MILLS & BOON

Vintage INTRIGUE

Under Lock and Key

SYLVIE KURTZ

Sylvie Kurtz

Under Lock And Key

«HarperCollins»

Kurtz S.

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SHACKLED HEARTOn a stormy Texas night, Tyler Blackwell awoke from a car crash to find himself in a castle dungeon, bound under lock and key by an ephemeral jailer with haunting eyes and virginal flesh that begged for a man's touch. Mysterious Melissa Carnes–the woman Tyler had been sent undercover to defend from a deadly enemy intent on destroying her life–was more tempting to Tyler than any assignment. And being her "prisoner" had its advantages. But could Tyler penetrate the cold stone wall Melissa had built around her heart before the past emerged like the grim reaper to sentence them both to life terms…?

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“Tyler, when you look at me, what do you see?”

Once the question was out, Melissa held her breath, not quite sure she wanted a response.

“I see pain. I see courage. I see strength.”

Emptiness, yearning, whistled through her, making her sway. “Do you see a woman?”

“Yes.” He placed his hand over her heart. Something in her sighed.

“I want to know…” Brashly she stepped forward and pressed her lips to his, lingering, absorbing the long slow shiver that went through her. She felt her blood heat. “I want to know…” she murmured against his lips. “I need—”

“Melissa…”

“I need—” Hot tears squeezed between her closed eyelids.

He kissed the line of tears, making them gush faster.

“Please, Tyler…” She wasn’t sure if she was asking him to stop or to continue.

“I promise not to hurt you,” he said between drugging kisses that made her weak.

“It’s already too late for that,” she whispered as she pressed herself closer to him….

Dear Harlequin Intrigue Reader,

Spring is in the air…and so is mystery. And just as always, Harlequin Intrigue has a spectacular lineup of breathtaking romantic suspense for you to enjoy.

Continuing her oh-so-sexy HEROES INC. trilogy, Susan Kearney brings us Defending the Heiress—which should say it all. As if anyone wouldn’t want to be personally protected by a hunk!

Veteran Harlequin Intrigue author Caroline Burnes has crafted a super Southern gothic miniseries. THE LEGEND OF BLACKTHORN has everything—skeletons in the closet, a cast of unique characters and even a handsome masked phantom who rides a black stallion. And can he kiss! Rider in the Mist is the first of two classic tales.

The Cradle Mission by Rita Herron is another installment in her NIGHTHAWK ISLAND series. This time a cop has to protect his dead brother’s baby and the beautiful woman left to care for the child. But why is someone dead set on rocking the cradle…?

Finally, Sylvie Kurtz leads us down into one woman’s horror—so deep, she’s all but unreachable…until she meets and trusts one man to lead her out of the darkness in Under Lock and Key.

We hope you savor all four titles and return again next month for more exciting stories.

Sincerely,

Denise O’Sullivan

Senior Editor

Harlequin Intrigue

Under Lock and Key
Sylvie Kurtz

www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Chuck, who loves me—ugly side and all

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Flying an eight-hour solo cross-country in a Piper Arrow with only the airplane's crackling radio and a large bag of M&M's for company, Sylvie Kurtz realized a pilot's life wasn't for her. The stories zooming in and out of her mind proved more entertaining than the flight itself. Not a quitter, she finished her pilot's course and earned her commercial license and instrument rating.

Since then, she has traded in her wings for a keyboard, where she lets her imagination soar to create fictional adventures that explore the power of love and the thrill of suspense. When not writing, she enjoys the outdoors with her husband and two children, quilt making, photography and reading whatever catches her interest.

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Parker County,
TEXAS
To
Springtown
Fallen Moon
Weatherford
To Mineral Wells
U.S. Highway 80/180
I-20
Trinity Meadows
To Fort Worth
/Dallas
To Abilene
All underlined places are fictitious.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Melissa Carnes —Someone is stirring the pot of her “witch” reputation in order to scare her off her land.

Tyler Blackwell —He has a debt to pay and will honor his promise to keep Melissa safe.

Lindsey Blackwell —Did Tyler’s wife have to die?

Freddy Gold —Melissa’s uncle has a hunch that something evil is afoot at Thornwylde.

Ray Lundy —The stable manager is looking for a job promotion.

William Carnes —Melissa’s father may have started his rich career with a lie.

Sable Lorel Carnes —She married Melissa’s father for his money and isn’t pleased she wasn’t given control over his billions when he died.

Tia Carnes —How badly does Melissa’s half sister want to catch her man?

Sheriff Tate —Believes the “witch” stories only too gladly.

J. R. Randall —The philanthropic businessman wants something that isn’t his.

GRACE'S CHOCOLATE CHUNK PECAN BROWNIES

4 oz unsweetened dark baking chocolate
¾ cup butter
2 cups sugar
3 eggs
1 tsp vanilla
1 cup flour
1 cup coarsely chopped pecans, toasted to bring out flavor
1 cup semisweet chocolate chunks

Heat oven to 350°F. Line a 13" x 9" baking pan with foil, extending over the edges to form handles. Grease foil.

Microwave the unsweetened chocolate and butter in large microwavable bowl on High for 2 minutes—or until the butter is melted. Stir until the chocolate is melted.

Stir sugar into chocolate mixture until well blended. Mix in eggs and vanilla. Stir in flour, nuts and chocolate chunks until well blended. Spread in prepared pan.

Bake 30 to 35 minutes or until toothpick inserted in center comes out with fudgy crumbs. Do not overbake.

Cool in pan. Lift out of pan by foil handles. Place onto a cutting board. Cut into squares. Makes 24.

Can be stored in a cool, dry place. Do not refrigerate.

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Chapter One

"I thought you were my friend." Tyler Blackwell loomed above the seated Freddy Gold, owner and editor-in-chief of Texas Gold. How could Freddy ask something like this from him knowing where he was coming from? Wasn't it hard enough for him to start again? But to start like this? Tyler blasted his friend with every expletive he knew.

Freddy calmly leaned back in his cordovan-leather chair and stared at him.

"Tyler, it's precisely because you're my friend that I'm giving you this assignment." Freddy turned away from him in his swivel chair and went back to work. "I owe her, Tyler. It's the least I can do. And you owe me. So I'm calling in my chip. Make sure nothing happens to Melissa Carnes."

What did Freddy have to do with her? She was nothing but a crazy artist who never came out of her self-imposed isolation. And Freddy had a dozen journalists on staff who'd kill for an opportunity to ingratiate themselves to the boss. "Why me?"

"I trust you. I don't dare trust anyone else when it comes to my niece."

"Your niece? Freddy—"

"She needs a champion. For once, she needs someone on her side."

Tyler sneered. The last time he'd tried to be a champion, his wife had died. "If it's a champion you're looking for, you're looking in the wrong place."

"I know that if you give me your word, you won't bail out on me until the job's done. You'll keep her safe."

"After Lindsey, you can still say that?"

"Because of Lindsey, yes."

That vote of confidence silenced him for a while. Since Lindsey's death, even he didn't trust himself.

"I know you," Freddy said. "I've taught you everything you know."

Tyler had come a long way since he and Freddy had been beat journalists together ten years ago. Tyler was just starting then, and Freddy was getting ready to move on to bigger and better things. Freddy had indeed taught him everything he knew. But some things you couldn't prepare for, and no amount of training could get you ready for some blows. Still, Freddy was always there for him—even when everyone else had given up—and that loyalty had to count for something.

"So who's this big bad wolf who's after your little lamb?" Tyler asked, sinking into one of Freddy's well-appointed leather chairs. He'd hear what Freddy had to say. Then he'd lay out a rational argument as to why he couldn't take on the responsibility of looking out for someone else. Freddy would have to listen to logic.

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?"

"It's a feeling…" He shrugged.

Tyler stared incredulously at his friend. "Freddy Gold's calling in a chip on a feeling?"

"Yeah."

Seeing Freddy so unsure of himself was strange. Tyler contemplated the man in front of him, noticed through his haze of frustration that Freddy had aged seemingly overnight. His jowls, usually so easy to jiggle with laughter, sagged. Puffed smudges made purple half-moons beneath his eyes. Lines spidered from the corners of his mouth.

"So what exactly is it you want me to do?" Tyler asked.

"I want you to protect her. Keep her safe."

"From what?"

Freddy marched his pen across his knuckles. The muffled noise of telephones and voices on the other side of the office wall filled the uncomfortable silence. Slowly he pulled open the middle drawer of the desk and drew out an envelope. “This came two days ago.”

He pushed the envelope across the desk.

Tyler started to reach for it, then sprang up from the chair, backing away, hands held palms out in front of him. “I can’t.”

“It’s an article about Thornwylde Castle where Melissa lives,” Freddy said as he unfolded the newsprint. “And a bishop.” From his hand, a black chess piece rolled out onto the desk. “It’s a warning, Tyler. Someone’s playing a game, and I don’t like it. I need you there.”

“It’s just an article.” Tyler ran a hand over his face, not liking the sinking feeling weighing him down. “How do you get a warning out of a chess piece?”

“Chess is a game of war. Bishops can move in any direction, but must keep on a diagonal. They’re valuable because they can make long, narrow moves.”

In spite of his best intentions, Tyler couldn’t quite bite off the questions that sprang up. “Who sent the package?”

“I’m working on that.” Freddy hid the bishop in the envelope and returned the whole to the drawer. “Melissa’s had a hard life, but in some ways, she’s very innocent. She won’t know how to defend herself.”

