

Scaredy Cat



A so not scary romatic comedy by...



Robin

Alexander

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By Robin Alexander

OceanofPDF.com

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Credits

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Dedication

For Becky, my favorite scaredy cat.

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I'd also like to give a shout out to the chicken that jumped into a Jeep with Becky and gave me the idea for this story.

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Chapter 1

Quinn Scott chewed the inside of her cheek as she stood in the only open checkout lane of Sommers Grocery. Glenda Percy idly ran items over the scanner as she and Judy Tauzin chattered about how risqué the new cheerleader uniforms for the local high school team were. Quinn suppressed a sigh as she set a bag of tomatoes and a gallon of milk on the end of the conveyor belt.

“If I had a daughter on that squad, I’d be downright furious,” Glenda said as she waved a package of pasta. “Girls nowadays wear those push-up bras, and those children are positively popping out of the tops of those uniforms. It’s no wonder the boys lost the game. Not one of them could concentrate with all of that gyrating flesh on the sidelines. Tess Lemoine should be run out of town for choosing that trashy garb.”

Quinn’s niece, Hailey, was on the cheer squad, and Quinn had seen the uniforms. She found them no more revealing than when her sister, Dawn, had been a cheerleader many years ago. The two women squawking like wet hens would not ask her opinion, even though they were aware that she was standing nearby. Glenda did make eye contact with Quinn a couple of times and seemed to move even slower as she continued to pontificate.

“I tell you, this country is going straight to hell in a handbasket. There’s no more decency, no sense of propriety.” Glenda glanced at Quinn haughtily. “Even in our small town, perversion has taken a foothold.”

“Hey, Grant, how about ringing me up?” Quinn called out as the store owner walked by. “My milk’s starting to sour and so is my mood. Gabby’s done broke out into a sermon.” Quinn grinned at the indignant snort from Glenda as she gathered her things and moved to the next register.

Grant hid his smile as he rang up Quinn’s purchases and spoke lowly. “You’re the only one ballsy enough to call her

that to her face.”

“I’m not afraid of her.” Quinn glanced over at Glenda, who was giving her the stink eye. “If people would stop worrying about what she has to say, she’d lose all her power.”

Everyone feared Glenda aka Gabby Percy, the town crier. There was only one grocery store, and Glenda kept an inventory of what everyone purchased. That was how everybody knew that Ken Dorsey drank a lot, Barbara Green had bought a home pregnancy test, and Irma Sandifer had problems with gas because she bought Beano by the bushel. But Glenda took it one step further; she was not above peeking in a few windows to maintain her position as a woman in the know. That was how Quinn was outed as a lesbian; she and Glenda were not friends in any sense of the word, but Glenda dropped by one evening—at least that was Glenda’s story. She’d found the one window where Quinn had forgotten to close the blinds and got an eyeful of Quinn and her date enjoying a romantic evening. The next day, everyone in Cypress Glade got an earful.

For this reason, Quinn did her shopping at the pharmacy for small items, and every two weeks, she drove to the next town to buy her groceries. She had fantasized so often about bitch slapping Glenda into another ZIP code, she was afraid she’d really do it if given the chance. If it had not been for Dawn’s request for milk and tomatoes, she would not’ve darkened the doorstep of Sommers Grocery.

“Hey, I’ve got a bathroom faucet that’s leaking. Do you think you could take a look at it for me?” Grant asked. “I really don’t want to change the whole thing out if I don’t have to.”

“Yeah, give me a call Monday or when you can get away from the store. Jacob or I will check it out.” Quinn held out a twenty, and Grant waved it off.

“You didn’t let me pay you when you fixed the kitchen sink.”

“Because it was only a washer.” Quinn continued to hold out the bill.

Grant pushed her hand away. “You stopped Mary from griping at me endlessly. That’s worth a lot more than a few tomatoes and milk. You go on, Quinn, and enjoy your weekend.”

“Thanks, Grant,” Quinn said with a smile. Glenda glared at her as she walked out the door, and Quinn shot her the finger.

“How much do you love me?” Dawn asked as Quinn walked into her sister’s kitchen.

“I picked up your milk and tomatoes, don’t ask me to do anything else.” Quinn put the milk in the fridge and grabbed one of Buddy’s spiked lemonades. “What’d you break?”

“Nothing.” Dawn tried her best to look innocent. She brushed a lock of blond hair from her perfectly made-up face. There was a ketchup stain on her crisply starched shirt; a French fry was stuck to her slacks.

“Did you already eat?” Quinn looked her older sister over. “I thought you invited me to dinner.”

Dawn shook her head as she plucked the fry from her pants with a look of disgust. “I fed Landon, so Buddy could take him to help set up for the game tonight. They’re father and son bonding, and I told Buddy if he didn’t get Landon out of my hair for a while, I’d set the recliner on fire.”

“Aren’t you going?” Quinn took a seat at the kitchen table.

“Yes,” Dawn said with a labored sigh. “I’m exhausted. The last thing I want to do is go sit in the stands and watch football. Frankly, Hailey doesn’t want me or Buddy there. It’s not cool for a cheerleader to have the parental units on site, but we go anyway.”

Quinn grinned. “Business must be picking up if you’re tired. You must’ve skipped your afternoon nap.”

Dawn ignored the playful dig. Quinn had caught her a few times sprawled out on the sofa in the tiny real estate office. “I closed a deal on the house over on Pickett, and I rented the Meyers place.”

“Well, that’s awesome.” Quinn raised her bottle in salute.

“And that’s where the favor comes in,” Dawn said with a sheepish smile.

“You need me to replace a faucet or repair something?”

Dawn shook her head. “This has nothing to do with plumbing. Have you ever heard of Blake Taylor?”

“No, is he new in town?”

“She.” Dawn took a seat next to Quinn, her smile wide. “She’s a famous writer, and she’s who rented the Meyers place. She’s also a lesbian.”

“Did she come here that way, or did she suddenly fall ill with it? I haven’t had time to spike her water yet as Glenda claims I do.”

Dawn made a face. “You’re still pissed about the whole Alan Slater thing.”

“Hell, yeah, I’m pissed. Glenda nearly had me lynched when that boy came out.” Quinn set her bottle down with a thud. “I’d maybe talked to that kid twice, and it was just a ‘hey, how you doing,’ yet everyone held me responsible for his gayness.”

“Not everyone,” Dawn said gently. “Not everyone thinks the way Glenda does.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” Quinn propped her chin in her hand. “I wish Jacob didn’t need me. I’d leave this town in a cloud of dust. Of course, we both know that’s a lie. I’ll be stuck here in purgatory for eternity because I don’t have the guts to leave again.”

“We both need you.” Dawn put a hand on Quinn’s shoulder. “I really need you right now. This favor is a lot to ask, but I kinda...well, I made a promise before I actually thought about what I was committing to.”

“That sounds so ominous,” Quinn said as she suppressed a yawn.

“Getting back to Blake, she’s here to work on her next book. She writes horror,” Dawn said excitedly. “There’s been like three or four movies adapted from her work. She’s a celebrity.”

Quinn waved her hands around. “Wow. Now what does this have to do with me?” she asked flatly.

Dawn’s brow furrowed as she thought for a moment. “She...um...well, she doesn’t drive, and she needs someone to show her around town.”

“That will take all of ten minutes.”

Dawn took Quinn’s hand. “She needs a friend. Her agent said she’s super shy, and you know how hard it is to be gay in Cypress Glade.”

Quinn stared at Dawn. “Just what exactly have you volunteered me for?”

“Her agent is offering a thousand bucks a month for someone ‘trustworthy’ to take Blake to the places she needs to go. Cassidy—that’s the agent—says Blake is somewhat of a shut-in, so she won’t really ask to do a lot. Sounds like an easy gig to me.”

Chapter 2

“It’s a cute two-bedroom house that sits just off the highway. There are rows of pecan trees in back. It has a big wraparound porch and a swing.”

“Oh, honey, it sounds absolutely horrible. I think you should come home right now. I can’t believe that Cassidy Spencer put you in such a desolate place. Surely, she’s aware of your special needs.”

Blake sank down on the sofa. “I need this.”

“No, you don’t,” her mother argued. “I don’t care what that therapist said, you should come home and find a new doctor.”

What Blake couldn’t admit to her mother was that she’d suffered three anxiety attacks since her arrival the day before. Each time, she grabbed whatever she could carry and got as far as the front porch. There was no car waiting to take her to safety, but there was a bird on a branch that was close by, and it stared at her menacingly. Blake had dropped the items she carried and scrambled back into the house. She then employed the tactics that Dr. Kieslowski taught her. She examined all the reasons she’d come there in the first place and the rewards if she could stick it out.

“I have to do something to break this block. I haven’t written anything in months.”

“Well, I don’t see how you can possibly concentrate there. It sounds positively dismal. There are probably coyotes or bears. Whatever you do, don’t put your trash out until the day they’re supposed to pick it up. Are the doors locked? The windows?”

“Yes,” Blake said and quickly looked at her phone. “Everything is locked up tight. Mom, I have to go. Cassidy is calling on the other line.”

“I know the doctor and everyone else says we’re not supposed to talk, but if you need me, call. I’ll be down there in

a flash to get you. Tell your agent she needs to relocate you to civilization.”

“I will, love you.” Blake switched lines. “Hey, Cassidy.”

“All settled in?”

“Yes. Do you know if there are coyotes around here?” Blake asked as she got up and peeked out the window.

Cassidy ignored the question. “Are you writing?”

Blake looked at her latest renderings still on the screen of her laptop. *There are bugs, and they're loud. Country life is deplorable. Who in their right mind would want to live in a place like this? There's a noise...what the hell is that?*

“Some,” Blake said and turned away. “I thought solitude would be helpful, but I find it distracting. There are things in the night that make horrendous noises. And...the door in the hallway rattles...there could be someone in the basement.”

“Blake, houses in South Louisiana don't have basements, that's a linen closet. The only things in there are your sheets and blankets,” Cassidy said evenly. “Have a look while I'm on the phone with you.”

“Is it deep enough for someone—”

“No!” Cassidy cleared her throat. “You'd be lucky to hide an infant in there, it's very shallow. Open the door, please.”

Blake approached cautiously and stared at the handle, her hand hovering near it.

“You're my best client. Do you honestly think I'd let something happen to you? Cypress Glade is a quiet, peaceful little town. The police chief lives right across the street. You couldn't be in a safer location if you were in the witness protection program.” There was an edge to Cassidy's tone that she could not seem to suppress. “Open that door and look inside.”

Blake inhaled sharply, gave the handle a yank, then jumped back. Just as Cassidy said, the closet was small. There were only shelves filled with linens, no space for a human to hide. She laughed nervously.

“See? There’s nothing to be afraid of. I have some very good news. A woman is going to drop by today and introduce herself. I’ve arranged for her to show you around, and she’ll take you out to Oak Alley Plantation. Just relax and take in all that history. Inspiration will come.”

“Who is she? Did you do a background check?” Blake asked nervously as she backed away from the closet and sat on the sofa.

“She comes highly recommended, and she’s the sister of the real estate agent. You really liked Dawn, remember?”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll like or trust her sister.”

“She’s also a lesbian,” Cassidy blurted out as her patience dwindled. “Haven’t I always taken care of you?”

“You have,” Blake said with a nod.

“This experience is important, remember that. You have a fabulous career, and you want to keep it that way, right?”

“Yes...right.” Blake blew out a breath and ran a hand through her hair. “When will she be arriving?”

“At noon. Her name is Quinn Scott. I have to go now, but I’ll check on you this evening.”

“Okay,” Blake said nervously. “Bye.”

Cassidy dropped her phone on her desk and sank deeply into her chair. She represented a troop of authors, but none of them sold as well as Blake Taylor, and none of them gave her half as much trouble. Authors were a funny breed who lived inside their heads with imaginary people and creatures. Some—the lucky ones—balanced both worlds with ease, then there was Blake. In her mind, something malevolent lurked around every corner; a box of fries had even been suspect once. Blake tested Cassidy’s patience like no other, but then Blake made the money like no other.

Cassidy turned and pulled a book from the shelf behind her desk. *Shadows Most Unkind*, Blake’s latest was a year old. It had topped the charts in horror and stayed there for months

before the book began its descent. It would fall faster without a promise of something else in the works. Blake's writer's block unnerved her. That was why Cassidy jumped on Dr. Kieslowski's suggestion that Blake relocate. It was a hard sell, but after months of gentle cajoling, she convinced Blake to leave her apartment in New York and settle in Louisiana because it was purported to be one of the most haunted states in the country. She hoped that Blake would once again find her muse.

Cassidy opened the back jacket and stared at her tiny cash cow. Blake Taylor wasn't the queen of horror, but she was certainly a part of the royal court. She stared back at Cassidy from the photo, half of her face in shadow, arms folded over a black crew neck sweater. A slight underbite made the lines of her jaw look sharp. Dark bangs fanned across her forehead, just shy of covering the blue eye that the right amount of light fell upon. The divot in her top lip was pronounced and formed the shape of the letter M. When Blake smiled slightly, as she had done in the photo, it made her look downright devious—the perfect representation of a horror writer. No one had to know that Blake was afraid of her own shadow, and Cassidy worked hard to keep it that way.

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Chapter 3

Quinn drummed her fingers on the steering wheel of her truck as she watched the drawbridge open for a shrimp boat as it meandered down the bayou that split the town in half. She'd lived in Cypress Glade all her life, except for the six months when she'd escaped the confines of the small town. Love had drawn her to Boston; heartbreak had left her colder than the winter there. She'd returned home to thaw, and though the mild climate was more accommodating, the emotional trauma to her heart was further exacerbated by the strained—or better yet, nonexistent—relationship with her mother.

Nelda Scott adored Quinn's siblings Jacob and Dawn, but Quinn was a major disappointment. A staunch Catholic, Nelda didn't approve of what she considered Quinn's lifestyle choice. Quinn's lesbianism was a serious bone of contention between mother and daughter. Quinn resented herself for the ever-present need for her mother's acceptance. She did whatever she could to make her mother's life in the nursing home more hospitable. She laundered her mother's clothes and kept the small cabinet in her room stocked with the things Nelda liked to nibble on. Quinn had even purchased a dorm-sized fridge so Jacob could fill it with his homemade dishes since Nelda considered the food at the home shit. But all these acts of kindness did little to mend the rift between them because Quinn could not be the straight mother and wife that Nelda expected her to be.

Quinn glanced at her watch and drummed harder on the wheel. "Come on, the boat's clear. Turn the bridge." She was already late by five minutes and mightily perturbed that Dawn had volunteered her as babysitter for some neurotic author. The only thing that made Quinn agree to the unenviable task was the money and the fact that Blake Taylor was gay. Once word got out, and it would, Blake would also be ostracized. Quinn knew that kind of rejection well.

After Glenda Percy had outed her, people Quinn had known all her life became strangers. It made her blood boil to realize

that they refused to see her as a person any longer. She was simply known as the queer. There were a few, like Grant Sommers, who owned the grocery store, who were unfazed by the revelation, but Quinn kept mostly to herself, unwilling to try to regain acceptance.

As the base of the bridge began to turn, Quinn stared at the bars and restaurants along the waterfront and missed shooting pool at the Captain's Quarters. It seemed a lifetime had passed since she warmed a barstool there and snacked on fried pickles, but no one knew her secret then. When the arm lifted, opening the bridge to traffic, she crossed and drove slowly down a boulevard filled with crepe myrtle trees of all colors when they were in bloom. Cypress Glade was a pretty little town built on the shrimping industry. Generations of shrimpers and their families called it home. Most days, Quinn called it hell, and she was stuck there because she would never leave again.

Quinn turned onto Tulip Street, and after a few blocks, the houses were spread out a bit more. She could see the rows of pecan trees on the Meyers property and the big oak that took up most of the front lawn near the porch. She missed the owners, Curtis and Polly. The older couple had always been kind to her. Avid travelers, they shared pictures and stories of the places they'd been. Quinn would sit for hours listening to them tell of their adventures. Curtis had been left a house in Montana when his brother died, and he and Polly spent most of their time there. They rented the house in Cypress Glade, unable to part with the home where Curtis had grown up.

As Quinn pulled into the driveway, she noticed that the lawn service Dawn had hired to maintain the yard had done a minimal job. The grass was cut, but the flowerbeds that had always been so lovely were overgrown with weeds. Polly would be disappointed. She climbed out of her truck, opened the chain-link gate, and walked toward the porch. The blinds covering the window of the front door moved, and Quinn put on her best smile as she climbed the steps. The door didn't open. She knocked softly and stepped back.

"Who are you?" a muffled female voice inquired.

“Quinn Scott, I’m your...tour guide, I suppose.”

“Press your ID to the glass, please.”

Quinn blinked for a moment. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

Quinn dug her wallet out of her pocket as she studied the pile of things lying on the porch. An umbrella, candlestick, a box of nails, and a couch pillow. She pulled out her driver’s license and held it close to the window.

“The picture is of a blond with short hair, yours is kind of long and reddish,” the disembodied voice said suspiciously.

“Because I stopped bleaching it, and it’s grown out.” Quinn laughed at the absurdity and pressed the license to the glass. “My face hasn’t changed that much.”

“It says you weigh one forty-five, and you don’t appear to be more than one thirty. Your height of five-ten appears to be correct.”

“Well...thanks.” Quinn stuffed the ID back into her wallet. “I know the people who used to live here. They never locked their doors. We have the typical criminal mischief, occasional vandalism, shoplifting, disorderly conduct, but there’s never been a murder in Cypress Glade. We call it Cypress for short.”

“There’s always a first. You also don’t look thirty-six, more like thirty.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Quinn said with a smile.

“Are you armed?”

Quinn suppressed a laugh. “No, I left my nine at home.” She held up both hands. “Hey, I know you’re from New York and probably have a skewed view of us Southerners, but we don’t all carry guns. I don’t really even own one.” Quinn shuffled from foot to foot when there was no response. “It’s gonna be kind of hard to show you around if you won’t open the door.”

“You’re very pushy. I find that disconcerting.”

Quinn was stunned. “Well, I...okay, I obviously make you uncomfortable, so I’ll just go.” The woman behind the door made no attempt to stop her, so Quinn turned and left. “She’s a nut case,” she said when she climbed into her truck. There was a slit in the blinds. Quinn knew she was being watched as she turned the engine and backed out of the driveway. She’d drop by Dawn’s, choke her a little bit for the interruption of her weekend, then go home and watch TV.

She’d just made the block when her phone rang, and Dawn sounded excited. “What’re you doing?”

“I’m on my way to your house, so I can throttle you.”

“Do that later, get back over there.”

“She wouldn’t open the door. I didn’t even see her face. Dawn, she made me hold my driver’s license up to the window and took issue with my hair. She’s crazy.”

“Eccentric, and very nervous about being in a new place. Please, go back. Her agent just called me all upset because you left.”

“It sounds like her agent needs to come down here and cart her ass around. I’ve got better things to do.”

“Like what?”

Quinn pulled off the road. “Floss my teeth, trim my toenails, which sounds far more exciting than standing on a porch and begging a neurotic mess to open her door.”

“Blake, you open that damn door.”

“She doesn’t look anything like her driver’s license photo. The woman that showed up could be an imposter.”

“I spoke to her sister, and the woman that was on the porch—the one you ran off—is Quinn Scott.” Cassidy took a deep calming breath. “Do I have to remind you that you have a deadline to meet? Have you written more than a page?”

Blake looked at her computer screen. It held a grocery list and a stream of random thoughts. *When are pecans harvested?*

Do bears eat pecans? I think there's a ghost in the hall closet. Why does that damn bird keep staring at me every time I look out the window? I think it's foaming at the beak.

“Your silence means no. Quinn is going to come back, and when she does, open the door, allow her in, offer her a seat and something to drink. Talk. If you don't like her, then I'll try to find someone else.” Cassidy's voice rose an octave. “Will you do that?”

“Yes,” Blake said with a sigh.

“Good, I'll call you later.” Cassidy hung up without saying goodbye.

Blake set her phone aside and went back to the door where she peeked through the blinds. A few minutes later, the same red truck turned into the driveway. Quinn hopped out. She was tall and fair-complexioned, moderately attractive with big expressive green eyes, dimples, and some freckles. Her smile was wide, but she wasn't smiling then.

Quinn walked up on the porch and put her hands on her hips. “I know you know I'm here. A strip search is out of the question. Don't even think about trying to pat me down.”

Blake inhaled sharply and opened the door. “Come in quickly, please. I don't like the looks of that bird out there. It could be diseased.”

Quinn looked over her shoulder, then stepped inside. “The red thing hanging from the branch beneath it is a feeder. The bird is waiting for you to fill it with seeds.”

“God no,” Blake said with a shudder, “more will come.” She closed the door quickly and locked it. “Can I offer you something to drink? I only have water and Mountain Dew, or I could put on a pot of coffee if you... Why are you looking at me like that?”

Quinn shrugged. “I'm checking you out. I want to make sure you don't have something like a machine gun hidden beneath your shirt.”

Blake straightened and stood tall, which wasn't very impressive at five feet three inches. “I'm sorry about earlier,

you can never be too careful. So something to drink?”

“Dew sounds great,” Quinn said distractedly as she eyed the strip of duct tape stretched over the hall closet.

“It rattles,” Blake explained.

“A piece of cardboard in between the door and the jamb works, too,” Quinn said with a slight smile. “They’re logging not far from here. The trucks aren’t supposed to come down this road, but occasionally, they do because it’s a shortcut to the highway. That might be the cause of the rattle.”

“That’s good to know. Have a seat,” Blake said as she walked into the kitchen.

Quinn sat on the couch and looked around. “Did you just move in?”

“Yesterday.”

Sealed boxes lined one wall. Wires hung out of an entertainment center, but the TV at least appeared to be hooked up. In the corner of the room was a desk, and everything on the surface was arranged neatly around a laptop. It looked as though that was the only thing Blake had truly bothered to unpack and set up. “Do you plan to stay long?”

“I’m not sure.” Blake returned and handed Quinn a glass. “That depends on whether my characters begin to speak or not.” She sat in a chair across from Quinn. “So far, they haven’t said a thing.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

Blake looked slightly embarrassed. “I’m a writer. I come up with a general story idea, but my characters tell the tale. It sounds strange, but it’s almost as if they sit beside me and whisper. I write what I hear in my head.”

Quinn nodded as she sipped her drink, but the expression she tried to hide behind the glass was one of puzzlement. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “I understand you write scary stuff.”

Blake nodded as she looked away.

“I have to admit that I’m not much of a reader. I mean, I can read, I just don’t do it much for pleasure. It must be an amazing feeling to have people all over the world read your creations. I imagine you must travel extensively.”

“Only in my head and on the Internet as of late,” Blake admitted softly. “I’m more of a homebody.”

“May I ask where you get your inspiration?”

Blake had heard that question a million times; her answer was well rehearsed. “Dreams, fears. I write what scares me. I have a very vivid imagination. It’s cathartic in a way to purge them onto a computer screen.”

“How many books have you written?”

“Eighty...something.” Quinn looked taken aback. “Wow, you must have a lot of fears.”

Blake stared at the floor. “What do you do?”

“It’s very exotic, I’m a plumber. My father owned the business, and my brother and I took up the trade. When Dad died, he left the company to me and Jacob.” Quinn smiled wryly. “We still get our hands dirty. It’s just the two of us unless we contract out for larger jobs like new construction. If you want to see scary, crawl under some of the houses in this town.” Quinn waved a hand. “That’ll give you nightmares.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Blake shook her head to dispel the images of spiders and snakes. “So...you’ve lived here all your life?”

“Yes. How about you? Did you grow up in New York?”

“No, I’ve only lived there for the past ten years.” Blake glanced at Quinn and looked away. “I’m an army brat. I was born in Georgia, and we lived there until I was six. After that, we moved all over the country and spent a little while in Guam.”

“Cool.”

It was anything but. Blake, unlike her sister, despised being constantly uprooted. She lacked Danielle’s gregarious

personality; friends weren't made easily. And there was always the fear of being in a strange place.

The conversation lulled. Small talk was not Blake's strong suit. From the corner of her eye, she could see Quinn studying her intently. It made her want to squirm. "How far is Oak Alley Plantation from here?" Blake blurted out suddenly.

"About forty-five minutes. Is that something you'd like to see?"

"I feel like I should," Blake said, loath to leave the house that she was only beginning to get comfortable with.

"Well, I'm off tomorrow. We could strike out first thing in the morning if you're interested."

Blake mustered a smile. "Sure."

"What else would you like to see?"

"If you have time, the grocery store. I need to stock up on a few things." Blake winced when Quinn's right eye twitched slightly.

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Chapter 4

Blake shopped as though she were going to be shut in for a year. Quinn stood behind a brimming cart as Blake tossed in a variety of frozen foods into another. The woman had a sweet tooth, too; she'd ransacked the cookie aisle and was eyeing frozen pies.

“Did you happen to bring an extra freezer when you moved down here?”

Blake shot Quinn a quick glance and closed the freezer door. “You have a point.”

“I’ll bring you to shop anytime you want to go, so please don’t feel like you have to stockpile.”

Blake wrinkled her nose. “I think I may’ve gotten caught up in the experience. I don’t shop for myself all that often.”

Quinn followed as Blake pushed her cart into the next aisle. “Must be nice to not have to go to a grocery store,” she said, glancing in Glenda’s direction. Glenda’s brown gaze moved over Blake like a laser as she sized her up.

Quinn found Blake visually appealing but straight up weird. She fidgeted nonstop, very rarely made eye contact, and when they left the house to get into the truck, she ran with her arms over her head. On the short drive to the store, she admitted to a dozen phobias. Fear of birds, bridges, and broccoli were just a few that Quinn remembered. It was September and still in the nineties, but Blake had on a long-sleeved black button-down shirt, jeans, and a pair of black boots. Quinn felt underdressed in her shorts and T-shirt as she watched Blake decide on what toilet paper she wanted to buy.

“Do you write slasher novels, you know the kind with masked freaks wielding chain saws?” Quinn asked out of the blue.

Blake tossed a pack of toilet paper into the cart and grabbed two more. “I mostly write about ghosts, sometimes demons. In my last book, I delved into the darkness of the human psyche,

there was some bloodshed. Have you heard of the movie *Elizabeth Torn*?”

“Yes, because my brother Jacob is into horror movies. He saw it and said it scared the crap out of him. As I recall, he said the main character was haunted by a dark entity, and in the end, she realized that it was a part of her.”

“That was mine,” Blake admitted lowly.

Quinn chewed the inside of her cheek as she remembered Jacob recounting the grisly murders. “That’s what you write?” she asked, her voice coming out in a squeak.

Blake nodded as she moved down the aisle. “It was based on a nightmare I had. I dreamed that I awoke and someone or something had wrapped the bed sheet around my head. It was terrifying. I couldn’t see anything, I couldn’t open my eyes, but when I did actually awaken, I found that I’d managed to wrap myself up. I was completely tangled in the sheet.”

Quinn blew out a breath. “I think the last nightmare I had was of a chocolate cake that was trying to eat me. That was after my nephew’s birthday party, and I’d overindulged. I’m sure the dream stemmed from guilt. How do you eat all this sugary stuff and stay so small?”

Blake shrugged. “I’m a nibbler. I seldom sit down and eat an actual meal. One pack of cookies may last me a month.”

Quinn looked at the crap in the cart she was pushing. If that was the case, Blake was set for life on snacks. “So...you dream of ghosts...and demons, too?”

“No, those haunt me when I’m conscious,” Blake said as she rounded the corner of the aisle.

Quinn’s flip-flops actually skidded to a halt as Blake’s statement settled in, then she took off. When she rounded the aisle, she nearly plowed over Blake, who was looking at the potato chips. “You’re gonna have to elaborate on that last comment. Are you telling me that you believe that you’re possessed? Is that what you meant about characters whispering to you?”

Blake looked as though she were trying to decide between barbecue and plain chips. She tossed both bags into the cart. “My imagination runs rampant and leans toward the dark. You may see an old house and admire the architecture. I look at it and see ghosts in every window. Not literally,” Blake said as she waved a hand when Quinn blanched. “That’s how my imagination works.”

“Okay,” Quinn said slowly. “Where exactly do the demons come in?”

“The news mostly. It’s hard for me to comprehend that people commit the heinous acts that they do, so I demonize them. I’m sure you never read *Behind His Smile*. It was about a congressman that was possessed.”

“Was he a Republican?”

Blake nodded.

“I might actually read that one.”

“I think I’m done.” Blake looked over the baskets.

They headed to the checkout where Glenda was ringing up Tom Watley. Instead of taking her time, Glenda tossed all of Tom’s items into one bag and hurried him as he tried to use his bank card on the machine. Poor old Tom looked stunned when Glenda snatched the card from his hand and swiped it on her side. She handed him the card and receipt and literally shooed him away like a stray animal. She returned to her lazy pace when Blake began loading her things onto the conveyor belt.

“Are you new in town, sugar?” Glenda asked as she studied Blake.

“Yes.”

“You must be renting the Meyers place then. I saw a moving truck in the driveway when I passed there yesterday.” Glenda smiled, and it reminded Quinn of a dog baring its teeth. “I’m the president of the Ladies’ Auxiliary, we usually welcome in the new residents. I can’t believe Dawn didn’t tell me about you.”

“I won’t be staying that long,” Blake said as she continued to load stuff onto the belt so high that it almost blocked Glenda’s view of her.

Grant walked by and appeared surprised to see Quinn standing behind a full cart. “Hey, Quinn, move on over to the next register and I’ll check you out.”

“I’m with her,” Quinn said with a smile and pointed to Blake, “but thanks, Grant.”

Grant looked as though he were about to speak to Blake, but Tom caught his attention. Glenda continued to move at a snail’s pace, and Quinn almost regretted not taking Grant up on his offer.

“You must have a large family.” Glenda eyed the mound of groceries.

“Yes, five kids and two very mean dogs,” Quinn lied with a smile.

Blake looked confused, and Glenda glared. “I don’t see any dog food,” Glenda said as she filled a bag with canned goods.

“They don’t feed them, that’s why they’re so mean. The dogs just eat whatever comes into the yard—the mailman, birds, cats...nosey neighbors.”

Glenda ignored her and turned her attention back to Blake. “What does your husband do?”

“He makes exotic weapons, axes that could chop a brick in half. He was working on a new dagger that can slice through bone when we left.” Quinn was thoroughly enjoying herself, and it was all she could do to keep from laughing.

Glenda waved a pack of toilet paper when Blake reached for it. “We have a cooking club that meets every Thursday night, do you bake, Mrs....?”

“Blake and no. Would you mind moving a little faster? I have a lot of items here.”

“Dismissed,” Quinn said under her breath with a chuckle. Blake was weird, maybe a bit crazy, but she’d made Glenda

Percy's face turn red, and in Quinn's book, that made Blake a goddess—for a few minutes at least.

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Chapter 5

“Blake Taylor doesn’t dream of Manderlay, but rather how to slice and flay.” Quinn held her glass out to Dawn for another splash of wine. “Her brain is in a galaxy all its own.”

“She’s eccentric. Her agent claims most writers are. I’ve never met another one to compare, so I’ll have to take her word.” Dawn propped her feet on the coffee table and sighed. “Does that mean you want to back out of being her tour guide?”

Quinn made a face. “We both know now that it’s more than that. I’m her assistant. Today, I took her grocery shopping, and the only reason I’m willing to take her to Oak Alley tomorrow is that she totally dissed Glenda Percy. Blake writes about ghosts, demons, and other creepy crap, but she’s the biggest scaredy cat I’ve ever seen. I had to bring in all her groceries because a bird gave her the ‘evil eye.’ Then she made me check all the closets and look under the beds for anyone who could’ve sneaked in while we were out.”

Dawn pursed her lips to keep from laughing. “She wouldn’t move into the house until I had it purified.”

Quinn’s brow shot up. “She’s a germaphobe, too?”

“Not that kind of purification. Her agent, Cassidy, and I had to follow an old woman around the house as she burned a sage stick and whispered some sort of cleansing ritual to purge the place of negative energy.”

“Are you kidding me?” Quinn sat up straight.

“I found it very calming. I had her do this place, and Landon hasn’t wet the bed since. I think I’m gonna have her back to do Hailey’s room again. If sage can do something to rid us of that teen girl attitude, I’ll buy it by the case and build a suite for the old woman.”

“Speaking of bad attitudes and spirits, Mom demanded to know where you were when I picked up her laundry last week.”

“I’ve been working and taking care of a family. I can’t go to that place and sit for hours. Every single time I go, she bitches at me for not visiting more often.”

Nelda had been in the home for a year and a half. Dawn had gone often during the first year, but as time passed, her visits became infrequent. As Quinn thought about it, she probably could’ve counted on one hand the times Dawn had been there the past summer. Of the three, Dawn did the least when it came to taking care of Nelda, but Dawn was the one their mother adored the most.

“You should go and see her. She isn’t going to be around much longer.”

Dawn took a long drink from her glass and leaned her head against the sofa. “We’ve been saying that for years, and she keeps hanging on. I know that sounds callous, but when will it end? She’s miserable. It’s hard to see her like that. I wish I didn’t have to. I want to remember her out in the yard tending her garden and yelling at Jacob because he was picking all the flowers.”

“I’d like to blot out the last ten years and go back to the time when she loved me.”

“She does, Quinn.”

“Bullshit. You know that picture of the three of us on her bed stand? She put the clock right in front of me. I’m dead in her eyes. I pray for the day that I won’t care, but it hasn’t come yet.”

Blake shook her hands in front of her face. “Write something! Anything!”

She set her fingers on the keys and stared at the screen, but nothing happened. The pad on the armrest of her favorite chair had fallen off during the move. Perhaps that was the issue. She got up, found a towel and some tape, and made a nice soft cushion for her arm. She sat back down, tested it, then set her fingers to the keyboard, but they refused to move. The

demented well from which she drew seemed to be devoid of restless spirits.

“Something...write something. What did you see today?”

Blake’s fingers began to move.

Cypress Glade was a quiet place. Children played ball in front yards, and lovers strolled hand in hand down sidewalks broken by the roots of ancient oaks. The late afternoon sun streamed through the boughs, spotlighting homes built at the turn of the century. One could be easily beguiled by quaint storefronts, pleasant smiles, and kind hellos. It was the kind of place that made...

Blake bit her lip. Names were the bane of her existence. As she pondered one that would fit her character, precious time slipped by, and along with it the story she longed to tell.

It was the kind of place that made Parsnip Whothefuckever want to let down her guard and forget the terrors that came with the night.

“And what terror is that, Blake? Dreams, memories, ghosts, perhaps the census form you refuse to fill out?”

Blake laid her head against the back of the chair and groaned. There was a time that stories played out in her mind with such vivid detail that she could barely type fast enough to record what she saw. Those were the days and nights she skipped food and sleep and nearly made herself sick. Her back and neck would ache from sitting for long periods of time. It was agony, but she missed it terribly. The muscles in her stomach constricted as she wondered if her own story was going to have an unhappy ending.

She got up and began to pace, a perfect evening wasted. Nocturnal for years, she spent her nights in front of the computer, her days sleeping. Lately, her evenings were spent watching too much TV and digging in the refrigerator. She leaned against the wall and stared angrily at her computer as though it was to blame for her block. It was new because in a fit of frustration and rage, she’d thrown the last one down the

stairs of her apartment building, then cried as she picked up the pieces.

She sat down again, her fingers poised above the keyboard as a line went through her brain about a dark and stormy night. “Oh, God, I almost plagiarized Snoopy. Think! Think!”

Her hands dropped to the keys, eyes closed as she recalled something she started long ago.

Salty air whipped Carrot’s long brown hair and momentarily obscured her vision of the dark waters below. The wineglass slipped from her hand and quickly fell several stories before making a silent splash. No one noticed. She wondered then as she had the night before if anyone would take note of a body’s silent descent. Dawn was approaching; soon the ship would be in port. Excursions had been planned for the last stop. Afterward, they’d be two days at sea, and Carrot would return to a life she could no longer live.

Celery lay snoring on the bed a mere few feet away. One hand draped across his forehead, the other twitched slightly as it lay on his chest. Those hands at one time had brought pleasure, and Carrot had seen them bring death. They were clean, but as Carrot closed her eyes, she saw them stained with blood. She trembled at the memory of seeing for the first time the coldness in his eyes while he watched dispassionately as life slipped away from his victim. Disguised as a man and a husband, a monster slumbered peacefully as Carrot pondered her escape.

She’d have to be fast. Carrot could not afford to climb over the railing and debate. Someone would surely see her. No, she’d have to be committed and lunge. Water from that height would no doubt feel like cement, and if the fall didn’t kill her, then being sucked beneath the ship surely would. Timing was essential. The mighty engines would slow soon, a sliver of opportunity would present itself, but could she take it? Could she jump?

The monster would never let her go. She’d seen too much. Days were spent with her wondering when it would be her turn. When would Celery decide to cut her throat as he’d done

to so many others? Carrot stared at the churning waters below. If she died, would it not be better at her own hand? Quick and painless, unlike what she had seen of Celery's victims who lingered and suffered.

She was a strong swimmer, and already she could see the shoreline of Cozumel. Her hands were wet with sweat as she gripped the railing, her teeth hurt from being clenched. Do or die, maybe just die. Carrot clamped her hands over her mouth when a hysterical giggle bubbled from deep within and passed her lips before she could restrain it. She turned slowly, her heart pounding with expectation of finding Celery's dark eyes upon her.

He slept. The great engines slowed, and she leapt.

Blake switched screens and searched the Internet for a cruise ship and stared at a picture in disgust. She flipped from one to another and realized that all the balconies were on the upper floors. Carrot would've surely died jumping from that height.

"I'm sightless, completely blind," she lamented aloud. She turned and stared at the muted TV. There was a woman on a stage apparently arguing with another. Spittle flew, fingers were pointed, then one ripped open her own shirt, her breasts hidden behind a censor box. "Now that is some scary shit."

Chapter 6

“Good morning. Are you ready to—” Quinn’s gaze swept over Blake’s black pants, shirt, and shoes. “What’re you wearing?”

Blake looked down at her outfit, then back at Quinn. “Obviously, something inappropriate, judging by the look on your face. The bird is back. Come inside, please.” Blake slammed the door when Quinn stepped over the threshold. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“It looks hot and not in that crazy sexy kind of way. I mean heat hot. It’s kind of the fall season everywhere else, but in South Louisiana, we wear shorts almost up to Thanksgiving. Don’t you have any?”

“I don’t wear shorts.”

“Ever?” Quinn asked in surprise.

“Never.”

“What do you sleep in?”

“That’s a personal question.”

“Okay,” Quinn said slowly. “Do you have a short-sleeved shirt that isn’t black?”

“Cassidy says I should wear clothes that match the persona that she’s trying to cultivate.”

“Are you recognized often when you go out in public?”

Blake shook her head. “I don’t go out that much, but the few times I have, no one seemed to.”

“Then why are you worried?”

Blake threw up her hands. “I wasn’t until you said something.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “I mean, why are you wearing the black then? Wear something cool and comfortable.”

Blake huffed and pointed to the kitchen as she walked toward the bedroom. “Coffee’s made.”

“Do you mind if I just grab a Dew?” Quinn called after her.

“Help yourself,” Blake said, then a door closed.

Quinn opened the stuffed refrigerator and pulled out a soda. She returned to the living room and glanced at the computer in the corner. It was on, and there was something on the screen. She moved closer to it and asked loudly, “Is this your next book?” There was no reply, so she took a quick peek.

Quinn stared at the opening that led beneath the house as a foreboding swept through her.

“That’s the only way you can get in,” Glenda explained. “My husband, God rest his soul, had it enclosed to keep animals from getting under the house. A raccoon built a nest there once and made a terrible mess.”

Quinn felt a trickle of sweat slip down her spine as she took out her flashlight. The air coming in from the door smelled stale with a hint of decay. She suspected that despite the effort, something had gotten in and had died. She took a breath and steeled her nerves as she slipped down into the darkness. The earth felt cool against her heated skin. She rolled onto her stomach and crawled toward the sound of trickling water.

Note: Ask Quinn if she wears a tool belt or carries a box.

Cobwebs stuck to Quinn’s hair as she directed her light to the sound of the water. “Figures,” she said aloud just to hear her own voice, “the leak would have to be at the far corner.”

“It always is,” Quinn agreed with a nod as she took a seat and continued to read.

Something reflected the light. Quinn crawled closer, her gaze fixed upon the shiny metal. It was not uncommon to find what she considered small treasures beneath the old homes, some she was lucky enough to keep. Heedless of the mud that was soaking into her clothes, she crawled close enough to reach out and touch what she realized was a gold band. She tugged at it and realized it was attached to something.

Note: You used realized too much in this paragraph. Fix it.

With a grunt, she gave a final push and shined her light on the ring. For a moment, her mind refused to accept what she was actually seeing, a desiccated finger. Slowly, she moved the light over a hand, then an arm.

Her scream was muffled beneath the old house as she scrambled toward the opening, gasping for breath. Her hands clawed at the earth. She could hear footsteps above her and the faint sound of what she thought might've been laughter. Quinn's own cries and screams masked the sounds. Her only goal was to escape the dark confines of what had become a tomb. Her back scraped against the flooring as she pushed her upper body through the door. Her feet pushed at the dirt beneath as she reached around wildly to pull herself out of the hole. Quinn never saw Glenda, wasn't even aware of the knife that penetrated her flesh. And then she was falling. Stunned, she lay there gasping for breath as the door slowly closed and darkness surrounded her.

Quinn shot out of the chair like a rocket and crashed into Blake.

