest rise and fall in ragged pants.

She couldn’t speak. She didn’t have the strength to speak. Turning away, she placed a plate on the tray.

“Leave it.” His voice edged into a command.

“No, I can take care of these. You take care of the wine.”

He lifted the bottle. It was almost empty. “It looks like I already did.” The corner of his mouth tilted. His eyes shifted in the hand-caught-in-the-cookie-jar guilt.

She lifted her brows and brushed past him. A moment longer and she knew something else would pass between them. Something she wasn’t ready to face.

After stacking the dishes, she headed for the stairs. “I’ll see you in the morning.” She gave a slight nod.

He watched her move swiftly across the kitchen. He still held the wine bottle. Something pushed against his sternum. Doper than that. It pushed against his heart. The realization made his eyes widened and his breathing ragged.

*Call out to her*. The voice in his head shouted like the urging he felt when he had to chase a project, when he had to work with director, when he had to cast a certain actor.

But this urge was nothing like what he felt when he chased after what would work for his company. Never had he felt this. Not for a woman.

Not for Charisse.

Charisse who was involved with another man.

He didn’t move. He watched her drum up the stairs, turn the corner.

Gone.

He turned away, set the bottle on the counter.

What had just happened? He rubbed the knot forming at the base of his neck.

It didn’t matter. In a few days, he and Charisse would’ve scouted the New Zealand locations, made their decision. After that, he would develop the project’s business plan, the storyboards, work with the director, the producers, the editors. His contact with the actors would be through the director. His contact with Charisse would be through the director.

One thing he knew, that wasn’t what he wanted.

Charisse sat at the vanity table. On the polished glass sat the brush and comb and makeup she had bought today. Her things. She stared at her reflection but didn’t see that her face had paled and the distant look in her eyes. She dragged the brush through her hair.

Instead, she saw the heated look in Trent’s eyes, felt the warm of his fingers wrapping around hers.

She dropped the brush. It clattered to the table. She dropped her head and pushed her palms into her burning eyes. She couldn’t be involved with someone so soon after she and Leo and separated. She couldn’t get involved with someone she had a business relationship with. She wanted to push the image of Trent out of her head. She couldn’t think about him.

Leo had no problem with his involvement with his actress.

She wasn’t Leo.

She didn’t love Leo anymore. If she’d ever loved him. But she couldn’t move into another relationship that quickly.

Especially with Trent.

Her heart missed a beat and seemed to float in her chest. She chugged form the water bottle sitting on the vanity.

Trent had kept a low profile when it came to the tabloids so she had no idea who he’d been involved with or how he treated them.

Tomorrow she and Trent would fly to New Zealand to scout the filming locations.

How was she going to survive these next few days?

Chapter

After a day of traveling, Trent, Charisse and the scouting crew checked into a hotel near the airport. After a dinner of salmon and potato beignet in Trent’s suite, they discussed the locations with the team. Tomorrow they would rent vehicles and drive south to the Hutt River.

The tenderness Trent had shown last night had vanished. He was now the producer making sure his film was a success. He spoke in short, blunt phrases, had his phone glued to one ear and his tablet pressed into his hand as if were another appendage on his body.

He never looked at Charisse, barely spoke to her.

She felt a fool. She had thought that last night could have led to something had she not walked away. Now, it was clear that he’d forgotten last night. He was focused on the film project, what would make it good, what would make it better.

She should’ve been relieved. Any time with him and her arguments would

Following dinner, the crew caught transportation network to a nearby pub. The time change caught up with Charisse. Bidding the group good night, she went to her room. She couldn’t stay. She couldn’t risk that her and Trent’s conversation would turn into something more intimate. She understood now that Trent was focused on his film. Anything that happened between them would be a distraction for him. When her head hit the pillow, she fell into a deep sleep. It wasn’t until the phone rang that she realized it was morning, late morning by the position of the sun.

“We’re leaving in an hour if you plan to go with us.” Trent’s voice was low with an emotion she’d never heard in his voice before.

Not anger. What was it?

She glanced at the clock. The night before, the crew had planned to have breakfast by eight. They would be dining in Trent’s room, discussing their plans for the day.

“I’m almost ready.” She threw back the covers.

“You sounded like you were asleep.”

She felt like a child stammering through a denial. “I was. But now I’m awake. I’ll be right there.”

She didn’t wait for the shower to warm before stepping beneath the stinging needles of hard water. Her hair was dripping and she was still shrugging into a jacket with her tote bag slapping against her hip when she raced down the hall to Trent’s room.

The suite door was ajar. Trent sat at the hotel desk and read a document on his laptop.

No one else was in the room.

“When is the crew coming back so we can leave?” She pushed her words through air her lungs gasped for.

“They’re not.” Trent turned off his laptop. Swiveling in his chair, he grabbed the computer case and shoved the laptop inside. His heavy look rested on her. “Come on. I’ve got a car waiting for us downstairs.”

When they reached the lobby, the car rental handed Trent the key. He and Charisse strode downstairs to an SUV.

Trent climbed behind the wheel. His mouth grim he checked the gearbox and the mirrors.

“You have driven a right hand car before, haven’t you?” Charisse asked.

“Of course.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Have you?”

“Remember, I was raised in England.”

He gave a short laugh and started the engine. “And you’re an expert.”

“I’m can take over anytime.”

“We’ll see.” He guided the car from beneath the hotel’s porte cochère and into traffic.

A car honked and whizzed past, the irate driver, his mouth pressed into a grim line, shook a fist at them.

“Trent, let me drive.” Charisse white knuckled the door handle.

“I got it.”

Another car honked and passed.

“Almost.”

“Almost can get us killed. Have you seriously never driven a right hand car before?”

“I have.” He said the statement in his blunt fashion that end conversation the way a butcher’s knife chops through meat.

“What about the rest of the crew. How are they getting to the location?”

“They rented a van. They’ll meet us down there.”

By the time they reached the state highway, Trent’s driving smoothed to that of the locals. Charisse dozed to the sound of Trent talking to the crew through his ear device.

She woke when the SUV slowed.

“Are we there?” Sleep had drained the stress out of her body. Her muscles relaxed, she had slouched into the car seat. Pressing her hand to the door handle she, shifted upright.

“Not quite. We still have a few hours to go. I need to buy gas. Look up ahead. That’s the van the crew rented. Let’s join them for lunch at that tea room.” Trent guided the car into the parking lot of a red building with Tearoom and Bakery painted above the awning. He stopped next to the van.

Charisse’s phone signaled an incoming text. She lifted it from her purse. Anna’s picture wavered onto the screen. She pressed the icon and read the message. “Call me ASAP. Dad’s here.”

Charisse’s heart did a double time drop into the pit of her stomach. She checked the signal bars at the top of the screen. The signal flickered from low to nonexistent. She took a deep breath. She had to calm down.

“I need to make a call.” She lifted the door handle.

She hadn’t wanted to look at Trent but her gaze slipped to his dark eyes that were probing. She almost thought they were filled with concern, not for her, but for their schedule. The locations needed to be selected. Which would it be – New Zealand or Colorado?

She opened the car door and stepped out and moved to the side of the building. She stared at the phone and watched the signal wane from weak to mediocre. It would never climb above that. She pressed the icon for Anna’s number and crammed the phone to her ear.

“Charisse?” Anna’s voice crackled through the earpiece. Static buzzed through the line.

“Anna.” Charisse rotated for a better signal. Static hissed in her ear.

With her twists and turns, the parking lot spun before her. Trent never left the car, his gaze locked on her.

She turned away. Through the static came bits of words that she tried to piece together. She caught Dad, helicopter, collapse. Somewhere in there was the word reporter and Rose. How did all this relate to their father?

“I’m sorry, Anna. The signal here is so weak, I can’t hear everything you’ve said. Did you say Dad flew to the ranch in a helicopter?”

“Exactly.” There was enough anxiety in Anna’s voice to push Charisse into a chair near the building’s entrance. “He flew here by himself and landed the helicopter on the old landing pad near the hangar. I don’t know where he got it or how long he’s been flying, but he collapsed and is in one of the bedrooms upstairs. The doctor’s with him now.”

“That has to be rather uncomfortable for Rose.”

“And for Mother.”

“Our mother? She’s staying at the ranch?”

“Oh, Charisse. I didn’t want to call you. You’ve been through enough with losing your house in the earthquake.”

Charisse felt brittle shock course through her chest. Their father had flown to the ranch? The man whose picture could have been in the dictionary next to the definition of power and strength had collapsed? “No, you did the right thing. I’m not in California right now. I’m with a scouting crew reviewing some possible locations for my next project.”

“Oh, Charisse, I didn’t realize. . . I should’ve waited until you returned stateside.”

“No, Anna, I need to know these things.” She put the phone on speaker. With her thumb, she pushed the screen through the apps until she saw one for flight scheduled. “I’m returning to Auckland. I don’t know if I can catch a flight out today, but as soon as I can I’ll return to the ranch.”

“But what about your film project?”

“It will still be there, but even if it isn’t, I’ll find another.” She hoped the confidence in her voice hid the underlying doubt.

Hollywood wasn’t a forgiving town. It would be easy to push her aside and make room for new talent. The town teemed with talent. It wouldn’t be hard to find the next face for America’s Sweetheart.

Her father was more important, though he’d never allowed his children to take priority over his mission to devalue a nation’s currency at the behest of garnering millions into his own coffers. A hot ripple grated up her throat. Despite his failings, he was still her father.

 “As soon as I can schedule a flight, I’ll call you,” Charisse said.

“Charisse.” The crack in Anna’s voice wasn’t the static this time. “Thank you.” The call disconnected.

Charisse dropped the phone into her lap. Her stomach knotted with tension. She tried to calm down. She didn’t have the whole story. Maybe, just maybe, Anna was exaggerating about their father.

Anna was cool and levelheaded. Exaggeration had never been one of her traits.

She hadn’t noticed Trent was standing near his car and talking to a couple of members of the scouting crew. She was in his view. Though the crewmembers were talking to him, his eyes settled on her.

She pushed herself up from the chair and walked to the group.

Trent said something to the crew. They nodded and moved to the side of the building where the rest for the crew stood.

“Is your father okay?” Something flickered across his face. His gaze locked into hers.

“No.” she exhaled roughly. “I hate to say this, but I’ve got to fly back to the states.”

His expression was enigmatic. Did he understand or did he disapprove? Either way, she didn’t care. This was a career, something she wanted, but something that couldn’t take priority over her family. She drew in her breath slowly to keep from shaking. She didn’t understand why. She didn’t need his approval.

He nodded, his mouth a grim line.

She found herself scrolling through her phone apps. It took her a minute to realize she was looking for transportation back to the hotel.

“I’ll drive you.” Trent’s voice was low and heavy.

“Trent, you can’t. You’ve spent all this money to fly down here for the scouting trip. You have an entire crew down here. A decision needs to be made.” Her hands gestured in wide circles. She paced back and forth. The words spilled out of her mouth before she had time realize what she saying.

She didn’t see him move toward her. Too late she saw. Her heart leaped. When his sinewy hands wrapped around hers and stilled them in front of her, she made a graceless sputter and stilled.

“These guys know what they’re doing. Give them a minute to tell them we’re driving back to Auckland.”

“I can catch network transportation or a bus or there’s got to be airport nearby.” She looked over her shoulder as if the airport would magically appear.

“No, you won’t.” there was steel in his voice. “I’ll drive you back.”

When she opened her mouth to protest, he gave her a look that sliced the words out of her voice.

Moving away, he spoke with the crew. Whatever he said made them nod, give agreeable curves to the corners their mouths. The group turned like a choreographed marching band and headed toward the van.

When Trent walked toward her, he motioned with his head she should get into the rental car.

She pulled out her phone and pressed the app to contact an airline.

“If you’re making a plane reservation, forget it. I texted Bambi and told her to do it. I’ll fly as far as Denver with you.”

“I have an assistant, too.”

He arched a brow that asked if he should tell Bambi not to make the reservations and let Flo make them.

She waved away his questioning look and stared out the window. “Bambi can make them. What about the location scouting? That was the purpose of the trip – compare New Zealand with Colorado.”

“If Colorado becomes an option. My manager can send me the final analysis. And if a decision needs to be made, I’ll make it.”

She didn’t object to his flying to Denver. Inside she felt fragile, her mind a mush of Max Whitloch, Sr., thoughts. Thoughts that confused the father of her childhood to the ruthless financier the media loved to hate.

The drive back to Auckland took longer than the drive to where they had stopped for lunch. Mainly because she remained awake.

The adrenaline pumping through her wouldn’t let her fall asleep. And neither of them spoke.

The bigger surprise was when he met her in the lobby with his luggage.

“You’re not staying to scout the locations?” Charisse asked.

He glanced out the sliding doors to the porte cochère. A taxi glided beneath the portico. The driver hopped out and opened the rear door for them.

Charisse climbed in. She moved over making room for Trent. Nothing registered during the drive to the airport. In her mind floated an image of her father, not the photos of older man she’d see in the newspapers. This man was younger, with dark hair and the crystal blue eyes everyone referred to as Whitloch blue. This man was in love with his wife and in love with his children.

She never understood why he had left. She was too young to understand a reason labeled infidelity.

Not his infidelity, her mother’s.

It was one summer at the ranch when she learned her mother had been pregnant with JT when her father left. Her heart dropped like a roller coaster down the track as she remembered when she’d learned the real reason her father left - JT.

“Remember to power down all communication devices.” Flight attendant’s melodic voice filled the cabin with this final instruction while the plane taxied to the runway. She was tall slender and her smile broadened whenever her gaze skimmed over Trent.

He didn’t seem to notice.

Charisse did.

Heat crept up her neck and flooded her cheeks. She was instantly mortified. She was someone who would be starring in his film, if she ever got around to auditioning for the part. He was flying back with her for one reason - to see if Crystal Creek was a good shooting location certainly made sense.

Trent may not have noticed the attendant, but he seemed to notice Charisse’s reaction. He arched a brow in that is-anything-wrong question. She jammed a headset into ear. Leaning back into her chair, she surfed the television set mounted to the half wall by her seat.

The voice on the television monitor balanced on short wall next to her seat broadcast news videos. Most of them discussing a vote in the New Zealand parliament.

“With news from America comes the puzzling disappearance of actor Leonidas Vasilios. Before the earthquake struck the Los Angeles, Mr. Vasilios’ assistant said he had received the disturbing news from his then fiancée, Miss Charisse Whitloch, that she had felt their relationship had run its course.” A video of Barbara being interviewed flashed over the screen, the actually interview was silenced as the announcer continued to talk over the video. “If you remember, Miss Whitloch has been seen in the company of the reclusive producer Trent Parker.” The photo of Trent carrying Charisse along the beach followed by the video of them dining in the shopping district played before the production cut to a live shot of the smiling announcer. “America became outraged knowing how coldly Miss Whitloch had abandoned Mr. Vasilios only to fall into the arms of another man. “

“What?” Charisse breathed. She didn’t fall into the arms of another man. Especially not Trent’s arms.

The image of Trent’s mouth devouring hers seared into her mind. She pushed her arms against the armrests and shoved herself upright. Without glancing at Trent, she could see that he was buried into some project on his laptop. If the paparazzi photographed that, she’d jump out of the airplane.

“Mr. Vasilios’ assistant Ms. Hibbert said she had understood Mr. Vasilios to be upset about the breakup. He had planned to spend a few days alone at an undisclosed location to recover from the shock before reporting to the location of his next film. Ms. Hibbert hasn’t heard from her employer since that last conversation. She reported her concern to the studio. Because Mr. Vasilios hadn’t reported to the location, the studio spokesperson said they had contacted authorities to try and locate Mr. Vasilios.

“Of course,” Charisse muttered. “It’s all bottom line to them. They could lose millions while entire crews cooled their heels waiting for Leo to make an entrance.”

Leo had his faults, but he took his career seriously. He was never late and he never missed scheduled shoots. On the days he wasn’t scheduled, he often went to the set anyway in hopes of fitting in extra shoots. It often worked. He pushed to get the extra face time. Directors often gave in. Fighting Leo cost time and money, something investors didn’t understand.

A text signal sounded from Charisse’s phone. She glanced down. She had meant to follow the flight attendant’s instructions turn and it off. She hovered her phone over the airplane mode icon when the text message envelope wavered into view.

The number was similar to Leo’s except for the last digit. Her heart quivered somewhere between fear and hope. She hadn’t expected Leo to contact her, but she hadn’t expected him to disappear for a few days.

She pressed the envelope.

The text spread across her screen as if someone typed each letter.

“You will pay for what you’ve done.”

-L

Chapter

“Miss.” The flight attendant stood over Charisse. “If you would please turn off your phone’s communication capabilities.” The attendant’s voice seemed to come from another realm. Her smiling face looked down at Charisse for a brief moment before moving to linger on Trent’s face.

“What?” Charisse tried to tear her gaze away from the screen, but the words blazed into her mine.

“You will pay for what you’ve done.”

What had she done? And to whom?

Who was L? Leo? He’d never signed a text like that before. He never signed his texts. She knew his phone number so it wasn’t necessary.

Was this a threat? If so, who was threatening her? Next question – why?

“Miss?”

“Sorry, of course.” Charisse didn’t need to apologize. Obviously, the attendant reprimanded her for an opportunity to remind Trent that her interest in him could lead to a very remarkable night once they landed.

Charisse glanced over her shoulder at Trent. He tilted his head at her the way a schoolboy tells his classmate she shouldn’t’ve disobeyed the teacher. His laptop no longer sat on the seat tray.

Charisse powered down her phone. She closed her hand around the phone and dropped it to her lap.

Her mind droned like an engine in neutral going nowhere. The text. Why had she received that text?

Charisse didn’t notice if the flight attendant remained by her seat or moved down the aisle to check the other passengers.

She thought back to the night she last saw Leo. Another car was leaving as she drove down the street to Leo’s gated entrance. The black sedan. A black sedan no different than the thousands of others driving around Los Angeles. Like Trent’s.

It would be impossible to know who was driving.

Something brushed against her arm. Not a touch. A stare. She looked up to see the question in Trent’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” His voice was rich, riveting, a stroke to soothe her, to make her stop from thinking of the confusing message.

“Fine.” Her voice was composed, completely different from the confusion and fear she felt roiling inside.

She shifted in her seat.

Everything was far from fine. She had received a text from a number that was similar to Leo’s, but not Leo’s number.

She hadn’t done anything. So why should she pay for it? Was someone playing a joke on her? She wasn’t laughing.

After takeoff, the attendants served cheese and relish trays followed by another attendant offering champagne. Charisse ordered mineral water. The attendant who had shown interest in Trent served him a tumbler filled with an amber liquid.

Once the meal had been cleared away, Charisse tried to focus on a novel she had wanted to option for a movie. The author had been adamant that her manuscript not be produced, but the book was visual and Charisse knew it would play well on the screen. Her last correspondence with the author’s agent hinted that the author might reconsider. Charisse opened her laptop and tried to compose a response, but her mind jerked back to the text she had received.

“You will pay for what you’ve done.”

Pay for what? What had she done?

A glance at Trent showed he was lost in the world of the numbers lining the spreadsheet on his computer. She wished she could forget her father had collapsed, that Leo had gone to parts unknown and refused to be found, that a bizarre text sat on her phone and could be followed by others.

That the man sitting next to her stirred emotions in her she didn’t understand.

More correctly, she dint’ want to understand.

The attendant strolled the aisle with a collection of pillows and blankets. When she reached the cubicle where Charisse and Trent sat, she offered bedding to Trent. Charisse was sure the attendant would willingly tuck him in if he gave the nod.

Without looking at the attendant, Trent took the bedding and dropped it onto the ledge by his seat.

The attendant never stopped smiling though the wattage in her smile seemed to dim a voltage or two. She moved away.

“I’d like some bedding.” Charisse called to her.

The attendant stopped and for a moment. Charisse thought attendant wouldn’t turn around, that she would offer bedding to the other passengers but ignore Charisse.

She turned to Charisse. Her smile looked more cracked than friendly. “Of course, miss.

The lights in the cabin dimmed. Tiny lights like stars glowed from the ceiling like the Milky Way galaxy.

Charisse pressed the buttons on the armrest. Her seat reclined and a footrest extended.

“Sleep tight.” Trent looked over the edge of his laptop at her.

His eyes were dark and spoke volumes, none of which made sense to her. The heat racing through her almost made her shiver. He was a man who could use the casting couch for his conquests, though she had never heard rumors to that effect. That puzzled her. Hollywood scuttlebutt was rife with rumors of producers who expected payment for the chance to star in one of their films. Many actresses’ careers were ruined if they didn’t consent to these advances.

Trent’s name never came up in those conversations.

She managed a smile that she hoped look friendly and didn’t betray the confusing emotions raging through her. “You’re not going to bed?” She managed a calmness in her voice she didn’t feel.

“In a little while.” His conversational tone vanished. His gaze shifted to the computer screen. He was back in producer mode developing projects, perusing budgets and checking the bottom line.

Charisse rested her head in the crux of her elbow and stared at the ceiling that looked as star flooded as a summer night on the Crystal Creek Ranch. Blood rushed to her chest. Soon she would be at the ranch. The thought normally gave her peace, but now she feared what she would find. Her father wasn’t well. Yvonne, her mother would be there. Her mother, her father’s second wife, staying in the home of her father’s fourth wife, Rose.

Rose was generous and open hearted welcoming anyone into her home. Her mother seemed to gravitate toward kindhearted people like Rose.

Charisse hadn’t thought she would fall asleep. She was surprised when Trent’s voice pressed into the dark fog of a nightmare floating in her mind.

“Charisse.” Trent touched his knuckles to her cheek.

They were warm, soothing and a touch completely foreign to her. Never had Leo’s touch affected her in that way.

Her eyes flew open. Her breath came out shakily.

She looked up in Trent’s dark eyes. They were half open as if he’d just woken.

Movement at his side made her look away. The flight attendant stood at Trent’s side. Her eyes narrowed as if trying to shove deep inside an emotion she didn’t want Trent to detect.

Charisse had no trouble detecting it. She glanced out the window before she humiliated herself by letting the attendant know Trent was off limits. That hollowed out feeling opened up in her stomach. Trent wasn’t hers. Beautiful women were free to fawn over Trent.

So why did she went to hammer a wedge between any relationship with Trent and the attendant.

“Hey, you okay?” Trent’s voice was low and ragged.

“I’m fine. I was asleep.”

“Not pleasantly. You were talking.”

“I was?” She stiffened. She couldn’t remember what she’d dreamt only that she was cold and breathless when she felt the warmth on her shoulder.

His warmth.

How was it that Leo’s touch never felt comforting? Whenever Leo touched her, she felt drained as if his touch sucked life out of her.

She willed a wall to fall in place over her thoughts of Leo. She’d spent two years with him. Two years of fun. Apparently, his reputation for a good time wasn’t lost on other women.

She shifted her gaze to Trent. She must have looked concerned because he said, “Don’t worry. I couldn’t hear what you said.”

“I wasn’t worried.” She couldn’t look at him when she denied that. At least if she had said something about him, he didn’t know it.

“Would you care for something to drink, Miss Whitloch?” The attendant looked concerned.

Charisse felt she probably was. Even if it was an act for Trent, she played her part well.

“I’d like some water,” Charisse said. Whatever she had dreamt had left her parched.

The attendant nodded and strode toward the alley.

“You want to tell me what’s going on?” Trent said when the attendant moved away.

“Nothing you don’t know. I’m concerned about my father.”

He gave a sharp exhale as if bored by her explanation. “Which you’ve said. The media are full of news about his return. You sure that’s it?”

“That’s it.” she still couldn’t look at him. The text from L or from Leo had caught her off guard, but it seemed more like a joke than someone trying to harm her. If she told him about it, he’d laugh at her being upset about a simple text. It was the only one she’d received.

She chanced a glance at him. One glance, then she’d look away. His gaze hooked into hers. It was deep and probing as if looking for the answer to what made her talk in her sleep.

“Here’s your water, Miss Whitloch.” The attendant set the glass and a water bottle on her tray.

“Thanks.” Charisse couldn’t hide her relief at the attendant’s interruption.

Trent pressed his hands to his knees and stood. He moved to the back of galley and fell into conversation with a group of travelers who seemed eager to stretch their legs.

The star like lights in the ceiling dimmed, and the paneled lights along the walls brightened. Charisse lifted the window dust cover. The sky brightened from dark blue to orange. The plane flew into the sunrise, greeting the yellow ball of the sun as it peered over the horizon.

Charisse glanced at her phone. The tightening in her chest gripped her so hard she couldn’t breathe, didn’t want to breathe. It hurt too much. Pressure built in her chest, pressing, stretching, pulling.

If she received another text, she wouldn’t know until the plane landed, which was several hours away. It would be waiting for her, popping up when she started her phone.

Trent returned to his seat, but the tip of his mouth told her he’d seen her expression when she looked at her phone.

After a breakfast of croissant, omelet, yogurt and fruit, Charisse opened her laptop. She flipped open the book and scanned the highlighted scenes she wanted to be included in the script. She couldn’t keep her gaze from drifting to the window. The expanse of ocean changed to waves lapping the shoreline. The beach crammed with houses thinned to farmland that curved up to a mountain range then a desert. Finally, the Rocky Mountains towered over the plains.

There was a quick tightening of the muscles around her heart. Crystal Creek, the only place that felt like home, was within her grasp.

The plane began its descent. She felt the compression in her chest. From excitement or the drop in air pressure, she wasn’t sure. When the plane circled the landing strip, Charisse had thought to see one of the ranch SUVs parked near the terminal. Unless Rose had bought a new truck, no one had driven to the airport to pick her up. She had expected Anna to meet her at the airport. She offered up a quick prayer that the reason Anna hadn’t come wasn’t because of her horse riding injury.

The pressure in her chest mounted to a breath stopping level.

When she returned to the ranch, she would learn what was wrong with their father. Learn why her mother was staying at the Crystal Creek Ranch. Learn how Anna was doing.

And maybe when she turned on her phone, she’d receive another text from L. From Leo? She had to find out who L was.

The airplane’s wheels touching the runway felt as if it had rubbed a layer of skin off her heart. She stared at her phone. Only a few more minutes remained before she could turn it on, find out if she had received another text message.

Charisse exited the airplane and stood at the top of the stairs. Trent stood behind her. She didn’t have to look. She felt his warmth. Her pulse hammered through her ears. This would be the last time they’d be together. He would be switching planes and heading to where she didn’t know. Maybe to California. Maybe to another location.

He would be gone.

The sentence echoed in a vacant center in her brain.

She wheeled her carryon across the tarmac and into the terminal. Passengers sat at the circular bar. Others stood by the window and watched their luggage being loaded into a private jet.

Trent crossed the tarmac and moved next to her. “Was someone supposed to meet you here?”

“I hadn’t confirmed anything. I had thought my twin sister Anna would be here, but. . . “Her voice trailed. She didn’t want to think that Anna still suffered from her horse riding accident and wasn’t able to meet her. “Taxis and network drivers wait on the other side. I’ll hire one to drive me to the ranch.”

“No, you won’t.” he crossed the terminal.

“What do you mean?” Charisse sprinted after him with her luggage in tow.

He stopped in front of a car rental booth.

“You’re renting a car? But your flight leaves in a few hours. Really, Trent, ”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Your ranch isn’t that far away, right?”

She lifted her brows and looked away. “True.”

He turned to the clerk. “What do you have available?”

A few minutes, he had stowed their luggage in the trunk and was seated in the driver’s seat. “What the ranch’s address?” He touched the GPS screen on the dash.

She gave it to him. They would only spend another hour together, then he would return to the airport and fly back to California. She felt hollow. They’d spend the last few days together. She had become accustomed to it. Now he was driving her to the ranch and then he’d leave. She wasn’t sure that was what she wanted.

She was being ridiculous. They led separate lives. He was free.

And so was she.

Trent guided the car along the airport to the open road leading to the ranch.

Charisse could tell the moment he first realized how much acreage the ranch covered. He kept silent but she could tell he was recording everything, the rolling hills, the evergreen forests, the cattle, the horses. A herd of elk strolled through a valley.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

He said it in that breathless way that a man admires an exquisite painting, a passionate symphony, a beautiful woman. That last thought made Charisse’s heart drop like a basketball down a staircase. Trent understood beauty. He would know womanly beauty.

Without warning, Trent gave her full look that made her pulse jump. What was he thinking? That she was fortunate to come to the ranch to resuscitate herself when the Hollywood vampires sucked life out of her?

He would be right. She was lucky.

The corner of her mouth tilted. Now he knew why she loved the ranch.

“The best is yet to come,” she said.

He turned the car into the tree lined drive lane and around the fountain in the circle drive. He stared at the ranch house. He stared at it when he climbed out of the car. Legs spread, hands akimbo, his gaze took in the two and a half story structure then traveled to the expanse of each wing.

“You grew up here?” he didn’t look at her. He analyzing the house with that director’s eye that imagines a frame.

“No. I didn’t even know it existed until I was fourteen. Having three children complicated my mother’s love life. Rose, my stepmother opened her home to us that summer.” She inhaled deeply as if being on the ranch was like breathing fresh air after being confined to an airless compartment.

A slow smile spread across Trent’s face.

“What?” her annoyance seemed into that one word.

“You’re different. You stepped onto this ranch and everything about you changed – your demeanor, your stance, the tone in your voice.”

“I can’t explain.” Her gaze slipped to the pastures now laden with know. “Crystal Creek has magic. It isn’t just for me.”

“No. I can see why your stepmother wanted to share this place with you. To keep it to yourself wouldn’t be fair to those you love.”

Love. The way he said the word, his voice low and heavy, and sent pleasurable sensations, sensations she wasn’t ready to acknowledge. Sensations she needed to stuff into some deep dark place that she knew she could never find again. Trent’s gaze on her lingered. Seemed to caress her.

JT walked around the corner of the house, his duster showed the wear of working with the horses. Faded jeans showed between the gap of the duster.

“Charisse. Why didn’t you tell us you were flying in. one of us could’ve met you.” His boarding school background was concealed in the Platte River diction he’d learned when the townies joked about his cut glass accent. A toothpick moved at the corner of his mouth.

“It was sort of last minute. I told Anna, but I guess she couldn’t make it. She’s all right, isn’t she?”

“More than all right and not here.”

JT’s gaze shifted to Trent. Curiosity tinged the Whitloch blue of his eyes. He extended hand to Trent. “I’m JT. Charisse’s brother.”

“I gathered.” Trent shook his hand. “Trent Parker.”

“He’s a producer. We’re working together on a film project.” Charisse didn’t want to say any more than that. The emotions rumbling inside her could too easily give away that for her there was more than a working relationship between her and Trent. JT wouldn’t care, but she had to wonder at the arch of his brow. He was reading more into the relationship than existed.

Trent gave a nod to Charisse. “Enjoy your stay.” He said it as though they had just met on the plane, as if they weren’t anything more than acquaintances. As if they’d never shared a kiss.

Her eyes widened and her head tilted. She could feel the heat rising in her face. “Since you’re here, now would be a good time to do some scouting.”

“Maybe another time.” Trent started to turn away.

Charisse didn’t want to let him go, but how did she make him stay? She would humiliate herself if she said another word.

“You’re the guy.” JT gave a dry laugh. “Rose said something about some movie producer reviewing the place for a location shoot.”

“I would’ve been the guy, but your stepmother didn’t seem too eager for a movie company to be traipsing through her land.”

“I don’t know.” JT’s voice curled on a question of doubt. “She said Charisse was going to give her more information so she could decide.”

“Let’s find out before you leave,” Charisse said to Trent.

“Now might not be a good idea,” JT said.

“Because of Dad,” Charisse said.

“More than that. Go inside. Vic’s back from her honeymoon.”

“Already? They were supposed to be gone for two weeks.” Her voice slowed, realization like a fan unfolding in her mind. “But they came back because of Dad.”

JT tipped a gloved finger at her.

“How’s he doing?” Charisse asked.

“He changes from moment to moment.” JT gave her an unblinking stare.

“I’ll go in and seem him.” She placed one foot on the stone steps leading to the double front doors, then turned back. “Where’s Anna? She’s all right, isn’t she?”

“She’s fine. Vic can explain everything to you. I’ve got to get back to the barn. Ralph’s in the hospital so we’re short a man.”

“Ralph’s never sick. What happened to him?”

JT held up a finger.

“I know. Ask Victoria.”

JT gave one nod and strolled around the corner of the house.

“I hope you’re ready for what you’re about to see,” Charisse said to Trent, but her eyes remained on JT’s long stride through the snow.

“What am I about to see?” Trent lifted her luggage from the rear of the rental car.

Charisse tightened her mouth and shook her head. Her gaze settled on the front doors as if she were the princess’ lover who must choose the door concealing the lady or the tiger.

She looked at him her mouth tipping. She wrapped her fingers around her suitcase handle. “The Crystal Creek Ranch is always full of surprises.”

She climbed the stairs. Trent followed her with the rest of her luggage.

The front door wasn’t closed all the way. She leaned her shoulder against the paneled would and pushed it open.

Victoria carried a tray down the staircase. Her breath caught when Charisse walked through the door.

“Char, what are you doing here?” Victoria rushed down the stairs. She set the tray on the hall table and wrapped her arms around Charisse’s neck.

“I might ask you the same thing. You’re supposed to be enjoying your honeymoon.”

“It’s hard to do when Dad decides to steal a helicopter -.”

“Steal?” Charisse felt the blood drain from her face. “Please let me he didn’t.”

“No one knows where it came from.”

“Including Dad?”

Victoria gave a slow nod. “And now that Mom can’t talk -.”

“Rose? What happened to her?”

“She –.” Victoria’s gaze drifted to something behind Charisse.

Charisse closed her eyes. Trent. She’d forgotten he had carried her luggage into the house.

“Victoria, this is Trent Parker.”

“Nice to meet you.” Victoria’s voice was filled with the confusion that the man with Charisse was not Leo.

Charisse knew she owed her half-sister an explanation, but Trent’s accompanying her to the ranch was a minor occurrence compared to the behavior of their father, Rose’s inability to talk, and ralph being in the hospital. Why was Ralph sick? He’d never been sick since the day she met him.

“Trent and I are working on a film project together. We were scouting locations in New Zealand when Anna called me about Dad.”

“You flew in from New Zealand?” Victoria’s jaw slackened. “What about the California earthquake?”

“It happened.”

“You’re being rather dry.” Victoria snorted a laugh. “That earthquake destroyed your house, according to Anna. What are you going to do?”

Charisse’s throat tightened with tears that burned her eyes. She longed to release them, but crying over a house seemed inconsequential considering what their father was going through. She had to think of Rose and Ralph.

“I’ll rebuild,” Charisse said. “But I can’t make that decision until the insurance company sends me their findings.”

“You need some time with your sister.” Trent gaze on Charisse was tender and firm. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to wander around the outside.”

“I should - ,” Charisse began.

“Feel free.” Victoria threw her arm open as an invitation. “The barn’s around back. There should be some hands in the equestrian center working with the horses for some upcoming competitions.”

“What about the bluffs?” Trent asked. “How far are they?”

