Imagine the Kiss

Crystal Creek Series, Book 7

Deleted Scenes

Chapter Two

Teagan guided Champagne up the trail to the main road that led to the barn. Ralph, the ranch foreman, was leading two horses from the outside arena. He strode toward Teagan and slipped a hand around one of Champagne’s reins.

“How was the ride?” He narrowed one eye at her.

Of course, he’d remember an hour ago when she’d barreled down the service road in her Mini and screeched to a stop in front of the barn. She hadn’t even gone to the main house to greet her family. Instead, she’d stridden to Champagne’s stall, tethered her in the alley and dragged her riding gear from the tack room.

“Interesting.” Teagan slid from the saddle. “Thanks for helping me saddle Champagne, by the way. I’m sorry I didn’t say anything when I arrived. It was one of those moments when I just needed to be by myself.”

“We all have them.”

“I saw a hiker while I was in the woods near the bluffs.”

Ralph’s face remained stony. He gathered Champagne’s reins. The horse stood patiently and blinked her long lashes.

“Ralph, who was that man?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, or you won’t say?”

He gave her a full look. “I don’t know.”

“Then I’ll ask Rose,” she said, referring to her stepmother.

“She isn’t here.”

“I’ll ask her when she gets back. When will that be?”

“Don’ know. She’s in Wyoming.” Ralph’s voice was flat and rough as if gravel churned in his throat.

“You mean Rose left the ranch? But she never leaves the ranch. And what’s she doing in Wyoming?” Confusion throbbed in her mind, and she shook her head. “I know she’s from there, but she hasn’t been back in years. Why would she go there now?”

“Ask her,” Ralph said in that way that finished a conversation.

Teagan wondered how much Rose’s leaving had to do with her teenaged marriage to Ralph, a marriage that had never been dissolved, though the family had believed she was the fourth wife of Maxwell Whitloch, Sr., Teagan’s father.

“I will.” Teagan lifted her chin. “Who would know about this trespasser?”

Ralph gave a rough exhale, but his dark gaze never wavered. “I’ll brush Champagne and put some fresh hay in her stall.”

He led the horses to the barn, his gait a little slower, his shoulders slightly bowed. He dragged open the door and tapped the horses’ rumps. Their heads high, they trotted inside.

Teagan stared at the entrance a moment too long. What secret was Ralph hiding? He’d hid his relationship with Rose. Was he hiding the identity of the hiker? That shouldn’t have surprised her. Ralph, a man of few words, revealed little.

She turned to the house and strode up the path to the backdoor. Inside, she inhaled the rich aroma of a pot roast. The voices of an older woman and a girl floated from the kitchen. She hooked her car coat over a hook in the mudroom and stepped into the kitchen.

“It smells wonderful in here.” Her stomach growled, and she pressed a hand to her middle.

“You came back. The way you took off, I didn’t think you were ever coming back.” Emily, Rose Whitloch’s seventeen-year-old daughter and Teagan’s half-sister, stood at the kitchen island and tore romaine lettuce into a wooden bowl. Max’s third ex-wife, Yvonne, scrubbed potatoes at the sink.

“Why not? I just went for a ride. I’ve done that before.” Teagan picked a sliced carrot from the cutting board and tossed it into her mouth.

“Maybe because you didn’t even bother to come to the house and then whipped Champagne into gallop across the meadow.”

Heat rose in Teagan’s face. “I know I shouldn’t have run her. I just needed…”

“What is it, Teagan? Did something happen? Your tour didn’t get canceled, did it?” Emily’s eyes rounded with concern. She rested a hand on Teagan’s arm.

Yvonne’s movements slowed. The older woman’s brows lifted in worry.

Teagan moved around the kitchen island and stared at the cutting board lined with neat rows of sliced carrots, tomatoes and cucumbers. She stuttered a laugh. “No, the tour will go as scheduled. Now more than ever, I’m looking forward to it and getting away from here.” Her voice slowed. She glanced up at Emily. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

Her half-sister lifted a shoulder and scanned the chopped vegetables covering the counter. “When you got here, you only came inside to put your violin in the music room. You don’t sound happy, and I’ve never seen you ride in jeans. You always change into your gear.”

Teagan glanced down at the jeans and tennis shoes she’d worn to rehearsal that afternoon. She twisted the corner of her mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude, but honest, Emily, I’m very happy.” She tried to infuse joy into her flat sounding voice.

Emily rolled her eyes. Picking up the cutting board, she scraped vegetables into the salad bowl.

“Teagan, dear, dinner won’t be for a while. There’s a bag of chips in the pantry if you’d like a snack.” Yvonne’s accent was more British than eastern European. The socialite looked out of place with her coiffed hair and expertly applied makeup and Rose’s apron. The daughter of a European princess was more accustomed to grand ballrooms and African safaris than cooking meals for the ranch hands.

Teagan’s laugh was deep. “I’d devour the bag, but I’m on a strict diet until the end of my tour, otherwise I won’t fit into my performance gown. If I were the size of Emily—”

“I’m not skinny.” Emily’s mouth twisted.

“Honey, you’re a rail, which is unfair because you eat more than any of these ranch hands.”

“I’d hardly call you heavy.”

“Now I know you’re just being nice. I’ve never been thin like the rest of the Whitloch girls, which is something I’m just going to have to accept. But since I’m here, what can I do to help?”

“Nothing.” Yvonne wiped manicured hands on her apron and glanced about the kitchen. “Emily and I have developed a routine. She makes the salad. I boil the potatoes. And we both cook the roast. We’ll be ready when the ranch hands march through that door. Why don’t you practice? I love hearing you play.”

“If you’re sure I can’t help…”

“Positive.” Yvonne fluttered her hands at her.

Teagan turned away then looked over her shoulder at her. “When I was riding through the woods, I saw someone.”

Yvonne stared at her, bright light in her eyes shaded to confusion. “Who?”

“A man. I didn’t actually see him. I heard a twig snap and knew someone was nearby. When I called out, the man responded.” She remembered the sound of his voice—deep and rich. The warmth she’d felt when she’d first heard it returned like a comforting stroke from a loving hand. Her pulse jumped, and she gritted her teeth. She didn’t want to remember that part of the encounter.

“What did he say?”

“Something about not meaning to frighten me, but he hadn’t frightened me, and I told him that.” Her voice turned edgy. “But the way he spoke made it seem as if he’d walked through our woods before. He seemed…comfortable.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’ve ridden through the woods a few times and have never encountered anyone.” A frown pressed across Yvonne’s smooth forehead. “The ranch hands have never said anything. They’re all over the ranch.”

“Except they don’t let the cattle graze near the bluffs.” Teagan glanced at Emily who said nothing.

Her half-sister stared at the salad bowl and shredded. Water droplets from the torn leaves sprayed water across the countertop.

“What about you, Em? You ride near the bluffs. Have you seen anyone?”

Emily picked up the bowl and stared at her. “No.” She set the bowl on the far counter and ripped more leaves.

Teagan arched a brow at her half-sister’s back and wondered about Emily’s curt response. It was Rose’s business if she allowed someone to hike through her ranch, assuming Crystal Creek was her ranch.

“Maybe you heard the wind,” Yvonne said. “You seemed distracted when you arrived.”

Teagan gave a dry laugh. Could finding her husband in bed with another woman be termed a distraction? How about heart-ripped-out-of-her-chest wretchedness?

“Sound is my life, Yvonne. I know the difference between the wind and a voice, but if there’s some reason I shouldn’t know about this person…”

Emily’s shoulders bunched and lifted to her ears.

“Are you sure I can’t help with dinner?” She spoke too quickly. “Just because I’m a violinist doesn’t mean I don’t know how to cook.”

“We have everything under control, but your playing would give cooking dinner the appropriate ambiance.” Yvonne’s smile looked strained.

“If I have time later, I’ll practice. Right now, I’ll look in on Dad. Do you want me to take anything to him? I can give him his medication.”

Yvonne jerked her gaze to Emily. If Teagan’s stepsister was supposed to respond, she didn’t. Instead, she added more lettuce leaves to a bowl overflowing with green.

“I’m sorry, dear.” There was a slight tremor in Yvonne’s invoice. “Your father isn’t here. I thought you knew.”

Chapter Three

Teagan stilled the lump rising in her throat. What was Yvonne talking about? Where had their father gone? She glanced at Emily who was engrossed in tearing lettuce leaves.

“Yvonne, no one’s told me anything about Dad. Is he better? Did he leave? Wouldn’t that be just like him? He never stays in one place.” The quiver in her stomach didn’t confirm the lightness in her voice.

Emily’s hands stilled. She looked at Teagan through her lashes. “He isn’t here because he’s slipping.”

“You mean mentally?”

Emily nodded. “His mind isn’t like it used to be.”

“That doesn’t seem possible. Dad’s smarter than anyone I’ve ever known.” Her chest felt hallowed out. “Emily, I’m sorry. I should’ve been here.”

“There wasn’t anything you could’ve done.” Emily’s eyes filled, and she looked away. “When he first came back, Mom thought she could take care of him, but with all that’s been going on…”

Teagan's voice softened. “Where is he?”

“There’s a place in Denver that specializes in dementia. They’ll keep him until…” Her voice broke.

Until he died were the words she knew her sister couldn’t say. She couldn’t say them either.

“I’m sorry, Em.” Teagan gulped a sob. She had to be strong for her half-sister. She crossed to her and wrapped her thin frame in her arms. “My next performance isn’t until this weekend. I’ll share some of the burden. I’ll talk to Rose to see how I can help.”

Emily didn’t pull away. She sniffed. “Mom won’t let you. She knows how important this tour is. We all do.”

“I’ll talk to her. When is she coming back?”

Emily lifted a shoulder. “Soon, I hope.”

“There’s plenty I can to until she returns. Now, if you’re sure you don’t need my help with dinner, I’ll practice until dinnertime.”

“That’d be nice. You always make everything sound so beautiful when you play.” Emily’s smile was damp. Her blue eyes glistened from the tears.

Teagan brushed a strand of hair off Emily’s forehead. “You have no idea how much it means to hear you say that.”

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Her first thought was to call cancel. The performance had drained her. She wanted to bask in the music, not confront her husband of his infidelity. The sooner she met with him the sooner she could end their marriage. If he tried to talk her into forgiving him, she would be firm. As charming and as handsome as he was, she now recognized his weakness for women. She couldn’t stay married to an unfaithful man.

She donned a spring coat that covered her performance gown and slipped through a side door to the street to join the crowd moving along the sidewalk. She’d parked on the street near the coffee shop where she had agreed Will. She didn’t know how long their meeting would last and she didn’t want walk through the concert hall parking garage late at night. The night was cool and she huddled into her jacket wishing she’d worn a something warmer. The sign for the coffee shop loomed in the distance. Her pace slowed. Why had Will wanted to meet with her? What did he have to say in person that he couldn’t say over the phone, or better yet, through his attorney?

She stopped in front of the door and stared through the plate glass emblazoned with the coffee shop’s name in bold, red letters. At a table near the window sat Will. Her heart took a startled leap. He was devastatingly handsome, his mouth enticingly sensuous, his dark eyes heavily lashed though lacking in the warmth she’d remembered. He was talking on his phone. As if he felt her watching him, he looked around. It was night, so she knew he couldn’t see her.

Run away.

The thought shot through her. It stunned her. Where had it come from? She’d never run away from anything in her life, but now she wondered if she should leave, not bother to meet Will, never let him know she stood outside the coffee shop and watched him.

She glanced at the street. The evening traffic inched down the street. A limousine with darkened windows crept so slowly it almost seemed to stop. She gave a soft laugh. The occupants were probably staring at her and laughing at how confused she must appear.

“Teagan?”

She turned to the coffee shop. Will was holding the door open.

“What are you doing out here? Come inside. You have to be freezing.” His voice dripped with the honey sound that used to send a thrill through her core. The sharp tip of his head didn’t hide his impatience.

“I don’t think our meeting is good—”

He moved toward her and placed his hands on her shoulders. His touch was cool. She hunched her shoulders against the shiver and moved away.

“Come inside.” He dropped his hands to his side. The lines around his mouth deepened making him look harder. As if sensing her reaction to his expression, his eyes softened. “I’ve missed you.”

Two women walked past them and glanced at him. Their exchanged glances was clear to Teagan. They were drawn to Will’s handsome face. Will acted as if he hadn’t noticed, but she wasn’t fooled.

“Let’s do this another night. I’m tired.” She looked at the passing pedestrians. She couldn’t look at him. She still loved him. She knew he could talk her into returning to the coffee shop, or worse, back to their condominium.

“How was the performance tonight?” The sincerity in his voice could almost convince her he cared. Touching her arm, he guided her next to the building and out of the moving throng.

“The audience seemed to like it.”

“What about you? You’re your own best critic.” He used the words she’d spoken over the years. He leaned against the building in that way that made him look like the sexy boy from high school who looked cool even when he didn’t do anything.

“The performance is over. I’m already thinking about the next one.”

“Your European trip.” The corners of his eyes seemed to tighten.

His tone sounded so natural, but there was something in his voice that made her look at him. “You’ve known about it for months.”

His mouth curved. “I’m not denying that. No need to get defensive.”

Just hearing him say that made her defensive. She wanted to argue that she wasn’t, and she would sound defensive.

“Good night, Will.” She turned away.

He was at her side. “Teagan, wait. Look, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She snorted. That he was questioning her about her tour was hardly as upsetting as catching him in bed with Ginny. Is that why she felt someone was watching her? Was Ginny standing in the shadows waiting for her to leave so she could join Will? She glanced down the street. A limousine was idling at the end of the block? The same limo? She was hardly a limo expert. One looked like any other.

Will reached for her hand. She shifted out of his reach.

“How about I walk you back to your car? Are you parked at the concert hall?”

“Don’t waste your time. I’m sure you have other places you’d rather be.” She looked straight at him, her meaning clear.

She could see the argument building behind his eyes.

As if sensing her suspicion, his face relaxed.

“I’m where I want to be. I’ll walk you to your car.”

“I don’t need protection, Will. I’ve walked alone downtown, thousands of times.”

“Tonight you can walk with me.”

Tired of arguing, she moved down the sidewalk.

“I met with my attorney.” His voice was flat, but she detected an underlying excitement that made her cringe. “I’m hoping we can work things out but thought I should talk to someone just in case.”

She stiffened. She hated being suspicious. “What did you and he discuss?”

“She. My attorney is a woman.”

She exhaled slowly trying to ease the tightness in her chest. That he’d chosen a woman shouldn’t’ve surprised her. She wondered if Ginny knew.

“What did she say?”

“We discussed the community property law—”

Her surprise froze her heart. “Are you after my inheritance?”

“That would be a little difficult since your father’s still living.”

“Remember, you did sign a prenup.”

“Yeah, about that.” He dragged fingers through his hair. “This is something that can be easily worked out.”

“What can be worked out?”

“An equitable division of your earnings.”

“You have a successful medical practice. Why would you want part of my earnings?”

“It isn’t what I want. That’s how the law is written. The spouse earning the lesser income, which is usually the wife, is entitled to share in the income of the spouse with the greater earning power, but in our case, I earn less than you. You have several sources of income with your orchestral position, your guest performances and your recordings. Because your earnings exceed mine, I’m entitled to a share of them. The law looks upon the emotional support I’ve given you during our marriage as having contributed to your success, therefore—”

“Good night, Will.” Shock and pain rose within her. She turned away not wanting to look at the handsome face that had learned another way to use her. She strode down the sidewalk.

“I’ll give you time to think about what I told you. I’ll call you in a few days,” he called after her.

“Please. Don’t.” She released a weak, defeated breath.

The crowd streamed around her. She could feel their stares. If Will had thought to follow her, he’d changed his mind. Her heart pounded with each step that pulled her away from Will. She should’ve known he had an ulterior motive to meeting with her. Her attorney had warned her, but she had hoped the conversation would turn toward reconciliation. Ha! She was a fool. Hot tears streamed down her face.

She was a fool who was still in love with Will Monroe. Phin stood in the shadows, the coat collar pulled tightly around his neck. The buttress of a building created when architecture offered efficiency as well as splendor hid him from the view of the masses crowding the downtown mall. The cold pressed against his scarred skin making it sting. His mended bones ached from standing motionless. He didn’t care. He couldn’t ignore the discomfort rubbing the inside of his chest. Discomfort that wouldn’t ease until he knew Teagan was safe.

“Sir?” His chauffeur balanced a hand beneath his elbow.

“Not much longer, Rupert.”

“It’s been too long already, sir. I’ll walk you to the car.”

Phin leaned forward. He narrowed his eyes for a better view of Teagan. A group of women rushed around her blocking her from his view.

He cursed. “I can’t see her. Is she still on the street? Where did she go?”

“I’ll escort you to the car. She’s walking along the sidewalk. She’ll be easy to follow. Please, sir.” The anxiety in his voice made Phin look at the man who had been faithful to him since the accident, if what had happened to him had been an accident.

“Hurry. I don’t want to lose sight of her.”

Rupert wrapped an arm around Phin’s waist. Strength drained from Phin, and he leaned on Rupert’s arm. He had stood for too long. the entire day had been exhausting. Would he never regain his strength? Rupert pressed the limousine’s fob, and the locks clicked open on the still running car. He helped his employer into the backseat and strode to the driver’s side.

Phin’s breathing was labored. He wanted to collapse into the seat, but he had to keep track of Teagan, make sure she was safe and had reached her car. She had to be familiar with downtown. She lived downtown, but tonight, the discomfort gnawing on his soul wouldn’t rest until he could confirm she was safe. Her meeting with Will had stirred something inside Phin, something he couldn’t shake.

“Are you comfortable, sir?” Rupert’s dark eyes shifted to the rearview mirror.

Phin stared out the side window. “Drive, please.”

The car rolled away from curb. Phin caught a glimpse of Will. The man slowed his pace, his face broke into a smile, and he opened his arms wide. A woman with a mass of red hair, wearing a short coat and thigh high boots, stepped into his embrace, and he closed his arms around her.

Phin shifted his gaze away. He gave a soft snort. He had wondered if there was another woman. Will was handsome, more so than Phin had been before the accident. He could see why Teagan had been drawn to Will.