“Glenda killed me!” She pointed a finger in Blake’s face. “No, you killed me!”

“It’s okay, you were only a secondary character,” Blake said as she took a step back.

Quinn’s green eyes were huge as she shook her head. “No, it’s not okay. You just killed me. Did you dream that last night, or was that a fantasy?”

“You told me you were a plumber. That’s how I came up with the idea,” Blake said calmly. “I thought you’d get a kick out of being used as a character. I wasn’t really thinking of you when I wrote that. I can name her something else if it makes you feel better.”

Quinn backed up against the wall and took a few calming breaths. “It’s just a character.” She scrubbed at her face. “I don’t read horror or go to scary movies for this reason. It freaks me out. I know I’m being silly, but it really rattled me to

see my name and what I do on that screen.” Quinn swallowed hard as Blake stared at her as if she were the insane one. “Glenda is a great villain, by the way. You don’t have to stretch to paint her as the devil.”

“She made me nervous. She looks like a bird with those beady eyes and the way she constantly cocks her head to the side. I think she’d make a great serial killer.”

Quinn nodded. “She’s murdered many a reputation. I thought you didn’t write slashers.”

“I don’t usually, but this idea came, and I went with it.”

Quinn smiled when she noticed the white T-shirt with a sketch of Mickey Mouse and the faded jeans Blake was wearing. “That looks more relaxed. The red Converse sneakers are a nice touch.” *You maniacal shrimp.*

It was a typical sticky Louisiana day, the sun shined brightly. Blake was slumped in the passenger’s seat with dark glasses covering her eyes. Quinn had seen her yawn several times.

“Did you write all night?”

“Some of it,” Blake said sleepily. “That’s what I do, write at night and sleep during the day.”

“So you haven’t had much rest.”

Blake shook her head. “I fell asleep on the sofa around five, so I got a few hours in.”

“You wanna nap while I drive?”

“Do you mind?” Blake glanced at Quinn.

“Not at all. You can recline that seat, the lever’s on the side.”

“No, if you were to hit something, the seat belt could decapitate me.”

Your mind really does go to the dark, Quinn thought as she stared at the road.

“What scares you?”

You, but Quinn kept that response to herself. “The usual... spiders, snakes, rats. I see those things a lot in my line of work, but they never fail to get a scream out of me.”

“But you still face them, so they’re not a crippling fear. What terrifies you?”

Quinn smiled. “The price of gas.”

“You make jokes when you don’t want to answer a question and probably when something makes you nervous. Do you believe in ghosts?” Blake asked, her voice growing softer as she moved closer to sleep.

Quinn didn’t answer aloud, but she did. Her encounter with the otherworldly had been sweet, comforting. She’d sat vigil beside her father’s bed as he lay dying. It seemed that one day he was diagnosed with cancer and the next he was bedbound. Hospice enabled Malcolm to stay where he wanted to be, at home. Quinn, her siblings, and their mother took turns watching over him.

The day before he took his last breath, Quinn stayed with him while her mother shopped for groceries. She’d sat beside the bed watching him sleep. The sound of the oxygen machine lulled her. She felt her eyelids grow heavy and decided to busy herself with straightening the room. Quinn walked around the hospital-style bed picking up odds and ends left by visitors and caught a strong whiff of perfume. Malcolm’s mother had always worn Royal Secret. The scent Quinn remembered fondly because Grandma Delia’s clothes and skin always seemed to smell of it. She had searched for the source, thinking that her mother had put something of Grandma’s in the room to comfort their father and found nothing. The perfume remained concentrated in one area by the bed.

When Dawn arrived, Quinn had her stand in that spot without telling her why. Dawn sniffed and looked around. “I smell Grandma.”

“She’s here,” Malcolm whispered as he opened one eye. “She’s been here.”

Dawn had tried to reason it all away, but Quinn knew in her heart that her grandma was in that room because the following night when her father died, the scent vanished. She liked to think of them together in the afterlife. She liked to imagine her grandma in the red dress that she'd worn when she was young in Quinn's favorite photo. Her dad in the soft white T-shirt that he used to wear around the house, his hair thick and blond and full of waves. No pain, no illness, just peace. Quinn would go to her own grave with that image in her mind and hoped to join them one day.

Though a soul probably didn't need earthly food, Quinn hoped there were cakes, doughnuts, and a chocolate fountain surrounded by strawberries. That was her kind of heaven, and despite what Glenda had to say, Quinn believed she would get there. She imagined it a vast place, and people like Glenda could have their own corner if they were allowed in. Quinn hoped they never crossed paths because forgiveness was difficult to muster when it came to the judgmental.

She glanced over at Blake. Her hands had dropped into her lap, and her head bobbed with every bump in the road. Quinn realized then that she'd also been judgmental when it came to Blake. Calling her a nut case wasn't really fair just because her brain operated differently than most. Everyone had a phobia or two. Quinn herself was afraid of horses. Of all the people in Cypress, Quinn should've been more understanding about being different, and she internally chastised herself for not being more open-minded.

When Quinn turned onto the highway that ran along the Mississippi River, Blake stirred, sat up straight, and asked, "How long was I out?"

"About twenty minutes."

Blake pulled off her sunglasses and rubbed her eyes. "It felt like hours." She reached into her bag and pulled out a camera. "What is that grassy hill that seems to go on forever?"

"The levee, the Mississippi is on the other side." Quinn watched as Blake snapped off a few pictures. "You mentioned that your characters kind of sit beside you when you write and

tell their stories. Was I the one who sat beside you when you wrote what I read earlier?”

“No, I was kind of forcing it, that’s why it seemed so choppy. I haven’t really written anything substantial in a while. It’s just not coming like it used to. But I feel like I have to create something because I have obligations to meet. So lately, I’ve been trying to force it, and when I do that, I write crap.” Blake pointed to something on the left side of the road. “What is that?”

“It’s an old store. I think it was built in the fifties.” Quinn slowed and pulled into the parking lot as Blake tried to snap pictures from the road. The dilapidated building looked as though it would cave in on itself at any moment.

Blake hopped out of the truck, looked around, then began taking more pictures. “Do you feel it—the history? The energy of the past is almost palpable.”

Quinn felt a burst of warm air when Blake had opened the door, but that was about it. “Are you seeing ghosts?”

“No.” Blake lowered the camera. “Take a good look at this place, then close your eyes. It’s almost dusk, there are cars from the fifties parked here in front. Men drinking nickel sodas and smoking cigarettes are standing on the porch. They’re watching women in pressed short-sleeved blouses tucked into long skirts, bobby socks around their ankles. This is the social hub, and from one of the cars, you can hear Buddy Holly sing *Peggy Sue*.”

Quinn smiled and opened her eyes. “Is that what you’re seeing?”

Blake nodded as she continued to stare into the past. “When it’s quiet like this, it’s so easy to imagine what must’ve been.”

“Do you wish you could live back in those times?”

“Oh, no,” Blake said as she climbed back in and closed the door. “There is no such thing as the good ol’ days. Every year in the past is filled with oppression of some kind or another.”

“Good point.” Quinn turned her truck around and pulled back onto the road. “I think you’ll feel a lot of energy at our

next stop.”

Quinn drove for another couple of miles and turned onto a gravel road that meandered alongside sugarcane fields and eventually into a parking lot surrounded by oak trees. At one end was a ticket booth where a small crowd was gathered. She parked her truck in a shady spot, killed the engine, and prepared to get out when she noticed Blake, who had leaned forward and was staring up at the trees.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’re so many birds.”

Quinn could hear them chirping now that the engine was silent. “Do you mind if I ask why they terrify you?”

Blake sat back and exhaled a long breath. “When I was around seven, we moved to a place that had a lot of trees perfect for climbing. One in particular had a very low bough, so I climbed up there. It was great, wide enough for me to sit and swing my legs. I was waving at Mom and laughing when what she said was a mockingbird swooped down and started pulling my hair. It wouldn’t stop, no matter how much I flailed. It just kept coming at my head and my face until I fell. I was on the ground, and even then, the bird was relentless. I broke my arm that day.”

“That would make an indelible mark on my psyche, too,” Quinn admitted with a sigh. “Blake, these birds won’t bother you, but if there’s a mockingbird in the mix, I swear I’ll knock it into next week if it comes anywhere near you.”

“I have to warn you,” Blake said as she stared out the windshield. “My therapist brought in a parakeet one day so I could confront my fears. I literally wet my pants and nearly killed that bird. Stay close to me, please.”

The last part of Blake’s statement sounded so desperate that Quinn would’ve promised to carry her if she had to. She got out of the truck, walked around to the passenger’s side, and opened the door. “We’ll walk side by side, I swear.”

And that was exactly what they did. Blake’s hip was glued to Quinn’s so snugly she had no choice but to put an arm

around Blake's waist. Blake bought their tickets for the tour, then burrowed into Quinn again as they walked down a cement path leading toward the old plantation home.

"Stop looking up at the trees and focus on something else, like that big bowl at the junction we're coming up on. I'll watch for the birds. Why are you afraid of broccoli?"

"It looks like trees, and that's where the birds live."

Quinn hid her smile. "I should've already figured that out."

"My dad claims that I use fear as an excuse to avoid doing things I don't want to." Blake was quiet for a moment, then said with a sigh, "He's right, or at least he was at one time. They pushed me and my sister, Danielle, hard to socialize every time we moved. That came naturally for Dani but not for me. All I wanted to do was stay in my room. I was allowed to do that after I broke my arm. I learned quickly that if I was terrified of something, my mother gave in to me. It became a habit, and as time went by, I built a fortress of fear around me, and now I'm trapped behind walls of my own making. That's what years of therapy have taught me, but that knowledge doesn't make it any easier to remove the bricks."

"Well, if it's any consolation, I think you removed a brick today by coming out here."

"Thanks," Blake said without much conviction.

Quinn stood guard against the birds while Blake snapped pictures of the lilies inside what looked like a giant metal bowl. They received a few curious glances as Quinn stood pressed against Blake. Quinn found it humorous that those who stared figured them as a lesbian couple. They were lesbians, but not a couple, and the closeness was not affection, but protection from birds, of all things.

It felt good, though. Blake's hair and skin smelled fresh and clean, her tiny body fit easily in Quinn's shelter. And yet there was no stirring of desire, which made Quinn wonder if the cold place in her heart had spread like a disease.

Blake stopped taking pictures and lowered her camera. "What is it?" she asked with tension in her voice.

“Nothing, why?”

“You suddenly became very stiff. Is...is a bird near?”

Quinn was compelled to lie and say yes, rather than explain what was going through her mind. Her silence unnerved Blake, who tried to climb into the water-filled bowl to escape whatever was behind them. “What’re you doing?” Quinn exclaimed as she grabbed her around the waist. Blake’s grip on the bowl was like iron, and she was trying to get a foot in as Quinn wrestled her.

“It’s a bird! It’s a bird!” Blake screamed as she writhed in Quinn’s arms.

Passersby stopped walking and stared at the two. One little girl pointed and said, “Momma, she’s gonna throw that lady in the bowl.”

“I’m not.” Quinn continued to try to restrain Blake.

“There’s a bird in the bowl?” a woman asked as she walked over and looked in. “It’ll drown, someone get it out.”

“Blake! Stop it!” Quinn ground out as she managed to pin Blake’s arms to her sides. “There’s no bird close by, and even if there was, it’s in Kentucky by now after you scared the shit out of it.” Quinn’s face turned dark red as she gazed back at the puzzled expressions on the faces that surrounded them. “It was a misunderstanding, folks. There’s no drowning bird.” She lifted Blake’s feet off the ground and carried her over to a bench where she forced her to sit. “You’ve got people thinking you’re insane,” she rasped.

“I saw your reflection in the water. Your face was like stone, and your eyes were huge.” Blake pulled her feet up onto the bench. “Oh, God, was it a snake?”

“I was daydreaming,” Quinn exclaimed in exasperation.

“You’re supposed to be vigilant!”

Quinn bent down so that she was eye to eye with Blake. “I was glued to your ass. Nothing was going to get to you without going through me first.” Quinn stood up straight and

released a heavy sigh. “Why don’t we skip touring the grounds and check out the inside of the house?”

Blake ran a hand through her hair, pulling it back from her face. “Just let me catch my breath.” Nearby, a bird squawked loudly. “Okay, I’m good,” she said as she jumped up and nearly wrapped herself around Quinn.

“I can’t walk with you on the front of me. You’re gonna have to let me go.”

Blake moved to her side but kept a firm grip on Quinn’s arm. They walked quickly toward the house, but upon arrival were told they’d have to wait on the back patio for the tour to begin. Quinn found a chair and stuffed Blake into it while she hovered over her like a tent away from the others.

“Better now?” Quinn asked, trying to keep agitation from her tone.

“A little.”

“What energy do you feel now?”

“Anxiety.”

“No, don’t you feel the history? Can’t you see women in hoop skirts with parasols on this patio?”

“I see one now,” Blake said.

“That’s it, just let that creative mind wander.”

“No, really.” Blake pointed.

Quinn looked up, and a woman in full antebellum dress stood on the portico. She raised her voice slightly as she addressed the group. “I’m Patricia Scrantz, and I’ll be your tour guide this fine morning. Welcome to Oak Alley Plantation, built in...”

Quinn felt Blake’s fingers dig into her arms. She saw the reason for the tension as it hopped across the manicured lawns seemingly headed straight for them. “That’s just a little ol’ squirrel, it’s... Oh, God!”

Members of the tour group turned when the screaming started. Quinn’s voice rose above Blake’s as Blake climbed her

like the squirrel did the tree behind them. She lost her footing and dropped to all fours with Blake hanging around her neck.

“Are you serious?” Quinn bellowed as Blake’s heels dug into her lower back.

Blake’s face was inches from hers. “It’s on me! It’s on me! I can feel it tearing at my back.”

“That’s a rose bush!”

Quinn felt someone pulling her up. Two men had come to their rescue. As she rose, so did Blake, who was still attached to the front of her body like a starfish.

“What happened?” one of the guys asked.

“I...uh...I tripped,” Quinn stammered. “Thank you both for the help, we truly appreciate it.” When Quinn and Blake were alone again, Quinn grabbed Blake by the arm. “You have got to get a grip. Have you seen anyone else out here attacked by birds or squirrels?”

Blake looked remorseful as her chest heaved. “I’m sorry. I get kind of excited when something scares me.”

“That’s an understatement.” Quinn grabbed Blake by the hand and dragged her into the house where they became the tail end of the tour. She’d preached to herself about being open-minded, but one breast was hanging out of her bra, and her good intentions were seriously waning.

“I’m sorry.”

Quinn was still breathing heavy as she discreetly tried to get herself back into the bra. More hair was out of her ponytail than in. She wanted the tour to be over, Blake back in her house, and the sight of it in her rearview mirror.

“I’m sorry,” Blake said again lowly. “I truly want to walk down the street like everyone else and not be afraid of who or what is going to swoop down, bite my leg, or knife me in the back.”

“Maybe you should start writing children’s books, make your characters fluffy bunnies with no teeth. I think what you

spend most of your time concentrating on fortifies the fortress you mentally live in.”

Blake shrugged. “They say you write what you know. Fear and I have an intimate relationship.”

“You need some joy in your life, Blake.” Quinn smoothed back her hair and redid her ponytail. “This place looks huge on the outside but kinda small on the inside.”

“That’s because you’re ten feet tall.”

“I’m only five-ten.”

“You look like a basketball player from down here. I feel small.”

“You are. I can see the top of your head. Black isn’t your natural color, is it?”

Blake ran her fingers through it. “No, it’s medium brown. Cassidy says I look more menacing with it black.”

“Your agent needs to let you be you.”

They took quick peeks into the rooms on the lower floor, then waited as some of the group stopped on the stairs to take pictures. Quinn found it dull. Rooms filled with old furniture from a bygone era held no appeal, especially the era the plantation home showcased.

When they arrived upstairs, one of the women in the group asked the tour guide if she’d ever seen a ghost, to which she replied with a smile, “I’ve seen shadows. Others have claimed to have seen some of the slaves on the grounds.”

Quinn and Blake hung back as the others looked into the rooms from the doorways. “Do you feel anything?” Quinn asked as she looked around.

“I’m not a sensitive or an empath, but this place seems sad to me, probably because of the history.”

They looked into the bedrooms as the group walked out onto the balcony. Just outside the door, a woman asked a friend, “Do you suppose that some of the slaves were happy here?”

Quinn looked at Blake and spoke softly. “I believe the answer to that question is no. Human beings were snatched from their home, sold like cattle, and made to wait hand and foot on someone else. That had to be emotionally debilitating. Their feelings and opinions insignificant in the eyes of their masters, no matter how well a slave owner treated them. The degradation, I’m sure, was intolerable.” Quinn looked out the door, and her gaze scanned the grounds below. “I feel the sadness, too. I find it hard to see the beauty of this place because of the history. It’s also a misconception that all Southerners are racist.”

“I’m aware of that. It’s everywhere, not just here.” Blake stepped out onto the balcony and kept her back to the wall. “It’s an act of choice that we all have to make. I choose to see everyone as a human being, and in all of us, there’s good and bad. That comes from being looked down upon by others who disapprove of who I am. Discrimination has shaped my personal choices. Don’t you just get mad at the expectation that we should live up to someone else’s standard or we’re less of a human?”

“Furious,” Quinn said with a nod as she stepped outside. She noticed how Blake was hugging the wall. “Are you afraid of heights?”

Blake winced. “A little, and a bird could send me over the railing.”

Quinn folded her arms. “Did you ever go anywhere else besides your apartment in New York?”

Blake looked away, her silence made the answer clear.

“How did you ever manage to have a relationship with anyone?”

“That’s a personal question.”

“You pulled one boob out of my bra back there and smashed the other. Your legs have been wrapped around me twice. I think we’ve gotten really personal. Before I take you anywhere else, I need to know *all* the things you’re afraid of.”

Blake sighed. “The dark, dogs, cats, anything that makes sudden movement, loud noise, cooked fish with the head still —”

“So everything,” Quinn said as she raised a hand.

“Look, I moved out of my comfort zone. I’m out here with birds and rabid squirrels,” Blake said as she clenched her fists. “I’ve made some big strides recently, and it hasn’t been easy. Do you have any idea how degrading it is to know that Cassidy had to pay someone to spend time with me?”

“Wait, she’s paying me to show you around, not to be your buddy.” Quinn bit her tongue when she noticed pain flash through Blake’s eyes before she looked away. It seemed Quinn’s heart still had a few soft spots left. “My friendship is lagniappe. I’ll help you break out of the jail you’re in, but I have to warn you. You need to get used to being out of that comfort zone.”

“What does lagniappe mean? I’ve never heard that word before,” Blake asked dully.

“It means something extra. My friendship can’t be bought, and if I’m gonna be your friend, then I can’t sit back and watch you hide your life away. So if you want to hang out with me, you start with a mint julep.”

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Chapter 7

Blake swallowed as Quinn put her finger on the bottom of the cup and tipped it upward. She turned her face away and inhaled a gulp of air. “That’s so sweet and strong. It’s making me sweat more than I already am.”

“Drink half the glass, and you’ll be grabbing the birds out of the trees.”

Blake tried to hand the drink back. “I don’t want to touch them.”

“Take the edge off, Blake, imbibe a little.” Quinn waved it off. “I’m told the food at the restaurant here is pretty good. Are you hungry?”

“I don’t like restaurants. Too many people too close.”

“Are you ready to go home, or is there something else you want to see?”

“I’d kinda like to see a graveyard where the crypts are above the ground.” Blake thought she noted a look of disappointment in Quinn’s eyes for a second. “I don’t want to go to New Orleans, though. I hear tourists get mugged in the cemeteries there a lot. We don’t really even have to get out of the truck, just a quick drive-through.”

“I know of one between here and Cypress. Drink half of that julep, and I’ll take you there.”

“My nose already feels like it’s vibrating.” Blake put her fingers on it to see if it actually was.

Quinn smiled. “But are you relaxed?”

“I think I can walk back to the truck without holding your hand.”

Quinn gestured toward the path. “Go right ahead, I’ll be a few steps behind. This is liberation lesson one.”

The parking lot was a good distance away; Blake could just make out the top of the red truck. She downed more of the

drink and grimaced as she wiped her mouth. “Am I already walking?”

Quinn shook her head as she took the cup and dropped it into a trash can. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Blake took a few steps, hesitated, and forged on without looking back. Instead of the birds, she focused on walking what she hoped was a straight line. The effects of the alcohol made everything seem surreal, like a dream where nothing could really hurt her.

“What’s your middle name, Blake Taylor?” Quinn asked as she followed.

“Angelique, and my first name is really Blakelyn.”

“Your initials spell bat, that’s kinda funny.”

Blake rolled her eyes. “And you’re the sober one. What’s your middle name?”

There was a long pause, then Quinn said with obvious disdain, “Iris.”

Blake was glad Quinn couldn’t see her face because it was all she could do not to laugh.

“Don’t disrespect my grandmother whom I was named after by laughing.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Blake said with a grin.

“Your legs look twelve inches long. How do you find jeans that fit?”

“I know what you’re doing, you’re trying to distract me.”

Quinn laughed. “No, I’m not, they’re really short.”

“Thanks, I had no clue.” Blake stepped up her pace as her feet hit the gravel in the parking lot, but before she could reach the handle on the door of Quinn’s truck, Quinn grabbed it first and opened it.

“You did really good,” she said with a smile as Blake climbed in. “Now you get a reward.”

“Why do they call them po-boys?” Blake asked as she unwrapped a sandwich that dripped with gravy.

Quinn shrugged as they sat on the tailgate of her truck on a dirt road just outside the gates of a cemetery. “I’ve heard everything from they were considered a poor man’s sandwich because they were made from scraps to a pair of brothers who fed streetcar workers on strike because the strikers were poor boys. This is going to be very messy. Don’t even try to be proper.” Quinn bit into the sandwich; gravy ran down her fingers and dripped onto her shorts.

Two bites in, and Blake had gravy down the front of her shirt and on her jeans. It was delicious. The French bread was saturated with the gravy, and cheese, pickles, lettuce, and tomato added to the flavor. Blake decided it was certainly worth the mess. She gave up on trying to manage the napkin and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

“This area is below sea level, and that’s why the crypts are on top of the ground, right?”

Quinn nodded as she continued to eat.

“Are all the graveyards in Louisiana like this?”

“No, not all, just the ones in the low-lying areas.”

“Here’s a tidbit you may already know,” Blake said before she took a sip of her soda. “Almost all graves face east.”

Quinn set her sandwich on the wrapper and tried to clean her hands somewhat before grabbing an onion ring from the box between them. “I didn’t know that. Why?”

“Some cultures worshipped the sun and buried their dead to face it as it rose in the east each day. The Christian religion believes in doing it because Christ will return in the east, according to interpretation of Scripture.”

Quinn waved a hand. “So all of those people out there are facing us and watching us eat these sloppy sandwiches. Had I known that, I would’ve used my napkin more often and not wiped my hands on my shorts. I think I’m going to save the other half of my po-boy for dinner.” She laughed when she looked at Blake. “You have gravy all over your chin.”

“I know, I’m a mess.” Blake scrubbed her hands with a napkin, then wiped her face on her sleeve. “It was scrumptious, though. I’ll save mine, too, and maybe eat the rest of it tonight.”

They wrapped up the food and put it back into the bag, then Blake pulled out her camera and began taking photos from where she stood beside the truck. Quinn watched her for a moment, then said, “You’re not going in because there are trees with birds, are you?”

“Yes, and there are dead people in there, and that creepy statue in the middle just weirds me out.”

“There are bodies, mostly dust and bones, and cement crypts, not people.” Quinn walked toward the gate. “Lesson two, Blake Taylor, braving the graveyard.”

“I think one lesson a day is sufficient,” Blake said under her breath as she looked into the trees and slowly followed.

Quinn walked through the gate, strode over to a crypt, and stretched out on it.

“What’re you doing?” Blake asked aghast.

“Lunch made me sleepy.” Quinn tucked her hands behind her head. “I’m contemplating a nap.”

“Oh, that’s so disrespectful.” Blake stepped in and looked at the grave marker. “Eugenia Billingsly is going to be very upset with you.”

“I’m sure Gina doesn’t care in the least. If I were to be buried, and for the record I don’t want to be, I’d want people to picnic on my crypt as long as they picked up the trash.”

Blake snapped a picture of Quinn. “You want to be cremated?”

“Yes, but my sister has a hissy every time I mention it. Frankly, I think it’s a macabre thing to lay out a dead person’s body for everyone to look at. With today’s technology, there’s no reason to sit up with the dead, so to speak. We know they’re dead for sure, and if they weren’t, they’d surely be after the embalming. No, cremate me and pour my ashes into

the Mississippi. I'll make it to the Gulf eventually. I don't want a service."

"Why?"

"At my dad's funeral, everyone talked about him like he was a saint. I guess they wanted to give him a positive send-off." Quinn crossed one foot over her ankle and stared up at the sky. "The truth was that Dad was a hard man to live with when we were young. He worked hard, played hard, and when he was home with us, he was tired and grumpy. My memories of him as a kid were of him yelling at us all the time. It wasn't until he got up in age that he mellowed and was nice to be around. He sat me and my siblings down individually and apologized for the way he was when we were growing up, and in his later years, he tried very hard to make it up to us." Quinn sat up. "He wasn't perfect, and that's what I thought people should know. Do you know what I mean?"

Blake pursed her lips. "It bothered you that people thought he was?"

"Not in the way you're probably thinking. Dad made mistakes, and he realized it, then he tried to make it right. I think that's better than people believing that you were perfect. We all screw up, but it takes guts to admit that you're wrong and even more to do something about it. I wanted people to know that my dad was that type of man, but at the funeral, I couldn't say it. I couldn't speak without the floodgates opening. He wasn't perfect, but what he did for me and my sister and brother was." Quinn cleared her throat and laughed softly. "I don't know why I got off on that tangent. I guess it's because he's buried over there." She pointed to one of the newer-looking grave markers. "Mom will be beside him soon."

Wrapped up in what Quinn was saying, Blake sat down on a crypt, unaware of what she was doing. "I'm sorry for your loss. Am I keeping you from spending time with your mother?"

"No," Quinn said with a shake of her head. "She is...we don't see eye to eye. She doesn't approve of me anymore. I'm

not what she wanted. Do your folks have a problem with your sexuality?"

"No, my sister and I are both lesbians. Dani came out first, and I suppose paved the way for me. I'm sure they were a bit disappointed at first because they wanted grandchildren and thought they wouldn't have any. But Dani and her partner, Susan, have two kids, both boys. They live in Connecticut, and my parents get to see them often."

"That's nice, I'm happy for you," Quinn said with sincerity. "I'm sure Cedric Weaver is thoroughly enjoying that you're sitting on his chest."

What Quinn said didn't immediately register, then it hit. Blake sprang up off the crypt. "I'm so sorry, Cedric!"

Quinn hopped up, laughing hysterically. "Let me get you home before you have a heart attack."

"Wait," Blake said as she followed Quinn to the gate. "Don't you want to visit your father's grave?"

"He's not here," Quinn said as she continued on. "The best part of him is always with me."

Quinn pulled into the driveway and looked at Blake. "I meant to ask the other day, why don't you drive? Are you afraid?"

"There was never any reason. I've always lived in places that didn't necessitate having a car, and of course, you know now that I didn't get out that much."

Quinn put the truck in park but didn't kill the engine. "Did you ever go on book tours and stuff like that?"

Blake released a sigh as the traumatic memories swept through her mind. "I did when my first few books came out. I found it very overwhelming, and Cassidy had to give me Valium just to make it through the signings. I tried to do a reading once but got so ill that she told everyone that I'd lost my voice, and she actually read in my place. I was just very fortunate that she got my fifth book into the hands of a movie

producer. My popularity soared after that, and my publisher stopped pressuring me as much to do social engagements. Cassidy schedules photo sessions often and maintains my website and all of my media networking sites on the Net. That's the extent of my exposure now. I just need to produce."

"Go do it," Quinn said with a smile. "Walk to that door alone, step inside, and write something that will scare the shit out of me."

Blake smiled weakly. "I'll try. Next lesson, right? Walk to the door past the bird."

Quinn nodded. "If it makes a move, I'll be out of this truck in a heartbeat. I have to work tomorrow, but I'll come by when I get off to check on you. If there's an emergency," she said as she fished a card from her console, "call this number."

Blake took it and stuffed it into the bag on her lap. "Thanks for today." Blake didn't give herself any time to debate. She threw open the door and walked as fast as she could to the porch, unlocked the door, and rushed inside. She gave Quinn a thumbs-up from behind the window. But when she turned around, the world seemed to shift.

Her first instinct was to grab for the bottle of pills she'd been prescribed. She dropped the bag, refusing to give in. "I'm okay," she repeated, hoping to believe it. "This is home for a while...I have to get out." Blake began grabbing as much as she could. Night would be there soon, and she'd be trapped. With her bag, a screwdriver, and a spool of string, she rushed onto the porch. "I can't do this, either." Everything dropped from her hands as she turned and ran back inside. She opened the door and grabbed the bag. Blake clutched it to her chest as she rocked back and forth. "I hate the night. I hate the dark. Right now, I hate me."

Chapter 8

“Blake Taylor...the author...is living in the Meyers house. You’re full of shit,” Jacob said as he poured himself a cup of coffee. “Dawn would’ve told me because she knows that I love Blake’s movies. Tonya and I both read her books.”

“That’s why she didn’t tell you. She knew you’d go over there and gush like a teenage girl over some boy band.”

“Men don’t gush, Quinn,” Jacob jerked a thumb at his chest, “especially not this one.” He took a seat in front of Quinn’s desk while she waited for her computer to boot up. “Why are you messing with me?”

“I’m not, and don’t tell anyone else, not even Tonya. No one is supposed to know who she really is.”

Jacob stared at her for a moment. “I don’t believe you.”

“Then don’t,” Quinn said with a shrug.

Of the three siblings, Dawn looked the most like their father, but Jacob had his mannerisms, and their voices sounded the same. Perhaps it was the visit to the cemetery that had Quinn missing her dad when she awoke that morning. Being with Jacob filled some of the void. She stared at his hand as he raised his coffee cup to his lips. It was Malcolm Scott’s hand.

“You remind me of Dad,” she said with a smile.

“Quinny,” Jacob began in imitation of their father, “you can’t fix everything with a hammer.” He laughed. “He used to get such a kick out of you losing your temper. He never let you see him laughing, but he’d walk out of sight, then double over.”

Quinn continued to smile as Jacob’s voice washed over her and brought back sweeter memories of the three of them working together. Jacob, tall and skinny, would always be elected to crawl into the tight spaces that Quinn and Malcolm didn’t want to. There had been times that it took the two of them pulling on his boots and legs to get him back out.

She loved her sister dearly, but Jacob was both brother and best friend. Of the Scott children, they favored the most, both with a head full of reddish-brown hair, their eyes were green, Dawn's blue. They were all fair-skinned, but Jacob and Quinn got the freckles, unlike their sister, whose skin was creamy and clear. Jacob had grown a beard and mustache to cover full lips that he claimed made him look feminine.

Jacob Scott was heterosexual and married to Tonya, his high school sweetheart, but he had an effeminate way about him that drew harassment from his peers, especially when he was in high school. So Jacob often went overboard to look and sound masculine. In the privacy of his home, he cooked with his wife, and they enjoyed crafts. Jacob's latest achievement was a fall wreath on his front door that he refused to take credit for. In public, he wore baseball jerseys in the summer, though he knew little about the sport, and in the cooler months, flannel because he said it made him look like a lumberjack.

Quinn tore her gaze away from him and stared at the screen on her computer. "You were busy this weekend."

"When we discover oil in one of our backyards and become rich, let's hire someone to take weekend call. That is the one thing I truly hate about our job."

"Little brother, if we strike it rich, neither of us will be plumbing anything." Quinn licked her lips. "Let's see what we have on tap for today. A kitchen faucet replacement at the Crawfords', a drain clear at Dole's, and a leak beneath the Sutter house. Oh, and Grant asked me if one of us could look at the faucet in his bathroom today."

"I can grab that when I go home. His house is on the way."

Quinn nodded. "I say we tackle the—" Quinn grabbed her cellphone from her desk when it began to ring. The number on her ID was not one she recognized. "Scott's Plumbing. Hey, Blake... Coyotes? Where? Well, I've never seen... Honey, if it's wearing a collar, it's a dog. That's probably the Comeaux's shepherd Chuck... No, I'm sure he's not rabid. Breathe." Quinn pointed at the phone and grinned when Jacob's brow

shot skyward, and she mouthed, *It's her*. "Are you outside? Okay, Chuck won't try to get into the house, I promise. Did you write last night?" Quinn pursed her lips. "I'm sorry. Sleep is a good idea. Chuck has never killed anyone, I promise. He's a sweet dog, and he's probably just hunting squirrels. Oh... okay. Good night or good morning rather." Quinn ended the call and set the phone on her desk.

Jacob's jaw sagged before he said, "Quinn, is Blake Taylor really at the Meyers house?"

She threw up both hands. "I swear."

Jacob jumped up and nearly spilled his coffee. "Oh, my God," he said in a pitch that Quinn could never hit. "Tonya and I have seen all her movies, and Tonya has read every book she's ever written—twice. I have to tell her, she'll keep it quiet, you know that."

"Y'all can't go over there. Blake's...kind of...well, she just doesn't want anyone to know she's here. She's trying to write her next book, and she can't have a lot of interruptions. I promise that one day I'll introduce you."

Jacob fanned his hand like a teenage girl. "What's your connection to her? How'd you meet?"

"Dawn rented her the house, and Blake's agent asked her to hire someone to show Blake around. Since she's a lesbian, Dawn thought she might be more comfortable with me."

Jacob raced back to his spot in front of Quinn's desk and sat down, heedless of the coffee that sloshed out on the papers covering the surface. "What's she like?"

That was a question that Quinn was slow to answer. "She's...eccentric."

"She's hot in a dark sort of way. I've seen her picture on the book jackets, almost menacing."

Quinn laughed. "That's not how I'd describe her. She's like five-three and tiny." Quinn left out that Blake was also a scaredy cat.

Jacob grabbed the keyboard and turned the monitor slightly. "I'm sure she has a website," he said as he typed. Blake suddenly appeared, staring up at the camera where she lay on what looked like a blood-red chaise lounge. Her hair was splayed out around her, one hand tucked behind her head, the other across her midsection. Her smile was sultry, almost cocky, and exuded more confidence than Quinn knew she possessed. The white shirt beneath a black coat was unbuttoned just enough to show a hint of cleavage. The image was sexy and so unlike the woman Quinn was getting to know.

"You must drool like a dog the whole time you're with her," Jacob said as he stared transfixed at the screen.

"I hate to burst your bubble, but that's just a persona created by her agent, I'm sure."

Jacob turned to her. "This isn't her?"

"It is...but it's not. I mean, that's her." Quinn pointed to the picture. She cocked her head to the side as she stared at it. "This just makes her look like something she's not, I suppose. You'd have to meet her to understand."

"When?" Jacob asked excitedly.

"Hold on, bud, I'll have to talk to her about that first."

Blake tossed fitfully. She was exhausted but failed to fall into a deep restful sleep. The coyote she'd seen sniffing around the back porch earlier had her unnerved. She flopped onto her back and wondered how long it would take for such an animal to chew through the screen and wooden doors. Quinn said it was just a dog. She reminded herself of that as she lay there and tried to keep her eyes closed.

She missed her apartment. At least there she knew the noises around her. Blake doubted the woman across the street who came out in the cool of the mornings to tend her flower gardens would be much help against a rabid dog, and the police chief never seemed to be home. She missed her mother, who always took her side, but Blake knew that was part of her problem. Her brow furrowed as she recalled the family

meeting they'd had. That, in conjunction with the writer's block and Cassidy's persistence, had been the catalyst for the move. It was an intervention of sorts and had made more of an impact on Blake than she was willing to admit to anyone.

"You are a large part of her problem, Mom," Dani said as she sat with her arms folded. "I hate to hurt your feelings, but it's the truth. You coddle Blake too much, you always have. You make excuses for her crazy behavior."

"Not crazy," Mike, their father, corrected and smiled kindly at Blake. "Sweetheart, some of your behaviors are a detriment to your mental health, and that's why we're here today. It has to stop."

"She has special needs. She—"

"Rhonda," Mike said firmly, "no, she doesn't. Blake is perfectly capable of living a full life, and we have to let her."

Blake's mother reached over and took Blake's hand. "I won't let them turn you loose in the city."

Blake's chest tightened. "Is that what this is about?" she said behind a gasp. "You're just going to throw me out there to find my way home?"

Dani rolled her eyes. "People do it all the time. They take a cab, train, or drive. How do you think I got here? Mom didn't pick me up. Blake, don't you want to live like a normal person?"

"She is normal," Rhonda countered angrily, "with special needs."

"Mom, stop saying that!" Dani sat on the edge of her seat. "Don't you see what you've done? You've told her that for years and look what she's become. She's a virtual shut-in. She has a hundred locks on her door. The last time I visited her, it took twenty minutes for her to unlock it." Dani took a deep breath when Mike put a hand on her shoulder. She was calmer when she spoke again. "Blake, I love you. I'd like to have a relationship with you. You're my only sibling, but we can't go to the movies, we can't shop together, we can't go have a drink. If I want to see you, I have to go to your place and be locked

down like there's a horde of zombies waiting outside your door to eat us."

"Zombies," Rhonda said with a smile as she turned to Blake. "That's something you haven't written about. Maybe you should consider them for your next book. They're hot right now."

"Mother! Focus!" Dani yelled.

"What do you want me to do?" Blake asked with exasperation.

"I want you to stop listening to Mom. I want you to realize that you're an intelligent woman and start acting like it. You've been in therapy for years, and it's done nothing for you. The only way you're going to get better is to stand on your own two feet!"

Blake flopped over on her side. Above all, loneliness had propelled her to leave New York. And when the temptation to run home became great, that was what kept her in Cypress Glade. Well, that and the fact that she couldn't drive, and she'd have to have help to escape. The bigger truth was that Blake wanted to live like everyone else. She wanted a life, a partner.

She'd had three significant relationships, the longest had lasted a year. Beth Pace, Cassidy's assistant, had been patient, had known before they got together that being with Blake would be difficult. That was why Blake trusted that what they had would last, but even Beth grew tired of what she termed "being held hostage by fear." The morning Beth left, Blake had followed her as far as the sidewalk outside of her apartment building but could not make her feet move as she watched Beth round the corner and walk out of her life. Blake wondered—hoped—that with some time, she could gain the fortitude to walk into Cassidy's office and win Beth back.

"It's a damn dog!" Blake said aloud. "Go to sleep, chicken shit!"

Chapter 9

Quinn swallowed hard as she watched water wash away the dirt piled up next to the base of the Sutters' home. It was a pier and beam house and sat a few feet above ground, but the space between the ground and floor had been bricked just like Blake had written. Quinn knew the irrational fear was foolish, but she was having a hard time with the thought of crawling into that enclosed space.

Jacob spat on the ground near the rivulets of water coming from beneath the brick. "It's either a crack in the pipe or a bad coupling. My bet's on the coupling."

"Why do you spit? You don't chew tobacco or dip."

Jacob narrowed his eyes as he glanced at Quinn. "Spitting is what a man does when he disapproves of something or if he just wants to."

Quinn spat into the dirt next to his boots.

"That's so not you. Don't do it again, you looked stupid."

Quinn spat on his boots. "So do you. I'll get a hammer and start breaking this wall."

"What?" Jacob grabbed her arm. "We're not breaking anything. Do you know how much that'll cost to replace?"

"That opening on the backside isn't big enough for even you to shimmy through," Quinn argued. "We're gonna have to break something. We might as well do it near the leak."

"You're forgetting they have a trap in the washroom that's close to the leak. We'll go in through there."

Quinn swallowed hard. "Do you really think it's gonna take both of us?"

"No, if you want, you can go down there alone, but it'd be a lot easier with the both of us so someone could hold the light and hand tools. What's wrong with you?"

“Blake used me as a character and described something just like this, and I found a dead body under the house, then the owner stabbed me and locked me down there.”

Jacob stared at her for a moment and grinned. “I don’t think she likes you very much, which is sad because I wanted to be able to say my sister is dating Blake Taylor.”

“I was just a character, a secondary one.” Quinn sneered. “It doesn’t mean anything. That’s what she said. You may worship her, but I don’t.”

“Quinn, get the tool bag and the couplings. Let’s get this done before dark.”

The musty air that came out of the trapdoor was as cool as the air-conditioned house. Quinn watched as Jacob’s feet disappeared. In her mind, she saw so vividly what Blake had written and hoped Blake wasn’t psychic and had predicted her end.

“Would you like something to drink before you go down there?” Mrs. Sutter asked kindly as she stood nearby.

“No, thank you...and you should stay back from the trap... way back.” Quinn gazed up at the silver-haired woman. “If you were to step off in this, you could break a hip. That would be debilitating, maybe even deadly. You should stay way back, maybe in the other room, and don’t carry anything sharp. You could—”

“Dr. Quinn, shut up and get down here,” Jacob yelled.

Mrs. Sutter was gone when Quinn lowered herself into the hole. Quinn knew she’d probably scared the old woman half to death, but she didn’t want to see her wielding a blade when it was time to come back up. She focused on the light slowly inching across the dirt floor and crawled after Jacob.

“This is what Blake feels,” she muttered softly. “She feels this terror all the time. How does she function? How does she ___”

“Are you talking to yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, thank God,” Jacob said with obvious relief. “I thought I was hearing voices. I was about to make that hole in the brick you wanted. Mrs. Sutter ain’t gonna stab you, she can barely hold anything with those tremors she has. Coupling, I was right. Get over here with the bag and that light so we can get this done.”