“A couple hours on horseback. The snow’s still deep.” Victoria’s gaze dropped to Trent’s feet. “Those topsiders will fall apart before you reached the trail head. Boris can be your guide to the bluffs.”

“I can take you to the bluffs.” Charisse tipped her head back as if her half sister had pushed her. “Who is Boris?”

“That’s right. He came after you left.”

“And after you left.” Charisse arched a brow at Victoria.

“Yes, he was here when I returned. Anna’s then fiancé hired him to protect Anna.”

“Not more trouble on the ranch.”

Victoria’s mouth drew tight. The Whitloch blue of her eyes dulled a shade. She glanced at Trent who showed no curiosity except for the flicker in his eyes which would’ve gone unnoticed had she not been watching him.

“Where are my manners?” Victoria slapped the back of her hand against her forehead. “You’ve been traveling all day and night, too since you came from New Zealand. You must be starving and dying of thirst.”

“Actually-.” Charisse began.

“You have enough to do with caring for you parents. I’ll wander down to the barn.”

“If Mom were herself, she wouldn’t think of letting you go down there on an empty stomach.” Victoria headed for the kitchen and waved an arm for Charisse and Trent to follow her. “Come to the kitchen. I’ll heat some coffee and fix you a sandwich, something simple so you still have time to wander around while it’s still light out.”

“I appreciate the offer, Victoria, but I know you and your sister have family matters to discuss.”

“I should go with you.”

“You will.” Trent’s eyes crinkled at the corners.

His stare seemed to touch Charisse, hard and hot, and she stepped backward.

“Have you discussion with our sister. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“You’re going to freeze if you go out wearing that light jacket and those shoes. Come with me.” Vitoria led them into the kitchen. In the mud room, she pulled a jacket off a hook and pulled a pair of cowboy boots from beneath the bench. “These should fit you well enough to get you down to the barn. But remember, your snack’s going to be ready in a few minutes. If you’re not back by then, I’ll send one of the hands out after you.”

Trent gave a soft laugh and shrugged into the jacket and boots.

It was a laugh that made radiated warmth through Charisse’s chest. She pulled a cowboy hat off the shelf. “Here.” Hat is hand, she strode toward him. “If you’re going to wonder around the ranch, you need to look the part. City slickers arouse suspicion.”

‘What makes you think I’m a city slicker?” Trent watched her rise on her tiptoes. It added little to her height.

She plopped the hat on his head. It hooked at an angle on the side of his head. He pushed it into place.

Her heart base drummed beat inside her chest so hard she thought her ribs would crack. He looked natural in the hat brought out the intensity in his dark eyes.

“Even if you weren’t, you are now. Your Californiaized. Nothing country about you.”

The corner of his mouth tipped. He gave a rough exhale. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He walked out the back door.

Charisse’s gaze watched his easy, natural stroll in cowboy boots through the know. He hunched his shoulders bringing the collar snug around his ears. Realization clattered through her chest like barn cats finding the lid off the garbage can. He was a natural in the boots and hat.

She didn’t know anything about him. She’d been so caught up in her own devastation, she never thought to ask Trent about his own life, where he came from, what he wanted.

Her assumptions had blocked her curiosity.

Not that Trent would’ve answered. He made it clear that he was a private person and didn’t like talking about himself.

How could she have ignored what the earthquake had caused him? No one had gone unscathed. True, his house hadn’t suffered damage, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t been affected.

She hadn’t stopped thinking about Leo. She’d made her concerns clear to Trent, though he seemed to have no interest in Leo’s welfare. If Trent and Leo had a disagreement or falling out, Leo had never mentioned it to her. Leo wanted to work on a project with Trent, though Trent didn’t seem to have any regard for Leo’s acting ability.

When Trent returned, Charisse would make an effort to find out what he really wanted. Maybe he was focused on using the ranch as the location for the film, but the question would be why. The primary understanding would be Rose would make the final decision.

Trent trudged down the path to the barn. How long had it been since he’d visited a barn? Of course, growing up in the prairie of North Dakota, his family hardly owned anything that could be called a barn by Whitloch standardized.

That was in the past. He looked across the snow blanketed meadows to the forests edging the property. He would need a chance to convince Charisse’s step mother that filming on the ranch would benefit her. He’d find out her price. Everyone had a price.

And if Rose was like Charisse, kind and thoughtful and caring it would be that much harder to present his arguments that they needed to lease to him a location for the film. This was business. He wouldn’t let his personal feelings interfere with this project. He had a strong script and a great cast. If he dealt with Charisse and her family in an easy going manner, he’d have the right location. He knew how to deal with welcoming custom of the small town folks.

He used to be one of them.

 There was more to the Whitloch’s than their small town personae. What was it about this family that received strangers? They knew nothing about him. And if they did?

They’d never agree to let him work on their property, no matter what the price.

Chapter

“Charisse, you’re staring.” Victoria’s voice penetrated through the thoughts tramping through Charisse’s mind.

“Am I?” Charisse felt the color creep up her neck and into her cheeks. She turned away from the window and looked around the kitchen as if trying to remember why she had come in that room.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Victoria’s gaze narrowed on her half-sister.

“Honestly, Vic, there’s nothing to tell.” She widened her eyes. She tried not to blink. What was it the rapid eye blinks meant? Something about not telling the truth.

She was telling the truth. If you discounted a kiss that had meant nothing. It meant nothing to Trent so it meant nothing to her.

Something cold settled on her shoulders and she rubbed her arms. She could make it mean nothing if she pushed that memory into a compartment where she would never have to retrieve it, never draw it out and remember that someone had kissed her so passionately that it felt as if there was something beyond the kiss, something emotional, something connecting.

“If you say so.” Victoria’s voice was a singsong I-don’t-believe-you lilt.

“Now tell me about Dad and Rose.”

“I’d rather you tell me about Trent.”

“Trust me, Vic. There’s nothing between us.”

Victoria’s eyes narrowed with disbelief. Then a sadness settling in to the deep blue. “Let’s fix a sandwich for you and Trent.”

From the refrigerator she pulled a loaf of shepherd’s bread and containers filled with sliced beef, turkey, Swiss cheese, American cheese, lettuce, tomato and onion.

“Vic, let me help you.” Charisse slipped the lettuce, tomato and onion from her grasp and set them by the sink. She pulled off a few leaves of lettuce and rinsed them beneath the faucet.

Victoria pulled a bread knife from the knife stand on the corner and sliced the bread loaf.

“You’re not talking.” Charisse narrowed eyes shifted toward Victoria.

“Where to begin.” Victoria gave a heavy exhale. “When Dad left Mallorca, he took Constanza’s helicopter.”

“Our other half sister that he managed to keep a secret for so many years.” Charisse stared at the water splashing over bright green lettuce leaves. “I talked to her the first time she called to let us know that Dad had disappeared again.”

“Not for long. Somehow, he got to the States. Garrett contacted customs, but they doesn’t have a record of his entering the country so we’re not sure how he managed this.”

“Probably a trick he learned during his Viet Nam war days.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. The other question was whose helicopter he flew to the ranch. No one seems to be looking for it. Mom had it trailered into the hangar. Dad had barely climbed out for the helicopter when he collapsed. Now he drifts in and out of the present, but one thing has remained consistent, he still thinks he’s married to Mom.”

“And that has Rose so upset she can’t speak?” She drew a sharp knife from the block on the counter.

“No.” Victoria dragged out the word. “A reporter did some digging and found out that Mom and Ralph were married.”

Charisse dropped the knife. It clattered in the sink. She hung onto the edge and swung her gaze to Victoria. “Would you please repeat that?”

“I can’t.” Victoria’s voice was thin and tight. “But you heard me correctly.”

“This to have been a long time ago.”

“Maybe. There is a marriage certificate, but no divorce papers.”

“Rose and Ralph are . . .?”

Victoria nodded, a sheen glistening in her eyes. She looked down at the bread she had sliced.

“I’m only going to ask this because I have to know. Is Ralph your -?”

Victoria shook her head. “Mom says that Dad’s my father – mine and Emily’s.”

Charisse exhaled slowly. “I’m glad to hear that. Even if it weren’t the case, I’d still consider you my sister.”

“There’s something else. Hillary found out about the marriage certificate.”

Charisse felt the blood drain from her face. Hillary would do anything to be declared the legal owner of the Crystal Creek Ranch. “Then that must mean Garrett’s involved.”

“He has the proof to that she isn’t the legal owner of the ranch, but convincing her of that will be difficult at best.”

“Victoria, I’m so sorry you have to go through all of this. After all you’ve been through with that stalker last summer, I was hoping this would be our chance at some happiness.”

“I am happy, Charisse. Don’t worry about me. I don’t even care if Hillary is declared the rightful owner of the ranch, though it would break Mom’s heart, but we need for Mom to talk about this marriage certificate. She hasn’t been able to talk or eat or sleep. She’s like a Zombie. She just stares at the wall.”

“Is that why Ralph’s in the hospital?”

“No.” Victoria looked more pale than when Charisse first saw her an hour ago. “Ralph was shot.”

“But he’s unarmed. Who would shoot him?”

“Simeon, Anna’s now former fiancée was searching the ranch for treasure stolen during the Russian revolution. Ralph happened to be at the wrong place and the wrong time.”

“Is he okay? Will he make it?”

“The doctor says he’ll pull through.”

“Thank goodness.” Tension drained out of Charisse’s body and she leaned against the counter. “I need to talk to Anna about this.”

“Except she’s in Europe. She calls every night. She can tell you why she returned to Europe and why Rocco went with her.”

“Rocco? The Sheriff’s deputy?”

“Like I said, she can explain all that to you.”

“How’s Emily doing?”

“Like the rest of us. Crushed that Mom kept this secret from us, but she’s tough. She’ll pull through. I hope.”

The back door opened. A gust of wind blew in with a snow covered Trent.

“Just in time.” Charisse placed the sandwiches onto plates and placed them and glasses of ice tea on a tray and carried them to the breakfast nook.

“That looks good.” Trent peeled off the jacket and hat. He opened the door and shook snow off the garments then hung them on a hook near the heater.

“You two enjoy this snack.”

“You’re not joining us? I made enough for us and for anyone upstairs who’s hungry.”

“We haven’t been too hungry these days, but I’ll let them know. Maybe I can convince Emily to eat something. She almost fainted this morning and I’m sure it’s because she hasn’t been eating enough.” Victoria slipped through the kitchen door leaving Charisse alone with Trent.

Charisse felt that aloneness. She brushed hair away from her face in the awkward way you feel when all the attention has been focused on you and it was the last thing you wanted. As an actress Charisse wanted the attention. She needed it to promote her career.

Except now. She wished she could gracefully push through the kitchen door. She didn’t feel comfortable being with Trent right now. Odd, since she’d spent the last few days with him.

Alone.

Trent pulled a chair away from the breakfast table. When she hesitated, his brows lifted in that unasked question for why she was locked into the ground and not sitting in the proffered chair.

“Thank you.” She swallowed her fear and sat down. Hard. It rattled her brain. She lifted a napkin from the tray and laid it on her lap all the while ignoring but ringing in her ears. “Did you see the equestrian center?” She set the bowl of potato salad in front of Trent.

He was watching her and she wasn’t sure why. Maybe the remnants of her conversation with Victoria still showed on her face.

“I saw it. Impressive. What I’d like to see are the bluffs on the other side of the forests.”

“How do you know about those?”

“The ranch hands in the barn. They’re an encyclopedia of information when it comes to the Crystal Creek Ranch.”

“They love this place. Most of them have worked here for several years.”

“So I heard. None of them can say enough good things about Rose and Ralph.”

Charisse’s heart squeezed tight. With Rose and Ralph unable to work, she wondered how the group was getting along. Because JT had been visiting the ranch since they were children, he could take over in most capacities. But no one could fully replace Ralph. Rose had mentioned several times she’d be lost without. Now Charisse understood that statement had more meaning than she realized.

Her phone signaled an incoming text. Tension seeped through her body. She chided herself for the reaction. The text could come from anyone. She had several projects where her contacts texted her.

Trent’s eyes narrowed. He had noticed her reaction to the notification.

Charisse felt her breaths seep into her lungs in little sips. Her pulse roared in her ears.

Avoiding Trent’s stare, she pushed a smile over face. She hadn’t checked her text yet. She didn’t know if it were from the mysterious L or someone else. She pressed her lungs against her pounding heart.

“What’s with the text?” he asked.

She twisted the phone back and forth without looking at the screen. “Just from a friend. I’ll check it later.”

“Check it now.”

“We can finish eating, then I’ll check it.”

“Do you want me to look at it?” he laid his open palm on the table.

Every muscle in her face hardened. “I can check my own texts.”

One brow lifted telling her he expected her to do so.

She pressed a finger to the phone’s screen. It trembled slightly and she pressed her finger hard against the phone to stop the trembling.

With more will than she thought possible, she lowered her gaze to the phone.

“You think Trent will keep you safe? Think again. You will pay. You will pay. YOU WILL PAY! - L

The words exploded in her head. She forced calm through her body as if it infused her bloodstream. Tipping the corner of her mouth. She laid the phone on the table and lifted her gaze to meet Trent’s. She didn’t want to look at him but she did so to convince him nothing was wrong.

“Nice try, Charisse. You’re a better actress than that.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Under any other circumstance she would have defended her craft as an actress. This wasn’t any other circumstance.

She looked away. Being an actress was like lying. She had no problem pretending she was someone else. She could convince anyone she felt something painful or joyful.

She couldn’t pretend this text didn’t disturb her. If this text was from Leo, why was he communicating with her as if he wanted revenge against her? Though she didn’t love him anymore, if she’d ever loved him, she couldn’t stop caring about him. They’d shared two years together. They had planned to marry. She’d never given him any reason to think she would harm him.

This wasn’t the Leo she knew.

“You’re as white as a ghost. My guess is this isn’t a friendly text.”

“I’m not sure this text was meant for me.”

“What does it say?”

She tried to read the text but the words you-will-pay kept screaming in her ears. She shoved the phone in front of Trent.

His face shifted from disinterest to outrage. “Who sent you this? Who is L?”

“I don’t know. I had thought Leo, but he’s never spoken to me in this way.”

“Why is my name mentioned in this text?”

“I can’t answer that.” She flopped against the back of her chair. “Someone thinks there’s something going on between you and me, but that’s not surprising given the reports from the paparazzi. But Leo wouldn’t care about that. He’s involved with someone else.”

“He moves fast.”

Charisse exhaled roughly. Slowly, she lifted her gaze to meet Trent’s. “Maybe not.” She couldn’t say anymore. Trent had been around enough actors to know that fidelity was a rare characteristic in that profession. What man wouldn’t want to take advantage of beautiful women readily making themselves available to him?

“Do you know where this text originated?”

“No, how could you know that?”

“I have a way. Do you mind?” He gestured toward the phone.

She shook her head and gave a dismissive wave toward the phone. “Please check. This is the second text I’ve received. I don’t want to receive anymore.”

“Second? Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because when I received the first message, I thought it was a fluke, maybe sent to me in error.”

“Two texts aren’t a fluke.” He pressed a screen and typed a series of codes onto a blank screen.

“I’m not even sure it’s from the same person. The phone numbers are different.”

“It’s easy to show a different number. Chances are this number isn’t valid.”

She leaned forward and watched his fingers fly over the digital keyboard. Lines of code scrolled up screen then stopped. “Where did you learn to trace text messages?”

“Just a little trick I picked up along the way to Hollywood.” His frown deepened and he typed more code into the phone.

“It sounds like you have a few secrets of your own.” Her gaze drifted to his face a roadmap of concentration.

What could he tell her? Nothing. Those secrets were best kept to himself.

Without lifting his head, he looked at her. “Know anybody in France.”

‘Several people. Can you tell where in France?”

“Provence.”

“I don’t know anyone who lives there now.”

“Someone who knows about you lives there now. Someone who knows enough about you to have your phone number.”

“What can I do? I can’t fly to France and do a door to door search for someone who has my cell phone number and is sending me crank texts.”

“There might be another way.” He pushed the phone toward her and stretched his legs in front of himself.

“What way is that?”

“I don’t know yet. When I do, I’ll let you know. There’s always the option of changing your phone number.” When she opened her mouth to protest, he lifted two fingers that gutted her objection the way she’d seen her brothers clean a trout. “Next time you get another text, let me know.”

“I may not. It may have been a-.”

“Coincidence. Which is what you thought before you received the second call. Don’t take that chance.” His stare turned hard.

His hand covered hers. It was a touch that made her burn for him. How could that be? Until a few days ago, she had planned to marry Leo. How could her body betray with these dark emotions stirring inside of her for Trent?

She didn’t pull away. She didn’t want the connection, as fraudulent as it was, to break.

The back door swung open. An army of boots trudged through the mudroom and into the kitchen.

Trent pulled away, but he never stopped looking in to her eyes. A muscle stiffened in his jaw. He leaned back into his chair.

Charisse glanced over her shoulder to JT followed by the other ranch hands.

“Sorry to interrupt.” JT opened the refrigerator and pulled bread, cold cuts, cheese and mayonnaise from the crispers. “Now that Rose isn’t feeling well, we’ve been making our own meals, and it’s dinner time.”

“I can do that.” Charisse pushed back her chair.

“Nope.” He laid the food in an assembly line order and surveyed the fare. “We may be ranch hands but we’ve gotten pretty clever with the cuisine. Of course, it doesn’t compare what Rose would cook for us, or what you get in your snooty Hollywood restaurants.”

“Listen to you make fun of those restaurants. You’ve eaten there plenty of times and I’ve never heard you complain.”

“Because I didn’t have to pay for it. You did.”

“And free food tastes better?”

“Always.” He winked then pulled plates from the cupboard. “We’ve got this down to a science. We’ll make these sandwiches and be gone in a flash. We even know how to clean up. You can get back -.” He looked over his shoulder at Charisse. “-to your whatever.”

Heat burned her cheeks.

She wasn’t sure what her face looked like. Judging by the rapid blink of JT’s eyes, she knew it wasn’t pretty. She thanked God she had her back to Trent.

“Get going, boys. We can eat these in the bunkhouse.”

“JT, you can eat here.”

JT’s gaze shifted from her to Trent. “We’ll be leaving soon.”

With slapped together sandwiches and bottle of water, the group tromped through the mudroom and outside.

Charisse turned toward Trent but couldn’t look at him. “Don’t ask me what that was about.”

The curve of his spoke of his understanding of exactly what that was about.

He stood, his long form unwrapping from beneath the table. “I’ll find a hotel for tonight and return in the morning. We can take a ride toward the bluffs and see if the location will fit the film. If your stepmother feels better, I can discuss my plans with her.”

Victoria pushed open the door. “I wouldn’t count on Mom feeling up to any negotiating for a while.”

“How’s she doing?” Charisse sank into a breakfast nook chair. How could solid as a rock Rose be sick?

“No change.” Victoria’s eyes were red as if she’d been crying. She lifted a teakettle from the cooktop and filled it with water. “The doctor keeps saying she’ll pull out of it, but he doesn’t know how stubborn she can be. If she doesn’t want to explain what happened between her and Ralph all those years ago, then she won’t, but I hate to see what keeping this secret is doing to her.”

“I’ll go sit with her for a while. Why don’t you rest?”

Victoria’s gaze shifted to Trent.

“I’m going to check into a hotel. I’ll be back in the morning.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Victoria’s jaw loosened and her gaze shifted to Charisse.

Charisse wished her half-sister wouldn’t look at her that way. Trent was her business associate. They weren’t romantically involved. The image of him kissing her, of his mouth hot and devouring pressed to her lips, exploded in her mind. She shoved it aside.

He’d made it clear.

The kiss meant nothing.

“There’s plenty of room here.” Victoria’s gaze kept switching from Trent to Charisse as if expecting Charisse to reaffirm that Trent should stay the night at the ranch.

Charisse should agree that he stay at the ranch. Hadn’t he been generous to provide shelter for her after the earthquake?

“The hotel is fine. I already made a reservation.”

“You can cancel it.” the words popped out of Charisse’s mouth. She felt her eyes stretch wide with surprise. Her voice spoke, but said something that had never been her intention.

And it didn’t stop there.

“Vic is right. We have plenty of room.” Again, that same voice saying things she didn’t mean. She must be possessed.

Trent leveled a steady gaze at her as if weighing the sincerity of her offer. “The hotel is fine. I’ll be back at eight o’clock tomorrow morning. Thank you for the hospitality.” He nodded toward Victoria then his stare settled on Charisse.

Charisse glanced out the window. Snowflakes shot past the glass. “It’s snowing. You should stay here.”

Trent’s laugh was low, edged in roughness, but went through her like a rich liqueur. “I’ve driven in snow before.”

“Not in a while. You’ve lived in southern California for at least ten years, maybe longer.” The words tumbled out of her mind. That each word was enunciated shocked her.

He tapped a finger to her nose, the way a teacher would touch a prized student. “I have left the state. I’ll be fine driving in the snow.”

He pushed through the kitchen door and into the great room.

Charisse felt a shove at her shoulder. She opened her mouth to scold Victoria, but her half-sister’s scowl swiped away the protest.

Victoria frowned and jerked her head toward the swinging door.

Charisse opened her hands in curled her fingers to the ceiling. Didn’t her sister understand? There was nothing she could do.

Victoria widened her eyes so far her head almost trembled.

With a rough exhale, Charisse swung her head and pushed through the kitchen door. “Trent.”

His hand on the front door he faced her, one brow lifted.

“I know you’ve driven in snow, but it would be better if you stayed here tonight.”

Trent’s gaze swept past her face to something behind her.

She looked over her shoulder to Victoria standing in the kitchen doorway. Color surged up Victoria’s neck and into her cheeks. She gave a funny sound like a mouse before the trap snapped and stepped backward. The door swept closed.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” He stepped outside.

“Come for breakfast.” Charisse’s face followed the narrowing gap.

The door closed with a sharp click.

She jerked her head back.

“I can’t believe you let him leave like that.” Victoria stormed out of the kitchen.

“Like what? He wants to stay at a hotel. What did you want me to do hogtie him? And what do you care anyway? He’s a business associate.”

“Business associate. Is that what you think? Vic, until last week I was engaged to Leonidas Vasilios. It’s not like I can drop one guy and pick up with another.”

“And why aren’t you engaged to Leo anymore?” Victoria crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes narrowed in probing stare.

“It wasn’t working out.” Charisse gave a rough exhale. Her gaze drifted to the bronze statues arranged on the shelf above the welcoming arms of the staircase.

“Yeah, I’ll bet. I never did like him.”

“Why?”

“He was too suave, too self-assured.”

“Why didn’t you say something.”

“Because you wouldn’t’ve listened. Like now.”

Something creaked at the top of the stairs.

“What are you two arguing about?” Garrett, Victoria’s husband, stood on the landing.

Victoria and Charisse jerked their stares to the staircase.

“We’re sisters. We can’t agree on everything,” Charisse pointed a finger at Victoria. “And another thing -.”

From outside came the sorrowful grind of an engine churning its last.

“His car won’t start.” Charisse moved to the window and lifted one of the drapes.

“Who’s outside?” Garrett stepped down to the next riser.

“Charisse’s boyfriend,” Victoria said.

Charisse tilted her head and widened her eyes at her halfsister. “Business associate.” She turned to the window. “He’s opened up the hood. He’s got a flashlight. He’s trying to see what’s wrong with the engine. I should go out there and tell him to come inside.”

Victoria opened the door. She waved one hand across her hips as if pushing Charisse out the door.

“I’m going,” Charisse said through clenched teeth. She grabbed a blanket from the hall chair, wrapped it around her shoulders and stepped outside.

Victoria closed the door with a thud. Shock bolted through Charisse like electricity. Her feet lifted two inches off the stone porch. Dark thoughts whisked through her mind. She didn’t need her halfsister telling her how to arrange her love life. Trent would never do as boyfriend let alone someone she would consider to have a more serious relationship with.

The cold pushed against Charisse’s face and hands. She gripped the ends of the blanket and dragged it over her head. “Can’t get it started.” Her voice trailed when he lifted his face from the dark cavern of the SUV’s hood.

Light from the porch poured over him. He had a smudge of grease on one cheek. He’d rolled up his shirtsleeves and dipped his hands in the black space beneath the hood. She assumed they would be covered in grease, too.

“Go inside.” He flicked his gaze over her then looked back at the engine. The muscles in his forearms knotted and his wrists twisted as if he were tightening bolts. “I’ve almost got it fixed.”

“Maybe I can help?” She stepped to the edge of the porch. Another one of those statements where she needed to kick herself for allowing it to push past her lips. In high school, she’d helped Ralph work on the tractors.

Behind her, the front door rattled. A sign that Victoria probably had her ear pressed to the thick wood and didn’t like the way Charisse was talking to Trent.

He paused and looked straight ahead. “Get in the driver’s seat and see if you can get it to start.”

“No.”

His eyes narrowed, he looked past his shoulder at her. “You offered to help, and now you’re refusing?”

“I misspoke. I shouldn’t’ve offered. Come inside. Stay the night here.”

He straightened. Even though he stood the bottom of the stairs and she at the top, he seemed to look down at her.

“I mean it. You should stay the night here at the ranch,” she said.

He pulled a pristine handkerchief from his back pocket. He wiped his hands on the starched fabric. His gaze never left hers, his dark eyes probing into hers as if wondering about her change of mind.

He strolled to the rear of the SUV and pulled two suitcases and a satchel from the opening hatch. He climbed the steps. “Where do you want me?”

“Come inside. I have a feeling Victoria knows exactly where you should sleep.” She slipped the satchel from his shoulder and reached for the door handle.

The door flew open.

“Come in.” Victoria peered over the edge of the door. She jumped from one foot to the other. “It’s freezing out there.” She hustled Charisse and Trent into the foyer.

Garrett no longer stood on the top landing of the staircase.

“Where should Trent-?”

“Cook’s old bedroom.” Victoria lifted her arms over her head and flexed her wrists. “I’m tired.” Her words were wide and airy and slipped through a yawn. “You won’t need my help. Goodnight.” Victoria embraced Charisse in a squeeze-breath-out-of-your-lungs hug and ran up the stairs. At the landing, she peered over her shoulder at them then ran to the top of the staircase. She peered at them again. Her hand pressed to her mouth, she smothered a laugh and disappeared into the darkness shrouding the hallway.

Trent’s frown dipped to the bridge of his nose. He shifted his gaze to Charisse.

“Don’t even ask.” Charisse stepped past him to the great room. After she showed Trent to his room, she’d have a heart to heart with dear sister Victoria. Her half sister had Charisse’s relationship with Trent all wrong. “Cook’s old room is behind the kitchen.”

He followed her down the hallway behind the kitchen.

In the small bedroom, she flipped on the light. A twin bed with a handmade quilt was shoved into the corner. A tiered vanity dresser stood against the opposite wall.

“It’s not the Ritz, but it will be comfortable for one night.” Charisse glanced around the room looking everywhere accept at Trent. She turned to the door.

“Charisse.” His voice was ragged and low and like a hook that pulled her back into the room.

She waited. She couldn’t look at him. Not after what had happened.

“About last night.”

“Trent. No.”

“You’re the type of woman -.”

“The type of woman.” She gave a dry laugh. “I’m not a category, Trent.”

The darkness in his eyes looked like pain. Pain that he’d misled her? It was a weak moment for her, maybe for him, too.

She was an adult. She’d survived missed acting roles and rejected movie proposals. She would survive a weak moment with the great Trent Parker.

“Tomorrow, we can ride to the bluffs and scout the site for a location. If it meets the criteria, we can approach Rose, but I’m not making any promises. I’ve never seen her like this. . .” Her voice trailed.

The corners of his eyes narrowed. He knew what he wanted.

So did Rose, the stepmother who had been more of a mother than Charisse’s own.

“Goodnight, Charisse.” There was finality in his voice that made her eyes widened.

Her hand on the doorknob, she stepped through the doorway and closed the door.

She rushed down the hallway, away from Trent and away from what just happened.

Charisse knew the site would be the supreme location for the shoot. She wanted this film to fulfill its potential as a blockbuster. She’d invested time and money, scouted locations, contracted with directors, scriptwriters, film editors. Now she had someone on her side. Someone big. No one in Hollywood But not against Rose’s wishes.

She was at the precipice of getting what she wanted since she set foot in Hollywood. The one film she knew would take the industry by storm.

But at what cost? She never had Trent.

He was all about the physical. He embodied Hollywood.

Chapter

Moonlight drifted through the shears covering the windows in Charisse’s bedroom. It splashed over her face like a sensuous stroke across her cheek. She leaned into it wanting more, knowing the more she received the more she would want.

Reality pried at the edge of her sleep-induced desire and peeled away the fog of a dream that satisfied her yet left her wanting more. She pressed fingers to her temple. What was she thinking? Where were these thoughts coming from? Thought the thoughts didn’t focus, she knew they centered around Trent. The man she couldn’t have.

Which was just was well. She didn’t want him.

Not in the way her mind was tricking her to believe.

She wanted his expertise, his financial wisdom, his connections. She needed them.

She threw back the covers. Her feet, warm from the pocket of heat tucked between the sheets, slapped against the cold flooring. She sucked air through her teeth. The shock shoved all remnants of sleep from her mind.

All luxuriating thoughts of Trent from her mind. She stilled trying to grasp the fragments of the dream. Had she really been dreaming about Trent?

Her mind was deceiving on her. She had been thinking about the film project. Coincidentally, Trent was involved in the project so naturally he would be in her thoughts.

She didn’t want him in her thoughts.

She strode to the bathroom. The cold floor had already shot through a jolt of alertness through her. She wouldn’t need a shower. And why waste a shower on horseback ride when she’d need to soak in a hot tub after the ride.

At the sink she splashed cold water on her face, the icy sting making every cell in her face tingle.

She dragged on jodhpurs and thermal shell. In the hallway, she smelled coffee. Victoria would be up already. Probably making breakfast for their father, Rose and Emily.

A wave of shame washed over Charisse. Victoria had cut short her honeymoon to be with their father. She should be luxuriating on a beach in the arms of her handsome husband.

Instead, she had assumed Rose’s job of chief cook and bottle washer to make sure her parents were cared for. She sacrificed, and Charisse lazed in bed.

Taking the stairs two steps at a time, Charisse rushed through the great room and slapped a palm against the kitchen door. “You need to stay and bed and-.”

Trent stood poured coffee from the decanter into a mug. His t-shirt hung from his broad shoulders and bagged over sleep pants that clung to his narrow hips. His gaze shifted to her burst-through-the-door-entrance. One brow arched. The open dishwasher was stacked with dirty dishes.

She skidded to a stop. “I thought, I thought. . .”

“That Victoria was in here?”

“Yes, she’s always been an early riser. And she makes the best breakfasts, after Rose.”

“She came down. I asked her to tell me where everything was and that I’d make breakfast. Then I sent her away.”

“She let you do that? Rose and Victoria are very protective about their kitchen.”

“So I noticed.”

“All those dirty dishes in the dishwasher -.”

“The hands pitched in. Most of them seem to know their way around a kitchen.”

“Then they’ve already eaten.”

“Eaten and gone. Victoria and Emily took trays up to Rose and your father.”

There was something so familiar with the way he spoke about her family – as if he knew them. After one night, it was as if he had been a part of the family all along.

Warmth pulsed in her chest. What would it be like to have Trent as part of her family?

Leo had never been interested in meeting her family. He had never introduced her to his. He hadn’t looked at her when he’d given her a sketchy explanation about his dysfunctional family that she wouldn’t want to meet. She had believed him.

Something raw and scraped throbbed inside her chest. How could she have thought to marry someone whose family she had never met? Who never wanted to meet her family? Family was everything to her.

Family seemed to be everything to Trent. He’d gone out of his way to get to know her family. He communicated with the hands as if he’d worked with them.

But why wouldn’t he? He worked with movie crews. Working together was mandatory for a film project.

Not for Leo. He had been the star. It was the crew’s responsibility to work with him, not the other way around.

“There’s still some pancakes in the oven. Grab a plate, and I’ll serve you a stack.”

She took a step away from him. Was she ready to share her family with him?

How could she share her most valued possession with someone who wasn’t ready to share himself with her?

“I’m not very hungry. I’ll have a yogurt.”

“That isn’t much to get you through a ride.” Trent raised his brow.

“I do it all the time.” She pulled a carton of Greek yogurt with blueberries from the refrigerator and a spoon from one of the drawers. She perched on top one of the stools at the breakfast bar and peeled back the top of the carton.

“Boris said he’d saddle Raja and Excalibur.” Trent sipped from his coffee mug. Steam wafted from the mug and drifted past his jaw that showed a day’s growth of beard.

It was an image that caught on the edge of her mind. Trent in a t-shirt and sleep pants, unshaven, standing barefoot in the kitchen, sipping coffee?

Her stomach did a backward off the diving board summersault. She wouldn’t see Trent like this again.

“Charisse, did you hear me?” Trent looked over the edge of his mug at her, his eyes dark and intense stared out at her as if he looked past her face and into her mind.

She stared down at her cup of yogurt. She couldn’t explain these thoughts, these emotions, that nudged their way out of some crevice. These thoughts seemed to say to her this is the way your life should be.

Her life could never include a man who charged through life seeking opportunities, pushing people aside.

That was what she had always read and heard about Trent. Seeing him now, seemed to push that hard charging image aside and focus on the more than human man standing in front of her.

Who was the real Trent Parker?

He set his mug on the counter. There was a way he tore his gaze from hers. A way that made her uncomfortable. Made her wonder what thoughts streaked through his mind.

“I’ll change and meet you in the barn.” he was down the hall striding toward Cook’s old bedroom before she blinked.

Chapter

Charisse guided her horse Raja down a snow packed path. Behind her came the soft plouffe, plouffe, plouffe of Excalibur’s hooves, the horse Trent road.

The sun shone brightly on freshly fallen snow making it glisten and turning it crusty. A cool breeze nipped at Charisse’s cheeks making them sting and making her heart swell. She was in the only place earth that felt like home doing what she loved most.

Charisse had wanted to follow Trent on horseback, make sure he knew how to ride a horse.

“Get in front,” he’d said, his voice tight with the authority he’d use on a movie set. He was used to being obeyed, not arguing the actors who tried to take over the shooting of a scene.

“It’s better if I follow -.”

“Why?” He turned in the saddle. His hat sat low on his brow. The collar of the borrowed shearling jacket hugged his square jaw. Chaps covered shiny jeans that hugged muscular thighs.

She pulled sunglasses over her eyes and focused on his face. The temptation to let her gaze drift over this wonderfully formed man dragged at her. She sunk her teeth into her lower lip and hoped he couldn’t see through the dark lenses of her sunglasses and see the struggle in her eyes.

“In case something happens,” she said.

“Like my falling off the horse.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that.” What a lie. But why admit it?

“I’ll follow you.” He guided his horse to the side of the trail to let her move ahead.

She gave a loud exhale. Squeezing the horse’s withers with her knees, she urged him to a trot until she had passed Trent. She listened to the stead plod of Trent’s horse, which sounded steady. Trent was familiar with riding a horse.

“Don’t be surprised,” he said.

She turned in her saddle. “About what?”

“That I know how to ride a horse.”