But the woman. He tried to turn his head to get another glimpse, but Rupert had guided the car past the couple. He tried to turn his head to look out the rear window. Pain swept through him, scooping air from his lungs. He’d lost his chance. If the woman seemed familiar, it was a coincidence. He’d spent most of his life surrounded by attractive women. It only made sense that one beautiful woman would remind him of another.

Teagan. He stared at the throng crowding the street. Where was she?

“Do you see her, sir?”

Phin was about to utter an impatient no, when he spied her standing between parked cars and checking traffic before she rounded one car to open the driver’s door.

“Slow down.” Phin wanted to make sure she got into her car safely.

Seeing that his car had stopped for her, she offered a quick wave. Her car’s lights flashed. She opened the door and climbed inside. She was safe.

“Take me home,” Phin said.

Rupert gave a slow nod and guided the car into the traffic.

The car moved past her. She lifted her gaze and stared at the blackened windows. A frown pressed between her brows, and her head turned, her gaze following the car.

“Yes, frown at me.” Phin rasped. “Wonder who sits in this car that seems to be following you, but don’t ask me why. Even I don’t know the answer.”

Phin collapsed into the seat and closed his eyes. Now he could release himself to the pain that willingly filled his body like blood pumping through his veins. Conscious thought left his mind. He couldn’t stay above it. He slipped into the darkness. It would only be for a little while. A night’s rest and he could face his miserable life of existing. Death was the gift he longed for and the gift that continued to evade him.

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He’d been desperate to find financial backing for his architectural firm. His designs had garnered attention of some of the wealthiest developers in the world. Over scotch and hors d’oeuvres, Max had offered him the capital he needed. The agreement was concluded with a handshake.

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Chapter Four

Teagan spent the night in the room she’d slept in since her mother, Brenda, had decided she’d had enough of single motherhood and had told Max, her ex-husband that summers were his turn to watch Teagan and her brother Jake.

Rose had decorated each bedroom in her house with complete bedroom sets, curtains and stocked the en suite bathrooms with towels, thick rugs to keep feet warm during the winter and toiletries. It was nicer than Teagan’s bedroom at her mother’s home. As a child, she couldn’t wait for summer when she could sleep in a room with lace curtains and a bed piled with embroidered pillows. While her half-sisters, brother and half-brothers rode horses and played in the barn, she’d cloister herself in the music room and practice, contented to live inside the beauty that filled her with joy and peace.

Last night she’d practiced until two in the morning not realizing the late hour until she was too tired to hold the bow. When she had crept out of the room, she’d found Yvonne seated in front of the fireplace, a cup of tea resting in her clasped hands.

“Are you finished?” Yvonne had asked.

Teagan pressed fingers to her lips. “I didn’t mean to keep you up.”

“Honey, there’s nothing I love more than to hear you play.” Yvonne’s carefully painted lips had stretched into a smile that showed her delight.

Teagan was grateful the family loved to hear her play.

Knowing she couldn’t stay in bed, she flung back the covers and buried her feet into the thick pile of the accent rug covering the wood flooring. The orchestral rehearsal wasn’t until later this afternoon which gave her time to practice.

And call her lawyer.

She went cold inside. She didn’t want to spend time before her tour trying to hammer out details of a divorce, but she didn’t want to tour knowing that she’d have to make that decision eventually. It would affect her performance, and she’d let nothing interfere with her music. She’d worked too hard to let Will’s indiscretion steal her dream.

With her next album in the planning stages, she wanted to scout the ranch for places to try some recording innovations she’d been considering. The weather was warming which would give her the opportunity to scout the property and find areas where the acoustics would complement the pieces she’d record.

After a quick shower, Teagan pulled on riding pants and a shell and vest and dragged on her boots. Her hair still damp, she pressed her riding cap over her head. She lifted her violin case from the padded bench at the foot of the bed and rushed down the hallway. A hint of brewed coffee greeted her at the top of the stairs. She hadn’t thought she was hungry, but now her stomach growled. She rushed to the great room hoping she hadn’t missed breakfast.

The dining room was empty. Yvonne stacked platters of leftover ham, scrambled eggs and Belgium waffles onto a trolley.

Teagan skidded to a stop. “Breakfast is over?”

Yvonne looked up from the trolley. “Good morning to you, sleepyhead. Yes, the ranch hands just left, but come into the kitchen, and I’ll fix you something.”

“I don’t need to eat anything. It’s probably a good idea if I skip breakfast since I need to be careful about eating too much before my tour.”

“Nonsense. Everyone has to eat the most important meal of the day. Follow me. I’ll heat the ham and make you an omelet.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll eat a bowl of cereal.”

Yvonne scowled. “We’ll compromise. How about a croissant and a cup of tea?”

Teagan laughed and was surprised when the tension in her chest eased away. “I won’t say no to a croissant.” In the kitchen, she set her violin on the bench near the mudroom entrance and placed a kettle on the stove. “Have you heard from Rose?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. She came home last night.”

Teagan whirled around. “She’s here? Where is she? Is she sleeping in?”

“Like your stepmother would ever sleep in.” She gave a dry laugh. “She’s at the assisted care center visiting your father.”

Teagan’s heart beat dully. “I need to visit him. Does he have visiting hours?”

“The facility is open to visitors until seven o’clock in the evening.” Yvonne’s voice was flat.

“Have you visited him?”

“Everyday. Not that it does any good. He doesn’t remember me.” She exhaled heavily. “Which might be a good thing.” Her red lips twisted into a smile that didn’t reveal joy, but pain.

“I’ll visit him, too.” Teagan didn’t know when, but she’d make time. He hadn’t been much of a father to her or to any of his children, but it was time to push past the bitterness and spend as much time with him as she could. She filled her teacup with boiling water and carried it to the breakfast nook. Yvonne placed a croissant and a tub of marmalade in front of her.

“I’m going for a ride this morning.” Teagan slathered marmalade over the croissant. “I’ll visit Dad when I leave for rehearsals this afternoon.”

“That would be nice but be forewarned—he may not remember you.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.” Her father had often criticized her for practicing instead of spending time outdoors.

The doorbell rang.

Yvonne tilted her head. “I wonder who that could be. I’ll be right back.”

Teagan’s surprise turned to dread. “Wait a minute, Yvonne.”

“What is it, dear? You’re so pale. Are you expecting bad news?”

“You could say that.” She pushed herself away from the table. “I’ll answer the door, but if you hear me shout, call the sheriff.”

“I’ll come with you.” Yvonne followed her to the door.

“No, stay here. I can handle this myself. Rose still keeps a gun in the hall table drawer, right?”

“A gun?” Yvonne gasped.

Teagan pushed through the door and strode across the great room to the foyer. Through the side light next to the front door, she caught the blurred image of someone wearing shorts and holding something in his arms.

She jerked open the door.

The young man standing on the porch opened his mouth, his eyes even wider, and stepped backward. The vases of roses he carried slipped in his arms and he crammed them against his chest.

“I’m sorry.” Teagan touched two fingers to the bridge of her nose. “I thought you were someone else.”

“I’m just delivering flowers,” the man said. “I feel sorry for the person you thought I was.”

“Don’t.” She stared at the deep red roses lifting graceful blooms to the sky. “Who are the flowers for?”

The man titled his head to read the card. “Teagan Monroe.”

“I’m Teagan. Who are they from?”

“I don’t know.”

She knew. “I don’t want them. Throw them away or deliver them to some hospital.”

“But I got eight more in the van.” He nodded to the white vehicle parked in the circle drive.

“Eight?” She felt weak. Would Will never understand she didn’t want him in her life?

“We’ll find places for them.” Yvonne stood behind her.

“I don’t want these in the house, Yvonne. How did he I would be here?”

“Because you always come here when you need to get away. All you children do that. I’ll take care of the flowers. You go for a ride.”

“Fine, but I need to tip this guy. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll tip him. Go for your ride.”

“Thanks, Yvonne.” She glanced at the roses again. This was typical of Will. She felt hollow inside. Whenever they’d have a fight, he’d surprise her with dozens of roses. He never sent her flowers any other time – only as a peace offering. “I wish you’d throw them away.”

“You’ll never know what becomes of these flowers.” Yvonne placed hands on Teagan’s shoulders. Her smile was motherly.

Teagan hugged her. “Thanks,” she whispered and crossed the great room to the kitchen.

Chapter Five

In the barn, Teagan saddled Champagne and strapped her violin case to the saddle’s jockey. She stuck a water bottle in one of the saddle bags. She guided Champagne through the meadow she had raced through the day before. Champagne glanced at Teagan as if asking when they would run.

Teagan rubbed the horse’s neck. “I shouldn’t’ve run you through the meadow yesterday. I was trying to get away from something terrible that I saw, not that you understand a word I’m saying.”

Champagne tossed her head and moved forward.

The images of Will and Ginny pushed into Teagan’s mind. If only she could erase them. She pressed her hand to her chest. It felt hot to the touch. She’d remember the moment she found she found her husband with another woman for as long as she lived.

She hadn’t checked her phone but was certain she had messages and texts from Will. Once she talked to her attorney, she’d text Will the information. Will was charming, he knew what to say to make her believe leaving him was the wrong decision, but after what she’d seen, she couldn’t believe he’d want to stay married.

Her phone rang. Each ring seemed to pull darkness around her. But it wasn’t the ringtone she’d attached to Will’s number. She’d also attached a specific ringtone to Ginny’s number, so she knew her ex-friend wasn’t calling. This tone sounded like a normal telephone ring. She pulled her phone from her pocket and glanced at a number she didn’t recognize. She’d called the attorney but had to leave a message. This number wasn’t his, but maybe he was calling from a different line.

She slid her thumb to the answer icon. “Hello?”

“Don’t hang up.” The words were soft, honeyed and rushed out of Will’s month.

“Oh, my God.” She choked. “Will, I told you—”

“Please, Teagan, —”

“Whose phone are you using?”

“I don’t know. I just borrowed one. Can you just hear me out?”

“Hear what? That what I saw was an accident? It was never meant to happen?” Hot tears filled her eyes.

“What I did was wrong. We…I did a terrible thing. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Does Ginny know that? Or were you planning to keep us both?” Bile rose up her throat.

He hesitated. He was thinking about it.

“Goodbye, Will.”

“Teagan, wait. You have to know I wouldn’t do that to you. Please, let’s just talk. I screwed up. If you walk away after this, I’ll understand, but if we could just try to work through it. I know you’ve been wanting to take that trip to India. I can get the other doctors to cover for me. We’ll stay as long as you want. A month. Two months.”

“You know I can’t stay away from the orchestra that long and you can’t stay away from your practice that long.”

“Fine. However long you can get. We’ll plan the trip for whatever you want.”

“You think a trip to India is going to fix this?”

“No, but I’m desperate. I don’t want to lose you.” She could hear his rough intake of breath. “I love you.”

She couldn’t breathe. Those were three words he rarely said to her, and didn’t say well, even though she told him almost daily she loved him. He would smile, kiss her, but wouldn’t say the words. Apparently, his love for her was supposed to be understood.

“Teagan, are you still there? Did you hear me?”

She clasped a hand over her eyes. “I heard you.” Her voice cracked.

“Please don’t cry. I know I hurt you. God, if I could just take it back—”

“You can’t.”

“Let’s meet somewhere. Not at the condo, I’ll get a room at the Tabor Palace on Sixteenth Street.”

“I know where it is. That’s not a good idea, Will. I need a few days. I’m going to talk to my lawyer.” She could hear him tense. “I don’t know what you expected me to do.”

“But a lawyer. That’s a little extreme.”

“What you did was extreme. Did you tell Ginny you were going to make this call?”

“My marriage, our marriage, is none of her business.”

“I’m sure she’d be interested to know that.” Teagan’s laugh bordered on tears. “Goodbye, Will.”

She slid her finger over the screen then blocked the number.

Will wouldn’t give up. He had a successful medical practice because he refused to give up. When she first met him, she’d been surprised then flattered by his attention and persistence. She had let him wine and dine her, and when the marriage proposal came two months later, she’d accepted with the condition he’d sign a prenuptial agreement. Her father’s idea, not hers. He’d been quiet at first and she had been certain she’d never see him again. It took him less than a minute to agree to her terms.

She reached the forest. Champagne stepped like a ballerina along the path and through the trees. Teagan dipped her head beneath the branches and peered through trunks for an open area that might provide adequate acoustics for a recording. Then she spied it. The grove they had called the cathedral with towering aspen that arced over a clearing. As a child, she had loved riding to this area.

She slid from the saddle and tethered Champagne to a tree. She walked to the clearing and gazed up through the treetops to a circle of blue sky. And she sang. Her voice loud and clear, she closed her eyes and let the notes float from her lungs. The tops of the trees captured the music and spread it through the trees. She opened her eyes. She felt not alone.

Through the clearing, she saw a form. Her breath came in little sips, and she backed away. But it wasn’t something. It was someone. A man. At first, she thought she was looking at Will. But this person was stronger and more powerfully built. His face was shadowed, but the way he carried himself, she could tell he was someone who had a position of authority. Or some leadership role—like the leader of a cult. Her heart squeezed tight and shrunk inside her chest.

“Who—?”

“Please, don’t be frightened.” His voice was composed and low and familiar. He was the man who spoke to her yesterday.

He lifted his palm as if to calm her. His movement wasn’t smooth. It was jerky as if doing so were painful.

“I’m not frightened.” She glanced at her horse, who munched grass. This man’s presence didn’t seem to faze Champagne. “You surprised me. Who are you and what are you doing on our land?”

“I have Rose Whitloch’s permission to be on this land.”

“That isn’t possible. I don’t believe you.” She pulled her phone from her pocket. “I’m calling the Sheriff’s department. You’re trespassing on private property. I’m going to tell the authorities to remove you from our land.” She punched the keypad.

“Wait.” His voice was unruffled, soft, but the underlying authority of someone used to giving commands and used to having them obeyed permeated that one word he’d uttered.

She stopped dialing, she lifted her gaze to meet his. “Why?”

“You can call the sheriff. He’s aware of my agreement with Rose, but before you do, call Rose. She can explain the situation to you or as much as she wants you to know.”

“She’ll tell me.” Teagan’s laugh held no humor. “I’m her stepdaughter. And you. Well, you’re no relation.”

“No, I’m not.” He nodded to the phone. “Call Rose.”

“Stay where you are.”

He gave a dry laugh. “Don’t worry. I won’t move.”

“I’m not worried. You’re on our land and you’ll do as I say.”

“Have I moved?”

“No.” She wondered why she couldn’t see his face. “Show yourself. Step forward.”

“I won’t be moving.” He sounded weary. “Please. Call Rose. The sooner we can end this conversation, the better.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” She dialed Rose’s cell phone number.

Her stepmother answered on the fourth ring.

“I know you’re with Dad, so I won’t keep you,” Teagan said. “I’m in the woods and I’ve encountered a trespasser—”

“He’s not a trespasser, though I’m surprised you saw him.”

“I’m with him now.”

“Where are you?”

“In the woods near the bluffs.”

“He must be feeling better. I didn’t think he could walk that far.”

“What do you mean?” Teagan looked at the man who hadn’t moved. She didn’t see a horse. She hadn’t heard any vehicle, but to reach this part of the forest, he would have had to walk.

“Never mind. Go back to the house, Teagan. He has my permission to be on the ranch.”

“But why?” She knew that man was looking at her. He had won this round, but she’d make sure this was the last.

“It doesn’t matter.” I’ll be home later this afternoon. We can talk then. Why don’t you plan to stay for dinner?”

“I have rehearsal this afternoon, but I’ll drive to the care center on my way to town. How’s Dad?”

“He’s having a good day today. Not saying much, but he’s relaxed and sleeping.”

“I’m sorry this is so hard on you, Rose. I’ll help any way I can.”

“You have enough going on. I’ll see you later this afternoon.”

Teagan didn’t say goodbye. Rose had already disconnected the call.

“It appears you’re telling the truth, Mr.—” She lifted her gaze and stared into the forest.

The place where the man had stood was vacant.

Chapter Six

“Hello?” Teagan’s voice echoed against the trees. She turned around. No one.

Where had he gone? She raced to the place where he had stood.

“Hello?”

Nothing. He couldn’t have gone far. When he’d lifted his hand his movements were awkward, bordering on pain. If lifting his hand was painful, walking would be, too. Wherever he’d gone, it couldn’t be far.

She strode to her horse and loosened her reins. He wasn’t going to walk away from her. She’d tell him she knew he had permission to be on the ranch, and then she’d find out why. She swung into the saddle.

Then stopped.

Rose had said she’d explain everything this afternoon. Whoever the man was, Rose felt the need to give him some privacy.

And free reign on her land.

How curious. Rose had always defended her property. When Max, Jr., had tried to convince her to sell part of it to a developer, she had stood her ground.

Why was this man allowed to trespass? The answer lay with Rose. Teagan turned Champagne toward the house. This afternoon, she’d learn that answer from Rose.

\* \* \*

The visit with her father had left Teagan speechless. If he was having a good day, she didn’t want to see the bad ones. The facility had a smell of something old and stale. It gave her a start, and she didn’t want to think about the people who lived in this place. Her father lived in this place.

\* \* \*

Teagan exited the highway to the ramp leading into downtown. She didn’t park her car in the underground parking of her condominium building. She didn’t want to risk seeing Will. Seeing him would turn into a lengthy conversation, and she didn’t want to arrive at the orchestral rehearsal late. Instead she parked in the garage next to the concert hall. She unloaded her violin from the backseat where it had been strapped in place as if it were a child and followed the walkway to the concert hall’s underground tunnel.

“Teagan, wait.” Will’s voice floating through the passageway made her blood freeze.

Never had he attended a rehearsal. When they had spoken earlier she had told him she would contact him after she talked to her attorney. Why couldn’t he wait?

“I’m going to be late, Will. I’ll call you later.” She kept walking.

Running footsteps closed in from behind. She knew he would touch her. She went rigid. There was a time when she longed for his touch. Not anymore. She didn’t want anything to do with him. Growing anger flooded her, and she purposely turned to face him.