“I do this for you, you know,” Quinn said with a grunt as she dragged herself and the gear. “I wanted to be a PE teacher. I could be teaching girls to play softball right now, but I’m belly hugging mud for you.”

“You don’t have the patience to be a teacher. The first kid that smarted off at you would get an earful, probably all profane, then you’d be fired and be right back in the mud with me. Hand over the saw, will you?”

“They probably wouldn’t hire me because I’m gay anyway. I’d have to leave Cypress if I had any hopes of employment. Glenda Percy, I’m sure, would launch an all-out campaign to keep me from corrupting the youth. Maybe I should be more like Dawn, kiss a little ass and try to fit in,” Quinn said as she handed him the saw. “If I bowed to Glenda Percy, she’d convince people to pretend that they liked me.”

Quinn closed her eyes when Jacob shined his light her way. “Don’t even joke,” he said seriously and turned the flashlight back toward the pipe. I love Dawn with all my heart, but she gets on my nerves with the hobnobbing. We’re good people, we shouldn’t have to try to fit in anywhere. If the people of this town don’t like us, then screw them. Your ‘kiss my ass’ attitude is one of the things I respect and admire about you. You had that long before anyone found out you were gay. When I was shunned for being a sissy, I just emulated you when what I wanted to do was cry like a girl.”

He put the saw to the pipe, then stopped. “You know, there’s too much trying to be like everyone else going on in this town. Look at Dawn. She has to work because she had to have that Escalade because Debbie Martin got one to shuttle her kids around. Dawn only has two children. She didn’t need

that gas hog. Someone builds a house and soon five or six more spring up around it because everybody else thinks they have to do it, too. Now half of them have been repossessed by the bank. Growing up here was hard, living here as an adult hasn't been easy. Even still, I love this town. It holds all the memories of Dad and Grandma. I just wish people would stop worrying about what everyone else does. It'd be a much happier place."

"You're not a sissy. There aren't many men that would crawl beneath this house. I love you just the way you are. I won't change if you don't."

"Deal. Did you go see Mom yesterday?"

"No," Quinn said as she shined her light on where Jacob was working. "I was busy with Blake. I'll have Dawn take her laundry when she goes tomorrow."

"You know that ain't gonna happen. I'll do it." Jacob stopped sawing and stared at the pipe for a moment. "I'm mad at her for the way she treats you, but I know she won't be here long, and it makes me feel guilty. I try to talk to her about it, but she just shuts me down."

"I appreciate that, but don't go to the trouble. Enjoy your time with her."

"That's hard to do." He began sawing again. "I don't think she's going to be like Dad. She'll go to her grave with her jaw set where you're concerned." Jacob grunted and rolled when the bit of water they could not purge spilled from the pipe. The front of his coveralls were saturated with mud.

Quinn was glad his focus was on the job, and he couldn't see her clearly because she'd teared up. She'd never been as close to her mother as Dawn was, but they'd always gotten along, and Quinn loved her. The few conversations they did have about her sexuality were brief. Nelda cut her off every time Quinn explained that she had not chosen to be who she was. Nelda Scott didn't want to hear anything from her daughter unless it was "I made a mistake, I'm straight," and that simply wasn't going to happen.

She bobbed the light as she groped the front of her coveralls when her phone began to ring. “Scott’s— Hey, Blake. Yes, I do like pork chops.”

Jacob groaned. “I’m so jealous.”

“Well, I’ll have to go home and shower first. I’m under a house right now. Do you need me to pick up anything? No, we carry a tool bag, it’s easier to drag around on jobs like this... It’s dark and smelly. Let’s not talk about spiders. Okay, I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“Stare all you want. You try to peck me, and I’ll tear your beak off. I’m not fooled by your pretty red plumage, you’re a killer. No, I won’t pay you off in seeds. You just go away,” Blake talked smack to the bird on the limb outside. “You’re just a bird, I’m a woman...who sounds like an idiot.”

Disgusted with herself, Blake leaned her head against the glass. She’d watched the woman across the street sit out on her porch that afternoon. In her apartment, she’d never really gotten to see anyone sitting outside just for the sake of doing it. Blake wanted the experience, to breathe in fresh air, to feel the breeze that gently moved the branches outside her window. For the last half hour, her hand had been on the door handle, but she could not give it a turn.

“I’m just gonna go out there and pick up the stuff I dropped. The bird won’t even notice. Slowly, she opened the door and pushed the screened one just enough to be able to reach the box of nails. The retrieval was a success and emboldened her to go for the pillow. Soon the items were all gone, and Blake felt brave enough to stand behind the screen door. The bird had left.

“I can sit on that swing,” she said haughtily, “if I wanted to, and I kinda do.” Quinn would be proud to see me out there, she thought as she edged the door open again.

Blake felt daring. She gave the door a push and walked slowly across the porch, hands stretched out in front of her in case she needed to defend herself. And then she sat. The

afternoon breeze lifted her hair and cooled her neck. In the distance, she could hear the burr of a lawn mower. She scanned the tree limbs for birds and didn't find any, though she could hear an occasional chirp.

“Okay, this was nice, and now I'm done,” she said as she raced back inside the house.

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Chapter 10

Quinn raised her hand to knock, and the door opened. Blake was all smiles. "I went out on the porch today."

"Well, all right." Quinn held out her fist, and Blake bumped it. "I have something for you," she said, keeping one hand behind her back as she stepped in. "It's not alive, so don't freak out when I show it to you, okay?"

Blake took a step back. "O...okay."

"It was my grandmother's, and she used it all the time," Quinn said as she produced a plastic owl.

"I was expecting it to be an afghan...but this is...cool. What exactly did she use that for?"

Quinn patted the owl on the head. "She used to put Hootie here on a post next to her garden to keep the birds from getting her blueberries. As I'm sure you know, owls are predators, so other birds are kind of scared of them. I was thinking you could put him on your porch railing, and that might keep the birds away," she said as she held it out to Blake.

Blake took it and held it reverently. "What a thoughtful gift. I can't express how much I appreciate this."

Quinn was pleased to be the cause of Blake's beaming smile. "I figured it was the least I could do since you cooked dinner."

"It's ready." Blake set the owl on the table by the door. "I realized earlier that I left the rest of my sandwich in your truck yesterday," she said as she hurried into the kitchen.

Quinn followed. "I ate it for dinner last night. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Of course, I'm glad it didn't go to waste." Blake spooned some rice onto a plate, then added a couple of boneless pork chops that had been cooked in some sort of sauce with bell pepper and onion. She added a spoon of green beans and

topped it off with a roll. “This is yours,” she said as she picked up another plate and only added a dash of each item to it.

“That’s your plate?” Quinn asked with a brow raised.

“I nibble, remember? What can I get you to drink?”

“Water, I didn’t drink enough today.” Quinn took Blake’s plate along with hers to the table. “Did you write any when you woke up?”

“Yes, I got to about thirty thousand words on the story that you read a bit of, then deleted it.”

Quinn stared at Blake’s back as she put ice into their glasses. “Why did you do that?”

“I wasn’t feeling it, and if I don’t feel it, it’ll suck.”

“Were any of the characters talking to you?”

Blake shook her head as she filled the glasses with water.

“If you hadn’t killed me, I would’ve talked to you.” Quinn took a seat and waited for Blake to join her.

“What would you say?” Blake asked with a half smile as she set the waters down and took a seat.

“I’d say don’t send my ass under that house, I’m gonna die. You’ll laugh when I tell you what happened to me today. Jacob and I had to fix a leak beneath a house just like you described. He freaked when I told him I just wanted to break the bricks out of the wall. I did *not* want to have to go through a trap, but I did after I scared away the old lady who owned the house. That’s where I was when you called.”

Blake shuddered. “I couldn’t do that. If I could get past the fear of spiders and snakes, my mind would conjure up all sorts of frightening scenarios.”

“Yeah, you had me worrying about dead bodies.” Quinn took a bite of the rice and pork chop. “This is outstanding.”

“Thank you. My mom used to make it for us. It’s nice to have someone to eat with.”

“You should come with me to my brother’s for dinner sometime. His wife, Tonya, is an excellent cook.” Quinn watched Blake closely to gauge her reaction to the suggestion.

“After I feel more settled in, I may take you up on that offer,” she said with a shrug. Blake smiled and met Quinn’s gaze. “Will that be another lesson? Do they have a big dog or a bird? Do you for that matter?”

“Not at my house. I do share my dad’s dog with Jacob, but he has custody of Jack. He’s a chocolate Lab, very sweet. Jacob swears a part of our dad’s soul is in that dog. He makes me stare into Jack’s eyes every time I go over there.”

Blake took a sip of her water before asking, “And what do you see?”

“I don’t see anything, only dog eyes, but I hear a gruff voice in my head saying, ‘Give me your hamburger.’” Quinn grinned when Blake laughed. “Do you believe in the stuff you write? Like ghosts and stuff?”

“I tell myself I don’t, that it’s all a fairy tale. Writing it takes the scariness out of it for me because I have the control. I’m *making* it frightening, and oddly, it doesn’t creep me out. When I write about my nightmares, seeing it on the computer screen takes the fear out. Sometimes, I wonder why people find the horror in it at all.” Blake shook her head. “I guess they don’t know what’s going to happen on the next page, but I do.”

“That makes sense, I suppose.” Quinn looked down at her plate and realized that she’d gone through the meal like a buzz saw. “Dinner was fantastic, thank you.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

After they’d cleaned the kitchen, Blake began making a pot of coffee, and Quinn went to the kitchen window where she stared out at the backyard. Leaves had begun to fall from the pecan trees, even though they’d not had a frost. Quinn loved the fall and looked forward to not having to contend with the

stifling heat, but she hated the winter. Being a plumber wasn't usually pleasant, but it was downright miserable in the cold.

Chuck came prancing through the yard sniffing around the roots of the trees and marking his territory. "Is this your coyote?" Quinn asked.

Blake joined her at the window. "Yes."

Quinn laid a hand on her shoulder and felt Blake jump from the unexpected touch. "He's a very sweet dog, and he's your next challenge."

"What?" Blake backed up a step.

Quinn grabbed her hand and held it firmly. "I swear, I won't let anything bad happen to you. Today, when I was under that house and I was thoroughly creeped out, I understood what you must feel all the time. I don't want you to live like that, no one should. Trust me, Blake. Let me help."

Blake stared past Quinn through the window. "What do I have to do?"

Quinn released her. "I'm gonna go outside and pet Chuck. Come out when you feel comfortable, and I want you to pet him."

Blake licked her lips as she continued to watch the dog. "Do you know if he's ever bitten anyone?"

"Never, the Comeaux's have had him since he was a puppy, and their grandchildren lay all over him. Just watch me, okay?"

Blake didn't meet her gaze but nodded.

Quinn stepped out onto the porch. Chuck's tail began wagging furiously when he saw her. She took a seat on one of the steps, and the dog came bounding over. "Hey, buddy, it's been a while," she said as she scratched him behind the ears and on his chest. She looked back at Blake, who was peeking around the doorframe and smiled. Chuck sat down as he basked in the attention. His tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth, and he grunted softly as Quinn scratched all his favorite spots.

“Tell me why you’re afraid of dogs,” Quinn said.

“My mom was. She always said you never know when one is going to bite. That’s why we never had one, and she’d call Dani inside if a dog came near where she was playing.” In her mind, Blake could hear the sound of the air horn whenever her mother spotted a dog headed toward their yard. Rhonda kept the can close at hand and would make it blare to run off what she was certain would eat Dani. The sound of it and her mother’s frantic screaming would leave Blake shaken for hours after a close encounter and probably everyone else in the neighborhood.

“I won’t mislead you, some dogs do bite. It’s not wise to pet one you don’t know, but I held Chuck here in my arms when he was a pup. He’s a gentle giant. He likes to chase the squirrels, but he’s never caught any of them, though I’m sure he could. Come on out here.”

“He’s really big. Shouldn’t I practice on a small breed first...maybe even a stuffed one?”

“Chuck is perfect. Aren’t you, boy?” Quinn asked with a smile as she rubbed vigorously the sweet spot on his chest. Her smile grew broader when she heard the floorboards on the porch squeak and the screen door softly close. “I’m so proud of you, Blake, you’re so... Put the skillet down,” she said when she looked over her shoulder. “You’re gonna make him think you have food, and he’s going to get really excited.” Chuck twitched when it thudded on the porch. “You can kneel down right behind me if you’re not comfortable sitting yet.”

“You didn’t say anything about sitting. That will put me eye level with it.” Blake’s hand shook slightly as it came to rest on Quinn’s shoulder.

“Just reach over and scratch him by the ears, he likes that.”

“I...don’t think I can.”

“Don’t think, just do. Pet him,” Quinn said firmly and smiled at Chuck whose expression seemed to say, *Are you sure she should touch me?* “She’s okay, boy, just a little afraid.”

“A lot, big-time afraid,” Blake said from behind her.

“Think of it like this, once you’ve petted him, you will have crossed another hurdle. You will loosen another brick in your wall if not knocked it out altogether.”

Blake’s other hand came into view as it moved toward the dog. Chuck’s jaw snapped shut as he watched Blake reach for him, then he began happily panting again when Blake’s hand lightly touched the top of his head.

“His fur is kind of soft.”

“Yeah, he’s an old fluff ball,” Quinn said in a silly voice. “Feel his ears.”

Blake began to scratch like she’d seen Quinn do. Chuck ducked his head a little to give her more reach.

“Now sit down. I’ll hold him.” Quinn wrapped her arms around Chuck’s shoulders and began scratching his back. To her surprise, Blake slowly moved over and sat beside her. Awkwardly, Blake petted the tufts of fur behind his head. Blake withdrew her hand quickly when Chuck turned suddenly and licked her wrist. “You just got a kiss, he likes you.”

“I...don’t have to kiss him back, do I?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it. He licks his butt a lot.”

Blake grimaced. “I could’ve gone the rest of my life without hearing that.”

“Watch this, he’s so funny,” Quinn said as she let go of Chuck. “Stand up, boy.” She nudged him to turn around and Chuck did. Quinn rubbed his right hip and he leaned his butt into her touch. Then she scratched the left side, and he did the same thing. “You do it.” Quinn took her hand, and together, they rubbed his right hip. Chuck leaned into it again, then shifted when they switched to the left.

“His fur is so thick,” Blake said with a slight smile.

“He’s your friend now. He’ll run off the squirrels and bark at anyone who comes in this yard.” Quinn realized her mistake when Blake’s eyes grew huge. “Like I said, we don’t have

very much crime, but don't you feel more secure knowing that Chuck's on patrol?"

"I think I do," Blake said with a wavering smile.

"You did it." Quinn grinned from ear to ear. "You petted a dog. That's a whole brick in my opinion. I'm very proud of you."

Blake continued to scratch Chuck's hips even when Quinn stopped making his butt go from side to side. "Thanks for doing this with me."

Quinn continued to stare at her. "It takes a lot of fortitude to confront a fear. I think you're a lot braver than you give yourself credit for. I can't wait to see what you're gonna do next."

Blake's eyes grew wide again. "One day at a time, Quinn."

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Chapter 11

Chuck curled up in a ball on the back porch when Blake closed and locked the back door. After the experience and what Quinn said, she decided that she liked him there. Her heart sank when Quinn said it was time for her to leave. Blake wanted to beg her to stay. She was getting used to Quinn's strength, and her nerves were calmer when Quinn was around.

"You must be tired after a busy day," Blake said, trying to keep disappointment out of her tone.

"I am," Quinn said with a yawn, "and I don't want to keep you from writing." Her green eyes seemed particularly brilliant as she gazed at Blake. "I'll get off work tomorrow night around five. I could pick you up and you could come to my place for dinner. I'm not much of a cook, but I can order pizza. I wouldn't keep you long because I know this is when you work, but it might be nice to be in another environment for a little while, don't you think?"

"Okay," Blake said with a nod. "I could do that." She jumped when Quinn patted her on the shoulder.

"Good, I'll pick you up after work then."

Quinn seemed surprised when Blake walked her out and stood on the porch as she descended the steps. "You've come a long way in a short time, girl."

"Yeah, I'm practically feral," Blake said with a laugh. "Good night."

"Night," Quinn said with a wave as she walked toward her truck.

Blake went back inside and watched from the window as Quinn drove away. A sliver of daylight was slowly fading, and she went about her routine switching on every light in the house. She nearly jumped out of her skin when her cell phone began to ring and vibrate where it lay on her desk. Blake picked it up and stared at the ID, her mother was calling. She set it back down with a sigh.

“I love you, and I miss you, but I can’t take your call right now,” she said as she stared at it.

Blake knew either her father was out, or her mother had found a place to hide and make the call. Though Blake wanted the comfort of her mother’s voice, she knew talking to her would set her back a few paces. Rhonda would ask what she’d been doing, and Blake, still on a high from petting Chuck, would admit that, and her mother unintentionally would help her replace her victory with fear.

After the intervention, Dr. Kieslowski had agreed with what Dani had to say. Part of Blake’s issues had a lot to do with her mother. He’d explained their relationship was unhealthy, like that of an addict and their codependent partner. It hurt to hear that Rhonda probably unknowingly helped to hold Blake back. The doctor said that for whatever reason Rhonda needed Blake to be totally dependent on her, and that was why Blake knew she could not answer that phone.

It would’ve been easy to blame her mother for being so screwed up, but Blake also understood that she had to take some responsibility for being like she was. At a young age, she’d made excuses for not wanting to face her biggest fear, and that was simply trying to fit in with the strangers who they’d been subjected to with each move. It was too hard to make friends and even more difficult to say goodbye when her father was transferred to another place. In truth, Blake didn’t want to have anything to do with Quinn the day she showed up but knew she had to.

She sank down onto the sofa and hugged a pillow to her chest. It was a tad easier knowing that Quinn was being paid to be there, and Blake didn’t have to try to be likable. But with every moment they spent together, Blake found she wanted more. Quinn pushed, sometimes none to gently, and with every parting, Blake felt stronger for it. With Quinn’s help, maybe by the spring, Blake hoped she might be able to find the courage to board a plane alone and walk back into the city where she belonged on her own two feet, unafraid, with a manuscript ready to be presented to Cassidy.

Blake hugged the pillow a little tighter, and it was then she realized it had bird shit on it. It was the one she'd brought in from outside. She tossed it away disgustedly. "Winged bastards," she said as she got up.

After she'd stuffed the pillow into the washing machine and switched it on, she returned to the living room and sat at her desk. Quinn was on her mind, and Blake began to write.

I didn't want to like her. I could see distaste in the depths of her green eyes the day she barged into my home and stared at me. She was everything I wasn't—tall, confident, brave—and I wanted to be out of her presence as quickly as I could, so I offered her a drink, hoping she'd decline, but she didn't. Her inquisitive gaze seemed to slice right through me. I felt she could read everything that was going on in my mind. With a smug grin, she sat on my sofa, her expression conveying that she fully expected to break me down and examine every little fragile piece.

Blake stared at the screen and could clearly hear Quinn's voice in her head. *Don't kill me, okay?* She smiled as her fingers reached for the keys. A character was talking, and she was determined to listen.

"I may maim you a little, Quinn, I hope you don't mind," Blake said as she began to type quickly.

Robert Plant's song "Big Log" played as Quinn sat in her favorite chair and stared out at the cars as they passed in front of her house. She'd never bothered to understand the lyrics. The music and the guitars were what she loved. The title made no sense to her at all, but that was how she felt, like a big log just lying in the path of everyone's lives as they swerved to avoid her.

Her mother's things lay neatly cleaned and folded in a basket on a chair nearby. She'd forgotten to call Dawn to remind her to pick them up, and Dawn, as usual, had forgotten to come by. Jacob had said he would take them but had also forgotten. They were busy. Dawn had Buddy and the kids to

keep her occupied, Jacob had Tonya, and all Quinn had was a handful of memories.

Shay Malone had no clue what she'd done. She'd whisked Quinn off her feet and carried her far away, only to drop her for someone else. They'd met in a bar not long after Quinn had been outed by Glenda Percy and Quinn's mother had morphed into someone she didn't recognize. Shay provided the escape not long after they'd begun dating, and Quinn took it. Quinn had known other women, but Shay was the one who'd completely captured her heart. In hindsight, Quinn realized that she should've noticed the flash of discomfort in Shay's eyes when she'd first admitted that she'd fallen in love. Quinn should've also taken note of the reticence in Shay when she told her that she wanted to go to Boston with her. Whatever the reason, Shay agreed.

I never loved you, and I never will. Quinn closed her eyes and leaned her head against the chair when Shay's words swept through her mind like a storm. It had hurt then, and it still caused her chest to ache to hear them replayed in her mind even after the years that had passed. Devastated, Quinn had packed her things and returned home where her mother was even less excited to see her and most people in town behaved the same.

Quinn and Jacob had always been close, but when she returned, their relationship became airtight. Pride made Quinn tell anyone else that the reason she came home was that she hated Boston. To Jacob, she'd told the truth, and he'd wept with her when she released her pain. But she still felt detached in the place she grew up. She had always been the oddball. First too tall, too strong, she intimidated all the boys, then queer, too different.

In some ways, Blake was stronger than she was. Blake, scared of everything, had packed up and moved to conquer the ties that bound her. Quinn was certain that Blake was unaware of how monumental that was. Quinn wanted to do the same but knew she never would.

When Quinn had left Blake's place earlier, she took the road that bordered the property and stopped to watch the

house. She wanted to see if Blake would venture out with her not there, wanted to know if the fear was all an act to gain her sympathies. But as she sat there and watched, all the lights came on. The floodlights around the wood frame place lit it up like a Christmas tree. Scared of the dark, birds, and broccoli, Blake still managed to stay there alone.

Quinn stared at the basket of clothes. If she could help Blake face her fears, maybe she could face a few of her own. Perhaps she could tell her mother how very shitty it was to shut her out for being who she was.

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Chapter 12

Blake awoke on the sofa sometime around eleven in the morning. She'd left her computer around four, absolutely dizzy from exhaustion, and had fallen asleep on the couch. Sleep came the second her head hit the pillow. She was repulsed by the fact that she'd not even brushed her teeth. Her mouth still tasted of the strong tea she'd drunk to keep her going as she got up and staggered into the kitchen where she set the coffee to brew.

Chuck lay on the back porch, his head up. Brown eyes watched her as she stood at the window. "Did you sleep out there all night watching over me?"

Chuck sat up as if to say yes.

"You should be rewarded, but Quinn isn't here to do it. That's not fair, is it?"

Chuck cocked his head at the question.

"A pork chop, you say? That would do it?"

Chuck continued to stare at her, his tail slightly wagging.

"Be right back." Blake went to the fridge and pulled out the leftovers. She made a plate to rival what she'd fixed Quinn the night before, including a roll, then warmed it in the microwave. When she went to the door, Chuck was in the yard sniffing at the base of a tree. She opened it quickly and slid the plate onto the porch. Chuck needed no prompting; he bounded up the steps and began scarfing up the food. From behind the screen, Blake praised him. "You are a great watch coyo— dog. You would never eat me, but you'd eat someone bad if they tried to hurt me...right?"

Chuck's tail was going ninety miles an hour. Blake took that as a yes and went into the bathroom where first she brushed her teeth. Next she switched the water on and climbed into the shower, every so often peeking around the curtain to make sure there was no one sneaking up on her.

She ached from sitting in the chair for most of the night but was relieved to have accomplished half a dozen chapters of what she felt was a decent skeleton that she would flesh out once the manuscript was finished. She'd never written by an outline, though Cassidy suggested it when Blake had hit her slump. The story told itself in her mind, and she was like a voyeur who watched and recorded it all. She never knew the end of her tales until she'd made the last keystroke.

As she bathed, images of the story flashed through her mind, and she mentally recorded each one. She washed fast, eager to get back to her keyboard and paint more of the picture as it formed. Blake had not felt that excitement in a while. She switched off the water, dried, and dressed quickly in a pair of cotton lounge pants and a tank top. With the towel wrapped around her head, she sat at her desk and noticed another missed call on her phone. Blake stared at the last page she'd written as she listened to her messages. The first was from her mom, and she was whispering.

"Hey, baby, I was just calling to check on you. I'll call you back later. Love you...I'm changing my clothes, do you mind?" she hollered before the call ended.

The second was from Cassidy.

"Hey, Blake, I'm calling for an update. Give me a shout when you can."

Blake hit the redial on Cassidy's number. Her breath caught for a second when a familiar voice answered. "Cassidy Spencer's office, this is Beth, how may I help you?"

"Beth, hi, it's Blake."

"Hey, Blake, how are you?"

Beth's voice washed over Blake like a warm summer breeze. She was eager to tell what she'd accomplished. "I'm doing fantastic. I've toured a plantation home, visited a graveyard where the crypts were above ground, and I kind of have a dog. I think he may still be on the porch right now."

Beth was silent for a moment. "That's...wow...great. I'm truly happy for you. Hey, Cassidy just walked back in, let me

send your call to her office before she gets on the phone.”

“Thanks, Beth, it was great talking to you.”

“You too, Blake, just a moment.”

Blake swung happily back and forth in her chair as music played, then Cassidy picked up.

“Blake Taylor, tell me you’re writing something brilliant.”

“I am. I’ve written six chapters already, and the ideas are coming in like tidal waves.”

“That is music to my weary ears. I don’t want to pressure you and squash your momentum, but, honey, you have got to hammer the keys.”

“I know,” Blake said with a nod. “I’ve written an entire novel in two months, I can do it again.”

“You’ve got three, make your magic. How’re things going with...what’s her name? Is she taking care of you?”

“Quinn, and yes. She made me pet a dog last night.”

“Well, hell’s bells, you’ll be climbing Mount Kilimanjaro next,” Cassidy said, sounding truly impressed. “Get off this phone and get back to work.”

“On it,” Blake said with a smile. “Talk to you later.”

Blake ended the call, sighed, and began typing.

At six, Quinn knocked on Blake’s door. It took a few minutes for Blake to answer, but when she did, her hair was wrapped in a towel, and her nipples poked at the fabric of a thin tank top that was nearly see-through. She didn’t appear to be ready to go anywhere.

“Uh...hey, I didn’t realize the time. I was engrossed in the new book I’m writing,” Blake said as she snatched the towel from her head. The hair that fell onto her shoulders was matted and tangled, making her look like Medusa.

Quinn noticed that Hootie was still sitting on the table near the door. She gave his plastic head a pat before asking, “How

long will it take you to get ready?"

Blake looked very uncomfortable. "I'm...on a hot streak, and it's been so long since I've hit one...I was wondering if ___"

"You want to bow out," Quinn said as she noticed the mess that had become Blake's desk. The surface and the floor around it were covered with chip and cookie bags. There were three different coffee cups sitting next to the keyboard. "I should go and let you get back to it."

"It's not that I don't want to, I—"

Quinn held up a hand. "This is what you're here for, I understand. At least take the time to eat something good for you. I see the snack carnage. Warm the leftovers from last night."

"I fed it to Chuck for breakfast," Blake said with a look of triumph. "I'll make a salad in a little while when I get to a stopping point."

Quinn backed out of the door. "You have my number, call me when you need me."

"Thank you," Blake called after her as Quinn walked briskly back to her truck.

When she climbed in, she could see Chuck walking with his back hunched across the backyard. He crapped, then moved to another spot and did it again.

"Aw, Chuck, you never could handle table scraps. I hope you feel better, boy."

Chuck straightened, kicked at the grass, and pranced off.

Quinn drove away disheartened. She'd told herself as she rushed home from the last job and cleaned her house that she was excited about helping Blake over another hurdle. She'd told the neighbor's cat to stick around because there would be treats and pets later. But the truth that she did not want to acknowledge was she was looking forward to spending time with someone new. Someone who would make her existence not seem so bleak.

She looked at the basket of clothes in the backseat that she'd intended to drop at Dawn's and decided to round the evening out with another disappointment.

Quinn understood why nursing homes dubbed themselves with cheery names. As she pulled into the parking lot of Sunny Glen Rest Home, she stared dismally at the utilitarian building beneath tall oaks and pines. She knew when she walked inside, the first thing that would assault her was the smell of disinfectant that did little to mask the odor of human waste and the dying. What bothered her more were the dull eyes of the elderly who stared at her from wheelchairs as she walked in. Quinn gathered her mother's things, strode across the parking lot, and put on her best smile as she punched a button, and moments later, the doors slid open.

"Hey, hey hey," a white-headed woman who moved with the aid of a walker said and blocked Quinn's path.

"Hi, Mrs. Beauchaine. How're you this evening?"

"Did you know that we all once had tails and they fell off because of revolution? Bill O'Reilly says that's not true, but that bitch is crazy, and she's the ugliest woman I've ever seen. Her momma musta knew that she was gonna be ugly and gave her a man's name. Kendra Watson's tail fell off today. I looked in her room when they were putting medicine on her butt, and I saw the hole it made when it dropped off. Did you get married yet?"

"No, ma'am," Quinn said, trying to control her laughter.

"You ain't gonna find no man in here, you came at the wrong time. You should come around lunch when the visitors come."

"I'll try to remember that."

Mrs. Beauchaine turned her butt to Quinn. "Do you see a nub back there? The nurse says there ain't one, but I don't believe her."

Quinn made a show of looking closely. "No, ma'am, your tail must've fallen off when you were born."

"Turn around, let me check you."

Quinn did as she was asked, then gasped when Mrs. Beauchaine grabbed a handful of her butt.

“Yours is gone, too.”

Quinn spun around and looked at the nurse’s station. She could see the aides and the nurses laughing hysterically. “Thanks for checking. I need to go see my mother. It was good to see you,” she said as she walked off.

The TV was blaring when Quinn knocked on the open door of her mother’s room. Nelda looked tiny in her bed. Her eyes were dark beneath, and the nasal cannula seemed to make an indentation where the tubes lay on her face. Congestive heart failure made it difficult for her to breathe. Nelda had made the decision to move into the nursing home when she could no longer care for herself, refusing Dawn’s offer to live with her. It’d been a good decision because no one in the family could tend to her round-the-clock needs.

“Dawn didn’t come by today, where is she?” Nelda asked by way of greeting.

“I have no idea. I imagine she was busy with the kids or work.” Quinn put her mother’s underwear and socks in one drawer and the nightgowns in another. That was the most Nelda wore as of late. Next, Quinn went into the bathroom and put away the clean towels and emptied the dirty clothes hamper into the basket.

“That bathroom needs cleaning. They never do a good job,” Nelda called out with a rasp.

Quinn unfortunately agreed and put on a pair of rubber gloves. Instead of complaining to anyone, she sprayed everything down with disinfectant and wiped it clean with one of the oldest washcloths, then tossed it into the trash along with the gloves. She spent a long time washing her hands to rid herself of whatever germs there were and to cut into the time she’d spend with her mother.

“I need some more protein shakes,” Nelda said when Quinn emerged from the bathroom. “They don’t serve the kind I like.”

Quinn grabbed a notebook and sat down. “Noted. What else do you want?”

“A puzzle book, nail files, shampoo.”

Nelda recited a list of things she already had plenty of. Quinn made the notations anyway because otherwise they’d sit in silence and stare at the TV. Her mother wouldn’t ask Quinn what she’d been doing. She didn’t want to know.

“I hate this,” Quinn said as her mother prattled on.

“What did you say?” Nelda asked sharply.

“I said I hate this pen, it never writes well,” Quinn lied.

Like Blake, Quinn had built a wall of her own. It was just one, but the bricks were solid and packed tightly with the fear of confronting her mother. Deep down, Quinn felt if she could show a little backbone, her mother’s temper would flare, but they’d say what needed to be said. But every time Quinn felt it welling in her chest, one look at her mother in her weakened condition would steal her steam. More frightening was Nelda might dispel the hope that Quinn had that deep down her mother still loved her.

“All right, I have your list and your dirty laundry. Is there anything else you need before I go?”

Nelda continued to stare at the TV. “Can’t think of anything.”

“Call me if you do,” Quinn said as she got up and walked out. She immediately put her hands over her breasts as Mr. Wade aka The Titty Twister shuffled down the hall toward her. He was known for boob grabs and pretended not to know any better. “Don’t make me whip your ass tonight, old man.”

Mr. Wade passed without a reach, and Quinn heard him chuckle.

Chapter 13

“So when am I gonna meet Blake Taylor?” Jacob asked as he sat in front of Quinn’s desk.

Quinn shrugged as she thumbed through a magazine. “I haven’t talked to her much the last few weeks. I’ve only gone by every so often to drop off milk and a few other things she’s needed.” Blake had invited her in every time, but Quinn had refused, still a bit peeved that Blake had stood her up for dinner.

“Well, call her.”

“She’s writing. I’m not going to disturb her.”

“Do you remember Carl Flemming?”

Quinn looked at Jacob and furrowed her brow. “He was the computer genius you used to hang out with, right?”

Jacob smiled. “It was nice of you not to call him a geek. I saw him a few months ago when he came back into town to visit his folks. He’s living in New Orleans now, and he has a very interesting hobby, paranormal research. Carl and a few guys go into places that are supposedly haunted with all kinds of electronic equipment and find out the truth. He said that most of the time, the hauntings can be disproved, but in a few instances, they’ve seen some crazy shit.”

He nudged the desk phone closer to Quinn. “You should call Blake. I bet she’d jump at the chance to hunt a few ghosts. Your favorite brother and his wife could go along, too.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure Blake would be all over that,” Quinn said with a smirk.

“Why are you laughing? You think it’s stupid, don’t you?”

“No.” Quinn stared at him for a moment. “Jacob, I’d like you to meet Blake because I know you really want to, but there’s something you need to know about her first.”

“Okay,” he said, seemingly bewildered by her tone.

“This has to remain between us, not even Tonya can know right now.”

Jacob nodded emphatically and put a hand to his chest. “You have my word as your brother.”

“Blake is...” Quinn licked her lips. “She’s terrified of just about everything. She’s got some phobias, and that’s one of the reasons she’s here. She’s trying to work through them. That’s why I haven’t already introduced you to her.”

“Quinn, I screamed like a bitch when I watched her movies. There are nights that Tonya has wanted to sleep with the closet light on because Blake’s books scared the crap out of her. So you’re just gonna have to come up with a better excuse to cover up the fact that there’s something going on between you two, and for whatever reason, you don’t want me to know.” Jacob pointed at her. “You’re not funny.”

“There is nothing going on with us, and I swear to you as your sister, that’s the honest truth. I invited her to my house, and she wouldn’t come. I took her to Oak Alley, and she nearly ripped my boobs off trying to get away from a squirrel. She thought Chuck was a coyote and thinks the birds outside her house want to peck her to death. She’s the most neurotic person I’ve ever met.”

Jacob snorted. “Asshole.” When Quinn didn’t laugh, the grin slid off his face. “You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

“You’ve totally ruined my vision of the mistress of darkness. I was looking forward to being afraid of her,” Jacob said sadly.

Quinn patted his arm. “You’re just gonna have to go back to having Batman as your hero.”

Jacob jutted his chin. “He was never my hero. I just liked his suit.”

“Quinn, where are you? Please, talk to me,” Blake pleaded, but no matter how much she begged, Quinn refused. “Why

now? It was going so good.” Blake stared hopelessly at her computer screen. She’d written, then deleted words by the thousands as she waited for Quinn the character to speak up.

Even Chuck had left her. Blake wasn’t sure if it was the spicy sausage or the salad she’d put out earlier that had gone uneaten. She was pretty certain that dogs didn’t care for lettuce, but she thought Chuck might make an exception because of the bacon ranch dressing. She’d even been daring enough to reach a hand out and scratch his head when he came near the door and mistook a burp for a growl. She shrieked before she caught herself. Chuck ran off with his tail between his legs, leaving a smelly vaporous cloud behind him. Blake thought he’d come back for another snack, but she’d not seen him for a day.

She’d not seen the real Quinn much for weeks, and perhaps that was the problem. Blake needed fresh inspiration from her muse. She felt slightly guilty as she stared at Quinn’s number on her phone. She did enjoy Quinn’s company, but what she wanted at the moment was to study her in hopes that it would trigger the character Quinn to start talking again. Blake pressed a button. Quinn answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Blake.”

“Hey...what’re you doing?”

“It’s a slow day, and right now, I’m shooting my brother with rubber bands.”

A high-pitched squeal prompted Blake to pull the phone away from her ear. “I bet he sings tenor.”

Quinn laughed. “You heard that high C, right?”

“I think people in Alaska heard it. Are you busy tonight?”

“No, you need something?”

“Pizza. I was wondering if I could cash in my rain check with you.”

“I don’t see why not. I’m gonna leave early today if we don’t get anything else. That would put me on your front porch at a little after four.”

Blake glanced at the clock. "I'll be ready this time."

"Okay, great, see you then. Bye."

"Bye." Blake ended the call, jumped out of her chair, and made a mad dash for the shower. Her legs were hairy, but she didn't have time to shave. She did it anyway, disgusted that she'd only taken the time to bathe each day before racing back to her computer. Fast meant sloppy and reckless. She nicked herself twice on the knee. She shaved her armpits without looking, afraid they looked like a beard on a pubescent boy.

Blake sprang out of the shower like a jackrabbit and dried herself as she ran down the hall, leaving a wet trail behind her. She had to towel off again just to be able to put on her underwear and jeans. "Not black, nothing black," she said as she rifled through the dresser until she found a light gray T-shirt. When she'd finished dressing, she charged back into the bathroom and frowned at her hair. It grew fast, and the brown roots were really beginning to show against the black. "Ball cap." Blake ran back down the hall and grabbed a blue one.

Her hair was still wet as she peered out the window of the front door. She breathed a sigh of relief that Quinn was not already sitting there as she turned and came face to beak with the plastic owl. "Oh, shit. She's gonna think I didn't appreciate this." Blake grabbed the owl, threw open the front door, and held Hootie out in front of her like a shield as she walked over to the railing and set him down. "Look and listen, fowl. This is Hootie, and if you come anywhere near my porch, he'll kick your ass. Be warned, winged demons."

Quinn drove up before Blake could go back inside, so she threw a hand up on a post, hoping to look as though she was relaxed. But a bird landed on a nearby branch, and Blake's legs began to feel wobbly. "Do your thing, Hootie," she whispered.

"Look at you, hanging out with the owl," Quinn said with pride as she hopped out of her truck. "Have you... Damn, there's more dog shit out here than grass."

"I've been meaning to talk to Chuck about that. He's kind of rude in that regard."

Quinn fanned the air in front of her face as she stared at the side yard. “Have you been feeding him?”

“Yes, he eats everything I give him, except the salad. He didn’t appear to be too fond of that.”

Quinn opened the gate and walked up to the porch. Her voice was low when she said, “The Comeaux’s feed him really expensive dog food. I imagine they’d be upset to know that he’s been eating a buffet over here. If you want to give him treats, then we’ll pick up some dog biscuits.”

“Oh, okay,” Blake said just as softly.

“You ready to go?”

“Yeah, sure, just let me get my bag.” Blake reached inside the door and grabbed the pack she carried with her camera and her keys. Eager to be in the safety of the truck, she locked the door and quickly walked through the yard, but at least she did not put the pack on her head and run screaming.

“You really have more choices than pizza,” Quinn said when Blake climbed in. “We have Chinese, Mexican, and there’s a seafood place that has the best fried shrimp you’ll ever put in your mouth. All I have to do is call and we can pick it up. Unless, of course, you’d like to eat out.”

“I think I’d like to see your place, and the shrimp sounds great.”

“As you wish,” Quinn said with a nod as she pulled out her phone. “The plates come with fries, hush puppies, and coleslaw. Is that good with you?”

“Yes, make mine a kids plate, please.”

“We could share one,” Quinn offered.

“Fine with me.”

Quinn called in the order, then backed out of the driveway. “We’ll take the long way around and give Freddie’s some time to fry the shrimp.”

“One thing I noticed the other day was that there are a lot of houses built in the old style, but they look new, and in between

a few of them, there are overgrown vacant lots. What happened there? Was it a fire?"

"No, Hurricane Katrina did a lot of damage here. Storm surge forced the bayou into the town, and what the flood didn't ruin, the winds took care of." Quinn turned onto a street and slowed. She pointed at an old home. "The wind blew the second story out of that place. A tree fell into the one next to it. This street used to be completely shaded. There were old oaks on both sides, but we lost a lot of them when they blew over. That's why the sidewalks are new here. When they toppled, the roots left gaping holes in the ground and pulled up the cement."

Blake tried to envision what that must've looked like. "Did you stay here during that storm?"

"At first, we decided to ride it out, but when we saw how massive and strong it was, we packed up what we considered valuable and caravanned to Baton Rouge. A two-hour trip took us six because of the mass exodus. I kept telling myself that she was gonna turn like they always seemed to do and miss us. But when it hit and we started hearing how devastated St. Bernard Parish was, my heart sank. When we were finally allowed to come back almost a month later, I cried when I saw it. We all did."

Blake looked at Quinn. "Were your homes...gone?"

Quinn sighed and was quiet for a moment. "Grandma's was. She'd been gone a long time and Dad had sold the place, but it was always there reminding us of her. It looked like matchsticks. Dawn's house was destroyed, too. She and her family lived in an old place like the ones here on this street close to the bayou. She said she had her family and her pictures and that was all that mattered, but she went through a depression for a long time." Quinn turned onto another street.

"Mom and Dad's house fared well. They built it about twenty years ago farther out of town because Dad wanted land. It had some roof damage but held together okay. Jacob and his wife live there now. My house is the one we grew up in. A tree came down on it and demolished the add-on we use for an

office. Jacob and I just had it rebuilt a couple of years ago. It was nice to get the desks out of my spare bedroom.”