“I wasn’t even thinking that but since you brought it up, where did you learn.”

“Same as you. When I was growing up.”

“Where was that?”

“How much farther to the bluff?”

“In other words, you don’t want to talk about where you learned to ride.”

His mouth flattened. Something sharpened in his eyes the look so harsh it gave her a jolt. “In other words.”

She gave a nod and faced forward in her saddle. “We should be at the bluffs in another hour.”

Trent didn’t care if it took twelve hours. He hadn’t ridden in years, but it had always been something that gave him peace, being alone with a great, gentle beast that trusted him and waited for his commands.

He took in the panorama of views, rugged mountains, crystal blue sky, sifted snow covering evergreen branches. And the air – clean and fresh. Not the exhaust clogged environment that hugged the coast.

It felt natural – to be on the ranch, to ride with Charisse.

His chest tightened. Being with Charisse wasn’t natural, especially after she found out about his meeting with Leo.

It hadn’t ended well.

An understatement.

The view past the bluff was a like a slow motion helicopter ride, the first scene in a movie when the camera pans a magnificent view before focusing on the setting that catapults the audience into the heroine’s adventure.

This was his opening scene. He’d tried to encompass the view on the story view, had the image locked in his mind. He’d never seen setting before, but in his heart had known this was what he’d had in mind.

If Charisse’s stepmother consented.

Charisse stopped her horse and twisted in the saddle. “This is the view I had in mind for the opening scene.”

Her statement was enough to drag his attention away from the vista to her. To Charisse with her heart shaped face, her large, blue eyes, her hair in cascading curls that framed her face and tumbled from her knit cap and spilled over her shoulders.

He tried to regain his breath. This was the image he’d had on the storyboard. He hadn’t realized before but the image of the heroine matched Charisse at this moment.

Charisse slid from her horse, her worn boots pressing into the snow. “Let’s take a closer look. We can leave the horses here.”

Trent followed her to a tree and tethered the horses to a branch.

With each step toward the edge of the cliff, his heart boomed in chest. Every film gave him a sense of excitement, but with this project, his enthusiasm knew no bounds. The setting, the actress, the script, each had power on its own to pull the project together. Combined, they would create a memorable film that would not only entertain an audience, but grab them and take them on the adventure.

“The opening scene would encompass this panorama.” Charisse held her arms wide as if trying to capture the view. “Then narrow to main character desolate in this beauty.”

“I can see it.” His mouth tipped. His eyes bright as if she could see the majestic range reflected in his eyes. He pulled out his phone and videotaped the scene careful to move slowly so that the lens captured the nuances he wanted to emphasize in the opening scene.

“From this angle, we can see a setting that will work for the campsite in the first scene.” Charisse walked along the edge of the cliff.

The slick sole of her boot skid across scree. The filament poured over the edge. The fine pebbles bounced on snow covered rocks cropping out from the walls of the canyon. The nicking sound echoed in the canyon carved by the Crystal Creek.

Her foot slide to the edge. She pitched forward. Her breath caught. Before her flashed the opening canyon. Below, water rushed between gaps of ice and boulders. A hard line divided the sky and rock dipping into the canyon.

The rush of blood in her ears matched the water splashing over the rocks below. Her tip forward was slow, gentle, not a push but a beckon.

A call.

Her arms flung wide in one last attempt to gain her balance, to throw herself backward.

She tipped forward. “Trent.” She whispered his name.

Steel circled her wrist, whipped her from the edge.

The view of the creek below became the rock wall, which became the glistening sky.

Momentum whipped her around. Her stomach shifted. She slammed into a rigid wall of muscle and sinew. Air burst from her lungs. Warmth and strength flooded her body. The scent of male virility washed over her. She gasped drying to draw a breath.

Trent’s powerful hand braced her back, buried her face into his chest. His pounding heart hammered through the jacket and filled her head. She heard no air moving through his lungs as if he’d stopped breathing.

“Are you okay?” His voice was low and muffled as if traveling through a tunnel.

She tried to speak. Her mouth tried trapping words in her throat. She nodded.

He tipped her back, his gaze grazing hers. “Are you?” His voice clogged with emotion.

“What just happened?” Her gaze traveled from shearling jacket to eyes dark and obscure and thick with a turmoil of emotions.

“You tell me.”

“I was walking along the edge. Something I’ve done a thousand times. Then it felt like my feet left the ground. Everything around me twisted.”

“You almost fell into the canyon.” He sounded controlled and breathless.

The strength in her legs seemed to drain into the ground. The tremor began in her knees. One collapsed. She sank deeper into the embrace that trapped her against iron.

“Charisse, stay with me.”

“I’m fine.” Her voice was raw and scraped the inside of her throat.

“Prove it.”

How did she prove it when she wanted spill over the ground?

She focused on her legs. Where there was no strength, she dragged strength from her mind and pushed it into her legs, her back, her arms, her neck.

“It’s okay, Trent. I’m fine.” she braced her hands against his chest. If she could push away, take a step, he’d see.

He tipped her head back. He was struck by the softness in her eyes. His blood warmed. He’d never seen such emotion in a woman’s eyes before. He’d seen desire. He’d seen lust. In her eyes, was something deeper, something everlasting. He ached with a weighty desire.

It was something he’d never acknowledged before but he recognized it. He remembered the first time he’d felt it – when Bambi had emailed him the transfer files containing the audition tapes.

Charisse’s hadn’t been the first he’d seen. It had been the last. If he’d seen hers first he wouldn’t have wasted on evening studying the other tapes.

In her eyes were depth, sincerity, love.

Realization struck him. She was an actress. A good actress. She could make him feel anything she wanted.

And she was making him feel as if she cared.

She was an actress.

She was a liar.

For one brief moment, he wouldn’t care. What he felt overpowered him.

He pressed his lips against hers. Crushing her, tasting her.

She was sweet. Spicy. Unpredictable.

A gasp escaped between them. More like small animal cornered by a beast. Her hands curled against his chest, pressing, then losing strength. The skin of her cheek bruised beneath his rough beard.

Her lips softened, turned pliable, then the urgency pressed into him.

In the distance, drifted a hum. Soft at first, but steady. The volume increased.

Charisse pressed against him, her boot catching the edge of the cliff.

He tightened his grip around her waist and whipped her away from the ledge. “You push me away and you’re going to drop over the edge.”

She pressed a gloved hand to her lips. They were raw and on fire.

“That noise.”

“I hear it.”

“Someone’s coming.” She moved around him and watched the woods.

Any minute someone on a snowmobile would burst out of the trees. Her chest squeezed. They would be looking for her. Bringing what news? Her father’s conditioned had worsened. Rose’s mental capacity was irreversible?

The three snowmobiles burst from the trees. She recognized the identical uniforms. County Sheriff Department gray.

When they saw her and Trent, they decreased their speed.

These deputies knew her, knew her family.

Even at a distance, she could see their grim faces. They stopped the vehicles a few feet away. The deputy in the center dismounted and strode toward her.

Trent moved toward the man and extended his hand. “Hello, Deputy. I’m Trent Parker.”

Charisse wanted to move in front of him. If they had news about her father or stepmother, she wanted this moment over. She had to know any problem with her family.

“I know. I’m here to speak with Ms. Whitloch.” The deputy’s blue eyes shifted from Trent to Charisse.”

“It’s okay, Deputy. Whatever you have to say can be said in front of Mr. Parker. Do you have news about my family?”

“No, ma’am. You’re wanted for questioning.”

“Questioning?” Confusion poured through her. “For what? Does this have to do with my father flying the helicopter to the ranch?”

“No, ma’am. This concerns Leonidas Vasilios.”

“Leo? What did Leo do?”

“Nothing. I’m very sorry to have to tell you this, Ms. Whitloch. He was found - dead in his home in Malibu, California.”

Chapter

The deputy’s words pounded in her head like an out of control echo, one of those echoes that penetrated your brain like a melodramatic film from the fifties.

Leo was dead.

Leo was dead.

Leo was dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Images of Leo laughing, talking with friends, his palms up, his fingers curved as he made described his exaggerated memory of a scene in his latest film. She stood on the opposite side of the room with the writer and her costar from her current project. She had felt someone’s gaze upon her and glanced to the side, to Leo and his friends. He had smiled – that smile that crooked at one corner. His dark eyes softened, closed slightly, as if he were lost in a dream. He seemed to look right at her, but drawing a straight line from his eyes to her didn’t work. That line had a curve.

She followed the straight line of his gaze.

To the twenty year old blonde who had starred as human trafficking victim in his spy thriller. The young woman’s this hair fell in waves over bare shoulders to the bodice of a strapless gown that dipped into cleavage that rivaled the Grand Canyon. Her blue eyes locked into Leo’s then slid across the room to Charisse. Full lips slid into a smile that seemed warm and friendly and stuck like dirt in Charisse’s throat. She looked back at Leo, but he was backslapping the director of his latest film, the scotch in his glass sloshing over crushed ice and dancing over the glass’ brim.

Charisse’s heart thudded until she thought her ribs would fracture. Had been paying attention, she would’ve realized then that Leo’s relationship with the actress was more than professional. How could she have been so blind to Leo’s wandering eye?

“Are you all right?” Trent’s voice broke through bad memory that held her captive like manacles on a slave ship.

“I, I don’t know what I am.” She felt the shudder in her knees. One bowed. Her head spun and for a moment she thought the ground rushed to her face, but she wasn’t moving. She stood erect.

“Are you up to riding back to the ranch?” His eyes when to her that seemed to hold her, keep her from falling face first into the snow.

“Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse us. As I’m sure you’ll understand, this news is quite shocking. Miss Whitloch and I are going to return to the ranch.

“Wait. Deputy, do you have any details on Leo’s death?”

“Not much.” He shifted his weight. His gaze shot to his partner then to Charisse. “His home was destroyed by the earthquake. When the demolition crew was removing the debris, his body was found beneath the rubble.”

“At his home?” Her knees quivered. One of them buckled. She wrapped her fingers around the horse’s reins and pulled. If she didn’t hang onto something, she’d be a pile of clothes and hair lying in the stone.

Xanadu nudged Charisse’s shoulder as if reassuring her. Charisse felt Trent’s questioning stare as if his hand pressed into the middle of her back.

“You act surprised that Mr. Vasilios was found at his home.” The deputy fixed his eyes on her.

“I had thought he was out of town.” Wasn’t that what his assistant had told her?

“Then he must have returned before the earthquake occurred,” Trent said.

Maybe. She and Leo no longer dated. There would be no reason for him to call her when he returned.

Just like there had been no reason for him to call her when he left town with the two line actress.

“If you find out anything else, would you please let me know?” Charisse asked the deputy.

“Will do, ma’am.” he touched the brim of his hat. He and his partner mounted their snowmobiles guided the vehicles down the snow covered path.

“Hey.” Trent’s low smooth voice was as soothing as a caress. “You up to riding back?”

Her throat closed. Even if she could talk, her mind had gone blank. She nodded and pulled herself into saddle.

“You lead,” Trent said.

“So you’ll know if I fall off the horse?”

“Something like that.”

She didn’t notice much of anything during the ride back. Images of Leo whirled in her mind. She didn’t want to remember her last moments with him - finding him in bed with the actress and arguing with him over the and was surprised with the compound loomed over the crest of the final knoll before reaching the barn.

Trent dismounted and took her horse’s reins. “Go inside. I’ll take care of the horses.”

She slid to the ground. “I can take care them. I need to do something. I don’t want to think about Leo anymore.” She didn’t look at him. Instead her gaze wavered like a bird trying to find a place to land.

She was still thinking about Leo. The realization was like a blow to Trent’s chest. Of course, she would be thinking about him. Broken relationships took time to heal. He was too familiar with the time it took to heal. How many nights had he lain in bed wondering if he’d ever heal?

He did.

In the alley, Charisse removed Xanadu’s saddle. It felt heavier than when Charisse had first removed it from the tack room. And larger.

“Here. Let me.” Trent reached to take the saddle from her grasp.

His gloves hands connected to the sleeves of a padded jacket that didn’t hide his muscular arms stretching at the jacket fabric.

Something seemed to press against her cheeks. She lifted her gaze. Trent was staring at her. Not hard but in quizzical way that asked what she was looking at, what she was thinking.

She felt the heat burn in her cheeks.

Her gaze dropped and she tugged at the saddle. “I can carry it.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t. I can carry it, too.”

She glanced at Excalibur tethered to the post in the alley. The horse no longer wore the saddle and bridle. He blinked at Charisse as if asking how she made him wait in the alley, especially when it was his dinnertime – hay, oats and maybe another treat waited for him in his stall.

“You’ve already unsaddled Excalibur.” She shifted her gaze to Trent.

‘Which means I now have time to put Xanadu’s tack away.”

Charisse released the saddle. “Thanks. I’ll curry the horses.”

Without waiting for his comment, she lifted a comb from the kit on the grooming shelf. Her mind wavered from the patient horse to Trent - powerful and virile in his moves, even when he wasn’t moving –to Leo.

How could Leo be dead?

There would be crowds of adoring fans camp outside what remained of his home. How would Barbara deal with that? She’d never been fond of the groupies who hung outside the house to get a glimpse of Leo. Of the ones who tried to sneak through the gate. Barbara always knew when an intruder entered the property. And never showed remorse when the guards ordered the dogs to chase an interloper off the property.

But Barbara was his assistant. She had been fond of Leo, working hard to meet his every need before even he knew what he wanted.

With Leo gone, what would Barbara do? Look for another job? Charisse needed to call her, express her condolences.

“You groom her much more, she won’t have any fur left.” Trent’s deep voice broke through her thoughts.

Charisse tightened her lips and nodded. “You’re right. I need to focus on what I’m doing.”

“You’ve just received devastating news.” He didn’t move toward her, but she felt him as if he held her.

She felt warmth-his warmth.

She moved a step backwards, deeper into the stall.

“The realization hasn’t sunk in yet that he’s gone.” There was a softness in his eyes, as if he knew she needed to put distance between them.

Trent slipped a hand around her wrist and pulled her toward him and out of the stall.

His breath was warm and fresh against her cheek, his heart a steady, reassuring beat penetrating through his jacket and beating against hers so that they lined up in one steady beat. She should pull away, but already her body responded, remembering the searing heat of his lips when he’d kissed her that night on the deck of his home.

His head bent toward hers. The signals in her mind flashed like warning lights. She should stiffen, pull away. Instead her body relaxed, molded against his.

He stopped. It was a jolt as if something had blocked him. He held her away from himself.

Confusion billowed in her chest like smoke from a fire.

“I’ll walk you to the house. If your stepmother is up to it, we can discuss the location shoot with her. Once she knows the details, she may change her mind.” He moved into the alley and strode toward the barn door.

She should be glad he stopped before she had a chance to humiliate herself. What was she thinking wanting Trent to hold her kiss her? She was consumed with the grief of Leo’s death. No wonder Trent pushed her away. What man wants to kiss a woman whose thoughts are filled with another?

She pulled the carrots she had stuffed into her pocket before the ride and fed them to Xanadu. The horse’s eyes blinked fast, her long lashes creating a breeze.

Excalibur’s neighs filled the alley. He knocked his hooves against the stall door.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten you.” Charisse held the carrot beneath his quivering lips.

Trent dragged open the barn door. His gaze flicked from her to the doorway.

She slid her hand along Excalibur’s nose then moved to the doorway. Trent followed her along the snow packed path to the house the silence between them building like a wall.

The back door opened. Victoria stood on the back deck. Even at a distance, Charisse didn’t miss her stony face and the grim set of her mouths.

Charisse quickened her pace. Only too obvious was what Victoria had to tell her. a chill crept down her back. She would discuss what had happened to Leo and how Charisse should deal with the law enforcement. Charisse wanted to spend time with her family, talk to Rose, ensure her father’s wellbeing.

But first she had protect herself. For that, she needed a plan.

Charisse thundered up the steps to the deck. With each step, her eyes burned with the threat of tears ready to pour down her cheeks.

Victoria wrapped her arms around Charisse’s neck. “Oh, Char, I’m so sorry.”

Charisse wanted to tell her she was fine, that she could move past this tragic news of Leo’s death. The words caught in her throat. The tears flowed.

“Come inside. We’ll have some tea. Garrett will help you write a statement to release to the media.”

“Media?” Charisse pulled away. through a blur of tears, she stared into her half-sister’s eyes.

“Leo’s death is all over the news. The media has been calling here demanding a statement. Not just the house phone, but our cellphones, too. Unless we recognize the phone number, we’ve given up answering the calls.”

“Vic, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for us. It’s sad to say, but something will push his death off the front page. Once that happens, the calls will step.”

“you’re right. That is sad. If Leo knew, he’d be angry. He would want nothing more than to remain the center of attention. Did you hear anymore about what happened.”

Victoria’s gaze shifted to Garrett whose mouth set in a grim line.

“What?” Charisse’s gaze flicked from her half-sister to her brother-in-law. “What have you heard?”

“There was evidence that Leo had been drinking. They think he had been drunk, maybe even passed out when the earthquake hit. He may not even have known what happened.”

Trent’s head jerked up. His mouth opened then closed so tight his jaw flexed.

“That’s so hard to believe,” Charisse said.

“You mean that he was killed?” Victoria asked.

“There is that, but that Leo was drunk. He prided himself in his physical appearance. He rarely drank and I’d never seen him drunk.”

“He’d also never been dumped before,” Victoria said.

“You think I dumped Leo?” Charisse pointed a finger at her chest.

“It’s all over the news. There’s even a picture of you and -.” Victoria’s gaze wavered to Trent.

“Of Trent carrying me on the beach?” Charisse released a disgusted sigh. “Yeah, I saw that. He was carrying me because I had sprained my ankle. Leave it to the media to get the story completely wrong.”

“The phone has been inundated with calls from news outlets and other media demanding a statement,” Victoria said. “We’ve transferred the house lines and our cell phones to an answering service. We set up a temporary line to use for incoming calls. Callers need a code to access it, but I’m sure the media will learn about the code and start calling on that line. We’re hoping after you’ve made a statement that the number of calls will decrease. It takes time but something else will happen that will push you and Leo off the front page.”

“You’re right that will happen,” Charisse talked through the tears. “But in the meantime, everyone’s life will be miserable. I can’t stay here. I’m going to check into a hotel.”

“You. Will. Not.” Victoria tipped her head, her stare hard.

“There won’t be any decisions made until after you’ve talked to Garrett. Now come inside.”

“If anyone should leave, it should be me.” Trent’s voice sounded hollow as if he had spoken through a tunnel.

“You already know everything that’s going on. It might help to have an outsider’s viewpoint. You knew Leo and you know Hollywood,” Garrett said. “Everyone come inside. We’ll never solve this standing in the cold.”

In the mudroom, Victoria took Charisse’s and Trent’s jackets and hats and anchored them over the hooks above the bench.

“You three sit in the breakfast nook. I’ll bring in the tea,” Victoria said.

In less than an hour, Garrett had helped Charisse draft a statement to release to the media.

“Read through it one more time and make sure it covers everything you want to convey to the media.” Garrett turned his laptop toward Charisse so she could read the screen.

Charisse scanned the statement. Words expressing her sorrow at Leo’s passing was a like lance piercing her heart. Leo was gone. Her love for him had changed and ebbed but hadn’t disappeared. He had done nothing for someone to take his life.

The authorities believed she had been involved in his death. A rush of fear shot up her spine sending a chill across her shoulders.

She glanced up. Victoria and Garrett focused on the statement spread across the computer screen.

Trent’s gaze locked into hers.

“Are you all right?” His voice was low with an emotion that made her lungs freeze.

She wanted to deny that anything was wrong, but no one would believe it. pictures of her and Leo crowded the internet and the tabloids.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll need to adjust to Leo being gone.” The corners of her lips curved into a smile you give when you don’t know quite how to react to the tragic news you’ve just received.

Charisse’s words pressed against Trent’s heart. She would need to adjust. Their relationship had changed. He hadn’t pried. She hadn’t offered an explanation. Maybe she had discovered Leo’s philandering. Everyone else in Hollywood knew about it. It didn’t surprise Trent that Charisse had been the last to know.

“What about the statement? Is that the information you want released to the media?” Trent asked.

“Yes, I believe this explains very well how Leo’s passing has affected me. Thank you, Garrett, for writing this.”

“Anything for my sister-in-law.”

“Would you please email this to me? I’ll forward it to my agent so she can release it to the usual news outlets.”

“Will do.” Garrett swiveled the laptop to face him. He made a few keystrokes then leaned back in his chair. “Done.”

Victoria scooted her chair away from the table. “Now that we’ve finished that, I’m going to fix a couple of trays for Mom and Dad.”

“With so much going on, I have had a chance to see how they’re doing,” Charisse said. “Let me help you.”

“You have enough to do,” Victoria said. “I can heat a bowl of soup for each of them and take them upstairs.”

“Letting me help you would get my mind off Leo.” Her gaze drifted to Trent.

“I have some calls to make, but if you need help, let me know.”

“Max’s office is through the alcove next to the dining room,” Charisse said. “You’ll have plenty of privacy in there.”

“I’ll show you where it is.” Garrett closed the laptop. He stood and tucked the computer under his arm.

The darkness in Trent’s eyes asked Charisse if she were okay. Her nod was almost imperceptible but she knew he saw it. The tension drained out of his face. The crook of his mouth told her he believed her.

“Let’s get started.” Victoria pushed away from the table. From the refrigerator, she lifted a white caldron. “I’ll heat the soup. You can make them each a salad.”

“Are they up to eating a meal?” Charisse pulled lettuce, tomato, red cabbage and carrots from the crispers.

“Not usually, but I won’t give up hope. Eventually, they have to start eating or they’ll both starve to death.” Victoria ladled soup into bowls and placed them in the microwave.

With the trays set for a meal, they each carried a tray up the stairs.

“You have Rose’s tray,” Victoria said when they stood outside Rose’s bedroom door. “You can take that tray into her room. I’ll take this tray to Dad.” The tray balanced in her arms, she moved down the hallway.

Victoria shouldered open the door and stepped into Rose’s room. The quiet in the room greeted her with the softness of Rose, the strong woman who had a tender spot in her heart for everyone who passed over her threshold.

On the opposite wall stood afternoon sun trickled through the panes of a bay window that overlooked the snowy mountain range. It was a view that always filled Charisse with peace. It was a view that always made her think of Rose, even when her stepmother was standing next to her. Charisse pressed her lips together. If she didn’t, she would audibly gasp.

In front of the window sat two armchairs and an ottoman. Against the adjoining wall was queen sized bed with a carved headboard. In the middle of the bed lay a small form beneath a quilted bedspread.

Rose.

Iron gray hair surrounded a pale face and spread across a block colored pillowcase. Her closed eyes were like black slits in a piece of white paper.

Charisse set the tray on the nightstand and stood next to the bed. Rose’s small white hand lay palm up on top of the covers. Charisse wrapped her long fingers around Rose’s hand.

Rose’s eyelashes fluttered. She looked at the ceiling then followed the bas-relief to the wall to Charisse.

Hot tears bubbled into Charisse’s eyes. “You’re awake.”

“What else would I be? I’ve got a ranch to run.” Rose panted as she pushed each word through her lips. Her eyes closed. The muscles in the corners strained. With great effort she pulled them open. Her mouth opened, but no words came.

Charisse rested a hand against Rose’s shoulders. “Don’t talk. You’re too tired. Rest some more. We’ll talk later.”

Rose moved her head back and forth along the pillow. “We need to have ourselves a conversation.” She stumbled over the last word.

“We will, Rose, but first you should eat. Victoria heated a bowl of soup for you.”

Rose’s nose crinkled. “Soup is for sick people.”

“It’s your favorite – potato leek soup.”

The agitation creeping into Rose’s face slipped away. Her gaze flicked to the tray. “Maybe I’ll have a bite.”

Charisse sat on the edge of the chair next to the bed and balanced the bowl on her knee. She dipped in the spoon and lifted it Rose’s mouth.

Her step mother tasted the spoonful. Her mouth turned into a faint smile. “Not as good as mine, but it’s passable.”

“I’ll let Vitoria know,” Charisse said with a laugh. She dipped the spoon into the soup.

“You wanted to ask me something.” Rose’s soft voice didn’t hide the demand to know what was happening on her ranch while she recovered.

“It can wait.”

“It couldn’t wait for you to discuss it with Victoria. It’s time I know what your plans are.”

Charisse inhaled then inhaled again. “You’re right. You should know what I’ve been considering. I’m involved in a film project - .”

“Not you.” Rose’s eyes glittered and turned edgy. “Your friend. Or your business partner, as you young folks say today. I want to hear from both of you.”

“You mean Trent Parker? You don’t need to speak with him. I can explain the project.”

“You’re both involved. I want to talk to both of you.”

“I’ll get him after you’ve finished eating.”

“I’ve finished.”

“Rose, you had one bite. When was the last time you ate something? This isn’t enough sustenance especially when you’re not well.”

“I know when I’ve eaten enough, and when I need more.”

“This coming from the woman who feeds everyone who walks through your front door.”

“Nice try with the delay tactics, young lady. You can take that tray back to the kitchen. For now, I want to talk to you and Trent about your plans. Before you go, help me into the sitting room. I can think better on my feet, but since that isn’t likely, a chair will do.”

Charisse slipped a hand beneath Rose’s arm and guided her to the chair by the bay window. Rose’s bones felt so frail it was as if Charisse were clutching a handful of toothpicks. She eased Rose into the chair and draped an afghan over her legs that stuck through the thin fabric of her pajamas. Charisse set a cup of steaming tea on the end table.

“I don’t need that.” Rose’s lined brow wrinkled dipped to the bridge of her nose.

“You may as well drink it. I’m not taking it back to the kitchen. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Charisse moved to the nightstand and lifted the tray.

“With Trent.” Rose narrowed her eyes at Charisse.

“It would be better if you rested, but since you have no intention of doing that, then yes, I’ll return with Trent.”

After leaving the tray in the kitchen she crossed the great room to her father’s old office. Through the French doors, she watched Trent who in the leather desk chair. He fast forwarded through a video on the desktop.

Charisse twisted one of the brass door handles and opened the door. “What are you watching?”

“Someone sent me clip.” He dragged the cursor to the end of the scroll bar. The screen went black. He draped an arm over the back of the chair and turned to her. “What’s up?”

“Are you ready for a meeting to discuss the location shoot?”

“Isn’t your stepmother the only one who can make that decision?”

“She is. She wants information.”

He rose. The chair rolled back and bumped against the credenza. “I left the details in my room. I’ll get them. Where are we meeting?”

“Don’t bother with the proposal. Details don’t work with Rose. Truth does. She wants the plan explained to her.”

He hesitated, his dark eyes l

Looking into hers, looking past her as if some secret lay buried behind her eyes. “She’s rather trusting,” he said. “I could tell her anything.”

“You could, but you won’t. She trusts me. I won’t betray that trust.” Charisse’s heart pounded in her chest.

Rose was willing to hear Charisse’s plan. That meant one thing – the possibility that Rose might agree to the shoot.

Upstairs, Charisse tapped on Rose’s bedroom door and pushed it open.

Rose sat in the armchair. She looked frail and brittle, not like the ranch woman who. She sat so still that if it weren’t for the subtle rise and fall of her chest, she looked lifeless.

“Sit where I can see you.” Despite the crackling in her voice, Rose made it clear – she was in charge.

“Rose, this is Trent Parker.” Charisse moved in front of her stepmother.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Ms. Whitloch.” Trent took her hand. The strength he felt in the hand that wasn’t much larger than that of a child gave him a jolt.

“Call me Rose.” She nodded toward the armchair. “Sit down, both of you. Looking up makes my neck hurt.”

Charisse stepped toward the bed to get the chair she had used earlier when she fed Rose.

“I’ll get the chair.” Trent’s voice was hot on her neck.

She tensed to keep the heat from his closeness from shuddering through her body. Stepping aside she tipped her hand indicating she would gladly let him get the chair. She lowered herself in the chair next to Rose.

Trent placed the straight back chair in front of Rose.

“Get started, young man. If you’re not finished before you exhaust me, the answers no.”

Trent’s brows lifted a fraction and his gaze flicked to Charisse. “We want to use your ranch for a location shoot.”

Rose stared at him her face stony like someone who had expected more and was now beyond disappointment. “Do better.” She pushed the words through dry lips.

“I don’t want to bore you with details, but tell you a brief synopsis of the movie.” He hesitated, waiting for Rose’s reaction.

The older woman blinked as if in slow motion.

Trent leaned forward and rested an elbow on his knee. “The movie will be the first in a trilogy about the kidnapped daughter of the king of the planet Ielis. She has joined the resistance movement to defeat the rogue nation of Voloki.

“What has that got to do with my ranch?” Rose’s blue eyes turned brilliant and scanned each portion of Trent’s face.

“The terrain is similar to what we’ve designed for the film’s set. If we could pay you for the location shoot - .”

“This is my ranch, young man. I’ve worked hard to maintain the ecological environment. I’ve rejected requests to drill and mine on my land. Why should I let you film a movie here?”

“I agree with your sentiments. Protecting the environment has been one my utmost priorities.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I know about you.”

“You do?” Charisse turned away from the window. Her gaze shot from Rose to Trent. “But how?”

“You think my whole life is ranching? I know what’s going on in the world. Ever since you moved to California, I made it my business to know what’s going on in Hollywood. Nothing much good, but I made it a point to know.”

“Then you know about the film.” Charisse moved to Rose’s chair. Sitting on her haunches she rested her hands on her thighs.

“Enough. I know it’s the most anticipated film since that movie about the wizards was released.” She twisted in her chair to look at Charisse. “And I know that every trade magazine has been insisting you play the role of Sedna.”

Charisse snorted a laugh. “I’d say you know quite a bit about this project.”

Rose rotated her head from one side to the other. When she stopped, her gaze bore into Trent. Her chest expanded to inhale a labored breath.

Charisse rested a hand on Rose’s shoulder. “Take it easy, Rose.”

Rose gaze wavered to Trent. “If agree to this project, what guaranty do I have from you that you’ll protect my land.”

“I’ll have our production counsel draft the contract. It will be worded exactly as you want.”

“Not good enough. You destroy my land, no contract is going to bring it back to its original state.”

“I’ll be on the set everyday. I’ll have a crew the will personally monitor the habitat. If there is an inkling of damage, filming will stop and remain stopped until the situation is rectified.”

“That will cost you a lot of money. What will your investors say?”

“I’m the investor. It will be as I say.”

“Draft the contract and give it to Garrett to review. If it supports what I’ve told you it, I’ll sign it.”

Trent gave a rough exhale. He stood and extended his hand to Rose. “It will be exactly as you want. We didn’t discuss compensation.”

Rose took his hand. It was fragile and small in his palm. “We’ll discuss that as soon as the particulars are ironed out.”

“I’ll call my lawyer now. We should have a draft for your review by the end of next week.”

“I want it before then.” Rose’s mouth pinched. Her chin dipped and her face paled the exhaustion of the conversation.

“When do you want it?” Trent’s voice was low and even.

In his eyes flickered something wavering. Charisse tried to still the trembling in her stomach. She had seen that look in his eyes before – when he’d helped when she sprained her ankle beneath the pier and when he had discovered her sorting through the debris of her earthquake rocked home.

“tomorrow at noon.” Rose’s chin didn’t dip anymore. She lifted it high and looked down her nose at him.

Charisse’s breath caught the click so loud, Trent glanced at her. How was Trent’s attorney going to draft an agreement for rose to review by noon tomorrow?

The corners of Trent’s mouth curved. “Noon it is.”

Charisse opened her mouth to protest.

The corners Trent’s eyes creased. She wouldn’t have noticed the shake of his head, the slight movement of his chin, had she not been watching him.

Trent strode from the room.

Charisse laid a hand on Rose’s sun spotted one. “Are you ready to finish your lunch?”

Rose stared straight ahead but her eyes shifted to Charisse. “The soup will be cold.”

“I heated in an insulated bowl. It should still be warm. Let’s try it. If it’s too cold, I’ll bring you a freshly heated bowl.

Rose didn’t nod. Instead, she pushed herself forward in her chair. Charisse removed the afghan and draped it over the back of the chair. She wrapped an around Rose’s waist. She winced when she pressed against her stepmother’s ribcage. It felt as fragile as a bird’s.

She helped Rose to the bed. She plumped the pillows for Rose to lean against and dragged the covers over Rose’s knees that looked like doorknobs pressed against the thin fabric of her pajamas.

“Shall we try the soup?” She lifted the bowl from the tray.

Rose held up her hand. “No, no soup. I’m going to rest.” her eyes drifted shut.

Charisse returned the bowl to the tray. She propped a hip on the edge of the bed and wrapped her hand around Rose’s. it was cool in Charisse’s hand. “Rose, why did agree to the location shoot?”

Rose’s eyes pulled open. “I haven’t agreed to the shoot.” Her voice was hesitant and scratchy as if her mouth were dry. ‘I agreed to review a proposal.”

“That’s almost the same thing.” Charisse pressed a glass of water to Rose’s lips. “Drink this. You’re getting dehydrated.”

Rose drank deeply then leaned back into the pillows. Her mouth curved. Her eyes drifted shut.

“Did you agree to this location shoot because of me?”

Rose’s chest rose and stilled as if she were holding her breath. Slowly, it sank until it dropped so deeply is seemed to curve against her spine.

Charisse squeezed her stepmother’s hand. “I love you, Rose.”

Rose’s mouth tipped into an almost imperceptible smile. Her eyes opened into slits.

“I want you to know you didn’t have to do this to help me. It’s not that I don’t appreciate it. I do. I’ve been scratching out my existence in Hollywood for ten years. You don’t need to sacrifice for me. I don’t want you to sign that document. There are plenty of places we can use for a location shoot.”

“None as pretty Crystal Creek.” Rose’s voice jerked as if she were galloping on a horse. “I know you don’t need my help. I know what a success you’ve made of your life. I’ve seen all your movies. A least ten times.”

“You have?” Charisse almost dropped Rose’s hand. Even her mother hadn’t seen her movies that many times. She was certain her mother hadn’t seen all of her movies.

“Em’s always streaming movies. She loves watching yours.”

“You never said anything. Neither has Emily.”

“What’s to say? You make good movies.”

“I’m touched.” The words caught in her throat. “It means a lot to me knowing you and Em like my movies.”

“You can go now. Take the tray with you. I won’t eat anymore. I’m tired.” Rose’s voice faded.

Charisse stood and picked up the tray. She set it down on the nightstand again. “Rose, tell me why you’re sick.”

A furrow pressed into Rose’s already creased brow. Her eyes opened. She stared at the ceiling seeing and not seeing. “I made a mistake.” Her gaze shifted to Charisse. “Ralph, I must talk to Ralph.” She pushed herself to elbows. Her breathing turned labored. Deep red colored her pale cheeks.

“Rose, you can’t go. You’re too weak.” Charisse grabbed Rose’s shoulders. “Wait until you feel better.”

“I can’t wait that long. I have to talk to him now.” Rose lifted her face to Charisse.

In the dim light of the night lamp, Charisse could see agitation press through the muscles in her face. Her eyes dilated to huge black circles that swallowed the brilliant blue of her eyes.

“Rose, you can’t. Ralph isn’t here.”