Who? What? Where? When? How? Instinct kicked in. It felt like old times when the merest hint of a question had sent him sniffing for answers. His limbs became jittery. He tried not to think of all the Tennessee bourbon and oblivion he’d only recently given up, but it was like trying not to think of a blue elephant. The bottle with the black label was all he could see. The fire of the dark liquid was all he could taste. The sweet blackness of nothing was all he desired. He shook his head. Stay here. Stay focused. “You already suspect someone.”

“She’s a rich woman who’ll be even richer in a month. Money makes people do unspeakable things.” Freddy frowned, his pen etching deep grooves into the pad on his desk.

Tyler licked his dry lips, tried not to taste the phantom whiskey and rested his backside against the edge of the credenza. “Why don’t you just tell her to be careful and be done with it? Why do I need to go there?”

“Because…we’re estranged. She would dismiss anything I told her.” The admission seemed painful to swallow. But then, mistakes always were. Tyler should know. He had a Texas-size one stuck in his craw. “She can’t know I sent you. She’ll just send you away.”

Tyler leaned forward. He couldn’t do this. Not even for Freddy. “Just how do you propose I accomplish this feat?”

“Find the story. Like you’ve done a hundred times.”

But this time it would be different. “There are ways for her to protect her money from poachers. What story is there?”

“Start with the money, work up to her family. Her stepmother has big social ambitions and that doesn’t come cheap. Her half sister lives for pleasure—also an expensive hobby.”

Tyler sprang from his chair, leaned his fists on the desk’s top and glared at his friend. “Are you insane? You want to send me into the middle of a family feud?”

“No, I’m dead serious.” Freddy kept scribbling, as if the action could keep him anchored while Tyler blustered. “Twenty-two years ago, my sister told me she didn’t feel safe at the castle. A week later she was dead. I dismissed her fears. I don’t want to make the same mistake again.”

Mistakes, Tyler had made so many already. And here was Freddy, desperate to send him right into the middle of another. “I can’t. Not after—”

“When you fall off a horse, you have to climb back on the sucker before he can kick you while you’re down.”

Too late. He's already kicked. Tyler dropped to the chair like a stone. This wouldn't work. It just wouldn't work. "How am I supposed to get in there to talk to her? You think a recluse is going to open her home to a stranger? Let him peek at her books and play knight to her damsel?"

"You'll pretend to be writing an article on her stallion. Eclipse is a champion. She won't turn down press for him."

That made sense. An article in the most respected news magazine in the state was publicity no one could afford to turn down. "That'll work for an hour, maybe two. After that, what?"

"You'll think of something."

Tyler knew himself well enough after the ravages of the past year to understand that his decisiveness had become rusted, his vision blurred, his drive stalled. But most of all, he knew he didn't want to be the Tyler Blackwell of a year ago. And that was what Freddy was asking him to do. He'd spent his life becoming Tyler Blackwell, ace reporter, the dog who wouldn't let go of the bone until he could drop it, meat and all, into the reader's lap on the morning paper's front page. Truth had once been all-important. But his drive for truth—and his ego—had also cost him the woman he loved, and in less than a year, his career. If he was to start over, he wanted something different.

"I'll have my secretary call Deanna and let her know you're coming," Freddy said, jotting a note to himself.

"Who's Deanna?"

"Deanna Ziegler is Melissa's friend. To get to Melissa you have to go through Dee."

"Have this Deanna person warn her."

"It's not that simple."

Nothing about this situation was simple. "You said you weren't on speaking terms. Why would this Deanna allow a reporter you send to write about the stallion?"

"An article in Texas Gold with horses show season in full bloom is good business, and Melissa is a good businesswoman. She doesn't trust me, but she trusts what I've done with the magazine."

A headache was starting to drum at Tyler's temples. "Why are you doing this?"

Freddy put his pen down, wove the fingers of his hands together and closed his eyes. A moment later he lifted his gaze. In Freddy's dark eyes Tyler saw a despair close to his own and knew he had no choice. Freddy needed to protect Melissa from this possible foe as much as Tyler needed to find some logic for Lindsey's death.

"After her mother died," Freddy said, "Melissa needed me, and I let her down because I was too busy building my career. I thought she was safe with her family. She wasn't. I owe her."

The jangle of the phone interrupted their conversation.

"Rena?" Freddy said, a frown creasing his forehead. Rena was Freddy's stunning wife, fifteen years younger than the old bear and the center of Freddy's universe since he'd met her two years ago. Rena was also seven and a half months into a difficult pregnancy. "I'll be right there, sweetheart."

"Rena all right?" Tyler asked. Freddy didn't need the worry about his wife on top of the worry about his niece.

"The doctors think they might not be able to stop the baby from coming this time. I'm off to the hospital."

Freddy hustled his bulk toward his office door. "I let Melissa down, Tyler. I need some redemption—especially now." Freddy raised his hands in a helpless gesture, and Tyler realized Freddy was trying to make the world right for Rena and their soon-to-be-born child by rectifying past mistakes and maybe even appeasing the gods of fate. For whatever reason, he still didn't feel worthy of Rena's love. Couldn't he tell just by looking into his wife's eyes that she adored him, soft middle, thinning hair and all?

"I can count on you?" Freddy asked, hesitating at the door.

Tyler nodded. Trust Freddy to know exactly what to say to make him feel like a heel. Who else had given him a million and a half chances? Who else had never given up on him—even when he'd

given up on himself? Guilt was as good a motivator as any, and Tyler felt guilty enough for letting Freddy down.

He grabbed the file with Melissa Carnes's name off Freddy's desk and strode out of the office behind Freddy. Just get it over and done with.

Fast.

TYLER COULDN'T SEE a thing. The furious rhythm of the wipers couldn't keep up with the torrents of rain plastering his windshield. His headlights were useless on the dark country road, and he cursed his stubbornness.

He should have waited until morning. But no, Tyler Blackwell had to do everything his own way. Maybe Freddy was right and he did have a suicidal streak. Why else would he be driving on this godforsaken road in the middle of a deluge? After all, May and mobile home-eating storms were synonymous. Had he unconsciously wanted a spring twister to rip him away from this unpleasant assignment? On the other hand, maybe he wanted to prove that he wasn't a washed-up has-been, that no storm could stop him. Whether he wanted to prove that to himself or to Freddy, he hadn't decided yet. All he knew for sure was that he wanted his debt to Freddy canceled. Get in. Get the answers. Get out. Once he'd made up his mind, he'd seen no reason to put off the inevitable.

Damn, where was all this rain coming from? Spring weather in Texas was temperamental, but this was ridiculous. Slowing to a crawl, he leaned forward over the steering wheel and peered into nothingness. There should be signs of civilization. A light. Anything. The town of Fallen Moon couldn't be more than a few miles ahead. He'd get a room there and find Melissa Carnes in the morning.

He'd just decided to stop and wait for the rain to thin when his Jeep dipped to the left and the road disappeared beneath the wheels. He grappled with the steering wheel, trying to find the road again. Too late. Gravity took over and plunged him into a deep ditch.

The Jeep bounced, slid sideways and came to a grinding halt, sending Tyler crashing into the left side of the vehicle and his head deflecting off the window. Pinpricks of bright light romped before his eyes, then faded like spent firecrackers when he shook his head.

The acrid stench of gasoline filled his nose. A warm trickle of blood ran down his temple. The sting of rain pouring in from the cracked window pelted his face. When he tried to move to get his bearings, dizziness overwhelmed him.

He reached up to touch his forehead and connected with the roll bar, instead. If it hadn't been for the bar, he'd be dead. And against all odds, he was surprised he was glad to be alive.

The engine wheezed spasmodically, but the lights were out. Tyler saw nothing, not even the hand he waved in front of his face. Slowly, deliberately, to keep his head from swinging crazily like one of those bobbing-head dolls in a car window, he fumbled for the ignition switch and turned off the engine. He reached for the door handle. Pain shot through his wrist.

"Okay. Take it easy." Securing his hurt wrist against his bruised ribs, he twisted his body and pulled himself through the window with his good arm. Rain assaulted him with a vengeance.

Another bolt of lightning rent the sky, giving him a chance to reexamine his position. Then he braced himself against the Jeep's frame and jumped. Slipping on the muddy embankment, he lost his balance and landed in the water at the bottom of the ditch. As he sat, water filled his cowboy boots and seeped through his jeans and cotton shirt.

The rain turned into pea-size hail. Numbed instincts prickled back to life. Survival proved stronger than the pessimism of the past year.

Tyler forced himself to stand. Pain throbbed through his body and ended in his head with the pounding of a hundred hammers.

"Tyler Blackwell is back," he warned the rain. Thunder mocked him.

He clawed his way out of the ditch, pulling up his body with sheer determination until he found the road. Lightning flashed at regular intervals, lighting his way. Wincing with every step, he trudged toward town.

What kind of trouble could a recluse get herself into within the confines of a castle? Melissa Carnes painted pictures, and she rode horses, for crying out loud. Freddy's instincts were wrong this time. It was the baby, the guilt. There was no psychotic stalker, no wicked stepmother, no greedy half sister out to harm his niece.

"I hope you're worth it, lady." He gritted his teeth and concentrated on walking.

"Damn you, Freddy, for cashing in your chip, and damn you, Lindsey, for dying." No, he didn't mean that. It wasn't her fault. He sneered. Yeah, most people would say it was his fault. His beautiful wife. If he hadn't been so ambitious. If he'd known when to let go. If he hadn't pushed the wrong person too far. Then Lindsey would still be alive, and he'd still be a hero. He rested for a moment against a sign that read No Outlet. "Great. Just great. I'm heading nowhere."