“Where did you live when everything was being repaired?”

“Dawn and her family moved in with my parents. Jacob and Tonya lived in a garage apartment that was miraculously untouched, so I stayed with them while my house was being repaired. When we first came back, we had to drive an hour away to buy groceries because everything here was in a shambles. We rode around with gas cans in our trucks to refuel because the gas stations were also damaged. Power wasn’t restored for like a month, so we spent a fortune running generators.”

Blake stared at her for a moment. “I hope this question doesn’t sound callous, but why would you want to come back knowing that could happen again?”

“This is home,” Quinn said with a shrug. “It’s one thing to choose to leave, but it’s another to be forced out. You know how that feels, don’t you?”

Blake looked away. “Yes, I suppose I do.”

Quinn pulled into a parking lot next to a shack on the water. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get the food,” Quinn said as she climbed out.

Blake pointed to what looked like a hut. “In there?” she asked, appalled.

“Don’t let the exterior fool you, it’s a nice place inside. They get their shrimp from the boats that come right up that bayou. You can’t ask for fresher seafood.” Quinn closed the door with a laugh.

“I beg to differ,” Blake said. “It might be fresh when it gets here, but God only knows what they cook it in.”

She watched as a boat moved slowly up the bayou, long metal arms raised on its deck. The setting sun in the west cast a soft warm glow over the town. Blake liked the light and pulled out her camera. She snapped one picture after another,

then lowered it. An old man and woman sat on the dock fishing. Blake smiled as the woman picked up the man's beer and poured it out as he slept in his chair.

"I think I could live like this." But as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she thought about Beth. Aside from her, there were many reasons to return to New York, but they were growing hazy with each passing day.

Quinn reappeared carrying a brown paper bag. The smell of the food filled the truck when she climbed in, and Blake's stomach growled. "What did you do during Hurricane Sandy?" Quinn asked as she put on her seat belt.

"I got the hell out. My parents and I stayed with my sister and her family. Even after we returned, I saw most of the damage on TV like everyone else." Blake looked out of the window and mumbled. "I've never ridden on the subway."

"Really? I thought that was a rite of passage for a New Yorker."

"Well, I'm not a real one. I travel by car when I have to." Blake sighed. "One day, I will. One day, I will walk down the street like everyone else with my head held high and pepper spray in my pocket."

"That's the spirit," Quinn said with a laugh.

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Chapter 14

It was a simple wood-framed house. There was a stump next to the driveway, and Blake assumed the tree that had fallen into the place had once stood there. Patches of grass grew where the boughs of a huge tree in the front yard allowed light, and where they didn't, bright green moss covered the ground. On the front porch was a pair of old white metal chairs. At the end of the driveway was a building with French doors, and the sign above them read, *Scott's Plumbing*. Quinn parked close to the side door of the house covered by a small metal awning that sheltered three cement steps.

"Give me a second, and I'll unlock the door. You can run right in."

Blake refused to allow panic to rule her. She was certain there were plenty of birds in the trees around Quinn's place, but she wanted Quinn to be proud of her. She opened the door to the truck and stepped out. Instead of running, she took a deep breath, looked around, then walked over to where Quinn stood on the steps watching her.

"I'm impressed," Quinn said with a smile. She opened the door and held it for Blake. "Welcome, brave lady."

Blake stepped into the kitchen and felt like she'd been transported to the late fifties, maybe early sixties. The white Formica on the cabinets was yellowed with age and had what used to be gold flecks. The edges were framed in silver metal. A kitchen table with the same type of surface sat in the middle of the room and was surrounded by simple chairs with red plastic cushions.

"As you can see, I haven't remodeled or modernized much. Dawn and Jacob don't want me to. They say it's like a museum where they can visit their past," Quinn said with a sigh. "The only things I've done were tearing out the carpet and refinishing the wood floors. I've painted, too."

"I like it," Blake said. "The kitchen flooring also looks new."

“Oh, yeah, that was a must do. The linoleum was gouged in places, so Jacob helped me tile it.” Quinn set the food on the table as Blake ran her fingers over the old porcelain sink.

“They don’t make them this deep anymore.”

“No,” Quinn said with a smile. “All three of us were bathed in that sink when we were babies. Jacob has the pictures. Do you want to see the rest of the house or eat first?”

Blake walked into the den. “The house.”

The furniture was modern, a couch and loveseat formed an L along one wall. A TV was on the other, and there were two chairs in front of the windows that looked out over the front yard. The walls like the one in the kitchen were stark white; the floors contrasted with their dark wood and colorful rugs. On a bookshelf was a framed black-and-white photo. Blake picked it up reverently and smiled at the image.

“How old were you when this was taken?”

Quinn moved in close and stared at it. “Dawn was nine, I was six, and Jacob was four.”

Jacob was crying, probably dismayed at having to sit still between his sisters who both had pigtails in their hair. The girls smiled brightly in their dresses. Quinn was missing two front teeth, and clutched in her small hand was a tiny truck. Blake put the picture back and glanced into the adjoining room through the archway. It was dominated by a long wooden table surrounded by matching chairs. The surface was covered with stacks of papers. In the corner was a china cabinet, which appeared to be empty.

“Don’t look in there,” Quinn said as she steered Blake by the shoulders toward the hallway. “That is all the junk that I need to move to the office and file away.” She flipped on a light in the first room to reveal an old claw-footed tub with a free-standing shower curtain rack surrounding it. The pedestal sink was stained, but the faucet looked new.

“This is all original, isn’t it?”

“The plumbing fixtures aren’t,” Quinn said as she flipped the light back off. “Now you know where the bathroom is. She

turned on the light in another room; there was a full-sized bed and a bed stand, nothing else. “This is my guest room. As you can see, it isn’t very welcoming. I don’t want Dawn getting any ideas when she gets fed up with her husband and kids. She comes sometimes anyway, though.” Quinn crossed the hall and again turned on the light.

Blake stood in the doorway and gazed at the bedroom. Quinn’s queen-sized bed was covered with a light quilt, white with dark and light blue strips. A TV was mounted on the wall opposite the bed, and there was a tall chest of drawers in the corner. It was all very plain but tidy.

“You grew up in a two-bedroom house? Where did you all sleep?” Blake followed Quinn back to the kitchen.

“Dawn, Jacob, and I shared a bedroom until Jacob was around eight, then he started sleeping on the couch. Dad converted the garage then to a bedroom, and he and Mom used that, so Jacob could have his own room. When they built the bigger house, this place became the office.” Quinn opened the fridge. “I have soda, iced tea, and of course, water. What can I get for you?”

“I think I’ll have tea. I should try to blend in with the Southerners. It’s very sweet, isn’t it?”

“There is no other kind,” Quinn said with a laugh. “You can add water if it’s too much.”

“Are you a licensed plumber?” Blake asked as she stared out the kitchen window.

Quinn glanced at her oddly for a second. “I am, so is Jacob.”

“Did you have to go to school for that?”

“We did, and I hated it. The course was heavy in math and building codes, which is mind-numbingly boring. I don’t use a third of what I was taught. I can read blueprints, though.”

“It’s a male-dominated career. Was it hard to fit in with your classmates? Did they resent you being there?”

“It’s not as male as it used to be,” Quinn said as she raked the food onto plates. “There were five women in my class. Several of them went on to be pipe fitters in the industrial sector. They make the big bucks. But Jacob and I knew we were destined to work in the family business because that’s how Dad wanted it. I preferred to be a teacher, but that didn’t pan out.”

“Why?” Blake turned and leaned against the counter.

“Jacob was kind of socially awkward then, and he didn’t want to go to school alone. I figured I’d get my license, work for a while, then go back to school. I’d have to pay for it anyway since Dad would only finance plumbing school. And then, I grew complacent. It was fun to work with my brother.”

“Why did you want to teach?”

Quinn looked at Blake. “Are you just making conversation, or am I being interviewed?”

Blake pursed her lips and shrugged. “Maybe both.”

“I wanted to teach because I struggled in school, especially in math. I’m the type that needs to work something out on my own, and that takes a while. My teachers just expected me to pick it up after they explained the concept. My brain didn’t work that way, and I was always several steps behind. Fortunately for me, my grandmother knew that, and she would work with me because my dad was the same way. I spent many a night at her kitchen table going over math problems. They’re called problems for a reason,” Quinn said with a groan.

Blake smiled. “You’re the type that never reads directions.”

“Exactly, but you do, don’t you?”

“Every last word, sometimes twice before I even attempt to put something together. The difference between us, though, is you probably get it right, and I end up calling someone to do it for me.”

“Well...I do tend to have parts left over. You probably shouldn’t get too close to the bookshelf in the den.” Quinn pulled out a chair. “Sit and relax.”

“So you wanted to teach math?”

“Hell no.” Quinn opened the fridge again and pulled out the ketchup. “Physical education. I wanted to coach softball. I figured I could at least make kids feel good about themselves like my coach did with me.”

“What do you wear when you work?”

Quinn laughed as though she thought the question strange. “Mostly jeans and work shirts, but when we have to crawl under a house, we wear water-resistant coveralls. Tell me about this book you’ve been feverishly working on.”

“I’m a little stymied at the moment...my main character has gone silent.”

Quinn sat and opened up all the dipping sauces. “Male or female?”

Blake found that she didn’t want to tell Quinn about what she was writing, especially since she was using her as a main character. Quinn, who she would rename later, was taking Blake in a direction she’d never gone before. She also rarely wrote in first person. The story felt more personal and bordered on romantic.

“I have a plumber in my story, that’s why I was asking questions.”

“The one I read some of?”

Blake shook her head as she nibbled a shrimp. “This is altogether different... Hot damn, this is spicy. Do you people have to put pepper in everything?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Quinn pointed to one of the sauces. “Dip it in that, it’ll dull the heat. What’s the premise?”

“It’s about a woman who is haunted by things...scary things.”

Quinn chomped on a shrimp, then swallowed. “She’s possessed?”

“No. Well, not in the typical sense.”

As Blake tried to explain, she realized that it was almost autobiographical. Some fears were good and kept most people from doing things that would be deadly, then there were others that served no beneficial purpose other than robbing someone of the joy of living. Blake had used her own name for that character, and she would change that later, too. Quinn's character was a hero of sorts, the ardent friend who stood at Blake's side.

"I might have to read this one. I'm trying to work up the courage to read your other books. Jacob's wife has them all. Tonya is a huge fan of yours."

"I'm flattered," Blake said shyly.

"That has to be a rush, to know that someone *loves* what you do. I'm tickled pink when someone does a happy dance over a new sewer line or faucet," Quinn said. "But to have real fans must be an ego boost."

"It is," Blake agreed with a nod. "When I get fan mail, I feel like the queen of the world, but it's also humbling. When I reread some of my books after they've been published, I get so pissed at myself. There was so much I should've done differently. My mind was so busy tying up every loose end, poring over every finite detail, I missed looking at the bigger picture. My books could be better, every last one of them. I'm never satisfied with the finished product. I've never held one and said this is perfect. But then, people praise me for them, and I wonder why."

"Obviously, they disagree with you. How much of your personality actually goes into what you write?"

"More than I like to admit. My villains or evil entities are everything that makes me uncomfortable, frightened, or angry. In my earlier books, my protagonists, my heroes were pieces of me or what I'd like to be. Lately, it's more of just me, flawed, often irrational, but unlike me, my characters go through an evolution, and in the end, they're better for it."

Quinn swallowed down her last piece of shrimp. "The other day, I went to the nursing home to drop off my mother's laundry, and this old woman met me at the door like she

always does. She made me laugh because she said ‘revolution’ made our tails drop off. She meant evolution, I’m sure. I think you’re changing, Blake, but I wouldn’t call it evolution because that just happens. What’s going on in your life right now is revolution because you are actively fighting for change. I admire you for that.”

Blake hoped she could remember what Quinn had just said exactly the way she worded it because it made an impact on her heart and would fit nicely in her book. “That means a lot to me, thank you.”

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Chapter 15

Quinn tried not to squirm as tension stiffened her neck while she watched the video on her TV. She'd borrowed two DVDs from Jacob, movies that he claimed were the least frightening of Blake's renderings. She strongly disagreed. She thought it'd be easier to watch them with Blake, and she was wrong, even with Blake's commentary.

"I didn't write that, they embellished," she said as one of the characters made a crude joke during a tense scene. "They take a lot of liberties, cut and splice to condense it all down to an hour and forty-five minutes."

"Yeah...I hear that a lot about movies adapted from books. The books are always better." Quinn sounded nonchalant, but she wanted to stand on her couch and scream at Blake, *What the hell is wrong with you? From what part of the underworld did you get your demented imagination?* "But this is good, really good," she said calmly instead. The corner of her mouth quivered as a dark and ominous black figure hovered just inches above the face of a sleeping woman.

"That's mine," Blake said as she pointed to the TV. "I got the idea from a nightmare." She tilted her head to the side. "It doesn't seem quite as scary."

"Is this the first time you've watched this movie?"

"This is the first time I've watched this one. I don't usually watch them for the same reason I don't read my books anymore, I'm not happy. In my book, Selene is dreaming this as it happens, not half awake and humping the covers as the entity seduces her."

"Pfft, yeah, they totally missed that," Quinn said with a wave of her hand. "Do you mind...if we play a video game after this, so I won't have to go to sleep with these images in my brain?"

"This isn't scary, it's stupid," Blake said, shaking her head.

"You're not spooked at all?" Quinn asked incredulously.

“No, I can’t get past the women’s breasts flopping out of their shirts at every turn. It’s frickin’ winter, the guys are in coats and sweaters, and the women are all in what could pass for swimwear. It’s dumb, it’s sexist, and it pisses me off.”

Quinn gladly took that as a signal to hit stop on her remote. “I take it you don’t have any creative control.”

“None, I’m not Stephen King.” Blake sighed. “It’s all about the money. I *have* to make it to keep doing what I do.”

“Have you ever wanted to write in another genre?”

“Sure, I’d like to write comedy or a satire, but that’s not what my publisher or my agent and most importantly my audience wants. They want horror. One doesn’t bite the hand that feeds her.”

Quinn tossed the remote aside. “Hey, do you like to dance?”

Blake stared at her warily. “Um...no.”

Quinn ducked Blake’s flailing arms and laughed. Music blared from the speakers. Blake was transfixed as she watched the screen, and with the Wii nunchuck in her hand, she tried to emulate what she was seeing. She waved her hands back and forth, then stopped and humped the air, then tried to do some sort of scissor motion with her feet. Quinn laughed hysterically.

“You’re killing me,” she wheezed as Blake put her arms up and looked very much like an ape as she twirled in a circle.

“I’ve got more points than you. They must not take into account full body motion,” Blake said as she worked up a sweat and showed no signs of giving up.

“Twerk it, Blake, twerk it.”

“What does that mean? I’ve heard the term, but I have no idea what that is.”

Quinn turned her back, stuck her ass out, and swiveled and bounced her butt at the same time.

“Oh, my God, I can’t do that, it’s nasty, and I’d pull something. Wait—don’t stop. Your butt looks like it has a mind of its own. How do you do that?”

Quinn spun around. “Arch your back.” Blake did, but she looked like she’d thrown something out. “Relax a little and just let your booty bounce.”

“I keep asking myself why I want to do this, and it throws off my rhythm.”

Quinn was laughing so hard she went down on her knees and clutched her stomach. “You look...you look like you’re trying to sit on something hot. Relax.”

“I feel so dirty,” Blake said with a growl as she gyrated. “How do I look? Am I nasty?”

Quinn was completely vapor locked, her mouth was wide open, but no sound was coming out. Tears streamed from her eyes. Blake was pretty sure she’d never master twerking, but she was bound and determined to try. She put her hands on her knees and tried to bounce her ass with the fast pace of the music, but she looked more like a jockey without a horse. She laughed along with Quinn until she finally dropped on all fours heaving.

“Oh, my God,” Quinn said as she caught her breath and wiped her eyes. “I haven’t laughed like that in a long time. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll be in traction tomorrow, but at least one of us got something out of it.”

“You’re really funny when you let your hair down.”

Blake stretched out on the floor and picked up a photo from the bottom shelf of the bookcase and brushed the dust from it. “Who is this?”

Quinn cleared her throat as she gazed at it. “My ex. I thought I’d thrown away all her pictures. I guess that one fell out of something.”

“The breakup was bitter?” Blake asked as she handed it to Quinn.

“She was ‘the one that got away.’” Quinn tore the picture in little strips and set the pile on the coffee table. “It’s best that I don’t have anything around that reminds me of her.”

“How long has it been?”

“Let’s see.” Quinn stared up at the ceiling. “Dad died in 2006, and I met her a year later. Almost five years.”

Blake folded her legs Indian style. “That’s a long time. No one has come along since?”

“I’ve dated. Actually, I have plans to spend this weekend with a girl I’ve been seeing who works on an oil rig as a medic. She’s coming off her thirty-day shift. We’re just casual, so it’s not going to amount to anything. She’s from Alabama and plans to go back there once she makes enough money. She’s got a lot of debt from a previous relationship that she’s trying to pay off. The rig thing pays really well, but Lilly says she doesn’t want to do that kind of thing for the rest of her life.” Quinn toyed with a frayed area in the leg of her jeans. “I’m good with the noncommittal arrangement. I’m just not in that place yet where you have to be to have something meaningful. What about you?”

“I have an ex, too, and when I get my shit together, I’m going to win her back,” Blake said with conviction.

Quinn met her gaze. “I hope that works out for you.”

“Me too,” Blake said with a nod and looked away. “I need to get my hair colored again. Is there a hairdresser you’d recommend?”

Blake’s abrupt subject change meant that part of their conversation was over. Quinn accepted the cue, though she had some questions she figured would always remain unanswered. She wanted to know how Blake managed to date and still hide in her apartment. She couldn’t imagine Blake being intimate. She seemed too closed off, and Quinn could not see Blake allowing herself to be vulnerable in that regard.

“There are only two in this dinky town that I’d suggest. Trina McKnight’s shop is in a trailer off a dirt road, and if you saw the place, you probably wouldn’t let her touch your head.

She's good, though, and she does my sister's hair. Dawn is one of her faithful customers. She was a blonde when she was a kid, but now her natural color is just as red as mine and Jacob's. Trina does an amazing job bleaching it, and I think Dawn's hair looks really great."

"It does," Blake agreed with a nod. "Would you be willing to take me to see Trina if I can get an appointment?"

"You will easily and yes." Quinn sat up straighter and shifted her weight to her hip. "Would you take off your hat?"

"I put it on while my hair was wet. I'm sure there's a train wreck beneath it."

"Just let me see."

Blake exhaled through her nostrils, making them flare. "Okay," she said as she pulled the cap from her head and ruffled her locks with her fingers.

Quinn got up on her knees and studied her roots. "From what I can see, your natural color is a pretty shade of brown. May I be honest?"

"No." Blake put the cap back on her head. "Okay, yes."

"That black hair makes you look harsh. I think it makes your face look pale. Maybe you should have Trina strip the color out of it instead of dyeing it again."

"I may do that." Blake looked up at the clock. "I hate to cut the evening short, but I should get home and get to work."

"Did I offend you?" Quinn asked, her face etched with concern.

"No, you didn't. I appreciate the honesty. That's what friends do, right? We tell each other the truth."

"Right," Quinn said with a relieved smile.

"Good and you should know that if you ever get tired of plumbing, you could be a stripper, judging by the way you shake your ass."

"I'll keep that in mind," Quinn said with a laugh as she got up.

“I wasn’t joking.”

“Here we are.” Quinn pulled into the driveway of Blake’s house. “I’m glad you came over. I had a great... What’s wrong with you?”

“I forgot to turn on the lights.” Blake fidgeted and made no move to get out of the truck.

“Blake, you can—”

“No! Don’t tell me I have to go in there! Not like that.”

“I’ll walk you to the door, we’ll flip on the living room light, then you can do the rest. This is your next hurdle. You’re gonna have to sleep on the porch if you can’t—”

Quinn fell silent when Blake turned and looked at her with eyes big and watery. “Don’t ask this of me, I’m begging you. Just...just walk in with me and turn on the lights, look everything over,” Blake said, her jaw quivering.

It stunned Quinn to see Blake that terrified, but she truly was. Her tiny body shook from head to toe, and her knuckles were white where she held on to the door handle. “Why does the dark scare you so much?”

“I promise that I’ll explain if you go with me, please, Quinn.”

“Okay,” Quinn said when Blake looked like she was going to seriously cry. She hopped out of the truck, ran around to Blake’s side, and opened the door. “Give me your hand. I won’t let it go until you feel better.”

Blake’s grip was like iron as she squeezed Quinn’s hand on the walk to the porch. The keys in her other hand shook so violently that she could not manage the lock. Quinn took them from her, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. Then she flipped on the porch light and the one in the living room.

“Let’s go to the kitchen first,” Quinn said as she tugged Blake along. She switched on the hall light on the way. Once the kitchen and porch were lit up and pantry checked, they moved to the spare room, which was empty. Quinn checked

the closet in there, too. After every corner of Blake's bedroom and the master bath were illuminated, Quinn checked behind the shower curtain, under the bed, and the closet. It was all clear—no masked villains, no ghosts.

“You missed the bathroom in the hallway,” Blake said as she began to calm. Quinn inspected it, too, and pulled the shower curtain way back to show Blake it was clear.

“Come sit down.” Quinn towed Blake to the couch where they sat. She released Blake's hand and stared at her curiously. “Tell me your story.”

Blake stared at something on the wall, her blue eyes still watery. “I've always been afraid of the dark. My imagination runs rampant, especially when I can't see anything.” She licked her lips. “I was nine, and Dani and I had been fighting all day because the weather was rainy, and she'd been trapped inside with me. It was early spring, but where we were living was still chilly. Dani and I had chores, and one of them was to bring in firewood. Dad came home that evening, and we were still bickering. He sent us out to get wood. I remember Dani opening the big wooden box. It was almost empty, and I had to climb halfway in to get a hand on the logs. She shoved me, then closed the lid. It was black as pitch.”

Blake looked down at her hands. “I think that's why she gets so frustrated with me now because she's admitted that she's always felt guilty for doing that. She knows that memory adds to my anxieties. She was furious with me that day because I'd broken a toy of hers, so she slipped the lock through the latch and hid behind the tool shed. Mom was on the phone, she didn't realize how long we'd been gone. I have no idea what Dad was doing, but I stayed in that box for what felt like a long time.”

Blake put the palms of her hands to her head. “I heard voices, and somewhere deep inside of me, I knew they weren't real. I knew it was my imagination just running wild. I just couldn't calm down enough to rationalize. I screamed and pounded on that box. I clawed at the lid. I was so hysterical by the time my dad found me that I didn't realize that a spider had

bitten me.” Blake pulled up her pants leg and put her finger in the indentation on the side of her calf. “It was a brown recluse.”

“Oh, my God!” Quinn said with disgust. “Jacob was bitten by one of those on his stomach. It was horrible. I hope you’ll forgive me, but I want to beat the shit out of your sister right now.”

“She’s got some scars from that incident, too,” Blake said as she smoothed out her pants leg. “You just can’t see hers. I guess that’s one of the reasons we aren’t very close. She’s never stopped reliving that day, and every time she sees me, she’s reminded of it.”

Quinn took Blake’s hand again and sandwiched it in between her own. “I’m so sorry. I was being a bitch when we were in the truck because I was trying to push you to conquer this fear. I’d have never done that had I known.”

Blake swallowed hard. “Eventually, I’ll have to face that fear, too, but that’s last on the list.”

“Don’t think I’d dream of putting you in a box.”

“Don’t think for a second that I’d let you,” Blake said seriously.

“Are you okay now?”

“I’ll get there eventually.” Blake’s reply didn’t sound too certain.

“Okay, this is what we’ll do. You go sit at your computer and channel some of this tension into your writing. I’m going to stretch out on your couch. If I snore, throw something at me.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Blake said, but her smile said, *I wish you would.*

“After watching that movie, I’m kind of skittish, too. Go write something else that will scare the shit out of me. I’m going to lay right here.”

“Make yourself at home then. If you get hungry, help yourself to anything in the kitchen. Should you get cold, pull

the blanket off the back of the couch. You can watch TV. It won't bother me at all."

Quinn gave Blake's hand a squeeze before she released it. "Go, Blake. I'll be fine."

Blake's response was childlike. "Okay," she said with excitement and jumped up.

Quinn fluffed the pillows and burrowed into the couch. She watched as Blake pushed a button on her computer, then went into the kitchen. She returned seconds later with a can of Mountain Dew. She took a seat, and after a minute or two, Quinn listened to the rapid tap of keys being pressed.

"You type fast. I hunt and peck."

"Yeah, I have to go back and fix a lot of mistakes. I do it so quickly that I misspell and use a lot of words in the wrong context. When it should be dear, it's deer, even though I know the difference."

"Thank God for editors, right?" Quinn said with a laugh.

"Absolutely. God bless them all."

Blake fell silent, but her keyboard didn't. From where Quinn lay, she could see words appearing on the screen but couldn't read them.

"You should put what you just told me in a book. I bet that would be cathartic, or would it be too personal?"

Blake stopped typing and turned her head slightly. "I already have. The book was called *The Deepest Cut, Darkest Heart*."

"I bet your sister hated that title. I'm still mad at her, by the way."

"Uh...Quinn...the TV doesn't bother me, but conversation that I have to be involved in breaks my concentration."

"Shut up, Quinn Scott," Quinn said as she put a pillow over her face. She knocked it away a while later when she felt her body relax and begin to give in to sleep.

Through heavily lidded eyes, she watched Blake work. Every now and then, she'd stop typing and take a sip of her soda, or she'd stare at the ceiling before she began again. Quinn smiled sleepily as Blake turned and looked at her for a moment. "Thanks," Blake whispered before she resumed tapping away.

For Blake, it seemed that only a few minutes had passed between one and three a.m. Quinn was sleeping soundly on the couch with one arm thrown over her forehead. The other one, the Quinn who lived in Blake's mind, was chattering away, and Blake could barely keep up with all she had to tell. Blake's bladder ached from being full, her shoulders and back felt stiff, and her butt was numb. Reluctantly, she put the mental Quinn on hold, hoping she'd still be willing to talk after a trip to the bathroom and a stretch.

When Blake returned, Quinn had rolled on her side and was hugging a pillow to her chest. You are very sweet, and someone is going to steal your heart again one day. I hope she's worthy of you, Blake thought as she walked silently by, staring at Quinn's face. Blake reclaimed her chair and closed her eyes, waiting for the Quinn in her head to break the silence.

When she first began to draft Quinn's character, she made Quinn a straight woman, but when Blake had introduced the male love interest in the story, imaginary Quinn clammed up. The more Blake wrote, the more tension developed between her character and Quinn's character, though Blake had not intended it that way. She'd never written lesbian characters into her books, even though she was one because Cassidy had unknowingly offended Blake when she suggested that she do it.

"Write in a lesbian couple, make them peripheral characters. Hot sex between women will have the tongues of your male fans wagging. Lesbians are the 'in' thing right now, you can get away with using them."

Blake had bitten her tongue like she always had with Cassidy because most of the time her agent knew best. She didn't care if it was the "in" thing. Something so intensely personal did not belong in a book that was written to make the reader shake in their shoes. But with every line she wrote, she could see that her Blake and her Quinn were gradually moving toward each other. It felt sweet and tempered the scariness of the story. Blake was content to see where it led.

She gazed over her shoulder at Quinn and wondered if she'd freak out as badly about this as she did being killed in the last story. The jury was still out on that. Blake made a mental note to shut down the program she was writing in whenever she was away from the computer.

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Chapter 16

Trina the hairstylist booked Blake for Friday at noon. Quinn picked her up and dropped her off because work was busy that day. She was, however, kind enough to walk Blake inside without Blake having to ask because a pack of dogs sunned themselves in what Blake could only loosely describe as a front yard. The mobile home sat near the road, patches of high grass broke up rutted dirt that she assumed was to be considered the parking lot. Blake began to sweat a little as she pondered trusting her hair to the epitome of rednecks.

“Like I told you, I was put off by the sight, too,” Quinn said as though she were reading Blake’s mind. “I promise, though, Trina is a magician. You okay?”

Blake blew out a breath as they stood on the deck outside. “Yes.”

Quinn smiled and pushed open the door. Trina was a plump middle-aged woman with a head of pink and orange stripes in her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She rushed to greet them. “Well, hi, sugar,” she said with a huge smile, which sounded more like suga since she dropped the R like everyone else did in town. “Your name sounds so familiar. Have we met?”

“I’m from New York, I don’t think so,” Blake said a tad timidly as Trina crowded her personal space.

“Well, it’s a fine pleasure to meet you.”

Blake’s head look like a bobble doll as Trina shook her hand furiously.

“How long do you think it’ll take? I’m her ride,” Quinn said, hoping Trina wouldn’t rattle Blake to pieces literally and figuratively.

“Give me about an hour and a half, Quinn.” Trina gave Blake a little push toward the coffeepot. “Suga, you get yourself a cuppa joe, and we’ll get started.” She stuck her finger in Quinn’s face. “Tell yo sista that she still owes me

twenty bucks. She was short the last time she came in, ya hear?”

Quinn pulled a twenty from her pocket and handed it to Trina. “I’ll be back in an hour and a half. She better still have hair on her head. Got me?”

“Git out,” Trina said with a laugh and shoved Quinn out the door. Trina rubbed her hands together as she regarded Blake. “Sit down here, girl, and let me see what you’re workin’ with.”

Blake wanted to chase Quinn but followed the order. Trina ran her hands and a comb through her hair. Every so often, she would say “hmm” or “uh-huh.” Blake wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

“Now if I recall, you want to strip this old black out and go back to your natural cullah.”

Blake took cullah to mean color. “Yes, if possible.”

“All things are possible in the house of Trina. Now look here, you got some split ends, and the stripping chemical is harsh. So this is what I say we do. I’m gonna strip yo hair first, then I’m gonna deep condition it, then I’m gonna trim off those ol’ dead pieces so yo beautiful hair can grow.”

There was not one R in anything Trina said, but Blake got the point. “Okay, that sounds like a plan.”

“Good, now drink that coffee down, suga, ’cause ol’ Trina is about to dance.”

Trina skipped the prewash since Blake had already washed her hair that morning and put in a pre-conditioner, then something foul-smelling to strip away the “cullah.” All the while, Trina spewed an endless stream of chatter that Blake listened to in pure amazement because Trina didn’t seem to take a breath. She switched subjects so fast that Blake really had to concentrate on everything she said because she occasionally asked a question.

“...and then there was the time I got stupid and went out with Bruce Gable. He was no Clark, let me tell you. You know Bruce?”

“No, I don’t know many peop—”

“You ain’t missin’ nothin’ in him. Anyway, he took me out to a club to dance. I do love to dance. I shook my big ol’ rump until I thought it would fall off. We closed that bar down. Bruce didn’t drink nothin’ but a beer, so I knew he was in his right mind when he drove me home. We were on an old dark road, and he stopped and went to pawin’ at me like a bear after a Honeybun. I told him no, but he just kept right on. I started whoopin’ on his ass somethin’ fierce. When Quinn drove up, I had his ass on the ground in the middle of the road justa stomping the shit out of him.”

Trina released a loud laugh that felt like it vibrated the walls. “You know what she said to me?”

It was obviously a rhetorical question because she didn’t wait for an answer.

“Quinn rolled down her window and said, ‘Trina, when you get finished killin’ that snake, climb in, I’ll take you home.’ I’d never been so happy to see anyone in all my life because it was a long walk back to town, and I had no clue how to drive Bruce’s old truck. It was three on the tree, ya know. Most everyone that comes in here talks bad about Quinn, and up until then, I hadn’t had much contact with her. I’d seen her around town, but we ain’t never spoke. She was just as sweet as she could be that night, and ever since, I’ve liked her despite what people have to say. You ever been through a winter here? It might not compare to New York, but after you’ve been in the heat of our summers, you gonna lose that winter skin and freeze like the rest of us when it—”

“Wait.” Blake held up a hand. “Why do people talk bad about Quinn?”

Trina kicked something under the chair and spun it around so that she was face-to-face with Blake. “How long you known her?”

Blake shrugged. “Not long, three or four weeks.”

Trina narrowed her eyes. “I used to be a judging woman, but I’m not no more, not after gettin’ to know Quinn. So don’t

be afraid to answer my question. Are you a homosexual, too?"

"Uh...yes."

Trina pointed her comb in Blake's face. "That's why." She spun the chair around again. "Oh, suga, they gonna talk that way about you, too, as soon as they find out you're Quinn's lady."

"I'm not." Blake tried to turn and look over her shoulder, but the fumes coming from her head nearly blinded her. "We're friends. I'm not her...lady."

"Don't make no difference. People gonna see you two hanging around together, and even if you wasn't a homo, they'd call you one 'cause you friends with her. Like I told you, I ain't a judging woman no more, so if anyone comes in here and speaks ill of you like they do Quinn, I'm gonna shut 'em down with a quickness just like I do when they get after her."

"What do they say when 'they get after her'?"

"They say not to call her if they having plumbing problems because Quinn will put something in the water to make them a queer. She fixed my sink in the kitchen once, and I still want me a man, so I know that's a lie. They try to say she's too ugly to get a man, but that's a lie, too, because Quinn is a pretty woman, don't you think so?" This time, Trina actually waited for a response.

"Yes, I do," Blake said after a moment of hesitation.

"Uh-huh," Trina said, and Blake caught her smile in the mirror. "They say that if she spends any time around the kids, they'll turn out homo, too, so they try to run her off if she goes to the football or baseball games at the high school."

"That's so unfair," Blake exploded.

For the first time since Blake walked in, Trina fell silent for a moment.

"Yes, it is," she said somberly. Glenda Percy is the ringleader of all the talk in this town, and she hates Quinn. I don't know why. Quinn is a likable woman, but when ol'

Glenda sees folks startin' to relax and be nice to Quinn, she riles them up by sayin' all sorts of nasty things. I think it's because she likes all the attention on her, and if she's a-bashin' on someone, everybody is a-listenin'. She works at the grocery store. You met her?"

"Yes, and I didn't like her," Blake said quickly.

"No one does, but they all afraid of gettin' on her bad side because she has a way of knowin' everyone's secrets, and she'll tell them if you piss her off. You watch her, ya hear?"

"I will, thank you."

"Now let's wash this shit out."

Trina was blow-drying Blake's hair when Quinn walked in. It covered most of Blake's face and eyes, so she didn't notice Quinn's arrival. She didn't hear the door close, either, because above the hairdryer, Trina was telling a story that Blake couldn't make a word out of. When Trina switched off the dryer and brushed Blake's hair from her face, she spotted Quinn in the mirror. Her green eyes were huge.

Trina spun Blake around to face Quinn and with a flourish said, "ta da!"

"What do you think?" Blake asked a bit worried because Quinn was still staring at her, mouth partially opened. "Quinn?"

"You're pretty," Quinn blurted out as her eyelids fluttered.

"Yeah, she is, pretty as freckles on an orange cat's lips." Trina slapped the back of the chair, jarring Blake. "And that's just her, no makeup, all natural. If I wasn't gorgeous myself, I'd be a little jealous."

Quinn was still slack-jawed and staring as Blake got up and walked over to the counter to pay Trina. Her tip was as much as the fee and earned her a hug from Trina that realigned every single joint in her body. Blake made a mental note to come back, even if she didn't need her hair done, for the chiropractic services alone.

“I’m sorry, I’m being rude, but I can’t stop staring at you,” Quinn said as she walked Blake to the truck and opened her door. “I mean, you were attractive before, but now...you look so different. Wait...I mean...”

“I know what you mean, and thanks,” Blake said with a smile. “You were right. The black did make me look harsh.”

Quinn looked pained as she said, “Harsh was so wrong. I shouldn’t have used that word. Did you look at yourself in the mirror?”

Blake laughed. “Yeah.”

Quinn smiled goofily and closed the door. Blake watched her walk around the front of the truck. She was so flattered by Quinn’s reaction that she’d not noticed that she had strolled right past the pack of dogs. Blake had not looked into the trees for birds, either. She was high in the clouds above them.

“I’ll bet you’re gonna take pictures of yourself and send them to everyone you know,” Quinn said teasingly when she got back into the truck.

“I’m feeling really cocky. I might send one to Beth.”

“Who is that?” Quinn asked as she turned the truck around.

“My ex.”

“Oh...well, you should. If she doesn’t beg to visit you, there’s something wrong with her.”

Chapter 17

“Do you want to have pizza for dinner?” Blake asked as Quinn turned into her driveway.

“I’d like to, but I’m going out with Lilly tonight.” Quinn stared straight ahead. “Rain check?”

“Absolutely.” Blake opened her door and prepared to hop out. “I hope you have a good time.”

“Thanks.” Quinn slowly turned to look at Blake. “I feel bad for making such a fuss earlier. You were pretty before, more so now.”

“So are you. I’m sure you know that already.” Blake looked away. “Thank you, Quinn, for everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

Blake closed the door, opened the gate, and walked casually to the front door as Quinn watched. They’d just had a moment, and she would put it in her book, hoping it would make the reader feel as warm as it did her. The lines between fiction and reality were beginning to blur a bit as Blake watched Quinn drive away. For a moment, she wished she could write romance into her life. Blake sighed as she walked over to her desk and picked up her phone. She’d twerked, been made over, and was feeling powerful for it all. It was time to call Beth.

Blake was surprised when her agent answered the phone. “Cassidy, hey, I was expecting Beth.”

“She took off at noon for a trip,” Cassidy explained, sounding peeved, probably because she was forced to answer her own phone.

“Oh...cool. Where’d she go?”

“She and the woman she’s been dating are going to Provincetown for a week. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was to get married the way those two can’t seem to be apart. I’ll have a temp in here Monday. Are you calling to tell me that you’ve

blacked out again, or is there some other problem? If the answer is yes to either of those questions, you're going to have to give me a moment to pour a drink because it has been a positively horrible day."

"Um...no...I just wanted to kick off your weekend by telling you that everything is going well. I shouldn't have any problems meeting my deadline."

"Excellent. Do you realize that you're dropping some of your R's? You're starting to sound Southern. Write fast, so I can get you back up here before that takes root."

"Okay, I will."

"Thank you for being a bright spot in an otherwise dismal day. I have to run now and try to figure out what Beth did with my backup laptop. The one I like to use gave up the ghost."

"Okay, good luck." Blake ended the call without bothering to say goodbye, afraid that the disappointment that was overwhelming her would leak into the conversation. Beth, the only woman who'd come even close to understanding her, had happily moved on.

Quinn did her best to match Lilly's fervor. She'd not had sex in the thirty days since Lilly had last packed up and headed out to the rig. Her body craved the attention, but her mind asked, *Why bother?* She liked Lilly, but Quinn knew she could never love her. In Lilly's arms, Quinn couldn't make herself believe she was being cherished like she foolishly did with Shay. The act meant nothing. She didn't feel anything but a short period of carnal pleasure.

Roughly, she pushed Lilly onto her back, unwilling to kiss her mouth; Quinn closed her eyes and ran her lips over Lilly's collarbone.

"What's wrong?" Lilly asked.

"Nothing, I just want you."

Lilly released a heavy sigh. "Then have me all you want."

The words failed to ignite even the slightest spark within Quinn.

Lilly was up before the sun the next morning and was busy shoving her stuff into a duffel bag when Quinn awoke. “Why are you up so early?” Quinn moaned.

“I have to get on the road. I need to be in Loxley before noon to meet with the Realtor.” Lilly ran a hand over her wet short cropped brown hair. “He says he’s got a motivated cash buyer for my house. If I can get out from beneath the weight of that mortgage, I won’t have to go back to the rig.”

“That’s good news.” Quinn rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“It is.” Lilly stopped packing and sat on Quinn’s side of the bed. “It means I might not be back here if the deal goes through, but you could come and visit me. We could go to the beach in Gulf Shores. I’d show you a good time.”

Quinn was so relieved to hear those words pass Lilly’s lips because the previous night had been their last, even before the news. “We’ve talked about this, remember? When it was time for you to return home permanently, we’d lay this to rest.”

“I know,” Lilly said with a nod. “That’s why I didn’t tell you about the pending sale last night. To be honest, I didn’t want to have to have this conversation. I put it off because I hate saying goodbye, and I had hoped just to slip out of here while you slept.”

Quinn sat up. “I’m glad you didn’t.” She pressed her lips to Lilly’s forehead. “Let’s not say goodbye, let’s wish each other happiness instead.”

Lilly stood up quickly and grabbed her bag. She took two steps toward the door and stopped. “I used your toothbrush because I forgot mine on the rig. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Quinn laughed. It trailed off as Lilly’s footfalls did the same through the house. They had no future, but it was still hard to listen to Lilly leave for the last time. She wondered if Shay had felt any remorse when she collected her things, set her keys on the table, and walked out.

Chapter 18

“Another sunny day.” Blake groaned and pulled the pillow over her face. At noon, light was sneaking around the blinds and mercilessly poking at her eyelids. To purge Beth from her thoughts, Blake had thrown herself into her book and had written until dawn. She wanted more sleep, but she knew it wouldn’t come. Aside from the sun, a dog barked outside. She wondered if it was Chuck demanding the food she wasn’t supposed to give him.

Blake climbed out of bed, made a stop in the bathroom, then plodded along stark naked into the kitchen. She never slept in the buff. It made her feel too vulnerable, and she didn’t want to be caught outside like that if she needed to make an emergency exit. But when she crawled into bed that morning, she didn’t care about much. She reached for the coffeepot, then stopped when she heard water running from somewhere inside the house. She’d flushed the toilet, but it didn’t make that noise as the tank refilled. The dog continued to bark, and Blake opened the blinds just a crack to look in the backyard.