“Where is he?”

“Rose, I thought you knew. He was injured. Shot. By Anna’s ex-fiancé.”

“Shot?” Rose sank into the pillows. “but how? Is he. . .?”

“He’s in the hospital now. The doctors think he’ll recover.”

Rose squeezed her eyes shut tight. “Thank God.”

“Rose.” Charisse laid a hand on her shoulder. “Did you know that Dad’s here?”

Her eyes opened slowly. “Yes, I remember. I remember other things, too. I’ve done things, things that’ve hurt those I love most. My daughters.” Her gaze shifted to Charisse. “You, Anna.”

“Rose, I can’t blame you for a mistake you made when you were seventeen.”

“Never too young to have integrity,” Rose said, her voice breathless, her face pale. She closed her eyes. Her breathing eased with sleep, but the furrow in her brow didn’t relax.

The bedroom door creaked open. Charisse turned to see Victoria holding the tray she had taken to her father. Soup had slopped over the side of the bowl. Gnawed bread crusts stuck up from the plate.

“How’s Mom doing?”

Charisse draped an arm over the back of her chair. “Exhausted. She’s sleeping now. She may be close to telling us why she collapsed.”

Victoria’s face tightened. She swept into the room and placed her tray on the nightstand next to Rose’s. she stood next to the bed and studied her mother’s sleeping form. “What did she say?”

“She needs to talk to Ralph. Apparently, she didn’t remember that Ralph had been shot and was recovering in the hospital.”

“He was in the hospital.”

“You mean he’s not there now?”

Victoria shook her head. “They called me a few minutes ago. He checked himself out. When the doctor told him about the liability issues, he seemed not to care.”

“Hopefully, he’s coming here.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. His truck is here. I’ll send a ranch hand to get him. Maybe they’ll find him on the highway trying to hitch a ride.”

“How is Dad doing?”

“The same. He’s lucid one moment, declaring he doesn’t need to be in bed. Then he becomes confused.”

Charisse felt the blood drain from her face. “Poor Dad. It’s hard to see someone so strong and determined become frail and disoriented. Is he up to seeing me?”

“He’s asleep. I thought I’d let him rest a couple of hours and then check on him.”

Charisse nodded. “That’s sounds best. I’ll take these trays to the kitchen.”

“Thanks, I’ll stay with Mom until she wakes up.”

Charisse stacked the trays and carried them into the hallway. Before closing the door, she took one last look at her stepmother. Rose tiny and frail. Even in her weak state, she was still thinking of others and nursing a guilt that was about to change her life if Hillary Reynolds had her way.

Rose’s offer to let Charisse use the ranch for the film’s location shots left Charisse feeling empty and hollow. The area near the bluffs was the exact terrain needed to portray the planet Ielis, but at what cost? Even if Rose did agree to the terms of the contract to use the ranch, something could happen to mar the beautiful landscape, the landscape Rose loved and had protected.

She was making a sacrifice for Charisse’s sake, but Charisse didn’t need that much of a sacrifice. The location in New Zealand would work just as well. The landowner had been elated when the negations and included his asking price.

She carried the trays down stairs. From Max’s office she hear Trent’s low, easy a voice, a voice that holds a calm, steady command, making it easy for other to agree, for others to willingly follow his instructions.

Through the window, the sun touched the mountain peaks spreading violet, blue, orange and pink across the glass like a Thomas Moran painting.

Two words floated through the doors. “Arrest” and “her.”

Charisse felt that a pain in her chest, the type you feel when you’ve swallowed something cold and the freeze lodges in your lungs like a knife that was just dragged through a sharpener. The tray tipped in her grasp and the soup bowl slid to the edge of the tray. Congealed soup slopped over the bowl’s rim. Her hands tightened on the tray handles. Her nails dug into her palms.

Arrest whom?

Arrest her?

When the deputy had looked at her, his eyes clouded and narrowed into slits of blue. She had felt the suspicious stare then. She felt it now. She was the last to see Leo alive. He was still alive when she left.

Did Trent think she was lying?

The last person to see Leo alive drove the black Bentley.

A Bentley like the one in Trent’s garage in Malibu.

Half of Malibu’s residents drove Bentleys. At least that many in Hollywood owned at least one.

She hadn’t seen the license plates. She didn’t know if the Bentley she had seen belonged to Trent.

But if Trent saw Leo that night, what business did he have with the actor?

Shame crept into her face. She was eavesdropping on Trent’s phone call. She stepped down the two steps into the great room.

The office door jerked open. The suction of air pulled into the room and rattled the glass.

Air rammed into her lungs. Again. And again. Her lungs pushed against her ribs as if desperate for more room to expand. The pain shot into her head. She lowered her eyelids as if that would suck away the pain.

“Charisse.” His eyes widened in surprise but that vanished a glint of impatience glowed in its place. “I didn’t know you were out here.” He seemed to look inward as if searching his memory of the phone conversation he had just finished.

“I’m taking the Dad’s and Rose’s trays back to the kitchen.” She lifted the tray slightly as if he couldn’t see it. Of course, he saw them. She was being ridiculous, showing her guilt from eavesdropping. She didn’t owe him an explanation but she didn’t want him to know she had heard part of his phone conversation. “Did you and the attorney discuss the contract for the location shoot?”

“We never got to that discussion. We’ll speak again tomorrow.”

“Just remember. The land means everything to Rose.”

“It sounds like you’re having second thoughts about the shoot.”

“I don’t know what I’m having.” Staring at Trent, she saw the weak figure of Rose lying in her bed, trying to look at Charisse, trying to speak. “Rose cares about me. She wants me to be happy.”

“I understand that. You’re family.” Trent took a step toward her.

Charisse stiffened. She didn’t know why. She’d stayed in his house. She trusted him. She couldn’t erase form her mind the two words she’d heard him speak - arrest and her.

The best thing to do was to ask him about it. Admit she’d overheard.

The words locked in her chest like wet cement.

Trent stopped as if barricade had flown in front of him. His brows dipped slightly. “You act like you’re afraid of me.”

Charisse gave soft deep laugh and shook her head slowly. A movement that even a novice would understand as so acting class. “You’re misinterpreting.”

His chin lifted a fraction. A fraction that told her he didn’t believe her. “Charisse, you don’t have to worry about the condition of the land after the location shoot. I could protect the land. I’ve lived in California to long not to care about the environment.”

“Then we’ll proceed with the contract for Rose’s review.” Images from the movie’s script filming on the bluffs played out in her mind. The location was perfect, but something wasn’t right.

“No.”

It took a minute for that one syllable word to work its way through her brain. “No?”

“The contract won’t be drafted. Rose won’t need to make that decision. She isn’t in any condition to consider something of that magnitude. It’s land she loved. Land she’s protected.”

A rush of air burst form Charisse’s lungs.

“You sound relieved.” There was a gruffness in his voice.

She set the trays on a library table behind the sofa. She held them any longer she’d tip the congealed soup onto the wood flooring. “That’s only part of it. The rest in couldn’t formulate in my mind, but you’re right. This isn’t the time to have Rose make that decision. If she hadn’t mentioned it, I never would’ve brought it up.”

“You didn’t tell her? How did she know?”

“When it comes to the ranch, Rose knows everything.”

“I’m not surprised. She seems to know a lot more than about the ranch.” He moved past her to the staircase.

Charisse made a slow turn that matched each of his steps. “Where you going?” the words slipped out before she could stop them. She didn’t care where he went. Wasn’t that right?

He rested his hand on the newel then faced her. “To hunt for a location.”

“But the attorney, you were going to call your attorney. You and he were going to draft a contract.”

“What Rose says and what she wants are two different things.”

Charisse gave a slow nod. She knew that in her heart. The realization never materialized in her brain. She had been so focused on the film. “You’ll return to New Zealand?”

The question was like a shove that pushed him back a step. She said you not we.

“Unless you have a better idea.” His features were stony, emotionless, his voice flat.

“No, the location in New Zealand will depict the scene.” She wanted to look away but that would reveal too much. He was a man with no connections to anyone. He would never connect with her. She gave him a half smile.

“Almost as perfect as Crystal Creek.” He gave a dry laugh. “I’ll make it work.”

Yes, he would. Trent knew how to take passable and make it perfection.

“You’ll stay here?” he asked.

“I can’t leave now. Not with the condition of my father and stepmother. I can’t leave this all this for Victoria and Emily and -.”

He held up hand. “That’s understandable. I’ll keep you apprised of the negotiations.

He moved up the stairs. To pack. To leave Crystal Creek. With his attorneys, he would negotiate the terms of the location shoot.

A hollowed out feeling scraped at the inside of Charisse’s chest. She’d spent the past few days with Trent – through the earthquake, to New Zealand, shared Crystal Creek, the most precious place one earth.

Now he was leaving.

Charisse picked up the trays. Her gaze swept to the side light by the front doors. The image of a man wearing a flat brimmed hat silhouetted against the glass.

The county deputy.

Her heart lodged in her throat. he would only be here for one reason. Leo. They had found out something about Leo.

The image of the black car waiting by the driveway pushed into her mind. What was it about this car she couldn’t forget? It couldn’t have anything to do with Leo’s death. It was an accident.

The curious thing was Leo’s assistant Barbara had said he’d left town. She knew everything about Leo. If he had returned to his house, she would know.

She set the trays on an end table and crossed the foyer to the door. She no longer heard Trent’s footsteps climb the stairs. Instead, she felt his curious gaze. She swallowed then stepped across the foyer. The doorknob felt cold in her grasp. She turned the handle

The deputy stood with his legs spread, his hands clasped in front of him. Behind him stood another deputy.

“Good afternoon, Miss Whitloch. May we come in?”

“Is this about Leo?” Her voice was level not like her heart which jumped in her chest.

“If we could come in for a moment.”

Garrett had told her not to talk to anyone until he returned. If she declined, would that direct suspicion to her? She wanted to know what happened to Leo.

“come in.” She opened the door wider.

Even at a distance, she felt Trent’s muscles go rigid.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thank you, ma’am.”

“We can sit here in here.” She led the way to the great room and indicated the sofa. She sat in a side chair, leaning forward, her hands on her knees.

Trent’s steps down the stairs were slow and easy. “good afternoon, Deputy.” He crossed to them and shook their hands. “I’m assuming you have more information regarding Mr. Vasilios.”

“Our business is with Miss Whitloch.”

“Mr. Parker is acquainted with Mr. Vasilios. He might be able to answer some if your questions.”

“Would you please explain to us what happened last time you saw Mr. Vasilios?”

“Garrett isn’t here.”

“Garrett Reynolds, your brother-in-law.”

“That’s right. I’m sure you know he’s an attorney.”

“Yes, ma’am.” His gaze shifted to his partner whose steady gaze remained on Charisse.

It was a subtle look, just a glance, no innuendo, but it made Charisse’s stomach grip as if claws dug into her flesh.

“Garrett’s representing me,” she said. “I need to consult with him before I discuss anything to do with Leo. You understand.”

The deputy stood. After a moment’s hesitation so did his partner.

“When do you expect to consult with Mr. Reynolds?” the deputy asked.

“I, I’m not sure.”

“Why all the questions, Deputy, if you don’t mind my asking?” Trent stood next to the deputy, almost between Charisse and the officer. “Is Charisse under suspicion?”

“What?” Charisse felt as if the floor had opened beneath her and she was falling, falling tipping end over end.

“We can discuss matter with Miss Whitloch and her attorney.”

Trent tipped his head as if in reluctant agreement.

“Wait a minute.” Charisse looked from one deputy to the other. “If I’m a person of interest. I have a right to know.”

“We’re only investigating the matter, ma’am. You were the last to see Mr. Vasilios alive.”

The rest of the deputy’s statement seemed to fall into a tunnel. The words muffled and echoed inside Charisse’s head.

Was she the last person to see Leo alive? The car waiting at the end of the drive. After she had turned onto the street, she’d glanced into her rearview mirror. The black sedan had pulled into the driveway and through the closing gates.

“Miss Whitloch?”

“What?” Charisse looked up to see the deputies and Trent watching her.

“I said, that is correct, isn’t it, that you were the last to see Mr. Vasilios alive?” the deputy asked.

Charisse’s heart sank. She had seen a car that looked like Trent’s, if Trent was the last to see Leo, if she were protecting Trent.

She glanced at him. His gaze was fully on her, concern etched into his brow. He looked innocent as if he hadn’t seen Leo that night. If she read him correctly, whom had she seen?

“Miss Whitloch isn’t going to answer any more questions. She’s acting on the advice of her attorney. Unless there’s another matter you wish to discuss, I’ll see you gentlemen to the door.”

“We’ll be in touch, Miss Whitloch.”

The deputies stepped out the door.

Air flowed easily in and out of her lungs. She hadn’t realized she’d been holding it. Her chest ached, her entire body ached, from lack of oxygen.

Trent whipped a chair around behind her. “Sit down.”

Without looking to see if there was a place to sit, she dropped down. The feel of the chair beneath her sent a shock up her spine.

“What do you know?” His voice wasn’t the low, easy voice he used when he spoke to his crew. This time his tone demanded an answer.

“About Leo? Nothing.” She had tried to match his hard stare, but his seemed to bore past her eyes and search her memory for that night she had been to Leo’s place.

“You saw something that night.”

She couldn’t keep it inside anymore. What would he do once he realized she knew his secret.

“You saw Leo that night,” he said.

She stared at the foliated lines wavering through the stone flooring. “When I left his house, he was still alive. A car was waiting at the end of the drive. I drove onto the street then slowed. I could see the other car in my rearview mirror. The car drove through the gate before it closed. It didn’t quite make it. The gate closed on the right rear bumper.”

“What kind of car.”

“A black sedan. A Bentley.”

He swung his head. “There have to be hundreds, thousands, of those in Los Angeles.”

She looked up, her gaze meeting his.

“Wait. You think that was my car?”

“You own a black Bentley. The right rear bumper is damaged. I know you said it was hit and run - .” Her heart was a death knell hammer in her chest. How could the man kissed her with such passion and warmth take another human’s life?

“Looks like I’ll be needing an attorney.” He crossed the foyer and picked up his suitcase. He looked over his shoulder at her. “Good luck with the film project. The best man, person, won.” Stepping out the front door, he closed it.

The click shut was like a bomb exploding in her chest. She had won, but what had she won?

Trent was gone. She had what she wanted - control of the production company. She had the company. She didn’t have Trent. The emptiness seemed to suck her down like a vortex, and she grabbed her sides as if that would keep her from dropping into this pit that snatched at her soul.

Trent shut the front door. Louder than he wanted to. He’d taken two steps cross the porch before noticed the other car in the circle drive – the sheriff’s car.

Cliff sat in the driver’s seat and typed on the keyboard. A map appeared on the computer screen. His partner stared at the screen and spoke into his cell phone.

Trent pressed the remote. The SUV’s tailgate open and he tossed his suitcase into the back. He covered the distance between his SUV and the sheriff’s car in less than a second.

He knew the deputy was aware of him as soon as the house front door opened. He didn’t watch Trent, but his shoulders were a little more rigid and his back seemed to climb up the seat into a straighter position. His partner continued to talk into his cellphone but the mouthpiece dipped so that it was now level with his neck. as if choreographed, both deputies swung their gazes from the computer screen to Trent.

Cliff lowered his window, the glass sliding into the door with a steady hum that whined when it reached the bottom.

“Deputy.” Trent offered the greeting and nodded at both men.

“What can we do for you?” Cliff asked.

“I have some information you might what to send to the investigation team in Los Angeles.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“When Charisse left Leo’s that night, she saw a car drive through the gate leading to Leo’s property.”

“Does she know whose car it was?”

“Yes. It was my car.”

Chapter

Trent tightened his fingers around the window ledge of the sheriff’s car. Both deputies were staring at him, hard.

“What happened that night?” Cliff asked.

“I have a driver. He sometimes runs errands for me. Picks up people from the airport, or runs scripts across town.”

“I can’t imagine you’d have to courier hard copies of script since everyone can now use electronic transmissions.” Cliff lifted one eyebrow.

“Except that the script is for an actor, a name you’d recognize from the height of his career twenty years ago. He still likes to work. He still has an audience. He refuses to buy a computer. For him, I schlep scripts to his home. When my driver returned, he reported damage to my car. A hit and run which is common in Los Angeles.”

“And now you think that maybe he wasn’t telling the truth?”

“I don’t know. I’ve had instances when I’ve discovered later that he hasn’t been honest with me. the day following the accident was when the earthquake struck. You may have heard.”

“The whole world heard.”

“Because of the earthquake, the car hadn’t been repaired. There’s too much damage in southern California for anything to be required, let alone a car.” If an investigative team examines the damage on the car, they might find that the black pain on the right rear bumper might match the paint on the entrance gate. I’ll notify my housekeeper that the investigators will be coming to the house and to give them access to the garage.”

Cliff poised his fingers over his keyboard. “Give me your contact information. I’ll notify the authorities in California and let you know what they intend to do.”

Trent gave him the information. He watched Cliff’s fingers fly over the keyboard. The cursor blinked on the screen. The letters and numbers appeared in the dialog boxes.

He’d never have contact with Charisse again. This would be his best effort to make sure she stayed safe.

\* \* \*

Charisse rubbed her temples. She had what she wanted – control of the company.

And what she didn’t want – Trent out of her life.

Victoria appeared at the top of the stairs. Her gaze shifted to the front door. “What happened?”

“Nothing. Not nothing. Trent left.”

“Left? For where? Is he going back to California?”

“Or New Zealand.”

“He knows Dad owns the production company?”

Charisse opened her mouth to speak the words stuck in her throat. She pressed her lips together and nodded.

“But he’s going to continue to work on the movie?”

“Until I can find a replacement.”

“Charisse, you can’t - .”

“Can’t what? Can’t let Trent go? He makes up his own mind, Vic, and so do I.”

“But still -.”

“I’m going for a ride.” She strode across the great room. “I’ll be back in time to help you with dinner.”

She pushed through the kitchen doorway. It swished shut the movement pushing a gust of air around her.

She stood in the middle of the room, her fingers curling into her palms, echo of the swishing door vibrated in her head. Trent was gone. She had the company, but not the way she wanted it.

In the barn, she lifted a bridle and saddle from the tack room and carried it to Raja’s stall.

Boris, the Estonian ranch hand Rose had hired, dragged open the door separating the barn form the equestrian center. He nodded to her. “Good evening, Miss Whitloch. You need help saddling your horse?”

“I can do it, Boris, but thanks.”

He nodded and rounded the corner to the feed room.

Charisse carried the tack into the Xanadu’s stall. “Hey, girl, you ready for some exercise?”

She set the blanket and saddle on the horses back. From her pocket, she pulled a carrot. Xanadu’s lips worked the carrot into her mouth. She nosed Charisse’s palm for another one.

“I can’t give them all to you now. Let’s go for a ride. I’ll give you another treat when we return.”

Outside, Charisse guided the horse along the trail to the bluffs. Xanadu’s hooves padded along the packed snow throwing a soft echo against the trees. She neared the frontage road and steered the horse to the surface of snow mixed with gravel.

A car’s engine sounded in the distance. It was soft, barely a hum, the manmade noise was steady and rhythmic, the steady beat a contrast to the water splashing over rocks in Crystal Creek and the breeze nudging through the boughs in the pine forest.

Xanadu’s ears flickered then twitched. She glanced over her shoulder at Charisse a question fi they should continue their walk along the road.

The question flashed in Charisse’s mind. The private road started at the county line before traversing through the ranch, a road only Crystal Creek ranch hands used this road. Occasionally trucks transporting horses or cattle to the ranch drove along the road.

On the crest, a black SUV appeared. Like the one Trent had rented. Charisse’s heart ballooned in her throat.

\* \* \*

He pressed the speed dial on his phone.

“First Street Deli, Bernice speaking.” The woman pushed her New York accent off her upper teeth.

“Bernice. Trent.”

“Trent, where you been? I thought you went and gone vegan on me.”

“Bite your tongue. How fast can you get a pot of chicken soup to my place?”

“I don’t use drones. Yet. If Craig drives like he normally does, ten minutes. It’ll still be hot.”

“Tell him there’s an extra fifty bucks in it if he makes it to my place in nine.”

“What if I make it in eight?” A teenaged boy’s voice sounded in the background.

“If he makes it in eight, we’ll talk.”

Eight minutes later,

**\* \* \***

“Mr. Parker.” A voice called from somewhere above him.

Trent glanced up the steps leading to his beach house. At the top, a teenager wearing a white jacket and a snapback cap held up an insulated case. Trent motioned to him, and the young man thundered down the steps.

“Nice job, Craig.”

“Yeah.” The boy was breathless. “I made it an eight. Let’s talk.”

“We just did.” Trent pulled some bills out of his wallet and handed them to Craig.

He counted the money then shoved it into his back pocket. “A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Parker.”

“More like you gave me the business. Give your mom a hug for me.”

Craig nodded and pounded up the steps.

Trent felt the insulated bag. It was still warm, just as Bernice had promised.

**\* \* \***

A thin man with an anchor beard tugged at a sliding door. It didn’t budge. The man kicked it.

Trent bent his knees then sprang across the room. He plunged into the man like a missile and knocked him to ground.

The man swore. He pulled back his fist. The bulging knuckles shot out at Trent’s nose.

Trent wanted to laugh. The man fought like a Hollywood actor needing stage direction. Trent leaned to the side. It was a slow movement. He had plenty of time to avoid the oncoming fist. It whizzed past his ear.

The man’s eyes bugged. The cloud looming in them was fear. he twisted around and leaped over the bed.

Trent snagged the man’s ankle and slammed him into a wall.

The man’s eyes crossed. He slid down the wall into a crumpled heap of legs, arms, torso.

Trent felt rather than saw the frightened stare.

He jerked his gaze to the bedroom entrance. Charisse stood in the doorway, her eyes a mixture of sleep and fear. She touched three fingers to her lips. She looked from the unconscious man to Trent.

Something stirred inside Trent. Something he hadn’t felt in a long time and shouldn’t have felt then. The thought pushed into his head unwanted. This was what Charisse looked like when she first woke in the morning. The urge to trail a finger across her cheek and down her neck shot an alarming sensation that burst through him.

“What happened?” Charisse’s voice was soft but solid.

“Do you know him?” Trent stepped over the rumpled pile of the man who had spilled over the floor like a tipped bottle of wine. He pulled his cell phone from his back pocket.

Charisse shook her head.

Trent spoke into his phone. “Yeah, I need to report an intrusion.” He pressed the phone to his chest. “What’s your address?”

She recited her address. Her gaze locked onto the man who looked like yesterday’s trash his shoulders and hips piled over each other like a stack of books about to tip over. The color drained from her face.

Trent gave the dispatch operator her address then closed his phone without waiting for confirmation that the operator had the correct address.

“You’re not going to faint on me.” It was more of a growl than a question. His stare was so hard it could’ve pressed her against the wall.

Charisse’s first movement was to drag a breath into her air starved lungs. Her second was to step into the room. “Who is he?”

“He’s in your house. You’ve never seen him before?”

Charisse shook her head. “No. Never.”

“You didn’t hear anything? A knock? The doorbell? The door opening?”

“No, nothing. I certainly wouldn’t have let him in. Gatsby should’ve heard something. I didn’t hear him bark.”

“Where’s Gatsby?” Something cold, chilling, touched the back of his neck like fingers, cold fingers, fingers that were no longer connected to a living, breathing human being.

Charisse glanced over her shoulder. “I don’t know. Whenever I’m home, he’s always underfoot. He never strays far from me.”

Trent pushed past her into the hall.

“Gatsby.” He shouted the name in a short, sharp burst.

He strode down the hall. There was something he didn’t hear – the sound of Charisse’s footsteps following him. Turning around, he saw that she still stood in the doorway. In two strides, he was facing her. He glanced over her head to the man still lying in a heap on the floor.

“You’re coming with me.” He pulled her so that she was almost running to keep up with him.

“What about that man? If he wakes up -.”

“He’s out cold.” His pace increased.

“Trent, give my feet a chance to touch the floor.”

He grumbled something that was as close to an apology that she’d ever hear. “Keep up.”

“It isn’t like –.”

The flash in his eyes startled her. She leaned away. What thought just raced through his mind? That he didn’t want to be here with her?

“Where does Gatsby go when he isn’t with you?”

“I don’t know.” She looked at Trent, but didn’t really look at him. It was as if her thoughts were pulling to a place not here and not now. “He’s always with me. I never thought about it before. When I’m home, he never leaves my side.”

“Like most dogs.”

“Earlier I broke a glass bottle. The sound startled him. He ran away. I haven’t seen him since.”

Trent’s steps down the hallway were hard and determined. “Think of everyplace he would be. We need to find him.”

Charisse didn’t have to ask why. A strange man had entered the house. Somehow, he got past Gatsby. That wouldn’t have happened, unless there was something wrong with Gatsby. The fear she didn’t want to acknowledge crawled around inside of her like a creature from the underworld.

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Her phone rang. Glancing at the screen, she saw her attorney’s name waver into view.

She thought to take the call into the other room, but what secret could she keep from Trent? He didn’t keep his ear to the ground. All transactions seemed to center around his wants and creativity. He led the current Hollywood theme. A few years ago, his blockbuster was romantic comedy. The industry flooded with RomComs, most not worth the digital they were recorded on. Now he’d optioned the best seller Interstellar Tales and everyone with a cell phone was filming and posting science fiction movies from shorts to epic sagas.

Everyone except her. She had optioned Sunset in Maui, a coming of age novel. She was breaking precedent, blazing her own trail. She closed her ears to the advices she received. Not producing to market meant she was doomed to fail, but she believed in this project.

“Hey, Frank, what’s up?” She crossed the great room to the balcony. She filled her lungs with the salt sea air. The breeze brushing her hair away from her face was cool and tingly and felt like a caress.

“Sunset in Maui. Denise and her attorney are waiting to be conferenced in.”

“Then this can’t be good news since you’re talking to me before including them.”

“It’s complicated.” His exhale was rough and caught on the note of bad news he was about to deliver.

“Give me the layman’s version. I don’t want to hear legal jargon.” She gripped cell phone so hard the plastic squeaked and bowed from the pressure.

“They want more money for the movie rights.”

Charisse stuttered a laugh. “We have a contract. Denise and her attorney both stated off the record that the offer was more than generous. What changed unless it’s a better offer?”

Frank said nothing. She could tell be the rapid increase in his breathing that she’d pinpointed the problem.

“No.” The word dropped from her mouth. Confusion waved through her mind like canvas sail whipped by the wind with a hard-to-lee turn. “Our contract is binding. Frank, you’re not saying anything. Do they have an out?”

“Not from the contract. It’s solid.”

“What do they have?”

“A better offer.”

“So someone said they’d offer more money. Anyone can say that.”

“Apparently this new offer is from someone who’s done more than say that.”

“And my contract means nothing? I can’t believe that.” She spoke in a low tone, each word fully formed before leaving her lips. Inside, the words pounded her gray matter like a marching band.

“Unless you beat the offer, they’re filing with the courts -.”

“Who gave them the offer?” Despite cutting off Frank’s sentence, her voice had a sweet, almost bordering on a laugh, quality.

“I don’t know.”

“Then how do we know-?”

“There’ve been rumblings. Word on the street is that they’ve been talking to someone.”

“But you didn’t tell me.”

“Not until I knew it meant something.”

From the great room, came Trent’s even voice. He was talking into his cellphone. His voice traveled behind her as if he were pacing the room. His even tone sent a warmth through her as if he touched her.

And then she knew. The warmth turned into a searing heat.

“I know who submitted the offer,” she said.

“Are you ready for me to connect to the conference call?”

“Not until I confirm my suspicion.”

“Then they’re filing today.”

“If they can find someone. You know Los Angeles is wallowing in devastation.”

“Maybe we have that on our side.”

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Gatsby had whimpered during takeoff. Now he snored softly. Trent and two other men removed the back seats to make room for the kennel. Gatsby scratched and gnawed at the kennel’s wire gate. His amber eyes drooped at the corners and looked as if they would slide off his face.

“Better let him out.” He shot a look over his shoulder at Gatsby.

Gatsby

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she won’t say anything about Ralph.”

“What should she say about Ralph? Vic said he’d left.”

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Her gaze shifted to Trent.

The snowmobiles edged out of the forest white with yellow trim. The word sheriff was emblazoned across the windshields. Deputy Scroop, his hat pulled down to his eyebrows, drove the lead snowmobile. Three snowmobiles followed him.

“How did they know where to find us?” Trent’s voice rose over the engine whine. “This is a big ranch.”

“Everyone in town knows the Crystal Creek Ranch. My question is why are they back so soon.” Charisse never stooped watching the approaching snowmobiles.

The snow machines whined to a stop. Deputy Scroop touched the brim of his hat. “Ms. Whitloch.”

“Hello, Deputy.” Charisse grip tightened on Champagne’s rein and closed the gap between herself and the deputy. “Back again, and sooner than I expected.”

“We received some additional information regarding the death of Mr. Vasilios.”

Relief rushed through Charisse’s chest. “He’s okay.”

“No, ma’am. Mr. Vasilios is deceased.”

“Then what else could you have to say to me?” Charisse took a step backward. Her ankle twisted and she bumped into Champagne who whinnied.

Trent’s powerful hand wrapped around her arm and pulled her, but not toward himself. The nudge helped her gain her balance. Then he released her. She felt adrift.

“What is it you gentlemen want with Ms. Whitloch?” Trent’s even voice held an edge of impatience.

“I apologize for the miscommunication, Mr. Parker, Ms. Whitloch. If you could come with us, we could talk in a more relaxed place.”

“Am I under arrest?”

Deputy Scroop pressed his lips together. “No, ma’am. We just have some questions to ask you.”

“Unless you plan to arrest her, she won’t be going anywhere with you.” Trent’s voice bumped over the words.

“That’s understandable,” Deputy Scroop said.

“Wait a minute, Trent. I need to know what happened to Leo. Deputy, I’ll be glad to talk to you.”

Trent’s eyes darkened as if ready to lecture her.

“I know I don’t have to say anything to them, but I want everything in the open. I have nothing to hide.”

“If you’ll come to the station with us -.”

The air around Trent crackled.

“I’d prefer to talk to you at the house.” Charisse rushed out the words before Trent could speak. “Trent and I will ride our horses back. You can wait for us in the great room. I’ll text Victoria so she’ll know to expect you.”

“You’ll also wait for your attorney to be present.” His dark eyes spoke volumes. He didn’t want her talking to law enforcement.

“I’ll text Garrett. He may already be at the house.” Charisse pulled her phone from her pocket and slid a gloved finger over the screen.

At the barn, a ranch hand met them at the entrance and held the reins as Charisse and Trent dismounted. He then guided the horses into the barn where they’d be fed and curried, a reward for their service.

When Charisse entered the mudroom, Garrett greeted her in the doorway from the kitchen. Victoria kneaded bread on the kitchen island. Rose slipped a roast into the oven.

It was the smooth transition from the holidays to know that Charisse needed to know that nothing had changed, that everything was as it should be.

“My advice is to say nothing,” Garrett said right after she introduced him to Trent.

“I have to know what happened to Leo. I’ve don’t nothing wrong, but I’ll do it your way.”

“The deputies are in the great room. I made a tea tray you can take to them.”

“I’ll get it.” Trent lifted the tray. With a nod he indicated he would follow Charisse.

In the great room, Charisse served the tea and cake to the deputies then sat on the sofa. Trent sat next to her his body rigid and ready. Garrett sat on the other side. He opened the conversation with the advice he had given Charisse. She was talking to them against his counsel.

“Would you please tell us what happened the last time you saw Mr. Vasilios?” Deputy Scroop.

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“Trent is a. . .” Her knife and fork flipped through her fingers and clattered to her plate.

Silence descended over the table. Knives and forks suspended above plates. Full mouths stopped chewing.

“He’s my, uh. . .” Again her gaze traveled around the table to the unblinking eyes that locked onto her. “My. . .”

“Neighbor.” Trent’s deep voice sliced through the silence.

Heavy sighs cut through the tension. Then the glasses tipped, silverware clinked and conversation rumbled to a steady flow.

“And you’re here, why?” JT asked.

“JT.” Charisse’s scolding slipped through the table conversation.

“With California threatening to slide into the sea, it seemed like a good

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Maybe Trent knowing her champagne preference wasn’t so unusual. She did live in Hollywood where discovering a star’s secret could provide comfortable wealth to the revealer. Maybe Flo hadn’t revealed Charisse’s secret. Maybe someone had hacked her computer or delved into Charisse’s past.

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“No.”

“That’s right. You sent that intern who wore the eyeglasses shaped like shark dorsal fins. Loki refused to answer the door when she saw him through the viewer.”

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A car whizzed past her and honked. She waved. The first time a car had honked at her, she’d nearly jumped out of her boots. Now, she waved and smiled, but she doubted the drivers noticed.

The road was wide. She walked along the edge of the shoulder that dipped into a ravine, several feet away from the drive lane. She couldn’t possibly be crowding the drivers. Apparently, they saw it differently.

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Charisse wasn’t sure how Lupe had found out that her mother was a princess, but she could guess - the gossip magazines. Lupe was an avid magazine reader claiming it helped her with her English.

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“That was before I realized you were spreading yourself around. I don’t want you, Leo. Get that through your head. I agreed to meet with you to discuss business. We’ve discussed business. Now I’m leaving.” Her heart pounded hard and fast. She tried to read in his eyes what thoughts his head conjured. She didn’t trust him.

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She still didn't understand why he had escorted her back to California. He wanted nothing from her. He was quick to point out her lack of acting ability. He wanted her to cancel the option on the most desired film in the industry.

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You’re memory’s failing you. I told you when I first read the novel that this part was written for Charisse. It was as if the Loki was staring at her photo when she wrote the book.”

“I don’t know which photo she would’ve been staring at. This one’s been retouched.” Even as he said the words, he could hear the hope in his voice that he was right. If he heard that hope, no doubt Bambi did, too. “Whitloch’s eyes aren’t that blue. She doesn’t smile like that.”

“Trent, that is Charisse Whitloch, blue eyes, dazzling smile and all.”

“I never said her smile was dazzling.”

“But you thought that. You still do.”

Trent’s eyes narrowed and took in the photo of probably one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen. The woman who sat in the next room.

“You need to look through her portfolio again.” Bambi moved in front of the photo. She dragged a strip of wrapping paper off the photo’s corner and wadded it into a ball. “That photo has not been retouched. Did you even talk to Charisse when she came in for her screen test?”

“That’s the casting director’s job, not mine.”

“If you’d watched her screen test, you’d know what she has the perfect look for Hand of Zeus.”

“I saw enough of her audition tape to know she’s not good enough for my film.”

Bambi jutted her chin and then stretched it an inch farther. “You keep criticizing her, you might believe all these fables you’re telling yourself.”

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“My next audition?” Her heart pounded heavily. She schooled her features to show no emotion. She didn’t blink. She slowed her breathing. She was an actress. She knew how to hide her emotions.

“After you’ve had acting lessons.”

“I don’t understand why - .”

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“I’ve seen her work.” Trent’s voice sounded from the doorway to her office.