A frown dipped between his brows, and he slowed his gait. “I won’t keep you, Teagan. I need to talk to you. When’s your rehearsal over?”

“There’s no set time that it ends.” That wasn’t entirely true. Some musicians would stay late and continue to rehearse. She usually stayed late.

“Then I’ll sit in the audience and wait.” His eyes were dark and seemed to search her face for the truth in her statement.

“I’d rather you didn’t.” She didn’t want to look into his heavily lashed dark eyes, but she couldn’t look away. She hoped the lie didn’t bloom on her face. She was a bad liar, and she knew it. So did he.

“Why? People come to rehearsals all the time. What difference does it make if I come?”

“Because you’ve never come to any of my rehearsals.”

He laughed and lifted his gaze to the ceiling. His laugh always did have that cocky tone. “I have a medical practice, Teagan.”

She felt the blood drain from her face. Before, she had tolerated his arrogance. He was handsome, and he was charming. That he loved her made her ignore his condescending remarks.

Other women would stare at him even though he was with her. She thought he hadn’t noticed their obvious admiration. He had her fooled–until yesterday.

His laugh vanished, making her wonder what expression had appeared on her face.

“Look, I’m sorry.” He reached toward her.

She stepped away.

He gave a heavy exhale and dropped his hands to his side. “If you really don’t want me at the rehearsal, I won’t come.”

“I don’t want you there.” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Fine, I won’t come, but I need to talk to you. Call me after the rehearsal. I’ll make reservations at the Castle’s Chair.”

Teagan’s mouth dried. That was the most expensive restaurant in Denver. “I’m hardly dressed to dine there.”

That sly smile spread across his face. “You will be after you come home and change.”

“My home is in Crystal Creek. Until I can find another place.”

“You moved out?”

“I will. I’m not staying at the condo as long as you live there. You can have the condo.”

“Are you saying that’s part of our divorce settlement?”

Teagan turned away and moved down the corridor. “I’m not saying anything. My lawyer will have plenty to say.”

She heard his footsteps behind her.

“Please don’t follow me.”

The footsteps stopped.

She didn't know how she found the door. She jerked it open, pulled it shut behind herself, dropped her head against it, and wept.

\* \* \*

Chapter Ten

The sun was setting when Teagan left the concert hall that evening. She had stayed late to discuss the upcoming performance with the conductor. With her hands bandaged, she couldn’t play and hadn’t brought her violin to the rehearsal. She’d felt naked sitting in the concertmaster’s chair, flipping through the score and jotting notes in the margins, but never lifting her beloved instrument to her chin.

After the rehearsal, some of the string players offered to wait and walk with her to the parking garage. She’d insisted they leave. She didn’t know how long she’d be. They had their lives and schedules. She refused to interfere with their evening plans.

She hadn’t confided in anyone about her impending divorce, but chances were they suspected. The orchestra members were a close-knit community and secrets were hard to keep from one another.

After Ralph had picked her up at Phin’s home, he’d driven her to the doctor’s office. Her doctor had expressed amazement with the first aid Phin had conducted and confirmed what Phin had said earlier—properly treated, the rash would dissipate. She could perform that weekend. Ralph had wanted to drive her to the rehearsal, but she had declined. Her bandaged hands wouldn’t prevent her from driving, only from playing her violin.

She finished her conversation with the conductor. His main concern was that she could perform that weekend. After allaying his concerns, she followed the underground tunnel to the parking garage. The echo of her ballet flats bounced off the cinder block walls. In the garage, she made her way to her car sitting alone by a concrete pillar. The garage was cool, and she was anxious to climb into her car for some warmth. She pressed the key fob. The lights flashed, and the locks popped.

“Teagan.” Will moved from behind the pillar. His chin low, he looked at her past his hooded brow.

Fear plunged through her. She clutched her purse to her chest and stepped backwards.

“Oh, my God, Will. You scared me to death. What are you even doing here?”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.” His eyes turned hard, and she wondered at his edgy tone.

“Well, you did.” She moved past him. She tossed her purse into the passenger seat. “If you’re waiting for me, you’ve wasted your time. I’ve nothing to say to you.”

“Don’t worry, you’re lawyer said plenty.” She didn’t just detect disappointment in his voice. It was heavy with disapproval.

It was all she could do not grab her purse had clobber him in the head.

“What did you expect? After I found you in bed with the woman who I thought was my friend? How long has this been going on?” She held up her hand. “Never mind. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.” She climbed into the car had slammed the door.

He stood next to her door. “What I did was inexcusable. I want to go back to the way we were.”

His statement, the pain in his eyes, scooped air out of her lungs.

“Would you please roll down the window?” he asked.

The image of Ginny satisfying him rose in her mind. Teagan and Phin’s relationship had never included such acts.

Teagan had friends who discussed their sex lives and, after a few glasses of wine, laughed about the acts they’d performed. The graphic details made her look away. It was her cue to part company for the evening. She had no interest in hearing those tales which usually resulted in everyone sharing. She wasn’t the sharing type.

“I have nothing to say to you, Will,” she said.

“Fine. Don’t talk. Just hear me out.”

She shook her head and started the engine. “You won’t say anything I’ll ever want to hear. Put it in writing. Send it to my lawyer.”

“Teagan, don’t let it end this way.” The pain in his voice made her catch her breath.

Tears filled her eyes and she looked at him through the glass. The garage lights reflected off her window and onto his face accenting the sculpted cheekbones and square jaw. He was so handsome. Her heart squeezed. It was the same feeling as when he’d proposed to her. She couldn’t believe this handsome man was in love with her, wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

“I…I…” The words caught in her throat, and she stared through the windshield at the empty garage that looked cold and bleak. The way she felt.

“Roll down the window, Teagan. I won’t hurt you. I just want to talk.”

She pressed her finger against the lever. The window whined into the casing.

“Give me fifteen minutes. We’ll meet wherever you want. Some neutral place. I want you to feel safe.”

The heaviness in her chest told her to drive away. She was never very good at doing what was smart when it came to Will. She loved him so much. He’d hurt her, but that didn’t erase the feelings welling in her heart. The first day she’d seen him, the first time he’d flashed her that sexy smile, the first time he’d whisked a glass of champagne off a passing tray at an orchestral fundraiser and had offered it to her. He was cocky and charming and funny, everything he said made the women at the soiree laugh, but he never stopped looking at her. He’d swept her off her feet. How could someone that handsome be attracted to her, the chubby musician who’d worn a long sleeved, high necked gown while the other svelte women had donned strapless gowns that accentuated tanned, toned arms?

“Where do you want to meet?” She’d have to call her attorney and tell him she was meeting Will. She could hear his tone dip into that lawyerly you’re-doing-this-against-my-advice tone.

“La Chateau.” He didn’t miss a beat.

Their first date was at the exclusive restaurant, which had impressed her. No woman entered the restaurant unless she were dripping with diamonds. Until Will, Teagan had never worn diamonds.

“No, let’s meet at the coffee shop on Glenarm Place.”

The corner of his mouth tightened. If he argued, there’d be no meeting.

“All right.” He knew she’d refuse to meet him. “When?”

“Tomorrow night, after rehearsal, but I’m not sure when that will be.”

His gaze dropped to her hands. The realization was a jolt. He hadn’t asked why her hands had been bandaged.

“Will you be able to perform with the orchestra?”

“I don’t know.” She shifted the car into drive forcing him away from the window. “Goodnight, Will.”

She didn’t want to look in her rearview mirror, but she had to have one last look at her handsome husband. The man who had promised to love, honor and obey. She jerked her gaze away from the mirror and guided the car down the drive lane. He didn’t seem like her husband anymore. Instead, she felt as if she had noticed some handsome stranger, with his windblown hair, his jacket collar turned up to ward off the still cool evenings. Some handsome man she’d accidentally encountered in the parking garage. He was so good looking her chest melted.

On the highway, she merged with the evening traffic and drove down the highway to Crystal Creek. She wondered at her stupidity to agree to a meeting with Will. The throb in her heart hoped this meeting would change what she’d seen in their bedroom a few nights ago, but that would never happen. She could never forget what he had allowed Ginny to do to him. It would be better if she didn’t meet with him. It would be better if she texted him and told him she’d changed her mind, or not do anything, just not go.

Such thinking was hopeless. She would go.

\* \* \*

“Teagan?”

She turned to the coffee shop. Will was holding the door open.

“What are you doing out here? Come inside. You have to be freezing.” His voice dripped with the honey sound that used to send a thrill through her core. The sharp tip of his head didn’t hide his impatience.

“I don’t think our meeting is good—”

He moved toward her and placed his hands on her shoulders. His touch was cool. She hunched her shoulders against the shiver and moved away.

“Come inside.” He dropped his hands to his side. The lines around his mouth deepened making him look harder. As if sensing her reaction to his expression, his eyes softened. “I’ve missed you.”

Two women walked past them and glanced at him. Their exchanged glances was clear to Teagan. They were drawn to Will’s handsome face. Will acted as if he hadn’t noticed, but she wasn’t fooled.

“Let’s do this another night. I’m tired.” She looked at the passing pedestrians. She couldn’t look at him. She still loved him. She knew he could talk her into returning to the coffee shop, or worse, back to their condominium.

“How was the performance tonight?” The sincerity in his voice could almost convince her he cared. Touching her arm, he guided her next to the building and out of the moving throng.

“The audience seemed to like it.”

“What about you? You’re your own best critic.” He used the words she’d spoken over the years. He leaned against the building in that way that made him look like the sexy boy from high school who looked cool even when he didn’t do anything.

“The performance is over. I’m already thinking about the next one.”

“Your European trip.” The corners of his eyes seemed to tighten.

His tone sounded so natural, but there was something in his voice that made her look at him. “You’ve known about it for months.”

His mouth curved. “I’m not denying that. No need to get defensive.”

Just hearing him say that made her defensive. She wanted to argue that she wasn’t, and she would sound defensive.

“Good night, Will.” She turned away.

He was at her side. “Teagan, wait. Look, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She snorted. That he was questioning her about her tour was hardly as upsetting as catching him in bed with Ginny. Is that why she felt someone was watching her? Was Ginny standing in the shadows waiting for her to leave so she could join Will? She glanced down the street. A limousine was idling at the end of the block? The same limo? She was hardly a limo expert. One looked like any other.

Will reached for her hand. She shifted out of his reach.

“How about I walk you back to your car? Are you parked at the concert hall?”

“Don’t waste your time. I’m sure you have other places you’d rather be.” She looked straight at him, her meaning clear.

She could see the argument building behind his eyes.

As if sensing her suspicion, his face relaxed.

“I’m where I want to be. I’ll walk you to your car.”

“I don’t need protection, Will. I’ve walked alone downtown, thousands of times.”

“Tonight you can walk with me.”

Tired of arguing, she moved down the sidewalk.

“I met with my attorney.” His voice was flat, but she detected an underlying excitement that made her cringe. “I’m hoping we can work things out but thought I should talk to someone just in case.”

She stiffened. She hated being suspicious. “What did you and he discuss?”

“She. My attorney is a woman.”

She exhaled slowly trying to ease the tightness in her chest. That he’d chosen a woman shouldn’t’ve surprised her. She wondered if Ginny knew.

“What did she say?”

“We discussed the community property law—”

Her surprise froze her heart. “Are you after my inheritance?”

“That would be a little difficult since your father’s still living.”

“Remember, you did sign a prenup.”

“Yeah, about that.” He dragged fingers through his hair. “This is something that can be easily worked out.”

“What can be worked out?”

“An equitable division of your earnings.”

“You have a successful medical practice. Why would you want part of my earnings?”

“It isn’t what I want. That’s how the law is written. The spouse earning the lesser income, which is usually the wife, is entitled to share in the income of the spouse with the greater earning power, but in our case, I earn less than you. You have several sources of income with your orchestral position, your guest performances and your recordings. Because your earnings exceed mine, I’m entitled to a share of them. The law looks upon the emotional support I’ve given you during our marriage as having contributed to your success, therefore—”

“Good night, Will.” Shock and pain rose within her. She turned away not wanting to look at the handsome face that had learned another way to use her. She strode down the sidewalk.

“I’ll give you time to think about what I told you. I’ll call you in a few days,” he called after her.

“Please. Don’t.” She released a weak, defeated breath.

The crowd streamed around her. She could feel their stares. If Will had thought to follow her, he’d changed his mind. Her heart pounded with each step that pulled her away from Will. She should’ve known he had an ulterior motive to meeting with her. Her attorney had warned her, but she had hoped the conversation would turn toward reconciliation. Ha! She was a fool. Hot tears streamed down her face.

She was a fool who was still in love with Will Monroe.

\* \* \*

Chapter Twenty-five

Teagan parked her car in the garage of the Denver skyscraper and waited while the engine ticked into silence. She hated that she had agreed to this meeting with her and Will’s lawyers. Nothing good could come of it.

Her attorney had called her several days ago with news that Will and his attorney were willing to discuss the settlement, but Teagan wondered if that was really Will’s intent. She couldn’t forget Phin’s words that she and Will wouldn’t divorce, but that was what she wanted. Will had betrayed her with Ginny. The pain of seeing them together had stabbed her with pain. He had dallied with Ginny. Had he dallied with others?

Ginny seemed to think so. Teagan remembered when she had seen Ginny at the hospital and the possessive way her former friend had looped her arm through Will’s. Something didn’t seem right. If they were so in love, why would Ginny feel insecure? Didn’t she believe that Will truly loved her? Teagan believed he did. She’d seen them in their compromising position. Why would Will be that close to Ginny if he didn’t love her?

She climbed out of the car and crossed the garage to the elevator, her heels tapping against the concrete. She heard another car drive through the garage. A car door opened and closed.

“Teagan.”

She froze at the sound of Will’s voice. Her pace slowed. She wanted to run to the elevator, pretend she hadn’t heard him, but the sound of rushed steps coming toward her made her slow her pace. She wondered if Ginny would be him, but she heard only one set of footsteps.

She turned to him. She swallowed convulsively, confused and heartsick.

He wore a suit that fit well across his broad shoulders. His tie swung across his chest. The last time she’d seen him wear a suit and tie was at their wedding, but she doubted the tuxedo counted. At the clinic, he wore custom tailored slacks and shirts.

He scuffed to a stop in front of her. He was breathless, his eyes bright, his mouth curving into a smile.

She stared at him and waited for him to say something.

“How are you?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes and turned away.

“Wait. I didn’t mean that like it sounded. I don’t know why I asked that. It just came out.”

“Like everything else about you.” She strode to the elevated and pressed the button.

She stared at the numbers above the elevator. They were stuck on P-three. Why had she waited for him? Now she would have ride in the elevator with him.

“Teagan, about what happened. I’m sorry—”

A couple moved into the elevator vestibule. She glared at Will. He glanced at the couple and stared at the floor indicator above the elevator. At last the doors slid open. Will stepped aside letting Teagan and the other couple enter. At the lobby level they exited. The other couple crossed the lobby.

Teagan walked toward the building elevators.

“Teagan, wait.”

Her eyes grew hot and grainy. She closed them trying to still the heat rising in her head. Why did she have to arrive at the same time he did? If they weren’t in a public place, she’d tell him what she thought of him. She passed some people who stopped and stared at her. She tilted her gaze to the floor. If these were music aficionados who recognized her, she didn’t want them to see her like this—upset that she was walking with her husband, upset that she was on her way to her lawyer’s office to discuss a divorce settlement with the man she’d thought she’d be with until death. Death. Will’s death. That sounded pretty good right now.

Heat flooded her face. How could she even entertain such a thought? But he had hurt her. How else could she feel after what he’d done? She stepped into the elevator and jabbed the button. Will followed. Other people positioned themselves around them.

The doors slid closed. She watched the floor indicator flash when it passed each floor. At last her attorney’s floor settled on the screen. The elevator glided to a stop. The other people parted and let her and Will exit. She glanced at the floor directory.

“Teagan, wait.” Will wrapped his fingers around her arm.

Her gaze fell to his hand, which felt cold, before looking into his eyes.

“I don’t want to do this. We’re meeting on the advice of our attorneys.” He released her and raked fingers through his hair.

“Good to know.” She strode down the hallway and pulled open the office door.

The receptionist notified her attorney’s assistant who appeared before Teagan could sit in the chair she had pegged as being as far away from Will as possible. The assistant told Will she would be with him shortly. She led Teagan down a hallway past cubicles packed with young men and women staring at computer screens and typing frantically. In the conference room, she sat next to her attorney, Patrick. On the opposite side of table sat a young woman wearing a tailored suit and designer glasses. She pasted on a professional smile, leaned across the table and introduced herself to Teagan as Kimberly something while shaking her hand. The Kimberly’s hand was ice cold and Teagan withdrew her own quickly ignoring the lift of the other woman’s eyebrows.

Patrick’s assistant led Will into the conference room. His smile inappropriately broad, he shook Patrick’s hand, nodded at Teagan and moved to the other side of the table. Smoothing his tie against his chest, he sat next to Kimberly.

Kimberly stared at screen of the laptop open in front of her. Patrick had his own laptop. He typed on the narrow keyboard. The clicking keys pounded inside Teagan’s head.

Kimberly’s head came up. “The first thing we want to discuss in the spousal support.”

Teagan fell back in her chair. “Spousal support? For what? Will and I both have careers. Why is spousal support even necessary?”

Patrick tapped an open palm toward her indicating he should be the one who should talk. “It’s state law.”

Teagan used to think his voice was calming. Now it grated. She folded her arms over her chest and leaned into her chair. “It isn’t necessary in our case. Will has a thriving practice.”

Will glanced at his attorney who ignored his client’s look.

“What are you telling me, Will?” Teagan leaned forward and planted her hands on the blond conference table. “Are you in financial trouble?”

“It’s a practice, Teagan.” There it was—that pandering tone Will used whenever he tried to convince her she wasn’t smart enough to understand what was being said.

His attorney’s sharp glance was clear—she should do the talking.

“I know what it’s called,” Teagan said. “You’ve always told me you make more money than you knew what to do with. Does Ginny know you’re having financial problems? That won’t fit into her plans.”