The road came to a sudden end. Lightning crazed the sky, flickering a mirage before him. The photographs had not done Thornwylde Castle justice.

Before him was a fortress straight out of Camelot—moat, drawbridge, towers and all. Castles belonged in England, not the wilds of North Texas. Took a rich eccentric like William Carnes to import a castle and plop it on land more suited to ranch bungalows. Took a peculiar woman like Melissa Carnes to live there and pass herself off as a witch. But she was Freddy's niece, and Tyler had promised to keep her safe.

Head pounding, he dragged himself over the wooden bridge that spanned a water-filled moat and found himself faced with a barred and closed entrance gate. Three stairs, that to his aching body, seemed as unscalable as Mount Everest, stood to the left and led to a smaller door. With his last ounce of strength he hoisted himself up the steps and knocked on the door.

He leaned against the rain-slicked wood. His body crumpled under his weight and his face buried itself in the prickly doormat. A wave of heaviness surged through him and filled him with the same darkness that surrounded him.

And as the last thread of thought snapped into black, an overwhelming sense of evil engulfed him.

RAY LUNDY sat alone in the cab of his pickup truck in the middle of nowhere, waiting for the prearranged two-short-and-one-long signals of light. He couldn't have asked for a better atmosphere if he'd had a straight line to God. Drenching rain poured from a sky darker than Hades, and the eerie strobelike dance of the wizened oak branches around him added just the right touch.

His contact wanted anonymity. Well, hell, you couldn't get more lost than in this part of Parker County. Ray pressed the button that lit his digital watch. He'd give his contact five more minutes, then he'd leave.

Only fools went out on a night like this. Even the witch wouldn't venture out of her castle tonight. No, anyone with half a brain would stay home, heeding the weatherman's forecast of possible tornadoes in the North-Texas area.

Though the purr of the idling engine offered a measure of comfort, Ray flipped on the heater button to stave off the chill. He didn't dare turn on the radio. Not that anyone would be out on a night like this, but he'd hate to be caught unawares. Instead, he let the rhythm of the rain on the pickup's roof keep his thoughts company.

Ray knew he was a fool, but if things kept going his way, it wouldn't be for much longer. Soon, very soon, he'd give his job the kiss-off and be his own man. He'd get back what was owed him. Then he'd be the one giving orders, sending whipping boys to do the dirty work and him reaping all the rewards. A smile curled his lips at the headiness of the thought. Yeah, he could handle that.

Through the heavy downpour Ray saw the weak signal. He hit his headlights in answer. Let the contact get wet. I may be a fool, but I ain't stupid.

The contact, dressed all in black, yanked the rusty door open and slid into the passenger seat. “Couldn’t you have picked a drier spot?”

“Yeah,” Ray said, exaggerating his drawl. “Guess I could’ve. But then I’d have missed a great sight. Tch, tch. Rain and leather and silk just don’t mix, do they.”

He laughed and drew a cigar from his coat pocket. Once he lit the stogie, he took a slow drag, inhaling deeply before he deliberately blew smoke rings in his contact’s face, enjoying the action even more than the poke he’d had earlier with the new stable girl. He was the one pulling strings now. Power. There was nothing to beat sheer power. It was his birthright, and he’d get it back—no matter whose strings he had to yank to get the results he wanted.

“Why all the secrecy?” Ray asked.

The contact shifted to avoid the smoke. “Nobody can know I’m involved. It has to look like it’s her idea. I have just over a month to run Melissa Carnes off her land.”

Ray stopped blowing smoke rings. Now wasn’t that interesting? Melissa Carnes would have been his last guess for this little enterprise. Oh, yeah, this was definitely his lucky day. “It’ll take me less than a day to plug a bullet in her brain. Everyone knows the witch likes to ride at night.”

“No, you jackass! It has to look like it’s her idea to leave.”

See if you talk to me in that tone of voice when this is over, you bottomfeeder… Ray took a long pull on the cigar. I’m in charge here. “Why?”

“You’re paid to follow orders, not to ask questions.”

“I like to understand the psychology behind the job.” And see how it fits with my game plan.

The contact reached over and scrunched Ray’s shirt collar in a tangle of fingers. “Understand this—if you don’t do things my way, you don’t get paid. Got it?”

Ray pushed away the powerless grip. The nerve of this pawn to think he had any say over the direction of play. “All right, don’t have a hissy fit.”

I’m in charge, Ray reminded himself. He couldn’t hide the smile coming from deep inside, and he tasted once more the sweet flavor of power. His power over people like the contact; people who usually considered him scum.

Who was scum now?

“So,” Ray said, blowing more smoke straight at the aristocratic nose, “what do you want?”

“I need her running scared.” The contact paused.

Lightning cut jagged lines across the black sky. Thunder boomed farther to the south. One of Ray’s greatest skills was reading people, and what he saw now was desperation. This desperation would buy him his crown. “I don’t come cheap.”

“Once Melissa Carnes is off her land, you’ll get your slice.”

“I like my cake with lots of icing.” Ray savored the thought, the power. His, all his.

“There’s enough to go around.”

Ray blew another string of smoke rings and marveled at their perfection. “Did you read about the mason who broke his leg at the witch’s castle?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Ever heard of the telephone game?”

“I don’t get it.”

Of course not. “How do you get rid of a witch?”

Impatience wrenched the contact’s pretty features into their true plug-ugliness, so Ray gave the brainless cockroach its answer. “With a witch-hunt.”

Chapter Two

A noise disturbed Melissa's gloomy thoughts. Her ears, tuned by years of living nearly alone in her immense castle, picked up the discordant sound. She listened, wary, then plopped her paintbrush into a jar of water. Someone was at the gatehouse.

The same thing happened every year around this time. The seasonal storms and the threat of tornadoes made a perfect backdrop for the dares and counterdares of local high-school kids. What could be more ghoulish than catching a glimpse of the witch when the heavens roiled with evil?

Why couldn't they leave her alone? What had she ever done to them?

Fists tight at her sides, she marched down the creaky wooden steps. She'd had enough and wasn't going to take the taunts this time. They wanted the witch; they'd get the witch. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she donned her black poncho, its hood strategically placed for the best effect. She grabbed the flashlight on the small table by the door and strode across the courtyard.

Melissa paused by the gatehouse door, listening for the telltale noise of the thrill seekers' presence, and heard nothing. Flashlight in hand, she readied to illuminate her pale face and set the fear of God into the little hoodlums.

She threw open the heavy door, placed the flashlight in its most effective position for fright and gave them her best cackle. She expected shrieks of terror. Instead, she heard a soft moan like that of a wounded animal. Turning her light on the crumpled body at her feet, she took in the bloody face and muddy clothes.

Stiletto-sharp instincts honed by pain and hatred told her to shut the door and ignore the wounded man on her doorstep. She didn't need a stranger intruding on her privacy. Frenzied lightning, followed by a deep rumble, seemed to second her decision. The wail of tornado sirens from town added urgency.

Melissa stood frozen, grasping the door like a lifeline. If she left him there, he might die. The sky quieted. The hard beating of her heart and the shallowness of her breath replaced the thunder. Pollen-laden rain streamed down her face.

Sighing regretfully, she crouched next to the man. As much as she'd like to, even the witch in her couldn't leave a wounded man out on a night like this.

"Grace!" Her shout competed with a new crash of thunder and the whip of the wind for her housekeeper's attention. "Grace!"

At six feet, Grace Jackson towered above many men. Her checkered past afforded her as much notoriety as Melissa's reclusiveness did. Most townsfolk had learned to fear Grace Jackson's wrath as much as Melissa's alleged hexes.

The door to Grace's apartment opened. "What are you doing down there, child?"

"I need your help. I can't move him by myself."

"Him? What are you talking about?" Grace snapped on the dim light above the stairs and moved down the creaky wooden steps with a lightness that belied her two-hundred-pound bulk.

"Lordy!" Grace whistled. "What happened to him?"

"Don't know. I found him on the doorstep."

Grace bent down to examine the man draped across the top of the steps. She swiped the mud off his cheek. "This man's gonna bring trouble. I feel it in my bones."

"Trouble or not, we need to get him out of the rain."

With a sigh, Grace hefted the stranger up in her capable arms. "Take his feet."

They moved him inside, then Melissa closed and barred the door behind them.

"Upstairs to my apartment," Grace said, adjusting her grip under the man's arms.

Melissa nodded and helped Grace carry him to her apartment. Once they'd settled him on the bed in the spare room, Melissa was only too glad to let Grace take over. A stranger—a man, at that

—was something she'd rather not deal with. Especially not tonight when the longing for normalcy stirred such deep cravings.

She stood, intent on returning to her own tower, when Grace looked up at her and said, "What are you waiting for, girl? I'm gonna need your help."

"Me?" Melissa brushed a hand to her chest. "What for?"

"He's deadweight, honey. I can't strip him out of them wet clothes by myself."

Melissa reluctantly shed her poncho, shaking off the excess water before she hung it on the knob.

"I'll need more light," Grace said.

Melissa nodded, then extracted a black silk shawl from her pocket and carefully arranged it around her face, leaving only her eyes uncovered before Grace turned on the light in her spare room.

Grace sat beside the unconscious man on the twin bed. "Help me hold him up so we can see where he's hurt and get them wet clothes off him."

"Grace?" Melissa's voice wavered with uncertainty.

"Missy, we gotta see how bad he's hurt," Grace answered with a touch of impatience. She ran her hands over the prone figure with the practiced ease of a nurse. Melissa watched, fascinated by the man on the bed.