She whirled around, her pulse rushed through her ears. Trent stood at the entrance, his phone pressed to his ear. His large frame seemed to dwarf the French door opening.

Which “her” was he talking about? The darkness in his eyes confirmed her suspicions. He was talking about her. Next question – with whom?

“She’s not right for the part,” Trent said.

He was talking to her agent, Marilyn. Charisse’s heart felt as if it had flipped upside down and was pounding a hole through her stomach.

“If you’re talking about me, put that call on speaker. I have a right to know what you’re saying.” She tried to stand. Her ankle bent sideways, and she plopped back into her chair.

“Sure, I consider you a friend, but this is business.” Trent continued to talk into the phone as if he hadn’t heard Charisse. He didn’t stop staring at her.

There was a glint in his eyes, as if he enjoyed the argument.

“We’ll have it your way. Ten o’clock tomorrow morning. Tell her to dress the part and be on time.”

“I’m always on time,” Charisse muttered.

He swiped his thumb over the phone’s screen.

Charisse’s desk phone rang. She picked it up. “I heard everything, Marilyn. I’ll dress the part. I’ll be on time like always.” She hung up.

“For the record, Trent, I’m never late.”

“Keep it that way.” He dialed his phone.

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“How are you going to audition for that part tomorrow?” he asked.

“Easy. I’ll recite my lines.”

“Not just recite.”

“What do you want me to do? Swing from a rope?” She gripped the arms of her chair and pulled herself upright.

“That’s the role. That’s why every actress in town wants this part. The character is a strong woman with a mind of her own. She’s complicated but sympathetic.” He stood and looked down at her.

He was trying to intimidate her. If she could have stood, she would have, though she didn’t stand any taller than the middle button on his shirt.

“I understand this character. I’ve been researching this role since I first read the script. I know what it takes to make her relatable to the audience.”

He dropped his chin and looked down his nose at her. “What’s that?”

“You’ll find out at ten o’clock tomorrow.”

His face darkened. “You’re in no condition to audition tomorrow. You can barely walk. How are you going to move through your lines?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow.”

“Don’t waste my time, Charisse. If you’re not going to make it, tell me now.”

“It isn’t because of my ankle that you don’t want me to audition. What is it?”

His face turned stony, his eyes lifeless. He looked like an inanimate object except for the flair of his nostrils, and the muscle jerking in his jaw.

She clenched her teeth and stared into dark eyes filled with something. Hate because she had won the option to Sunset in Maui?

She stuttered a breath. This man was tall and powerfully built. His face was a sculptor’s masterpiece of angles and planes. His eyes shone like water soaked agates. His broad shoulders tugged at the seam of his shirt. His torso tapered into narrow hips. He had no physical flaw.

He straightened. His stare never wavered. “You don’t have the experience. Like you said, this character is complex. Bravo, if you’ve actually done the research, but it isn’t enough. You have to live the life to understand her.”

“Maybe I did live this life.”

He gave a derisive laugh. “Your life doesn’t come close to that of this character. You’re the daughter of a princess. You lived in a castle. You attended elite schools.”

She gave a start. He knew her. Earlier he had said he did, but she’d brushed that aside.

He’d done his research.

A slow smile spread across his face. He’d seen her shock. She couldn’t let him know he was right about her.

“I won’t ask you how you know about my personal life. You have only to look at the Internet.”

“That may be true for other people. It doesn’t apply to me.”

“You do have your minions. Do you know about an elite lifestyle because that’s how you were raised?”

There was a flicker in the back of his eyes. The feeling inside her chest was raw. She’d referred to his childhood. What dark secret did he hide? He knew about her. She should know about him. She wouldn’t tolerate his double standard.

“You know nothing about me,” he said.

“You’re right.” She’d tried to do her research, but Trent Parker was elusive. He never gave interviews. She found nothing on the internet. “But somewhere along the way, you learn to talk, act, live like an elitist.”

He gave a snort of annoyance. “Not even close.” He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned into the sofa. “We were talking about your audition, unless you’re afraid to audition for me, which I certainly understand.”

Charisse sputtered a laugh. “You’re hilarious.” The rage boiling in the back of her head seeped into her words. “I’m ready to addition for you anytime, anywhere, anyplace. It looks like that will be tomorrow at ten o’clock.”

“Ten o’clock it is.” In one even movement, Trent rose before her.

Her head tilted. She stared up and up and up. “Ten o’clock.”

“Do you need anything else before I leave?”

“No, I appreciate all you’ve done.”

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She picked up the phone and dialed her agent’s phone number. The first statement out of her mouth was for Marilyn to cancel her audition with Trent. If Trent were home now, she’d walk next door and cancel it herself. Then, she’d be on the next plane to Colorado.

“Don’t do anything rash.” Marilyn sounded calm, but Charisse knew Marilyn’s blood pressure boiled and she’d be white knuckling the edge of her desk. “Go to the audition. We’ll talk afterwards.” They made plans to meet at Trent’s studio, but Charisse was firm. She wanted to return to Crystal Creek.

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For now, her mind filled with other thoughts. She had the audition in seven hours. If she didn’t feel rested, she wouldn’t perform well for Trent. Without a stellar performance, he might not let her finish.

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“Trent, I’m not going to audition for you today.” She hadn’t meant to blurt it out. Now that she’d said it, now that she’d canceled, the weight dragging on her shoulders lessened. “I have to see for myself that my sister is fine. If this is my last chance to audition for you, then I’ll accept your decision. My sister and I are very close. Until I know she’s fine, I don’t want to be unavailable in case she needs me.”

Trent’s lips pressed together. She had expected him to argue with her as Marilyn had.

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“Don’t cancel the audition yet. Call your half-sister again. Emily, is it? If everything’s fine, if you don’t have to fly back to Colorado, I’ll still plan on seeing you at ten o’clock.”

“I can’t commit to that. Something’s wrong with Anna. I can feel it. Unless I can see her, I won’t have any peace.”

“Who’s older?” Trent asked.

“Anna is. By seven minutes.”

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Charisse stuttered a laugh. “Trent, are you saying you would consider me for another project? What about my acting ability?”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “I didn’t say I’d give it to you, and I won’t until you’ve had more acting lessons.”

Her frustration turned into a cauldron of anger that bubbled inside her head. Her feet locked into sand. “There are quite a few people in this town who think my skills are superior.”

He walked backward. “Name one.”

“George Godfrey.”

“He’s a hack.”

“He’s won two academy awards.” When Trent narrowed his eyes, she said, “Okay, so you’ve won three, but that doesn’t mean George is a hack.”

“I could care less how many awards I’ve won or anyone else for that matter. Awards are the opinions of others. My opinion is the only one that counts for my work. If I’m not satisfied, no award is going change my dissatisfaction. Besides Godfrey, who else?”

“I’m not going to tell you. You’ll criticize them as well.”

His laugh was deep and low. Turbulent emotions poured through her. This man set her on edge. She didn’t like being around him. That didn’t explain the confusion pouring through her whenever she was near him.

“I know who told you you’re a good actress.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Because you don’t know, otherwise you’d tell me.”

“I won’t tell you because your ego is big enough already.” He strode down the beach.

“My ego.” She had been touted as one of the few actresses who didn’t have a big ego. The bubbling cauldron spilled into the fire. Telling him that would sound egotistical.

“Now you’re going to tell me how everyone thinks you’re not egotistical.”

She choked.

“I work with actors. I know how you think. Keep up. I have an eight o’clock meeting.”

“You could wait. I did sprain my ankle.”

“You also said you didn’t crutches.”

“Walking on the beach with crutches is impossible.”

“Then you’ll have to figure something out.”

She uttered a groan that did little to take the edge off her temper.

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“Trent was kind enough to let me stay last night. My house.” She pointed aimlessly behind her. It was the wrong direction. “It was damaged in the earthquake. Is Trent still upstairs?”

“No.” The woman’s eyes widened with more questions. “He left a long time ago.”

Charisse pressed a hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry. I should introduce myself. Especially since Trent didn’t tell you. I stayed the night. My name is Charisse.”

“Charisse Whitloch, I know.”

“I’m flattered you know who I am.” Heat flooded her face. She wasn’t accustomed to people recognizing her, telling her how much they liked her acting.

Some told her they didn’t like her acting. That was to be expected, a veteran actor had told her when she sat in her trailer and cried over a vicious email.

“What is your name?” Charisse asked the woman.

“Greta.”

“Greta. What a beautiful name. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“You spent the night? Here?” Greta bobbed a pointed finger toward the floor.

“Yes, I live next door. That is, I used to live next door. I lived there until the earthquake destroyed my home.”

Greta’s eyes widened, and she tilted her head away from Charisse as if trying to decide the real reason Charisse had stayed the night in Trent’s house.

The pop inside Charisse’s chest felt as if a gigantic switch had been flipped. “Oh, no.” She waved her hands, crossed them over each other so fast she felt a breeze. “I didn’t stay here last night in that way.”

Greta seemed to calm. Her brows lifted inviting an explanation.

“I hardly know Trent. I realize that isn’t always a requirement to, uh, stay the night, uh, in that way, but it is with me.” She touched a hand to her forehead and turned away. “And why am I explaining this?” She looked over her shoulder then faced Greta. “You can ask Trent. He’ll tell you.”

Greta’s gaze flickered to the clothes Charisse wore.

“You’re right. These are clothes I found in the closet in the guest room, where I spent the night, but I only borrowed them because I had nothing else to wear. You can ask Trent. Where is he?”

One of Greta’s shoulders lifted almost imperceptibly before falling into place. “He left before I got here. I didn’t see him.”

“Where did he go?” She pressed her lips together so tight they turned cold.

The question sounded like that of a jilted lover. She could see in Greta’s eyes that she suspected something happened between Charisse and Trent. She could deny it, but she didn’t care what Greta thought. What anyone thought.

Greta shook her head and wiped an already clean counter. “I don’t know.”

An odd feeling floated inside Charisse’s stomach as if it were the universe and this feeling was a space capsule floating, floating, floating. Never landing, being tossed about by pulls and pushes trapped inside the universe. It almost felt as if Trent has abandoned her. He had kissed her. Her lips burned at the memory of his hunger. When he pulled away, that drifting in space feeling consumed her.

Like now.

Leaded realization bottomed in her stomach. He was typical of Hollywood. Use people. Throw them away. Even if you weren’t finished with them, throw them away. Pick them up later if you have a need for them again.

A heat of relief rose in her face. If she and Trent had done more, if she had slept with him, how much deeper her disappointment. Her heart beat dully. Not disappointment.

Devastation.

But she hadn’t slept with Leo, which was why he left her.

She wouldn’t sleep with Trent. That wasn’t her style.

“You would like breakfast?” Greta lifted a brow.

“Yes. No, I don’t need breakfast. I’m going home.”

“Your home? That place next door that’s gone?”

A weight of realization pressed on Charisse’s shoulders. “Yes, that home. I have to decide what to do next. Do you hear those sounds of heavy machinery? That’s what I have to do. Clear away the debris that used to be my home.”

“What if Trent wants to know where you are? What do I tell him?”

“You can tell him what I said. I’m going to clean up the trash that used to be my house.” A void floated in her chest. Trent wouldn’t look for her. “Don’t worry. Trent won’t ask about me. You won’t have to tell him anything.” Even as she said the words, the vacuum in her chest dipped into something dark and murky.

She didn’t care about Trent. That didn’t answer the question of why she held out hope that he’d ask about her. She had to bury that thought in the rubble that used to be her house.

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He didn’t want to tell her that when he was at the studio this morning, he had screened the audition tapes. Not one actress fit his idea for the character in the script.

Hollywood’s elites had cooled their heels in his waiting room for a chance to spellbind him with their talent.

A couple had come close. It wasn’t their fault they weren’t young enough, thin enough, blond enough.

Those problems could be corrected, but his mind kept going back to Charisse with her hair cinched in a rewoven braid, her small waist bound by a belted poncho. She was what he had in mind when he edited the script. She was what he had in mind when he reviewed the storyboards.

“I’m not auditioning.” Charisse stared at the rubble. “I can’t. Not when there’s so much devastation surrounding me.”

Even in her protest, he could see her on the screen, her bow slung over her shoulder, waiting on the bluff for the conquering army to carry out their threat to invade the planet where she hid with the resistance movement.

“You can stay with me while you resolve this.”

“And have every conversation based on my starring in your film and breaking the option contract on my film? No, thanks.”

“I understand your concern.” His voice had a warm, I-understand tone. “I want to help, too. I know it doesn’t look like it, but a lot of damage has been mitigated.”

She shifted her gaze to him and lifted one brow. “It doesn’t look like it. Look at my house. Look at half the homes in this neighborhood.”

“You can stay at my house for as long as you need to.”

“I belong at Crystal Creek.”

“Your family’s home.”

“My stepmother’s home. Everyone knows the doors are always open at Crystal Creek.”

“How long before you hear about your house?”

“Three weeks.”

“And how long before you can fly back to the ranch?”

“The end of the week. Why?”

“What will you do in the meantime?”

“You mean where will I stay?”

“Where will you stay? What will you do? Nothing in your house is salvageable.”

“Something might be.” She dipped her head and stared through the timbers.

“You can’t go in there now. Not in that condition. The upper floor almost caved in on you.”

“If I can’t go into my home now, then when? It’s supposed to rain tonight. Once water mixes with dirt and sand covering everything, everything will be ruined.”

“You think something inside can be salvaged?” When she nodded, he said, “Let’s look now.” He took a step and looked over his shoulder at her. “Are you coming?”

“You don’t have to help.”

“I don’t have to do a lot of things.”

“But you do. Like the helping abused and abandoned children. Why do you do that?”

His eyes blanked. He looked at her but not as if he saw her. Instead, a vacant, detached look floated in in the back of his eyes. “Let’s look for something to save before the rain starts.”

She knew Trent well enough to know he answered the questions he wanted to. His interest in hurting children wasn’t something he was willing to share with her - someone he hardly knew. Charisse had a feeling even those he knew well probably didn’t know why he felt the need to protect children.

Staring at the rubble, she saw a job that would make a bulldozer cringe. Her photos and artwork would be crushed beneath the crumbled remains.

She had to know. She had to try to save something.

“We go through each area together. No going rogue. You stay with me.” His voice was I-mean-business low and firm.

She felt as if someone had opened a hole in her chest and syphoned her strength. She was too drained to argue.

Inside, she found a canvas bag. She sifted through the ash. Beneath one pile of planks and drywall, she found photos framed in pewter, wood and acrylic. The glass was broken. The pictures had scratched marks across the faces. The edges curled.

Pictures of her family from Christmases past. Hot sorrow bubbled in her throat. The photos were too damaged to save.

Trent stayed close. He never watched her, but where she went, he went. With bare hands, he moved broken framing and cracked siding and sifted the layer of sand the wind had blown over the rubble.

His nearness gave her peace and serenity. She hadn’t noticed it at first. It was the way she felt. The calming of her heart. The slow easy breathing even when she pulled at broken timbers and moved slabs of tile. The pressure in her head that felt like a vice slowly tightening gradually lessened until her tunnel vision widened. Widened so she saw more of her house, became more aware of what she was digging through and the insurmountable task it would take to look through the damage to find something worth saving.

She noticed the difference. It had to be the sea air that refreshed her.

She noticed something else. When Trent neared her, she felt a warmth, a security.

A ripple skittered over the back of her neck, and she rubbed it. How could this gruff man make her feel secure? Nothing made sense.

She was past trying to make sense of anything. She needed to be back at Crystal Creek. That was where the simplicity of life helped her make coherent decisions.

Beneath a broken timber sat a bronze sculptor of an Indian, biceps bulging, wrestling a buffalo to the ground. The horse was wild eyed and reared. Its tail twisted sideways. Only sand and ash marred the patina. The setting sun warmed her face. She slanted a hand at her brow and watched the waves gently lap the shore.

“Let’s get some dinner,” Trent said.

“I’m too tired to eat.”

He slipped his fingers around handle of her canvas bag. He wrapped his other hand around the stomach of the wild-eyed bronze buffalo and lifted it to his thigh. “Then that means you should eat.” He moved toward the ripped opening that had once held a door then glanced over his shoulder. “We’ll come back tomorrow.”

**\* \* \***

“In case, she isn’t in agreement, we’ll fly to New Zealand to make sure the terrain isn’t acceptable.”

“The front man should do that.”

“He’s done it. I’ll determine if it’s adequate.”

“It isn’t, but it’s your picture, and your decision.”

“Exactly.”

“Have a nice trip.” She slid the cut fruit into a glass bowl.

“We’ll have a wonderful trip.”

His words caught her and hooked her to a stop. He would be traveling with someone else. Maybe several someone elses. Maybe his statuesque assistant, Bambi. What was that to her? He had opened his home to her. There was no relationship between them. He was free to be with whomever whenever.

“You’ll have a wonderful trip also,” he said.

“I always have a wonderful trip when I visit the ranch.”

“I’m not talking about the ranch. I’m talking about New Zealand.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. The squeeze she felt was like sandbag after sandbag after sandbag being dropped on her chest.

Trent’s eyes crinkled in the corners like a camera’s aperture.

“I’m not going to New Zealand.” Each word dropped out of her mouth.

“Yes, you are. New Zealand is the perfect setting for this project.”

“You know I disagree.”

“But you won’t once you see the terrain.”

“My house. I can’t leave my house. I can’t go to New Zealand when my house is a shambles.”

“You can leave your house to return to the ranch.”

“That’s different. My sister needs me.”

And she needed her family. That was clear to Trent. “What arrangements have you made about your house?”

“The debris will be hauled away tomorrow, but the inspector won’t arrive for three weeks and-.”

“You have nothing to do for three weeks. We’ll be back by then.”

“What about my production company? I have my film project.”

She hadn’t meant to look at him when she started talking about the film. She was thinking aloud, but he was in the room and she was talking. The most natural thing was to look at him, to connect.

Big mistake. It was as if a knife pricked a hole in this bubble of enthusiasm that cocooned her.

**\* \* \***

“We leave in an hour.” Trent strode toward the plane.

Charisse’s relief was sucked away by guilt. “We can’t leave tonight.” Her voice was louder than she intended.

She had to catch Trent’s attention before he left.

Conversations around them quieted. Several of the men stared at her. Others glanced at her then moved away.

Charisse’s cheeks burned. Her stomach dropped into a hot pit. She moved to Trent and lowered her voice. “What I mean is, it’s not a good idea. You’ve been flying all day -.”

“As have you.”

“But I wasn’t piloting a helicopter, trying to land it, then flying the injured to Los Angeles’ only working hospital.”

**\* \* \***

“Go get Gatsby. I’ll find him a cage and something for him to take for the trip.”

“I don’t want that.” Charisse’s voice showed no emotion, but her eyes reflected fear and her face was ashen.

“A sedative will keep him calm.”

“But how do I know it won’t hurt him. The person who broke into my house fed him a sedative. It practically paralyzed him.”

“It isn’t the same. Trust me in this.”

Even before she could declare she would never trust him in anything, Trent strode away.

“He can’t be in a kennel.” Charisse rushed after him.

One of Trent’s eyebrows did a slow creep up his forehead.

“Please, Trent. He’ll be good.”

“He’d better be.” Trent growled and moved across the hangar.

Trent had the plane in the air one hour later. Charisse sat in the seat next to him, Gatsby in the seat behind her.

Before takeoff, Charisse had texted Anna their arrival time at Centennial Airport.

Gatsby had whined during takeoff, but the sedative had taken affect and now he snored softly. His tail dripped over the side of the seat. His chin rested on the armrest.

“How’s are passenger doing?” Trent shifted his gaze to Charisse.

**\* \* \***

She’d show him how close she was to succeeding. She’d send him a gift – proof she had no intention of failing.

She picked up her phone. She’d make sure he received this gift before her plane landed in Los Angeles.

“Hey, Boss.” Charisse’s assistant, Flo, answered the phone with an exaggerated nasally tone.

“Happy New Year,” Charisse said. “How was your holiday?”

“Typical sunny California. Got in a fight with the boyfriend. Partied with people I didn’t know. How about yours?”

“Typical Crystal Creek, Colorado. We had some excitement, but I’ll tell you later. For now, I want you to send a gift to Trent Parker.”

“The producer? I didn’t know you and he were on gift giving terms.”

“I’m initiating our gift giving relationship. I doubt he’ll reciprocate. Listen carefully, Flo. Here’s what I want you to send him. Remember that photo that was taken when I received the AFMA award for the indie short I produced?”

“Sure. How could I forget that? It was the most exciting night of my life.”

“It was?”

“Well, sure. I never worked for anyone who won a Hollywood trophy.”

Heat rose in Charisse’s face. She had felt proud when she won the award. She hadn’t realized her assistant did, too. “Thanks, Flo. Here’s what I want you to do. Order an enlargement as big as a house -”

“How big is that?”

“Use a tape measure. Make sure Trent receives it today.”

“I’m on it,” Flo said. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

Charisse dropped her phone into her purse and leaned back into padded leather seat. She loved surprises, when she was doing the surprising.

**\* \* \***

She glanced about the fuselage, which was shorter than the length of the jet. The door in front of her led to another room. She’d explore the other room later. For now, she had scripts to read. Scripts she had planned to read during her vacation, but the vacation had been too much fun for her to think about work.

She pulled the scripts out of her briefcase and placed them on the table in front of her. The best way to cure homesickness was to keep busy – the gospel according to her stepmother, Rose Whitloch.

Charisse pulled a script off the stack and flipped to the first page.

From behind her, she heard the pocket door slide open. She glanced over her shoulder. The flight attendant, Phil according to his nametag, pushed through the opening a serving cart covered with a white cloth.

“Explain to me why there is a wall dividing the fuselage in half. I thought the reason for investing in a private jet was to enjoy the extra room,” Charisse said after she had introduced herself to the attendant.

“It provides privacy,” Phil said.

“For whom? You, the pilot and I are the only ones on board. To me that’s private.”

“Everyone has his own definition.” Phil placed an ice bucket filled with a chilling bottle of champagne on the table in front of her.

“What’s that for?” Charisse pushed back into her seat. Her gaze shifted from the champagne to Phil.

Phil pulled the bottle from the bucket and wrapped a white cloth around the bottle. He extracted the cork. A curling whiff of steam escaped from bottle.

“Compliments of the studio,” Phil said.

Charisse’s eyes widened and widened more. “Studio? There must be some mistake. My assistant chartered this flight to fly me back to Los Angeles.”

“I don’t know anything about that, Miss Whitloch. I work for the studio.”

“But the film wrapped production a month ago. There’s no reason for them to fly me anywhere.” Her heart tipped sideways and beat at the base of her throat. “We are talking about Wiley Studios, correct?”

Phil shook his head. “No, ma’am, I work for Parker Studios.”

“Parker? As in Trent Parker?”

Phil filled her champagne glass. “Yes ma’am.” From the tray behind him, he lifted a platter filled with lemon cake and kiwi.

“How did you know I liked to drink champagne with lemon cake and kiwi?” Charisse’s gaze flicked to the champagne bubbling in the glass to the platter Phil set before her.

“I didn’t. This was on my list of things to do before I left you alone so you could enjoy your flight.”

“There’s only one person who knows,” Charisse mumbled. “Thank you for your help, Phil.”

“If you need anything else, Ms. Whitloch, just tap the call button.”

Charisse waited until the door closed behind Phil then she opened the contact icon on her phone and pressed Flo’s name. With each ring, her teeth clenched tighter. How dare Flo reveal any information about her, especially that she drank champagne with lemon cake and kiwi. And why didn’t Flo tell her she’d be returning to California on Trent Parker’s jet? Trent Parker, who just sent her a too-bad-you’re-going-to-fail email. She’d spoken with Flo and arranged for her surprise gift to be delivered to Trent’s office. Flo said nothing about the producer sending his plane to fly her back to California.

She waved her hand in front of her face as if that would cool the heat rising into her cheeks. She would be calm. She would be cool. She would be collected. And then she would jump right down Flo’s throat.

“Hello.” Flo’s voice sounded through the earpiece.

“Flo, what’s the big idea –.”

“This is Flo.” The voice continued. “I can’t come to the phone right now.”

A recording. Charisse’s brain sizzled like beach-barbecued hotdogs. She held the phone away from her ear and rolled her eyes waiting for the recording to end. The beep sounded.

Charisse crammed the phone to her ear. “Flo, honey, I didn’t realize Parker Studios was flying me home on their private jet. A little forewarning would’ve been nice. And guess what they’re serving me? Champagne, lemon cake and kiwi, though I can’t eat or drink anything when I fly. Flo, darling, you’re the only one who knows what I like to eat when I drink champagne. Not even Dino knows this about me. You know I don’t like the studios to know what I eat because I don’t want to have to get into those you’re-not-eating-right-for-this-picture discussions. You know producers always turn into nutritionists when they start shooting. Call me soon as you get this message, hon. It looks like we have a few things to discuss. And remember for next time, I don’t like surprises. Thanks a bunch. Bye-bye.”

She pressed the end button so hard her thumbnail turned white. She tossed the phone into the seat next to hers. How could Flo not tell her she would be flying back to California on Trent Parker’s private jet? And why did Flo reveal to the studio caterer Charisse’s favorite munchies? She had very few weaknesses, champagne and lemon cake topping the list, and she needed to keep each one a secret, especially from blabbermouth studio heads. They loved revealing their stars’ secrets.

Trent Parker. Why would Trent Parker fly her back to California? Trent Parker who sent her an insulting email. Trent Parker who chipped away at her insecurities. He said she’d fail. She would not fail. She may be Max Whitloch’s daughter, but could succeed on her own with no help from anyone, especially from her father.

Trent was feeding her psycho mumbo-jumbo. She was his competition not someone who followed his orders.

Next time Charisse saw Trent Parker, and she’d make sure she did, she’d tell him why he was mistaken about her ability to produce a movie. She knew about film production. The AFMA award proved it. Granted an indie film wasn’t the same as being nominated for an Oscar, but she won an award.

She jolted upright in her chair. Her elbows dug into the armrests. The AFMA award – the glossy photo she’d told Flo to send it to Trent. As big as a house, she had said. That would make the photo gargantuan.

Heat climbed into her face. She sunk into her chair. How could she have done that?

She snatched the phone out of the side chair. She had to call Flo. She had to make sure Flo hadn’t ordered the photo. She pressed Flo’s number again.

“Hey, Boss.” Flo’s cheery voice answered the phone.

“Hey, yourself. Did you listen to my message?”

“Not yet. What do you need?”

“Never mind that. We have a bigger problem. Did you order that picture for Trent Parker yet?”

“The one of you receiving AFMA award? Yes, I ordered it right away.” Flo’s voice held the falsetto joy of having done something right.

“Cancel the order."

“Okay.” Flo dragged out the word. “Can I ask why?”

“Cancel it first, and then I’ll tell you.” She pinched the bridge of her nose so hard black and blue bubbles seemed to float in front of her eyes.

“I’m online right now.” The tapping sound of computer keys floated through the phone’s receiver. “Canceling the order. It’s canceled. Now tell me why.”

“I meant the photo as a joke.” Charisse fumbled through the explanation. “But now I’m thinking about it. It doesn’t seem very funny anymore. You sure the order’s been canceled.”

“I’m printing out the cancelation notice right now. I have it in my hand. And I’m going to file it in the folder marked Canceled Orders.”

“You have a folder labeled Canceled Orders?”

“I do now.”

Charisse exhaled roughly. “Thanks, Flo. I need a better filter between my brain and my mouth.”

“Don’t worry. No one’s going to know this happened. Now tell me about the message you just left.”

“The flight attendant served me champagne with lemon cake and kiwi.”

Silence radiated through the phone, then Flo uttered a dragged out, “So?”

“So? Outside of my family, you’re the only one who knows I like to eat lemon cake and kiwi when I drink champagne, not that I can eat anything when I fly.”

“Wait a minute, you think I told the flight attendant that’s what you like? Oh, no, Charisse. I signed a confidentiality statement when I started working for you two years ago. I know that’s your secret munchy. I’ve never told a soul. Not even my dog.”

“Then how did Trent’s studio find out?”

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t from me. The other phone’s ringing. I’ll call you back.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll call you back when I land.”

Trent knew a secret about her. The muscles in her stomach squeezed, then squeezed again. How did he find out? Another question pushed its way into her head. What other secrets did he know about her?

And who was telling him these secrets?

Chapter Two

Charisse stood and stretched her back. She’d been studying scripts since the plane departed. It was the only thing she could do to stop thinking about the ranch and leaving her family behind. Her back ached and her eyes felt like sandpaper. She was too tired to read another page.

She walked to the window and stared at the landscape below. Ribbons of highways and rivers wound through snowcapped mountains. She still hadn’t heard from Marilyn. She still didn’t know why Parker Studios was flying her from Colorado and to California. And who told Trent Parker she liked champagne and kiwi?

The other person she hadn’t heard from was Dino. His production schedule must’ve been heavier than he thought. She had sent him plenty of messages. If she sent anymore, he’d think she didn’t trust him. She trusted him.

Something dry and prickly swelled in her throat. She knew the rumors about him and his latest costar, but Dino had never given her a reason to not trust him.

She fell back into her seat and logged onto her tablet. The link directed her to the latest Hollywood news – which actor starred in which movie and the current projects of every producer.

Trent Parker’s name appeared at the top of the list. The link next to his name was three days old. She clicked the link.

A video streamed of an awards dinner. The mistress of ceremonies was an actress who had been a major star several decades ago. She now devoted her time and wealth to a foundation for abused and neglected children. As the actress spoke to the audience, her gaze traveled to the Teleprompters strategically positioned around the podium.

Charisse’s thoughts drifted to Dino and the schedule he must be enduring for his latest shoot. It wasn’t until she heard the name Trent Parker that her attention returned to the streaming video.

She tilted the tablet for a better view of the image.

The audience burst into applause. The camera panned the crowd. Like a wave, the attendees pushed their chairs from the tables and stood.

One figure stood taller than everyone else in the audience.

Trent Parker.

Trent Parker with his wavy black hair, square jaw, broad shoulders. Charisse’s jaw dropped a fraction and her face drifted closer to the screen.

Trent Parker was handsome.

Beyond handsome.

He had also insulted her.

She cleared her throat. She pressed two fingers against her lips and looked around, as if to make sure no one else was in the compartment.

She cast a sideways glance at the screen. It was hard not to watch Trent Parker.

He wove his way through the crowd, shook extended hands, and accepted hugs. Elegantly dressed men and women parted like the Red Sea to make a path for him to approach the stage. He climbed the stage two steps at a time. He looked stiff when the mistress of ceremonies hugged him and whispered something in his ear. He mouth tightened, and he nodded once.

A young woman dressed in red sequence strutted onto the stage carrying a gold base. A gold torch with golden flames sat in the center of the base. When she reached Trent, she handed him the award. He nodded his thanks. She smiled then stepped out of the camera’s view.

The clapping turned from applause to steady beats with the crowd shouting, “Speech. Speech. Speech.”

“You don’t want to hear from me.” Trent’s voice was low and held a slight catch. The tone moved the audience to silence.

Something else about Trent’s voice - it was deep and gentle and stirred emotions she’d never felt before. She pressed a hand to her stomach.

“The kids are the ones who deserve this award.” Trent held the trophy out to the audience. “They did all the work. We’ve just started. We have a long way to go. But they have the courage and the stamina to make their lives better. I’m only grateful they took me along for the ride. Thank you.” He strode across the stage.

Thunderous applause, cheers and whistles burst through the speaker. Charisse wanted to jump to her feet and join in.

Heat flooded her face. She clasped her hands in her lap.

She felt as if she sat in the audience and watched Trent receive his award. She almost felt proud.

What was she thinking? She barely knew the man.

His impatience crackled over screen. The lines pressed around his mouth made it clear - he didn’t want to be on that stage.

The smiling presenter tapped fingers into her palm in a polite clap and followed Trent into the wings.

The screen faded to black. Another video queued – a cellphone video. It bumped and jerked with the photographer who was trying to keep up with Trent. Sometimes, Trent’s broad back filled the screen. Other times, he was several feet in front of the photographer.

Trent no longer held the trophy.

“Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker.” A young man’s voice called out to Trent. “Do you have a comment for the viewers?”

“No comment.” Trent growled. He kept his pace.

“Will you attend the awards party?”

Trent stopped. His broad shoulders expanded like a bodybuilder’s muscles engorging with blood before lifting a five hundred pound barbell. He whipped around so fast the cellphone couldn’t capture it. Trent leaned into the camera.

The photographer’s cell phoned pulled away as if he were frightened by Trent’s looming form.

Charisse pressed her back into her chair. Trent was big. Filling-the-entire-screen big.

“Do you know what these kids have been through?” Trent’s voice was soft, a baritone with a slight rumble.

“No. Sir.”

“Research it, son. Journalists research their articles.” He reached inside his tuxedo and pulled out a card. “Here’s the number to the foundation. I’ll tell them to expect your call. Schedule an appointment with them. They’ll show you around and explain the foundation’s mission.”

“How about if I come when you’re there?”

“How about if you go so you can learn what they do? You want to learn something, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” The young man stretched out the word.

“Good.” Trent stepped through the back door.

The cell phone camera followed.

A bolt of lightning streaked across the sky. Thunder cracked. Rain sliced through the air and pummeled the pitted asphalt.

“People at the reception will be expecting you.” The cameraman’s voice strained to be heard over the pounding rain. It fell in front of the lens but no drops splashed against the glass, as if the cameraman stood beneath a rafter.

Trent looked over his shoulder at him. Great drops plopped on his shoulders and hair. Some drops streamed down his face. “You don’t get it, do you?”

The video moved as if the photographer shrugged. “Sure, I do.”

Trent shook his head. He crossed the parking lot.

The photographer didn’t follow him. Trent disappeared among the parked cars. In the distance was the sound of a car starting and driving away.

The video cut to black.

Charisse stared at the dark screen. Who was Trent Parker? He was pressuring Marilyn to convince Charisse to star in his movie, but Charisse hadn’t met him. She’d heard stories that he was a tyrant, made the actresses cry. Some actors, too. Still everyone in Hollywood wanted to work with him. He was the best.

He told Marilyn he wanted Charisse to star in his next film – a first class ticket to happiness for Charisse.

That was before she’d won the option to produce Sunset in Maui. That was before she won against the great Trent Parker.

Now Marilyn would have to tell him Charisse wouldn’t sign the contract to star in his movie.

Charisse’s uneven heartbeat felt like boulders rolling down the mountain. It wouldn’t be fair to make Marilyn tell Trent. As an agent it was Marilyn’s job, but Charisse would tell him she was breaking the contract and tell him about her other idea.

She leaned back in the padded chair and stared out the window at the passing clouds. The muscles in her back gripped around her ribs. They weren’t just stiff. They were shooting lactic acid down her sides.

Her hands against the armrests, she pushed herself to her feet and paced around the table she had used as a desk.

Charisse’s thoughts passed through her mind blocking out the airplane furniture. She walked faster. She ground her fist into her palm. She had a great speech to give Trent Parker.

Her toe slammed into the table leg. With an oath, she grabbed her foot and dropped into a swivel chair. Agony radiated up her leg. Her heart bashed the inside of her ribcage.