“Leave her out of this.” Will’s face turned cold. The warmth and care he had shown earlier never existed.

“I will. I’m not supporting you so you can support her.”

Will looked at his attorney. He opened his palms in that helpless way that said he tried to be nice and look how Teagan treated him.

Teagan glared at him. Her breathing turned hard and rapid.

“The first thing the court will ask is if there is a possibility of reconciliation,” Patrick said.

Teagan shook her head.

“Is there?” Will’s question caught her off guard, and she lifted her gaze to the hope in his eyes.

“Do I really have to answer that?” She looked at Will but the question was for her attorney.

“If there’s a possibility,” Patrick said. “The court will ask that the parties meet with a counselor of your choosing. Otherwise, the court will appoint one.”

“There’s no point,” Teagan said. “This marriage is over. I’m not sure it ever started. The sooner we can dissolve it the better, but I’m not paying anything to you.” She stared at Will. “You are a doctor. You’re earning potential is far greater than mine.”

“I’ll remind you that your husband supported you during your career.” Kimberly looked over her glasses at Teagan. “Emotional support has a value.”

Teagan choked a laugh. “If he had given me any support that had value, I would agree, but he focused on his practice, at least that’s what he told me. Were you lying about that?”

“We won’t resort to this type of language,” Kimberly said.

Teagan stared at Patrick. “Integrity has to be considered. Will had an affair. I can’t trust him. I want to review his financial and the revenue statements for his practice.”

Her attorney arched a brow at Will’s attorney.

“That’s unreasonable,” Will said.

His attorney’s scowl seemed to say that Will should have had a better response.

“Adultery is unreasonable,” Teagan said. “Until all your financial records have been reviewed by a forensic accountant of my choosing there’s nothing further to discuss, except that I want to enter our condo at a time of my choosing to collect my scores, computer, piano and other items I need for practicing and performing.”

“I’ll discuss that time with my client,” Kimberly said. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Fine.” Teagan rose and strode out of the room.

“Teagan.” Will called after her.

Tears burned her eyes when she rushed through the reception area. Her attorney’s assistant appeared and said something about waiting in her attorney’s office for a few moments. Teagan waved her away. A couple sat in the waiting chairs near a fish tank and watched her move through the lobby. Teagan pushed through the glass doors into the elevator lobby. She jammed the elevator call button. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and paced. What would she say if Will followed her? She couldn’t say anything. She didn’t trust her voice. If he came to her, she’d take the stairs, but if he followed her?

The elevator doors opened. She stepped inside and hit the lobby button. The doors slid closed. Will hadn’t followed her. She prayed she wouldn’t see him again. She folded her arms across her chest and hung her head. Seeing Will again would bring more pain than her heart could bear.

\* \* \*

It wasn’t until she had almost reached the ranch, when she heard a siren. She pressed her horse into a gallop and crested the hill. Below, an ambulance bumped over the service road toward the arena. In the middle lay a crumpled form. Ralph held the horse’s rein and stared at Rose and a ranch hand. They were hovering over someone lying between them. Teagan’s gaze shifted to the riding cap a few feet away from them. Not just anyone lay between them. It was Emily.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Teagan galloped down the hill to the arena. At the gate, she slid from her horse and ran through the opening. The paramedics had wheeled a gurney into the arena and knelt next to Emily. Rose stood a few feet away and watched.

“What happened?” Teagan was breathless when she reached them. She wrapped her hand around Rose’s and stared at Emily’s still form. Her heart drummed with her next question—was Emily okay? Clearly, she wasn’t. She asked anyway.

The paramedics talked into microphones hooked to their shirts. Their movements were smooth and fluid and filled with the reassurance they knew what they were doing.

“We’re not sure,” Rose said.

The paramedics bundled Emily and loaded her onto the gurney.

“I’m going to follow them.” Rose strode across the arena.

“I’ll drive you.” Teagan followed her.

“I’m taking my truck.” Rose didn’t face her but kept walking. “It might be better if you follow in your car. I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

At the hospital, Teagan turned off her engine and the string quartet filling her car vanished. She raced into the emergency room. A nurse’s aide led her down the hallway. The scent of sterility and antiseptic hit her full force. Flashing through her mind was the time she had spent there with Phin. In front of her, a nurse’s aide reached for the door, but Rose opened it before the aide touched the knob.

Teagan’s gaze flicked to Emily’s still form lying on the bed behind her mother. “Is she okay?”

“She finally woke up, but she’s groggy. Probably because of the pain medication the doctor gave her.” Rose stepped into the hallway.

Teagan wasn’t sure where the nurse’s aide went.

“They’re taking her to radiology,” Rose said. “Apparently, she broke her leg in the fall.”

“How did she fall? She’s ridden horses before she could walk.”

“I’m not sure we’ll know. She doesn’t remember falling. They found a room for her. They’ll take her there after they’ve finished with the X-rays and setting her leg.”

“Why is she being admitted for a broken leg?”

“I’m going to talk to the doctor about that now.”

“Poor Emily,” Teagan whispered. “She was looking forward to the competition this weekend.”

Rose pressed her mouth into grim line and nodded.

Two nurse’s aides came into the room, unlocked Emily’s bed and wheeled her down the hallway. Rose collected the bag holding Emily’s belongings. She and Teagan walked down the hallway that led out of the emergency room to an elevator lobby. An information booth sat in front of oversized revolving doors.

 Teagan’s paced slowed. Phin had said he would be away for a few days. Away where?

“What room will Emily in?” she asked Rose.

“Fourteen ten.” Parallel lines pressed into her stepmother’s brow.

“I’m going to ask the woman at the information desk something. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

She moved across the tiled floor to the circular desk. “Can you tell me what room Phineas Ellery is in?” she asked the woman seated in front of the computer.

The woman clicked through a couple of screens. “No one by that name is registered here.”

“Is anyone named Ellery registered?”

The receptionist gave her a hard stare. “I can’t give you that information.”

“I understand.” Teagan backed away, but her pulse rushed through her ears.

Was that why Marianne had been so abrupt? Because Phin wasn’t at home, but here at the hospital? What had happened?

She moved to the elevator bank. A young woman wheeled a cart of flowers through the lobby.

Teagan rushed to walk beside her. “Those flowers are beautiful.”

“I know. This is the best part of my job. I get to smell the flowers.” She pressed the elevator button.

“I was wondering, does the hospital have a burn unit?”

“The best in the nation. People from all over the world come here for treatment.”

“Is it in this wing?”

“No, it’s in the south wing on the third floor.”

“Can anyone go there?”

The woman shrugged. “Beats me. I see a lot of people there, but I’m assuming they’re relatives.”

The elevator doors opened. Teagan stepped in but stepped out and crossed the lobby to the south wing. At the flower shop, she bought a vase of red and yellow roses. She carried it to the elevator.

The third floor was lined with rooms with glass walls. A nurse’s station was positioned between every other room.

Teagan moved down the hall and stared through the glass of each room she passed. Phin’s thick hair at the top of a mound of covers was impossible to miss. She dragged open the sliding door.

“Miss, only relatives are allowed in that room.” A nurse rushed toward her.

“I’m his wife.” She lifted her hand to show the nurse her ring. The lie made her chest hurt.

“I didn’t realize he was married.” The nurse’s eyes widened.

Teagan lifted her brow and shrugged a shoulder.

“But he can’t have any flowers in the room”

Teagan handed the vase to the nurse and stepped inside. Her pace slowed and she crept toward the bed. She wondered how long it would be before the nurse realized Phin didn’t have a wife. Teagan would probably be banned from the hospital for telling that lie.

Phin wasn’t wearing his mask. Damaged skin twisted on one side of his face looking painful and pink. Heat rose inside Teagan, making her throat close. What had happened to him? She hadn’t asked because she didn’t think he would tell her. Marianne had made it clear it was none of her business.\*\*

“I told you I didn’t want to be disturbed.” Phin growled. He didn’t open his eyes. “The doctor said he would release me this afternoon. Do your job and find out what’s taking so long?”

Teagan moved a step closer. “I’ll tell the nurse.”

Phin’s eyes flew open. One was beautiful and dark surround with thick lashes. The other eye opened wide, but the lashes were sparse. He reached for the call button.

“Phin, wait.” She dropped her hand over his. “Please give me a few minutes.”

“How did you get in here?” Anger mounted in his voice. He was trying to intimidate her. “Only my staff is allowed to enter.”

“And your wife.”

His face turned as hard as his voice. “What? You told them you were my wife?”

She lifted her hand from his.

He turned away, disgust filling his eyes.

“I wanted to see you. I haven’t heard from you in several days. I thought I had said or done something that made you hate me, or that something had happened to you. I see I was right.”

“You weren’t right.”

“You weren’t admitted because you had nothing better to do.”

From behind her, the door dragged open. “Miss, you have to leave. Only relatives are permitted.”

Phin looked past Teagan. “She’s my wife.”

That Phin would claim her made her heart leap.

“Sir, I checked the records. There’s no mention of your having a wife.”

“Because she won’t be my wife for much longer. Until that happens, I’ll claim her.” He shifted his hard glittering glare at Teagan. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have a divorce settlement to discuss.”

“I’ll need to report this to the doctor.”

“Good. And tell him to quit procrastinating and release me.”

The nurse shook her head and left the room.

“Divorce settlement?” Teagan gave a soft snort.

“That is what you and your doctor husband are discussing, isn’t it?”

She gave a start. He was blunt—and accurate. “Unfortunately.”

She could see him stiffen and wondered why any discussion with Will would bother him, or why he would even care?

“What did you work out?” he asked.

“You’re rather inquisitive.”

“You invaded my privacy.”

“Because I was concerned. I hadn’t seen you or heard from you.”

“You’re repeating yourself. Did you ask your husband why he visited me in the ER?”

She shook her head. “No. There wasn’t an opportunity. We had a meeting with our attorneys and delved into the dissolution and the property division. We’ve made arrangements for me to go to the condo so I can collect some things. I have to move my piano and my scores out of the condo.”

“The old Tower building.”

“How did you know where I lived?”

“I didn’t. You just confirmed it. You had mentioned that you had moved into a condominium four years ago. The Tower was renovated four years ago.”

“And you would know that because you’re an architect. Did you work on that building?”

Phin pressed the nurse call button.

“I don’t know why this is such a secret. I could easily look up the information on the web and find out what happened. Fine. We won’t discuss that, but at least let me know when you’ve been released.”

He said nothing.

The nurse stepped into the room. “Mr. Ellery, did you need something?”

“This young woman—”

“Never mind. I’m leaving.” Teagan lifted her gaze to Phin’s.

If she’d hoped he would change her mind and open up to her about what had happened, she was disappointed. He said nothing but stared at the hexagonal window that framed a patch of blue sky.

She moved out of the room. In the hallway, she stared through the glass wall. The nurse moved around Phin’s bed and checked the monitors. Phin remained motionless and stared into the space in front of himself as if he were watching a movie. The nurse glanced up and met Teagan’s stare. Reaching to a panel behind Phin’s bed, she flipped a switch. A metal panel slid over the windows.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Teagan’s fingers felt hot and sticky around the steering wheel. She flexed them trying to cool them. It was early morning, the only time her attorney could schedule for her to return to the condominium when Will wouldn’t be there.

At the entrance to the condominium garage, she waved her access card over the reader. She rippled her fingers around the steering wheel again and waited until the door had risen. She guided her car into her parking space relieved to see that Phin’s car didn’t occupy the space next to hers. And relieved that Ginny’s car wasn’t parked in her space, but Ginny had her own parking space and her own condo in the building. Teagan didn’t want to think that now that she and Will had separated that Ginny was now living in their condo. She’d know soon enough.

She rode the elevator to the twentieth floor of the converted clock tower of the old department store. Her attorney had scheduled the time she could remove her belongings from the condominium. She would tag what she wanted to move. Tomorrow, the moving company would pack the items she’d tagged and move them into storage. Her piano would be stored at a friend’s house. She hadn’t looked for another apartment. She’d be leaving for her tour soon and wanted to focus on the performance, not apartment hunting.

She stared at the polished elevator doors reflecting an image of her—her eyes wide and bluer than she remembered, her skin pale. She looked as if she were walking to her execution. That was how she felt.

Four years ago, she and Will had stepped off this elevator and entered what she thought would be her new life. They had carefully planned their future, including starting a family, around her career.

Four years later, they still had no children. Her reputation had expanded beyond her dreams with recording contracts and invitations to perform with the world’s most prominent orchestras. Will’s practice consumed most of his time. He’d come home late and was on call evenings and weekends. She had thought his practice was flourishing, so why was he demanding spousal support in the divorce settlement?

The elevator glided to a stop.

“Twentieth floor.” The female voice of the elevator computer broke through her thoughts.

The swallow down her dry throat almost made her choke. She waved her hand over the reader. The door slid open into the foyer of her condominium.

She glanced about the room, quiet and sterile. It had never felt like a home, not the way the house at Crystal Creek did. She and Will had hired a decorator who worked for Ginny’s architectural firm, but the woman had quit before she started. Ginny had claimed she didn’t want to delay the decorating until she found a replacement and had taken over the project. Their condo now looked like Ginny’s condo on the eighteenth floor—all glass and chrome, not the warm, lush colors and furniture Teagan used in her apartment before she and Will had married.

She wandered through the foyer past the mirrored wall to the living room. The tap of her heels across the marble tile echoed into the vaulted ceiling. The paintings in the room were splashes of black and gray that held no meaning for her. Ginny had suggested Teagan place her paintings of early twentieth century Paris into storage. The colors were too vibrant and would detract from the scheme Ginny had recommended.

Why had Teagan agreed? Then she remembered. Will had liked Ginny’s suggestions.

Teagan passed through the living room only glancing at the closed double doors leading to Will’s office. In the bedroom, she opened the doors to her walk-in closet. She’d already taken the clothes needed for her tour and for everyday wear. What would she do with the rest? Place them in storage for now. She closed the doors and pressed an adhesive note on the mirrored surface. After labeling what she could claim as hers in the bedroom, she moved down the hallway to her studio and noticed that the door to Will’s office was open.

She started in fright, her arms flung wide as if she could fly away.

Will stepped out of the office. He looked at her. Only the flicker in his eyes showed his surprise at seeing her.

“Will.” She gave a soft exhale. “Didn’t you hear me come in?”

“I did.” His gaze rested on her in a way that made her uncomfortable.

“Then you should have said something, and what are you doing here anyway? This time was prearranged. You knew I didn’t want to see you.”

“I didn’t think we would see each other. I thought you’d come and gone.”

“Didn’t you notice that nothing’s been marked?” The disbelief in her voice rose over her irritation. Did he expect her to believe his absentmindedness?

He glanced about as if registering the logic of what she said. “No, I was working on some things. I hadn’t bothered to check anything. I went straight to my office.”

“I’ll come back.” She turned away.

“Teagan, wait.”

The disturbed tone in his voice made her stop. “Don’t make me do this, Will. Our attorneys set this time aside so I could prepare things for the movers. You knew I would be here.”

“Honest, I forgot.”

Her head ached. What else could he say to her that didn’t hurt?

“I’m hoping we can talk this through,” he said.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning is divorce the only solution?”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Are you serious? You’re having an affair with a woman I had thought to be my friend, and you think I’ll reconsider the divorce?”

He pressed his mouth into a white line. And waited.

Realization seemed to shine on her like morning dawn. She turned to him. “That’s exactly what you think. You think you can tell me that what I saw didn’t mean anything, that it was a mistake. The mistake is that you were caught.”

“That’s not true. Granted, I had a weak moment. I did something I shouldn’t have.”

“Doing something you shouldn’t have is what you say when you jaywalk, not when my friend…services you,” she said through clenched teeth. She strode across the living room.

“You’re right. What I did was wrong, more than wrong.” He was shouting.

“Lower your voice. What is it you really want, Will? It isn't to save our marriage. My father isn’t well. Is that what you’re waiting for? My inheritance so it can be included in the community property?”

“You’re not being fair, Teagan. I love you.”

Hearing those three words made her chest hurt. He never said them very well.

“Will?” Ginny stood in the archway leading to the kitchen. The pained look of distrust seeped into her porcelain face. Her eyes stretched wide. Her mouth trembled. She looked frightened. More than frightened. She looked scared to death.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Teagan’s heart leaped to her throat. She looked from Ginny to Will. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but this is stopping right now.”

Anger flashed in Will’s eyes. He glared at Ginny. “This is no game.”

Teagan glanced at the elevator on the opposite side of the condo from the kitchen. “How did you get in here, Ginny? How long have you been here? Will, did you tell her I was coming? Never mind. You two do whatever it is you do. I’m calling my attorney.” She strode to the elevator.

“Teagan, come back,” Will called after her.

“Will.” The shock in Ginny’s voice was palpable. “What are you doing?”

Teagan waved her hand over the elevator reader. The soft chime sounded and the doors slid open. She stepped inside. She heard footsteps running toward her. Her heart in her throat, she glanced over her shoulder. Will had almost reached her. Ginny ran after him and grabbed his arm. He tried to shake her loose. Tears streamed down her face. Her voice choked with tears, she was saying something, something Teagan couldn’t understand. Teagan waved her hand over the reader. The doors closed.

Her lungs gasped for air. She braced her hand against the door and stilled her stomach against the elevator’s descent and the roiling bile climbing up her throat.

How could Will be here when her attorney had specified that she wanted to be alone when she tagged her belongings for the movers?

And where had Ginny come from? She had walked out of the kitchen. How did she cross the condominium without Teagan seeing her? Will had looked just as surprised to see her. And he looked angry.

In the parking garage, Teagan dashed across the concrete to her car and locked the doors. She didn’t want Will to follow her. She didn’t want him to talk to her. She threw the car into gear and sped down the ramp.

“Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God,” she whispered brokenly.

 Someone blasted his horn when she jerked the steering wheel toward the next ramp. The garage door made its graceful lift. She sped beneath the door before it fully opened. Her eyes blurred with tears. She didn’t see, didn’t even look, for oncoming traffic. Her tires squealed when she hit the asphalt and angled the car onto the street.