Chuck was completely soaking wet and shoved his face into the stream of water Quinn was shooting from the hose. His front paws left the ground as he shook his head and barked, then he went back for more. Quinn’s hair was down and wild, sunlight revealed deeper shades of red, lighter hues, and streaks of blond. She was smiling as she watched Chuck dance in and out of the water.

Blake stepped back, then raced into her room where she pulled on some clothes. By the time she returned, the water had been switched off, and Chuck was no longer barking. Blake opened the door and stared through the screen. Chuck was wandering out of sight.

“I am very selfish and rude.”

Blake pushed open the screen door and found Quinn sitting on the end of the porch swinging her legs. Unrepentant, she gazed up at Blake and said, “I needed a laugh, so I came here

to ask you to twerk again, but the house was quiet. I knew you were sleeping. I riled Chuck up so he would bark and wake you, and I wouldn't have to take the blame."

"Then why are you confessing?" Blake asked with a smile.

"Because I know you saw me."

"Yeah, you've been caught. Come inside while I make coffee."

Quinn got up and followed her inside. "I brought a bag of dog biscuits. Don't let me forget to get them out of my truck."

"I'm kind of surprised to see you today. I thought you were supposed to be with Lilly this weekend," Blake said as she set up her coffeemaker.

"Well, that's over." Quinn sighed as she folded her arms and leaned against the cabinet. "She's been trying to sell her house, and she thinks she may have a buyer. If that's the case, she won't return to the rig, and she won't be coming back here."

Blake stopped what she was doing and looked at Quinn. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it was just kind of sad watching her go. We knew this day would come, we were both prepared."

Blake clamped her lips tightly together for a second. "Last night, I was feeling really good about myself, so I called my agent's office. Beth is Cassidy's assistant. Cassidy told me that Beth had gone away with her new flame. They're gonna be gone for a week."

"Are you okay?" Quinn asked.

"No," Blake said as she spooned coffee into a filter. "Beth was the only woman that understood me. It just got too hard for her to have a relationship in my apartment, and that's what ended us. It was good otherwise."

"What did Beth understand that the others didn't?"

Blake thought as she poured the water into the coffeemaker and switched it to brew. "She was willing to work with me, but

the breaking point was when she wanted me to go to her place and I wouldn't."

"Why? Because you'd have to ride the subway?"

"No, we could've taken a cab." Blake shrugged. "I didn't know if I'd be comfortable at her place."

Quinn narrowed her eyes. "But you would've been with her. Wouldn't that have made it comfortable?"

"No, because if I didn't like it there, I'd have to take a cab by myself back to my place," Blake explained. "I'd never done that alone."

Quinn's jaw worked for a second or two without her saying a word. "Let me pose the question this way. You'd have rather been in your apartment alone than with someone you cared about in hers?"

Blake was beginning to see the light but still made excuses. "I was different then. I wasn't trying to work through my issues like I am now."

"Let me ask you this. Did the idea of being at her place make you as scared as you felt when you petted Chuck for the first time?"

"Um...yes...no."

Quinn stood up straight and gazed down at Blake. "So you wanted Beth as long as it was on your turf and your terms, anything else was a no go."

"I guess so," Blake admitted. "What are you trying to get me to admit—that I'm a self-centered asshole on top of being neurotic?"

"No." Quinn dropped her arms to her sides. "It just sounds to me that maybe you were more enamored with..." She rolled her eyes. "This is going to come out wrong. Can I just rewind this tape to where you said you weren't all right, then I can say I'm sorry? Maybe pat you on the shoulder and invite you to go eat ice cream?"

Blake's brows knitted together. "Real ice cream, not that frozen yogurt stuff? And there's no tape," she said, shaking

her head. “No take-backs. Say what you were going to say.”

Quinn huffed. “I was going to say that maybe you liked the way she placated you more than you actually liked her.”

Blake stared at Quinn as her heart sank with the truth. “I think you’re right again. I’m beginning to become annoyed with that, and I may hate you just a little bit for it.”

Quinn wagged a finger. “You accepted what I said too quickly. You already knew it, Blake, admit it.”

Blake shook her head and looked back at the coffeepot. “No.”

“No what?”

“No, I won’t admit it.”

“Now you’re just being a tool,” Quinn said with a laugh. She gave Blake a light poke on the arm. “Admit it.”

“Uh-uh, no.” Blake slapped at Quinn’s finger as it moved toward her again.

“Blake.”

“No.”

“I am going to pull the waistband of your underwear over the back of your head unless you admit it.”

“I’m not wearing any, and if you tear my favorite lounge pants, I will...I will be mad.” Blake shrieked when Quinn stuck her finger in her ear. “All right! Why must you torture me this way?” she yelled with a laugh, then sobered. “If I admit that, then it means that I’ve never really loved at all.”

Quinn’s face fell. “That’s not true. I’m sure you did care for her.”

“Now who’s making excuses?” Blake asked flatly. “To get better, I have to face the truth. I’m pretty messed up. So tell me what fearsome task you want me to tackle today. I’m feeling kind of reckless right now.”

“Nope...hell no...uh-uh...no.”

“It’s fun,” Quinn insisted as she held the rope. “It’s not that high, and if you fall, you’ll only go into the water. Can you swim?”

Blake hugged the tree tighter. “What do you think?”

Quinn pursed her lips. “That would be a no.”

“You have me in a tree with birds. One of them could fly down and peck me. I could lose my balance, fall, and die. Isn’t that enough, Quinn? Really? Don’t laugh!”

“We’re not but four feet off the ground, and all the screaming you did while I shoved your ass onto this platform scared every creature away for miles. Listen...do you hear birds?”

“They’re waiting for you to swing so they can attack me. There are probably hundreds of them hiding in the foliage. Which by the way is strange for October. What is wrong with this place? Don’t the seasons change here at all? What is that? What. Is. That?”

“It’s a moth. They don’t bite,” Quinn said with a giggle.

“Oh, it’s funny.” Blake began to curse like she had Tourette’s. “Fuck...fucking...shit...damn...fuck. I want down! I want down now! Shit...damn...hell.”

“Watch me, Blake.”

“Fucking...shit...fuck...shit.”

“Blake! Shut up!”

Blake inhaled sharply and spoke barely above a whisper. “Don’t you scream at me.”

Quinn held up a finger. “Watch.” She grabbed a knot on the rope and pushed off the platform. Quinn laughed and yelled excitedly as she sliced through the air, then returned to land effortlessly on the wooden deck. “Awesome, right?”

“You have demonstrated a fairly decent vocabulary, so I think you should agree with me that awesome is a bit of an embellishment for what you just did,” Blake said between

gritted teeth. And then her command of language failed her. “Shitty...damn...shit...poo.”

“Rain Man, you have to let go of that tree and take this rope.” Quinn held it out in front of her. “The water below is only a few feet deep, it’ll pad your fall, and you won’t drown.”

Blake closed her eyes with her cheek pressed against the tree. “If I do it, when I return to this platform, I will most certainly overshoot it and fly off into the brush behind us where there will be birds and snakes, quite possibly boa constrictors. You will have to explain to my parents how I died and why. They will hate you, maybe assault you, then sue you to pieces. Get me out of this tree.”

“There’s only two ways down, and it’s via rope or the ladder. I’ll climb down and catch you if you fall, but I will *not* hold your butt again. And I’d like to remind you that as we stood at the base of this tree, you reiterated that you were feeling reckless and that *you* wanted to do this. Look at me, Blake!”

Blake opened one eye.

“You said that, didn’t you?”

“You cannot hold me accountable for agreeing to this under the influence of sugar. I didn’t eat breakfast. You fed me ice cream during the drive to this place. Until I got up here, I would’ve agreed to climbing the Empire State Building without a safety harness and jumping off holding a string.” Blake whimpered.

“I have a bag of Skittles in the truck. I’ll get them, and you can eat a few if that’s what it takes. Open your eyes, damn it!” Quinn knew it was time to get tough. She’d seen children do what she was asking Blake to do, and she firmly believed that Blake was capable if only she’d try. “You have convinced yourself that you’re gonna die or get eaten by a bird or a reptile. But the simple truth of it is that you will swing off this platform and come back where I will catch you. Do this, and I’ll sleep on your couch for a week, so you won’t have to worry about anything but writing.” Quinn breathed a sigh of relief when Blake opened her eyes fully, and the wheels

behind them began to turn. “If you do this, you can do anything.”

“I need a minute...or a...day to consider your proposition.”

“If you let go of this rope and I have to fetch it, I’m gonna be pissed,” Quinn said as she stuffed it between Blake and the tree. “Grab that rope, and hey, you’re an educated woman, you know we don’t have boa constrictors around here.”

“Someone could’ve released a pet.”

Quinn put her arms up and inhaled deeply as a cool breeze blew across her skin. “Doesn’t that feel good?”

“Yes,” Blake said begrudgingly.

“You could feel more of it if you’d only swing out there. Some part of you wants to do it, the part of you that agreed to come up here in the first place. You are your own worst enemy. Stop telling yourself you can’t and just do it.”

“You sound like a self-help book just belched.” Blake grabbed the rope and held it to her chest. Her feet shuffled a few inches, then she stopped. “I hold the knot, then I jump.”

“No, you hold the knot and you push off hard with your feet.”

“I’m gonna do this.”

Quinn pumped her fist. “Yes, you are.”

“You’re going to stay on my couch.”

“Um, yeah,” Quinn said and smacked her lips.

“You said you would.”

“So did you. Now do it.”

Blake shuffled a little more. “I hate you.”

“You won’t after this is behind you.”

“But then I’ll hate you for something else.”

Quinn nodded. “Whatever it takes.”

“Hold the knot and push.” Blake moved closer to the edge of the deck. “Hold on tight. Swing back and you will catch

me.” Blake heaved a deep sigh. “Just so you know, if I get killed, I will haunt you. A poltergeist will have nothing on me. I’ll...I...” Blake clamped her eyes shut and pushed off, screaming profanity the whole way. Her eyes were still closed when she sailed over the platform and Quinn caught her. Blake’s legs wrapped around Quinn’s body like a vise.

“Let go of the rope, I’ve got you,” Quinn said with a huge smile. “Look at me.”

Blake’s eyes flew open. “I did it? I really did it?”

“You so did,” Quinn said excitedly as Blake let go of the rope. She hugged Blake close. “You have passed the test.”

“I did that! I did!” Blake exclaimed as she loosened her hold and her feet slowly dropped to the platform. “I rocked it! I beat its ass.”

Quinn stepped back just as giddy. “High five!”

Blake smacked her hand. “I did that! Did you see me? We should’ve filmed it.” In her zeal, she gave Quinn a shove. “I did... Oh.” Blake put both hands over her mouth and peered over the edge of the deck. Quinn lay flat on her back in the mud. “Does this nullify our deal?” she asked lamely.

“Are you mad?”

“Muddy, but no.”

“Are you sure?”

You know...not really, so don’t ask me again.” Quinn shifted uncomfortably on the towel that protected her truck seat from her grimy body.

Blake hung her head. “That was a real downer.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Are you sure nothing is broken?”

“Positive.”

“I’m really sorry, Quinn.”

“It’s okay. You were excited, and I was, too. That makes it all worthwhile.”

“Do you think...you might’ve deserved it a little because you were kind of brusque up there?”

“Blake.”

“It was the altitude.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “We were four feet off the ground, it was you. When you feel that panic coming on, try to just stop and breathe for a second.”

“That’s why it’s called panic. You lose your ability to reason, and the brain just goes haywire.”

Quinn glanced at Blake. “How do we fix that?”

Blake looked out her window. “I’ve paid therapists a lot of money to find that out. The answer is usually pills that I don’t like to take.”

“Look, I know our adventure ended on a muddy note, but you jumped a massive hurdle. Don’t forget that. You were really terrified, yet you swung on that rope. I’m super proud of you. Now I want to tell you something Jacob told me about. I want you to just listen and think about it. We don’t have to do it tonight or not even next week, but I think it would be good for you in a number of ways.”

Blake began tapping her fingers on the window frame. “That’s a big buildup. It’s already making me nervous.”

“Jacob has a friend,” Quinn continued, “he and a group of guys are ghost hunters. We could go—”

“Fuck no! Fucking...shit...no. I’ve seen shows about that. They do it in the fucking dark.”

Quinn reached over and put a hand on Blake’s arm. “Tell me what you’re feeling right now, all the physical symptoms.”

“My chest is tight, it’s a little hard to breathe...kinda sweaty...queasy, but not as bad as when I was in that tree because then I was pretty sure I was going to wet my pants. Fuck.” Blake whimpered.

“But you didn’t because I distracted you with the offer to stay at your house. You began to weigh the options, and it took your mind off your fear...kind of. You’ve already been using that skill, and I don’t think you realize that. You’re afraid at night, so you do what distracts your mind, you write. You just have to master distraction. Do you know the ‘Star Spangled Banner’?”

“Yes...fuck...yes.” Blake inhaled sharply and let it out slowly.

“When you feel that tightening in your chest, sing that song.” Quinn continued to hold Blake’s arm. “We’ll put the ghost hunt on the back burner for a while and focus on some other things.”

“Like what—wrestling alligators because that would only be slightly less horrifying? At least it’s during the day.”

Quinn pulled into her driveway and parked. “I meant to tell you earlier that the sunlight in your hair brings out all the different shades of brown. Your natural color is very lovely.”

The topic change and what Quinn had to say instantly stilled the trembling Blake felt inside. “Thank you,” she said with a goofy smile. “I like your hair down. It’s even kind of pretty with all the leaves stuck in it right now. You’ve got a fall motif going on.”

Quinn smiled. “Now that our self-confidence is bolstered, let’s jump out of this truck like a couple of badassess.”

Blake wandered around Quinn’s house as she showered. The pantry door in the kitchen stood open. There was enough light streaming through the windows, and the light in the kitchen was on. The normally dark space was illuminated. Blake felt brave enough to peek inside. On the shelves, there were cans, boxes of cereal, and potatoes in a basket. On another shelf were plastic pipe joints arranged by size and shape. It reminded her of what Quinn did for a living and how she crawled into dark cramped places probably on a daily basis. Quinn had claimed to be afraid of the creatures that

lived in that environment, but she faced them anyway. Blake wondered what really made such a formidable woman quake or if anything actually did. She longed to be like Quinn.

She turned to go back into the kitchen and noticed lines and dates along with Quinn's and her siblings' names next to them. According to the chart, Quinn had been taller than her at eleven. Blake thought about the woman who had taken the time to measure the growth of her children. She marveled at what little it took for her to turn her back on her own flesh and blood.

That notion made Blake think about her mother. They had not spoken since Blake arrived there in September. That was a record, and Blake missed her terribly. It was so hard for her to accept that someone who loved her so deeply could be a detriment to her mental health. The concept seemed so ironic, so backward. She longed for that day when that would not be so.

She jumped when Quinn suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Are you hiding in my pantry?"

Blake smiled and wrapped her arms around herself. "I was snooping, the door was open." She pointed to the marks on the jamb. "You grew really fast."

Quinn poked her head in and stared at the chart for a moment. "Yeah, my folks had a hard time keeping shoes and pants on me. Mom always said it seemed I grew overnight. She used to joke about making me sleep in a cardboard box to stop it."

"What was she like when you were small?"

"Tired." Quinn stepped out of the way and let Blake out of the pantry. "She was always cooking or cleaning, working in the yard. She was mechanically inclined, too. She fixed all the things she got tired of waiting for Dad to do." Quinn smiled wistfully. "But she read to us every night. Dawn would whine when Mom would turn off the TV, but Jacob and I would curl up under a blanket on the couch and listen to every story."

Quinn ran her hands through her wet hair. “She used to get irritated with me when I got into my teens. Dawn would let Mom fix her hair and teach her how to apply makeup properly. I never would. I was always a mess, usually sweaty, no regard for my appearance because I was too busy playing basketball. I wanted a ponytail, and that was it. Mom said I looked like a feral cat most of the time.” She laughed. “And I did.”

“Hey,” Blake said when Quinn began to fuss with the overnight bag she’d dropped on the table. “You don’t have to stay with me. It’s not fair to make you do that.”

Quinn didn’t look at her as she appeared to be making sure she’d packed everything she needed. “I’m a woman who keeps her promises, I want to go. You make me laugh, you make me forget...things. Besides, this will be like a vacation where I can come home for stuff I’ve forgotten when I need to. Are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

Quinn opened the door and held it. “When your book is finished, will you go straight back to New York?”

“The house is rented through March. I have the option to go home in December when this book will hopefully be done or stay here until the spring.”

“I hope you’ll stay,” Quinn said and averted her gaze when Blake passed.

Chapter 19

“There’s still a lot of daylight left.” Quinn parked her truck in Blake’s driveway.

“Oh...God...you’re thinking of another hurdle for me, aren’t you?”

“It’s utilitarian. We need to eat, and it’s a beautiful afternoon, so here’s my plan. You and I will take a walk, and while we’re out, I’ll pick up something to barbecue. When we get back, I’ll dig the Meyers’s grill out of the storage shed and make dinner while you write.”

“Okay,” Blake agreed with a nod.

Quinn looked surprised. “No arguing, no cussing?”

“No. I’ll be fine because you’ll be right there with me.” Blake pushed open the door. “Let’s go.”

Blake stayed close, but she didn’t grab or try to climb Quinn as they lazily strolled down the sidewalk. Quinn pointed out landmarks and told the stories behind them. “You see that house with all the New Orleans Saints flags in the yard? That was an empty lot when I was growing up. It had a dirt hill, and Jacob and I would ramp off of it on our bikes.”

“You never mention anyone but Jacob. Weren’t there other kids you played with, or were you always that close?”

“We’ve always been close. But Jacob didn’t fit in with the other boys. None of them wanted to play with him. When you meet my brother, you’ll probably think he’s gay. He tries hard to appear what is considered manly, but he’s more feminine than I am with the way he walks and gestures. I thought for sure he was just like me, and I waited through our teen years to hear him confess it. When he was little, the other boys teased him relentlessly. Even after he started dating Tonya in high school, they still taunted him. He’s been married since he was eighteen, but everyone in town calls him a closet case

queer. I have to admit that I wondered about that, too, until we had a talk after I was shoved out of the closet. Jacob is most definitely straight and totally in love with his wife.”

Blake glanced at Quinn. “Who shoved you out?” she asked, though she already knew the answer, wanting to hear Quinn’s version.

“The asshole you met at the grocery store, Glenda Percy. I grew up watching how everyone treated Jacob, and I knew if I came out, I’d face the ridicule, too. There were already rumors because I wasn’t married and I didn’t date any of the men here. Cowardly, I made my folks believe that the reason I was going to New Orleans every weekend was to see a guy, but I was going to the bars to meet women. I’d begun dating one pretty steadily, and she came here for a weekend. I guess the strange car in the driveway piqued Glenda’s curiosity, so much so that she came to my house after dark one night and looked in the window. By the next morning, everyone in town knew I was making out with another woman on my couch.”

“She really is despicable,” Blake said with disgust.

“No one saw it that way. No one seemed to care that Glenda was a peeping Tom, only that I was a *faggot*. I heard that word whispered a lot whenever I ventured out of my house. Mom and Dad confronted me, and I admitted the truth. It took Dad a little while to come to terms with it, but Mom never did. The day I sat at their kitchen table when all my secrets came out, the relationship between us changed and grew worse over time. Now we’re like strangers.”

Quinn inhaled sharply and looked around. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore today. I’m in good company, it’s a cool, pretty day, and I’d just like to enjoy it. So tell me what you feel about this experience.”

“I feel good.”

“You’re a writer, you can do better than that. Give me detail, emotions. Do it like you would in a book.”

They walked in silence for a minute or two, then Blake cleared her throat. “Blake Taylor heard and saw all the things

that usually struck fear inside of her, mundane things to which most people only devoted an insignificant amount of attention. The sounds of birds singing their songs, a dog barking somewhere in the distance all seemed to fade into the background as she breathed in fresh air and simply strolled along. The late day sun cast its warm glow, trees gently swayed in the breeze and every so often released a leaf to drift and eventually join the others on the ground. Tidy lawns surrounded her, gardens still produced flowers, and potted mums seemed to be on every porch along with pumpkins, a colorful celebration of fall. Blake was distracted by the beauty of it all, but what truly calmed her spirit and soothed her soul was the woman who walked beside her. Quinn Scott probably had no clue that Blake considered her strength, compassion, and friendship the most valuable of gifts.”

Quinn wasn’t a writer and struggled with finding the right words to say how incredible she felt at that moment. “I thought you would say something about that ugly scarecrow Mrs. Patterson has sitting on her bench.” She cleared her throat. “Thank you. I’m honored that you feel that way.”

Blake tucked her hands behind her back. “I assume that the ghost hunters will probably be doing something special on Halloween. I suppose I might be ready by then to face that hurdle, but I can only do it if you promise that you will never leave my side.”

“I won—”

“That you’ll hold my hand.”

“I wi—”

“You won’t let it go even if you have to go to the bathroom.”

“Wha—”

“You must promise that you’ll hold me if I lose my mind.”

Quinn stopped and smiled. “You have my word that I will do all those things.” She noticed then that Blake had begun to meet her eyes full on, no fidgeting, no quick glances, just an open, curious, and searching gaze.

“Shake my hand, seal the bond.” Blake reached out.

Quinn clasped it firmly. “So be it.”

“Oh, Blake, if you saw this, you would shit.” Quinn searched for a stick to clear the cobwebs from the inside of the doorway. There was no light in the tool shed, and she could hear something scurrying around in the back of it. “Chuck, if you’re my buddy, you’ll go in there and get the grill.”

Chuck sat down and stared up at her with his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth.

“The offer to stand guard over me while I do it isn’t what I wanted, but thanks.” Quinn picked up a stick and ran it around the entryway, then tossed it aside. She could barely make out the shape of the covered propane grill. She moved a couple of flowerpots out of the way, ran inside, and yanked the rolling cart into the yard.

“Please let the tank be full of propane.” She grunted as she dragged it to the small cement pad at the base of the steps leading to the porch. Fastidious Curtis had thoroughly cleaned it before he stored it away, and it only took a little wiping down before Quinn crossed her fingers and muttered a silent plea that she would not go up in flames. She turned the knob on the tank, then pressed the automatic igniter. A satisfying poof met her ears, and Quinn smiled. “Yes!” She closed the lid and left it to warm.

The potatoes had already been peeled, boiled, and drained. They were ready for Quinn to add her secret ingredients and whip them into potato salad. Baked beans were simmering in the oven, and the house smelled of bell pepper, onion, and the bacon she’d added along with a dab of brown sugar. All she had to do was take the chicken breasts that she’d boiled in seasonings from the stove, lay it on the grill, and smear it with her special homemade sauce.

“How’s it going?” Blake peeked into the kitchen.

“Great. Why aren’t you writing?”

“It smells too good, and it’s making my stomach growl. Can I help?”

“Yes.” Quinn pointed to all the bowls she had sitting on the counter. “Pour those into the potatoes and mix it all together when I’m done.” Quinn spooned in mayonnaise and some mustard and poured pickle juice into the bowl with the potatoes. “Whip ’em good. Take out your aggression and make them smooth and creamy.”

“I can do that,” Blake said as she moved around Quinn, occasionally putting a hand on her lower back to remind Quinn that she was behind her.

Quinn took the pot with the chicken from the stove and drained it in the sink, watching Blake as she worked on the potato salad. When they’d first met, Quinn thought Blake was one big train wreck of an individual, but her idiosyncrasies were becoming endearing, her personality a delight. Quinn liked her and didn’t bother to rebuff the growing attraction she felt for Blake. Quinn was not one to kid herself or employ denial. Fact was fact. The question was whether she could admit that to Blake or if she even should.

She’d caught Blake staring at her quite often. Blake had also grown touchy, not the “I’m using your hip bone as a ladder to escape a squirrel” sort of thing, either. Just little touches here and there that seemed more like affection. The hug they’d shared after Blake’s earlier triumph was energetic, but it too seemed warm. Quinn wondered if they were on the same page or if she was reading more into it than was wise. Regardless, come spring or possibly sooner, Blake had plans to leave.

“Has some part of you begun to enjoy country living?” Quinn asked.

Blake, with her back to Quinn, stopped what she was doing and looked over her shoulder. “I never dreamed I would say this, but yes. It’s nice to look out a window and see the grass and trees. Where you took me today was lovely, too.”

“I like the creek. I used to splash around in it during the summers. One day if you’re interested, I’d like to take you

down to the Gulf. The water isn't particularly pretty there, but the ride down is nice, and a walk on the beach is always serene."

"I might like that," Blake said as she returned to whipping the potatoes.

"The beans are ready. The chicken won't take long." Quinn picked up the tray and pushed the back door open with her foot. "You can join me if you'd like."

Chuck was standing guard over the grill when Quinn walked out and opened the lid. "Don't even think about it, buddy. I've seen the statues you left all over this yard. I'll give you a biscuit later."

"Or you can have one now." Blake walked onto the porch and set the treat on the top step. Chuck rushed over, grabbed it, and took off. "You're welcome," Blake said with a laugh, then looked up into darkening skies. "Are those bats?"

Quinn glanced up. "Chimney swifts, we call them sweeps." Quinn pointed to a creature flying erratically. "That's a bat."

Blake folded her arms and took a step back.

"I have never nor have I ever known anyone who was attacked by one," Quinn said as she put the chicken on the grill. She smiled when Blake came to stand beside her. "I'm not embellishing when I say that it is *awesome* that you just walked out here."

Blake stood close and stared at the night sky.

"What do you see?"

"Those damn chimney things...I lost a visual on the bat."

"Look beyond them at the stars."

"Is that what you do—look beyond the ugly and find the beauty?"

Quinn studied Blake's profile. "That depends on what I'm looking at." She was so busy watching Blake that she'd forgotten about the chicken. Flames hissed as they licked at it. "Oops," she said as she grabbed it with the tongs and flipped

the pieces over. “Light sauce on your chicken or sloppy good?”

“Make it sloppy,” Blake said with a laugh.

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Chapter 20

Blake suppressed a burp as she sat at her computer. She'd eaten way too much but could not make herself stop. She felt painfully stuffed, and still she looked forward to nibbling some of the leftovers as a snack later on. She peered over her shoulder and found Quinn sprawled out on the couch, one leg stretched up the back of it, an arm over her forehead as she stared at the TV totally engrossed in a movie.

She'd told herself that it was a character study, but in truth, Blake just liked looking at Quinn. She liked the way Quinn absentmindedly toyed with the string in the waistband of the blue cotton pajama pants she wore covered in the emblems of sports teams. Blake also liked the oversized T-shirt and the fact that Quinn wasn't wearing a bra beneath it. The soft rise of a nipple through the fabric drew most of her attention.

Quinn was sweet and attentive. When they'd first met, Blake thought her pushy and impatient. She wasn't sure when the subtle shift of her opinion had occurred. It might've been when they hugged on the platform. The close contact with Quinn's body had caused a visceral reaction that stayed with her even as she sat in front of the computer.

She realized Quinn the character wasn't really her creation at all. There was no difference between the two, except on Blake's screen, she could manipulate Quinn into doing what she was beginning to want in reality. She'd never really written sex scenes into her books, and the one she was currently working on wouldn't be any different. Blake had begun to write something erotic anyway. The separate file would be for her eyes only, and as soon as Quinn drifted off to sleep, Blake would turn her imagination loose. Her fingers would tap out every desire she wanted to experience in the flesh.

"Is the TV disturbing you?" Quinn asked.

Blake blinked, feeling embarrassed for being caught, and turned around. "I was just thinking...sometimes I have to look

away from the screen or the temptation to edit will break my train of thought.”

“I’ll be quiet then.”

“You’re fine. Knowing that you’re here makes me feel relaxed. My mind really...goes places. When you get sleepy, you should go get into my bed. It’s much more comfortable than the couch. I know, I’ve slept on both.”

“Thank you, but that’ll mean you will crawl onto this couch in the morning when you’re ready to sleep. I want you well rested for tomorrow. I’m dreaming up hurdles.”

“I already thought of one. I’d like to meet your brother and his wife. We could go somewhere and have dinner like normal people do.”

“You are normal. Are you serious about this? I need to text him so he doesn’t make plans.”

“I am,” Blake said with a nod, a slight bit fearful that Quinn would have her skydiving if she didn’t suggest something more mundane.

“I’m gonna call him instead,” Quinn said excitedly. “Want me to go in another room?”

Blake grinned. “No, I’m just daydreaming right now.” She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of Quinn’s voice.

“Hey, were you asleep? I don’t care, listen up. The author Blake Taylor would like to know if you and Tonya would like to have dinner with us tom— Don’t do that in my ear! Stop, your voice is so high I can’t make out the words...breathe. Hey, Tonya, did you understand him? Well, Blake Taylor has invited y’all out for dinner...Tonya...no, not now, tomorrow night...Tonya? Jacob...dude, one of you has to calm down... give the phone back to your wife. Blake, what time do you want to go?”

Blake turned around and shrugged. “Seven?”

Quinn put the phone back to her ear, then abruptly pulled it away. She rolled her eyes and said, “Hey! Yes, I was talking to *her*. Stop screaming. Seven, be ready at seven, we’ll pick you

up. Good night.” Quinn tossed the phone onto her lap and pinched the skin of her forehead. “I should’ve just texted.”

Sometime after midnight, Quinn released a soft moan as she turned over. The sound of it sent chills down Blake’s spine, and she had begun to sweat a bit while she brazenly wrote out every last detail of what she wanted to do to Quinn. She’d never written anything so explicit. Her skin was flushed as she read over the words she dared to put on the screen. She was under the influence of an arousal so strong that she feared she might act on impulse. Blake refused to turn around and look at Quinn. She feared a great many things, lacked fortitude that most people took for granted, couldn’t even hail a cab, but Blake had learned she was not afraid of sex. All she required was the slightest welcome, and it was on.

Beth’s signal had been clear, and Blake had stunned her with an immediate response. It was the only time in Blake’s life that she’d felt smug. The seductive smile on Beth’s face turned to an expression of shock when Blake ripped her blouse open, then went filled her eyes when Blake pulled Beth into her arms. Sex between them was hot, volatile, and as Blake thought back on it, probably the only reason Beth came back so often.

“You have all this passion pent up inside you and no way to let it out,” Beth whispered.

“Until now.” Blake smiled contentedly as she ran her hands through Beth’s hair as she lay with her head on Blake’s chest.

“If you were to venture out of this building, step into life, I would become only a memory.”

“That’s not true,” Blake proclaimed.

She’d not known then that she was lying to them both. Beth did, though. Perhaps she’d felt it in Blake’s touch or saw it in Blake’s eyes that all she had to offer was passion. In the end, it could not sustain.

The woman sleeping behind her was far too special to toy with. Blake highlighted the file she'd just written and hit delete. She didn't want to live vicariously on the screen. Blake felt that a real story was gradually unfolding between her and Quinn. She didn't want to only experience it in her imagination. So she changed the names of her characters to Carrot and Parsnip until she could think of something else more suitable, and she began to write.

“Blake, wake up.”

Blake was sitting on the edge of a well. Muted light shimmered on the water below that seemed so far away. She felt herself leaning toward it. Her mind warned her to stop, but her body, with a will of its own, just kept right on. Strong arms unseen reached beneath her arms to stop the descent. Blake could feel the warmth of the body but could not comprehend how something that felt so tangible could be invisible and be between her and the water. Warm breath caressed her ear as a voice whispered, “Wake up, sweetie.”

With a gasp, Blake awoke, her chin on Quinn's shoulder, her arms hanging limply at her sides. Her feet felt numb and heavy, she couldn't move them. Quinn stroked her back soothingly.

“I can't believe you fell asleep in this chair. When I woke up, you were leaning forward like you were about to fall on your face.”

Blake wrapped her arms around Quinn. “I think there are ants in my socks.”

“Your feet are probably asleep. I'm gonna slip my hands under your thighs and lift you up. Just hang on.”

“Just give my feet a few minutes. I can wa— Whoa!”

Their chests were pressed together. Blake could feel Quinn's laughter, the swell of her breasts. “You are light as a feather,” Quinn said as she carried Blake down the hall. “It's just five in the morning. Sleep for as long as you want to. I'm

going to the bathroom after I drop you off, then I'm going back to the couch where I will go back to sleep, too."

"You should've dropped me on the couch, it was closer."

Blake released Quinn when her butt hit the bed, then she flopped back when Quinn grabbed her feet and lifted them. "You are so easy to toss around, I bet I could make a jump shot with you as the ball," Quinn said with a chuckle.

"I'd prefer that you didn't put that into practice." Blake held up a hand when Quinn reached to switch off the lamp. "The sun isn't up yet."

"You'd sleep better without that light in your eyes. I'll leave the hall light on."

"I'm not ready to cross that hurdle." Blake grimaced as more circulation returned to her feet.

"Is this what's bothering you?" Quinn grabbed one and began to rub.

"Ow...Ouch."

"I'm rubbing very gently. Do you have something wrong with your feet?" Quinn ripped a sock off before Blake could reply and inspected the foot in her hand.

"I was saying ouch in preparation for it to hurt."

Quinn stared at Blake, her face blank. "But it didn't...did it?"

"No, but it could've had I not said something."

"You never cease to amaze me, and before you ask, that's not necessarily a bad thing." Quinn dropped Blake's foot onto the bed. "Tell that creative mind of yours to go back to sleep."

"Are you sure you don't want to trade places with me?" Blake asked as Quinn stepped into the hall.

"Positive. Sleep well. We're going skydiving later."

"That's what I thought, and fuck no."

"Joking," Quinn said, her voice fading.

Blake whispered, "I need to learn how to drive, so I can escape should you suggest swimming with sharks."

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Chapter 21

“Are you scared?”

Quinn kept her gaze averted and shook her head.

“I need you to look at me and say it.”

Quinn tilted her head to the side as she turned, her eyes on Blake. “A little.” She put her hand over her mouth and laughed. “You can’t sit that close to the steering wheel. There’s an airbag inside of it. If you were to hit something, it would deploy and... Just scoot the seat back a couple of notches.”

Blake wiggled around, managed to grab the bar, and slid the seat back. “This truck is huge.”

“It is, but if you learn how to drive this, a car will be a breeze. Now what we want to accomplish today is you getting used to the operation of the vehicle.” Quinn stared down the dirt road. She’d picked the one where her father had taught her to drive. There were no ditches, and the trees were far enough away that she didn’t have to worry about Blake slamming into one unless she got a little crazy with the accelerator. “When you’re ready, take your foot off the brake, put it on the gas pedal, and press it gradually down. “Keep your speed—”

The rear tires dug into the earth, and the truck lurched forward before bouncing to a stop. Blake released a sigh that sounded more like a whimper. “Okay, that was great. I think I’m done.”

Quinn wiped her hair from her eyes. “Yeah...you got a little taste, but the next time, a little less gas. That’s it,” she said when the truck began to creep along. “I’m just curious. If you didn’t drive, how did you get back and forth to school?”

Blake had a death grip on the wheel; she stared straight ahead, doing a whopping five miles an hour. “My mother drove us, or sometimes we rode the bus, depending on where we lived.”

“I mean college.”

“I never went. I barely graduated high school. Technically, I didn’t. I took the GED when I was sixteen.”

Quinn was stunned. “I would’ve never guessed that.”

“I hated school. I felt so frazzled and awkward that I couldn’t concentrate, and my grades lagged as a result. About the time I began to feel remotely comfortable, we’d be packing up to move somewhere else. I was shy, and in high school, I realized that I was gay. Though no one knew, it just felt like the divide between me and the others grew even bigger. One morning, I just refused to go, and I suppose my parents realized that since I was failing in every subject but English, allowing me to drop out was the best course of action.”

“How’d you learn to write?”

“Reading. I was a voracious reader. I’d read the story first for pure enjoyment, then I’d go back and study the technique. When I decided that I wanted to write, I amassed every book on the subject that I could.” The truck rolled to a stop, and Blake just sat there staring out the windshield. “I still remember the day that it all just clicked. I was so caught up in the mechanics that every attempt I made was choppy and stilted. I was trying to write about how my life was so messed up, but on that day, I just let the restraints on my imagination fall away, and it all began to flow. My first book took a month to write, a year to edit and fine tune. Dad had been hounding me to find a job, but when he read what I’d done, he stopped.”

Quinn slid the gearshift into park when Blake’s hands slipped off the wheel. She appeared to be so deep in her memories that she was unaware that she was supposed to be driving. Her foot was at least on the brake, but Quinn feared that Blake would forget that, too. She looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was behind them and asked, “Did you submit it to a publisher?”

“No, I went to therapy because Dad thought I was insane after reading what I wrote.” Blake smiled. “It was dark and twisted. The therapist, however, read it, and with my permission turned it over to a friend of his, Cassidy Spencer,

an agent for Castillion's press. *Dark Renderings* didn't do very well. I made next to nothing off the sales, but Cassidy said she saw promise. I had a job, low paying, but it was enough to make my parents happy. They supported me as I continually pounded out books. The one that took off shocked me because I really had my doubts about it. *Unwelcomed* soared to the top of the charts, and I felt like I could call myself an author. Everything changed after that."

Blake inhaled sharply and seemed to break out of her haze. She turned to Quinn and asked, "What're we doing here?"

"You asked me to teach you how to drive," Quinn said flatly. "It fascinates me how you can go so far away in your head like you're in a trance. You did it a couple of times when you were writing. You'd just turn and stare at the wall. The first time I noticed it, I spoke to you, and it took a long time for you to come back. Where do you go?"

Blake shrugged. "Everywhere. I've always done it, even when I was little. Mom told me she used to worry that I was having seizures. She'd snap her fingers and get no response." She smiled faintly. "I learned to control it after she took me to the doctor a few times. The diagnosis was termed 'profound daydreaming.' For me, it's just like watching a movie. Sometimes I control it, sometimes I simply watch."

"What do you see?"

A smirk formed on Blake's lips as she looked away. "I can't tell you."

Quinn laughed. "Drive, smart-ass." The engine of the truck revved, but it didn't move. "Put it back in gear, but put your foot on the brake first. And this time, go a tad faster—not that fast. Blake, let off the gas," Quinn said loudly, trying not to scream as she grabbed for anything she could hold on to. "Find a medium between crawl and Mach one."

At forty miles per hour, Blake was all over the road as she tried to get accustomed to the steering. "How am I doing?"

"In this country, we drive on the right. Stay in your lane."

“There is no lane,” Blake argued as the truck bounced through a pothole.

“Brake.”

“What?”

“I said brake not Blake.”

The truck skidded to a stop, and dust billowed around them. “I don’t think I’m meant to drive,” Blake said shakily.

“Remember how you told me that when you got used to the mechanics of writing, it just flowed afterward?”

“No, I told you that I ignored that and just wrote.”

“It’s the same concept,” Quinn rasped as she tried to appear calm. “Once you get used to the technique, it becomes second nature, so we...” *Oh, dear God.* “...we practice. Take off again.”

Quinn felt positively seasick. The second half of the lesson was in an open field where people rode four-wheelers and motorcycles. The dry earth was rutted and made the ride bumpy as Blake drove the truck in circles and figure eights to get used to steering. The more she drove, the faster she went.

“This is great,” Blake said with a wide grin as she bounced them along.

“Yeah,” Quinn said. She dug her phone out of the center console when it began to ring and juggled it for a second. “Scott’s Plumbing.”

Blake thankfully brought the truck to a stop.

“Do you know where the main cutoff is? Okay, I’m not far from you. Give me about five minutes, and I’ll be there.” Quinn set the phone back in the console. “We’re gonna have to change seats. I’m on call, and there’s an emergency.”

Blake quickly vacated the driver’s seat, and they got out and switched sides.

“What kind of emergency?” Blake asked as she climbed into the passenger’s seat and fastened her belt.

“Patty Jenkins somehow broke the faucet on her garden tub. She says water is pouring out onto the ledge, and it’s flooding her bathroom. I’m sorry to make you have to go to work with me, but I’m on call, and this can’t wait.”

“I understand. I think it’ll be kind of cool to see you in action,” Blake said while she held on as Quinn navigated the rough terrain to the road.

Blake intended to go inside with Quinn when they arrived at the house. She was feeling more comfortable with Chuck, but she sat rooted when a pack of dogs came barreling out of the shrubbery barking like they were going to eat Quinn when she hopped out.

“Stay here a minute, let me get the water cut off.” Quinn reached into the back of her truck and pulled out a long pole with a T bar across the top of it. She sprinted across the yard, fooled with something on the ground, then stuck the pole down into it. She made one twist and walked back to the truck.

“Patty’s dogs don’t bite, they just like to bark,” she said as she opened the driver’s door. “I need to get in there. Do you want to brave it and walk with me?”

The large dogs seemed too interested as they paced back and forth looking at the truck, occasionally releasing a bark. “I’ll wait here if you don’t mind.”

“Okay, again I’m sorry,” Quinn said earnestly. “I’ll be as fast as I can.” She grabbed a large canvas bag out of the back of the truck and jogged up to the house.

Blake watched as the dogs scattered, then flanked Quinn and followed her right into the house when a woman opened the door. Quinn had been heedless of them, and Blake wished she had the girl balls to do the same, then she thought about that expression. “Why do people equate testicles with being tough?” she wondered aloud. “They’re mushy and tender, the weak spot of a man.” She made a face. “Yuck.”