He was a beautiful creature—the epitome of the tall, dark and handsome hero in those romantic movies her friend Dee insisted on sharing with her once a week.

Even with his brow furrowed in pain, his face had a quality of strength. The impression came from the high cheekbones, the sharp cut of his jaw, she decided, and rated his bone structure as excellent. His long eyelashes lay against smooth skin that was too pale to be healthy. Only the slightly sardonic twist of his mouth and the drying blood on his forehead marred the perfect proportions of his oval face. Drawn to those full lips, she tried to imagine how they would taste. She frowned. Where had that thought come from?

"What do you suppose happened to him?" Melissa asked to distract her wayward thoughts.

"Looks like a car wreck. Weather like this, wouldn't surprise me none." Grace finished her inspection and covered him with the blanket. "I don't think he's too bad off," she continued. "Left wrist sprained, two bruised ribs and probably a concussion, judging by the bump on his head. If he don't wake up soon, I'm gonna have to take him to the hospital." Grace pointed to the side of the bed near the man's middle. "Go sit there." Grace gently held the stranger up. "You do the buttons."

With shaky fingers, Melissa fumbled with the buttons of his denim shirt. Light and shadow played over pectorals whose pleasing definition had her itching for a pencil and paper. Her frown deepened. He was a man. She didn't draw men. The spray of dark hair centered on his torso mesmerized her. She followed its course until it disappeared in the waistband of his jeans. After a moment of hesitation she unbuckled his belt, unsnapped the button of his fly and pulled down the zipper just enough to free the shirttail. With curiosity, she noted how the soft dark line of hair continued down into his navy shorts, automatically cataloging the fascinating lines made by bones and muscles over stomach and hips. She sucked in a breath at the painful purpling bloom of bruises over his left ribs.

With the shirt loosened, Grace leaned the man forward so that his head lay on Melissa's shoulder. He moaned in pain. Instinctively Melissa wrapped her arms protectively around his waist and trembled as his body relaxed against hers. He was heavy on her chest, and she tensed under the weight as Grace proceeded to remove the shirt.

Relax. He can't hurt you; he's unconscious. Watching all those romantic movies hadn't prepared her for the solidness of a man or for the irrational feeling of loss sinking through her like a rock in spring mud.

"Push him back easy," Grace ordered. "I'm gonna go get some bandages for that cut."

With a small sigh of relief, Melissa did as Grace asked. While Grace was gone, her gaze returned once more to the stranger's lips. Artistic analysis, she told herself. Her hand reached for her heart and she knuckled the soft pining ache there. He's not the one, she thought. He can't give you what you want—no one can.

She started to move away, then found her hand—as if it had a mind of its own—wandering toward that beautiful face. With a fingertip, she traced the edge of the bruise on his forehead, trailed down the sharp definition of his cheekbone and found his mouth. A study of proportion, she told herself, and tried to push away the notions of heat and softness and stark maleness. Would he begrudge her a moment of fantasy?

With uncharacteristic abandon, she loosened her shawl and gave in to temptation. A spark of electricity ran between them when she touched her lips to his. A small gasp escaped her as she jerked back in surprise. When she kissed him a second time, his lips felt cold and lifeless.

Just as well, she thought. He was no Snow White waiting for a wake-up kiss, and she definitely wasn't Princess Charming. Love at first kiss was the invention of movie-makers. Everyone knew that. When he woke up, he'd most likely think he'd landed on the set of a horror movie, not some sort of romance. Still, she couldn't resist one last touch, this time with her finger to his lips.

His eyes fluttered open and he mumbled, "Lindsey, don't leave me, Lindsey."

Spurred by a shot of adrenaline, Melissa scrambled off the bed and rewrapped the shawl around her face. When she turned to face him, he lay still once more, and the momentary speeding of her heart returned to normal.

Armed with scissors and bandages of all kind, Grace reappeared. She positioned herself opposite Melissa. Her hands moved quickly as they cleaned, patched and secured the various wounds.

Prodded by Grace, Melissa once again took up a post by his head. Sympathy for a creature in pain soon edged out her natural wariness of the human male. All the while Grace tended him, Melissa stroked the stranger's straight brown hair, soothed him when he moaned. In his call to the mysterious Lindsey, Melissa had heard a familiar ring of grief. Who was Lindsey? How had she hurt him? Melissa calmed him with the same soft voice she used with her horses.

When Grace finished, she covered him with a quilt and tucked in several hot-water bottles around his body. Then Grace picked up his damp jeans from the floor. From the back pocket, a wallet fell out and the contents spilled to the floor.

"What's his name?" Melissa asked. She'd grown used to the weight and warmth of him against her and still stroked the soft hair along the side of his head.

"According to his driver's license," Grace said, stooping to pick up the wallet, "this is Tyler Blackwell, thirty-three, 184 pounds, six-two."

Tyler Blackwell. It had a nice sound.

"Lives in Fort Worth. Oh, no!" As if the wallet had suddenly turned into a venomous snake, Grace dropped it. "Missy, he's got a press ID."

The words hung heavily between them. Grace held her breath while she waited for her reaction.

Slowly Melissa got up from the bed and moved to the farthest corner of the room. A chill colder than the hail stoning the castle walls iced through her. A reporter? Here? How dare he?

"Get him out of here." Melissa's body shook and her blood ran cold. Another reporter trying to advance his dubious career at her expense. The last two had created the witch and sealed her permanently from the world.

She wouldn't be easy prey again.

When Grace didn't move, Melissa paced the stone floor while she fought the quickening of her anger, the sting of tears. "Now! I don't want him here."

The idea of revenge crept unbidden into her mind. The poisoned thought fed on her anger and took on life. White-hot fury swirled deep inside. Grace positioned herself between Melissa and the wounded man.

"Missy, he's hurt."

Revenge soured her mouth with its venom, spread like fire through her blood. He was hurt, but so was she. He had a life. Hers had been stolen from her. Not once, but twice. By people like him. She couldn't let that happen again. She had nothing left to lose.

This time she would fight back. This time it would be different. She stopped her animal-like pacing and gazed down at the broken man on the bed. No longer did she see the sensual lines that had so pleased her earlier. She saw her last chance to reclaim her peace.

Lightning clawed the sky. Thunder resounded, shaking the walls, matching the anger quaking inside her. Melissa spun on her heel and met Grace's stern look squarely.

"On second thought," Melissa said, "if it's a story he wants, let's give him one he'll never forget."

LIGHTNING AND THUNDER receded to low flickers and distant rumbles. Rain still crashed in fury against the windowpanes of Grace's spare room. Its rhythm mirrored the wild beating of Melissa's heart. She was tired of the pain.

In her mind she heard the child's sobs. They hadn't bothered her in years. Not since Deanna had showed her how to cage her anger and her sorrow with the horses. She wanted to cry, too, like the child she'd once been, but the years of conditioning wouldn't let that happen.

"You can't put him in the dungeon, Missy," Grace said. "It ain't right."

Anger's slow growl thrummed through Melissa's body. "Why not? He's ready to sell my soul for a story. Why not give him a story that'll fit right in with the trash he writes?"

"You don't know that." Grace sidestepped, hiding the stranger from Melissa's view. "You don't know he was even heading here."

"What else is there around here? The thriving metropolis of Fallen Moon?" Melissa waved her hands at the buttressed ceiling. "I don't think he's here to admire the architecture." She resumed pacing the far side of the room to keep from exploding.

A part of her realized that her anger resulted from her encounter last summer with Brent Westfield. He'd wormed his way into the castle under false pretenses. One of her paintings had sold for a fantastic amount at a charity auction sponsored by James Randall, Dee's father. She'd succeeded despite her condition, and that success had come as a pleasant surprise. For once she'd been normal. Pride at her accomplishment had let the reporter's interest in her work lower her natural defenses.

She cringed at the memory. The interview she'd never given, filled with lies and bizarre innuendoes, had hurt more deeply than she'd admitted to anyone. That the people of her own town had let the lies feed their imagination almost bled her dry.

"You can't put him in the dungeon when he's hurt," Grace said, her voice gentle.

"His kind always survives," Melissa scoffed, knowing Grace was right.

Grace crossed her arms over her ample chest. "My eyes might not be so good, but some things you don't need to see to know. Mark my words, Missy, you're making a terrible mistake."

When Melissa didn't answer, Grace caught her shoulders and shook her. "You keep him caged like that and you're no better than the townsfolk who pass judgment without knowing any of the facts. Let him go."

"No," Melissa said firmly. Her body shook. Her anger's poison filled her veins and she couldn't stop it. "I can't, Grace," she pleaded, wanting Grace to understand the desperate need she had to assert dominion over her tiny world. "I have to show them once and for all that I'm not a witch, that I need to be left alone."

"Are you sure that's what you want, child?"

No, it wasn't, but she'd learned long ago certain things couldn't be changed and certain prayers were never answered. And if she had to choose between being a freak and being alone, she would go with loneliness.

This man couldn't fulfill her dreams, but he could put an end to the witch. "That's the way it has to be."

Grace rolled her eyes in exasperation. Ignoring her, Melissa moved away to gather the contents of Tyler Blackwell's wallet from the floor. She riffled through the items, noting with interest that his wallet held no pictures—not even of his Lindsey. Why? Was this man as alone in the world as she was? Suddenly she had to know. She wanted to know everything about him. Adversaries needed to start the battle on an even footing. He knew about her, she had no doubt; she'd find out about him. Melissa tucked the wallet back in the jeans pocket, retaining only his driver's license.

"He'll have to see a doctor for that head of his," Grace said.