Then it slowed. Air eased into her lungs.

She looked around the room. With the wall dividing the fuselage in half, it was no wonder she stumbled into the table leg. The seating area was half the size it should be. What was the purpose of the wall? What was on the other side of the door?

She set her injured foot on the carpet and eased out of the chair. An ache vibrated across her arch, but the pain had eased from when she’d first struck her foot. She braced a hand on the wall and limped to the door.

From the other side, heard a voice. Her shoulders stiffened. She had thought she was the only passenger. She pressed her ear to the door. The voice was muffled, the words jumbled sometime rushing, sometimes drawn out, but there was no mistaking there was one voice, a deep voice, a man’s voice.

She rolled her shoulders trying to shake the hesitation that seemed to grab her and pull her away from the door. She pressed her lips together. She had to know who shared this plane ride with her. One person. Maybe more than one. It was time they made their presence known.

Her hand on the knob, she turned it.

The room was larger than the one where she had been sitting –twice as large. The man seated at the table had a phone clamped to his ear. One elbow was propped on the table. He rested his forehead in the curve between his thumb and forefinger. Dark curls covered the top of his head.

“Jim, he’s bad, and not in a good way,” the man said into the phone. “Tell him he has six hours to accept the deal, or I’m dropping his salary by seven figures.”

He lifted his head. His dark eyes turned into hard slits that seemed to bore a hole through Charisse.

She stared into the dark, condemning eyes of Trent Parker.

If she hadn’t held the doorknob, she’d have fallen backwards into the other room.

“Jim, I’ll call you back.” Jim was still talking when Trent swiped his thumb over the screen.

Trent Parker stared into the blue gaze of Charisse Whitloch, the daughter of the man he hated more than any power monger in Hollywood. The hatred pinched the blood vessels traveling in and out of his heart so that he had to inhale a deep breath to start the blood pumping again. He reminded himself hatred was a weakness. He had no room in his life for weaknesses, even for hatred of Maxwell Aloysius Whitlock, Sr.,

“Trent Parker.” Charisse’s voice quaked. She swallowed the prickle stuck in her throat.

She pushed away from the doorjamb and hobbled across the room to Trent’s desk. She’d meet this scion head on. She extended her hand. His rude email stuck in her brain like sand between her teeth, but she’d start this relationship on the right foot, even though that foot hurt so much she wanted to scream. “I’m Charisse Whitloch.”

Trent’s mouth flattened. His gaze lurched from her hand to her face. He didn’t shake her hand. “I know. You’re early.”

She dropped her hand. “What do you mean early? I’m on a jet. It’s not like I can drop in for a visit. I didn’t know you were onboard. And early for what?”

“Our meeting.”

She dropped her chin a half inch. “We didn’t schedule a meeting. Why would we have one? You already sent me an email telling me I wouldn’t succeed as a producer.”

“I know what I said.” He leaned back in his chair and rubbed the back of his neck.

“If you’d relax, it wouldn’t bother you.”

“What?” He jerked his gaze to hers. Confusion flashed in his dark eyes.

“Your neck. You’re rubbing it because it hurts. It hurts because you’re tense. If you’d take deep breaths and tilt your head - .”

He waved his hand at her as if flicking away a fly. “I know what to do.”

“Obviously, you don’t or your neck wouldn’t hurt.”

“Go back to your room. I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

He was ordering her around like her father. The back of her head scalded. The rattle in her chest was a pot boiling on the back of Rose’s stove. She inhaled a calming breath and shoved an image of Crystal Creek into her mind. She had told him to calm down. Her shoulders hunched and her back braced – battle stance in place.

“Actually, I’m ready now.” She shoved sweetness past the teetering-on-explosion temper. “What did you want to discuss?”

The confusion twisting on his face relaxed into an I-know-your-game smile.”

“You’re not breaking your contract with me.”

Her jaw unhinged. Her tongue would have fallen out of her mouth if it hadn’t been connected. “I never said. . . I never told. . .”

“Good. We agree. Meeting’s over.” His gaze dropped to his laptop.

Did he just dismiss her? The way her father did?

“Wait a minute, Mr. Parker.”

He glanced up. His brows scooted up his forehead. “You’re still here? I told you the meeting’s over.”

“A meeting is when everyone present voices his, or her, as in I’m the her, opinion. I didn’t sign a contract; therefore, I’m not breaking a contract. Now our meeting is over.” She whirled about.

Pain shot up her leg. She sunk her teeth into her lower lip. Her exit would lose its effectiveness if she did a face plant. She grabbed the doorjamb.

“Wait a minute.” His voice thundered. She heard his chair squeak as if he’d shot to his feet.

She gritted her teeth. Waited for the Trent detonation. She glanced over her shoulder. Her lungs locked at what she saw.

Trent Parker was tall, almost-to-the-ceiling tall. Anger etched into his Greek god face. Power bulked his chest like a weight lifter. Anger shooting out of his eyes was sharp enough to slice through her.

“Yes?” She forced Scarlett O’Hara sweetness into her smile.

Trent planted his palms on his desk and leaned forward. “Marilyn and I discussed this. We had an agreement. The contract’s a formality.”

“Starring in your film doesn’t work for me right now. All contracts have an out clause. I’m exercising mine even though I never signed it. Have a nice flight, Mr. Parker.” Her head high, she hobbled into the next room.

Now she’d done it. As Hollywood’s top producer, she was going to approach him for help in her production of Sunset in Maui. She’d nailed that coffin.

She didn’t need his help. She could do this on her own.

Maybe.

“You’ll never succeed with your film project.” His voice was gentle as if he were offering her encouragement.

She whirled around and strode, limped, to his desk. “You’re only saying that because I won the option and you didn’t. I understand this book. I know what it needs to make this film Gone-With-the-Wind memorable. You gave it your best shot, Mr. Parker, but you lost. You’ll have to chalk that up to experience.”

“I didn’t lose.” As if bored, Trent sank into his chair and stared at his computer screen. He gave her a dismissive wave of his hand.

Charisse choked on her laugh. “You lost. I’m producing Sunset in Maui, the option you lost.”

He looked at her through the ridge of his eyebrows. “I didn’t bid on the project because I wanted to produce it. I bid on it so it wouldn’t be produced. That book isn’t film worthy material.”

“It’s been number one on the best seller list for a year.”

“There’s no accounting for some people’s taste.”

“I know what you’re doing. You’re using psychobabble to make me think I made a mistake. I didn’t. Everyone is going to love this movie. I’m going to be nominated for an Academy Award. I’ll save you a seat at the ceremony.”

“You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?” He pushed the words through his laugh.

“I’ve been in this industry long enough to know when something has potential.”

“You’ve been this industry six years. You have a lot to learn.”

“I’m open to that.”

Trent lifted his brows and tilted his head. His gaze dropped to his computer. As if bored with the conversation, he typed something into his computer. A pyramid shaped frown pressed between his brows. He typed again. His mouth tightened and his fingers curled into a fist.

“What happened?” Charisse stretched her neck as if that would help her see over the top of his monitor.

“I’m locked out.”

“Do you mind if I take a look?”

“You?” He leaned back in his chair and shot her a you’re-a-girl look.

“I have a little experience with computers.”

He stood and waved his hand at the chair. “Have at it.”

She rounded the desk and dropped into his still warm chair. She gave a sharp intake of air. Sitting in the chair felt as if she were sitting in his lap. A heart-pounding image wavered in her mind. She shook her head and scooped her hands over the keyboard. She’d offered to help. Melting in his chair that still carried his warmth wouldn’t portend a professional presentation.

She opened the network drive and scanned the code. “This site’s been hacked.”

“Are you sure?” Doubt laced through his question.

“See for yourself.” She tilted the screen toward him.

He waved it away. “I don’t read code. Who hacked it?”

“Not an individual. The internet protocol address is directed at Redbox Production. They’re located in -.”

“I know where they’re located. Can you get them out of my site?”

“I can but I’ll have to change the links.”

“Whatever it takes. Get them out and make sure I still have access.”

Charisse copied the code, saved it to a separate file, then created new links.

“You’re set.” She rose from the chair and moved around the desk. “Now, if anyone tries to hack your site again, you’ll notice immediately.”

“Where did you learn that?”

She moved to the front of his desk. “I’ve always liked playing on computers, and my brother’s a computer geek.”

“In other words, I can’t trust you.” His eyes were hard, as if he were seeing past her face and digging through her brain.

Chapter Three

“Trust me?” Trent’s accusation was like a sling of arrows flung into Charisse’s chest. “I’m trustworthy. You’re the one who’s trying to -.”

“We had an agreement. You’d star in my next film. Marilyn and I agreed we wouldn’t need an out clause.”

“Marilyn said that?” Charisse’s stomach spiraled like an out of control elevator.

Trent’s video chat icon on his computer screen chimed and flickered.

“We’re done here.” Trent glanced at her over the top of his laptop.

“Hardly done. You’re trying to prevent me from producing a film with the potential to change the industry.”

“I’ll compensate you for the film rights. You can accept or decline. If you do the latter, I’ll see you in court.”

The threat stabbed at her like a pin into a balloon. Energy drained out of her dragging her shoulders to her elbows. “Who are you, Trent Parker?”

He snorted. The corner of his left eye squinted. His eyebrows dipped into his nose as if asking what in God’s name was she talking about.

“I just saw a video of a man accepting an award for the work he’d done for underprivileged children,” Charisse said.

“Children are helpless. You’re not. You have wealth, and you have a pedigree, Princess Charisse.”

Her throat felt as if steely fingers wrapped around it and pressed. Hard. “I’m not a princess.”

“Save your explanation for your subjects.”

Her brain baked. She curled her fingers over the edge of the desk. It was that or she’d fly across the desk and wrap her fingers around his neck.

He touched his finger to the screen. “What is it, Bambi?” He spoke as if Charisse had obediently left the room.

“You received a delivery.”

The voice floating out of the computer speakers was husky and cultured and stirred not a little bit of jealousy in a dark place Charisse hadn’t known existed.

Trent receiving a package was his business. She should leave. She couldn’t go far, but sitting in the other room would give her some respite from this Hollywood powerhouse with an ego the size of Parker Studios backlot.

She froze. Trent had received a delivery. Her mouth went dry.

She had asked Flo to send Trent the as-big-as-a-house picture of her receiving the AFMA award.

But Flo canceled that order.

Charisse walked, limped, to stand behind Trent. The computer screen framed a woman who was as beautiful as her voice, with piles of blond hair cascading over her shoulders, almond shaped eyes and enhanced lips. Not everyone who came to Hollywood became a movie star, but it was easy to spot those who had come with dreams of becoming a star but sadly settled into a position they hoped would open a door to stardom.

“Why did you call me about a package?” Trent’s tone edged past impatience. “Tell the mail room to take care of it.”

“Because you need to see this delivery.”

“Why? What is it? Were you expecting it?”

“I wasn’t. Maybe you were.”

“Let’s see it.”

The computer screen served away from Bambi and framed an open doorway. Two men wearing T-shirts, shorts and sunglasses carried a large flat board wrapped in red paper. A Goliath sized bow flopped over the top. The men leaned the package against a built in bookcase and left.

Something hot and hard rose in Charisse’s throat.

Trent was on his feet. “Who’s it from?”

Bambi’s fingers slipped into view and pulled a taped card from the wrapping paper.

“That package is from me,” Charisse said at the same time Bambi flipped open the card.

“Charisse Whitloch.” Bambi read the card. The computer screen framed the swirling cursive lettering that covered the card.

Trent looked over his shoulder at Charisse. His brows hooked above his nose. “Let’s see what the princess deigned to send me.”

He drew out the word princess as if it had been smeared with grease.

Charisse felt as if a bolt was lodged in the middle of her chest and Trent was tightening it harder, harder, harder.

The computer screen focused on Bambi’s manicured nails ripping away the wrapping paper.

“I’ll tell you what I sent.” Charisse’s voice was a little loud, a little sharp, a little fast. “I sent a picture of myself.”

A blast of air exited from Trent’s nostrils. The corner of his mouth curled. His eyes half closed. “A peace offering. I receive them all the time.”

“Not a peace offering. I sent this picture to educate you.”

Trent’s eyes widened a fraction before settling into his usual arrogant squint.

Charisse knew she had the upper hand. He didn’t utter a snide remark. He didn’t utter any of his Trentisms.”

“I didn’t send just any picture, Trent Parker. This picture was taken the night I won the AFMA award for best indie short film.”

“AFMA is second place.”

“A lot of people would disagree with you.”

Trent swallowed. He couldn’t argue with her. He didn’t believe the Academy Awards acknowledged the best talent in the film industry.

He turned to the computer screen. His eyes narrowed. Tatters of wrapping paper hung over the edges of the picture. In the center of the photo stood Charisse Whitloch, her perfectly shaped mouth formed into a smile filled with magnificently white teeth.

And joy.

Her bright blue eyes stared directly out of the picture and directly into Trent’s. It was a stare that almost made him stop breathing. In hands that had the grace of a finishing school graduate, she held the coveted award from the AFMA ceremony.

Trent closed his eyes. As beautiful as the woman in the photo was, the picture didn’t capture the beauty of the woman standing behind him.

No clear thought filled his head. Sensation coursed through his body.

Though her beauty was like staring into a blinding light, there was another quality about her. Innocence? Genuineness? It was a quality he’d been seeking in actresses since he first started in the film industry, but no one had it. In Hollywood, there were plenty of beautiful women, and plenty of fakes.

Phil stood in the doorway separating the jet’s two sitting rooms. “Mr. Parker, we’ll be landing in thirty minutes.”

“Thanks, Phil.” Trent shut down his computer. When Phil closed the door, he swiveled in his chair and faced Charisse. “Better buckle up, Princess. You’re in for a rough ride.”

Charisse’s teeth ground in the back for her mouth. She wouldn’t let Trent set her off course. That was how he won arguments. His wit was quick even in this town of quick-witted people.

“We’ll see whose ride is rough,” she said. “Now that you’ve seen proof others acknowledge my producing ability, you admit my next film project will succeed.”

“We’ll see. I want the option for Sunset in Maui.”

“I won’t break that contract.”

“Yet, you’ll break our agreement to star in my film.”

The jet bucked. Charisse’s feet lifted off the floor. She pulled her elbows to her side ready to tuck and roll as soon as she hit the ground. The jet leaped like deer jumping over the Crystal Creek boundary fence. Her stomach flipped. Charisse squeezed her eyes shut and covered her head. She braced herself for the slam against the ceiling.

Iron clamped around her waist and jerked her into a solid wall that smelled fresh and spicy and so Trent. His nearness felt strangely soothing and comforting.

She stiffened. This feeling was a ruse. She wouldn’t let this man bent on destroying her career as a producer fool her into thinking he cared.

He cared for nothing. He especially didn’t care about her. He made that clear in every word that fell out of his mouth, in the way he looked at her, his narrowed eyes, his sneering tone, in the way he touched her.

Her cheek grazed something gritty and dense. Trent’s jaw. She gasped, pulled away, pressed a palm to her cheek. Her skin felt raw and bruised as if it had been rubbed with sandpaper. Strong fingers pushed through her hair and anchored her head to the solid wall that encased a pounding heart.

Trent’s heart.

She pulled away.

“Stay.” Trent’s voice growled in her ear.

“But I-.” Again, she tried to pull away.

Again, Trent’s strength anchored her against his chest.

The jet settled into a smooth ride. She heard Trent’s heart slow to a steady, powerful beat. His breathing eased. His grip around her head loosened.

The door swung open.

“Sir, I want to apologize for the -.” Phil’s voice sounded from the doorway. “I beg your pardon, sir.”

Charisse looked up. The color creeping from Phil’s collar washed over his face.

She pushed against Trent and sought a wobbly stance away from him.

The jet lurched knocking her forward. Toward Trent. She grabbed the desk corner. The heat in her cheeks had to match the color reddening Phil’s face. Trent’s deep laugh confirmed what she feared. She was blushing.

“You don’t have to apologize, Phil.” Charisse looked to the doorway.

It was empty. Phil was gone.

A deep guttural laugh erupted from Trent’s lips.

“This isn’t funny.” Charisse clenched her fists. “You know he thought something was going on between us, which is totally false. Everyone knows I’m in a relationship. You probably are, too.”

Trent’s smile dimmed a couple of watts. The message was clear. He was not in a relationship. Why would her commenting on his involvement in a personal relationship change his demeanor?

Everyone in Hollywood was involved with at least one person.

Charisse had never heard of Trent’s involvement with anyone.

She hadn’t even known about his involvement with the children’s foundation. Most celebrities touted their charity involvements. The public loved a celebrity with a heart.

Apparently, Trent wanted to keep his involvement with the children’s foundation and anyone else a secret. From the dark eyes that glittered through narrowed slits, he seemed to want her to keep his secret.

Charisse clenched her teeth so hard she could hear them squeak. She had to make sure she didn’t look afraid. She was not afraid of Trent Parker.

Maybe a little bit.

She’d make sure he didn’t know.

Trent intimidated other members of the movie industry. Yet he had a heart for children. For abused and neglected children.

Who was the real Trent Parker?

Charisse moved toward the doorway

“I’ll see you after we land.” Trent’s hard look told her she had to agree.

“I don’t think so.” She stepped through the doorway. “There’s nothing more to discuss.”

He followed her. “You plan to break our agreement. There’s plenty to discuss.”

“Marilyn will be in touch.”

“I’m not waiting for Marilyn. I’m talking to you. Remember to buckle up.” Trent closed the door.

Charisse curled her fingers into her palms. Trent had drawn the battle lines. She was ready to face him on any front, whether it was refusing to star in his next film or discussing the film option for the most sought after novel in the industry. She’d never give up her option for Sunset in Maui, but she’d definitely use it as a bargaining to break Marilyn’s agreement.

She slid into the padded chair, powered down her tablet and waited for the wheels to touch the runway.

The plane descended to a lower altitude. Her stomach dropped with the descent. She tightened her seatbelt and squeezed her eyes shut.

Trent dropped into the desk chair and pressed the video chat icon on his desktop. The blurred view sharpened on the giant photo of Charisse Whitloch. Her delicate hands caressed the AFMA award. Charisse with her beautiful face, genuine smile and her eagerness to give the world the quality film it deserved.

“I knew you’d want a second look.” Bambi’s voice bordered on laughter.

“I’m looking for you, not that monstrosity you call a photo.”

“It’s a photo, and it’s a photo of the only actress who’ll make your next film a smash hit.”

“She’s going to break the agreement.”

“You’re contracts are iron clad. She can’t do that.” Bambi’s face filled the screen.

“She never signed the contract.”

“But she’s the one who campaigned for the part.”

“She changed her mind. For now. Get that picture out of my office.” Even as he made the demand, his focus was on the photo or what he could see of it. Bambi blocked his view.

“Give me a few minutes,” Bambi said. “I need to get the guys to take it out. Where do you want me to put it? Or do you me to send it back?”

“Send it back.” He pulled a stack of scripts off his desk and shoved them into his briefcase.

“You got it.” Bambi’s spikey heels clicked across the room to the door.

“Don’t send it back.” Trent shouted after her.

“You want to keep it?”

“No, but it’s here. It will stay here until I don’t want it here anymore.”

“Okay, it’s staying here.” She walked out of his office and closed the door.

Trent leaned back in his chair. He’d leave it in his office until he returned and could see the giant monstrosity face to face.

\* \* \*

The plane taxied to the private terminal on the far side of the airport. It passed a line of airplanes waiting at gates. Lightning ripped across the sky. Rain bounced off the tarmac.

Phil opened the door to the passenger compartment. “Are you ready to disembark, Ms. Whitloch?”

“Yes.” She slid her tablet into her briefcase. “Thank you for the pleasant flight.” Pleasant except for time she’d spent with Trent. “I’d like to tell Mr. Parker that I appreciated the lift.”

“Mr. Parker has already disembarked.”

“How can that be? We just arrived at the gate.”

“He’s no longer on the jet, ma’am. Your luggage will be delivered to you in the terminal.” Phil offered her a polite smile and held the door open for her.

She walked into the terminal. She recognized a few of the travelers, well-known actors and pop singers surrounded by their entourage.

Except for Flo and Marilyn, Charisse had no entourage. She’d driven herself to the airport in her hybrid car, which now sat in an uncovered outlying parking lot.

She made her way through the milling crowd to the concierge’s desk. She needed a driver to shuttle her to the parking lot.

A man wearing a midway cap signaled to her. “Miss Whitloch? I have your luggage in the cart on the next aisle. If you’ll come with me.”

“Thank you. Could you please take me to parking shuttle?” She climbed into the cart.

The skycap navigated the pedestrian traffic to a hallway where only an occasional cart passed them. He drove through sliding doors and stopped on the sidewalk next to a drive lane. Limousines and other luxury cars waited at the curb.

“Maybe I didn’t make myself clear,” Charisse said.

Charisse’s gaze followed the stream of cars idling curbside. Elegantly dressed men and women were escorted to the vehicles.

“I need to catch a shuttle bus.”

“I was just following orders.” The skycap climbed out of the cart. From the rear, he pulled Charisse’s suitcases and set them next to a limousine that was short and plain compared to the others.

“Not my orders.” She climbed off the cart.

“Mine.” The limousine’s back door swung open. Trent sat in the backseat, his collar open, his shirtsleeves rolled up revealing muscular arms. The name Jimmy was tattooed on the underside of his forearm.

The tattoo gave Charisse a start. This man sitting before her looked born and bred Ivy League. The trimmed ends of his hair couldn’t have been cut by any hair stylist who charged less than four figures. His face may have been clean shaven this morning, but now an artful growth covered the square jaw that Hollywood stars paid hefty sums for plastic surgeons to sculp. Or had airbrushed onto their photos. Trent’s stubble was heavy enough to give him that annoyed look that said he knew he would have to shave again by two o’clock in the afternoon.

A chauffeur climbed out of the driver’s seat and held the door for her.

“I told this gentleman - . Charisse waved her hand at the cart.

The cart was gone. She looked through the flow of departing passengers to see the cart edge through the sliding doors and disappear into the terminal.

“Get in.” Trent lifted his chin. “I’ll take you home.”

“I left my car in outlying parking. I had asked the skycap to take me to the shuttle.”

“I’ll take you to the parking lot.” Trent’s face was angles and planes in the shadows of the limousine.

“So we can continue our conversation from earlier? No, thanks. I’ll walk.”

Thunder crackled overhead. Charisse jerked her head up. Past the overhang, rain splashed against the asphalt.

“It’s a little wet out there.”

“I’m not afraid of rain.”

“But you’re afraid of me.”

Charisse stiffened. He did intimidate her. And not a little.

A tumble of curls fell in front of her eyes. With a jerk of her head, she flicked it to the side. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Gripping the handles of each suitcase, she hoisted the strap of her briefcase high on her shoulder and dragged the suitcases behind her. Thunder cracked again.

Trent’s low guttural laugh mixed in with the rumble.

Chapter Four

Charisse stood beneath the overhang and stared at the sheets of rain racing over the pavement. With each passing second, the rain poured harder, hit the pavement then bounced into the air. She had a Noah like feeling and wondered if she should contact an ark builder.

Nonsense. California was known for its rainstorms. Even in California, rain didn’t last forever. Today, it seemed it would never stop.

Charisse’s boots crunched along the gravel road leading to the flyover. Holding the umbrella and dragging her luggage along the bumpy road had required more finesse than she had hands. Something had to give. It wouldn’t be her suitcases or computer so it had to be her umbrella. She tucked it inside her suitcase.

Wind whipped against her face. Rain drenched her hair and streamed along her scalp before dripping down the jacket collar. A fantasy of soaking in a hot tub filled with bubbles played in her mind. She may be miserable now, but it wouldn’t be forever.

She pulled her phone out of her purse and dialed Dino’s number. His phone rang into voicemail. She wondered about the director who wouldn’t even let the talent take a break so he could return phone calls. With a harsh exhale, she dropped her phone into the side pocket of her purse that held a puddle of water. Dino would call her when he had a chance. She was certain of that.

Her certainty felt as if it had fallen into a dry well and bounced off the stone walls until it hit bottom with a plouffe.

Dino would call her.

While she waited for Dino’s call, she placed another. To Flo. Her efficient assistant who had somehow missed canceling the enlarged photo of Charisse accepting the AFMA award.

Flo picked up the call on the first ring. “Hi, Charisse.”

“Hi, Flo. I’m on my way home.”

“Where are you? I can barely hear you. It sounds like you’re walking in traffic.”

“That’s because I am.”

A crack of thunder split the sky.

“Are you walking in the rain?”

“Yes.” Charisse released a heavy sigh. “I’m doing that, too.’

“Why are you walking in the rain? Can’t you catch a taxi?”

“I would if one would drive by.”

A car passed and leaned on its horn. Charisse jumped and stepped off the shoulder. Her ankle twisted. The handle of her suitcase flipped behind her and slammed into the middle of her back. Her laptop slid off her shoulder and crashed to the ground. She threw her arms wide to catch her balance. Too late. She stumbled down the embankment. She hit bottom landing on all fours - in six inches of water.

Still holding the phone, she pulled her hand out of the water. “Flo?”

“Charisse, are you okay?” Flo’s voice crackled out of the phone.

“I’m fine.” She pushed herself to her knees.

In the middle of the ravine sat one suitcase. Tiny air bubbles floated from the zipper enclosure. She stuttered a breath. Everything in her suitcase would be ruined. But she couldn’t leave it in the ravine. She waded into the water and grabbed the luggage handle, then dragged her suitcase up the incline to the road. Her jeans and jacket were soaked. Gravel and mud caked the knees of her jeans. Grime coated her fingernails.

“Flo.” She sat on the suitcase. Her breath came in short gasps. Rain carved rivulets through her plastered hair. “Do you remember that picture I asked you to enlarge and send to Trent Parker?”

“Sure. You changed your mind. I canceled the order.”

“It wasn’t canceled.”

“What? You mean they sent that picture to Trent Parker? Oh, Charisse, I’m so sorry. But it had to have been canceled. I have the cancelation email right here. I’ll call the studio. We won’t pay for it.”

“That’s not the point, Flo. Trent Parker received the picture. My career is at stake.”

“I’ll call him. I’ll tell him it was all a huge mistake. I’ll tell him the photography studio made the mistake. Are you doing okay? Do you want me to come get you? You sound miserable.”

“I haven’t arrived at miserable, but I’m close. I’ve almost reached the shuttle pick up. If I’d known it was this far and the walk this treacherous, I would’ve waited until the rain stopped or called a cab or a transport driver or never mind. Flo, don’t call Trent Parker. I’ve already talked to him. We’re having a discussion about the contract I didn’t sign for his next film.”

“I have to do something. I feel responsible.”

“No, Flo, you don’t. I’m on my way home. I’ll have a nice dinner, and then I’ll call Marilyn. We’ll figure something out.”

From behind her, Charisse heard tires crunch along the gravel then slow to a barely moving pace. She looked over her shoulder, then rose and faced the dark windshield of a limousine. Trent’s limousine. “Flo, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Is your ride there?”

“It’s a ride, and it isn’t mine. I’ll call you tomorrow.” She dropped her hand to her side.

Rain pounded the earth turning it into a mixture of mud and gravel. Water streamed down her face, penetrated her clothes. Her drenched clothes stuck to her legs, her arms, the back of her neck.

The back door to the limousine opened on one side. The driver holding an umbrella climbed out on the other side.

Trent Parker unfolded himself from the backseat. “You can get back in, Pete,” he said without looking at the driver. His gaze locked onto Charisse.

The chauffeur nodded and dipped back into the driver’s side.

Trent’s shoulders tugged at the seams of his custom tailored shirt. He was beautifully made. The square jaw. The full lower lip. His leading man good looks made Charisse’s stomach quiver like Rose’s homemade jelly and made her wish she were far away from him – like at the ranch.

The rain planted wet circles on his cheeks. His hair clumped into curls.

Charisse tried to pull her gaze away from his. Her eyes refused to stray instead drinking in the smooth features that looked as cold and hard as marble, the dark eyes, the sensuous mouth set in a firm line. Her lungs locked, refusing to draw into her deflating lungs.

Dark shadows rested below his eyes. He looked tired and something else.

He looked concerned.

About the option she refused to cancel? The contract she refused to sign?

“Look, Trent, if this is about the option - .”

“Enjoying your walk in the rain?”

“Does it look like I am?”

His mouth curved. “I don’t know you that well. Get in. We’ll drive you to the parking lot.”

“I’m almost to the shuttle pick up.” A shiver ran down her spine. She was cold and tired of walking in the rain, but that was preferable to sitting in the backseat with a man whose face was a mask of his ill humor.

“Maybe we got off on the wrong foot,” he said.

Now she really couldn’t breathe. Was he apologizing to her? “It’s my fault -.”

“If we’re going to stand in the rain and discuss our previous encounter, we’re both going to get soaked.”

She didn’t want to be within a mile of this man, but she was tired of standing in the rain.

The tickle in her nose was like a too full balloon. She sneezed. Hard. Brain-popping hard.

He strode toward her, pried the suitcase handles out of her hands and picked up her laptop. “Get in the car.”

His voice was low with a tone she couldn’t comprehend. Not an order and not warm and fuzzy. Somewhere between those choices.

The trunk lid opened with a graceful lift. Trent set her suitcases and laptop inside. The lid lowered. The flicker in his eyes was clear. Her suitcases were going with him.

Her shoulders rounded with the weight of her desire to be miles away from him and the rain. She made steady steps toward Trent. A swallow stuck in her throat. She was about to give up the luxury of freezing in the rain to sit in a car with perpetually-in-a-bad-mood Trent Parker.

Trent stood to the side. With his hand, he gestured she should climb into the car.

She slid across the leather seat leaving a wet streak. She propped one shoulder against the opposite door.

“You need to go home.” Trent slid in beside her and draped one arm over the back of the seat.

“Except I need my car.”

“I’ll have my assistant arrange for a driver to deliver it to your house.”

“I want to drive it home myself. It’s less complicated.”

Another predicament popped into her head. Spending time with Trent Parker. She and Dino weren’t engaged, but they’d talked so much about the wedding it almost seemed as if they were engaged.

Despite the scuttlebutt that raged through Hollywood about who slept with whom, none of it had been about Trent Parker and his romantic liaisons. She wondered if he liked women. Being this close to him now she was pretty sure he did.

She sneezed again. Then three more times.

“You’re sick.” He pulled a handkerchief embroidered with a white T from his pocket.

She took the handkerchief. “Thank you,” she murmured. “A sneeze doesn’t mean I’m sick.” Even as she said the words, she felt the heat rise in her head. She closed her eyes and tried to will away any symptom that foretold a cold. Or worse.

“Chicken soup.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. She jerked her gaze to him.

“Best cure for a cold.”

“I’ll fix some when I get home,” she said.

“Which garage is your car parked in?” he asked.

“It’s the outlying lot off the four-oh-five.”

Trent pressed a button on the door handle. “Did you hear that, Pete?” He spoke into a speaker.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Parker. I’m on my way.” Through the smoked glass, Charisse saw the chauffeur’s eyes flick to the rearview mirror then the side view mirror.

The limousine glided into the traffic then floated over the rain soaked road. Water splashed against the windows and echoed inside the wheel wells.

“Why are you doing this?” Charisse gave him a bold, face-on stare. The exhaustion pouring through her drained her strength to lift her chin.

“After what you’ve been through today, you need to be home. I don’t want you sneezing all over me and my staff when we start filming.”

“Except I won’t be signing the contract.” That shoveled out feeling dug inside of her stomach. Acting had been her life, but now she’d found something she liked more. Producing. Following her desire was the right decision.

Wasn’t it?

The limousine turned. Charisse slid to the middle of the seat. She dug her fingers into the upholstery to keep from knocking into Trent.

He tipped his chin. His eyes were dark slits in his face.

Now he was going to think she was making a pass at him. She had a boyfriend. Even if she didn’t, she knew better than to make a pass at a colleague.

Trent didn’t know her at all. He would rank her with every other starlet hoping for the break that would catapult her to stardom.

Some producers would’ve welcomed an actress making a pass at them. From the muscle flexing in Trent’s jaw, she knew he wasn’t one of them.

“Sorry,” she muttered. She pushed herself back into the corner.

The limousine pulled into the parking lot.

“Ms. Whitloch, do remember where you parked the car?” Pete’s voice sounded over the speaker.

“In aisle double A, space thirty-two.”

The limousine glided down the lane then stopped in front of a hybrid hatchback.

“Thank you for the ride.” She opened the door.

“Close the door.” Trent’s voice was sharp with the edge that said he was used to getting results.

Her back muscles cinched. She slammed the door shut. “Why?”

She berated herself for complying to his command. He may run other people’s lives, but he didn’t run hers.

“I’ll start your car, let it warm up, and load your luggage into the trunk.” He held out his hand. “Give me your keys.”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s pouring rain -.” She sneezed.

He shook his head and tapped his hand against the air. Between sneezes, she handed him the keys. He climbed out of the car.

So much for standing her ground. If she’d felt better, she’d have insisted on starting her car herself and loading her own luggage into her trunk. She wouldn’t have accepted a ride with Trent in the first place. She dabbed her nose with his handkerchief. She couldn’t be sick. When the plane had landed, she’d felt fine.

She clutched Trent’s handkerchief inside her fist. Even after washing it, she couldn’t return it to him. She’d buy him a new one. A dozen new ones. She’d have to find out from Bambi where he bought these. Or had them made. They were much nicer than any she’d seen in a department store.

Only a moment had passed when he opened the car door and leaned through the opening. “Did you fall asleep?”

Charisse’s head was packed with the cottony feeling of deep slumber. She elbowed her way to an erect position. “I guess so. I didn’t realize I was so tired.”

“Come on.” With a flick of his wrist, he beckoned her to climb out of the limousine.

His hair was a wild mass of curls, not the sleek business type style of when she first met him on the jet. His jacket clung to his shoulders then gapped around his waist.

“Thank you for the ride and for loading my luggage into my car and -.”

“I know. You’re grateful.”

“I am. It’s pouring out there.” Lightening split the sky. Thunder burst around them. Drenching rain limited vision to five feet.

Trent whipped off his jacket and held it out for her.

“I have a jacket.” She touched the collar of her coat.

“Which is soaked.”

She stepped out of the car. Trent angled the jacket over her head. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her to his side. He was warm and strong and she shrank away. It would be too each to get used to his warmth, not so much his aloofness. They raced the short distance from the limo to the passenger door of her car. She could barely keep his pace. Her boots splashed through ankle deep puddles.

He jerked open the car door. “Get in.”

She heard the click of the remote lock and grabbed the door handle. The passenger side handle. She needed to be on the driver’s side. She turned from the door.

And sneezed.

“You’re getting in on this side.” His hand pressed against her shoulder. His voice was flat. The I’m-not-in-the-mood-to-argue tone sliced through the pounding rain. “I’ll drive you home.”

“No, you won’t. I’m driving myself home. I appreciate what you’ve done for me -.” She shot out ten sneezes. She swung her head. She couldn’t drive when she sneezed every five seconds. She climbed into the passenger side and slid down into her seat. She sneezed. She dropped her head against the headrest.