What she wanted was fortitude, and it wasn't going to come along naturally. Blake was tired of sitting on the sidelines of life, she wanted in the game, so she pushed her door open. She debated stepping out. The dogs were inside, so then what was the point? Still, Blake felt if she could just put her feet on the driveway, she would feel that she'd accomplished a first step on her own. Minutes passed as she worked up the courage.

Something moved in the gravel out her line of sight, and suddenly, a chicken appeared on the ground between her and the door. "Shit!" Blake blurted out as she climbed up onto the console. The chicken stopped pecking at the ground and cocked its head to the side, staring at Blake with one curious beady eye. Blake waved her hands. "Go! You, go away!" The chicken had other ideas.

Quinn hoped she had the faucet stem in her truck that was required to make the repair. If not, it meant a trip back to the office. Patty followed behind her as she walked down the hall.

"Is it bad? Will you be able to fix it? Is it gonna cost a lot?" she asked in rapid succession.

"I can fix it, I just need the right part. It won't break your bank, I promise."

Quinn and Patty walked outside, and Patty slammed into Quinn when she stopped abruptly, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. It looked like there was a tornado in her truck. Flashes of hands and something red whirled behind the windshield. Quinn took off running.

All of Blake's avian nightmares had come true when the chicken jumped right into the truck with her. It was fight or flight, and since her brain would not function properly and remind her that there was another door, she fought. That apparently pissed off the chicken. Someone grabbed her around the waist and pulled her out of the truck as Blake flailed.

“Come on, mother fucker!” Blake screamed as the chicken continued to bounce around the cab. “You want some more? I’ll kick your feathered ass in.”

“Blake, calm down, I’ve got you,” Quinn yelled, but in a fit of hysteria, Blake fought her, kicking at the air and the gravel to get free.

Patty was on the other side of the truck and managed to get a hold on the bird. It flapped and squawked as she caught it and tossed it on the ground. Indignant, the bird stalked off, and the dogs that had followed backed up to give her a wide berth.

Patty was apologetic, even though her chicken had been assaulted. Evidence was all over the inside of the truck as feathers wafted on the breeze through the opened doors. “I’m so sorry, honey. I hope Ester didn’t hurt you. She’s as mean as she can be, even the dogs won’t have anything to do with her. I’d kill and cook her if I wasn’t afraid she’d kick my eyes out. My grandbabies don’t want to come over here anymore because she harasses them before they can even get out of the car. Oh, you have scratches,” she said fretfully. “I’ll go get something to clean you up.”

Blake had stopped fighting, and Quinn released her hold to get a good look at her. Blake’s hair was a mess and sported a few feathers. Blood was oozing from a small nick above her right eye. Some of the scratches on her arms were lightly bleeding, as well. Blake didn’t seem to notice she was giving the chicken the stink eye as it walked around the yard.

“You took a beating, that’s for sure,” Quinn said sadly. “Are you okay?”

“Bitch chicken. That’s right, I’m talking about you!” Blake growled as she continued to stare at it. She turned to Quinn, eyes full of fury. “I kicked its ass. It came at me, and I punched it right in the jaw. I don’t remember much after that, but I’m sure I was winning.” Blake looked back at Ester. “I’m having chicken for dinner tonight. I’m gonna eat your momma! You better hide your eggs, bitch.”

“Okay, tiger, chill. Why don’t you sit down here until Patty comes back?” Quinn gently pushed Blake back toward the

truck and helped her to sit sideways in the driver's seat. She frowned at the marks on Blake's arms. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have left you here alone."

"Do you realize how pathetic that sounds? I'm a grown woman who can't even sit outside in your truck without you having to worry?" Blake stuck a finger in Quinn's face. "I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at me and that fucking chicken."

"But you beat her ass," Quinn offered.

"I did." Blake pointed at the yard bird. "I kicked your ass."

"You're the winner."

"I am," Blake said hotly, then blew out a breath. She glared when Quinn started to snicker, then some of Blake's fire went out, and she started to laugh. "I punched a chicken."

Quinn nodded as she laughed harder. "You're a total badass."

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Chapter 22

Quinn laughed despite the fact that she was cleaning chicken shit and feathers out of her truck. Once the shock of what happened wore off and she was certain that Blake was not going to suffer a nervous breakdown or a heart attack, it was damn funny.

Quinn had to demand that Blake come back into the house while she finished the repair because she was afraid to leave her alone. Not because she feared that Blake would be attacked again but that she would go on the attack. As they walked back into Patty's house, Ester began to head their way posturing, her wings out like she was ready for round two. So was Blake. Quinn had to get in between them and usher Blake inside.

On the ride home, Quinn would burst out laughing uncontrollably, and when she sobered, Blake would lose it. The memory of Blake with her head thrown back, laughing, feathers still in her hair, tears on her cheek, and a little Band-Aid on her brow made Quinn smile as she wiped excrement from the dashboard. Blake had come a long way from the neurotic little thing Quinn had met about a month earlier. Quinn had gone from pitying her to understanding, then to admiring. The attraction she felt was growing stronger with each minute they were together. She still wondered what to do with that.

She looked at her watch, sprayed some fabric freshener in the truck, and rushed into her house to shower. Quinn looked forward to the dinner date. She wanted to see Jacob and Tonya meet the dark princess of horror they believed Blake to be. More than that, she wanted Jacob's opinion of the woman she was coming to know and adore. Quinn was still unsure if she was reading too much into the lingering gazes and the twinkle in Blake's eye when she regarded her. If the attraction was two-sided, her brother would pick up on it, and Quinn knew when they were alone, he'd tell her.

She showered quickly, then stood in the mirror staring at herself. Blake had mentioned that she liked her hair down, so Quinn dried it until it was lightly damp. She sprayed it with curling gel and wound a few locks around her fingers. The result was a wavy almost messy look. Hair was easy; picking the right clothes was not.

There weren't any fancy eateries in Cypress Glade. Jeans were the obvious choice, but the shirt would take some consideration since what she mostly wore were T-shirts. Quinn sighed and decided to go with the old standard, a light denim shirt, and she grabbed a pair of her favorite brown boots with buckles on the ankles.

“Wow...wow...you look hot. Those jeans fit your ass like a glove. No, turn around again...yes.”

Blake sighed as she watched Quinn take things out of the backseat of her truck and toss them into the bed. When Quinn slammed the doors, Blake dropped the slat in the blinds she'd been peeking through and backed away from the window, her heart racing. She was nervous about meeting Jacob and his wife, but more about opening the door to Quinn. Her crush was reaching a fevered pitch, and earlier that day before they parted to get dressed, Quinn had stroked Blake's hair away from her face when it had clung to the copious amount of antibacterial ointment that had seeped from beneath the Band-Aid. Her touch had been gentle, and the fingertip that trailed lightly down the side of Blake's cheek nearly made her swoon.

Blake had gone inside and cupped her hand to her face as if to hold Quinn's warmth to her skin, and she remembered something that made her tingle. Quinn's eyes seemed slightly out of focus for a moment as they swept over Blake's face and settled for only a fleeting second on her lips. And then Quinn smiled and backed away. The affectionate encounter had left Blake with that tingly feeling in the pit of her stomach and had not faded during the couple of hours they'd been apart.

Quinn's knock jarred her. Blake waited a few seconds, breathed out a sigh, then walked over to the door. When she

opened it, Quinn's gaze swept over her from head to toe. She didn't say anything, just stood there and stared.

"Okay, my shirt is black, but I don't have a lot of—"

"You look fantastic," Quinn said, almost with a sigh. She blinked and shook her head slightly. "Taller...you're...tall."

"They kinda have a heel." Blake lifted her foot and pointed at her black boots.

Quinn cleared her throat. Her face looked a bit flushed. "I like the way you tied your shirt at your waist." She gestured for a moment. "It's cute...um...are you ready?"

"Yes." Blake grabbed her purse. "Lights are on, back door is locked, yeah, I'm ready."

Quinn held the screen door open for Blake as she locked the front door. Then she opened the passenger's side door of the truck and held it for her as she climbed in. Blake tried not to stare as Quinn walked around the front of the truck and got in.

"I should've helped you clean your truck, it was a mess," Blake said as Quinn backed out of the driveway.

"I needed to wipe down the inside anyway, it was dusty. I kept a chicken feather to commemorate this day," she said with a grin.

"I did, too." Blake pointed to her head. "But then, I do have a battle scar."

"How're your arms?"

"They stung when I took a shower, but I consoled myself with the notion that Ester probably has a sore jaw. Patty should rename that bird something like Satan or Winged Demon. She had the devil in her eyes for sure."

Quinn chuckled. "Jacob and Tonya don't have any chickens, just Jack, and he's very sweet. They, however, are extremely excited to meet you, so if they gush too much, just pop them in the jaw like you did Ester. Let me know before you do it, so I can get my phone out and video."

“I probably won’t talk much. I’m shy when I meet new people. Making small talk isn’t easy for me.”

“Trust me, they will do most of the talking. I’ll be right there with you, so if you feel uncomfortable, let me know.”

“My protector,” Blake said with a smile as she looked out her window.

Jacob and Tonya’s house sat well off the road on a large plot of land filled with oaks and pines. In front of the L-shaped porch were well-tended flowerbeds bordered by ornamental grass. Gaslights on posts bathed the front of the house in a flickering glow as the sun quickly set. Jack lifted his head where he lay on the porch and watched as Quinn’s truck approached.

“This is lovely,” Blake said as she caught sight of a fountain next to a covered walkway leading to the garage.

“It’s very pretty during the day, especially the patio. Jacob and Tonya are avid gardeners. There’s always something in bloom around here.”

Blake watched as a tall thin man walked out on the porch dressed in a pair of jeans and a white button-down shirt. He said something to Jack, who had stood and looked as though he was ready to walk out into the yard. Jack sat down, his ears slightly perked as he stared at the truck.

“I’ll let you out. That way, I can act like a buffer in case Jack decides to disobey Jacob. He won’t bite or jump on you, I promise.”

“I trust you,” Blake said as she kept an eye on the dog.

Quinn got out and waved at Jacob as she walked around the front of the truck. She opened Blake’s door and took her hand to help her out. To Blake’s great pleasure, Quinn held on to it as they walked toward the porch.

“Blake’s not used to being around dogs,” Quinn called out.

“He’s why I stepped outside. He stinks. I don’t want him to get near either of you,” Jacob said with his gaze fixed on

Blake. “I didn’t have a chance to bathe him today after his swim in the pond.”

“Jacob, I want you to meet Blake Taylor.”

Jack stayed put as Jacob reached out both hands and took Blake’s between them. “It is such an honor to meet you, Ms. Taylor.”

“Likewise. Please, just call me Blake. Your sister speaks very highly of you.”

Jacob smiled and released her. He leaned toward Quinn and kissed her cheek. “Please, come inside,” he said as he opened the door.

Tonya was short with a stocky build. She brushed her short dark hair from her face as she approached with a huge smile. “Blake Taylor, I *cannot* express how thrilled I am to meet you and have you in my home.” She didn’t bother with the formality of a handshake; instead, she enveloped Blake in a warm hug, then she took her by the hand and led her to the sofa. The coffee table was piled with books. “Please, don’t think I expect you to sign them all, but if you’d just sign one, I’d be so honored.”

Quinn stared slack-jawed at the pile. “Good Lord, Blake, how many have you written?”

Jacob looked appalled. “You don’t know?”

“Obviously not,” Quinn said as she walked over and picked one up. “*Bitter Bones*,” she said as she studied the cover.

“Oh! That is one of my all-time favorites,” Tonya exclaimed. “I love gothic tales, and the ghost in that story was so scary. You created such an unsettling mood in that book. I had the heebie-jeebies a long time after reading that one.”

Jacob nodded. “She did. That’s why we have a night-light in the hall and our bathroom.” Jacob laughed. “One night, I was in there, but Tonya thought I was still in bed when she—”

“Baby, don’t tell that story right now,” Tonya said as her face flushed.

Quinn obviously knew it because she turned away, and Blake could tell that she was laughing.

Tonya set a hand on Blake's arm. "Can I get you something to drink? Would you like a glass of wine?"

"No, thank you," Blake said politely. "I do need a pen, though."

"Okay." Tonya jumped up and ran toward the kitchen looking like there were hot coals under her feet.

"She's excited." Jacob sliced a hand through the air in front of him. "I'm totally cool."

Quinn patted him on the stomach. "Good boy, you get a biscuit later."

Tonya raced back in, reclaimed her spot on the sofa next to Blake, and handed her a pen.

"Do you...do you mind, Blake, if I take a picture of you doing that?" Jacob asked.

"No," she said with a smile. "I don't mind at all."

Jacob ran out of the room just like Tonya had done moments before. Quinn rolled her eyes and laughed as she looked at Blake. Jacob returned quickly with a camera, lens cap dangling. The sound of the shutter started going off as Blake signed.

Tonya looked back at him, her smile huge as she pointed at Blake. Tonya couldn't suppress her squeal of delight when Blake put an arm around her waist and smiled up at the camera while Jacob continued to take photo after photo.

"Dude, we'd like to eat this century. Give the girl a break," Quinn said and thumped him.

Jacob handed Quinn the camera. "Get me, then we'll go." He sat on the other side of Blake and beamed.

Chapter 23

“They’re really sweet,” Blake said as she and Quinn waited for Jacob and Tonya to clear out the backseat of Tonya’s car since it had more room than Quinn’s truck.

“They’re crazy. I forget sometimes that you’re a celebrity.”

Blake shook her head. “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Quinn winked at her. “I know you told me how many you’d written, but seeing that stack was still shocking.

“I think eighty-seven is on the computer right now. I’ve been writing a long time, but there are authors out there that have written far more in less time.”

“I’m impressed.” Quinn almost went with the impulse to touch Blake’s face when she smiled demurely. Instead, she stuffed her hands into her back pockets. “You made their year, thank you for that.”

“They made mine. I was very flattered that they wanted their pictures taken with me.”

The car pulled up beside them, and Jacob climbed out quickly to open Blake’s door. “Quinn, get in on the other side. You know how to use the handle.”

“Oh, you were all nice when I was bringing her over. Now that she’s here, you’re back to being a tool. I got your number, buddy.” Quinn pointed over the top of the car. “I’m gonna write my own book about you.”

Jacob laughed at her as he closed Blake’s door. When he got into the driver’s seat, he said to Blake, “My sister has a reputation for being feisty. I love to rile her up.”

Blake grinned at Quinn. “What has she done to earn that rep?”

Jacob and Tonya released twin grunts.

Quinn leaned forward and said, “Shut up and take us to the House on the Bayou.”

“As you can see, her attitude is part of the legend.” Jacob glanced at Tonya. “Quinn won’t hurt you, so you tell on her.”

“Let me see,” Tonya said, despite Quinn’s nudge on the back of her seat. “My favorite was the time she went off on the woman who used to own that sandwich shop next to the dry cleaners. That was totally justified, though, because she was just rude, and that’s probably why she’s no longer in business. Quinn likes to throw tools when she gets mad. There’s probably a wrench in every yard in town. Oh, and the day she told Glenda Percy that she was a parasite that lived only to suck the joy out of everyone else was a classic. The Ladies’ Auxiliary was having a pie sale to benefit something, I can’t remember.” Tonya waved a hand. “Quinn looked at the rest of the women standing there slack-jawed and said, ‘Y’all aren’t immune, everybody in town knows that one of you has a gambling problem, another is cheating on her husband, and one of you has a home in danger of foreclosure. So as you’re standing there looking all smug while hearing about everyone’s dirty laundry, just know that Glenda has yours swinging in the breeze, too.’” Tonya chuckled. “I laughed so hard at Glenda and her gossip posse because none of them could say a word. Jacob had to half carry me back to the car. I was completely in tears.”

Blake grinned at Quinn and said, “I’m sorry I missed that.”

“It didn’t have much of an impact but just made Glenda more fearsome to everyone else.”

Tonya turned in her seat so she could look at Blake. “Which of your books is your favorite?”

“I can’t give a definitive answer. They’re all special to me in one way or another. *Warning to the Sage* is probably my least favorite. I really struggled with that one, and I think it showed. I think my writing was stilted, and I just wasn’t in the right mind-set to write it, I suppose.” Blake looked out the window.

“Let’s not make her talk shop,” Quinn said with a glance at Blake. “She’s been working a lot lately and would probably like to clear her mind. Feel free to continue to fawn over her.”

Tonya turned around to fuss at Jacob for driving her car like he was on a racetrack.

Quinn leaned in close to Blake and whispered, “Was that okay?”

Blake nodded and squeezed her arm.

Quinn liked the contact and wished that Blake would’ve continued to hold on to her. She wondered how Blake would feel inside the restaurant that was usually crowded on the weekends. It would give her a good excuse to stay close.

When they arrived at the House on the Bayou, Jacob let the ladies out at the door, and Tonya went inside to put their name on the wait list while Quinn and Blake stood on the curb away from those who gathered on the porch. “Is this place new?” Blake studied what was designed to look like a Victorian-era home.

“Yes and no. The original was an old house that had been converted into a restaurant and was a casualty of Katrina. From what I’ve heard, the owners debated for a long time about reopening. They only had this place built a few years ago. That’s why it sits up so high, and it’s supposed to be able to withstand a category five hurricane. Like everyone else, I hope to never see it tested.” Quinn took advantage of their alone time and asked, “How’re you doing?”

“Good, I think the experience with Ester today has bolstered my confidence. I can’t give her all the credit, though. You’ve been steadily chipping away at my fortress.”

Quinn smiled. “All my pleasure. I enjoy seeing you shine.” She looked over Blake’s shoulder at Jacob as he walked up. “Did you park in the next town?”

“Felt like it,” Jacob said as he joined them. “How long is the wait?”

“I don’t know,” Quinn said as she looked for Tonya. “Your bride hasn’t returned yet.”

Jacob ran his knuckles over his tidy beard as he stared up at the door. “She’s probably trying to secure the perfect table. She’ll pester the hostess until she gets exactly what she wants.”

“I understand that you have friends who...hunt ghosts.”

Jacob looked down at Blake. “Yes, they’re avid hunters. I just talked to Carl this morning. He was all excited about spending the night in some old building near the French Quarter. I assume you’ve probably done a few hunts yourself for research.”

“No,” Blake said with a smile. “I find the whole idea frightening.”

“Me too.” Jacob put one hand on his hip, the other he fanned in front of his face before he seemed to realize what he was doing. Then he folded his arms and stood erect. His voice was deeper when he said, “It’s a scary thing. I’m not sure I could look at it scientifically like Carl and his team do.”

“Do you have any idea if they’re doing something special on Halloween?” Quinn asked.

Jacob nodded. “Oh, yeah, Carl was so excited he started stuttering when he told me they’d been invited to investigate some old farmhouse between here and the coast. The woman who owns it lives in Dallas, but she and her family are supposed to move into the place next month. They can’t keep renovation crews there because of all the strange occurrences. Carl says the prices go up every time she has to hire another crew because apparently word has gotten out. She wants Carl’s team to disprove that it’s haunted. If they find that it is, she’s going to make it into a bed-and-breakfast because ghosts draw the business.”

Blake’s face had fallen slack, and she was clutching the strap on her purse as though it were a lifeline. As Quinn regarded her, she regretted asking about Halloween. She’d hoped to take Blake on a hunt that wouldn’t yield anything, so her fears of what lay hidden in the dark would be dispelled. The house’s reputation alone guaranteed to make any type of

investigation tense. She'd begun to give up on the Halloween idea when Blake spoke up and surprised her.

"Could...could...would...you ask your friend...Carl if we could tag along on Halloween?"

Jacob hit an octave that made everyone turn and look at them when he exclaimed, "Yes! We'll go...we'll all go." He'd begun to do a little dance, then suddenly stopped. Quinn feared he'd spit to look manly, but Jacob cleared his throat and refolded his arms. "Strength in numbers as they say."

Tonya poked her head out the door and waved them up. Quinn stayed close by Blake's side as they wove through the crowd at the door. The main dining room was a large area, but there were small rooms, as well. The hostess led them to one that had windows overlooking the water, and there were only three other tables.

Once they were seated, Jacob asked lowly, "How'd we score this? The wait had to be at least an hour judging by the crowd outside and in the foyer."

"I slipped Madison forty bucks. Don't tell anyone she's on the take, she'll get fired." Tonya turned to Blake. "If you like seafood, the shrimp Robichaux is to die for. The sauce is spicy and tangy. It'll make you slap your mamma."

"That's an expression used down here when something is really good," Quinn explained when Blake's brow rose.

"Thank you for the suggestion, Tonya, but I'm in the mood for chicken."

Jacob and Tonya stared at Quinn and Blake when they began to laugh like a pair of fools. "I think there's a story here," Jacob said with a smile.

Blake nodded at Quinn. "You tell it."

"I took Blake with me out to Patty Jenkins's place to fix a faucet. While I was inside, Patty's chicken Ester attacked Blake. Let me just say that Ester is missing a lot of feathers right now. Blake thoroughly plucked her up."

Jacob closed his menu. “That settles it, I’m having chicken, too. I hate that damn bird. She pecked me once when I was fixing a spigot at Patty’s neighbor’s house. Blake, if I had a drink, I’d toast you.”

“I think that problem is about to corrected right now,” Tonya said as the waiter approached the table.

Perhaps it was spite that made the chicken so delectable, but Blake also gave credit to the sauce that she’d allowed Tonya to spoon onto it from her shrimp Robichaux. Jacob and Tonya were pleasant company, as well. The night was beautiful. Blake watched the reflection of the moon ripple on the waters of the bayou and the headlights of cars that traveled on the roads near the bank. All around her were the sights and sounds of life, and she’d been missing it by hiding herself away when the sun went down—for that matter, when the sun was up.

“I didn’t tell you the news,” Jacob said to Tonya as he fed her some of his pecan pie à la mode. “Blake and Quinn want to go with Carl and his guys out to that farmhouse I told you about.”

Tonya grabbed her napkin and held it in front of her mouth. “Shut the front door! Are you kidding me? A ghost hunt? And with Blake Taylor? Oh, my God!”

Jacob still looked as excited as Tonya. “Carl is gonna freak when I tell him you want to go, Blake. Wait...am I allowed to tell him who you are?”

That was a question Blake wasn’t prepared for. She thought about it for a few minutes. If she made an absolute fool out of herself by doing something stupid like pissing her pants, word could get out, especially if there was video. She swallowed hard when the image of her with urine-stained pants and probably screaming being played on the Internet swept through her mind. Not to mention how humiliating it would be, but all of Cassidy’s hard work to make her appear dark and mysterious would go up in smoke.

“I’ll have to get back to you on that, Jacob. I’m really not sure.”

“No problem,” he said with a smile. “I’ll just tell them Quinn and her...friend want to join on the hunt. You can tell them when we get there if you want.”

Blake motioned for the check when it arrived, but she had all three of the Scotts vying to pay. “This is my treat. I can’t tell you when I’ve had a more enjoyable evening,” she said, smiling at Jacob and Tonya.

“Well, you have to promise that you’ll come back out to the house and let us cook for you.” Tonya reached over and took Blake’s hand. “We’ll spoil you rotten. Say you will.”

“I will. I promise.”

Blake was doing well in Tonya’s care as they stood near the water and watched children toss french fries out to the seagulls. The birds were distracted by the food, and Blake had happily allowed Tonya to take her arm. Tonya gestured wildly as she explained something to Blake, who nodded often.

“She’s a sweet, sweet woman. Soft-spoken, polite, so not what I expected. What you’ve told me about her being afraid of everything and meeting her has totally dispelled my opinion of the dark princess. She’s not scary or diabolical at all.”

“She shocked me when she brought up the ghost hunt. She’s changing so fast, just jumping into everything.”

“You’re good at making a person feel strong. You had a lot of practice with me, that’s for sure.”

“Thanks.” Quinn nodded as she stood beside Jacob a short distance from Blake. “Do you think she likes me more than just a friend?”

“Oh, it’s obvious, and so do you. I don’t think you have to fear rejection if you ask her out.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know if I should. I really do like her, and I’m stuck in that place of trying to keep my feelings at bay or going for it.” Quinn glanced at Jacob. “She

plans to go back to New York after her book is done or when the lease goes up in the spring. I might be in over my head by then regardless of whether we get together.”

Jacob released a small groan. “I don’t see how you have any choice then. If your friendship does turn intimate, that might be enough to make her stay. She’s a writer. She can work most anywhere.”

“I couldn’t stand her when I met her,” Quinn said with a soft laugh. “I thought the whole scaredy cat thing was an act to get those around her to do what she wanted. But the odd thing is after getting to know her, I think she may be braver than me. After Shay, I came back here and hid. I let Mom treat me like one of the employees at the nursing home. I don’t date women with long-term potential because I’m afraid of opening up. My love life has dwindled down to a handful of secret affairs. And here I stand afraid to tell her how I feel. Blake and I aren’t that much different, except she’s tired of being afraid, and she’s daring to make a change.”

“Make your change with her.” Jacob cuffed Quinn on the shoulder. “Be brave, see what happens.”

When the fries were gone, the gulls began to scatter, and one noticed Blake and Tonya. It flew close to see if they would throw it anything. With the strap in her hand, Blake swung the purse at the bird, and it flew away.

“I’m going to retract my earlier statement. Blake might be a little diabolical after all,” Jacob said as they watched Blake thrust her chest out in challenge at the birds.

“I had a great time. I haven’t been to dinner in a restaurant since I was a kid. I felt adult, empowered, free.” Blake sighed as she turned to Quinn. “You and your family were great company. You forgot to switch on your turn signal.”

Quinn laughed. “Are you backseat driving now that you’ve had a lesson?”

“I watch everything you do very closely.”

“I’ll continue to teach you, and one day if you so desire, you can test for your license.”

“That’s my goal,” Blake said with a nod.

“Will you buy a car, and if so, what would you get? I can see you in a sporty red convertible.”

Blake patted the console. “I like this, what is it?”

“A Ford F-150, a work truck. Not very exciting.”

“I disagree. It makes me feel big and tough.”

“You are tough. You beat up a bully chicken today, and I saw you go after that seagull. If I were a bird, I’d be quaking in my feathers right now.”

Blake laughed softly. “I need to learn to control my toughness. I was on a bold high when I asked Jacob to tell his friend that I wanted to ghost hunt on Halloween.”

“It’s okay if you want to back out. We can always do another one. You heard Jacob, they go all the time.”

“No, Jacob and Tonya would be disappointed. I’m going to do this,” Blake said resolutely.

Quinn came to a stop at an intersection and looked over at Blake. “They would understand.”

“I don’t want this night to be over,” Blake blurted out, then smiled as she ran a hand through her hair. “I feel liberated.”

“What would you like to do? We can go anywhere, do anything. Movies, dancing, a moonlit stroll, whatever you want.”

The thought of crowded places held no appeal to Blake, but the idea of walking alongside Quinn even in the dark was. “Where would we take this stroll?”

“On the outskirts of town, there’s a trail that follows along the bayou. The night might be cool enough to keep the mosquitoes at bay.”

Alligators, snakes, and a freaky voodoo woman with a bag of bones flashed through Blake’s mind, but the excuse to hold

Quinn's hand won out over fear. "I think I'd enjoy that."

Blake had expected a dirt path bordered by high grass and weeds, but what she found was a wooden boardwalk and every so often a low lamp that illuminated their feet as they strolled along. Quinn had taken her hand as she climbed from the truck and never let it go. Overhead, the stars were bright, and the moon bathed everything in a soft glow.

"This is nice. I've never done anything like this before. Isn't that sad for a forty-three-year-old woman to admit?"

"No." Quinn gently squeezed Blake's hand. "The only way it would be sad is if you never did it. There are a lot of people who never take the time to do something like this. Not because they have phobias but because they're just so swamped with life. This is a simple pleasure I haven't even allowed myself. I've come out here during the day with Jack, but I've never done it at night. It's peaceful, pretty, and I'm so glad you wanted to do it."

"What else haven't you done?"

Quinn thought for a moment. "I haven't traveled much. I've been to Boston and the Mississippi coast, but that's the extent of my wandering. One day, I think I'd like to see Mount Rushmore, maybe the West Coast. I'd like to visit the old castles in Scotland and Ireland. My list is long."

"Have you ever been to New York?"

"No, cities have never impressed me much. It's the countryside that appeals to me."

"I hear that upstate New York is beautiful. I've never been. Maybe one day you could come home with me. I'd be willing to explore if you were by my side." Blake looked up into a tree as they walked beneath the boughs that hung over the boardwalk. She shivered as Quinn brought them to a stop in the shadows. "Is this a hurdle?" she asked when Quinn turned and faced her. "You're standing very still...is there... something behind me? Is it a—"

She inhaled as Quinn's lips brushed softly against hers. Blake's gaze scanned the depths of the dark for whatever horrors hid there and closed as Quinn's arms encircled her waist. Senses that had been on high alert dulled as Blake gave fully into the kiss. She moaned softly as Quinn's tongue met hers, their bodies pressed together. Quinn continued to hold her close when she broke the kiss and rested her forehead against Blake's.

"That was my hurdle. I was afraid if I didn't kiss you then, I might never have. I really like you, Blake, and I've been afraid to tell you that."

"I like you, too. I'd hoped you liked me." Blake ran her fingers down the side of Quinn's face as she kissed her again, completely uncaring of what surrounded them. Warmth seemed to spread from the sweet contact through Blake's body down to her toes. Blake basked in the moment until Quinn pulled away with a soft gasp.

Quinn's hand trembled slightly as it took Blake's. "We should walk."

Instead of going back to the truck, Quinn continued to walk farther away. Blake figured that the encounter would not lead immediately to sex, though Quinn's kisses whispered that it eventually would. She wasn't disappointed. This time, she wanted more. She wanted to give more than just her body, and she wanted to take from Quinn whatever she had to offer. The warmth from the kisses didn't fade as they strolled along; it seemed to settle in her chest and the pit of her stomach.

"What're your plans for tomorrow?" Blake asked as she held firmly to Quinn's hand.

Quinn sighed. "I have to catch up on a few things before I begin the workweek. I need to mow my grass because unfortunately it's still growing and do laundry. I also have to take my mother's things up to the home unless I can talk Dawn or Jacob into doing it. But tomorrow night is yours."

"Would you like company when you go to the nursing home?"

Quinn stopped abruptly. “Yes, I would, but visiting with my mother isn’t pleasant, and I’d hate to expose you to that.”

Blake licked her lips, keeping them moist in case Quinn wanted to kiss her again. “You shouldn’t be alone when facing unpleasant things. Besides, I want to meet all your family.”

“My mom isn’t like Jacob and Tonya. She’s very brusque, often rude, and I can guarantee if you’re with me, she’ll be downright ugly.”

“I won’t go if you think it’ll make it harder on you, but if you want me to be there, then I will be.”

Quinn laughed softly. “You’ve just jumped right out of the box and set it on fire.”

Blake wrapped her arms around Quinn’s waist and laid her head on her shoulder. “I have very strong incentive. I want to know what makes you, you. I know you could never be like your mother, but being who she is has helped shape the woman you are.”

Quinn hugged Blake tightly to her. “Come with me then.”

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Chapter 24

Quinn's heart thudded happily in her chest as she drove along with Blake's hand atop hers where it rested on the console between them. Her pulse had been pounding since the minute they began strolling the boardwalk. At first, the cause had been nervousness, then desire after the kisses they'd shared.

"Are you going to write tonight?"

Blake smiled as she stared out the windshield. "My mind is buzzing with ideas, but I find myself distracted."

"I know I promised to stay with you at night, but since..." Quinn fell silent when the smile on Blake's face faded.

"I want you to stay, but not because I'm afraid. I enjoy your company."

Quinn pulled into Blake's driveway and killed the engine. They sat silently for a moment as Quinn wondered what the next step should be. Finally, she turned to Blake. "What do you want?"

Unwaveringly, Blake met her stare and whispered, "You."

As soon as the front door closed, Quinn's back met it. Blake's hands were in her hair, kisses burned her lips. And she couldn't remember if she'd shaved her legs when she showered earlier or if she'd taken the time to groom other parts of her body. Blake's hands were already inside her clothes, and they ran across her ribs and her lower back.

Quinn's heart pounded with anticipation and arousal. Her fingers fumbled as they tried to unbutton Blake's shirt. Blake moved much faster as she undid Quinn's belt and unzipped her pants. Quinn shuddered when she felt Blake's hands on the bare skin of her hips.

Blake suddenly pulled away and took a few steps back. "I need to tell you something," she said breathlessly.

Quinn's mind immediately began to try to prepare her for what she might hear—physical deformities, disease, Blake was a man. Her gaze immediately dropped to the front of Blake's jeans.

“When you kissed me earlier, it turned me on, and when you told me how you feel, I felt emotions well up inside of me that I've only dreamed about experiencing. You told me about what you had with Lilly, and I need to know if this is the same thing because as much as I want to be with you like this, I don't think I can do that.”

“No, it's not, and we don't have to do this if you're not ready,” Quinn said honestly.

“It's not about being ready, it's about what happens next. I've had sexual relationships, I want the rest. If that's not something you think you want to work on, then we have to stop right here. Think on that. I know it's hard with your pants around your knees, but just think on that.”

Quinn took the opportunity not because she wasn't sure about how she felt, but if she were to be totally honest, she'd have to ask if what happened between them on that night would have bearing on Blake's plans to leave in the spring. This was where Quinn's inner chicken met the road—her hurdle. She feared that Blake's answer would be for Quinn to join her, and as much as she wanted to be with Blake at that moment, Quinn wasn't sure she was brave enough to leave her comfort zone after what happened last time. Only time would tell.

Quinn raised both hands as if she were being held at gunpoint. “I'm going to pull up my pants, not because I doubt my feelings for you, but hormones and sex may get in the way of something that could be good—possibly great.” She reached down and tugged her jeans over her hips. “So to answer your question, I adore you. I need to see where that's going to lead without distraction.”

“Okay, switching gears,” Blake said with a sigh. “Something to drink. Something cold, very cold. How about a glass of ice water?”

Quinn nodded as she continued to lean against the door. She wiped her sweating palms on her jeans when Blake turned her back and went into the kitchen. She'd made a promise, but Quinn didn't think staying there that night was a wise idea, even on the couch. She'd lost control once and knew it would be easy to do it again. Blake didn't appear to be much stronger. She was rubbing ice cubes on her neck when Quinn passed the kitchen on her way to the sofa.

Blake returned a few minutes later, handed Quinn the water, then sat at the other end of the couch. They both stared at the floor. "You're going to have to give me a few minutes because I'm still very turned on. And you should know, I adore you, too. This isn't the way it was with Beth. I'd go anywhere with you, and not just because you make me feel safe. I just want to be where you are." Blake released a soft mournful moan. "You've got the softest skin, the firmest...oh...damn." The last part came out in a whisper. Blake took a gulp of the water.

"The sexual attraction between us is good and strong, isn't it?" Quinn said with a smile, unable to look at Blake.

"Yes, I do believe we have that covered. I'm sitting here right now trying to imagine you as a chicken. I think that'll eventually cool me off."

"I've got Glenda Percy's head on your body right now in my mind. That's not doing much for me."

"You're a chicken with a broccoli floweret in its mouth."

Quinn wrinkled her nose. "I don't care much for broccoli, either." She laughed. "We're a pair, aren't we?"

"Yeah."

Quinn raised her head slowly and looked at Blake. "Hey," she said with a smile. Blake gazed back at her openly. There was no reticence, no subtle shifting of her eyes, no fear. Quinn set her glass on the floor and stood. She turned toward the hall and held out her hand behind her. A few seconds later, Blake took it. Quinn walked toward the bedroom, and Blake's grip tightened as she kept up with her stride.

The lamp was on and so was the bathroom light. Quinn knew better than to try to turn them off. She sat on the bed, and Blake stood between her legs as she unbuttoned Blake's shirt. Blake smiled as she held Quinn's gaze. When her shirt was open, Blake stepped back and slid it off her shoulders as she kicked off her boots. Quinn did the same and kicked hers out of the way. She held her arms out, and Blake returned.

The pace had changed. It was unhurried, and Blake took her time as she unbuttoned Quinn's shirt and slipped it from her shoulders. She traced Quinn's lips with her fingertips and smiled as Quinn kissed each one. Quinn reached behind Blake and unclasped her bra, her gaze drifted lower as it fell away. She released a sigh and whispered, "So pretty," as she kissed the skin of Blake's chest. Blake held her there for a moment. Her breath fanned out over Blake's skin, making her tremble.

Blake moaned as Quinn's tongue grazed her nipple. Her hands fell and joined Quinn's as she undid Blake's belt. Both of them worked at getting her pants undone, and Blake stepped away as she slid them down her legs. She'd barely had a chance to straighten when Quinn pulled her into a kiss and down on top of her. The sound of their erratic breathing filled the room as they kissed.

Blake pulled away and sat up astride Quinn's hips. The skin of her neck and chest were flushed, her hair in her face, lips parted, eyes wild as she breathed heavily and tugged on the front of Quinn's bra until she sat up. Quinn felt the cool air of the room on her nipples that were already hardened with arousal, then the softness of the bed on her back when Blake pushed her down again.

She watched as Blake bit her lip while her gaze swept over her and her hands worked quickly to open her jeans. Quinn raised her hips slightly as Blake backed off the bed and took her pants and underwear with her. She reached for Blake, but she wasn't coming back. Blake dropped to her knees and pressed her lips against the inside of Quinn's thigh. Then she looked up, eyes unfocused, before they closed and her head dipped down.

Quinn inhaled sharply when Blake's wet mouth met with her, unable to control the way her body jerked when Blake found her most sensitive spot. Her eyes slowly closed as she gave what little control she had over to Blake, and her fingers dug into the softness of the comforter. Blake took her places sweet and torturous as the tension built. Quinn's thighs trembled as Blake pushed them wider.

Quinn's murmurs were unintelligible. Her body responded so easily to the requests of Blake's mouth. She shuddered with the pressure of Blake's tongue, thrust when Blake backed off.

The feeling of Quinn against her lips, the control Blake knew she had made her burn. Quinn's body stilled. Blake felt the tension beneath her hands on Quinn's thighs. She gripped them when Quinn gasped deeply. Her own body throbbed in empathy, knowing what Quinn felt at that moment. Quinn's strangled cry broke the silence of the room.

There was no rest, no break. Blake felt herself leave the floor, her body hit the bed. Quinn's tongue filled her mouth, her hand slipped between Blake's thighs. She moaned into the kiss as Quinn filled her. One leg was trapped beneath Quinn, the other was being pushed wider by Quinn's knee. Blake opened fully as Quinn's fingers slipped easily in and out of her. Blake's hands gripped Quinn's shoulders as Quinn worked her and pushed her to heights that robbed Blake of all thought.

Quinn was gentle, but she pushed Blake, testing all her limits. She filled her one second, then massaged her clit the next. Blake matched the rhythm. Her hips rose to meet each thrust. Blake hissed between clenched teeth, groans tore their way through her throat. Quinn pinned her down harder when Blake's body lost the timing of the dance. The orgasm was explosive.

"You're so beautiful," Quinn whispered while she kissed the side of Blake's face as she caught her breath. Blake's lips were soft again as she kissed them. Blake whimpered as she wove her fingers into Quinn's hair as their tongues met.

The hours went by as they made love. Spent, Blake lay atop Quinn. Flashes of what they'd done swept through her mind.

Quinn's face as she came, the feeling of her against Blake's fingers, her mouth. Every moan, every cry echoed in her mind, and she slept deep in a place where there were no dreams.

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Chapter 25

Quinn awoke on her back, Blake's fingertips lightly trailing over her skin. Quinn smiled as she took Blake's hand and kissed it. "I thought for sure I'd wake up before you did," she said, her voice hoarse.

"Your brow furrows when you sleep, like you're thinking about something, and you moan softly when you roll over."

"So you've been awake a while."

"I like watching you sleep. I loved being in your arms last night." Blake rose, propped herself up on one elbow, and gazed down at Quinn, eyes full of wonder. "What we did was special."

"Yes, it was," Quinn said as she kissed Blake's hand again. "Let me take a shower, and I'll make your morning special."

Blake smiled. "You already have just by being here, but I'll take you up on that shower if you'll share."

"When you say this toothbrush is a spare, do you mean you clean the sink with it or something?"

Blake peeked out from around the shower curtain. "I just opened it. I haven't even used it yet. From now on, it's yours."

"I like that." Quinn put a liberal amount of paste on the brush and went to work on her teeth, eager to get into the shower with Blake. She didn't want to go to the nursing home; she wanted to spend the whole day in bed exploring new and delightful territory. Her eyes glazed over as she stared at her reflection in the mirror, remembering poignant details from the night before. The look in Blake's eyes as she knelt between Quinn's legs, her gaze as it swept over Quinn's body. Her blue eyes seemed to telegraph everything that was going through her mind—want, fascination, appreciation, and the most compelling, affection. Quinn realized that she'd never seen those things in Shay's eyes. Or Lilly's. She'd never felt

cherished or adored beneath their touches, but she did with Blake's.

“Quinn, come to me.”

Quinn noticed Blake in the mirror, watching her. She rinsed her mouth quickly. “On my way.”

“Have you ever been inside a nursing home?” Quinn asked as she parked.

“No.” Blake stared at a man in a wheelchair just outside the entrance smoking a cigarette.

“It can be a bit disconcerting. Most of the residents here are...limited in ways,” Quinn began as she tried to think of a tactful but honest way to explain it. “There are some that aren't in their right minds, and they may say or do things that are out of the ordinary. Just stay close to me, okay?”

“Count on it.”