Melissa stood up. "Send for Adam. After Adam's seen him, put him in the dungeon."

"Missy—"

"If he's hurt that badly, Adam'll have him transported to a hospital. If he's not, he has a lesson to learn." Melissa handed Grace the driver's license. "And see what Dee can dig up on Tyler Blackwell."

"Missy—"

"Tell her to bring me her report as soon as she has it."

Melissa leaned on the foot of the bed and stared at the unconscious man. "It's my decision. I'll live with the consequences."

"I don't think you know what you're getting into."

AN HOUR LATER Melissa made her way down the steep steps of the northeast tower to the cell where Grace had installed Tyler Blackwell. Grace tucked a blanket around the unconscious man's body, now clad in sweats belonging to Grace's son, who was away at college.

"How's he doing?" Melissa asked, stopping at the open cell door.

"Doc says he'll be all right." Grace kept fussing with the blanket. "His body temperature's back to normal. He woke up once, then fainted."

"Maybe he's tired." Melissa grabbed one of the cold steel bars, worried despite her best intentions about the man's unconscious state.

"And maybe they're right to call you a witch." Grace put a hot-water bottle at the man's feet, then turned around to face Melissa. "He woke up long enough to tell Adam he didn't want to go to no hospital. I tried to make him see the light, but he's just as stubborn as you are." She shook her head. "You two deserve each other." She jerked her chin toward Tyler. "He needs to be watched till he comes to, and I'm too old to do it."

"I'll keep an eye on him. I'll come get you if he wakes up."

"You do that. Wake him every hour and make sure he ain't seeing double."

Grace departed with a huff that left no doubt how she felt about Melissa's actions. A twinge of guilt niggled at Melissa's conscience. Then the anger stirred again. He's a reporter! a voice in her mind exploded. He wants to hurt you like the others.

She heard the abandoned child's sobs echo somewhere in the past. They wrenched her heart and nearly dropped her in a pool of self-pity. Turning from the pull of memories took everything she had. The pain, the loneliness—both hurt so much.

She forced her attention back to Tyler Blackwell. He looked beautiful. So innocent and peaceful. But Melissa knew she couldn't trust the appearance of innocence or beauty. No one ever came to Thornwylde Castle without a reason.

She moved into the cell and checked on the reporter. His breathing was even and his skin felt warm. Suddenly his brows knit together and his face contorted itself into a mask of pain. She snapped back her hand. What did I do? What should I do? I don't know what to do with a sick man. He's not sick. He's just bruised. This is what you get for letting your anger get the best of you. Before she could run to call Grace, his face returned to its calm state.

He's a reporter, she reminded herself. He wants to hurt you. With her heart pounding, Melissa stood and moved away from Tyler. She wouldn't let him. Not this time. He wanted the witch, she'd give him the witch. Then she'd show him she wasn't a gorgon—just a simple woman.

The scene set, Melissa returned to Tyler Blackwell's bedside. She tucked the blanket around his shoulders. Then she sat beside him, watching and waiting. Every hour she woke him. Each time he called her Lindsey. Every cry to the unknown woman touched her soul and scratched at her resolve.

When the first light of dawn eked through the dusty window, Melissa felt the stranger stir. Slowly she rose and left. As she closed the barred door, it squealed.

She turned the lock and pocketed the key. "My dear Mr. Blackwell, welcome to your worst nightmare."

"HEY, SAL, HOW ARE the biscuits today?" Ray Lundy asked. Breakfast at the Parker Peach had been a part of his routine since he took on managing J.R. Randall's stables three years ago.

The redheaded waitress turned and smiled.

"Hey, Ray, you're late this mornin'." Sally Warren grabbed the coffeepot off the heater and headed to the corner table where Ray took a seat. He doffed his battered cowboy hat and laid it crown-side down on the vinyl seat next to him.

"Hear about the fire at Granger's barn last night?" His eyes strayed over Sally's hourglass figure squeezed into a cotton-candy-pink uniform that was half a size too small. He licked his lips, then forced his gaze back to her freckled face.

"What happened?" Sally asked, interest glowing in her eyes.

"They say it was the witch."

"No!" Sally eyed the kitchen window, then placed the coffeepot on the table and sat down across from Ray.

"Yep. Granger, his wife and his daughter's Girl Scout troop all saw her ridin' away on that black stud of hers." Glad to see his juicy gossip having the desired effect, Ray sampled the coffee, added a heaping teaspoon of sugar and a small container of cream.

"What reason would she have to do that?" Sally placed her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands.

In the background Ray heard the clatter of dishes being washed, the scuff of a spatula scraping grease off the grill and Joe's sharp bark at a kitchen helper. With the breakfast rush over, all Sally's tables sat empty at the moment. Besides, he'd timed his arrival just right; he knew she was due for a break. He had her rapt attention—for the next couple of minutes.

"Granger said his cows wandered over to her pastures a few weeks ago," Ray said. "She wasn't too pleased. Had her henchwoman tell him to keep his cows home or she'd do it for him."

"You don't say."

"Yeah. Good thing his stock was out, but the barn's a total loss."

"You know, that really doesn't sound like her. She's never bothered anybody before."

"What about the hex she put on Harris when he shot that deer on her land last spring."

Sally gave him a quizzical look.

"The next week the roof on his house caved in."

"Oh, come on, Ray, there was a tornado spotted during that storm. She had no control over that."

"Maybe, maybe not. What about Andy Stone?" Ray took a deliberately long sip from his cup. "I hear tell he saw her face last week when she was out ridin' and hasn't been able to talk since."

"For heaven's sake, Ray. Andy's got laryngitis."

"Are you sure?" Ray saw her thoughts waver. She's so transparent.

"Then there's the disappearin' animals," Ray continued. "The Strykers' dog and the Andersons' cat. Even old Zeke put in a report he had a goat missin'." Ray sweetened his coffee with another spoonful of sugar. He loved the way the spoon clinked in time to Sally's thoughts. "You know the full moon's comin'. A witch's moon."

Ray saw Sally study him. They'd known each other since grade school. He liked to play with people, and she knew it. He hoped she wouldn't realize he was playing her for a fool. Knowing Sally

as well as he did, she'd jump at the chance to be the first to repeat the juicy gossip. That was why he'd picked her. Ray recognized the instant she made up her mind.

"Well, I gotta get back to work or Joe'll have my hide," she said. "The usual?"

"The usual." Ray smiled a satisfied grin. He'd planted the kernel of doubt. Sally Warren's loose tongue would spare no time in sharing the rumors. Everything was going according to plan.

Chapter Three

Tyler's first thought was that he was dead. Then he tried to move and knew that if he was dead, he'd gone to hell. Nowhere else would such pain be allowed. His whole body throbbed. Something sharp dug into his rear and his guts hurt from sleeping on his back.

He willed his fuzzy mind to clear. Where was he? Why couldn't he open his eyes? He vaguely remembered a woman talking to him. Had he imagined the soft fingers on his skin when they'd unbuttoned his shirt, or the strong yet gentle hands that had held him as someone bandaged him, or the musical voice that had soothed him every time he awoke during the night? The floating image of a green-eyed angel buoyed on his closed lids. Warmth had surrounded him.

A dream, Tyler thought, as he shivered under the thin blanket. It had to be a dream. The narrow cot grew unbearably uncomfortable beneath him. He had to get up. If only his body would cooperate. Water dripped somewhere to his right—a sharp, slow, echoing clank. The wind moaned at his feet. The clop of horse's hooves on cobbles resounded above his head. All that's missing are the scurrying rats, he thought. He forced his head up to look around, then let his head flop back on the flat pillow. There were bars instead of a door. Why wasn't he surprised?

I'm in the middle of a nightmare, and I'll wake up any minute now. He willed the warmth back, the soft hands, the gentle voice. It was no use. Reality kept intruding. The night came back in slow pieces. His promise to Freddy. The accident. Camelot. The castle. Why had he ever thought of the castle as Camelot? Somehow he'd ended up stuck inside a medieval dungeon. This wasn't the way he'd expected to start this assignment. She must be as crazy as the tabloids said she was.

He didn't like the idea of being at anyone's mercy. Not after Lindsey. And especially not at the hands of a nutcase like Melissa Carnes. He was the pursuer, the one who put on the heat, not the other way around. It was time he set the record straight.

Professional pride, if not his male ego, jolted him into action. He regretted his sudden move when pain resonated throughout his body.

Tyler saw at once that the medieval atmosphere was carefully orchestrated. The drip came from a faucet turned on just enough to let one drop at a time clang into a metal bucket. The barred window was open a crack, allowing the wind to moan through it, but not the fusty air to dissipate. The walls needed no dressing up; their stone starkness, wet with morning dew, was enough to depress anybody. He glanced at his wrist and found it bandaged and his watch missing. By the weak light filtering through the dusty window, he judged the time somewhere just after dawn.

He was dying of thirst and the dripping water didn't help. He hobbled over to the faucet and twisted it shut. The rust color inspired no confidence the water was drinkable. He made his way to the bars. Hanging on to them, he looked down the lightless tunnel. He could see nothing but black on either side.

"Hello," Tyler called into the darkness. "Is anyone out there?" The moaning wind was his only answer. He hobbled back to the bucket, emptied the water with a splash on the stone floor and carried it back to the bars. He banged the empty pail against the bars.

"Anyone out there?"

"There's no need for all that racket."

A hulking giant seemed to magically materialize before his cell. He stopped the noise. She held a tray heaped with food. The odor of freshly brewed coffee set his stomach growling. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. He forced his gaze off the steaming platter and back to the dark-skinned woman.