Trent slammed the door shut. A moment later, he climbed behind the steering wheel and backed out of the parking space.

“Is the limo going to follow us?” she asked.

“No.” He guided the car out of the parking lot and onto the freeway.

“What about Pete?”

“I gave him the rest of the day off.”

They were headed toward Malibu when she realized she hadn’t told him where she lived.

“You are taking me home, right?”

“Yep.” He merged onto an exit ramp.”

“I didn’t tell you where I lived.”

“I know where you live.”

Charisse’s mouth dried. Her stomach dropped and pushed against her unpleasantly full bladder.

“And, no, I’m not stalking you. I rented the house next door to you.”

“The Fickleroys’ house?

“Is that who owns it? I wouldn’t know. Bambi made the arrangements. I wanted to know who my neighbors were before I rented it.”

“I didn’t realize the Fickleroys had moved. They never mentioned anything to me.”

“It was a last minute decision.”

“Or maybe a decision made by someone with a lot of money who’s used to getting what he wants when he wants?”

Trent’s laugh was low and deep and stirred an emotion in her she’d never felt before. “You’re way off base.”

“Not by much, I’m sure.” Charisse stared out the window at the rugged cliffs dipping into white capped waves. “I’m assuming I passed the good neighbor test.”

“You did. No wild parties. No drugs.” The abrupt ending of his sentence seemed to cut off what he was about to say next. Instead, he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and glanced at the seascape sliding past the window.

“You didn’t finish,” Charisse said.

“Yeah, I did.”

“You were going to include no sleepovers.”

“My staff doesn’t dig that deep.” His glance was a narrow eyed challenge for her to dispute his claim.

She would gladly accept that challenge, but he was right. Her relationship with Dino hadn’t gone that far. She wasn’t ready. Thankfully, he hadn’t pushed her.

Right now, all she could think of was crawling into bed, alone, and sleeping. What had come over her? She hadn’t felt this tired since pulling college all-nighters during final’s week.

Her eyes grew heavy. Sleep packed inside her skull. The gentle turns of the car rocked her to a peaceful slumber.

Something warm with barely contained strength touched her shoulder.

“Hey, you’re home.” Trent’s voice was a honeyed baritone that dripped over her.

She opened one eye expecting to see undulating waves lapping the shore.

Instead, she stared at a wall lined with metal cabinets. Her spine went ramrod straight. She grabbed the dashboard.

“We’re in my garage.” She tilted her chin at him. “How did you-.”

He tapped the garage door opener in the dash console. “Lead the way. I’ll get your luggage.”

“I can manage.”

“So can I.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re being awfully nice. I thought you didn’t like me.”

“It has nothing to do with liking or disliking you.”

“You don’t want me to produce Sunset in Maui.”

“I don’t.” His frown edged deep into his forehead. “What does that have to do with you as a person?”

“I would say it doesn’t -.”

“Good. We agree. Now tell me where you want me to leave your luggage.”

She expected him to mention she had refused to star in his film. He said nothing. Instead, he turned away.

He may not be discussing it, but he was thinking about it. He wanted the option to Sunset in Maui. It had to be front and center in his mind.

The door at the top of the stairs leading into the house opened. Lupe, Charisse’s housekeeper, appeared in the doorway. She wore a flowered blouse and yoga pants. “You are back. You brought back a souvenir?”

“Not a souvenir, Lupe. He’s just a. . .this is Trent Parker. He drove me home.”

Trent smiled at the small woman. He pulled Charisse’s luggage out of the trunk.

Charisse finished introductions. A loud bark exploded from inside the door.

“Hey, Gatsby.” Charisse leaned over the balustrade and looked up the stairs.

“I thought you lived alone.” Trent cocked one eyebrow. It paralleled the twist at the corner of his mouth.

“Looks like your investigator missed something.” Charisse mirrored his cocked eyebrow.

Chapter Five

Charisse lifted her chin and stared down her nose at him. How, he wasn’t sure. She was at least a foot shorter than he was.

“My investigator did miss something important.” Trent snatched a tennis ball from the top of a cabinet and dropped to a squat. “Gatsby, come here.”

“Wait.” Panic shot up Charisse’s spine. “You can’t call him.”

“Why not?”

“He doesn’t like men.”

A shaggy blond head with golden eyes nosed past Lupe. He pushed the housekeeper against the garage stair balustrade. Lupe gasped and latched onto the handrail. A string of Spanish filled the air. Charisse squeezed her back against the banister. The dog stopped a moment and glanced up at Charisse as if anxious to say hello, then barreled past her. He had his priorities.

The dog released another head splitting bark. He sunk his great jaw into the ball in Trent’s hand. He growled and tugged. He lifted his gaze to Trent’s. Instead of the dark look wanting to draw blood, the dog’s face radiated joy.

Trent released the ball, and Gatsby bounded up the stairs and through the house. Trent’s face broke into a broad you-were-saying grin.

“Sometimes he doesn’t like men.”

“For sure he hates Dino,” Lupe said.

“Dino?” Trent looked put off.

“Dino Vasilios.” Lupe’s eyes widened as if she couldn’t believe Trent didn’t know who Dino was. There was only one Dino.

Charisse felt the color creep into her face. Apparently, Trent’s investigator missed the part about Dino, too.

“You know Dino,” Charisse said.

“Yeah, I know him. Why did you name your dog Gatsby?” Trent asked.

“I’m an F. Scott Fitzgerald fan. Jay Gatsby is my favorite character.” The explanation popped out before she had a chance to decide if she even wanted to answer him. What was it with this guy - he asked questions - she answered? “If you want to know what breed Gatsby is, you’re guess is as good as mine.”

Charisse sneezed. The momentum pushed her down the backward one step. She grabbed the banister.

A powerful hand spanned the back of her waist. “Steady there. You okay?”

Heat so intense surged through her. Her lungs locked. Air didn’t push out of her lungs, nor did it seep in. If she hadn’t been burning up, she would’ve thought she had frozen. She stepped to the next riser. Trent’s hand dropped away and coolness rushed to where warmth had lingered.

“Fine.” Charisse’s voice was strained and raspy. It gave her a start as if someone else’s voice flowed out of her mouth.

“Salúd.” Lupe rushed down the steps. “It’s good to have you home.”

“Thank you, Lupe.” Except Malibu wasn’t home. Crystal Creek felt like home. “I hope you had a wonderful holiday.”

Lupe fluttered her hands. “Wonderful, yes. I have family. What else do I need?”

Charisse felt a darkness settle over Trent. Her glance at him was long enough to confirm what she felt – home and family – that was what she wanted.

Charisse dipped her chin at him. “Is something wrong?”

He jerked his gaze at her, a hard jerk that made her lean away. “No. Why?”

Charisse shook her head. She’d worked with enough high-powered men to know when something was wrong. Few hid their feelings. When someone denied something was wrong was a good time to drop the conversation.

“Please, Princesa, let me take your luggage.” Lupe lifted Charisse’s laptop from her fingers.

“Princesa?” Trent’s low voice was like a stroke down her cheek.

She felt the soothing touch in a place she hadn’t known existed. She rolled her shoulders to release the tension building in her chest. “Until today, she was the only one who called me that.” She looked away. She didn’t need to hear any of his comments about her heritage. “Lupe, I can carry my briefcase.”

“You are tired. I see it in your eyes.” Lupe dragged the case that was almost as big as she was and probably weighed as much.

Charisse released the handle. She was tired. She lacked the stamina to argue with the stubborn woman.

Lupe shouldered open the door into the mudroom and held it open for Charisse and Trent.

“Where do you want these?” Trent lifted her suitcases, one stained with the watermark from the ravine at the airport.

Charisse opened her mouth but Lupe jumped in.

“Set it next to the bench.” She indicated a white bench covered with colorful pillows. “I will sort through her luggage once I put her to bed.”

“Bed? Lupe, I just got home. I have plenty to do. Bed won’t be on the list for quite some time.”

“Senorita, I heard your sneeze. Everyone in the neighborhood heard your sneeze.”

“It wasn’t that loud,” Charisse muttered.

“Louder.” The word burst out of Lupe’s tiny form. “You are not well. Rest, that’s what you need.”

“I agree.” Trent looked down at her. The hardness in his face dared her to disagree.

“I’m fine.” She met his challenge with an equally hard stare. “There’s something in the air. Allergies. I’m not sick. I don’t have time to be sick.”

His laugh was easy and held amusement, not like his expression when he heard Dino’s name. His laugh captured Lupe’s attention. She gave him a curious look as if she knew something about him.

“I’ll bring that chicken soup by later,” Trent said. “That’s the best cure for a cold.”

“I’m sure we have plenty, isn’t that right, Lupe?”

“No, that’s wrong. We have no chicken soup.” She waved her hands past her ears. “If you want her to have chicken soup, Mr. Trent, then you are going to have to bring it yourself.”

The corner of his mouth twisted and he snorted as if he found Lupe entertaining. More than that. Charming.

A slight tremor jolted the house.

Lupe’s eyes widened. She pressed her back against a wall.

Trent’s mouth tightened.

The vibration traveled across the floorboards and up Charisse’s spine.

A little fear pulsed in her chest and a lot of annoyance expanded in her head. “Not again. Was there an earthquake while I was gone?”

“No.” The word shot out of Trent’s mouth.

“I take it you’re not from here,” Charisse said.

“Nope.” He stared out the mudroom window that framed the hill rising from the back of Charisse’s house. “It wouldn’t matter if I were. Earthquakes are hardly an acquired taste. I’ll bring that chicken soup over later.” He moved through the back door, down the stairs and out the garage – gone before she could protest.

Charisse watched him until he followed the stairs to the beach and out of sight.

She should’ve been relieved he’d left. She never wanted to be near him, let alone have him drive her home, let alone have him inside her house. He’d insulted her ability to produce a film.

And he didn’t want her to produce Sunset in Maui.

Her film project.

He said the novel should never have been written. She gave what she thought to be a soft snort until she saw Lupe’s gaze rivet to her. She opened her tote bag and rummaged through layers of billfold, keys, lip gloss, receipts, looking for what she didn’t know, but she had to make it look good. She pulled out her sunglass case and set it on the kitchen counter.

How did Trent being in her home make her feel flustered and ruffled?

He was gone. She wouldn’t think about him. Goodbye and good riddance, Trent Parker.

Lupe leaned through the doorway to watch him leave. “He’s walking? Where is he going?”

“Next door. He rented the Fickleroys’ house.” She narrowed her eyes at Lupe. “Did you know they were moving?”

Lupe lifted her shoulders. “No, not until that day. They were not home, but Greta.” She trilled the name of the Fickleroys’ housekeeper over her tongue. “I saw her. She was directing the movers.”

“Did she say anything?”

“She said plenty.” Lupe nodded hard. “Some man came and told the Fickleroys they should move and, poof, they were gone.”

“I guess with the right amount of money, you can make anything happen.”

“How much money?” Lupe narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t know. I don’t care. Trent Parker is rich, rich, rich. Knowing Trent, he probably paid a lot. Why would he want to live here? There are much nicer homes down the beach. Forget that.” She held up her hands to block any comment Lupe would offer. “I don’t want to know why he wants to live in the Fickleroys’ house.”

“Are you sure? I can tell you things.” Lupe wiggled her eyebrows.

“Already?” She leaned forward then pulled back. “No, don’t tell me. He doesn’t want me to produce Sunset in Maui. You know how hard I fought for that option. He’s making my life difficult.”

Lupe’s eyes widened as if demanding to know more.

“No, not that. It’s something else which doesn’t matter because there’s nothing more to discuss.”

“Why doesn’t Trent Parker want you to produce the film? That makes no sense.” Lupe struck a closed fist into her open palm. “You won the AFMA award.”

“That doesn’t impress someone like Trent Parker.” Charisse suddenly felt tired as if a drain had opened in her head and all her energy seeped into a duct opening in the pit of her stomach. “I’m going to sit in my office and review some of these scripts. The holidays were so hectic I didn’t have much time to read anything.”

Lupe flipped open palms at Charisse. “Look at you. I cleaned your office. You’re not sitting in your office in those clothes.”

Charisse glanced down at her rain soaked clothes. “You’re right. I’ll take a bath and then I’ll look through the scripts.”

“You want me to bring you a snack, a sandwich, a glass of wine with a plate of fruit and cheese?”

Charisse touched a hand to her stomach. “I’ll settle for a glass of mineral water. All I did was eat when I was at Crystal Creek. Mountain air and Rose’s cooking combines into a much too healthy appetite.”

“Mineral water. Phfaw. What kind of a meal is that especially when you are sick?”

Charisse pushed away from the counter. A wave of dizziness spun in her mind like a whirling plate teetering on a pole. She remained motionless until the dizziness passed. “Except that I’m not sick. I’m sticking to mineral water, Lupe. I’ll get it myself. You don’t need to stay. Take the rest of the day off. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Lupe skirted around Charisse. From the refrigerator, she lifted a bottle of mineral water. She lifted a glass from the under counter rack and filled it with the mineral water, then headed toward the stairs. “You just returned from a trip. I can’t leave you. There’s too much to do.”

She lifted the glass from Lupe’s hand. “There’s nothing more for you to do. The laundry can wait until tomorrow. Go home. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You are a bossy lady.” Lupe’smouth twisted and pushed into a frown that wrinkled her forehead.

“I have to be. It takes an army to stand up to you. Call it a day, Lupe. Everything can wait until morning. I’m not hungry. There’s nothing more for you to do here.”

Lupe opened her mouth to argue.

Charisse held up a finger. “Lupe.”

“There’s plenty for me to do, but have it your way. I’ll be here bright and early tomorrow morning, so be prepared.” Lupe held up her hands in surrender and walked out of the kitchen.

Charisse carried the mineral water to her bedroom. She stared out the glass wall. Below, spread the beach. Waves crashed over the sand.

The tide was moving out. Seagulls swooped along the shore and snatched up morsels left from the receding water. Through the glass, she heard the seagull calls and the waves lapping the shoreline, a sound that gave her peace.

Charisse stepped through the sliding glass doors to the balcony and balanced her elbows on the rail. The undulating waves were hypnotic, a rhythm she could listen to for hours.

As much as she liked the ocean, she missed Crystal Creek rushing through the mountains. There was true serenity at the ranch, walking through the meadows, riding the horses, listening to the waters of the creek trip over boulders and felled trees. She would be counting the days until she could return to the ranch.

She turned away. She’d watch the lapping waves another day. She needed a bath. She had scripts to read. She needed to talk to Dino.

Why wasn’t he answering his phone? Why hadn’t he returned her calls?

A twinge squirmed below her stomach. She wasn’t worried. He could take care of himself. But she was concerned.

She walked into the master bath.

Gatsby nosed the backs of her knees - his way of telling her he’d missed her, and he wanted to identify the strange odors her clothes carried. Absently, Charisse scratched his head.

She dumped the clothes down the laundry chute, filled the bath and sank into pillows of bubbles. She could fall asleep. Instead, she scrubbed the dirt out of her hair and beneath her fingernails. Half an hour later, she towel dried her hair and dressed in jeans and an oversized shirt.

Downstairs, she went to her office. She pressed speed dial for Dino’s number. The call rang into voicemail.

“Dino, what’s going on? I’ve been trying to call you for days, which you already know. Come on, Dino, take a break from the film, and call me back. I’m reading through scripts. I found another project for our production company.” She closed her eyes. Trent wanting to take Sunset in Maui from her rubbed her raw – like scraping her knee on a concrete sidewalk. She wouldn’t share that news with Dino now. That could wait until he returned home. “This script is an original screenplay and would be a great vehicle for you. Call me tonight. I don’t care how late. Love you.”

Love you. The words felt lifeless, less than lifeless.

She pressed her lips into a blood staunching line.

She loved Dino. But the words “love you” seemed to roll off her tongue with a have-a-nice-day mundanity. How long had she been saying those two words, not the full three words – I love you - to Dino?

What would it be like if she said those words – all three words –I love you - to Trent?

Her heart ballooned in her chest.

Say I-love-you to Trent? Where had that thought come from? She wove her fingers together. Those were words she’d never say to Trent. Nor would she want to. He was an egomaniac caught up in his own importance. A typical Hollywood mogul.

Charisse had no room in her head for thoughts of Trent. The man had made it clear - he wanted nothing to do with her, except to take from her the most exciting film project Hollywood had ever seen.

She reached down to give an absentminded scratch to Gatsby’s nose.

He wasn’t there.

Odd. The dog was always underfoot but now was doing a better disappearing act than Dino.

Gatsby had places where he liked to stretch out and take a nap. Maybe the tug of war with Trent wore him out. He’d reappear at dinnertime.

Charisse crawled into an overstuffed chair in the corner of her office and pulled a pile of scripts into her lap. She opened the cover of the top script and read, “Fade in.”

Ten sneezes exploded in her head so fast she barely had a chance to breathe. She exhaled roughly and snatched a handful of tissues from the box on her desk. She couldn’t be catching a cold. She had too much to do.

And she needed to buy replacement handkerchiefs for Trent. She sent a text to Flo to contact Trent’s assistant. She wanted Trent to have those replacement handkerchiefs when he returned to his office.

\* \* \*

The rain had stopped, leaving the sandy beach spongy and pocked from raindrops.

Trent stared out into the ocean. He didn’t see the ocean.

He saw Charisse.

An emotion too baffling to put into words twisted in his chest. He closed his fist and rubbed his sternum. He inhaled and let the fresh air cleanse his mind.

It didn’t work. He still saw Charisse.

She was beautiful. His breath rasped in his throat. He hadn’t realized how beautiful she was. Not just on the outside, but also on the inside.

Inner beauty in Hollywood was rare. No other city on earth was filled with so many beautiful women, outwardly beautiful women. The beauty stopped there.

Charisse’s beauty was no façade. He thought of her audition tape - the tears, the quiver in her voice. How could one so young feel these emotions let alone relay them on the screen?

She had succeeded.

She would make the film a success, if she agreed to star in it.

One thing he wouldn’t give up on – stopping the production of Sunset in Maui. She undercut him with the acquisition, but he’d convince her the project should be his. Once it was his, he’d bury it.

Chapter Six

Trent’s only regret was failing at burying the Sunset in Maui novel. He hand curled so tight it cut off the blood flow. Fabiana Waiola would have accepted a multi-figure contract and not cared whether her book was published. Had he known she was writing that book, he’d have paid her enough money to prevent its publication.

Trent crossed the beach to the house he’d rented during the holidays. He had to rent it. He had to get away from his friends’ crazy partying.

He hadn’t missed the parties.

He missed something deeper.

It struck him Christmas Eve when he stood on the balcony and stared into the darkness hovering over the ocean. He felt an emptiness he hadn’t experienced since he left his last foster home and started living in his car. He had made up his mind then he’d never spend another Christmas Eve alone.

Every Christmas Eve since then he had spent it alone.

His phone rang.

“Trent Parker,” he barked into the phone.

“Trent. Jim. I got someone for that role.”

“Email me his file. We’ll talk.” He disconnected the call before Jim could argue with him. If Jim sent him another egocentric actor. . . An actor without an ego? Not possible.

He pushed open the door to the lower level of his house. Voices floated from upstairs – a woman’s voice, his housekeeper Greta, and a young man’s voice. Probably Greta’s son Ed.

The tenor voice spewed incoherent words, words built with anger.

Annoyance stacked in Trent’s head like a burgeoning cloud. At twenty, Ed was too old to vent his frustrations on his mother. Darkness tumbled around Trent’s heart. Ed had a mother who cared for him, maybe a little more than normal but Greta had only her son, no one else.

Trent caught the words “screenplay” and “ripped off.”

“Greta?”

The voices silenced as if sucked into a vortex.

“In the kitchen, Mr. Trent,” Greta said at the same time a door opened and slammed shut.

Trent took the steps of the open staircase two at a time. He crossed the great room to the kitchen.

Greta leaned into the refrigerator, her blond curls streaked with gray tumbled from a hairband. Her shoulders shuddered as if trying to smother a sob.

Trent pressed his mouth into a tight line. He’d promised himself not to get involved with his employees’ personal problems – depending on the employee, depending on the problem, that promise wasn’t easy to keep. Still he couldn’t ignore Greta’s pain.

“I heard two voices.”

“Ed.” Greta straightened, her arms filled with lettuce, tomato, carrots. “He had to leave.” Her pale eyes were red rimmed with the sorrow a mother feels when she can’t offer enough help to her son.

“I heard. Look, Greta -.”

“He’s not a bad boy -.” She stacked the vegetables on the counter.

“He’s not a boy.”

Her eyes widened as if Trent had said something she hadn’t noticed. “This town has no heart.”

“If he’s got new screenplay to show me -.”

“He’s working with someone else.” She released a sigh that seemed to deflate her broad frame. “It’s complicated.”

“My door’s always open.”

“Ed knows. I’ll fix some lunch for you.” She fluttered large knuckled fingers at him. “I’ll bring it to you in your study.”

“Forget lunch. I need some of your chicken soup.”

“You’re sick?” She flung her head back. Her curls flung around her head. She anchored her fists into her hips.

“Not me. A. . .” The word froze in his mouth. How did he refer to Charisse? She wasn’t his friend. Now that she knew his plan to quash her Sunset in Maui film project, she’d join his ranks of his enemies. “I met my neighbor. She’s -.”

“She?” Greta eyebrows pushed into her widow’s peak.

He ignored Greta’s interest. Let her think what she wanted, as long as she abided by the nondisclosure agreement he’d had her sign when he moved in. He couldn’t control Greta’s thoughts.

He couldn’t control his own thoughts.

“She caught a cold. I told her your chicken soup could cure anything.”

“You go.” She pulled the canister filled with chicken broth from the refrigerator. “I’ll heat this then pour it into a thermos, then pack it in -.”

Trent’s phone rang. He crammed his phone to his ear and waved his hand at Greta. He strode out of the room. “Yeah, Sam.”

In his bedroom, he grabbed a handkerchief from the bureau.

He was still talking to the agent and pacing the beach when Greta rushed out of the house with an insulated carrying case and a list of instructions for heating the soup.

Trent nodded, heard nothing, and crossed the beach to Charisse’s home. He climbed the steps to the back of her house. He reached up to knock on the door.

It creaked open.

“Sam, I’ll call you back. No, I don’t have another deal going.” He shoved the phone into his back pocket and set the insulated bag on the bench by the door.

He touched a finger to the door. Inch by inch it shifted a little wider. Maybe Charisse left it open. Or maybe somebody entered and didn’t close it because he hadn’t expected to be in her house that long. Shame washed over him. Breaking and entering. He was familiar with that lifestyle when he was so hungry he couldn’t sleep at night. His past was hard to forget, especially when it leered at him from some neglected corner in his memory.

He expected to hear Gatsby’s claws click across the wood flooring.

Silence.

Where was Gatsby? He should be at the entrance sniffing or barking. The dog’s bark could be heard in Bakersfield.

Trent looked through the opening. No Gatsby. No Charisse. He didn’t want to startle her, but why had she left her door open?

He stepped into the house. He didn’t call out. He listened.

No sound.

Smell.

It was a scent he hadn’t noticed before. It wasn’t Charisse’s scent. It was stronger, more pungent.

He stiffened. The odor hanging in the foyer didn’t fit into the sweet fragrance that was Charisse.

The smell wasn’t overpowering. It was a human odor that didn’t fit. Not Charisse’s scent. Not Gatsby, who’d recently been shampooed.

The odor was coarse.

Male.

Dino? The thought hit Trent through his cerebral lobes. If Dino were at her home, Trent would give her the soup and leave.

Disturbed blood flowed through his veins.

Dino.

Dino didn’t deserve Charisse.

Trent wanted to laugh out loud. He knew nothing about Charisse.

He only knew she’d done what he hoped would never be done – optioned the film rights for Sunset in Maui.

Trent’s gaze tipped to the stairs, to the second floor.

A surge shot through him, hardening his muscles.

At the top of the stairs, a shadow edged over the landing, hesitated, then backed into the hallway.

An odd way for Dino to behave.

Rage pumped through Trent. He bounded up the stairs three at a time. At the end of the hallway, he caught a glimpse of jeans and a fitted t-shirt ducking through a doorway.

He powered strength through his thighs and shot down the hall.

The shadow vanished through a double doorway, slamming the doors. A bolt sliding through metal echoed down the hallway.

Trent twisted the knob.

Locked.

He rammed his shoulder against the door.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The doorjamb splintered. The door sagged on its hinges.

Trent burst into the room.

The shadow plummeted from the balcony.

Trent dashed past a canopied bed and upholstered armchairs and through the French doors. His muscles pumped. He grabbed the balcony rail and scanned the beach.

No one.

He dragged air into his lungs. A cold darkness smoothed over him with icy fingers.

He saw no one.

No one running down the beach.

No one running between the houses.

He gripped the rail, bent his knees, pushed adrenaline into his muscles to spring over the balcony.

“Trent.”

Only one person could lace his name with music.

Charisse.

He jerked around. His neck cracked.

“What happened?” Her eyes wide with fear and panic and confusion, she glanced at the splintered doors, the armchairs propelled against the wall, the rug kicked beneath the bed.

“You didn’t hear anyone?”

“Hear who?”

“Call the police.” Trent’s chest heaved.

“I did. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Someone was up here.”

“Who? A man? A woman?”

She didn’t know. Then it couldn’t’ve been Dino. If it had been Dino, he wouldn’t have run away.

Adrenaline drained out of Trent’s muscles like the tide when the moon set.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Then how do you know someone was up here?”

The fear in her eyes sharpened into distrust. Their eyes met. Her look was a lock on his, then her gaze drifted back to the splintered doorway.

“I’ll pay for the door.” Trent dragged air into starved lungs then let them decompress. “When the police get here, we’ll listen to what they have to say.”

He moved past her then stopped. Something was missing.

“Where’s Gatsby?” A scalding spasm scrambled up Trent’s throat.

“He’s -.” She looked over her shoulder. “Well, I thought. . .”

“He’s always at your side.”

“Gatsby. Come here, boy.” Her voice mixed with Trent’s. They roamed the house calling the dog.

It was when they passed the garage door that Charisse heard a whimper.

Trent heard it, too. He jerked the door open and thundered down the steps. Charisse followed.

“Gatsby.” Trent’s voice had a soft center with sharp edges.

Another whimper. Charisse rounded her car. Before her lay a mass of fur that looked like a rumpled rug. She dropped to her knees, and ran her hands over the dog.

Gatsby tried to lift his head but dropped it back to the concrete.

Charisse shuddered a cry and wrapped her arms around the dog’s neck. Normally, he would be licking her face and wagging his tail. Not a muscle in his body moved.

“Who’s your vet?” Trent pulled out his phone.

“Linda Diaz. Her number’s in my -.”

“Bambi will get her over here.”

Charisse nodded. She couldn’t speak. Tears clogged her throat and stung her eyes. Anything she said wouldn’t be intelligible. She only hoped Dr. Diaz could help Gatsby. Charisse couldn’t stand the loss.

Who had entered her house? Why hadn’t she heard him? She was tired, but she was a light sleeper and could’ve heard someone roaming the house.

With his phone stuck to his ear, Trent climbed the stairs.

From the open doorway, she heard the doorbell followed by voices and footsteps climbing the stairs to the second floor. The police. They would investigate her home, her bedroom.

Knowing someone strange had been in her room made her shudder as if the spiny legs of a spider crawled across her skin.

The doorbell rang again. A moment later, a young woman in a light blue lab coat followed Trent into the garage.

Charisse greeted her and tried to answer her questions. Trent’s gentle touch on Charisse’s shoulders guided her away from Gatsby. He didn’t remove his hands. She basked in his warmth and strength. She barely knew this man and here he was offering her comfort.

The last thing she expected.

He wasn’t comfortable.

Dr. Diaz finished her exam and rose. Gatsby tried to stand, too, but the effort drained him, and he laid his head on the garage floor.

“What do you think, Doc?” Trent’s hand on Charisse’s shoulder tensed.

“He’s been sedated. How did that happen?” Dr. Diaz spoke in a low tone as if she didn’t want Gatsby to hear.

“I don’t know.” Alarm spread through Charisse.

“We might.” Trent didn’t look at Charisse. “An intruder entered the house. Gatsby should’ve heard him entering, but he didn’t make a sound. After the intruder left, we looked for the dog, but couldn’t find him and he didn’t respond to our calls. When we passed the garage door, we heard him whimper. We found him lying on the floor.”

“That would explain the bruise,” Dr. Diaz said.

Charisse stiffened. “What bruise?”

Trent went rigid. Anger seemed to flow out of his pores. His touch didn’t change. In the curve of his arm, she felt solace.

“On his right side,” Dr. Diaz said. “It received a severe impact. I can’t tell if something hit him or if he hit something. It could’ve been after he had been sedated so he couldn’t defend himself.”

“But how would he be sedated?”

“Maybe the intruder fed your dog a piece of meat that had been infused with a sedative. Once the drug affected your dog, it would be easy to push him out of the way then enter your house undetected.”

“But I was here.” Charisse couldn’t shake the growing alarm crawling through her. “I was in my office. I had just returned from a trip and was tired. I must have dozed. I didn’t hear anyone enter the house, and I didn’t hear Gatsby make any noise.”

“No need to feel guilty. He’ll be fine. The sedation eased the pain he felt from the bruise,” Dr. Diaz said.

“How could anyone treat a helpless animal that way?” Charisse asked.

Dr. Diaz’s mouth tightened. A strange pain pressed against Charisse’s sternum. Apparently, seeing abuse wasn’t uncommon for the veterinarian.

“I’ll carry Gatsby inside.” Trent scooped the dog into his arms, carried him up the steps and into the mudroom. “Where do you want him?”

“He has a bed in the solarium,” Charisse said.

“Lead the way.”

The solarium would have been cozy if the sun were shining. The rain had started again and dripped down the multi-paned windows lining one side of the room. A cushioned window seat stretched along the wall.

Trent settled the dog into a circular bed with an upholstered cushion. “Your dog has a nicer bed than mine,” he muttered.

“And mine. He’s devoted to me. It’s the least I can do for him.” Charisse smile was slight. Concern for her dog dimmed its wattage.

Dr. Diaz checked Gatsby once more then gave instructions to Charisse along with a bottle of pain pills.

“If I have to leave him, will he be okay?” Charisse asked the veterinarian.

“He’ll be fine,” she said. “He’ll be moving around within an hour. Probably less.”

Trent escorted the veterinarian to the door.

Charisse sank into a cuddle chair.

Trent had taken charge. Charisse thought of Dino who avoided problems. If he had been with her when the break in was discovered, he would’ve left and let Charisse manage the veterinarian, the dog, the police.

She didn’t know Trent returned to the solarium until Gatsby lifted his head. His tongue hung out of his mouth and his eyes squinted as if he were laughing.

His mood struck Charisse. Gatsby liked Trent.

Dino and Gatsby prowled around each other as if vying for alpha male status.

“How’s he doing?” Trent crouched next to the dog and scratched him behind the ears.

“Better but his breath is catching as if he’s feeling pain. I can give him a pain pill in an hour.”

“Are you up to talking to the police?”

She shook her head. “I’ll call them tomorrow. What did they say?”

“They found fingerprints.”

Charisse rubbed her hands over her shoulders. Did she want to know who had broken into her home? What if it were someone she knew?

Her chest squeezed, then squeezed again.

“Why did you come to my house?” She sneezed and dug in her pocket for a tissue. It was empty. She had used the last one

Trent pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. “Chicken soup, remember?”

“Thank you.” She took the handkerchief and pressed it to her nose. “I remember, but in this town nobody says what they mean.”

“I’m not from this town. Have a seat. I’ll bring you a bowl of soup.”

Charisse didn’t want him to bother, but fatigue weighed on her like the dreary day outside. “It won’t be hot.”

“If it isn’t, I’ll heat it.”

“You know your way around a kitchen?”

“Microwaves are man’s best friend.”

Gatsby gave a sharp bark.

“Don’t worry, pal.” Trent rubbed the dog’s ear. “They’ll never replace you.”

A few minutes later, Trent carried a tray with a steaming bowl of chicken soup into the room. The aroma of chicken, broth and spices, penetrated Charisse’s stuffy nose.

A memory of her sitting before the curtained window of her grandmother’s Belgravia home flashed through her mind. Cook always brought her chicken soup on the days she was too sick to go to school.

Trent set the tray over Charisse’s lap. He leaned his hands on the chair’s arms. “Do you need anything else?”

His scent was fresh, like the falling rain, and spicy. She leaned back into the chair.

She sneezed and crammed his handkerchief over her nose.

“No.” She said the word in one, short, soft syllable.

He straightened. “Good.” He scratched the top of Gatsby’s head. “Be good.” He turned away.

“You’re leaving?” The panic in her voice gave her a start.

She wanted to sink beneath the chair’s cushions. She sounded as if she didn’t want him to leave. She didn’t but he didn’t have to know. Maybe he hadn’t noticed.

He looked over his shoulder at her. One of his brows lifted.

He noticed.

“No reason for me to stay.” He made a slow turn toward her. His voice didn’t have that solid Trent sound.

He didn’t ask questions, but if he did, it seemed he would’ve asked if she wanted to him to stay.

“Exactly,” she said. “No reason for you to stay.”

The police had checked her house. There was no sign of forced entry.

Maybe Lupe had left a door unlocked. She’d never done that before, but with Charisse’s return and because she had been accompanied by Trent, Lupe may have been distracted.

“Eat your soup,” Trent said.

He was gone. His command wavered in the room.

She stared at the doorway for several minutes, still seeing Trent, still seeing him turn away and walk out the doorway.

“Maybe I don’t want to eat my soup,” she said.

Trent couldn’t hear her. He’d left.

The aroma of the soup drifted to her face. It smelled good. She was starving. She had eaten a light breakfast. She wasn’t good at flying and didn’t eat much when she traveled.

Now she was home, smelling delicious chicken soup. Her stomach growled.

She’d taste it. If she didn’t like it, she’d leave it on the tray, and she’d let Trent know the soup hadn’t tasted as good as he said it would.

She dipped a spoon in the broth, blew on the steaming liquid, and tasted it.

It was delicious - the right amount of spices, the vegetables still al dente. The warmth wafted through her head. She tasted another spoonful. Soon her spoon was scraping the bottom of the bowl. She settled back in her chair. She was ready for seconds.

And she wasn’t sneezing.

She wouldn’t give Trent’s chicken soup credit for that. Maybe after she had eaten a second serving.

**\* \* \***

She set the tray aside and went upstairs to her room. She hesitated at the splintered doorway.

The burglar was gone.

How did he gain access?

He had spent time in her room. In her private space where she felt safe and protected.

She grabbed leggings, a tunic top and boots from her closet then strolled down the hallway to the guest room. The thought of the stranger in her room shot a shiver up her spine.

Tomorrow, she’d have Lupe scour her bedroom and remove all traces of the intruder. Tomorrow, the contractor would repair the doors. Next, she’d call the security company and have them secure her home better than any fortress.

Inside the guest room, she locked the door. After changing, She set the house alarm. No one would break into her home without a police greeting. On her way through the mudroom, she grabbed a felt hat from a tiled hook. She rushed down the steps to her car.