Quinn got out and grabbed the basket of her mother's clothes. She picked up a fall wreath off the backseat and set it atop the things in the basket. Blake was glued to her side as they walked to the front door, which was unlocked during the daylight hours. As soon as they stepped inside, Quinn heard the familiar, “Hey, hey, hey.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Beauchaine. This is Blake,” Quinn said with a smile.

Mrs. Beauchaine moved closer with the aid of her walker and gave Blake the once-over. “That's not a boy.”

“No, she isn't,” Quinn said with a laugh.

“But she has a boy's name, like that ugly woman on the news.”

“It's Blakelyn. She goes by Blake for short.”

“Hi, Mrs. Beauchaine,” Blake said and positioned herself behind the laundry basket Quinn held against her hip.

“Hey, hey, hey, the furniture store kidnapped my son because I didn’t pay the bill. I looked out the window and saw the men stuffing him into a truck.”

“Did you call the police?” Blake asked.

“No, I don’t like Royce, he’s mean. But hey, I get to keep my dresser.”

“Congratulations. Blake and I have to drop these clothes off. It was good seeing you,” Quinn said and headed for her mother’s room. “You understand what I mean now?”

Blake nodded and sniffed before making a face.

“Keep an eye out for a tall man who wears a blue cap backward. Unlike Mrs. Beauchaine, I think Mr. Wade is in his right mind, but he pretends not to be. He’ll grab your breasts if you let him get too close.”

“Good God, are they all like that?”

“No, a lot of the folks in here are just elderly that need special help.” Quinn slowed her stride and knocked on an open door. “Hey, Mom, I’ve got your laundry,” she said as she hung the wreath on a nail in the door.

Nelda Scott lay on her bed with the covers up to her waist, her head and shoulders were propped up high, a TV remote in her hand. Quinn and Jacob favored the old woman, and Blake felt a pang of sympathy for her until she began to speak.

“Who is she?”

“This is Blake Taylor,” Quinn said as she set the basket on the floor and began putting Nelda’s clothes away.

“Why is she here?”

“She’s someone special, and she’s keeping me company.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Scott,” Blake said as she stepped farther into the room.

Nelda’s watery gaze swept over Blake before she turned her attention back to the TV. “Jacob came yesterday. Is Dawn coming today?”

Quinn's tone was cool and distant. "I have no idea. I haven't talked to her in a few days."

"You said that the last time you came here. I'm out of protein drinks."

Quinn put the last of the clothes away, then looked into a cabinet. "You have plenty." She looked in the fridge. "And plenty here."

"You have a very nice room," Blake offered as Quinn stepped into the bathroom and emptied a hamper into the clothes basket.

"It's a nursing home. There isn't anything nice about it. Quinn, that bathroom needs to be cleaned."

Quinn switched off the light and stepped out. Her face was a tad red. "Then I suggest you let housekeeping know that Blake and I have plans."

Nelda narrowed her eyes for a second. "Then get to them."

"See you later."

Blake followed Quinn back down the hall stunned that the visit had taken less than five minutes and saddened by the exchange between mother and daughter. There was no warmth in Nelda's eyes as she regarded Quinn, and Quinn didn't look at her.

"Now you know," Quinn said as she moved quickly toward the front doors.

Blake had to nearly jog to keep up with her as they crossed the parking lot to the truck. Quinn opened Blake's door, then the one behind it and set the clothes basket on the seat. She kept her gaze averted as Blake climbed in and closed her door. When Quinn got in on her side, she turned the engine on and sat there for a moment.

"I don't know why I come here. I guess I hope she'll lose her mind like Mrs. Beauchaine and forget why she hates me. Each time I do come, I leave telling myself that it's the last, that I won't do this to myself again. I think...today, I mean it."

Blake wanted to crawl across the console and pull Quinn into her arms. She put a hand on her shoulder and whispered, "I'm so very sorry."

Quinn continued to stare at the building. "Thank you for coming with me. You made it easier to face her, but I'm sorry that she was rude to you."

"I'm glad to be on the giving end of support."

Thunder rumbled overhead as Quinn turned to Blake. "You don't realize it, but you have been all along. It's a great day for a driving lesson."

Quinn grinned as she bounced around in the open field. Blake had managed to stay in her lane and on the road, and Quinn had rewarded her with play time in the dirt. "Stop for a minute, wild woman."

Blake brought the truck to an abrupt halt and smiled at Quinn. "Are we going on a real road?"

"No, you still have a lot to learn. You've mastered the figure eight going forward, now it's time to do it backward, so adjust all your mirrors."

Blake lowered her sunglasses, her blue eyes held a hint of mischief. "I can back up. I think I demonstrated that this morning."

Quinn shivered as she recalled what they'd done in the shower. "Oh...yes, you did," she said with a groan. She inhaled deeply. "This won't be as much fun."

"We can go home and you can—"

"Stop it," Quinn said with a laugh. "You do this for me, and I'll do something for you."

Blake's voice was almost a whisper, "What?"

"Do as I told you, and I'll show you."

Blake released a little sigh and tilted the rearview.

“When you look into the side view mirrors, you should be able to see just a little bit of the truck and a lot of what’s on either side of you.”

Blake looked in both and nodded. “I do.”

“To look over your shoulder out the back window will be the natural compulsion, but I don’t want you to do that yet. I want you to get used to using the mirrors. Let’s start off with a circle.”

Blake put the truck in reverse and backed up a few feet. “This feels awkward, I don’t like it.”

“You ain’t gonna hit anything, there’s nothing out here.”

“I ain’t gonna hit nothin’. I like the way y’all talk down here. I s’pect I’ll sound just the same one day.”

Quinn’s eyes flew open wide. “I don’t sound like that, do I?”

“No, you say some things that sound Southern. Trina blew my mind. I really had to pay attention to her to understand.”

“Oh, honey, Trina’s a hybrid. She’s originally from Mississippi. She talks with a twang and a dash of South Louisiana Cajun.”

“You called me honey,” Blake said with a big smile.

Quinn reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind Blake’s ear and spoke low and sexy. “Baby, back this truck up, so I can give you your special prize. It’s making me wet just thinking about it.” Quinn’s head bounced off the back of the seat as the truck lurched backward.

Blake cursed, stomped the brake a million times, and shot the mirror the finger, but after an hour, she finally got it right and made a dozen circles using only the mirrors.

“You can stop now,” Quinn said as she blinked to reorient herself and rain began to softly patter on the roof of the truck.

Blake unbuckled her seat belt. “Okay git over here. Let’s go home.”

“Stay right there.”

“Aw, what else?” Blake whined as she slumped and shifted the truck into park.

Quinn took her phone out of the cup holder of the console and set it on the dash. Then she unclipped her seat belt and raised the console before sliding closer to Blake.

“Wait, this thing moves?” Blake said as she stared at it. “All this time, it didn’t have to be... Oh.” Her eyelids fluttered as Quinn kissed the side of her neck and ran her hand up the inside of Blake’s thigh.

“I’ll bet you’ve never been ‘parking,’ have you?” Quinn said, and her hand moved between Blake’s legs.

“No,” Blake said with a sigh before Quinn kissed her mouth.

Quinn reached over her and reclined the seat a bit, then began undoing Blake’s pants. “I need you to pull these completely off.”

“But what if somebody comes out here?”

“They won’t, not in this storm,” Quinn said, and thunder boomed as if to accentuate her point.

Blake felt daring as she kicked off her shoes, hedonistic as she raised her hips and slid everything to the floor. Quinn’s fingers returned to her thighs, her breath was hot against her ear as she nibbled and kissed it. Blake stared at the windshield, her eyes heavy lidded as Quinn pushed her legs wider apart. The first stroke made them both moan.

“I’m proud of what you accomplished today, but this is what I was thinking about the whole time,” Quinn whispered breathlessly as her fingers worked magic between Blake’s legs. “When I’m done, I’ll let you feel the effect it had on me.”

Blake gripped the armrest on the door as she closed her eyes and exhaled loudly. “Keep talking,” she rasped.

“I’m gonna make you come, but I’ll take my time because you feel so good.”

Muscles twitched in Blake's stomach and thighs as Quinn teased her slowly. "What...will you let me do to you?"

Quinn breathed out with a shudder. "Anything you want."

Blake craned her neck back. "Oh, Quinn," she said with a breathless shudder.

"What do you want to do to me?"

Blake tried to control her breathing. "I want to lie down, and I want you to straddle my face."

"We may have to wait until we get home for that. There's not a lot of room in here."

Blake was so aroused she didn't care if they did it on the hood. Every whispered word, every sigh, every touch drove her higher. Quinn knew exactly what she was doing, knew everything Blake liked. She groaned as Quinn entered her.

"I love the way you feel, the way you open to me."

Blake's eyes opened when Quinn concentrated on her clit. Her legs stiffened as she pushed at the floorboard with her feet. "Don't stop," she pleaded as she felt the orgasm coming on. It stole her breath away as intense waves of pleasure fanned out over her body.

Quinn rose up and looked at the gas, then the temperature gauge. The windows were fogged, and despite the AC being on full blast, her naked body was covered with sweat. Blake was pushing on her to straighten fully.

"You lied, Quinn, it can be done," Blake said as she repositioned herself on the seat.

Quinn grabbed the headrest with one hand, the dash with the other. She closed her eyes as Blake's tongue swept through her wetness. "You're a wild animal, Blake. I love it."

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Chapter 26

Quinn was standing in the doorway of the office with a cup of coffee in her hand when Jacob climbed out of his truck on Monday morning. “She likes me. Blake likes me a whole lot.”

Jacob stared at Quinn’s mud-covered truck as he walked by. “And you took her mud riding to celebrate?”

Quinn shrugged. “She’s gone country. Look, I went over the schedule for Thursday, and we’ve only got two jobs, small ones. I wanna see if we can reschedule them and close because I’m sure we’re gonna be up all night on Halloween.”

“Absolutely, or at least push them back until later in the day. Have you blocked out the rest of the appointment times so we don’t forget and add something?” Jacob walked in and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Quinn moved to her desk and sat down. “Done.”

“I think my wife may have a crush on your new girlfriend, so we should probably keep them apart on the hunt,” Jacob said with a laugh. “When she wasn’t talking about Blake, she was digging through recipe books to find a meal ‘worthy of a queen.’ I hope things work out between you two because Tonya’s heart will be broken if it doesn’t.”

“Mine too.” Quinn stared at her computer screen as memories of the night before flooded her mind. Blake would write a little bit, then she’d get up and climb onto the couch and kiss Quinn senseless. This process was repeated until neither of them could maintain control. Blake hadn’t written more than a few paragraphs over the last couple of nights.

“Hello...hey...”

Quinn blinked and realized that Jacob was standing right in front of her.

“Welcome back to reality.” He took a seat in his favorite chair in front of Quinn’s desk. “My sister is dating Blake

Taylor...my sister is married to Blake Taylor...Quinn Taylor, that has a ring to it.”

“She met Mom.”

Jacob had his cup to his lips and pulled it away, almost spilling his coffee in the process. “Why did you do that to Blake?”

“She wanted to meet her.” Quinn leaned back in her chair and rocked. “She said she wanted to meet all my family. Mom was rude as you might’ve expected, and I was so pissed we barely stayed there two minutes.”

“You know, you should wait until after Blake falls in love with you before introducing her to Dawn’s kids. Throw those two on top of Mom, and she may run out of town screaming. Tonya’s limit is an hour, and that’s only if she’s drinking. Last time we were over there, Landon blew his nose on her shirt. If they were my kids, I’d throw Hailey’s phone away and send Landon to dog obedience school. They’re the reason I don’t feel as bad about not having a baby yet.”

“You have a point,” Quinn said as she continued to rock.

“I know I say this every time we talk about Mom, but I feel like I betray you when I visit her, and I don’t say anything about the way she treats you.”

“You’ve tried, and as much as I know you want to protect me, this is between me and her. That’s why I’ve made the decision not to go back there anymore. I’m going to try to remember Mom as she was when it was good between us, and that’ll be impossible if I just keep having to face what is. So I need to ask a favor of you. I’ll still do her laundry if you’ll pick it up.”

“I’ll do that, and if she asks why you’re no longer coming, I’m going to tell her what you just said.”

“She won’t ask.” Quinn drummed her hands on the arms of her chairs. “Let’s make some calls and get these appointments rearranged.”

“Call your mother,” Cassidy said grumpily when Blake answered her phone. “She’s been calling several times a day

whispering into the phone that she knows that something terrible has happened to you and that's why you're not taking her calls."

"You and everybody else told me not to talk to her."

"Make an exception. Keep the call brief, but let her know that you have not been eaten by a coyote or a bear, and you're not in the hospital."

"All right."

"How's the book coming?"

Blake stared at her computer screen. She'd made no appreciable progress over the weekend. She was too caught up in living the story to write it.

"Good...it's...good."

"That's what I want to hear. Call your mother, then get back to work."

"I will." Blake looked at her phone when Cassidy didn't say anything else and realized that she'd hung up. She pressed the number one on her speed dial. Her mother answered on the second ring. "Hi, Mom, I'm fine."

"I've been so worried, and your father is watching me like a hawk. If I leave the room, he follows. I've had my nails done four times this week, just so I could call Cassidy. I'm on the way to the parlor now. Baby, you don't have to lie to make me feel better, tell me the truth."

Blake knew that her mother would find the *truth* equally as disturbing as if she had been in the hospital. "I'm doing very well. I'm writing, and this past weekend, I went to dinner at a restaurant with friends. This move has been very good for me."

There was a long period of silence, then Rhonda said, "That's great," but her tone belied her words.

"Maybe by the spring, you and I can do something together. We could go to a mall without me having to be medicated."

“Dani never needed me, not like you did, and though I want you to get better, I feel like I’m losing you at the same time.”

“That won’t happen. I’ll always love you, and I’ll always need you. Right now...I just need you to be proud of me.”

“I am, and your father is, too, but, baby, we have always been proud of you.”

Blake smiled. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

“I’m at the nail salon now. I should say goodbye.”

Blake knew her mother wanted to get off the phone before she broke down, and it broke her heart.

“Not goodbye, but see you soon.”

Rhonda sniffed. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

“See you soon.”

“Soon,” Blake said as she pulled the phone away from her ear and laid it on her desk.

Quinn’s mother doesn’t love her enough, Blake thought, and mine loves me too much.

Quinn grunted as she set the base of a new commode into place. Jacob was walking down the hall of the home that was being newly constructed and skidded to a halt. “Wow, you’re working fast. I expected to find you in the downstairs bath.”

“I’ve got someone to go home to now,” Quinn said with a smile as she checked the seal. “She’s cooking my dinner.”

Jacob leaned against the doorjamb. “I don’t think you ever had that, not even with Shay.”

“Help me with the tank.”

Together she and Jacob positioned the tank, and Quinn connected the water line. “Will you go with her if she decides to go back to New York in the spring? Have you thought about it?”

“I have considered it, but I’m not making any promises to myself. I know I’m smitten and under her spell, but I’m not willing to make the same mistakes I made with Shay. I’m going to take this one day at a time and see where it leads.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. It was hard seeing you the way you were when you came back from Boston.” Jacob reached into the back of Quinn’s pants and gave them a tug. “A plumber should show a little crack.”

“Oh, you asshole, you always do that when I have my hands full,” Quinn said with a laugh.

Jacob walked over to the tub and sat on the ledge. “I would miss you.”

Quinn kept on working. “I’d miss you, too.”

“If you’re gone when Mom passes, do you want to know about it?”

Quinn turned around and propped an arm on her knee. “Of course, I want to know. I’d want to be here for you and Dawn.”

Jacob scuffed at his beard as he stared at the floor. “If you liked New York, maybe Tonya and I could move up there, too. Tonya’s always wanted to live in a ‘real’ city. You and I could open our business there.”

“You think you’d be happy in a place like that?”

Jacob shrugged. “I dunno, but I’d be with you.”

“Don’t start packing just yet. I’m crazy about Blake, and I think she’s really crazy about me. It feels that way. I keep searching her eyes for doubt, looking for little hints that she might not be as taken as I am, but she sure seems like she is. I was fooled by Shay, though.”

“No, you weren’t,” Jacob said, meeting Quinn’s eye. “You admitted that when you came back. You just wanted her to love you so much that you ignored the warning signs. You can’t judge Blake by what happened with her. You might sabotage what you have.”

“It’s scary, very scary to trust someone like that and lay your heart on the line after it’s been broken.”

“Don’t I know it. I didn’t survive a broken heart, but it was still very hard for me to believe that Tonya loved me. I was so pathetic the first few years of being married to her. I needed her to tell me all the time that she loved me and wanted to be with me. I was so insecure that if she didn’t kiss me when she got home from work, I’d freak out thinking she was going to leave.” Jacob smiled. “Then, one day, she said the sweetest thing to me, and I just stopped worrying.”

“What was it?”

Jacob sounded a lot like Tonya when he said, “Boy, you’re stuck with my ass for eternity, and if you even think about leaving, I’ll hunt you down like a dog and kill you with my bare hands.” Jacob sighed happily. “She was so sincere, I just melted on the spot.”

“Y’all are one seriously romantic pair.” Quinn turned around and began working again. “How long did it take you to fall in love with Tonya?”

“I think I started falling for her the first time we kissed, and I’ve been falling ever since. Here’s my take on love. When we meet the right one, the connection begins immediately.”

Quinn looked over her shoulder. “I didn’t like Blake when I first met her.”

Jacob held up a finger. “But you kept going back.”

“Because her agent hired me to.”

“When did it stop being about the money because it obviously did at some point?”

Quinn sat back on her heels. “I never picked up the check from Dawn, it just didn’t feel right. I made my mind up not to do it the day I took Blake to Oak Alley. That was the second time I saw her.”

“Then mark that as the day you began to fall.”

Chapter 27

“Oh, my God, look at these two,” Quinn said as she pulled up in front of Jacob and Tonya’s place a few days later. Both of them were wearing black, and Jacob had on a headlamp. Tonya was wearing a giant silver cross that would’ve made Madonna envious in the eighties. They stood next to a cooler that Quinn was certain was packed to the lid with special snacks probably decorated to commemorate the occasion. Cameras sat atop it next to a giant box of batteries, and a duffel bag lay beside it.

“I think they’re very serious about this,” Blake said as she waved at the pair.

Quinn opened her door. “I don’t think I have room for you and all your gadgets, Jacob. You may have to ride in the back.”

“Is that what you’re wearing?” he asked with obvious disapproval as he gave Quinn’s jeans and sweatshirt a once-over. “You’re so not cool.”

“I’m sorry, my geek gear wasn’t clean.”

“Don’t get out, we need to be there for the briefing.” Jacob hoisted the cooler in the back of the truck. “Does anyone need a drink or a finger sandwich before we hit the road? We baked the cutest ghost-shaped sugar cookies, bats and pumpkins, too. Oh, they’re just so—” Jacob cleared his throat and deepened his voice. “They’re cool, I ate a bat. And hey, avoid the pimento cheese, you know what that does to you.”

Quinn jerked a thumb at the backseat. “Get in, black string bean.”

Once the Scotts and their accoutrements were loaded, Quinn turned the truck around and headed for the road. “Jacob, I assume you know where we’re going.”

“Yep, get on the main highway headed south. Blake, you ready for this?”

“I think I am.”

“Oh, shucks, I forgot the napkins and paper plates,” Tonya said.

“We can’t afford to go back for them now, dear. We’ll just have to make do,” Jacob said as he patted her on the arm.

“I’m really surprised you two didn’t make a CD of scary —” Quinn bit her lip when one appeared between the seats. “Ah, you did.”

She handed it to Blake, who opened it and popped it into the player. Sounds of a moaning wind filled the cab of the truck. Then a retina-searing light switched on.

“Jacob! I’m trying to drive.”

“Sorry. Headlamp is a go. Check it off the list, darling.”

Tonya leaned up and handed Blake a small box. “Blake, I brought you a voice recorder, so you can document tonight’s events in case you want to use them for your next book.”

“Thank you,” Blake said and sounded a bit nervous.

Quinn gave her hand a little squeeze.

The drive felt like it took five minutes to Blake, but in actuality, it was a little over thirty minutes. Her hand felt moist against Quinn’s, and she often closed her eyes to steel her nerves. Jacob and Tonya did provide some amusing distraction as they debated which of their treats would be an acceptable offering for the spirits.

Jacob pointed to a dirt road between two cornfields, and Quinn turned off the highway. The ride immediately became jarring and seemed to go on forever until the fields gave way to a two-story house. Blake was relieved to note there was electricity. An old model white utility van was parked out front with cables streaming out the back of it. Three men stood on the porch and descended the steps as Quinn parked alongside the van.

“Jacob, it’s good to see you, man,” one of them called out as he approached.

“Hey, Carl, you remember my wife, Tonya, and my sister Quinn. This is Blake Tay...Blake Tay.”

Blake half expected Carl and his crew to look like the male cast members of *Scooby-Doo*, without the dog. One at least favored Shaggy. He was thin and wiry, hair unkempt. The other was short and stocky with a closely trimmed beard like Jacob’s, which did nothing to man up his baby face. Carl was very nice-looking and well-built. His graying dark hair was cut very short and gelled. A pair of thick rimmed glasses covered intense brown eyes.

Carl nodded at Tonya and Quinn, then put out his hand to Blake. “It’s a pleasure to meet...have we met before?”

“I don’t think so,” Blake said as she shook his hand.

Carl turned and pointed at the others as they made their way over. “That’s Donnie and Joey.”

“You’re missing Jordan and a couple others,” Quinn said with a laugh. “You know...New Kids on the Block, the boy band?” Carl and the others exchanged confused glances, and Quinn waved a hand. “Never mind.”

“Y’all got here just in time for the briefing, so we’ll begin,” Carl, the apparent leader of the group, said. “The hotspots are the kitchen, the den, the hallway upstairs, and the master bedroom. We have IR cameras set up in those places, so watch your step. The cords have been taped down, but you can still trip.”

“What is an IR?” Quinn asked. “And define hotspots, please.”

Carl rubbed the back of his neck. “I forget that y’all haven’t done this sort of thing before. Hotspots are where the most allegations of paranormal activity have been reported. My wife sets up our investigations, and my team and I aren’t privy to the claims beforehand. Therefore, we don’t come in with predisposed ideas. For instance, if someone reports seeing

shadows in a certain area, subconsciously we expect to see the same, and our own imaginations kick in. That make sense?"

Quinn and the others nodded.

"We investigate in the dark because it heightens the senses. IR is infrared so the cameras will record in the dark. We also use digital voice recorders because often they can pick up EVP, or Electronic Voice Phenomenon, that the human ear can't. We picked up an outstanding EVP on the last case." Carl threw up his hands. "It totally blew our minds."

Tonya was engrossed. "What'd it say?"

Joey, the skinny guy with grease stains on his shirt, spoke up. "We'd just asked if anyone had a problem with us being there, and it said, 'Burt.' It could've been burp, but we're all pretty sure it said Burt."

Carl beamed as he pushed his glasses farther up on his nose. "You just haven't lived until you've heard a disembodied voice speak." He went on in a professional manner. "We also use EMF detectors, you may've seen electricians use them. They detect electromagnetic fields. Spirits supposedly use energy to manifest, so when we pick up a strong reading and there's no explanation for it in the wiring, we also consider that a hotspot. We'll usually do an EVP session there and try to make contact."

"I'm the tech guy," Donnie said as he stepped forward. "You'll all be armed with either a video camera or a voice recorder and a flashlight while you investigate. We ask that you whisper so you don't drown out anything the devices may pick up."

Quinn raised her hand. "I have another question. Is there running water?"

"Yes," Carl said, "and electricity, but we'll throw the main breaker when it's time to investigate. So if you need to use the restroom, now is the best time or you'll be doing it in the dark. We have a few things to go over before we begin, so if you'd like to take a look around the house first, please be welcome."

“I’m gonna go to the powder room.” Tonya looked at Blake. “Do you need to go?”

“No, but thanks.” There was no way Blake was going to let go of Quinn.

“I know I’ve seen you somewhere before,” Carl said to Blake as the others went up to the house. “You said your name is Blake Tay?”

Quinn stepped between them. “Sorry to interrupt, but you said something like if there’s no explanation in the wiring, what does that mean?”

“A leakage of energy that can happen with improper or faulty wiring. It can happen if you have too much plugged into a multiplug strip. High EMF has caused people to hallucinate, it can make them nauseous or nervous if they’re sensitive to that sort of thing. We find that’s often the cause of people feeling uncomfortable in certain rooms.”

“That’s fascinating,” Quinn said as she gave Blake’s hand a tug. “We’re gonna have a look around, get the lay of the land, so to speak, while the lights are still on.” As they climbed the steps, Quinn looked over her shoulder and noticed that Carl was still staring at Blake, his brow furrowed. “I think he may’ve recognized you. Are you okay with everything he said?”

“Not the lights out part.” Blake pulled Quinn to a stop before they crossed the threshold. “I knew it was going to be dark, but there is nothing else out here. When they kill those lights, it’s going to be black as pitch.”

With the hand that was not caught in Blake’s vise-like grip, Quinn ran her fingers down the side of Blake’s cheek. “You crossed a hurdle by agreeing to come out here. This is scary to someone who isn’t afraid of the dark. You say the word, and I’ll whisk you out of this place in a heartbeat.”

Blake swallowed as she stared up at Quinn. “If I can do this, I can do anything, right?”

Quinn smiled as her hand came to rest against the side of Blake’s neck. “You can do anything. I respect and admire you

so much. You amaze me.”

“You know just what to say to get to me.”

“Because it’s the truth,” Quinn said with a smile as she leaned in and kissed her.

Blake breathed out a heavy sigh. “Let’s do this.”

The walls in the den had obviously been covered with wallpaper and stood bare. It was empty except for an old sofa and two metal chairs. The camera Carl had mentioned was set up in one corner to cover as much of the room as it could. Blake expected to feel an ominous presence, but the place just felt empty and sad.

She followed Quinn into a wide hallway; on one wall was a staircase, beneath it an open door to a bathroom. Near the front door was the master bedroom, which was empty except for another camera. Quinn and Blake simply poked their heads in and looked around before proceeding to the kitchen at the other end of the hall. Yellowed wallpaper covered in roosters and hens made Blake’s skin crawl. The scarred cabinets were bare. There was an empty place where she assumed there had been a refrigerator. On the other side of the room were windows where a table sat with a few matching chairs.

“Very spacious,” Quinn said as she looked around. “With a lot—and I mean a lot—of TLC, this place could be something nice.” Something thudded on the floor beneath her feet. She and Blake stared at each other for a moment, then Quinn smiled weakly. “Probably needs a lot of plumbing work, too.”

Blake closed her eyes and started to softly sing her version of the “Star Spangled Banner.” “Oh, say, did you hear that knock on the floor? If it happens again, I’ll run for the door.”

“Very good,” Quinn said with a laugh.

They peeked into the adjoining dining room, which was also empty, then continued upstairs. Jacob and Tonya were already there and standing in the doorway of a bedroom. Blake could see past them to the wallpaper covered in balls

representing nearly every sport. Most of it had been stripped away except for a jagged piece shaped like a V.

“This was obviously a kid’s room,” Jacob said, his tone soft as he laid a hand on Tonya’s shoulder. Quinn patted him on the back and moved on to the bathroom.

“Let’s make a mental note to avoid this room,” Quinn said, nodding toward the rotted floor near the bathtub. “It’s not safe.”

She led Blake farther down the hall where they looked into two more empty rooms. Through the windows of one, they saw lightning flash and heard the low rumble of thunder that followed seconds later. For a moment, the lightning had illuminated empty fields that seemed to go on forever and made the place seem even more isolated.

“That’s gonna fu— jack up things,” Donnie said as walked up behind them. “Rain and thunder make it difficult to hear. I hope that storm moves the other way. We’re ready for everyone to come to the den, so we can get started.” He turned to walk off, then spun around. “Carl’s thrilled to have you with us, Ms. Taylor.” He grinned when Blake and Quinn looked surprised. “That’s right, we know who you are. Carl’s on your Facebook. Frankly, I think what you do bastardizes a legitimate phenomenon.”

“Not yet,” Blake shot back testily as Donnie quickly retreated.

“I’m gonna shove him down the stairs,” Quinn said as she started after him, but Blake tugged on her hand. Quinn turned and faced her. “He really just pissed me off, but I like the way you handled that.”

“I get emails from people like him all the time. Cassidy has a form letter she just pastes in that reminds them that what I write is fiction and is for entertainment purposes only.”

“I still may kick him squarely in the ass, so don’t let me get near him,” Quinn said as she led Blake to the stairs.

In the den, everyone gathered as Carl gave his final instructions. “This place is kind of small in regards to an

investigation, making it easy to contaminate evidence. For instance, if we're down here and Jacob is upstairs, we could mistake his footsteps for those of a spirit. That's why we'll divide into two teams. Donnie and Joey will start off in the van monitoring the video feeds from the cameras. The rest of us will begin here in the den. Joey, we're ready for you to throw the breaker."

Tonya, Blake, and Quinn sat on the couch. A few feet away, Jacob sat in one of the metal chairs while they all silently listened to Joey's footfalls as they echoed through the house. Moments later, everything went dark. Quinn pried her hand from Blake's and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

Donnie's voice came over the radio after a few minutes. "Joey's clear, you're ready for takeoff."

The silence was so thick that even it seemed to make a sound of its own in Blake's ears. Quinn's grip on her shoulder tightened, but Blake felt somewhat safe sandwiched between her and Tonya. "I'm going to do a quick EMF sweep," Carl said, shattering the stillness as he walked around the room. Everyone sat quietly as he did, then eventually returned to where they all sat.

"I'm not getting any readings, but I think we'll start off with an EVP session," Carl said softly. "Feel free to ask whatever you want, and try to remember that who you're talking to are just people." A red light appeared in the darkness. "My name is Carl, my friends and I would like to know your name." A moment of silence followed. "Are there more than one of you?"

"You have a pretty house," Tonya blurted out.

"That wasn't a question, dear," Jacob admonished.

"I know, but we're supposed to talk to them like people."

Carl cleared his throat and continued. "Do the work crews that come in here upset you?" There was a thud that sounded like it came from the kitchen. "Did y'all hear that?" Carl whispered excitedly.

"Plumbing," Quinn and Jacob answered in unison.

“Was that you?” Carl asked. “If so, please do it again.” Nothing followed.

“Are you afraid of us?” Tonya asked. “Because...I can tell you I’m scared shitless of you.”

Quinn’s soft snicker soothed Blake’s nerves.

“Make another noise and give us a sign of your presence,” Carl said. Another thud sounded in the kitchen. “What the hell was that?” Carl rasped.

“Well, you asked whoever that is to make a noise,” Tonya said. “I don’t know why you seem so surprised.”

Carl continued. “You can touch one of us if you want.”

“No, no, just Carl, or Jacob, not one of us, please,” Quinn corrected.

“The hell you say,” Jacob said as he shuffled around. “Don’t listen to Quinn, just touch Carl.”

“Is it dark where you are?” Blake asked softly. There was no response except for Quinn’s gentle squeeze of assurance on her shoulder.

Carl spoke up a little louder. “I’m here to renovate. I’m going to begin by knocking out a wall.”

“Why would you say that?” Quinn asked.

“I’m trying to provoke it.”

“Well, that’s just rude,” Tonya said, “and you called them an ‘it.’ I thought they were people. He’s just joking, don’t mind him. We brought some cookies and sandwiches, so if you’re hungry, just float on out to the cooler in the back of the red truck and help yourself.” Another thud sounded. “You’re welcome.”

“I’d strongly suggest avoiding the pimento cheese,” Quinn added. “It may get you kicked out of the spirit realm.”

Blake dared to ask, “What’s wrong with the pimento cheese?”

“It’s spicy, and it tends to cause gas,” Jacob said, then chuckled. “I wonder what a spirit fart sounds like.”

“That may explain the thuds,” Quinn said with a laugh.

Carl cleared his throat again. “There’s nothing wrong with humor, but let’s try to focus. I don’t believe I got your name, who are you?” he asked the spirits.

Quinn’s body shook with silent laughter. “Burp, I’m sure.”

A high-pitched keening noise came from Jacob’s direction.

“People, get it together.” Carl sounded flustered as he asked, “Are you unhappy with the renovations?”

There was no response; the house had gone completely still.

Tonya sounded serious when she whispered, “I bet they’re outside having a snack.”

The red light from the recorder disappeared. “I think we’d do better by dividing up into teams. I’ll take the kitchen, Jacob, you and Tonya can stay in here. Quinn, you and Blake can have the master bedroom. *Please*, don’t walk around. Just take a seat and conduct your own EVP sessions and do it quietly.”

“Are you up for that?” Quinn whispered against Blake’s ear.

“Yes, I think so.”

They stood, and Carl turned on a flashlight. He handed both teams video and digital voice recorders. Quinn crossed the hall with Blake in tow.

“Where would you like to sit?”

“With our backs against a wall, maybe the one with all the windows.”

Quinn led Blake over to the wall where they both sat. “I think we may’ve flustered ol’ Carl.”

Blake laughed softly. “Is it true about the pimento?”

“Lord, yes. Ten minutes after you eat it, a fire erupts in the pit of your stomach. I don’t know why they make that stuff.

No one but Tonya can eat it and not explode.”

“I’ve been thinking about what Carl said about if anything is actually here, it’s just a person. Maybe he or she has come back to the place they loved. I would imagine if that’s the case that it’s disheartening to see strangers changing it.”

“Yeah, it would be. I’d like to think that my dad is at a buffet and my grandmother is swooning while Elvis croons, but who knows what happens there. There may be a very thin veil that divides us, and they, like us, just get glimpses of what’s on the other side.”

Blake felt comforted with the solidness of the wall behind her back, and though the sky was cloudy, there was still some light coming through the windows to break up the darkness. She tried to keep her mind off the fact that she was surrounded by it. “So you believe in life after death?”

“Yes, that’s what I choose to believe.”

“I want your take on this. Let’s say someone dies, and their surviving partner finds someone new. Then who do you think gets who in the afterlife? Does that kind of love not exist there?”

“I have no idea, but I’m inclined to say your true love, that one special person that owns your heart and soul. I realize that’s a silly romantic notion and there could be complications, but that’s how I want to see it.”

Blake took Quinn’s arm and draped it over her shoulder. “That’s not silly. You amaze me, too, you know. You’re strong and take charge one moment and very kind and sweet the next. It’s an intoxicating combination.”

Quinn held her tighter. “I’m glad you think so.” She kissed Quinn softly, then sighed. “I think Carl expects us to turn on the equipment we brought in here, but I’d rather just make out with you.”

“That would lead to something else, then we’d ‘contaminate the evidence’ with the noise we’d make. I think...I would like to ask some questions.”

“Are you prepared for the responses you may get?”

“No and yes.” Blake switched on the recorder. “I feel kind of stupid,” she whispered.

“We feel stupid,” Quinn said a little louder, “because we don’t know if we’re talking to ourselves or not. In case you are here, we hope you don’t mind that we’re in your home. We just wanted to visit you and see what you have to say about the renovations.” She turned to Blake. “How’d I do?”

“That was great.” Blake rewarded her with a kiss. She inhaled deeply and let the breath out slowly before saying, “I understand if you’re scared. I’m scared, too. I hope where you are is a happy place.” She stiffened when one of the floorboards in the room creaked. Quinn kept a protective hold on her. “The year here is 2012, I have no idea how long it’s been since you left this plane. This house you’ve left behind unfortunately belongs to someone else now, and they’d like to move in. I understand they have children, so if you choose to hang around, I hope you’ll kindly watch over them.”

“That was fantastic, baby,” Quinn exclaimed in a loud whisper as she hugged Blake close. “You’re really getting the hang of this.” The floorboard creaked again, silencing Quinn.

Blake cleared her throat. “I believe I told you I was... afraid, so I’d appreciate it if you did not come any closer. No offense, but it is kind of disconcerting thinking that there may be someone in here that I can’t see staring at me.”

A shrill scream pierced the darkness, and Blake thought it was Tonya at first until she heard Tonya say, “Baby, that was me, I touched you. Whoa! Stop swinging.”

Blake’s body was so rigid that she felt if Quinn were to tap her she’d break into a million pieces. She laughed though she wanted to cry. “Oh, say, can you see anything, where’s dawn’s early light?” she began to sing softly.

“It’s okay, that was just my crazy brother,” Quinn said breathlessly. “Nothing to—”

“Me too, something touched me, too,” Carl screamed as he charged through the house. The front door flew open, and

there was another panicked scream from Jacob, followed by Tonya's.

“Okay, that's not good.” Quinn bolted to her feet.

Blake felt like she was being thrown into the air as Quinn jerked her along. Her feet barely touched the ground as Quinn dragged her through the front door across the porch and down the steps. And Quinn didn't stop running until they were behind her truck. Jacob and Tonya were already there with Jacob prancing in a circle and waving his hands like a two-year-old girl who'd just seen a spider.

“What is wrong with you people?” Quinn clutched at her chest with her free hand. “You nearly gave Blake a heart attack.”

Jacob waved both hands up and down in front of Tonya as though he were worshipping her. “That was not you. You were across the room when something brushed my face.”

“Jacob, you were hiding behind the curtains,” Tonya said with a hand on her hip. “*They* touched your face.”

“I felt fingertips,” Jacob screamed, his voice reaching heights that very few opera singers could muster.

Carl was nowhere in sight, but there were raised and muffled voices coming from the van.

Tonya shook her head and flipped open the lid to the cooler. “Anybody want anything to eat, something to drink?”

Chapter 28

The bottle of soda shook in Carl's hand as he tried to raise it to his lips. He lowered it and said with a weak smile, "I've been doing this for years, but it never fails to excite me when I receive a touch from the other side."

Quinn thought his use of the word excite was incorrect. Carl didn't look excited, and he had changed his pants. "What happened in there?" She turned to the screens where she watched Donnie and Joey conduct their own investigations.

"I was sitting at the kitchen table, and I'd just remarked that I'd seen the blueprints for the renovations and they're gonna knock out the wall where the cabinets are and enlarge the room." Carl's eyes were huge behind his glasses when Quinn looked back at him. "Someone cuffed me on the shoulder. Like this." He leaned forward and hit Quinn on the arm. "On the playback, you can clearly see my shoulder move suddenly and the recorder fly out of my hand."

Quinn massaged the tension she felt in Blake's neck as Blake sat staring at the monitors. "That could've been a muscle spasm."

"It wasn't," Carl said firmly. "Someone is in there. You got responses to your EVP session in the master bedroom. Want to hear it?"

Blake turned to Carl. "Are you serious?"

He nodded as he began to punch keys on a computer. Blake's voice sounded loudly over the speakers. "I understand if you're scared, I'm scared, too. I hope where you are is a happy place." It was followed by a soft "yes." Carl played it several times as chills shot up Quinn's spine.

"It's a woman," Blake said breathlessly.

"She laughs in this next part, listen." Carl hit another key. Quinn's voice came over the speaker. "It's okay, that was just my crazy brother..." That was followed by an obviously female giggle.

Quinn was fairly certain their night was over, but Blake shocked her when she said, “I want to go back in.”

Donnie and Joey concluded their investigation with not much of anything to report a couple of hours later and had returned to the van. Jacob and Tonya camped out in Quinn’s truck and were sound asleep when Blake and Quinn walked back into the house alone. Blake led this time with Quinn’s hand clutched firmly in one hand and a digital recorder in the other.

“I’d like to go upstairs,” Blake said as she went up and walked directly into what they had concluded was a child’s room. Like before, they sat with their backs against a wall. Blake pushed a button on the recorder and set it in front of them. “I heard your voice on tape, I know you’re a woman. If I didn’t introduce myself before, my name is Blake, and this is Quinn. Thank you for having us in your home, even though I realize you didn’t have a choice in the matter. I’d really love to know your story. Did this room belong to your child?”

Blake listened for a moment. “Was it a boy? Did you have other children?”

Despite being on an upper floor, this room felt cooler. Quinn looked around to see if one of the windows was open or broken. Blake inhaled sharply, and Quinn turned just in time to see the door move slightly. She stared at it a long time, then looked at the windows again, hoping she could explain it away with a draft.

“Was...was that you who moved the door?” Blake asked.

“Wind,” Quinn whispered. “Someone probably opened the front door.”

Blake lifted Quinn’s hand to her lips and kissed it softly. “You can let me go now.”

The statement took Quinn completely by surprise. Her jaw sagged as the hold on Blake’s hand loosened. She felt Blake pull completely free. Quinn met the pivotal moment with mixed emotions. She was elated that Blake felt bold enough to

break the contact and a little disheartened that Blake no longer required her comfort. She watched as Blake scooted toward the door and held her hand out to nothing.

“I don’t feel a breeze, but it is cooler right here.” She sat back on her haunches. “I can’t hear your voice, I have to rely on the recorder that we brought with us. I say that so you’ll understand if you’re asking me questions why I don’t respond.”

Quinn watched in awe as Blake seemed to shake off any fears she might’ve had and continued to reach into the air around her. “You’re not afraid?”

“It’s funny, but when I realized it was a woman and she responded to me, I got excited. This is just amazing.”

“You’re amazing.”

“I was terrified when I first came in here,” Blake admitted softly to whoever was listening. “But now I’m just curious. I hope you’re not trapped here for some reason. I know what that feels like. I found my freedom when someone special came along and cared enough to take my hand. When I first met her, I never dreamed I would do something like this, but here I am.”

Quinn swallowed hard and smiled, though Blake couldn’t see her.

The sun was coming up when Blake and Quinn emerged. Blake turned and wrapped her arms around Quinn’s waist, and they stared up at the house looming above them in the growing light of morning. “I feel like she’s standing at one of the windows watching us, maybe waving goodbye,” Quinn said.