"Where am I?" he asked her.

"Where did you wanna be?" Intense black eyes bored through him. Maybe Freddy was right and his niece's life was in danger.

"Why am I here?"

She shrugged. "You tell me. You're the one who insisted you had to stay."

Tyler didn't like the course of this conversation. "Is this Thornwylde Castle?"

Her impenetrable stare accused him of unknown crimes, but her face remained blank.

"I want to see Melissa Carnes," he commanded.

"She don't see no one till she's good and ready."

"I need to see her." Why was this woman making things so difficult? His request was simple enough. It deserved a simple answer. The headache pounding at his temple shredded through what remained of his patience.

"Don't you know, one look at her face and you'll turn into a pillar of salt?" He saw the amusement dance in her coal-black eyes.

"I'll risk salt over these accommodations." Maybe changing the subject would dispel the idea that he was dealing with a brick wall.

"She ain't too pleased with your presence, either."

"Let her tell me herself."

"She will." The big woman set the tray down by the door. "When she's ready."

A heavy set of keys jangled as she fumbled with the lock. Tyler thought of pouncing on her as she bent to pick up the tray, but to keep his promise to Freddy, he needed to stay here, not be shown the door before he'd even seen the woman he was here to protect. He silently sneered. Some protector.

The woman handed him the tray. Breakfast smelled good and he was ravenous. "She told me to feed you gruel."

He lifted the cover from the plate. Beneath lay eggs, bacon, hash browns and the biggest peach muffin he'd ever seen. He cast her a sidelong glance. Was this draconian woman an ally? While balancing the plate in one hand, he gulped down the glass of orange juice with the other.

"Best-looking gruel I've ever seen." His most genial smile was rewarded by a steely glare.

"Don't get too comfy now."

"Fat chance!"

She waved two fingers in front of his face. "How many fingers you see?"

"Two. I'm fine." He sat down and dug into the mound of scrambled eggs.

She grunted and left, keying the lock closed behind her.

"Tell Miss Carnes I'd like to see her." He bit into the muffin.

"She knows."

A cacophony of various aches and pains stirred by his activity soon joined the pounding in his head and overtook his hunger. He placed the tray beside him. Sitting on the edge of the cot, he held his head in his palms and pressed the heels of his hands against his temples. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

"Any chance of getting some aspirin?" he asked as the woman started up the stairs.

She paused and nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Tyler forced himself to finish the breakfast. He'd need strength to face Freddy's witch of a niece—when Her Royal Shrewness deigned to see him. After he was done eating, he pushed the tray beneath the cot, then lay down. Sleep would take the edge off the pain. And maybe when he woke up, he'd find it had all been just an awful dream.

"GOOD JOB, Ray," the voice on the phone said. "Rumors are flying from the café to the courthouse."

Bright sunshine streamed through the stable door. The day wasn't halfway done and already Ray had more than exceeded his expectations. Everything from now until midnight was gravy.

"Thought you'd be pleased." Ray puffed on his cigar, a satisfied grin on his face.

"Keep the tongues wagging."

You think you're ridin' high, you little priss, but I'm in charge of the show. You ain't getting' me to do nothin' I don't want to be doin'. I've got position.

Ray took another puff on his cigar, anticipating another gain of material that would lead to the win that was rightfully his. Everything was going according to plan. That the witch had so easily taken in the reporter proved a bonus. "Hey, ever hear of a guy named Tyler Blackwell?"

"Tyler Blackwell?" There was a catch in the voice.

Ray's grin widened. Gotcha. The chance at redemption, he'd discovered, made for good motivation. "Yep. Seems he landed on Melissa Carnes's doorstep last night."

"Well, well, what an interesting development." A pause, swarming with possibilities, followed as the contact processed options. "I can get him Tyler Blackwell's head on a platter as an added bonus." The phone clicked off.

"Yeah," Ray said, extinguishing the cigar under the heel of his boot. "What an interestin' development." No one knew how to play pawns the way he did.

BEFORE DEANNA RANDALL came to her, an endless parade of nannies had flowed through the castle as if it had a revolving door. The pent-up rage Melissa had harbored since the accident was flung full force on each new and unsuspecting arrival. They never stayed for more than a week. Most never made it through the first day. Melissa's unruliness drove her stepmother crazy and afforded young Melissa the only source of satisfaction she knew. Sable Lorel Carnes would have gladly sent her ugly stepdaughter to an institution and never given her a second thought, but William Carnes had just enough guilt to grant his daughter her wish to stay home.

Melissa was almost ten when Sable hired Deanna. Deanna was newly graduated from college with a degree in education, and she was a nice change of pace from the dour matrons Sable usually chose. She was full of the enthusiasm of a new teacher bursting with fresh ideas. No one had bothered to tell Deanna that Melissa had the manners of a wild animal. Nor had anyone told Deanna she had the right to refuse the job.

Melissa still remembered the day they met. She'd sat huddled on the window seat in the room where her stepmother kept her hidden. Sable disappeared as soon as she'd shown Deanna the room, not wanting to be around when the fur started flying. Deanna hesitated as she entered the room. Her long blond hair, caught in a barrette at her nape, flowed like liquid gold over one shoulder. Her round face and rosy cheeks made her look more like sixteen than twenty-one. But her starched white shirt and conservative navy skirt branded her as the latest nanny, and Melissa was ready to do battle.

"Hi! I'm Deanna Randall," she'd said in a gentle friendly voice. Melissa simply glared at her from across the room. When Deanna started moving in her direction, Melissa flung a wooden toy horse at her. Deanna ducked and kept on walking.

"Go away! I don't need you," Melissa screamed, putting her all into the performance.

"I thought we might be friends." Deanna had stopped six feet away and lowered herself to Melissa's eye level.

"I don't wanna friend!" Her hostile stance dared the new nanny to argue.

"I'd like to teach you wonderful things." The woman's voice was silky smooth, inviting.

"Why should I learn?"

"Because learning is growing and growing is what living is all about." Deanna had talked to her like a person instead of an animal to be ordered about, then shoved back in its cage.

"What good is that gonna do me? I'm gonna be stuck in this room for the rest of my life."

"That's up to you, isn't it?" Deanna smiled. Not a condescending smile, but one that accepted Melissa's right to make her own decisions.

Melissa sprang from her seat. She stood, fists balled, directly in front of Deanna.

"Look at my face! See how ugly it is?" She turned her head and offered Deanna an unobstructed view of the mangled left half of her face. Deanna reached out and touched the still-tender burn scars.

"I can see inside you, and I see a beautiful soul."

Melissa had been stunned. No one had touched her so gently since the accident. Her looks had repulsed all of the previous nannies, and they hadn't bothered to hide it. Deanna had touched her softly and told her she was beautiful. Melissa hadn't known whether to hit her or to cry. So she'd done both. As her love-starved soul pounded the new nanny, Melissa had dissolved into tears. Deanna had gathered her in her arms and held her close. She'd sobbed as only a heartbroken child could.

They'd been friends ever since. Not that Melissa had made it easy for Deanna, but Deanna had thrived on the challenge and had made Melissa's life alive with laughter, learning and love.

They'd been inseparable until Deanna married Sam Ziegler five years ago. Sam and Deanna had since had two beautiful children, and Melissa's time with Deanna was reduced to one night a week and daily phone conversations. Melissa allowed herself to visit her two god-children only when Sam was absent.

Tonight Melissa was determined to push Tyler's arrival on her doorstep last night and his presence in her dungeon out of her mind and concentrate on the movie Dee had brought. Ghost was Dee's favorite and she'd brought along the required box of tissues.

Dee lay sprawled on the sitting room's comfortable couch while Melissa sat cross-legged on the plush cream-colored carpet using the couch leg as a backrest. A bowl of popcorn was propped on several cranberry-and-forest-green throw pillows within easy reach of both women.

Patrick Swayze slid his hands provocatively over Demi Moore's body while "Unchained Melody" played in the background. The actors' eyes glowed as they savored each other's bodies. And though Tyler looked nothing like Patrick, and she in no way resembled Demi, Melissa saw him there on the screen, touching her like that. Ridiculous, of course. Only Dee could stand the sight of her face. Only the horses could stand her touch.

"Is love really like that?" Melissa asked, eyes glued to the TV as she popped a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

"Like what?" Deanna answered lazily, her attention also directed at the screen.

"Serious and strong and raw and, I don't know, so intense." What was real? What was movie magic?

"Sometimes."

"Does it happen with all men or only when you're with a special one?" She had nothing to go on to analyze the strange feelings Tyler stirred in her.

"Why do you ask?"

"Just curious." Melissa chewed on another handful of popcorn. "Do you realize I'll be thirty next month and I've never even been kissed by a man?"

Dee sat up, reached for the remote control and switched the movie off. "What's going on in that head of yours, Melissa?"

"Nothing." Melissa picked up the bowl of popcorn and balanced it on her knees, refusing to look directly at Deanna. She concentrated on each kernel she picked, chewing it longer than necessary and swallowing it untasted. How could she explain lustful thoughts about a man who wanted to hurt her when she wasn't even sure what lust was?

"Come on, Mel. I know you. I know something's eating you."

Melissa continued her ritualistic choosing of popcorn, thinking of the man under lock and key in her dungeon. Now that Tyler Blackwell was fit, though bruised, she wasn't sure what she wanted to do with him. Dee was right, she should have shoved him out the portcullis at first light. But that would only have enhanced her witch image. And that, she'd decided as she'd watched him last night, was the last thing she needed.