She swallowed convulsively and dashed tears off her cheeks. Why did she think Will had fallen in love with her? She was nothing like Ginny with her brilliant red hair, her smooth skin, her well-toned body. What had always been in the back of her mind now came to the forefront. Will had never loved her. He knew who her father was. When they were dating, he’d asked her questions about her family. The questions were subtle and few and had struck her as odd, but Will was charming. He’d told her he loved her. She’d believed him.

By the time she arrived at the ranch, she could draw more than little sips of air into her lungs. She parked in the circle drive and glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were red and puffy, her face blotchy.

Great! Now everyone would ask what had happened. Rose would try to make her feel better. Rose, who had enough going on with taking care of her father, Max.

Maybe now would be a good time to visit her father. He wouldn’t remember her or remember her visit, but at least she could calm the guilt rising in her chest knowing she’d seen him.

It wasn’t until she climbed out of her car that she noticed the black SUV parked on the other side of the fountain, the SUV that belonged to Phin’s chauffeur.

What was he doing here? When he saw her would he think she were some drama queen who cried whenever she didn’t get her own way?

The front door opened before she reached the top step.

“How did it go?” Rose stood in the doorway.

“It didn’t.” She didn’t want to explain what happened. Thankfully, Rose would accept that. “Is Rupert here?”

Rose opened the door wider. Marianne rose from a chair in front of the fireplace. Teagan glanced around the room for Rupert, but only Marianne was here.

Marianne moved toward Teagan and clasped her hands. If she noticed Teagan had been crying, she gave no indication.

Teagan didn’t know where Rose went. Teagan and Marianne were alone.

“How are you?” Marianne asked.

“Is everything all right? I’m surprised to see you here.” She’d skip the pleasantries. It had to be obvious something had upset her.

“Everything is fine. I had come to invite you to visit Phin.”

“Did Phin send you?”

“No, he doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Then why did you come? I think it’s pretty clear that he doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

Marianne’s smile looked rueful. “He can be… harsh.”

“To put it mildly.” Teagan hung her jacket in the closet. “I think it’s better if I don’t see him. Please give him my regards. If he wants to see me, he can let me know.”

“I thought that would be how you felt. Is there anything I can say that will make you change your mind?”

“Why would you invite me knowing he wants to be left alone?”

“What he wants isn’t always what’s good for him.”

“And you think I’m good for him?”

“Except for Nancy, Rupert and me and occasionally his doctor, he sees no one.”

“He’s an adult. He can make the decisions of whom he sees and doesn't see.”

“If you change your mind…”

“I won’t. I have a recording to plan and a tour coming up.”

“I understand.” Marianne pulled car keys from her pocket. After some pleasantries that Teagan couldn’t remember, she left.

Rose came into the great room and set the silver service stacked with a plate of cookies and teacups on the coffee table.

“I suppose you think I made the wrong decision.” Teagan scraped her teeth over her lower lip

Rose straightened and looked at her. “Sometimes, we make decisions with our heads when we should make them with our hearts.”

“He wants to be left alone.”

Rose’s smile was slight. She crossed the great room to the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Chapter Three

Teagan hated the smell of hospitals and doctors’ offices. It tossed her stomach and made the blood rush from her head. Whenever she visited Will at his office, she’d have to stand in the hallway and take deep breaths before she could trust herself to walk inside and smile at the staff as if she were buying milk, bread and eggs at the grocery store.

Now she sat in her car and stared at the columned entrance of the nursing home where her father had been committed. She wanted to spend time with him before she drove downtown to rehearse with the orchestra. It wasn’t fair that Rose had taken on the burden of caring for him. they’d divorced ten years ago.

Teagan was determined to help. Maxwell Whitloch, Sr., was her father, though she’d never been close to him. As a child, he’d terrified her with his loud voice and bombastic persona. He’d never approved of her. She could read the disdain in his sharp eyes when they roved over her plump figure. His orders to Rose to forbid Teagan from eating dessert with the rest of the family had wounded her. Rose had ignored him, but her father’s criticism had stolen any appetite she might’ve had for Rose’s apple pie. She never touched her dessert.

Teagan swallowed at the hot tears welling in her throat. She hadn’t seen her father in ten years, yet damage he’d inflicted upon her was as permanent as the Michelangelo’s chisel stabbing a block of marble. Still he was her father. She was determined to help him and Rose. With one last deep breath, she climbed out of her car and crossed the parking lot to the double door entrance that resembled a southern mansion rather than a nursing home.

A young woman with dark hair that that escaped in wisps from a hair scrunchy led her to a private room at the end of a quiet corridor. Her father, Max Whitloch, Sr., sat in a chair by the window and watched a man with a broad brimmed hat trim a waist high hedge. Rose sat next to Max, her liver spotted hand wrapped around his. In her eyes shone her love for the man who had abandoned her.

It had stunned Teagan to see her father sitting quietly, his gaze shifting to her as if trying to remember who she was. She didn’t ask Rose about the man she had spoken to in the woods. She hadn’t actually seen him, though she couldn’t free her mind the way his deep vice had filled her with confusing emotions. He had stood in the trees, their branches casting shadows over his face. He seemed to know that she couldn’t see his face. To prevent her from identifying him? After seeing her father in this placid state and the distress it caused Rose, discussing the man who claimed to have permission to trespass on the ranch no longer seemed important.

An hour later, she was on the highway driving toward downtown Denver. She could barely see the highway through her tears. Never had she’d been with her father and he not say something, usually something critical about her weight or her questionable career as a violinist.

How could the quiet man sitting in a chair with a blanket over his lap be the powerful man who had terrorized the financial industry worldwide? She’d been young when he’d left her mother. She’d barely known him. She saw him more frequently during the summers she spent at the ranch, than she had when her parents were married.

She’d always wished her father weren’t loud and boisterous but seeing him quiet and confused made her long for the man who made her press against the wall whenever he entered the room. He didn’t like that she spent her summer days playing the violin in her room rather than tumbling in the barn with her brothers and sisters or training the horses.

\* \* \*

She stepped onto the front porch and stared down the path, but what she saw made her blood run cold.

Instead of a man approaching the house, she saw a pack of dogs. The leader hung his head, his tongue dangled from his mouth and his eyes scanned across the path to each side. His followers pressed close together inches away from his hind legs.

The leader’s gaze connecting to her was like an electrical current shooting through her. He gave one short bark and bounded toward her, his muscular form bulking into a mass of strength and terror. His eyes darkened, and saliva dripped from his fangs. The others broke into savage barking and raced after him.

Champagne’s eyes turned wild with fear. She pulled against the reins and whinnied.

Teagan raced down steps, but Champagne’s reins loosened from the trunk. Her head turned to the side, she pulled free from the tree then galloped through the woods.

The pack’s leader growled and shot after the horse.

Teagan screamed and ran after the dog. She’d stop them from destroying her horse.

A shot rang out. The dog dropped to the ground. Champagne bucked and vanished through the trees.

Teagan skidded to a stop. Behind her, blood curdling barks grew louder. She whipped around. The pack of dogs raced toward her, their teeth bared, their eyes wide with hate. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t scream. Her body shook from the pain she’d feel when they sank their teeth into her flesh and ripped it apart. One dog outran the others closing the gap between himself and Teagan. He sprang through the air. She brought up her elbows to block the attack. He slammed her to the ground. Blackness washed over her.

\* \* \*

Chapter Nine

A thick pressure seemed to clamp around Teagan’s head. The scent of something metallic drifted past her nose. The sounds surrounding her were beautiful, sweet and soothing. Violin music. Her violin music. It was the live recording of her concert when she had performed in Berlin last fall.

She felt the comfort of a padded cushion enclose around her. Someone held one of her hands. Cool water poured over her skin then someone rubbed a solution over the top of her hand, along her fingers and into her palm.

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared at thick log beams stretching across a tongue and grooved ceiling. She twisted her head to look at her hand. Well-shaped hands marred by long white scars covered hers. She gasped and stiffened. Her gaze lifted to a face, a man’s face, shaded by a wide brimmed hat. Shadows cast by the partially opened window blinds slanted over his jaw as if he were trapped behind prison bars.

“Who…who?” she stammered.

His head tilted, and she could feel an intense gaze moving over her face.

“She wakes.” It was the deep voice she had heard in the forest the other day. A smooth voice, rich and passionate

She didn’t like the feeling it stirred within her. It was an unfamiliar feeling that both thrilled and frightened her.

“I don’t understand. Where am I? What am I doing here?” She looked at her hand resting in the palm of one of his hands. In his other hand water dripped from a wet cloth. She pulled against his grasp. “What are you doing to me?”

“Give me time, and I’ll answer your questions. Will you do that?”

He had such authority in his voice, she froze. She could only nod.

“Good. You are in my home, which you probably know because you entered it before you were attacked.”

“Attacked?”

“You have to remember that or it’s a very peculiar amnesia you have indeed.”

“I remember the dogs.”

“Yes, the dogs.”

“I remember them running toward me, but nothing happened, right?”

“Nothing happened because…” His head tilted toward the corner of the room.

Her gaze followed his to a rifle propped in the corner. “You shot them?” Her voice trembled.

“It was that or have them rip you to shreds.”

A shiver raced through her. “Thank you. I’m so glad you were nearby.”

He uttered a rough sound. She brought her head up, and she wondered if he wished he hadn’t been there when she’d been attacked.

“Ralph had warned me about the pack, but he hadn’t seen them in a while, so he thought they had left.”

“They haven’t left, and they seem to enjoy living on your stepmother’s ranch.”

“I’ll tell Rose. How do you my stepmother?”

“We’ve not met. I know of her. It’s because of her generosity that I could build my home on her land.”

“But why would she do that? She’s fiercely protective of her property.”

“The answer to that question lies with her. You’re asking more questions. If you want answers, you need give me time to do so.”

She lifted her gaze to his. “Why are you washing my hands?”

“Yes. That.” He placed her hand in a towel spread over his lap. “When the dogs attacked you, you fell backwards into a patch of poison oak. I’m washing the urushiol from your skin.”

“I’ve never heard that word before. I’m assuming that’s the name of the poison.”

“It’s an oil that adheres to the skin.”

“And it’s on my hands?” Panic bubbled inside of her. “You don’t understand. If I can’t use my hands, I can’t play. My hands are my life.”

The violin music crescendoed. She jerked her gaze to his. “That’s one of my recordings.”

“A recording of your Berlin concert from last fall, to be exact.”

“Then you know.”

“And now you know.”

She stared down at her hands. “What am I going to do?”

“You can start by letting me help you.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Don’t ask questions. Let me help you.”

“Help me how? What will you do? Are you a doctor?”

“No, I’m not a doctor, but I know enough about first aid that I can help. I can put something on your hands that will stop the itching. Will you let me do that?”

“Let me see it first.” She wrapped her hands together and held them to her chest.

He held up a tube. “It’s a topical antihistamine. I’ll apply it then wrap your hands in gauze.”

“I won’t be able to play.”

“I doubt it’s that severe, and not much time has lapsed. Can you play again, I don’t know? You’ll need to discuss that with your own physician. When you leave here make an appointment to visit your doctor. He can advise you.”

“She.” His head tipped, and she said, “My health provider is a woman. I’ll schedule an appointment.”

She couldn’t see his mouth, but she heard his dry laugh.

“Who are you?” Her voice was thin and scratched the inside of her throat.

“That isn’t necessary—”

“If you’re going treat me for poison oak, I should at least know your name.”

The hat brim lifted as if he were looking at her. “Phin.”

“Phin? Do I know you?”

“No, how do you feel?”

She looked around, but no one was near her. “Like a truck ran over me.”

“That’s very close to what did happen Do you remember anything?”

She tried to remember. She’d spent most of her life memorizing scores. She remembered everything. Why couldn’t she remember this? Then thoughts like blurred photographs filtered through her brain. She heard the vicious barks, saw the saliva dripping from gleaming fangs. Champagne’s whinny sounded, and Teagan could see the terror in the horse’s eyes.

“The dogs. They chased my horse. Champagne. Is she…”

“As far as I know, your horse is fine. I couldn’t follow her, but I didn’t see any blood. Hopefully, she made it back to ranch. Only one dog tried to chase her had he’s dead.”

“You shot him.” She pressed a hand to her mouth. “I pray my horse is safe. If anything happened to her, I’d never forgive myself. Those dogs.

“Let’s just say there are fewer now than there were when they attacked you.”

He wrapped gauze around her hands and collected the bandages and ointment and sat back in his chair. “How do your hands feel?”

“Fine, I suppose, but I’ll be worthless at rehearsal this afternoon.” She did a quick intake of breath. “What time is it? I have to be downtown by two o’clock.”

“You’ve still time.”

She pushed herself to a sitting position and glanced about herself. She was in the living room, the sunken room she had seen when she’d entered the foyer. A pitcher of water and a glass sat on a tray on the coffee table.

Phin sat in a winged back chair. A cane leaned against the armrest. Other than the scars on his hand, he seemed fine. That she couldn’t see his face troubled her. What man wore a broad brimmed hat inside his own home?

Though he was sitting, his body folded into the chair as someone who was tall. What she didn’t miss was his powerful form filling out a button-down shirt. The quiet in the room closed around her and she realized she was staring at him.

“You saved my life. I want to thank you,” she said.

“I’m glad I was here. As you know, no one comes to this part of woods. I called the ranch. Someone will be here soon to take you back to the house.”

“What happened to the rest of the dog pack? Did they try to attack you, too?”

“They tried. A couple of them are lying in the woods. I’m assuming I won’t see the rest for a few days. Enough of your questions. It’s time for mine. Why did you enter my house?” His voice took a sharper tone.

She dropped her gaze to the coffee table. “For that I apologize. I had no right to trespass. I was surprised to see your house, and such a magnificent house, but why would Rose give you permission to build on her land?”

“As I said—”

“I know. I need to ask Rose, but you must have some idea.”

“I have no idea, because I never spoke to her.” When she gave him a sharp look, he said, “My attorney did.”

“And now you sit in the shadows, so I can’t see you. When I saw you in the forest, you stood in the shadows. It’s as if you didn’t want anyone to see your face.”

She felt tension radiate from him. It seemed to scoop air out of her lungs.

“That’s it. you don’t want anyone to see you. You built your home in this isolated part of the ranch. The cattle don’t graze here. Rose would know this. She knows everything about this ranch. Is that why you built your home here? So you could avoid people?”

The sound of an ATV whined through the air. Teagan stretched her neck to peer through the window that overlooked the forest.

“Someone’s coming.” She looked to chair where Phin sat.

It was empty. He was gone.

“Phin?”

“Please go, Teagan.” His voice sounded from above.

She pushed herself from the sofa and stepped to the center and stared up to the gallery crossing above the room. He wasn’t there. Turning to the stairs, she didn’t see him standing on the landing. This was a man who wanted his privacy. She had invaded it.

“I’ll go, but I’d like to come back.”

“You’re not invited.”

What tortured soul was this that he didn’t want any contact with another human being?

“Then I won’t come back.” She turned away and stepped onto the stone porch. She scanned the front of the house. Two dogs lay near the porch. Another had fallen on the path near the tree where Champagne had been tethered.

Ralph, Rose’s foreman, guided the ATV along the path. He approached the house reducing the speed. His gaze swept over the dog carcasses, then looked at her. “You look a lot better than these sorry canines. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. A little shaken. I’ve never seen wild dogs on the property before.”

“Because they’ve never been here before. Some of the ranchers in town had talked about a dog problem on their properties. People buy dogs, decide they don’t want them, then let them loose in the country. Poor souls don’t know how to take care of themselves, so they turn wild. I see you met the new neighbor.”

“In a way. I never saw his face.”

“Which is the way he wants it. I’d suggest you allow him some privacy.” His gaze dropped to her bandaged hands. “Did those dogs—?”

“No, when they tried to attack me, I fell into some poison oak. Phin treated my hands.”

“Phin?” Ralph lifted a brow.

“That’s about all I know about him—his first name is Phin.”

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, Teagan removed her bandages. She spread her fingers and stared at her still red hands. A welt swelled on the top of one hand—hands that had been photographed for the past ten years, hands that had the privilege of holding a Stradivarius and had played brilliant compositions for more than two decades.

From her vanity she lifted a tube of ointment the doctor had given her and applied it to the welt. The doctor had said the welt would disappear within a couple of days. Teagan gave a heavy exhale and rubbed the cream over her hand. She hoped the doctor was right.

After a breakfast of dry toast and tea, she carried her violin to the barn and saddled Champagne. The horse glanced at her several times as if questioning her wisdom of returning to the woods.

“Don’t worry about the dogs. The ranch hands made sure they’d stay off the ranch.”

Ralph had promised the dogs wouldn’t bother her again. She didn’t want to ask how he knew. The dogs couldn’t help that they’d been abandoned and had to turn wild to survive.

Teagan dug an apple out of her pocket. The horse snatched it from her fingers.

“You’re welcome.” Teagan laughed.

Champagne nosed her hand searching for another slice.

“Be patient. You’ll get another piece when we find the clearing. I wish you could remember where it is, because I can’t, and I thought I knew this ranch as well as I know a Mozart sonata.”

She strapped the violin to the saddle and guided the horse out of the barn. They rode to the forest, where Champagne turned on the path leading to Phin’s house.

Teagan pressed her knees against the horse’s side causing her to turn in the opposite direction. “Champagne, behave. You’re trying to get me into trouble. You know he doesn’t want us near his house.”

They passed through several groves of trees before Teagan spied the arching aspen covering the clearing.

“Good girl.” Teagan pulled an apple slice from her pocket and leaned forward.

Champagne munched it then looked back at Teagan. “I promise. I have lots more.”

She slid from the saddle and tethered the horse to a tree. Sunshine drifted through the leaves, and she inhaled clean, crisp air. It infused her with an energy that made her feel alive. So different than what she’d felt for the past few days. The wind rustling through the leaves sounded musical and sent a thrill down her spine.

She lifted the violin from the case and tuned the strings. She dragged the bow over the wires. The branches caught the sound and spread it through the forest.

\* \* \*

That first stroke of the bow over the strings siphoned air out of Phin’s lungs. He’d been walking for nearly an hour and his legs were starting to ache. He was too far from the house to make the trip without resting. He lowered himself to a stump and let his staff rest between his knees.