**\* \* \***

Her phone rang. Marilyn’s name flashed across the screen. Charisse twisted in her chair and reached for the phone. It sat less than an inch from the tips of her fingers. She couldn’t reach it. Trent pick up the phone and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

He nodded once.

Marilyn was talking before Charisse brought the phone to her ear.

“Finally, logic reigns.” Marilyn’s drawl blasted through the earpiece.

“What are you talking about, Marilyn?”

“Not what, who, and I’m talking about you. You’ve come to your senses. You’ve made the logical decision to star in Trent Parker’s film -.”

“Whoa, Mar. I’ve made the logical decision not to star in -.” She shot a quick look at the man who sat across from her, his elbows propped against his knees, his eyes deep and dark and holding the knowledge that she and Marilyn were discussing him. Her stomach gave that I’m-guilty twist. “- Trent’s film.”

He pushed against his knees and stood. His mouth thinned.

“Don’t play coy, Charisse. You and he can’t look that cozy if you hadn’t agreed to the contract.”

“Trust me, Mar. We’re not cozy and there was no-.”

“I know what I’m seeing, Charisse. This news clip hasn’t been edited,” Marilyn said.

“News clip about Trent and me?”

A frown etched a painful looking crevice between Trent’s brows. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and pressed a video app. The screen opened to a shaky clip of Trent carrying Charisse across the beach. Gatsby raced from them to the water and back again. He looked happier than Marilyn sounded.

Who would film them? When the rain stopped, people piled on the beach.

Along with the paparazzi.

 “Marilyn, Trent carried me because I hurt my ankle. I couldn’t walk, and don’t you dare text all your agent buddies about this.”

“They need to know the truth.”

“The truth won’t matter to them. They want what makes money.”

“Charisse, that’s cold.”

“I know. I wish I weren’t right, but you know I am.”

Trent stopped the video, gave a slight wave and headed toward the door.

“Marilyn, I have to go.” She clicked off the phone cutting off Marilyn in midsentence.

“Trent.”

His pace slowed but he didn’t face her. Gatsby was on his feet, his head oscillating like a fan, as if giving his opinion on how to handle the situation. “I know your decision, Charisse.”

“Trent, you were an actor once. I know you wanted to produce for the same reason I do. It will give me more control on the final product.”

He looked over his shoulder at her. His face was hard and firm. But in his eyes was a flicker of something. If she had blinked, she would’ve missed it.

He looked vulnerable.

That twist in her stomach wrenched.

“It’s a Whitloch trait. Going back on your word.” He gave a slight nod and strolled out of the house.

Air seeped in and out of her lungs. The thudding of her heart crashed wildly. Tension cinched her muscles. She went from rigid to crumbling.

What had he meant by the Whitloch trait? Who else did he know in her family? But no one in her family went back on his word.

She gritted her teeth. Trent may have power over others. He’d never have power over her.

Drawing battle lines against Trent Parker could ruin her career. That was a risk she’d take. He’d soon find out she wasn’t like those who would do anything to work with him. Like Dino.

Even if Trent made it hard for her to find work in Hollywood, she still had her production company and the greatest coup in movie history – the option on Sunset in Maui. – provided Dino didn’t fight her for it.

Gatsby’s claws tapped along the wood flooring. The dog was following Trent to the front door. The door closed. She heard Gatsby rush to the window to watch Trent walk across the beach to his own house. When he could no longer see Trent, he rushed back to Charisse’s chair and sat in front of her.

“We need to discuss your loyalties. Why do you like Trent? You hate Dino. Maybe it’s because you know Dino’s a cad. Wish I’d known that. As for your admiration for Trent, it’s over-the-top. Now you probably want to be fed.”

Gatsby barked and backed away from her.

She texted Flo to email her the contact information for the attorney who had helped her and Dino set up their production company. She needed to start proceedings to buy Dino out.

**\* \* \***

“Charisse, honey, don’t hang up. I was wrong. I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Charisse’s chest collapsed as if a steel belt had tightened around her. She dragged air into her lungs. Her ribs groaned from the strain.

“Charisse, did you hear me?” It was as if he were asking if the director had liked the way he had recited his lines.

Acting had permeated every cell in Dino’s body. Whether in front of the camera or away from the camera, he was an actor.

“I heard you. Have a nice life.”

“We need to talk.”

“We did. You have your life. I have mine. I wish I had realized that a long time ago.”

“I don’t mean about our relationship. I’m talking about the production company.”

Charisse went brittle. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one who wondered about the company.

“What about it?” Her voice was a tinny vibration in her ears.

“You contacted our attorney.”

“Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

It did matter. She had left a message with the attorney’s paralegal and had asked her to keep the call confidential. No one else knew. She remembered how starry eyed the young woman had been when Charisse and Dino had met at the law firm to discuss the incorporation of the company. Charisse knew then the paralegal would do anything for Dino.

Including sharing with him confidential information.

Charisse made a mental note to find a new attorney.

“Never mind. I know who told you.”

“No one from the law firm.”

“Thanks for the clue.”

“You’re not talking to our attorney unless I’m there.” Dino lowered the volume of his voice with each word.

“It’s better if I talk to him alone, Dino. He and I can discuss our options -.”

“You and he and I.” Dino hesitated after last word. “Can discuss our options. I’m part of this company, honey. I’ll be present for all decisions.”

She winced when he called her honey. The word sounded flat and stale, especially since he probably called Miss Two-Line honey. Her heart sunk a little lower in her chest. Who else had he called honey?

“Dino, you can talk to him one on one. We’ll discuss our options with the attorney and then you and I can meet.”

“You and I should meet. Now,” he said.

“Before we meet with the attorney?”

“Honey, we don’t need the attorney. We can work this out.”

“Dino, there isn’t enough working out that can heal the pain you caused me.”

“I thought you -.” He broke off the sentence.

She could see him dragging his hand over his face, pacing through the house. It was the part he played in a movie two years ago. He’d been nominated for an academy award. Since then, she had seen that character creep into his demeanor whenever he confronted a major decision.

She didn’t see the character transformation when she caught him in bed with Miss Two-Line. Apparently, that decision didn’t require any thought.

“We’re through, Dino. Future conversations will go through our attorneys.”

“You make it sound like a divorce.”

Charisse’s chest pressed inward. She could barely breathe. She took little sips of air. After a minute, the catch in her throat eased.

“It feels like a divorce. We’ll divide the company equitably.” The calmness in her voice gave her a start. She should be screaming and raging at this cad who stole six months of her life.

Her relationship with Dino had given her something else. Wisdom. She’d never give her heart to another man again.

“Honey, we can’t end it like this,” Dino said.

“It’s ended.”

“I don’t want to part this way. Come over tonight. Let’s talk.”

“That’s not a good idea, Dino.” Tears seeped into her eyes. Her voice cracked. She couldn’t see him again.

They couldn’t avoid each other. They would attend the same parties, work on a film together. She released an exhausted laugh. The entire time they dated, she wanted to work with him. It never happened. Now she never wanted to see him, which meant they might work together.

“It will just be dinner. I’ve hired a new chef. He can fix an intimate dinner -.”

“Dino, I’m not going to have dinner with you and your. . . friend.”

“You mean Molly? She won’t be here. I sent her home.”

“That seems rather unkind.”

“She understood.”

“You don’t know much about women, Dino.”

The catch in his throat popped through the phone. “That’s where you’re wrong. I understand women very well.”

“Which is why you have no idea how much you hurt me.”

“I never meant to hurt you, honey.”

“You can’t call me that anymore.” Sadness saturated her voice.

“Wait, Charisse, don’t cry. You don’t want me to call you honey anymore?”

She shook her head. She couldn’t talk. She couldn’t stand the pain in her heart let alone the pain in her voice.

“Don’t hang up, Charisse. I won’t call you honey – that name anymore. Let’s meet tonight, over dinner, discuss what we want to do, and then we can let our attorney handle the rest.”

“No.”

“Nothing will happen. We’ll talk. That’s it. Charisse, I need to see you once more

“Why are you so insistent? You’re not going to have a photographer there, are you?”

“No. This is a private moment between you and me. No one will know we were together.”

“I have to be insane for letting you talk me into this. I’ll come over, but no dinner. It’s strictly a conversation. A short one.”

“I agree. What time should I expect you?”

“I’ll be there at eight. And remember, Dino, if your girlfriend -.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Whatever she is, if she’s there, if you have a photographer there, I’m leaving, I’m never coming back, and all future conversations will be through our attorney. Tell me you agree, or I’m not coming over.”

“I agree.” He uttered that statement in a tone that she had never heard him use before. It made her pull her face away from the phone as if she’d been pushed away by those two words. Dino understood only what he wanted.

**\* \* \***

Even as the words left her mouth, she knew seeing Dino was a mistake. He wouldn’t let her leave until he had everything he wanted. She picked up her phone. She had to call him back and tell him she’d changed her mind. She wouldn’t come to his house.

More than she didn’t want to go to Dino’s house, she didn’t want any contact with him again. Their attorneys could talk and present what Charisse and Dino wanted from the company. That should eliminate any question that could arise later. She’d go to Dino’s house. If the discussion didn’t include her best interest, which it wouldn’t, she’d leave.

Her first thought was to dress in a way that would make Dino regret he’d been unfaithful to her. But that could lead to his thinking she still wanted a relationship with him. She wanted nothing to do with him. She’d make sure she didn’t make herself more presentable.

Picking up her crutches, she hobbled to the powder room and splashed cold water in her face. Dino had broken several hearts before he broke hers. She should have known her heart wouldn’t be an exception.

Gatsby had barely touched his food. Instead, he sat by his bowl and watched her through the open door of the powder room. His head drooping, his eyes blinking rapidly. He knew her motions, knew when she was leaving. He seemed to sense when she was upset. When that happened, he’d lose his appetite..

“How about I take you for a walk? We can’t walk far because I’m a little hampered.” She lifted her crutches. “But we’ll do what we can.”

She picked up the leash that was caked with dried mud and sand. The sand crumbled from the nylon cord and speckled the Persian rug. She sighed. Another mess Lupe would have to clean up later. She limped to the door. Gatsby followed sniffing the rubber caps at the base of her crutches. She led him outside.

He scampered down the steps and faced her, his tail wagging. Her heart dropped a fraction. He was excited to go for a walk - oblivious she couldn’t take him for a regular stroll.

She looked down at the steep stairs leading to the beach. Climbing down the steps would prove a challenge with crutches. Staying cooped up in her house would be more of a challenge. The rain had stopped though on the horizon another storm teased the waves.

Placing the crutches on the step, she gingerly balanced herself on the riser. Climbing down the steps was a slow process. Gatsby whined and sniffed the bottom step then looked up at her. He glanced behind himself as if anxious to join the other dogs escorted across the beach by their owners.

“You’re not following doctor’s orders.” Trent’s voice sounded from above her.

His voice was deep and low and stirred emotions within her she wished she could pretend meant nothing.

She glanced at the balcony of the house next door. Never had she seen him look so relaxed, though he still seemed stiff.

He had changed since he had carried her into her house. Those clothes had been smeared with sand and grit, courtesy of Charisse’s own grimy clothes. Now he wore an open collar shirt, khaki pants and topsiders. He held a tumbler filled with amber liquid.

“Gatsby still needs to be walked. I can do that.”

“Or you could ask a friend to walk him.”

What did he mean by friend? Himself? She could tell by the grim set of his mouth he’d never consider himself her friend.

“Or I could do it myself,” she said. “I need to learn how to walk with crutches.”

“You look like you’re going somewhere.”

Talking to him was like talking to a detective. Or a lawyer. He didn’t miss anything. She hesitated. She wouldn’t be grilled by Trent Parker. “Not that it’s your business, but I made plans with a friend. I intend to keep them.”

“Looks like you just made it my business.” His smile had that gotcha curve.

A woman strolled down the beach with a Chihuahua scurrying behind her. The woman slowed, her gaze moving from Charisse to Trent.

“I advise you to cancel your plans for the evening.” Trent’s face sobered but not enough to erase the mirth that filled his eyes.

Charisse’s temper started a slow boil at the back of her head. “I won’t need advice from you especially when it comes to my personal life.”

“Make wise decisions about your personal life. Foolish ones can affect your professional life.”

Charisse’s laugh sounded more like a cough. “Visiting a friend won’t impact my career.”

“If you were visiting a friend, I wouldn’t be concerned.”

“And you know who I’m seeing?” She felt the color creep into her face. This man unnerved her. She felt like a child trying to hide the cookie she had been forbidden to eat before dinner.

He couldn’t know she was meeting with Dino, yet he seemed so confident

“You just confirmed with whom,” he said.

“You’re guessing.”

“True, but I’m good at it. Take my advice - cancel your plans, though I know you won’t. You should have your fill of Vasilios’ lies.”

Air pushed out of her lungs. But how did he know? Only one way - he had his finger on the pulse of Hollywood.

“I appreciate your concern, Mr. Parker.”

“So now it’s Mr. Parker.”

“It doesn’t change my mind. I can make my own decisions, and they’re good.”

“Maybe in other areas, but not in this.” His eyes darkened.

What she saw in his eyes was something she wished she could understand. It wasn’t hatred. Was it pity? Something gripped her chest like iron fingers.

She needed to meet with Dino. She couldn’t share control of the production company with him.

Trent walked into his house. She heard the door close.

She had a moment’s relief before doubt crept in. Behind doubt stormed in rage. Who was Trent Parker to tell her whom she could see? The man had no people skills.

Yet he’d been honored for his charity foundation. How could a man care nothing for people, yet do something nice for victimized children?

She shook her head, trying to shake out the image of the award Trent had received. The man was a dichotomy.

He carried her when she sprained her ankle.

He told her not to see Dino.

The sound of a car’s engine firing up in a garage boomed over the beach. Glancing at the street, she saw a black car glide down Trent’s driveway then speed down the street. She couldn’t see the driver’s face, but she knew who drove the car.

Odd that he suddenly had somewhere to go. Was he angry with her for not following his orders? Was he leaving for a meeting or to cool off? She didn’t care. He was used to being obeyed. She didn’t need him to tell her how to live her life.

There was the tumble of her heart falling down the stairs of disappointment. She almost wished she would see him again. But that didn’t make sense. He was rude and intrusive. He could do whatever he wanted.

She didn’t care.

She didn’t care.

She. Did. Not. Care.

**\* \* \***

Charisse tucked her crutches into the back seat of her hybrid car, then squeezed behind the steering wheel.

Through the garage door, she heard Gatsby’s whines and scratches. Her stomach had that frozen feeling you get when you’ve eaten ice cream too fast. She wanted to take Gatsby with her. But a business meeting with her ex-boyfriend was hardly the proper place for a big, lovable dog.

She started her car. The engine drowned out Gatsby’s pleas. She still heard them with her heart. She backed out of the driveway.

The meeting would be quick, and she would return home. If only she could reassure Gatsby.

**\* \* \***

She turned into the driveway. At the gate, she pressed the number pad and waited for the gate to open. She tried not to think of what she had seen there just hours ago. Dino in the arms of another woman. The memory felt like a fist size rock stuck in her throat.

That wouldn’t be a problem now. This morning she had been in love with Dino. This evening she was returning to discuss a business matter.

The gate didn’t open. She reentered the code. The gate remained shut. She pressed the intercom.

“May I help you?” Barbara answered her page.

“Barbara, this is Charisse. Why are you asking me if you can help me? You can see me on the monitor. Why isn’t my access code opening the gate?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Whitloch. After you left, Dino requested I change the entrance code. I didn’t realize you were returning this evening.”

“Didn’t Dino tell you he and I had a business meeting this evening?”

Dino’s personal assistant hesitated. It was brief – hardly a pause at all. Charisse noted the lull. After almost being hit by the car racing out of Dino’s driveway, she was aware of everything – the breeze lifting the fronds of the palm trees lining the street, a stretch limousine turning into the driveway of the rap star who lived across the street from Dino, the high-pitched yap of a dog who wanted to be let back into his master’s house.

Barbara’s hesitation before answering Charisse’s question made it clear she hadn’t expected Charisse to return. Not today. Not ever. Barbara hadn’t rehearsed her response. Barbara rehearsed everything.

“Please wait a moment, Ms. Whitloch.”

Before Charisse could answer, there was a clicking sound. Barbara had disconnected the speaker. To ask Dino’s permission to open the gate?

Charisse leaned back into the seat. The next move would be to leave. Their lawyers could discuss the dissolution of the company.

She put the car in reverse.

“Ms. Whitloch, I apologize for the confusion.” Barbara’s voice sounded a little strained – very unBarbara. “Mr. Vasilios is expecting you this evening. I’ll give you access.”

“What about my access code?”

She heard the clicking sound. Barbara had turned off the intercom again. She didn’t answer Charisse’s question.

Charisse drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. She wouldn’t need the access code. She wouldn’t return to Dino’s home.

She shouldn’t have returned this evening.

Instead of parking in the open bay at the rear of the house, Charisse guided the car around the circle drive and parked in front of the stone steps leading to two oversized front doors. She reached behind the front seat and pulled out her crutches. She fitted the bands around her upper arms then picked up her portfolio and tote bag and hobbled to the entrance.

The front door opened and Dino dressed in a polo shirt and cargo shorts stepped onto the brick portico. “I didn’t expect you to use this entrance. You always park in back.”

“It isn’t the right place for me to park anymore, Dino. It’s available for your girlfriend.” She cringed at her snide remark.

Too late. She’d said it.

“Honey, she’s not my girlfriend. What did you do to your ankle?”

What should she tell him, that finding him in bed with another woman had upset her, and she went for a walk on the beach and tripped underneath the pier and hurt her ankle?

“I tripped.”

He was down the steps and at her side. His arm around her waist didn’t match Trent’s warmth. His touch was cool.

She braced herself against the shiver crawling up her spine.

“You don’t have to help me, Dino. I’m learning how to walk with these things.” She nodded toward the crutches.

“Of course, I’ll help you. You’re injured.”

She gave up arguing with him. Maybe this was a way for him to feel better after the way he had treated her. “I was expecting Barbara to answer the door.”

“She’s working on something else. I told her I’d answer it. Be careful, honey. Does your ankle hurt? What did the doctor say?”

“It feels fine, Dino.” Even as she said those words, the throb in her ankle pumped up her leg. She clenched her teeth. She wasn’t sure if it had been caused by the pain or because he still called her honey. “I need to sit.”

“We’ll sit on the patio. I have the brazier going.”

“Who was driving out of your driveway when I arrived?”

“Nobody.” When he saw her narrowed eyes, he said, “Oh, that. It was a business meeting.”

“It didn’t look like it went very well.” She arched a brow at him.

“It could’ve gone better.” He glanced at her. A defensive look clouded his eyes, and he leaned away from her. “Honest, honey, it was a business meeting.”

“Like the meeting you had this afternoon?”

“No, this was different.” He seemed more disappointed about the recent meeting than her catching him in bed with Molly.

Charisse wouldn’t pursue it. After tonight, she wouldn’t see him again.

“I see you removed my access code from the entrance gate,” she said.

“No, I didn’t. Why would I do that? You’re welcome to come anytime.”

“Except when you’re entertaining. Since I won’t be back, I don’t need a code.” She wanted to tell him he didn’t need to lie anymore.

He snorted a laugh, a stage laugh, one he’d seen the elite movie stars do, but Dino made it his own. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll be back.”

The thought of returning made her stomach cramp. She would never come back. Dino would realize it eventually.

He guided her up the steps and through the house to the back patio. Flames flickered in the brazier that stretched across the flagstones. “What would you like to drink?”

“Mineral water.”

“How about a glass of wine? I just received a shipment from San Gimignano. Remember when we strolled through the streets and listened to the harpsichordist in the plaza?” Dino helped her to a padded chair with a view of the pool and the city skyline.

“I remember.” It was the first time they’d talked about getting married. She’d been so excited she hadn’t noticed the harpsichordist or remembered eating gelato in front of the Neptune fountain. “Just water for me, Dino. I won’t be here long.”

His brow shot up to his wavy hairline. “Stay for dinner.”

“No, Dino. I’ll discuss the division of the company with you, then I’m leaving.”

“I know why you want to split the company. You’re upset about what you saw today.” His eyes turned edgy. His voice was clipped.

“Dino, any woman who saw what I saw today would have been upset. We’ve been together for six months. That’s a long time in Hollywood years. It was nice while it lasted, but it’s time to move on. You already have.”

He opened his mouth to protest.

Her upheld hand cut him off. “You were going to bring me a mineral water.”

A half smile spread across his face. “You’re right. Enough about our relationship for tonight.”

“Exactly. Let’s discuss business.” She set her portfolio on the coffee table. She twisted away from Dino.

His hand fell to his side. There was a flicker in his eyes. He looked hurt.

Charisse’s mouth felt beach sand dry. She hadn’t meant to hurt him.

“I’ll fix the drinks,” he said. “Albert will bring the hors d’oeuvres.”

As if on cue, a young man wearing a white jacket carried a plate of sushi canapés to the patio and placed them on the table. Dino moved behind the bar and mixed a martini for himself. He splashed mineral water and a lime into a tumbler and carried the drinks to the table.

Charisse pulled from the portfolio a list of the projects they had optioned for production. “The projects you brought into the company will be yours, if you still want them. If not, tell me, and I’ll return the rights to the creators.”

“That’s fine as long as we cancel the option on Sunset in Kauai.”

“Maui. And we can’t cancel it. The contract won’t allow it.”

Dino’s cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen. “I have to take this.”

Her surprise moved toward anger. “I’m leaving in fifteen minutes whether we’ve discussed everything or not.”

He held up a finger. Scooping up the phone, he climbed over the coffee table and walked to the other side of the pool. A minute later he returned having finished the shortest phone call in history.

He picked up his glass and plopped next to her on the sofa. “You never should’ve agreed to that option, Charisse.” There was a slight flare of his nostrils.

“Not me, we. And you know why. Everyone wanted that option. We won the bidding war. Did you forget how we celebrated?”

“No.” He set his glass on the coffee table. “We can break the contract.”

“I don’t want to break it. Don’t worry. I’ll take the option in the settlement -.”

‘No. I want you to cancel it.”

“Only one other person doesn’t want me to have this option. Did you talk to Trent Parker?”

“Trent? No.”

His hard stare seemed to drill through her. She couldn’t tell if he were lying or if he thought the option was a bad deal.

“We’ll let our attorneys work on this. How about the projects? Which ones do you want?”

The conversation bounced back and forth. Charisse lost two that she wanted, but was able to convince Dino to give her the others.

The chef removed the hors devourers’ plates. Charisse hadn’t touched the sushi and had only had a couple of sips of water.

“I’ll bring your salads and a basket of rolls.” The chef gave a slight bow.

“None for me.” Charisse held up her hand.

“You didn’t eat anything.” Dino sat a little straighter, planted both feet on the floor, dug his elbows into his knees a la Daniel Craig’s James Bond.

“Because I’m not hungry. We’re finished. I’m leaving.”

“Honey, don’t go. Bruce created a great meal for us – salmon, asparagus with hollandaise, couscous, chocolate torte for dessert. I won’t enjoy it if I have to eat alone.”

“You’re not alone.”

His tanned face turned pale. “You and I are the only ones here.”

“And Barbara, though I’m sure you’re not looking for her when you look at the second floor bedroom window.”

“I’m watching birds fly over the house. You know my interest in ornithology.” Dino had the dignity not to look her straight in the eye when he lied.

“Birds don’t fly at night, Dino. Bats do. Brush up on your ornithology.”

Dino couldn’t tell her the truth. The last six months had meant nothing to him. Sadness struggled around her heart.

She closed her notepad and stuck it into her portfolio. She picked up her crutches. “I’ll send this to my lawyer for his review.”

“My lawyer needs to see what you wrote. Give me your notes so Barbara can make copies.”

“Don’t you ever give that poor woman time off?”

“I try.” He lifted a shoulder and dipped his head. “She likes working for me.”

Charisse’s chest felt like wind dried wood. She felt pain - for Barbara. The woman had spent most of her adult life looking after Dino.

He would never understand how devoted his assistant was to him. Maybe someday he would truly need Barbara. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be too late. “I’m glad she’s loyal to you, Dino.”

Her comment made Dino seem a little off. His bright eyes dulled. His rakish smile dimmed.

“Why wouldn’t she be? I pay her well.”

“Some people don’t want money.”

He snorted. “Everybody wants money.”

“You’ve lived in Beverly Hills too long, Dino. Not everyone wants money.”

“What do you want?” He moved to her. Taking her crutches from her, he laid them across the coffee table.

“To go home. Rest. This day had more excitement than I’d planned.”

“Are you spending the evening with Trent Parker?”

Charisse choked a cough. A prickly cold dug into her throat. “Trent Parker? What made you think of him?”

“It seems you’re the one who’s been thinking of him. A clever ruse, spraining your ankle, so he’d spend the afternoon at your house.”

“I don’t know who your spy is, Dino.” Charisse inhaled a deep breath to stop the anger building in her chest.

“I don’t need a spy. Everyone wants to know about Trent. You’re with Trent. Everyone wants to know about you.”

The flicker in his eyes bordered on jealousy. Jealousy because she had spent time with Trent or jealousy because the paparazzi followed her and Trent and not Dino.

Or jealousy because she had spent time with the one producer Dino wanted to work with.

“He’s no good for you, honey.”

“Not that’s it’s your business, but I agree.”

“That’s not what I hear.” Dino wrapped her in his arms and pulled her close.

There was a time when his touch made her blood heat. Now she felt cold. Her heart beat dully. She pressed hands against his chest. “What did you hear?”

“Your audition. You’ll get the part every actress would kill for.”

“No, Dino, I’m not going to -.”

“Word on the street is you’re as good as in.”

“Word on the street is uninformed.”

“Everyone likes your style. You’ve been dubbed most promising.”

She leaned away from him. “By whom?”

“Everyone.” He pressed lips to her curve of her neck.

It was chilling. He felt clammy and rubbery as if warm blood didn’t pump through him.

She pushed away and stumbled. She knocked a torchiere. It tottered then crashed to the stone patio. “Stop it, Dino.”

He watched her as if trying to decide if she really meant she wanted him to stop. “If you had let me have you, I wouldn’t’ve had to go elsewhere.”

“I’m leaving.” Charisse’s lungs grabbed for breath. She picked up the crutches and wrapped her fingers around the crutch handles. They dug into her palms. They felt cold. More than cold. Skin-ripping-cold.

“I don’t mean to frighten you.” Tension gripped his jaw. He looked deflated. He wrapped his hand around hers and pulled her to him.

“You’re not. You’re making me mad.” She hoped the anger in her eyes, the grim press of her lips, convinced him of her words. She leaned away from him. His touch, his scent, the darkness in his eyes. All of this felt as if something foul crawled across her skin. How could she have thought she loved this man? “I want my hand back.”

He nuzzled her cheek. “You smell nice.”

“I’m leaving now, Mr. Vasilios. Is there anything you need before I go.” Barbara’s voice sounded from the doorway.

Anger flashed in his eyes. He lifted his gaze to the doorway.

Air flooded into Charisse’s lungs. Dino’s grip loosened. She pulled away.

“Yes, Barbara.” Dino’s voice had a sharp edge. “Ms. Whitloch has a list of things we discussed this evening. I want you to make a copy of it and put the copy on my desk.”

Barbara nodded and walked across the patio.

“She doesn’t need to make a copy.” Charisse slipped the folder into her tote bag. “I’ll email this to you when I get home.”

“I want it now before you change anything.” Dino’s eyes glittered.

Her breath caught. “I wouldn’t change anything. You’re accusing me of being dishonest.”

“No. You’re protecting yourself. It’s predictable.”

“Never in the time we spent together have I been dishonest.”

“Except about your relationship with Trent. Maybe there were others.”

“Your moral dilemma doesn’t apply to me.” She turned away.

Barbara moved in front of Charisse and held out her hand. “I’ll take the papers, Ms. Whitloch. I’ll bring them right back.”

“These are my papers.”

“With my information,” Dino said.

“Which you will get.” She slipped her tote over her shoulder. She balanced on the crutches. She lifted her gaze to Barbara’s unblinking stare. “If you’ll excuse me. Please.”

Barbara’s gaze dashed to Dino.

Charisse held her breath. As Dino’s loyal assistant, Barbara would do whatever Dino asked. If Dino didn’t want Charisse to leave, Barbara would block Charisse’s path.

Chapter Ten

Barbara stepped aside. Her face was robotically serene. She was quiet and awaited an order from Dino.

Charisse didn’t dare breathe. Adrenaline pumped through her. She tipped her lips into a smile. A smile of thanks. A smile of relief.

Tension locked her muscles. She wasn’t out of Dino’s house yet.

Barbara’s face remained cold, implacable, her eyes like an eagle watching her prey escape.

The crutches tapped across the patio. The only other sound was the water splashing in the fountain.

Charisse reached the front door and balanced on the crutches. She reached for the doorknob.

Barbara’s heels clicked on the tile. “I’ll open the door for you, Ms. Whitloch.”

Her white hand reached passed Charisse to the knob.

The stark contrast of Barbara’s pale hand against her own tanned one jolted Charisse. In southern California, no one was pale. The residents wanted to be outside as much as possible.

Except Barbara. She was always inside, always near Dino to meet his every need.

“Thank you.” Charisse looked into Barbara’s eyes, but the other woman stared straight ahead, stood at the door as if awaiting her next command.

Charisse stepped onto the portico and hobbled down the steps. At her car, she fumbled through her purse for her keys. Her mind was a jumble swallowing coherent thought. She wanted to be away from Dino.

Inside her car, air rushed into her lungs. Her hands pressed against the steering wheel, she pushed her back into the seat. She needed to stretch, release the ache wrapping around her chest, but that would mean another moment on Dino’s property.

She was done with Dino.

She slipped her key into the ignition and drove around the circle drive. When she reached the end of the lane, the gates swung open. Leaving Dino’s home was like leaving a prison. On the other side of the gate stood freedom.

Something touched her cheek. She brushed at it. Her cheek was wet. Drenched. Hot tears streamed down her face and slid over her fingers. Tears from a broken heart mixed with tears of relief.

She was free of Dino. The other side of her sorrow pushed through her relief of being free. She had loved, she had trusted, someone who was worthy of neither. The signs had been there. She was foolish to believe Dino would be honest.

When she reached the boulevard, she pulled to the side of the road. Her breath came in ragged spurts.

Dino wanted two things – the name of their production company and to stop her from producing Sunset in Maui.

First, she’d calm down. Next, she’d call her lawyer to find out what she could do about the film option and about the division of the company.

A legal battle would mean years in court. It would mean remaining in contact with Dino. It would mean she couldn’t produce the most sought after option in the industry.

Dino could have the company name. It wasn’t the name that made the company good - it was the product. With complete control of the company, Charisse would produce better films than if she shared control with Dino.

The anger in her head cooled by one hundred degrees. Giving the company name to Dino was a decision she could accept.

**\* \* \***

He laid a hand on the banister and looked up the staircase that curved to the main floor. She knew the thoughts coursing through his mind. What disaster might greet them at the top of the stairs? The lower level showed no damage, but that didn’t foretell the condition of the other floors.

The option was more important to her. She would do whatever she needed to keep the option.

Even if it meant working with Trent.

Staring through her office door into the living room, she caught a glimpse of the gash marring the wood paneling. A reminder of the intruder. A torrent of panic pumped through her.

Why had someone broken into her house? He had taken nothing. The police found no evidence he was looking for anything.

Had he seen her asleep in her study?

Had he been hired to break into her home?

She smothered the chill nipping at the hairs on the back of her neck. If someone had hired him, who? Trent? Dino? Someone else?

The police made it clear they didn't have the manpower to investigate the break-in. Nothing had been stolen. If she wanted protection, she should hire an armed bodyguard.

She smothered a laugh. Never had she had armed protection - even as a child growing up in the family castle. If she didn’t hire protection, would the perpetrator invade her home again? Goose bumps pricked over her hands and crawled up her arms.

She raked fingers through her hair. Even more disturbing was finding Dino in bed with another woman.

Then acting as if he had done nothing wrong.

She’d gone to his house this evening to discuss the division of their production company, then she had to thwart his unwanted advances.

**\* \* \***

She came face to face with a picture of herself. It stretched floor to ceiling and was almost as wide. Pressing a knuckle to her mouth, she gasped so hard it cut off her air. She stepped forward, then backward. It was the giant sized photo she’d sent Trent when he had mocked her receipt of the AFMA award.

“What’s this doing here?” She couldn’t stop staring at her wide smile that stretched from the middle step of the staircase to a van Dongen painting.

“It’s too big for my office. I had it delivered here.”

“But why? Why didn’t you throw it away? I didn’t mean for you to keep it. I sent it as a joke.”

“And I laughed. I’m keeping it because I have a place for it.”

“I didn’t send it to you to be hung on the wall.”

“Who said anything about hanging it on the wall?”

“Then what will you do with it?”

“What difference is it to you? You gave it to me. It’s my property. Freshen up. I’ll start dinner.” He strode toward the kitchen. “And quit staring at that picture,” he said, his voice a little lower than a shout. He didn’t turn around.

Charisse didn’t want to go upstairs. She wanted to slash a knife across the smiling face that two days ago seemed like the perfect jab to get the famous Trent Parker to agree she had the talent to produce a film. The film he wanted to take away from her.

She pounded up the stairs.

**\* \* \***

Chapter

The sun’s evening rays were slipping into the ocean when Charisse turned onto Dino’s street.

The entrance gate drifted open.

Headlights flashed into her face and over the opening iron gate.

Charisse slammed on the brakes. Her purse slid to floor. She tilted her hand over her eyes to block the glaring light.

A car barreled toward her and whipped through the gap. The gate hadn’t opened completely when the car careened around the slow moving gate. It’s rear fender cracked against the gate knocking the rear tires off the driveway and onto the lawn.

The car didn’t slow. It accelerated and zigzagged through the gate. It’s front fend dipped and dragged over the flagstone then whipped around the corner to the street.

It was gone.

Who was in such a hurry to leave Dino’s house?

Charisse didn’t recognize the car. And where were the police? Did something happen to Barbara to prevent her from calling them?

Charisse should have called them.

She’d call them now. And what if nothing was wrong? It would mean Dino’s private life would be plastered across every tabloid and internet site in the nation. The world.

Dino would be mad, but she no longer cared what he thought. She came because he needed help. She knew she shouldn’t be here, but here she was staring at the open gate that led to Dino’s multi-million dollar home and God only knew what else.

Charisse pulled out her phone and dialed nine-one-one.

“What’s your emergency?” came the operator’s child-like voice.

“I’m not sure it is an emergency.” Charisse explained the situation.

“We have a car in the area. An officer will be on site in ten minutes,” the operator said.

**\* \* \***

When she starred in her first film, she’d been thrilled and frightened. She could still remember stumbling through her lines sending her seasoned costar into a rage. He’d thrown the script at her and stormed off the set. She burst into tears and fled to her trailer. The grandfatherly director followed her. Inside the trailer, he’d pulled out a deck of cards and taught her how to play poker while he coached her through her lines.

And made her six hundred dollars poorer.

His coaching helped her win an academy award nomination. Her costar wasn’t even invited to be a presenter. He never forgave her.

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