Now, watching this movie of two people in love, she knew she wanted someone other than Dee and Grace to see her as a person—to see her as a woman. But how to achieve that when people tended to see only the scars?

"I'm just wondering about love between a man and a woman," Melissa said finally, not knowing quite what she wanted Dee to tell her. "How does it come about? How do you know when you've got it? What does it feel like?" She put the bowl of popcorn aside and faced Dee. "Is it like in the movies?"

Deanna shook her head. "Oh, boy, I don't know how to answer that. Why this sudden urge to find out?"

Melissa shrugged, then stood and walked to the window. Nothing but blackness in all its shades. After Dee left, she would go for a ride and gallop away all these crazy sensations sliding through her.

"Because I feel empty inside. I want a husband and children. A normal life—like yours. And I know I can never have that. I guess I'm going through an early mid-life crisis." She laughed halfheartedly, then turned to stare once more at the darkness. "How long does it take to get pregnant?"

"What!"

"Well?"

Deanna flushed. "We covered that in basic biology."

"Would one time be enough?"

"Are you considering artificial insemination?"

Then something seemed to click in Deanna's mind. She gasped and spilled the bowl of popcorn with her foot as she sprang up. "He's still here! Tyler Blackwell's still here! I thought we agreed letting him go was best all around. Dad says his being here can't be good. He's a dirt-digger, Mel. He doesn't stop until he gets what he wants." Deanna sucked in air and put a hand over her heart. "You're not planning on sleeping with him, are you?"

"Are you mad!" Melissa brushed away the half-sketched thought. "The man is out to ruin me. Of course I'm not going to sleep with him." She sneered and slapped her left cheek. "Do you really think he'd want to take someone like me to bed? Or that I'd even know how to seduce a man?"

Gently Deanna wrapped one arm around Melissa's shoulders. Melissa hated the pity in her friend's eyes.

"You know that's not what I mean," Dee said softly. "It's just that he's not another of the battered creatures you like to take in. He's much more dangerous."

"I know that." Melissa knew it with her mind, saw it with her eyes, felt it in the strange sensation shivering down her back. Shrugging off Dee's hand, she sat down and pressed the remote to restart the movie. But there was also something about Tyler Blackwell, about the pain in his voice, in his eyes, when he called to his Lindsey, that touched her deeply.

"I don't want to see you hurt."

"I know." But Dee, in her own well-meaning way, had also never encouraged Melissa to venture past these castle walls. All the field trips but one had been James Randall's idea. Because of his generous donations, he'd had museums and galleries opened after hours just for her. And as dangerous as Tyler Blackwell was, his words could open a whole new world to her. The only way she could think to achieve that was to hold him prisoner until he saw past the witch.

Patrick Swayze kissed Demi Moore, and she arched back in ecstasy at his touch. After wondering all night and all day what she was going to do with her unwanted guest, Melissa had her answer. The only question left in her mind was whether she would have the courage to follow through on her brash decision.

"MR. BLACKWELL?"

A woman's voice pierced through layers of drowsiness, and Tyler winced as he propped himself up to answer.

"What…? What time is it?" he asked, his voice hoarse with sleep. "Who are you?"

"I'm sorry to wake you up, but I need to talk to you. I'm Deanna Ziegler, a good friend of Melissa's." She looked at her watch and added, "It's about two in the morning."

"Two a.m.!" Tyler sat up. He was wide awake now and annoyed. "What the hell are you doing here at this time?"

"Visiting. For Melissa it's only midafternoon—she keeps quite different hours from most people. I want to know what your intentions are."

"Intentions?" His eyes adjusted to the night and he stared unbelievingly at the small woman peering at him through the bars of his cell. She sounded like a father facing his daughter's suitor. By the moon's soft light, spilling from the high window, he guessed she was about forty. Her hair, gleaming white and her smooth Germanic features drawn tight with worry betrayed her age more than the well-proportioned figure clad in fuchsia exercise pants and flower-print T-shirt.

"I'll arrange for Grace to let you go in the morning. I suggest you leave the second you get the opportunity," Deanna said.

Tyler guessed that "Papa" had judged him to be an unsuitable prospect. Who was Grace? The woman who brought him his meals?

"I can't." He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then leaned his elbows on his thighs and cradled his head in his hands. The angel of his hallucinations with her heavenly voice and jewel-green eyes had revisited him in dreams a man like him had no right to have. The angel was so far removed from the tabloid witch that he had to reconcile the two and find which one was real. Maybe he was doomed to repeat his mistakes, he thought, as the need for answers once again reasserted itself. How did he expect to find a new path if he followed the same old road?

"What do you mean you can't?" Anger rose and turned the woman's soft features surprisingly hard. "Melissa's been through hell and can't take any more of the kind of pain you bring."

"I'm not here to hurt her."

The knuckles of the hands gripping the bars whitened. She shook her head. "She doesn't need the kind of notoriety your work brings. It'll change the quiet atmosphere she's used to and needs to survive. You're an investigative reporter, and I'm telling you there's nothing here to investigate or report."

"I'm not going to hurt her," he repeated flatly. Family feuds had a way of burning anyone foolish enough to cross the battlefield. Freddy had to know that or he would have come to the rescue himself.

"Maybe you really don't mean to, but you have to understand, Melissa isn't like the people you're used to interviewing."

"I don't imagine she is." How could she be after spending her life alone in a place like this?

"Put yourself in her place. You're eight years old and you're disfigured in the same accident that kills your mother. Imagine growing up without love, with scars that today even the best plastic surgeon can't make disappear because they're too old and set. Imagine being kept in a room all alone—just because your family thinks you're too ugly for anyone to see. Imagine what that does to the psyche of a child, and then tell me that your words won't hurt her." She jerked at the bars. "Go back to your editor and tell him you can't do this story."

"I can't do that."

"You have nothing to lose, Mr. Blackwell. You'll get other chances. The last reporter who did a story on her nearly killed her with his words. She's had enough pain to last her a dozen lifetimes. Leave her alone. Go," Deanna pleaded.

Deanna's fierceness spoke of loyalty and love. Freddy wanted Tyler's reason for being here to remain a secret until he could corroborate it, but he'd also said that to get to Melissa he had to go through Deanna. Nothing short of the truth would work here. "Freddy Gold sent me."

She snapped back as if the bars were suddenly electrified. "Why would Freddy Gold send a reporter? He knows how she feels about them."

"To do an article on Eclipse."

"Freddy doesn't send reporters. I send him Melissa's copy over the Internet."

Freddy, Tyler thought, had probably never gotten around to asking his secretary to call Deanna about the article on her stallion. Were Rena and the baby okay? "He thinks she's in danger."

"From what?"

Tyler sighed. Freddy's hunches had garnered him untold scoops, but sometimes they were a pain in the butt to explain. But if he was to stay, he had to convince Melissa's guardian that his presence was needed here. "He received a warning that someone wants her harmed."

"Who?"

"I don't know. That's why he sent me here. He knows Melissa won't talk to him, won't even pick up the phone when he calls. He knows she won't accept his help except through a business transaction. That's why he thought she'd go for an article about her horse now that show season is under way. His secretary was supposed to call."

"She didn't."

The thing about Freddy's hunches was that they were usually right. And if Freddy thought danger lurked around Melissa's castle, then there was probably something to it. Sometimes the intuition proved nothing more than a leaky faucet. Sometimes it was the shot that killed the woman you loved. But it was always worth checking out.

"I promised Freddy I'd keep her safe. That's all." That was everything. And it was too much. Especially when she'd managed to haunt his dreams in less than a day. He rubbed at the pain pounding in his forehead. "The story is just a cover. I won't write one word about her. Call Freddy—he'll verify my claim."

"She's as safe as she can be behind these walls. The last thing she needs is an intruder—a reporter—with a hidden agenda." Deanna made an exasperated sound. "The best thing you can do for her is leave. I'll look out for her. I've been keeping her safe for a long time."

"Then maybe a fresh set of eyes is warranted."

Deanna's face hardened. "I come from a powerful family. I can make sure you never work again."

"The name Ziegler doesn't ring a bell."

A drop from the leaky faucet pinged onto the brick floor. A gust of wind moaned through the half-opened window. The concert of crickets outside suddenly stilled.

"Try Randall, as in James Richmond Randall."

"Randall Industries?"

"The very one."

The hair on the back of his neck bristled. Last year a trail of creative accounting, colored profits and corruption had led to Randall Industries before it ran cold.

Old instincts he thought had died with Lindsey revived. Danger had a scent, a taste, a feel of its own, and it slithered through him in a sticky cold that threatened to turn to black. He got up from the cot, shrugged off the unwanted feelings creeping down his spine and shuffled to the gate. He held the bars right above Deanna's hands and looked straight into her pale blue eyes, gleaming in the moonlight.

"Even J.R. Randall can't take something away from nothing. But you, how will you feel if the warning Freddy got is true and something happens to Melissa?"

Deanna swallowed hard. "She's safe here."

Money makes people do unspeakable things.

Did Freddy know Deanna was linked to Randall Industries? Was that why he'd sent him here? What chance did Melissa have against someone who thought nothing of murder to keep an illusion afloat?

"She's in danger, Ms. Ziegler, but not from me."

"I will not let you harm her."

"Then help me keep her safe."

Chapter Four

Tyler's worst hangover paled in comparison to the freight train barreling through his head. He tried to hold very still, but somehow the bruises on his body felt as if they were being pressed in turn for doneness.

Grace returned several times during the day. First with a bottle of extra-strength ibuprofen, his laundered clothes, soap and a set of towels, then with lunch, and finally in midafternoon with the remnants of his personal effects from his Jeep—minus his Swiss Army knife, razor, cell phone and Palm Pilot.