The second note sounded. She was tuning.

He closed his eyes and allowed her image to push away the darkness that had been trapped in his head since the accident. Teagan with a breeze teasing the ends of her thick hair. Her eyes would be closed. She’d sway in the that graceful way that seemed as if the notes were dancing around her. The music poured through her. Each stroke of the bow across the strings would release a magical sound that quenched the desert trapped in his soul.

Hearing the music wasn’t enough. His soul longed to see her move. He knew how she would look. He’d seen her perform, seen how the music consumed her.

A Mozart sonata filled the forest. A deer lifted her head from the creek, her ears pivoting. A chipmunk sat on a stump, rubbed his paws over his nose and turned his head at the sound.

Phin planted his walking stick into the ground and rose. Pain shot through his leg. He sucked air through his teeth. Leaning against the stick, he straightened and moved down the path toward the sound that captured his soul.

He stood at the edge of the clearing. Teagan had shed her jacket. She’d anchored her hair at the nape of her neck though a few strands danced about her face when she swayed. The t-shirt she wore had capped sleeves and was made from a clingy fabric that smoothed over her voluptuous breasts. Her eyes closed, she scooped and swayed with the music, her feet dancing through an undergrowth of soft green ferns and nodding flowers. The trills and phrasing lifted to the bowed trees. The quaking leaves caught in the breeze was like an applause.

She whirled around. She opened her eyes. She met his gaze. With a gasp, she stepped backward, her foot catching on a root. She clutched the violin to her chest and uttered a soft cry.

He reached out to her. He couldn't run. He couldn’t catch her.

She stumbled into a tree trunk. Her eyes wide and wild, she riveted her gaze on him. The violin was safe. She was livid.

“You.”

“Are you all right? I’m sorry for the intrusion. I didn’t mean—”

“It doesn’t matter what you meant to do. You startled me. If I had dropped this violin…” She shook her head. Stalking to the stump where she’d left her case, she unzipped it and placed the violin in the interior protection.

She had hidden the beautiful instrument from his view. He wondered if she wanted to hide from him. So many did.

“The sound was lovely.” His throat hurt. How long had it been since he’d spoken so many words? He spoke to his housekeeper and staff. He spoke to his doctor. No one else. “I had to see you play.”

Her movements slowed. She fastened the violin in place and closed the case. “For someone who wants solitude, you have a peculiar way of trying to find it.”

“Your lovely playing is hard to ignore.” His voice softened. “Do you often play in the forest?”

“Are you asking me so you can watch me again?”

He hadn’t thought why he’d asked such a question, then he knew. “Yes.”

“Then maybe I’ll find another place to play.” She looked over her shoulder at him. “I certainly don’t want to disturb your peace and quiet.” Her voice was exaggerated and filled with pain.

He gave soft laugh. “I deserve that.”

Her eyes widened as if his answer had surprised her. “I didn’t mean—”

He gave her a dismissive wave. “Save your apologies.”

“I wasn’t going to apologize.”

“Teagan Whitloch, you are an amusing person.”

“I’m no longer Teagan Whitloch. I’m—””

“I know your name. To me you are Teagan Whitloch.” Both hands wrapped around his walking stick, he leaned toward her.

He was some distance from her and she shouldn’t have felt the need to lean away from him, but she did. Her fear assaulted him and nauseated him. He was a monster. He hid because the stares confirmed what he already knew—a face such as his, a form such as his, should be kept hidden. No one should have to suffer for the mere lapse of resting her gaze upon him.

Chapter Twelve

Phin had thought to turn away but then remembered what had drawn him to the clearing—her music.

“Why are you playing in the forest?” he asked.

“You’re a curious recluse. I’m surprised you’d want to know.”

“Forget I asked.” He turned away.

“I’ll answer your question.” There was a hint of urgency in her voice.

Turning back to her, he saw a pleading look in her eyes. She wanted company. Why? Surely she was surrounded with people who begged to hear her play.

He lifted a brow at her, though he knew she couldn’t see it.

“I’m scouting venues for my next album. I wanted to mix nature, the wind, the creek, the animals, with the music. I’m playing in this clearing because—”

“Because of the acoustics.”

“What do you know of acoustics?” She looked stunned and amused.

“Quite a lot, though that isn’t important.”

“Let me be the judge.”

He felt the corner of his mouth curve. He could tell her, but then it would cement the truth he could never accept—he could no longer be what had given him the greatest joy. He could no longer be an architect.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’ve already answered that question.”

“You told me your name is Phin. I’m assuming that’s short for Phineas.”

Though he hadn’t said anything, he seemed to withdraw from her more than before.

“You have to have a last name.”

He took a step away from her. Unspeakable pain split through his body. He hesitated and leaned on his staff.

“What is it? Do you need help?” She clutched the violin case and looked as if she’d burst into a run, but not away from him. She would run toward him.

He waved her away. He didn’t want to be close to her. He was too frightful to be near. Let her stay with the beauty she created and the beauty of the forest. She was beautiful. She deserved this beauty.

“Please. Let me help you.” She stepped toward him.

“No.” His voice caught in the branches and vibrated through the trees. He made the word sound as monstrous as he himself.

He felt the fear shoot through her. He closed his eyes. How had he become like this? There was a time when he laughed and joked with friends, rushed to parties, paced across the stage of his corporate headquarters while he shared his view of the future with eager listeners.

She wanted to help him, but no one could help him. He didn’t need help.

Another shot of pain ripped through him. He hissed through his teeth. This morning, he had refused to take the pain medication the aide had set out for him. He hated the drugs that clouded his thinking and darkened his already foul mood. He wanted to live and love as he had before.

Her presence was so gentle it radiated a warmth that was filled with something else—compassion, concern. He wanted to drink at its well.

“I’ll walk back with you.” Her voice was angelic and floated around him like sparkling dust.

He wanted to laugh at the waves of pleasure her voice sent through him.

“Leave me.” He drank in one last swallow of the gentleness her presence poured into him. He turned his back to her. “Now.”

The anger in his voice filled him with despair. How was it necessary that he reject this woman’s compassion and care? He had no choice. He had to save others from the monster he’d become. No one could come near him. He had to keep this invisible wall cemented into place.

“You’re hurt.” The impatience in her voice gave him a start. “If you want to be a misanthrope, I won’t stop you, but you’re a great distance from your home. I can tell each step you’re taking is painful. I don’t know what happened to you, but quit being ridiculous, and let me help you.”

He turned to her. The mask covering his face blocked most of her from his view, but he could see her red lips, full and tight, the corners turned with exasperation.

“Ms. Whitloch, I am a misanthrope. The sooner you accept that the easier it will be for both of us. I have been wandering through these woods for several months. Yes, I have moments when it’s a struggle, but this isn’t one of them.” He lied. He fought the pain that blurred his vision. “Now do me the honor of leaving me in peace.” His voice rose with each word and he saw her jerk with fright. He turned away. Leaning heavily against his staff, he pulled himself along the path. “And play that blasted violin.” He uttered a curse. A low growl rose from his chest.

The gasp escaping from her lips made him falter and close his eyes. He hadn’t meant to frighten her, but he needed her to stay away. Along with everyone else. Leave him alone. What was with this need inside humanity to reach out and help him? He didn’t need help. He was beyond help. Concentrate on those whose needs could be met.

The bell-like sound floating through the branches gave him pause. Of all that was damaged, his hearing wasn’t. She was laughing. He hadn’t frightened her after all. He lifted his gaze to the sky as if he could follow her musical voice rising into the clouds. Beautiful. The sound was so beautiful his throat closed. Would that he could turn back and bask in that sound.

Beauty was not for him. Once he had created beauty. Beauty for which he had received worldwide recognition.

That wasn’t to be anymore.

A bow slid over the violin’s strings. A serenade of notes reached for him, caressed him, called to him. His jaw tight, he pressed forward. The beauty was more than he could endure. He would press it into his heart. He would never hear it again.

Chapter Seventeen

Sun filtering through Teagan’s bedroom window splashed across her face. She groaned and dragged a pillow over her head. How could it be morning already? If she hadn’t practiced until four o’clock that morning, she’d be rested, but at four in the morning she still wasn’t ready to stop practicing. It was upon hearing the voices of her family who had risen and begun preparing breakfast for the ranch hands that she realized she’d spent the entire night in the music room.

The warmth of the bed told her to ignore the rising sun but her pressing schedule gave her the strength to throw back the covers and plant her feet into the thick rug covering the floor. From a side chair, she scooped up the jeans and t-shirt she’d worn the day before and dragged them on. Sitting at her desk, she took a calming breath and called her lawyer. His assistant said he was advising a client, so she was surprised when he took her call.

“Is it true? Is Will entitled to half my earnings?” she asked him.

“We’ll review your tax returns to determine that. How much does he claim in taxable income?”

“I don’t know.” Deep heat flooded her face. How could she have been married to a man for four years and not know how much money he made?

She’d never reviewed the tax returns. Will had taken their earnings records to the tax accountant. Gladly. He did that with his practice. He didn’t mind working with the accountant to calculate their personal income. She never questioned that. She’d never thought about her income. Her manager had taken care of that before she and Will had married. With recording and performing and traveling, she didn’t have time to spend on gathering income information to calculate the taxes.

Money had never been a problem. She and Will had bought the condo when they first learned an old department store, an architectural masterpiece, was being converted. Ginny had been one of the designers and had invited them to her office to review the floor plans and finishings. Ginny and Will worked together selecting tile and carpet and window coverings always narrowing the options before they presented the final choices to her. She’d appreciated that. Little did she know their relationship went deeper than color selections.

“Email me a copy of your tax returns,” her attorney said. “If Will won’t give it to you, call the tax accountant. If it’s still a problem, we’ll subpoena the records.”

Something dark and burning rose in her throat. Would Will resist sending her the tax returns? The only time she saw the returns was when she signed them. She never reviewed the calculations. She’d trusted Will. How foolish!

By the time she’d finished her discussion with the attorney, she’d written five pages of items she needed to collect to determine the divorce settlement. How had her life become so complicated? Her manager would help her with some of the items, but most she’d have to do herself. With the recording of her album and preparing for her upcoming tour, she didn’t know how she’d collect the information her attorney needed. The divorce could take years.

This wasn’t how she’d planned to spend her morning. She’d been looking forward to spending the time in the forest practicing and planning recording options for her album. She pushed away from her desk. Her divorce from Will would not change that plan.

Snatching a down vest from her closet, she rushed downstairs while slipping it on. In the music room, she grabbed her violin and carried it to the kitchen.

“Good morning to you.” Rose cut vegetables at the kitchen island. “Where are you off to in such a rush? I have some breakfast warming for you. Have a seat. I’ll pour you some coffee.”

Her stepmother looked tired and more hunched than Teagan had remembered.

“I’m not hungry. I have more planning to do for my album,” Teagan said.

“I’ll make you a sandwich that you can take with you.”

“Rose, you’re making it hard for me to stick to my diet.”

The older woman’s mouth curved at one corner, but not in a smile. It was more rueful. “That was never my intention.”

“I know, but you and all the Whitloch girls have never had to worry about your weight. I do. Probably because I sit and practice all day.”

“Don’t try to be someone you’re not.”

Was that what she was trying to do? But if she wasn’t careful about her diet, her weight would balloon. Struggling into her performance gowns would add to the depression caused by the divorce. “I know who I am. I’m a musician, and I want to spend the morning planning the recording for my next album.”

“You’re a musician who needs to eat breakfast.” Rose placed a warm croissant on plate and set a mug of coffee next to it. “Now eat.”

Teagan tore off piece of the croissant and stuffed it into her mouth. “When I went riding the other day, I found the cathedral. Remember that area where the aspen arch over clearing?”

“I remember. I haven’t been there in years. Just no time.” Rose scraped a carrot clean.

“You should take the time, Rose. Every time I see it, it’s more beautiful than the last. The last time I visited, I met someone in the forest.”

Rose motions slowed.

“Who is the man who built that house on your property?”

“I don’t know who he is. He was interested in buying some land, but I have no intention of selling any part of Crystal Creek unless…I won’t be selling anything. We came to terms with a land lease. He presented plans for a house. My attorney and I reviewed them and agreed he could build that house. I visited a few times during the construction but haven’t been back.”

“The house is magnificent. It’s built in a clearing and fits into the surrounding area as if it had always been a part of it. There’s something curious about the man. He’s been injured. He wears a mask. When I’ve seen him walk in the woods, he uses a staff.”

“He can walk?”

“If you want to call it that, though it’s obvious he’s in great pain. Why do you sound so surprised?”

Rose stared ahead. “I’d heard he was crippled, but I had assumed it affected his mobility. If he wears a mask, I’m assuming he’s disfigured.”

“The mask only covers part of his face, but not every well. The damaged part of his face looks as if it’s been burned.”

“I’m surprised you saw him. He said he didn’t want to be around people.”

“He told me the same thing. We encountered each other by accident. He wasn’t pleased, but he had trouble walking and couldn’t avoid me. I wonder if I’ll see him again.”

“I think that will be up to him.” Rose scraped the pared vegetables into a Crockpot. She glanced at the wall clock. “I’m going down to the barn and review some schedules with Ralph. I’ll walk down with you.”

An hour later, Teagan guided her horse into the clearing. She dropped Champagne’s reins and led the horse near some sweet grass. She untied her violin from the saddle. Strolling through the clearing, she tuned the instrument, before warming up with some scales. In her mind formed the movements she would make while playing. Whirling around, posed her bow over the strings.

 Her eyes locked into a dark gaze. Her heart leaped up her throat. “What—”

Phin stood between two slender aspen that towered several stories above him. He held up calming hand. “No need to be frightened.” He sounded impatient.

“What do you expect when you creep up on me like that?” She dropped her violin to her side. “A warning would be nice.”

“Accurately spoken.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I didn’t realize I needed an invitation.”

Turning away, she strode to Champagne. “You don’t, but when last we spoke you made it clear we didn’t need to occupy the same area.” Her voice slowed and she paused at the comfort washing over her. It was the same sensation she’d felt last night at the performance. Was he at the performance? But how? Any movement caused him severe pain.

“It’s a big ranch,” he said.

“You may have leased part of the ranch, but with that lease does not come the right to demand that my family and I relinquish this portion of the land.”

“True, but you own a large area—”

“Not I. My stepmother.”

“Rose is your stepmother?” The question lifted his voice. “And she allows you to roam freely about her property?”

“Why shouldn’t she? As her stepdaughter, I have more rights to this land than you do.”

“I have a lease.”

“I have her word.”

“Having one’s word is important.” His laugh was deep and low.

Something soothing flushed through her. “Just so you know, I’ll be coming here every day until my tour starts.” She felt him stiffen and wondered if it were because she would be coming here or because she would be leaving. He should be glad she wouldn’t stay. He’d made it clear he didn’t want her anywhere near him.

“When will that be?”

“At the beginning of next month. The point being, you’ll have this entire forest to yourself. No one in my family comes to this part of the ranch, not even the cattle. I can’t vouch for the wildlife, though I imagine they’ll keep their distance.”

“Actually, the wildlife and I seem to have developed an understanding.”

“They are tolerant, which is a word that doesn’t fit into your vocabulary.” He may be disfigured, but that didn’t give him the right to be mean.

“I apologize for disrupting your practice.”

She didn’t turn around. She wanted him gone.

The sound of the staff tapping into ground floated to her, followed by something rustling the undergrowth as if he dragged one foot behind himself. She squeezed her eyes shut. He needed help. She could hear his pain with each step. She turned to him.

He was gone.

Silence fell around her. He’d already moved away from the clearing. Maybe he wasn’t in as much pain as she’d thought. Should she follow and make sure?

And have him berate her for being concerned?

She had enough to think about with her tour, the recording and now facing a contentious divorce with her soon to be ex-husband. Phin could instruct his staff to care for him.

She dragged her bow across the strings and fell into the rhythm of the concerto she would perform next weekend. She lost herself in the music and let the rhythms capture her into their realm of beauty and peace. When at last she played the final note, she stood motionless trying to hang onto the final sound before it slipped into the forest.

The soothing sensation she’d felt the night before washed over. She felt safe and secure, so odd because she was alone. The music filled her with peace, but what she felt now and what she’d felt last night was more than security. It was like a shield of protection covered her. It had come from that dark box seat in the concert hall.

Her eyes flew open.

Phin stood at the edge. Through the mask she could see the deep brown of his eyes.

“You were there last night,” she said.

He stood silent. If she could see past the mask, what would she see? Pain? Bitterness?

“Why had you come?” Her voice was strangled.

“At first I didn’t know, but soon it became clear to me.” He said nothing else as if he’d answered her question.

“Are you going to tell me?” she asked with a soft laugh.

“You know.”

His words gave her start. She did know. She knew before he spoke. “For the music.”

“As you can imagine, there isn’t much beauty in my life.” He stood stone still both hands wrapped around his staff. Though his mouth was partially hidden by the mask, it barely moved.

“Driving downtown had to have caused you great pain. Why would you take such a risk?”

“I have asked that question of myself. I have no answer. I only knew I wanted to hear you play.”

“Is that all?” She couldn’t believe he would take such risk. Even now she could feel his pain. What had he endured last night?

“Isn’t that enough?”

“You have a home in the most isolated part of the country. I’m assuming you want no contact with people. Why would go downtown that’s filled with people?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“You answer very few.”

“The answers don’t matter. They aren’t really answers, are they? You find more questions to ask. I’m tired of answering. Good day to you, Ms. Whitloch.” His movements jerking and rigid, he turned away.

“Wait. I’ll walk with you.”

He waved her away. The movement had to cause him great pain. “No. Stay where you are.”

She set her violin inside its case and moved to him. She touched his arm. When he flinched, she jumped.

“You don’t follow instructions.” He sounded breathless.

“Why won’t you let people help you?”

“Because I don’t need help.” He pulled away from her. He leaned on his staff and took a step.

“Says you.” She wrapped her hand around his arm and felt his muscles ripple beneath.

He said nothing. He took another step, a labored one. His breath was heavy and tortured.

“You shouldn’t even be out here. I’m sure if you’re doctor knew what you were doing, he or she would advise you against it.”

“Now you’re a medical provider.” Anger rumbled beneath his words.

“Caring doesn’t require a medical degree.”

“You argue about everything.”

“As do you. Lean against this tree. I’m going to put away my violin then I’m going to walk you back to your house.”

“I don’t need—”

After making sure he was steady, she half ran to her violin and packed it inside the case. She strapped it to the horse. Slipping the reins through her belt loop, she led the horse to Phin.

“When you helped me the other day, I didn’t realize how much pain that caused you. Is that why you’re in pain now, because you attended my concert?”

“Silence would be golden right now.”

“You knew I would be here.”

“I had hoped.”

“Why did you come? You’re in so much pain.”

“If I’m to be troubled by your incessant chatter, at least make it worthwhile.”

She laughed. “Who are you that you expect everyone to obey you?”

“No one you would know.” His voice was thin and filled with pain she could feel.

“We won’t take another step.” Fear rose within her, gripping her.

“Keep walking.” He leaned forward as if to take another step but leaned against her.

His weight, dead weight, almost toppled her. She was tall and she thought she was strong, but not tall enough to sustain the weight of a man several inches taller than she, if he could stand straight. She spread her legs and gripped him.

“Let me go.” His voice was less than a whisper.

“Please, lean against the tree. I’ll call for help.”

“No…help.”

“Yes, help. I don’t know who you are, but you’re in pain, Phin. You can’t prevent someone from helping you when it’s obvious you need it. Who do you think you are, telling someone not to help you?”

“Again…the…diatribe.”

“At least you have the energy to complain.” She tried to sound calm, tried to calm the thrashing inside her chest.

She braced him against a tree and pressed against him. If she let him collapse, she’d never raise him again. She called Ralph’s cell phone.

“Teagan?” He answered before the 1st ring finished.

“How soon can you get to me?”

She heard him suck in a breath. “Are you—”

“No, but it’s going to take too long for an ambulance to get here.”

“I’m heading toward my ATV now. Where are you?”

She glanced at the distance she’d covered. “Maybe half a mile northeast of the cathedral.”

“I’ll call nine-one-one, then I’m on my way.”

Chapter Thirteen

Teagan spent the afternoon practicing in the clearing. Her ears tuned to the breeze and the quaking leaves, the woodchuck lifting his snout from his burrow and sniffing and the laughing creek dancing over boulders and the sunlight filtering through the branches. The sounds mixed with the music she played as if an orchestra accompanied her concerto. She lost herself in the music. She danced. She swayed. She moved from one edge of the clearing to the other, her ears aware of the arching branches that captured the sound and spread it through the forest.

She listened for something else. For Phin’s return. But why did she want him there? He was a verbal brute. Why would she care if he returned to listen to the music she created, let alone apologize? She would never receive an apology from him. She’d met others like him. Tyrants. Egotists. She had met her share in the field of music. But he didn’t fall into that category. His intimidation didn’t seem to come from enjoyment. It was something deeper more damaged—like him. She never saw his face, but the skin she glimpsed through the eye holes in the mask revealed twisted and bright pink skin that looked raw and painful. What had happened to him? She didn’t dare ask. Whatever had marred his skin had marred his soul. He wore his bitterness like a suit. More than a suit. It didn’t cover him. It burrowed inside him.

Tumultuous emotions gripped her chest.

He’d made it clear. He wanted nothing to do with her or anyone. Only Rose knew he’d built a home on the ranch. Being alone seemed to be what he wanted. He didn’t want fellowship. She would give him his privacy.

The sun shone down from above her. A cool breeze rustled the leaves and brushed over her shoulders. She dropped her violin and stared at the sky. The entire afternoon, she’d been practicing and dancing and now she was perspiring. She lifted a water bottle from her backpack and drained half of it in one swallow. She glanced at her watch. It was noon. She had to get ready for tonight’s performance. Afterward, she would meet Will.

The joy her playing had brought her shriveled into dust.

Will.

She regretted agreeing to meet with him this evening, but she had let him talk her into it. He was so handsome it made her heart ache. That someone as perfect and as smart as Will had been interested in her had always amazed her. She wasn’t perfect.

Ginny was with her strawberry blond hair, upturned nose, emerald green eyes and her tight little body. She was perfect. She was bubbly and charming and everyone who met her wanted to be her friend. Men flocked to her.

Teagan wasn’t beautiful. Far from it. Her weight had always been a problem. And she didn’t have a personality that drew people to her. When she was in a crowd, she couldn’t wait to leave, lock herself in her room and play her violin. She was too shy to strike up conversations, which made others uncomfortable. At parties, her conversations with others were interspersed with long periods of silence and soon her companions would make excuses and wander away.

Tonight, she would meet Will. Her heart hammered inside her chest. She could call him and tell him something had come up, an emergency with her father, or she could stay away and not warn him that she wouldn’t be coming.

But that wouldn’t stop Will. He would suggest another time when they could meet. He wanted to talk to her. God forgive her, she wanted to hear what he had to say.

And she wanted to see him. Nothing was more wonderful than gazing into his dark, enigmatic eyes. Soon the divorce attorneys would draw up the papers and she would never stare into those eyes again. The inside of her chest felt hollow and scraped out. She didn’t want to divorce Will. Maybe what he had to say would explain why he had been unfaithful. Whatever his excuse, it wouldn’t be reasonable, but she would listen. She couldn’t take him back. What he had done was unforgivable. He had to know she wouldn’t want him back, so why did he want to meet with her? And why had she agreed?

She packed her violin into its case. From her backpack, she withdrew a soft towel and dabbed the perspiration beading on her cheeks and the back of her neck. She drained the bottle of water and searched her pack for another bottle. She hadn’t packed one. She hadn’t realized she’d work this hard and be so thirsty. The ride back to the barn wouldn’t take that long. She’d remember to grab a couple of bottles from the kitchen and throw them into her car. She’d want some water backstage during the performance.

The physical exertion made her jersey top cling to her arms and her chest. She pulled it over her head and threw it into her backpack. The tank top she wore underneath would provide enough cover. By the time she approached the barn, she’d feel cool enough to wear her top again. She strapped her violin case to the saddle and slipped her arms through the backpack’s straps. She climbed onto her horse and guided her from the trees. Her hooves clopped over the slate rock pushed across the field by glaciers thousands of years ago. In her mind played the music she’d been rehearsing. She could imagine the score and could read each note that sprang loud and clear in her mind.

Something soft stroked the back of her neck. She slipped her hand beneath her hair and rubbed her skin. What could’ve touched her? Her hair was thick. It wasn’t as if something could’ve slipped through the strands to her skin. She slowed her horse’s pace and looked for something that could’ve fallen from her hair to the ground. Nothing.

It wasn’t her imagination. She had felt something, but whatever had touched her was now gone.

Or was it?

Looking around, she felt as if she weren’t alone, but she saw no one, not even a lost cow or a lone elk.

She pressed her knees into Champagne’s ribs. The horse quickened her pace.

\* \* \*

Phin stood on the bluff and watched her pass below. She was leaving and with her would go the music. His chest hardened, and he closed his eyes to draw the breath his body demanded. How long before he heard the music again?

Maybe never. He felt like an animal wanting to be near her yet keeping his distance to spare her from his disfigurement. Emptiness swept over him pulling him into a darkness deeper than what he’d felt on a daily basis since the accident. Her music had lifted him. He could close his eyes and be swept away by the lovely sounds she’d created. She would perform tonight. Would he dare to go? He could call in a favor. A ride in a limousine. Furtive walk through the underground tunnel. A private seat in a shrouded box seat. He knew the theatre well. He had designed the remodel of the nineteenth century building.

It was possible. To hear her play filled his soul. Yes, he would risk a night away from his home to attend her performance. His body went rigid. He hadn’t felt such pleasure since…he didn’t want to think of that moment. It had all been a ruse.

Chapter Eighteen

“No...ambulance.” Phin could barely speak but that didn’t dim his anger.

“At least this hasn’t affected your hearing, and, yes, an ambulance. Look, Mr. Phin, if you want to be in charge, quick wandering in the woods by yourself and—”

He swore and sagged against her.

“Phin! Phin!” She pushed against him trying to keep him from collapsing.

He spoke but nothing she could understand.

Slowly the strength faded from his body. “Oh, God. Oh, God. Please. Stay with me, Phin. Please stay with me.”

She dropped to her knees. Wrapping her arms around him, she rolled to the ground, her arms wrapped tightly around him. Tears seeped across her temples and into her hair.

Phin collapsed against her chest, almost crushing her. She stiffened trying to maintain some strength to support him. The heaviness wasn’t just from his weight, it wrapped around her heart.

\* \* \*

She grunted the words, his weight crushing against her made talking difficult. Breathing was difficult.

“Teagan, you have to get out from beneath him.”

“I don’t want him on the ground.”

“I’m not putting him on the ground. I’m going to help him, but it would be a lot easier if you weren’t in the way.”

“I’ll move if you promise to help him.”

“You have my word on that.”

She propped herself on her elbows and crawled backwards never taking her eyes off Phin.

Ralph held Phin with one arm and shrugged his free arm out of his jacket. “Take off my jacket and put it underneath him.”

“You said you wouldn’t lay him on the ground.” Teagan froze.

“This is a better idea. Get my jacket.”

She pulled his jacket over his arm and shoved it under Phin. “If I’d known—”

“We both want to help him.” He laid Phin on top of the jacket. “I’m going to do whatever I can until the paramedics arrive.”

Phin tossed his head and groaned.

“It appears he doesn’t like that idea.” Ralph’s mouth tightened into a grim line.

\* \* \*

Chapter Twenty-six

For Teagan, the following week was a whirl with practicing, planning the recording of her album and preparing for her tour. The weather was warming, and she didn’t want to be inside. She spent most of the winter secluded in her studio at the condo, a room she’d soundproofed so her playing wouldn’t bother the neighbors, though her neighbors often complained they were sorry they couldn’t hear her practicing. She didn’t explain that practicing wasn’t the same as performing. Hearing the same phrase a multitude of times would have driven them to distraction.

Now that the days were longer, the warmth penetrating the windows in the music room called to her. Rose had told her to take a break and ride with Emily. The meadows were blooming, the creek was thawing, and the wildlife was scurrying through the forests on its way to higher ground to avoid the approaching summer heat.

Teagan longed to spend time riding over the ranch, through the forests and soaking up the beauty of summer, but another thought crowded through her mind. Would she see Phin? She had heard nothing from him since he’d invited her to dinner. He hadn’t invited her back. Had her visit with him been that unpleasant? He had revealed things to her, namely his love of music. He was a pianist. Did he regret sharing this private talent with her? Had he revealed too much of his personal life? Marianne had said he’d be leaving town for a few days, but Teagan couldn’t imagine he would travel far. A walk through the woods exhausted him.

She stowed her violin in its case. Upstairs, she dragged on her riding clothes. She stood before the cheval mirror and stared at her reflection. She hadn’t applied makeup even though it would add color to her skin so pale from a winter without sun, but why should she when she rarely traveled farther than the music room? No one saw her. She hadn’t joined the family and the ranch hands for meals in several days. She squeezed foundation onto a makeup sponge and brushed blush over her cheeks. It wasn’t much of an improvement but at least she didn’t look like death.

Outside, the fresh scent of spring hit her full force and she dragged the sweet air into her lungs. Emily was guiding one of the geldings toward the outside arena.

“I’m going for a ride. Do you want to come with me?” Teagan tucked her crop beneath her arms and dragged on her gloves.

“I can’t.” Emily’s smile of disappointment reflected in her eyes. “I have a competition this weekend. Right now, I’m going to practice. Afterward, I’ve made other plans.”

With a boy, no doubt. Teagan wondered what Rose thought of that. She touched Emily’s arm. “We’ll plan it for another day. I should’ve given you more notice.”

“Where will you ride?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Though, an hour later when she found herself on Phin’s porch, she wasn't surprised.

“I haven’t heard from Phin. I’m sorry to come unannounced, but I wanted to make sure he was all right,” she said when Marianne opened the door after her third knock. She had tied her horse to a tree several feet away and could hear her sharp teeth munch the native grass.

“He’s fine.” The hesitancy in Marianne’s voice made Teagan’s chest ache.

“May I see him?” Teagan looked through the doorway into the foyer past the marble hall tables and the leaded French doors at the top of the hall steps.

“He isn’t here.”

“Where…um…will you tell him I came to see him?” She wondered at the suspicion reflected in Marianne’s eyes.

“Of course.” Marianne closed the door.

Teagan hadn’t thought it would hurt so much to have Marianne close the door in her face. Hearing that final click made her heart sink into the pit of her stomach. The breath she inhaled was a sharp stab to her lungs. The message was clear. Wherever Phin had gone was none of her business.

After her dinner with Phin, she had thought she and Marianne would become friends. Musicians had few friends who weren’t musicians. No one else understood the dedication required to become a musician. It wasn’t a craft that could be dropped then picked up again on a whim. It required consistent practice and devotion.

Phin had seemed to understand that. Now, Marianne’s unspoken message was clear—Phin had no desire to pursue a friendship with her. He had invited her to dinner. For whatever reason, the relationship ended there.

She had thought to call Rupert, Phin’s driver, and quiz him about anything Phin may have said to him, but that would put Rupert in a precarious position. It was clear Phin’s employees were devoted to him.

Teagan had thought to ride to the clearing and scout the area for other locations to include one her album, but by the time she reached the clearing, she couldn’t focus. Instead, she thought of Marianne and the way the woman had dismissed her. The tightness in her chest wouldn’t let her pretend that something wasn’t wrong with Phin, but whatever it was, it would be resolved by his staff.

\* \* \*

Chapter Thirty-two

Teagan walked down the transit mall that cut through the center of downtown Denver. She should’ve felt good, ebullient. The evening performance had gone better than expected. The three curtain calls after the performance seemed to confirm what she’d felt while performing the violin concerto. The audience had appreciated the hard work she had poured into the piece during her months of practice.

She wished she could have enjoyed performing the piece as much as the audience had enjoyed hearing it. Instead, she could barely press from her mind her mission following the performance. She would return to the condo to collect the scores as had been her original intent the last time she had come. That day, Will had said he wouldn’t be there, but he’d proved once again she couldn’t trust him. That he had wanted to cancel the divorce had made her nauseous.

Once again, their attorneys had hashed out a time when she could return to the condo with the guarantee that Will wouldn’t bother her. As luck would have it, he’d planned to be out of town tonight. The hour was late and she wanted to return to the ranch, but she had to take advantage of the opportunity to collect the scores she desperately needed for her scheduled performances and her recordings.

Her phone rang. It wasn’t a programmed ring. She glanced at her phone to see a number she didn’t recognize, but the thought that the caller might be Will flashed through her mind. Was he calling to see if she’d collected her things and left? Maybe he hadn’t left town after all. Her heart climbed up her throat. Maybe he was waiting for her in the condo. She gritted her teeth. She wouldn’t let him stop her. She had a right to her personal belongings, even if they were considered community property.

She stepped out of the stream of pedestrians moving down the mall and stood beneath an awning. She wanted privacy in case Will was calling to tell her he wanted to return to the condo tonight.

“Hello.” She squeezed the phone to one ear and plugged the other ear.

“Teagan.” The voice she hadn’t expected sounded in her ear and scooped breath from her lungs.

“Phin? What is it? Why are you calling me?” There was a long pause and she thought he’d hung up. “Are you there?”

“Yes. I owe you an apology.”

She touched two fingers to her brow and shook her head. “I believe you should have this conversation with Marianne.”

“I did. I thought about what you said. About friendship.” Strained words floated through the phone. Because he was in pain? Or because what he said to her had caused him remorse.

 A clap of thunder cracked above her. She gasped and glanced at the sky thick with clouds that rolled past the skyscrapers. Light flashed inside the clouds like a flickering bulb. Another crack of thunder. Huge drops splashed against the pavers. She shook her head. Why hadn’t she checked the weather report before coming?

“Phin, now isn't a good time.”

There was another long pause. “I see.”

“Not that I need to explain anything to you, but I’m in the middle of something—”

“Where are you?”

 She choked back her surprise at his blunt question. “What?”

“I hear thunder. There’s no thunder here so you’re not at the ranch. The orchestra performed tonight. Are you downtown?”

“Not that it’s your concern, but yes, I am. As you know, I have a condo at The Tower.”

“I remember.”

The sharpness in his voice shot a streak of annoyance through her chest. He called her.

“I need to take care of some business,” she said.

“Then I won’t detain you. We’ll talk another time.” The phone went silent.

She dropped her phone into her purse. Mr. Phineas St. Cyr may be injured but that hadn’t curbed his acerbic persona. If he’d called to apologize, it was the worst apology she’d ever heard, but he probably wasn’t used to apologizing.

\* \* \*

Their wedding had been the largest wedding she’d ever attended. More than two thousand five hundred guests. Will had insisted. She hadn’t wanted a large wedding. She’d tried to talk him into something small and intimate. He wanted the day to be special for her he had said. He’d pressured her to ask her father to pay for it, and she had. She loved Will. She would’ve done anything for him, though she knew her father would laugh at her. She was stunned when Max had agreed. He had given her away, and why wouldn’t he? He loved being the center of attention almost as much as Will had.

\* \* \*

“Tell me the exact location of it. Where was the entrance?” He sounded patient, but she didn’t miss the underlying strain in his voice.

“Between the kitchen and the breakfast nook which used to be part of the neighboring unit.” When Phin tilted his chin at her, she said, “Phin and I wanted the top floor to ourselves so we purchased all the units and combined them to be one unit.”

“Where were these units connected?” He reduced the floor plan size.

She propped a hand on the desk and stared at the screen. “I don’t remember. I was touring during the remodel. Will worked with Ginny. When he and I discussed the changes, he said he would tell Ginny what changes we wanted, and she would draft our requests into the floor plan.”

“It appears that the wall dividing the units is through the living room.” Phin dragged the cursor through the floor plan. “The front door of your unit opens into the elevator.”

“It does. The entrances for the other units were removed. Ginny had suggested that we incorporate the hallway into the living room. I saw the units before we bought them, but then my tour started and I didn’t return until after the remodel. Ginny oversaw everything.”