She inquired more than once if he wanted the doctor to look at his head again. He refused, knowing instinctively that once he left the witch's castle, she wouldn't allow his return. The faster he got to the bottom of the situation here, the sooner he could go. He didn't like the way his promise to Freddy was drawing him back into a past he was trying to forget.

He closed his eyes. The image of Lindsey's blue eyes widening with shock, of blood blooming on the bodice of her white dress, exploded on the black screen of his lids. He moved too fast as he sought to escape the bloody vision. Pain rattled through him as he came to a sitting position. Wiping a hand over his face, he forced himself to concentrate on his current situation.

What if Melissa wasn't the innocent lamb Freddy thought her to be? What if she was involved in a partnership with Randall Industries?

Then this time, he wouldn't miss the mark.

He was willing to bet that, for all Melissa Carnes's witch reputation, his skills were honed to a sharper edge—even with the wasted year to dull them. When he knew ahead of time he had to be patient, he found it easier to quell hasty actions and keep focused on the goal. And his goal was to wipe the slate clean between him and Freddy, to start fresh on a new page.

He rolled his shoulder, dragged his hands through his hair and massaged the back of his neck. A chilling feeling crept into his being, burrowed under his skin, and made evil seem to lurk in every shadowy crack in the stone wall, in the suffocating heat that settled and thickened the must, in the dankness that seemed to coat his skin like slime.

And if he wasn't careful, he thought, it just might swallow him whole—just as it had after Lindsey's death. The whiskey demon whispered to him and Tyler felt the pull of it from head to gut. Think of something else. Think of what you're supposed to accomplish here. Think of the story.

As evening darkness infused his already dim cell, the jangling of keys announced an arrival—but not Grace. Not Deanna. The footsteps were too light, too airy. Melissa Carnes. Patience was paying off.

"About time," Tyler mumbled.

He knew she was there, could feel her watching him from the shadows. He hated the fact his pulse kicked up a notch at her arrival. Leaning back on the unyielding hardness of the stone wall, he waited. The one who spoke first was always at a disadvantage.

"Does the dark frighten you, Mr. Blackwell?"

The melody in her voice took him by surprise. Given her reputation, her possible connection with Randall Industries, he'd almost expected a cackle. "Not particularly. What about the light that scares you?"

Her throaty laugh echoed in his cell. "You haven't done your homework, then."

"I know about your burns, if that's what you mean."

"And here I thought you were going to bring up witchcraft," she said. "Photophobia."

"Pardon?"

"One of my eyes was damaged by the heat of the fire and remains sensitive to light. Doctors have cautioned me to stay out of the sun because my skin has lost its ability to defend itself." He

could hear the defensiveness in her voice. “And most people would rather I cloak myself in shadow so that they’re not subjected to the sight of my ugly face.”

“I’m not most people.”

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Melissa took shape on the other side of the bars—a pitch-black outline against the dark gray of the stairwell. Her ghost-white fingers stroked the black creature—a cat?—in her arms. Her long-sleeved black T-shirt showed off the slimness of her body, the swell of firm breasts. Ebony hair flowed under the black shawl covering her head, face and neck, leaving only her steady gaze exposed.

“Which begs the question—what brings an award-winning investigative reporter to the redneck town of Fallen Moon, and more precisely, to Thornwylde Castle?”

Tyler shrugged. “What takes a reporter anywhere? An assignment.”

“Honesty. Refreshing.” She smacked one hand on the wall. “Your cards, Mr. Blackwell. Spread them on the table. Games don’t amuse me.”

“You’ve been playing a mean one since I got here.”

“I’ve been trying to decide what to do with an unwanted guest.”

He stretched his legs in front of him, crossing them at the ankle, then folded his arms over his chest. “What did you conclude?”

The slow stroking of her long fingers on the cat’s fur didn’t change. A shiver of recognition rippled down his torso. He knew exactly how they felt against his skin—gentle and warm. With a sharp hitch of his shoulder he shrugged away the disturbing sensation. A reporter’s job was to get beneath the illusion and expose the truth. She was no angel.

“What do you want from me?” she asked with caustic interest, studying him across the murky darkness.

Power and pain. He could hear both in her voice, sense the fragile mask of tough over hurt little girl. Freddy didn’t want her to know the true reason he was here, but this time Freddy was wrong. To gain her trust Tyler had to give her a measure of truth. “Your uncle sent me.”

“I write my own copy for the articles on my horses. We communicate through his secretary.”

“He’s starting a new column called ‘Texas Tales.’ It’s a series on Texas legends. People from Texas who’ve made it big.”

Her fingers paused in their stroking of the cat. “Then you have the wrong Carnes. My father is the one who managed to build an empire from nothing. I merely spend his fortune.”

“Your father passed on.”

“He would still make a better story than me.”

Sometimes the shortest distance between two points was the long way around. “What about your paintings? They’re unique collector’s items. They must afford you a decent income. Then there are your horses. Your stallion’s success warrants a feature.”

She said nothing. The soft purring of the cat sounded like a well-oiled chain saw.

Without quite knowing why, he found himself imitating her clipped regal tone. “Then, of course, there’s your reputation. Some say you’re a witch, the devil incarnate. Others say you’re merely a harmless recluse. Yet others claim you’re an agoraphobic who’s turned into a vengeful neurotic.” He paused. “But that’s what you expect, isn’t it? Persecution.” Was that why she’d fallen prey to Randall’s schemes? Innocent victim or willing participant?

The cat bumped its head against her stopped hand.

“If you don’t believe any of those reasons,” he said, watching every flicker in her shadowed eyes for signs of deception, “then there’s always the truth.”

Fingers laced over his lap, he waited.

“Truth,” she said finally, her fingers resuming their slow stroking of the cat. Tyler almost purred.

“Freddy got a warning that you might be in danger.”

"A warning?" The cat arched to keep its head in contact with her hand.

"Do you play chess?"

"Yes."

Why didn't that surprise him? She had the mind for it. And the time. "He received an article about the mason who broke his leg doing repair work on one of your towers and a bishop from a cheap plastic chess set."

Silence deepened and the shadows seemed to curl around him.

"Freddy wants me to find out who sent those items and keep you safe."

"Safe?" she said, sneering. "What can be safer than a fifteenth-century castle with walls six feet thick, a moat and a drawbridge?"

No point sugarcoating the situation. "According to Freddy, a bishop works on the diagonal and makes long moves. Working from a distance on the sly. Isn't that your relationship with Randall Industries?" He sensed more than saw her tension.

"Really, Mr. Blackwell, you take your work much too seriously. There truly isn't a conspiracy around every corner. James Randall is a friend and patron of the arts. Look at all he's done in the area with his charitable donations." Her strained laugh held none of its previous lilt. "A bishop has relatively little value. It can't win a match by itself."

"Exactly." Tyler noted that her gaze was level and her voice was steady. If Randall was using her, she didn't have a clue. So maybe it did all boil down to a family feud, and he was just letting his own past failures interfere with his present task. "Sometimes a billion-dollar trust fund is enough to make a bishop think he has a chance at the prize."

"My money? You think someone wants to harm me for my money?"

"Money is the number-one motivator for crime. Who benefits if you die?"

"The same people who benefit if I live."

"Do you know that women are more likely to hire a surrogate to kill for them?"

"Are you insinuating that my stepmother wants me killed?"

He shrugged. "If the shoe fits…"

"Wicked stepmothers went out of style with the Brothers Grimm, Mr. Blackwell. I happen to get along with mine just fine."

He had to reel back the urge to stand nose-to-nose, toe-to-toe with her, to retain an air of calmness in the electricity snapping through the air. "Then why are you stuck in this dusty museum in the middle of some hick town while she and your half sister are living it up in a mansion in Dallas?"

"By choice."

"Your birthday is a little more than three weeks away. If you die before you reach thirty, your stepmother and sister split your father's holdings. If the trust reverts to you, then you can do as you please with it. Your stepmother and sister are then at the mercy of your generosity."

"They're my family. They know I wouldn't deny them their share of my father's fortune."

"Do they?"

"If that's all you have—"

Tyler kicked the steel bucket by the cot. The sound resonated across the room like a gunshot and startled the cat that dug its white claws into its mistress's black-clad arms, making her flinch. "You haven't heard a word I've said. Someone has set a game in motion, and you're somehow the objective."

Melissa returned his steady gaze unblinkingly. For an instant he was a kid back in Pennsylvania, playing chicken with one of his stubborn sisters. First one to blink is a rotten egg!

"I'm not a princess in a castle, waiting to be rescued," Melissa said. "I don't need some knight in tarnished armor to conjure up a conspiracy because he needs a new victory to prove to the world he's still a hero."

Forgetting his resolution of cool calm, Tyler stood up. The cot scraped back with a sound that would have pleased a medieval torturer. “No, you’re a recluse in a castle, shutting out the world. You can’t shut this out, Melissa. Your lifestyle makes you easy prey.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked. “What do you have to gain by coming here and disrupting my peace?”

He wondered at the tremor in her voice and felt a nudge of sympathy for her. Not knowing was always the worst part. Answers didn’t come until you pushed past the fear. He should have remembered that after Lindsey. “I owe Freddy.”

Her short sharp laugh jabbed through the darkness. “Don’t you know by now that some debts are too costly to repay?”

He knew only too well. “And sometimes your word is all you have.”

She sliced an arm through the air in an arc. “I’m supposed to accept this improbable theory of yours based simply on your word?”

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