“I’ll bet she did.” He lifted his gaze to hers.

\* \* \*

Chapter Thirty

It was morning when Teagan stood in the music room and lifted her violin from its case. She wanted to practice and she had to practice. It was the only way to force the confusing thoughts that consumed her mind—thoughts of Will and of Phin.

She hadn’t heard from Will in two days. No doubt he’d forgotten that he had wanted to meet with her at the condo, but where was he? Not with Ginny, though he may have been waiting for her to leave so he could join Ginny. She remembered limousine that had glided past her on the street, so slowly it was as if the person inside were watching her.

If she wasn’t thinking about Will, thoughts of Phin nudged her mind. Phin with his commanding persona and powerful form. He may not run a corporation, but every word he spoke, every move he made, proved he was still in charge. He may be in charge, but he wasn’t in charge of her.

She dragged her bow over the violin’s strings and turned the pins. She wanted a memory-ectomy. She wanted to forget that Will had ever been a part of her life. She wasn’t so sure she wanted Phin in her life either. So why couldn’t she stop thinking about him.

After playing scale after scale after scale, she dropped the violin to her side. With all the painstaking memorization she’d poured into her pieces, thoughts of Phin wouldn’t leave her. Dark confusion welled up inside her spilling over her in waves of bewilderment. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t play. She laid her violin in its case and took the stairs two at time to her room.

A half hour later, she guided her horse through the forest to the cathedral, t the clearing where the aspen trees arched overhead. Her heart pounded when she slid from her horse and led her into the opening. She stilled and listened. She knew why she was here. She knew she wanted to see Phin, had hoped that he would be here.

She was alone.

There was no point in playing. Thoughts of Phin wouldn’t leave her.

She clicked her tongue. Champagne’s delicate hooves crunched over brown pine needles and fallen leaves and picked her way through the forest. Interesting how her horse knew the way to Phin’s house.

Marianne must have seen Teagan when she rode out of the woods, because she was standing on the porch when Teagan slid from the saddle. Teagan tethered the horse to a tree.

“Would you like some iced tea?” Marianne called to her before she reached the porch.

“No, thank you. I don’t know how long I’ll be staying. Does Phin know I’m here?”

Marianne’s expression turned placid but didn’t hide the flicker in her eyes. “Yes, he saw you from the window.”

“What did he say?”

“What you would expect.”

“Then you were supposed to tell me to leave. You didn’t do that.”

“I’m a housekeeper not a slave.” The curve in her mouth was slight. She gestured Teagan to enter the house.

Teagan unzipped her jacket. “Where is he?”

“In his study. I’ll take you there.”

Teagan followed her down a hallway she hadn’t noticed during her previous visits. Marianne turned the handle on a set of double doors and stepped aside. Teagan moved into the room.

“Yes?” Phin was staring at his computer monitor. When Teagan didn’t answer, he looked up. Despite the mask, his displeasure at seeing her was visible. “Marianne?” He looked past her to the hallway.

“Don’t worry,” Teagan said. “I won’t stay long. I only came to see how you’re doing.”

The door clicked shut behind her.

“Now you’ve seen. End your visit.” Phin growled.

“What are you doing?”

“I didn’t realize you monitored my activities.” He clicked the computer mouse, but never stopped staring at the screen.

“I’m trying to start a conversation. It was the wrong choice of words.” When he didn’t’ respond, she said, “Why do you hate me so much?”

“Hate is a powerful word.”

“Okay, you don’t like me.”

He pushed away from his computer and steepled his fingers. “What do you want?”

“I told you, to see how you are. When I left last night you were exhausted. I was concerned.” She lowered herself into the chair opposite him.

“I didn’t invite you to sit.”

“No, and I knew you wouldn’t, so I didn’t wait for an invitation. You should quit thinking of yourself. Your staff cares about you. Isolating yourself isn’t good for you, and it isn’t good for your staff.”

“They’re not chained to this cabin. They can leave.”

“That doesn’t change how they feel about you. I know little about you. You’ve managed to stay off the grid. There’s limited information about you on the internet.”

“As it should be, if you want to know something, ask.”

“Will you answer?”

He only stared.

“All right, I’d like to know about your family, where you’re from—”

“I’ve no family, and I’ve lived all over the world, so I guess you could say I’m a global citizen. Isn’t that the fashionable term these days?”

“Has there ever been any one special in your life?”

She expected him to become angry and demand she leave his house at once. Instead, he remained quiet. Only the flicker of pain in his eyes gave her the clue a relationship had not gone as planned. Because of his injury?

“You could’ve asked me these questions last night.”

“I could have, but I didn’t. I’m asking them now.”

“There was someone once. I said as much last night. There was someone I misjudged.” His voice was dull and detached.

“I’m sorry.”

His head came up sharply. “Why? It has nothing to do with you.”

“True, but I know the pain of thinking you know someone then learning that you didn’t.”

“Anything else?”

Teagan felt his tension. She gave a weary exhale. “No, just let me know when you’re ready to let someone else care about you. I’d like to be added to that list.”

She turned away. Her gaze lifted to the wall where enlarged photos of buildings hung. The photos were black and white. The cars on the street were vintage indicating the photos had been taken decades if not centuries ago. Most of the buildings she didn’t recognize. One building stood taller than the others surrounding it—the building that housed the condo she had shared with Will.

“Where did you get that photo?” she asked.

“Which one? My wall is covered with photos.”

“The one of The Tower, the one in Denver.”

“The building where you live. Those pictures are online. There easy enough to get. If you want one, I’ll order it for you.”

“You have this photo because The Tower was one of your projects.

“I oversaw the renovation. One of my architects—” There was a flicker in his eyes. “—supervised the design.”

“It’s a beautiful building. I fell in love with it long before it was scheduled for renovation. The design stayed true to the original plans and the turn of the twentieth century design. I knew the designer—”

“Who was that?” The sharpness in his voice made her jerk her gaze to his.

“It doesn’t matter.” Teagan cursed herself for her reference to Ginny. She didn’t want to think about the woman she had considered her friend.

He grabbed his cane and pushed himself to his feet. “I believe you’ve overstayed your welcome.”

Chapter Thirty-one

A deep sadness welled up inside Teagan. What had happened to Phin that he pushed everyone away? His house staff was his only contact and maybe an occasional doctor or some medical provider.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” Phin’s mask hid his scowl, but his tone was heavy with indignation.

“I’m sad for you. People care about you, but you push them away.”

“You don’t know who cares about me.”

“I know your staff does, and you ignore that they want the best for you. You grumble because people want to be close to you. If you didn’t have any redeemable qualities, which you might, though I have yet to see them, your staff wouldn’t care if you didn’t have other people in your life.”

“One thing I don’t need is psychoanalysis. Who are you to tell me to let other people in my life? You don’t know what I need.” Both hands gripping his cane, he leaned forward. His eyes glittered through his mask.

It have her a start. Her heart leapt with fright.

“You admit you need something.” She inflated her lungs to press down on her hammering heart.

“I admit nothing.” His voice was soft, almost as quiet as the forest where they’d first met.

The only sound was the rasp of his breath and for a moment she thought he’d exerted himself. So like him. He had to be in control no matter the cost to himself. She waited for some sign that he needed help. That was the only way she’d know. He wouldn’t tell her.

“Don’t diagnose me,” he said. “You’re a musician, not a doctor. Most people may not know the life of a musician, but I’m not most people.”

“You mean because I spend so much time alone. It isn’t what I want. It’s what I must do. I have to practice.” That was the reason she told herself, though the real reason rumbled beneath the facade of why she preferred solitude.

Solitude was safe.

“If that’s what you believe then you’re not being honest with yourself, but I see you already know that,” he said.

“You think I hide behind my career.”

His silence was the unspoken question of why she became a violinist.

“Maybe at first that was the reason.” Why did she feel the need to explain herself? For his sake or hers? Heat rose in her face, and she gritted her teeth. She owed him no explanation. She couldn’t stop talking. “I wasn’t like my brothers and sisters. I looked different. My mother wanted me to be like them. I couldn’t change. I excepted the way I look but my parents couldn’t. when I was alone, I didn’t hear the criticisms and that eased the pain. What better way to be alone than to play the violin? I could be alone and hear something beautiful at the same time.”

“I’m sorry.” Deep emotion laced his voice. “I didn’t mean to open an old wound.”

“It’s no longer a wound. I may have hidden behind my music, but it brings me great joy, and I hope it brings joy to others.” She had thought it would bring joy to Will, but his joy came from a different source.

“It does bring joy to others.”

“Thank you for saying that.” His comment gave her a start. “I know you want to be left alone, but I agree with your staff. It isn’t good for you to here in the woods and not interact with others.”

“I interact.”

“You need more—”

“I’ll decide what I need.”

“Then you should make better decisions.”

“You and your opinions can go to—”

“Don’t worry. I’m leaving.”

She should have felt satisfaction at the stunned look in his eyes. Instead, she felt sorrow.

She strode out of his office and down the hallway. Her eyes burned with tears. Why had she come? After last night, she thought he would want to see her. She was mistaken. Phin made it clear—he had no desire to see her.

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“Turn right.” Phin’s voice floated down the hall.

“Thank you.” She didn’t look over her shoulder at him. She wanted to get away from him and his sour mood. Phineas St. Cyr could stew in his mansion that he called a cabin, live alone and convince himself he was happy.

Whatever became of him, she didn’t care. She would never see him again.

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As if someone had called to her she looked over her shoulder at the house. He couldn’t hear what she said, but the way she cast her gaze to the ground made it clear she was hurt, that he had hurt her. She gave one short nod and rushed to her horse. She barely untied the mare before she swung into the saddle and galloped across the clearing and disappeared into the woods.

Muttering a curse, he turned away. She should never have come.

“Marianne,” he shouted.

“There’s no need to shout. I’m here.” She moved into the room. “And before you begin your diatribe, yes, I invited her. She’s the only person who has made you almost yourself…as you had been before the accident.”

“From now on any visitations will be my decision. Do I make myself clear?”

“It’s clear that you’re not making sense.”

His temper rising he turned to the windows. “What did you say to her?”

He heard the catch in her throat. Marianne was skilled at anticipating his needs and comments. For those she always had a retort.

“I apologized to her.”

“Good. Did you tell her you wouldn’t overstep your bounds again?”

“No, I apologized to her for your behavior.”

He turned on her. “Mine?” His voice rose with his temper.

“You were never very good at realizing who was a friend and who was an enemy. Even before the fire.”

Her retort was a barb that anchored into his chest. He should fire her.

“I have no need of friends. Someone who needs a friend can buy a dog.”

“Except no dog would have you as a master.”

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“Mr. St. Cyr.” Marianne gasped and stepped to him.

He waved her away and sank into his desk chair. It was a moment before he trusted his voice.

“When you apologized…for me…what did she say?” he asked.

“She was completely gracious.” Marianne’s watchful eye took in each of his movements as if calculating how much time she had before she needed to help him. “She said she understood, and that she would never come back.”

A darkness sank over him. He hadn’t anticipated how much pain those words would cause.

\* \* \*

It was morning when Teagan stood in the music room and lifted her violin from its case. She wanted to practice and she had to practice. It was the only way to force the confusing thoughts that consumed her mind—thoughts of Will and of Phin.

She hadn’t heard from Will in two days. No doubt he’d forgotten that he had wanted to meet with her at the condo, but where was he? Not with Ginny, though he may have been waiting for her to leave so he could join Ginny. She remembered limousine that had glided past her on the street, so slowly it was as if the person inside were watching her.

If she wasn’t thinking about Will, thoughts of Phin nudged her mind. Phin with his commanding persona and powerful form. He may not run a corporation, but every word he spoke, every move he made, proved he was still in charge. He may be in charge, but he wasn’t in charge of her.

She dragged her bow over the violin’s strings and turned the pins. She wanted a memory-ectomy. She wanted to forget that Will had ever been a part of her life. She wasn’t so sure she wanted Phin in her life either. So why couldn’t she stop thinking about him.

After playing scale after scale after scale, she dropped the violin to her side. With all the painstaking memorization she’d poured into her pieces, thoughts of Phin wouldn’t leave her. Dark confusion welled up inside her spilling over her in waves of bewilderment. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t play. She laid her violin in its case and took the stairs two at time to her room.

A half hour later, she guided her horse through the forest to the cathedral, t the clearing where the aspen trees arched overhead. Her heart pounded when she slid from her horse and led her into the opening. She stilled and listened. She knew why she was here. She knew she wanted to see Phin, had hoped that he would be here.

She was alone.

There was no point in playing. Thoughts of Phin wouldn’t leave her.

She clicked her tongue. Champagne’s delicate hooves crunched over brown pine needles and fallen leaves and picked her way through the forest. Interesting how her horse knew the way to Phin’s house.

Marianne must have seen Teagan when she rode out of the woods, because she was standing on the porch when Teagan slid from the saddle. Teagan tethered the horse to a tree.

“Would you like some iced tea?” Marianne called to her before she reached the porch.

“No, thank you. I don’t know how long I’ll be staying. Does Phin know I’m here?”

Marianne’s expression turned placid but didn’t hide the flicker in her eyes. “Yes, he saw you from the window.”

“What did he say?”

“What you would expect.”

“Then you were supposed to tell me to leave. You didn’t do that.”

“I’m a housekeeper not a slave.” The curve in her mouth was slight. She gestured Teagan to enter the house.

Teagan unzipped her jacket. “Where is he?”

“In his study. I’ll take you there.”

Teagan followed her down a hallway she hadn’t noticed during her previous visits. Marianne turned the handle on a set of double doors and stepped aside. Teagan moved into the room.

“Yes?” Phin was staring at his computer monitor. When Teagan didn’t answer, he looked up. Despite the mask, his displeasure at seeing her was visible. “Marianne?” He looked past her to the hallway.

“Don’t worry,” Teagan said. “I won’t stay long. I only came to see how you’re doing.”

The door clicked shut behind her.

“Now you’ve seen. End your visit.” Phin growled.

“What are you doing?”

“I didn’t realize you monitored my activities.” He clicked the computer mouse, but never stopped staring at the screen.

“I’m trying to start a conversation. It was the wrong choice of words.” When he didn’t’ respond, she said, “Why do you hate me so much?”

“Hate is a powerful word.”

“Okay, you don’t like me.”

He pushed away from his computer and steepled his fingers. “What do you want?”

“I told you, to see how you are. When I left last night you were exhausted. I was concerned.” She lowered herself into the chair opposite him.

“I didn’t invite you to sit.”

“No, and I knew you wouldn’t, so I didn’t wait for an invitation. You should quit thinking of yourself. Your staff cares about you. Isolating yourself isn’t good for you, and it isn’t good for your staff.”

“They’re not chained to this cabin. They can leave.”

“That doesn’t change how they feel about you. I know little about you. You’ve managed to stay off the grid. There’s limited information about you on the internet.”

“As it should be, if you want to know something, ask.”

“Will you answer?”

He only stared.

“All right, I’d like to know about your family, where you’re from—”

“I’ve no family, and I’ve lived all over the world, so I guess you could say I’m a global citizen. Isn’t that the fashionable term these days?”

“Has there ever been any one special in your life?”

She expected him to become angry and demand she leave his house at once. Instead, he remained quiet. Only the flicker of pain in his eyes gave her the clue a relationship had not gone as planned. Because of his injury?

“You could’ve asked me these questions last night.”

“I could have, but I didn’t. I’m asking them now.”

“There was someone once. I said as much last night. There was someone I misjudged.” His voice was dull and detached.

“I’m sorry.”

His head came up sharply. “Why? It has nothing to do with you.”

“True, but I know the pain of thinking you know someone then learning that you didn’t.”

“Anything else?”

Teagan felt his tension. She gave a weary exhale. “No, just let me know when you’re ready to let someone else care about you. I’d like to be added to that list.”

She turned away. Her gaze lifted to the wall where enlarged photos of buildings hung. The photos were black and white. The cars on the street were vintage indicating the photos had been taken decades if not centuries ago. Most of the buildings she didn’t recognize. One building stood taller than the others surrounding it—the building that housed the condo she had shared with Will.

“Where did you get that photo?” she asked.

“Which one? My wall is covered with photos.”

“The one of The Tower, the one in Denver.”

“The building where you live. Those pictures are online. There easy enough to get. If you want one, I’ll order it for you.”

“You have this photo because The Tower was one of your projects.

“I oversaw the renovation. One of my architects—” There was a flicker in his eyes. “—supervised the design.”

“It’s a beautiful building. I fell in love with it long before it was scheduled for renovation. The design stayed true to the original plans and the turn of the twentieth century design. I knew the designer—”

“Who was that?” The sharpness in his voice made her jerk her gaze to his.

“It doesn’t matter.” Teagan cursed herself for her reference to Ginny. She didn’t want to think about the woman she had considered her friend.

He grabbed his cane and pushed himself to his feet. “I believe you’ve overstayed your welcome.”

Chapter Thirty-one

A deep sadness welled up inside Teagan. What had happened to Phin that he pushed everyone away? His house staff was his only contact and maybe an occasional doctor or some medical provider.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” Phin’s mask hid his scowl, but his tone was heavy with indignation.

“I’m sad for you. People care about you, but you push them away.”

“You don’t know who cares about me.”

“I know your staff does, and you ignore that they want the best for you. You grumble because people want to be close to you. If you didn’t have any redeemable qualities, which you might, though I have yet to see them, your staff wouldn’t care if you didn’t have other people in your life.”

“One thing I don’t need is psychoanalysis. Who are you to tell me to let other people in my life? You don’t know what I need.” Both hands gripping his cane, he leaned forward. His eyes glittered through his mask.

It have her a start. Her heart leapt with fright.

“You admit you need something.” She inflated her lungs to press down on her hammering heart.

“I admit nothing.” His voice was soft, almost as quiet as the forest where they’d first met.

The only sound was the rasp of his breath and for a moment she thought he’d exerted himself. So like him. He had to be in control no matter the cost to himself. She waited for some sign that he needed help. That was the only way she’d know. He wouldn’t tell her.

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