“Hey.”

Blake and Quinn turned as Carl walked over. “Give me the equipment. Let’s see if you got anything.” Quinn handed him the camera and digital recorder. “It’ll take a few minutes for me to do a preliminary check, so grab a cup of coffee or a soda. If I find something, I’ll let you know.”

“They’re not night birds.” Quinn pointed to her truck. There was a large pair of booted feet pressed against the windshield. Jacob had obviously made himself comfortable. Tonya was probably reclined beside him in the driver’s seat.

Blake sniffed at the air. “I do smell coffee.” They walked around the side of the van and found a coffeepot sitting atop a folding table. A long cord ran to a generator. There were cups, sugar, and creamer. “These guys hunt in style,” Blake said as she reached for the cups.

“You let go of me in there.”

Blake stopped spooning cream into her cup and looked at Quinn. “You made that possible.”

“I was scared shitless, especially when that door moved, and you just let me go.”

Blake began to laugh. “You mean *I* was protecting you?”

Quinn smiled. “You gave me strength. I know that sounds like a corny love song. I can be honest now and say I did not want to go into that house. That’s why I kept asking you if you wanted to. I was hoping that you’d back out so I wouldn’t have to admit to being chicken. When I heard that voice on the computer, I nearly wet myself.”

“Then you probably don’t want to hear this.” Carl leaned out the back of the van.

Blake and Quinn rushed in. Carl waited until they were ready and pushed a button. Blake’s voice came loudly through the speakers. “I hope you’re not trapped here for some reason.” The same female voice could be heard softly saying “no.”

Quinn put both hands over her face and said, “Oh, my God, play it again.”

Carl set the recording to play on a continuous loop. They all listened in wonder.

“As I said at the briefing, the only substantial EVP we’ve ever gotten was ‘Burt.’ There have been what we thought were sighs or laughter, but these are crystal clear.” Carl took off his

glasses as he spoke and wiped them on his shirt before putting them back on. “Blake, obviously, you made the difference. I hope you’ll come back and investigate with us again.”

“I’d be honored.”

Carl put out his hand. “It was a real privilege to meet you, Ms. Taylor, or Tay, as you prefer to be called.”

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Chapter 29

“I can’t believe we missed all that,” Tonya whined. Her eyes looked like two slits, her hair stood on end on one side of her head, and there was a drool stain on her cheek. “I could cry.”

“Carl’s gonna make us a DVD and CD of everything that happened.” Quinn glanced at the sleepy pair in her backseat.

Tonya shook her head sadly. “It won’t be the same, not like if we’d been there. Turkey, I shouldn’t have eaten the turkey. It always makes me sleepy.”

Quinn winked at Blake. “You can fight one of those next, they’re really big birds.”

“A ghostly woman touched my husband’s face.” Tonya nudged Jacob. “Isn’t that cool?”

“Not even if she’d grabbed my crotch.” Jacob folded his arms. “It’s gonna be a long time until I get that chill out of my bones.”

Tonya reached through the two front seats and patted Blake on the arm. “I bet you’re riding a rush.”

“I am,” Blake said with a smile as she leaned her head against the seat and stared at Quinn as she drove.

“Did the experience give you any ideas for a new book?” Tonya asked excitedly.

“It did, and I’m very sorry to tell you that I didn’t remember to use your recorder.” She handed it back to Tonya. “That was so thoughtful of you. I hope you aren’t too disappointed.”

“No, just as long as it got onto tape, and it did. Can I be a character? You can make me bad or stupid just as long as I’m on the pages.”

Blake laughed. “Absolutely, and I’ll make you a brave one, with awesome culinary skills.”

Tonya squealed and flopped back. “I love you.”

Quinn glanced at Blake with a grin, then Jacob leaned up, his head protruding through the seats. “I would like to request to be the dashing love interest, also very brave and freakishly handsome with a huge—”

“Jacob!” Quinn yelled.

“My sister has a very nasty mind and apparently a low opinion of me,” Jacob said calmly. “I was going to say a huge bank account. I’d like to be a rich man for a change. Oh, and I want black hair, a really broad chest, and washboard abs. If you want to embellish on my man parts, please feel free to do so.”

Quinn and Blake showered together, too tired to do anything but bathe. Neither bothered to dry her hair and crawled into bed. “I feel like I dreamed all of last night,” Quinn said with heavy eyes as she lay on her side facing Blake, their fingers entwined.

“Me too. Thank you for suggesting it and for being with me. I think you know I would’ve never done that without you.”

“You would’ve eventually. I couldn’t help you if you weren’t already prepared to make these changes. This is all you, sweetie.”

Blake grinned, half her face hidden in the pillow. “I’m your sweetheart?”

“Yes, you are.”

Blake raised up on her elbow, her expression serious. “Quinn, don’t ever think that my affection for you is because you take care of me. I’m grateful for that, but what endears you to me is your personality, your charm, wit, compassion. Those are just a few of the things that draw me to you. If I weren’t half asleep, the list would be much longer.”

“Thank you for telling me that,” Quinn said as she rolled onto her back. “Some things you just need to hear. Now lay

down.”

Blake gave Quinn a quick kiss and laid her head on her shoulder. “When I wake up, I’m gonna rock your world.”

“Sleep fast,” Quinn said drowsily.

“Why aren’t you writing?” Quinn asked the next evening.

Blake held up her hands and flexed her fingers. “It’s there. My head feels like it’s going to explode with all sorts of ideas, but when I type, it’s all gibberish. I don’t want to sit here. I want to be on the couch with you.”

“We should talk about this.”

“I don’t want to.”

Quinn sat up. “Because you know what I’m going to say, and you know I’ll be right.”

“Shh.”

Quinn folded the blanket she’d been lying under. “I’m gonna go home. After work tomorrow, I’ll come back and we can have dinner, spend a little time together, then I’ll go home again.”

Blake twirled around in her chair. “I don’t like anything you just had to say.”

Quinn got up, walked over to Blake, and clasped her face in both hands as she leaned down to kiss her. “You have obligations. Couples have to balance work and play, that’s life.”

Blake grabbed Quinn’s hands and held them tight. “Okay, I’m ready to talk about this. I like sleeping next to you. I’m hooked, I’m a junkie. I won’t write if you leave. I’ll just sit here and think about you.”

“How do we fix that?” Quinn asked as she knelt.

“I need to rearrange my schedule to match yours. Write when you work, so we can have evenings and nights together. So you stay. I’ll write until midnight, then I’ll go to bed. You

wake me up when you get up in the morning, and I'll get back to work.”

“And how is that going to fix your immediate problem?” Quinn smiled. “I really don't want to see your head pop off.”

“Go to my room, lock the door, and do not let me in until midnight. I may howl, scratch, and beg.” Blake laid a hand on Quinn's shoulder. “Be strong for both of us.”

“Fine, I'm taking this.” Quinn snatched a book off of Blake's desk. She kissed her and took off running.

Blake watched her go and turned to her computer. “Okay, just forget how great her butt looks in those yoga pants. Focus...make something happen...I need tea...focus.”

Blake reread the last paragraph that she'd written. The book was more than halfway done. It was time to start winding it down to a finish, but each time Blake tried, her brain locked up like a safe. The idea for the next book was pushing hard to the forefront of her mind. Blake sighed and opened a new page.

At a quarter till one, Blake realized that she was parched and had to go to the bathroom. She'd written for hours nonstop as the new story played in her head like a fast-paced movie. It felt as though words were dripping from her fingertips like water, the story flowed so easily. She couldn't stop. Times like this didn't come often; she had to ride the wave.

She crept down the hall and softly opened the bedroom door. Quinn was sound asleep with the book on her chest. Blake closed the door, went to the bathroom, and made herself a cup of tea. All the while, scenes flashed through her mind. She returned to her computer, and her fingers danced over the keys.

“You did it again.”

Blake sat up, and a pencil that had been stuck to her face fell onto the desk.

“Honey, this can’t be good for your back,” Quinn said as she rubbed it.

“Oh, Quinn, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. Can you walk?”

“Yes, my feet aren’t asleep this time. I’ve only been sleeping...an hour.”

“An hour?” Quinn exclaimed. “Get your little butt in the bed.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m a-goin’,” Blake said, testing her Southern accent again. “I won’t sleep long today. I’ll be ready to switch schedules tonight.”

Quinn gave her a quick kiss. “I have to go. See you after work.”

Blake watched Quinn walk out and flopped down onto the couch like a rag doll.

Blake stared at the chicken that was ringing like a phone. She didn’t want to answer it. “You stop that, don’t you have voice mail?” But the chicken went right on ringing as it circled her. Blake awoke with a start, sat straight up, and stared at her phone. “Damn chicken.” She crawled across the couch, then slid to the floor and grabbed it.

“Hello.”

“Are you at your computer?” Cassidy asked.

“I was sleeping.”

“Go to your computer.”

Blake climbed up in her chair and pressed the power button. She propped her chin in her hand and was about to doze off again when Cassidy asked. “Is it up yet?”

“What do you want me to see?”

“Your Facebook page.”

“Cass, I always go with what you write. Why do I need to look at it?”

“You’ll have the answer when you see it.”

Blake signed in, her eyes half closed. They flashed open wide at the picture on the screen. “Who is that?”

“You!”

Blake stared at herself. Her face showed abject horror, mouth and eyes wide open. Her legs were spread as though she were about to do a split, one arm was in the air along with her hair. “What the hell?”

“That’s exactly what I said when I saw it. I’ll read the post. ‘Blake, thank you for accompanying the Flemming Paranormal Research Group on our investigation of the Whitley farmhouse. You were awesome.’” Cassidy released a sigh. “Blake, you don’t look very awesome. You look like a petrified cartoon character! Do you have any idea how long I’ve worked to cultivate your image? Why would you pose like this? What were you doing out at night? Why didn’t you tell me you were going to make a public appearance?”

“Stop yelling at me,” Blake said calmly. “I did not pose for that picture. There was a video camera rolling in that room, I assume they grabbed a still from the footage. It was not a public appearance—”

“You appear to be shitting your pants in public! What do you call that?”

“Scream at me again, and I’m going to hang up.”

“Who...who are you?” Cassidy asked, sounding confused.

“I’m Blake Taylor, former chicken and doormat. You can fix this, just make a joke out of it.”

“Wait, wait, wait, back up. First, tell me what you were actually doing.”

“Quinn and I along with her brother and his wife joined this group of paranormal researchers on a ghost hunt. When this was filmed, Quinn was dragging me out of the house because one of the *professionals* ran out screaming. I should be getting some excellent audio of me soon talking to a ghost during an

EVP session once Carl gets everything together. That should woo anyone who may think less of me after seeing this.”

“Honey, how much of the medication have you been taking?”

“None, absolutely none of it.”

“I think you need to send me the book you’re working on,” Cassidy said, her tone suspicious.

“It’s on hold, I’ve begun something else.”

“What?” Cassidy bellowed.

“I warned you about the screaming. The book I was working on isn’t ready to be finished. I know it won’t make sense to you, but that story just hasn’t come to a close yet. I’ve begun another one. You will have a book by the deadline and another to follow immediately after. It’s all good.”

“Okay...fine. I’ll let you get back to sleep. We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Sure.” Blake pressed the button to end the call, went back to the couch, and flopped down. “I feel that backbone growing in, yeah!”

“Oh, Blake, I don’t know if we should be doing this.”

“Tonya, you’re not an accomplice, you’re only the transportation. I’ll be in and out in probably less than ten minutes. Quinn and Jacob will never know, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Tonya said without much conviction.

“You swore your secrecy.”

“What if she tells Jacob or Quinn?”

“You blame it all on me.” Blake pushed open the door and climbed out. “I’ll be right back.”

Maybe it was the lower temperatures, but more than likely, it was the encounter with the chicken and a ghost that caused a lot of the fear reins to vaporize their hold on Blake. Fresh from her chat with Cassidy, she felt very bold, and before she lost

her nerve, she was going to say what she should've the day she met Nelda Scott. With great purpose in her stride, she marched into the nursing home and down the halls to Nelda's room. She paused long enough to make sure the woman wasn't undressed, then took a seat next to the bed.

"What the hell are you doing here and where's Quinn?" Nelda asked.

"She's not here, and I came to chat," Blake said as she crossed her legs.

"I don't have anything to say to you. Get out."

"Good. I'll do the talking. I've met your children. I haven't spent much time with Dawn, but I have spent a considerable amount with Quinn, and I'm really getting to know Jacob. They are kind, intelligent, warm, giving, dedicated to one another, and shockingly devoted to you. Quinn told me that you predominantly raised them, so I can't comprehend if the three of them possess all the same wonderful attributes how you can despise one and love the others. I don't have children, but if I did and they were like yours, I'd be beside myself with pride."

Nelda's lips curled in a snarl. "That's right. I did raise them on my own while my husband gallivanted around like he didn't have a care in the world. And then one day, he realized they considered him a stranger. Oh, he made a change then, asked for everyone's forgiveness, and they gave it to him. All those years that he couldn't be bothered with them were gone in an instant. Not only did the kids begin to think he was made of gold, but everyone in town. Malcolm was the good time Charlie."

Nelda shoved the nasal cannula deeper into her nose as she raised the head of her bed. "When word got out that my daughter was a queer, no one blamed Malcolm. They blamed me, the mother who did everything for her. I'd hear the talk when I was in town. They made sure I heard. 'Nelda wasn't this, Nelda wasn't that.' Malcolm's name was never brought up. People I respected, thought were my friends, held me accountable for Quinn's perversion."

Blake watched the rapid rise and fall of Nelda's bony chest. "Nelda," she said gently, "I can understand how demoralizing that must've been for you. But you put the opinions of people callous enough to say those things they knew you would hear over your daughter. By your actions, you are saying what they think is more important to you than Quinn. Where are those people now? Do they do your laundry? Do they make sure you have the things you like?" She pointed at the wreath on the door. "Do they care if you have something pretty to look at? Quinn does. As horrible as they made you feel, you make Quinn feel a hundred times worse because you're her mother."

Blake leaned forward when Nelda turned her face away. "I don't mean to be heartless, but we both know you don't have a lot of time left here. If you don't do something, you're going to go into the next life, and I won't judge and say what you'll face there. But what you will leave behind here is the girl you gave birth to, the one you read to each night, the one despite all you've done still comes here to take care of you now. She will have to live the rest of her life believing that you hated her. It won't take much, less than a paragraph—two sentences. 'I love you. I'm proud of you.' I'm begging you, Nelda, please make this right before it's too late."

"I heard what you've had to stay. Now you can get out."

Blake stood, her heart broken. "I haven't known Quinn the amount of time that you've known her, but already she's finding her way into my heart. I hope I can love her through the damage you stand to leave behind. She's certainly worth the effort to me." Blake walked halfway to the door and turned back to Nelda, who was still facing away. "If you tell her I came here, I will come back and beat your ass. I whipped a chicken, I know I can take you."

With her head held high, Blake walked out the door and came face-to-face with Mr. Wade. Her scream set off all the pacemakers.

Chapter 30

Blake slept like a dead woman that night. Saturday, she wrote for six hours, then Quinn took her out to practice driving. Sunday they spent at Jacob and Tonya's where they barbecued and Blake learned to fish. Blake wrote that evening after dinner and climbed into bed with Quinn at eleven. Monday found her at her computer at eight a.m. Blake was on day shift.

She was happily typing away a little after noon when someone knocked on the front door. Blake approached warily and peeked through the blinds. On the porch stood Cassidy, her mother, and Dani. "What is going on?" she asked as she opened it.

"That's why we're here," Cassidy said as Rhonda launched herself on Blake. "We want to know the same thing."

Rhonda's hands were all over Blake's face as she stared into Blake's eyes. "She doesn't look like she's on drugs."

"I'm not." Blake backed up, dragging her mother with her as the others walked in.

Cassidy went straight to the computer and began to read what Blake had written. Dani looked around the room and craned her neck to see into the kitchen. "This is a cute place, I love the yard. Who does the dog outside belong to?"

"My neighbors, and that's Chuck," Blake said as her mother continued to inspect her and stare deeply into her eyes. "Mom, I'm fine. You should sit down."

Rhonda shook her head. "No, you tell me what's going on. Cassidy said she talked to you the other day and didn't even know who you were. She said you sounded strange and crazy."

"Thanks, Cass," Blake said. Cassidy ignored her as she continued to read. Blake grabbed her mother's hands as they swept over her shoulders. "Sit down. I'll get you something to drink, and we'll talk."

Rhonda didn't, though. She followed Blake into the kitchen along with Dani and looked over Blake's shoulder when she opened the refrigerator. "You have food, thank God."

"She's obviously eating, she looks great," Dani said as she went to the back door and looked out. "Wow, what a great yard. Have you been grilling?"

"Quinn has, she's the woman I'm seeing."

Dani spun around. "And you're dating?"

"I've been doing all kinds of things."

Blake made everyone a drink, and they returned to the living room where she told them everything. She took pleasure and pride in the way her sister's jaw sagged when she told them that she'd been on a ghost hunt and was learning how to drive. But with every word, Rhonda sank deeper into the sofa.

"I won't deny that I came here expecting to find you strung out on drugs, maybe hiding in a closet." Dani pounded her fist in the arm of the couch. "You're living, sis. You're really out there grabbing a hold of life by the fistfuls. This is what I wanted for you. Doesn't it feel great?"

"It does." Blake wanted to match Dani's enthusiasm, but as she gazed at her mother, whose eyes were downcast, she couldn't revel in her accomplishment.

Dani noticed, too, and reached over and took their mother's hand. "You have to let her go and be who she is."

Rhonda dissolved into tears. Blake sat on the other side of her and wrapped an arm over Rhonda's shoulders. "Mom, I'm happy. I know you want that for me. I know you're scared, too."

The front door opened, and Quinn walked in quickly, her features etched with concern. "What's wrong?" she asked as she took in the scene.

"Hey, baby," Blake said with a smile. "You're early."

Quinn stared at Rhonda, who continued to cry as she laid her head on Blake's shoulder. "I thought...we'd have lunch."

Dani jumped up. “So you’re baby. I’m Danielle, Blake’s sister,” she said as she put out her hand.

“Quinn Scott. What’s wrong?” she asked again as she shook Dani’s hand.

“Blake is happy and doing well. Mom’s overjoyed and a little frightened that she’s lost her forever. The woman at the computer is Cassidy Spencer, Blake’s agent. We just came to check on my sister.”

“Oh,” Quinn said as her shoulders drooped slightly. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Taylor.”

“Rhonda, call me Rhonda,” she blubbered and buried her face in Blake’s chest.

Cassidy whirled around in Blake’s chair. “This is good. I’m totally wrapped up, and this skeleton has a lot of meat on its bones. It’s much more than a draft.” She looked up at Quinn. “Who are you?”

“Blake’s girlfriend,” Dani supplied. “Quinn Scott.”

“Oh, you haven’t cashed your paychecks. I mailed them to your sister since I didn’t have your address. Thanks for taking care of Blake,” Cassidy said as she whirled back around.

Dani’s face went blank. “What check...for what?”

“She wanted to pay me for showing Blake around. That’s how we met.”

“Why didn’t you cash it?” Blake asked.

“That’s not something I want to explain right now, but you know the answer,” Quinn said as though Blake should’ve gotten the point before she asked.

“No, I think that’s something you should explain,” Dani persisted. “You’re being paid to be with Blake?”

Quinn’s famous temper suddenly flared. “No one can pay me to care for her and don’t cop an attitude with me. You locked her in a box. There’s a tool shed out back that I’m thinking about stuffing your ass in right now.”

Blake jumped to her feet. “Quinn, wait. We were kids, and she’s apologized for that.”

“Which is precisely why right now she’s not in the shed.”

Cassidy whirled around again. “What’s going on?”

“They’re about to fight. You’d know that if your head wasn’t buried in that computer,” Rhonda spat out. “You don’t care about Blake, just her books.”

Blake rubbed her forehead as she stepped between Quinn and Dani. “Fighting the chicken was easier than this. Now, everybody, wait just a damn minute,” she yelled. “I am fine with all of this. It’s y’all that need to get a grip.”

Cassidy smacked her lips as everyone fell silent. “Do you realize you just said y’all?”

Blake could tell that Quinn was still a long way from fine with Dani, but she was doing her best to be friendly. Blake stood near the kitchen window as she watched them at the grill while Quinn cooked dinner. Chuck sat nearby with a hopeful look on his furry face. She turned and stared at her mother, who sat at the kitchen table; Rhonda had at least stopped crying and was trying to pull herself together as she peeled potatoes. Cassidy, who’d been satisfied with what she’d seen of Blake’s writing and was convinced that Blake had not completely lost her mind, was on her way to New Orleans with hopes of catching a late flight.

Blake returned to the table and resumed slicing vegetables for salad. “What do you think of Quinn?”

“She’s tall.” Rhonda dropped another potato into a bowl.

“And?”

“I’ve been seeing a therapist.” Rhonda picked up another potato and began peeling. “She basically says nearly the same things your father and Danielle have been saying. It just sounds different coming from her. We were always moving to a new and strange place, and I never felt normalcy. That was especially difficult with two little girls. I never knew the

people around us. I had no idea if there were predators nearby.” Rhonda shook her head as the peels and slices of potato flew. “Basically, I was too overprotective, and that chipped away at your self-esteem.”

Blake put a hand on Rhonda’s arm. “Mom, you’ve made potato chips. Get another one, and this time, just take off the peel.”

“Right,” she said with a sigh and grabbed another potato. “Dani was always so rebellious and headstrong. It got to a point that I knew if I told her not to do something, she was going to do it, but not you. You obeyed everything I said.” Rhonda’s red and puffy eyes slowly rose to meet Blake’s. “You were a good kid, and I messed you up. After you broke your arm, you were so needy. It was just so much easier to keep you safe if you were afraid. That’s where our journey into the quagmire began.”

“I’m responsible for a lot of it, too. I suppose it served me well in one way. I developed a love for books, and that turned into a wonderful career. But I realized that I was only living vicariously through what I wrote, and it was a dark place. I’m beginning to live in the light now. I feel good about myself, and I’ve met someone who challenges me, who lifts me up when it’s hard to stand on my own.” Blake set her knife aside for a moment. “And what’s so amazing is that I want to do that for her. I don’t want to just take, I want to give.”

Rhonda smiled. “That sounds like a relationship.”

Blake nodded. “It is, or it’s the beginning of one, a real one. I know that’s scary for you for a number of reasons. I’m sure you wonder what kind of woman she is and if she’ll treat me well. But I also think you fear that she’s going to replace you in some way.”

Rhonda’s lip quivered as she focused her attention on the potato again. “She will, she’s supposed to, and I’m supposed to be happy about that. You’ll lean on her when times get tough. She’ll be the one you run to when you’re afraid. The difference between us, my love, is that you grew tired of living the way you did, I never have. My desire will always be to

protect you, but I'm going to have to learn that I can't do that now. I'm trying really hard, but the instinct is still there. You're going to have to push me away sometimes."

Blake put one hand on her mother's arm and took the peeler away with the other. She held Rhonda's hands until her mother met her gaze. "I will push, but I will never love you any less. We made some mistakes, but I have always known that you loved me with all your heart. Now tell me what you think of Quinn."

Rhonda sniffed but smiled. "She's tall."

"Mom."

"She's pretty. When she came in today, I could tell she was very worried about you. She cares, and I can see in your eyes that she makes you happy."

"She does."

Rhonda's smile wavered. "Does this mean you won't be coming back to New York?"

"I don't know, we'll just have to see."

"You have a temper, Quinn Scott, and you hold a grudge." Blake traced Quinn's face with her fingertips.

Quinn licked her lips. "When I got here and Dani introduced herself, the story of the box rushed to the forefront of my mind...no, that's not the truth. I knew who she was when I walked in. You look a lot alike. I was afraid that they'd come to take you home. I wanted to put them all in the shed and lock the door."

Blake laughed softly as she smoothed Quinn's hair from her face. "That's sweet. Slightly deranged but sweet. I wouldn't want to go anywhere without you. That's why I'm in your bed, and they're at my house."

"I'm very happy about that," Quinn said with a smile. She wanted to ask if Blake would always stay, but Blake's kiss made it clear that all verbal conversation was over, except maybe for a few utterances here and there.

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Chapter 31

Quinn was putting the finishing touches on a kitchen faucet that she'd just installed in a newly renovated home when her phone rang. "Scott's Plumbing," she said as she looked in her bag for a pen, certain she was about to take another job.

"I'd like you to come over. We need to talk."

The pen fell from Quinn's grasp. "What's wrong?"

"I just need to talk to you."

"Okay, I'll be there in ten minutes."

"See you then."

Quinn pulled the phone from her ear and stared at it, heart pounding. "Jacob?"

"Yes," he said, his voice sounding muffled.

Quinn walked down the hall and leaned against the bathroom door where he worked. "Did you talk to Mom?"

He stared up at her from where he sat on the floor next to a new toilet. "No, why?"

"She just called me and asked me to come over, she wants to talk," Quinn said as Jacob continued to stare at her. "Her bathroom's probably a mess. That's what it is, I'm sure."

"Are you going?"

Quinn sighed and looked at her phone. "Yes. I'll probably be back in about twenty minutes," she said as she walked out.

"I hope not," Jacob whispered.

"That was fast."

"I'm sure you realized when you came in that New Orleans isn't that far away," Blake said to her mother as she watched Dani sign a rental agreement for the car parked in her driveway. "Are you sure you want to drive home?"

“Danielle and I talked about it last night. The trip will be a good opportunity for us to bond. As much as I love the boys, I don’t get to spend much time alone with her. Besides, we’d like to see where you’re living right now. I’m looking forward to the tour.”

“There’s not much to see, but we can ride out to Oak Alley, the plantation home Quinn took me to when I first arrived, if that’s something you’d be interested in. I understand they have a nice restaurant. We could have lunch there and make a day of it.”

“That sounds so funny coming out of your mouth,” Rhonda said with a slight laugh.

Blake smiled. “You’re gonna hear more crazy stuff like that in the future.”

Dani pushed through the door with a key fob dangling from her fingers. “Ladies, we have wheels.”

“...and most of the sidewalks on this street are new because they were broken by the trees when Katrina toppled them,” Blake said.

“It’s such a pretty, quiet place. Lucas and Tyler would love the bayou and climbing some of the trees. I bet it’s a great place to raise kids. How’re the schools here?” Dani asked.

“No, don’t you start, Danielle. It’s hard enough having Blake so far away. I need to adjust to all of this before you begin talking about moving.”

Dani smiled into the rearview mirror. “My wife isn’t going to leave Connecticut, Mom.” She looked over at Blake. “I take it you and Quinn haven’t discussed living arrangements yet.”

“No, this is all still new.”

“Right.”

Blake cocked her head. “What’s with the smug grin?”

“I think you know.” Dani looked into the rearview mirror again. “Mom, I think I’ve seen enough of Cypress Glade. Are

you ready to go to the plantation?”

“Yes,” Rhonda said with a long sigh.

Dani pushed a few buttons on the GPS mounted on the dash. “Blake, you want to drive?”

“Yes!”

“No!” Rhonda said. “She doesn’t have a license.”

“Yet,” Blake said with a big smile.

“She’s not answering her phone, and she didn’t come back to work,” Jacob said worriedly. “Her truck wasn’t at the nursing home, her house, or Blake’s. I have no idea what happened or where she is.”

“Hmm” was all Tonya could say, her insides all jittery.

“If it was bad, she’d talk to me first, not Dawn, right?”

“I’m sure.” Tonya kept her back to Jacob while she cooked. She listened as Jacob called Dawn.

“Hey, are you home? Have you seen Quinn? No, nothing’s wrong, I just need to ask her something. No, I said nothing’s... Mom called Quinn and said she wanted to talk to her, I haven’t seen her since,” Jacob blurted out. “I don’t want to call Mom, you do it...she won’t tell me anything. She never talks to me about Quinn. What if Mom said something horrible to her? No one is home at Blake’s, and I don’t know her number...okay, call me back.”

Tonya was so nervous she dropped a container of salt into the soup and had to fish it out.

“If Mom did something to further hurt Quinn...I’m just gonna be done with her. She’s my mother and I love her, but what she’s doing isn’t right. I’m gonna tell her that,” Jacob said, his voice high. “I’m gonna tell her right now.”

Tonya whirled around and grabbed the phone from his hand. “Honey, wait until you hear back from Dawn.”

Jacob looked as though he was going to cry. “I should’ve said something before now. I should’ve been a man,” he screeched on the verge of hysteria.

“You are a man in every sense of the word.”

Jacob grabbed a paper towel and blotted his eyes. “You look so pretty today. Fall colors look so good on you. I love how you color coordinated the scarf to match the shoes. Would you listen to me?” he yelled. “Men don’t say stuff like that.”

Tonya answered Jacob’s phone when it rang. “She wouldn’t tell me anything. Mom said what she and Quinn discussed was between them,” Dawn said flatly. “So I called Blake. She hasn’t heard from her, either, and now she’s all freaked out.”

“What did...Blake say?” Tonya turned her back to Jacob. He moved around in front of her, and she twirled again.

“She just started babbling incoherently something about an old man grabbing her breasts, and it was her fault.”

Jacob pulled the phone away from Tonya. “Is she with Quinn?”

“No, but, Jacob, you need to calm down. You know how Quinn is. She has to digest something before she can talk about it. She’s probably off somewhere thinking.”

“What did Mom say?”

“She told me to mind my own business.”

“That’s it, I’m gonna do something about this!”

Tonya wrestled him for the phone, but he ran through the house holding it over his head screaming at octaves she was certain were going to break all the glass around them. She crashed into Jacob when he stopped suddenly and said, “Is that her truck?”

Tonya stared out the window in the distance near the pond and noticed Quinn’s red truck. Jack splashed in the water.

“Have you been crying?” Quinn asked as Jacob walked toward her with a beer in each hand.

He held one out to her. “You have. Drink this. It’s what men drink when they need to chill. Frankly, I hate the taste. I don’t see what anyone finds appealing about it.”

Quinn twisted the top and lifted the bottle to her lips. She grimaced as she swallowed. “Thanks.”

“Just give it to me straight. Tell me what Mom said, then don’t try to hold me back when I walk away. I don’t care if she’s dying. I’m gonna say my piece, and that is it.”

“Sit down.” Quinn patted the tailgate beside her.

Jacob did and released a little whimper when the lid to his beer bruised his palm as he tried to open it. She reached for it, but he held it away. “I can do it. Tell me what happened.”

“She apologized.” Quinn watched Jack as he walked along the edges of the pond looking for his ball. “She explained a little about how she felt when everyone thought my being gay was her fault. She said she was proud of me and she loved me, and things would be different from now on.”

Jacob released a deep sigh as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Quinn patted his knee. “I’m okay, I just had to think about it for a while and get myself back together.”

“I’m gay, too—well, kind of. I’m a straight man trapped in a gay man’s body...or maybe I’m a lesbian in a man’s body. I love my wife, and I’m very sexually attracted to her.” He looked at Quinn. “I just wanted you to know that you’re not alone.”

She squeezed his knee. “Thanks.

Jacob wiped his face on his sleeve. “Did she hug you?”

“Yeah, and she kissed my face a few times. You know, like she used to do.”

“Little kisses on the brow,” Jacob said with a nod. “Will you be able to put it all behind you like you did with Dad?”

“That didn’t happen in a day, but I will certainly try.”

“I will, too. Tonya’s cooking soup, want to join us for dinner, or do you have to rush home to Blake?”

“I love you, Jacob, but what do you think?” she asked with a smile as she hopped off the tailgate.

He held out the beer. “Take this and pour out yours. They’re probably bad. I bought them a few years ago when I was trying to fit in with the guys. After dinner, I’m going to make a beautiful wreath for your front door like a real man.”

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Chapter 32

Blake was sitting on Quinn's porch when she arrived that evening to shower. "How'd you get here?" Quinn asked as she climbed out of the truck.

"I walked, and I'm feeling really proud of myself. I only screamed twice and scared a bird and some kid on a skateboard."

"It's three miles between your house and mine."

"I know," Blake said with a smile, "but I'm a big girl." Her smile slowly faded as she walked over to Quinn and touched the puffiness beneath her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I am. I've had the best day, Blake." Quinn kissed her and smiled. "Come inside, I'll tell you about it while I get dressed."

That evening, Quinn got a good dose of Rhonda Taylor. Quinn took Blake and her family to dinner at the House on the Bayou. Rhonda made Dani drive around the parking lot three times in search of a parking spot that would be the most lit when they returned to the car. Rhonda sent her chicken back twice because she feared that it had not been cooked thoroughly, even though Dani assured her it was. The view of the bayou wasn't pretty because Rhonda was certain it was filled with gators and the nutria rats she'd read about. Everything that Blake mentioned as a positive about Cypress Glade, Rhonda countered with a negative.

"Danielle, now that you've gotten acquainted with Louisiana, I'm sure you won't be entertaining any more ideas about moving here," Rhonda said as she waved off Blake's offering of a bite of her pecan pie. "No offense, Quinn."

"As I told you earlier, Mom, Susan would never leave Connecticut." Dani's frustrated gaze fell upon Quinn. "I'm sure Blake told you we moved around a lot as kids. I won't do that to mine unless it's absolutely necessary. I do like

Louisiana, though. I'm sure it's much hotter in the summer, but I don't find the heat as stifling as some make it out to be." She threw a glance at her mother. "But more importantly, Blake likes it here, and if she stays, I will bring my family to visit often."

"Don't put any ideas like that in her head," Rhonda snapped, then tried to cover with a smile. "Blake needs to make up her own mind."

Blake had been mostly quiet through dinner but pushed her dessert aside. "And I will," she said firmly.

Dani nodded and raised her coffee cup with a smile. "Coming here has been great for you."

"Yes, it has. I've realized that some of my perceived phobias weren't truly that at all. I took the first step, and I met someone who didn't mind holding my hand while I tested barriers." Blake smiled at Quinn. "So I'm sure y'all will understand when I say that I'm not in any hurry to get back to New York."

"You all, not y'all," Rhonda corrected.

Blake jutted her chin as she raised her wineglass. "I hope y'all have a safe trip home tomorrow."

When dinner was over, Quinn could not wait to deposit Rhonda at Blake's place. She and Blake walked them inside, and when she got a moment alone with Blake, she said, "Since they're going home tomorrow, do you want to stay here tonight?"

"No, I want to go home with you," Blake said, meeting Quinn's eye. "I'll see them off in the morning."

Quinn waited patiently as they visited for a while, even though every time Rhonda made the statement to Blake "when you get back to New York," it made Quinn wince. Every obvious suggestion Rhonda planted reminded Quinn that her future with Blake was uncertain. Blake was going through a rapid evolution/revolution, and though Quinn wanted to believe that Blake truly did care for her, there was some part

of Quinn that feared that what Blake was attached so firmly to was comfort. Once Blake truly realized that she could stand on her own two feet, Quinn feared that she wouldn't be needed. It made her stomach turn to realize that she and Rhonda shared the same fears because Jacob had been right—she was falling for Blake and couldn't stop it.

Fear sometimes makes the fool, and Quinn was eaten up with it when she and Blake walked out to her truck. Instead of opening Blake's door, Quinn leaned against it and said, "I think you should stay here tonight. They're leaving in the morning, and you still have time to visit."

Blake replied irritably, "I'm pretty certain I said earlier that I didn't want to do that."

"Do you remember the first night we made love? You were referring to sex when you said something like 'it's not about being ready, but what happens next.' Have you considered what's next? I mean, where're we going? Are you just gonna gird your loins until spring, then go back to New York? You're changing so fast, I don't know what my role is. I don't know what you want from me. I don't want to get hurt—again. You need to take some time and think about those answers."

"Then let's go to your house and talk about it," Blake said. "And would you look at me?"

Quinn kept her gaze averted. "No. It's too soon to talk about long-range plans and living together. You just need to stop and think about all of this."

Blake ran a hand roughly through her hair. "You're not making sense. Yes, it's early, and yes, I remember the first time we made love because it wasn't that long ago. I think about these things, but I don't know how you feel, and since we're in this together, we should talk about it *together*."

"I'm not ready." Quinn walked around the truck and opened the driver's door. "Spend time with your mom and sister, and we'll talk later." Blake walked slowly toward the porch as Quinn backed out of the driveway and drove off feeling like a neurotic mess. She was mad at Rhonda and Dani for showing

up and disturbing her new world. But Quinn was furious with herself for allowing Rhonda to make her into a scaredy cat.

She drove home mentally arguing with herself. The fearsome side told her to pull away now. Though Blake didn't behave like Shay, there was still the opportunity for disaster. She wanted and needed Blake to make it easier on her and swear that she would stay in Cypress Glade forever. The other more sensible side implored Quinn to consider that Blake was not Shay and that she was being a fool. Common sense stepped in and reminded her that they'd only been technically dating a little over a week, and the whole mental argument was premature. By the time Quinn got home, she was absolutely livid and slammed every door she came in contact with.

She tore open the refrigerator door and found the rotten beer that Jacob couldn't open. "It's what men drink when they need to chill," she said, quoting Jacob. Quinn twisted off the top and took a swig. She felt the compulsion to spit, then burped. She looked at the bottle. "This explains a lot about men."

She sank into her chair by the window and stared out at the street. It was her place to think, where she contemplated her loneliness and how her life seemed to be going nowhere as the cars passed by. It had been going somewhere until that evening when everything seemed to derail, and she'd been in the conductor's seat. She'd panicked and overreacted.

The question was what to do about it. Close her eyes and just jump, or play it safe and stay on the platform while Blake swung away from her. She smiled ruefully, remembering how she'd told Jacob that Blake was the brave one; she hadn't realized how true that was until now.

Quinn stared into the darkness for a while when something darted past the window. She jumped, spilling some of the beer onto her pants as her brain tried to reconcile what she'd seen, then the pounding began. Quinn got up and went into the kitchen and opened the door.

"I need...to...go...to...the...gym because I think I'm dying," Blake said as she doubled over.

Quinn walked down the steps and put a hand on Blake's shoulder. "Did you run all the way over here?"

"I didn't want to have to go back inside and explain to Mom and Dani why I didn't leave with you. Mom would've seized on that. I'm still working through the whole dark thing," Blake said breathlessly and held her side. "There are a lot of shadows...things...that make weird noises." She grabbed the bottle from Quinn's hand and took a swallow that was immediately followed by a burp. "Excuse me, that's revolting."

"It is." Quinn tossed the beer into the outside trash. "I'm sorry about earlier. Can we just chalk that up as an anxiety attack?"

"No." Blake shook her head as she caught her breath. "We need to talk. I ran over here in the dark. I think that should show that I'm very concerned about the way you feel."

Quinn took her by the hand. "Come inside, let me get you some water."

Blake followed and asked as they walked into the kitchen, "Is your power out?"

"I didn't bother to turn on any lights." Quinn flipped the switch to the one over the sink, filled a glass with water, and handed it to Blake, who drank. Her blue eyes narrowed as she studied Quinn's face.

"Right now, you scare me," Blake said as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Quinn shrugged. "I don't like me very much at the moment."

Blake took her by the hand and led her into the living room, switching on the lamps before they settled on the couch. "So what I gathered from what you said earlier is that you think when my time is up here that I'm just going to leave."

Quinn pulled a knee up and wrapped her arms around it. "Not exactly...maybe...kind of."

Blake pursed her lips as she nodded. “You’re right, it is early to be discussing long-range plans, so we should stick to the here and now. We’ve basically known each other for roughly a month and a half. Every minute I spend with you makes me like you more. I like your humor, the way you think, everything about you. I think you’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever met. I’m not about to walk away from you unless you tell me you don’t want me anymore. I have an apartment in New York. Eventually, I will have to go back there, but what I do with it depends on what happens here. If we continue on the path we’re going, I fully expected to have your input on that decision.”

Quinn scrubbed at her face, feeling incredibly stupid. “Your mother rattled me.”

“She rattles me, too. That’s why I came here in the first place. As much as I love her, I am *so* ready for her to get into that car and leave.” Blake took one of Quinn’s hands and traced the veins that stood out with her fingertips. “I agree with what you said earlier. I am changing fast. I still can’t look a squirrel in the eye, and even after the fight with Ester, birds still make me nervous. I can’t sleep in a totally dark room even with you. Aside from wanting to live a full life, my biggest incentive to face things is to be with you. Quinn, you make me happy, and I want to make you happy.”

“I get scared, too. I was afraid that your mother would convince you to go back with them.”

“Then why did you want to leave me there tonight?”

Quinn couldn’t look Blake in the eye and instead stared at Blake’s fingers as they continued to stroke the back of her hand. “I never told you about Shay. She was the woman in the photo you found here the day I taught you how to twerk.”

“For the record, I still don’t know how to do that, but I’m fine with it,” Blake said with a laugh. “I remember her as being the ‘one that got away.’”

Quinn nodded. “I thought we were in a relationship. Shay came here to go to school. After graduation, she stayed a while. I met her in a bar in New Orleans not long after I came

out. We dated for a while, and she decided she wanted to go home. As I look back on it, I think she was done with Louisiana and me, but when I told her I wanted to go with her, she agreed. I think I knew she didn't love me, but I wanted her, and I was eager to escape. I went with her to Boston, and we'd only been there for six months when she told me she didn't love me and never would. I was crushed, even though deep down I'd known she didn't."

Quinn sighed. "I feared that I would see the same doubt in your eyes, especially after your mother harped on you about going back to New York. I panicked, and I couldn't face you, so I came back here to hide away from what I couldn't confront."

"Ah," Blake said softly, "that I understand." She locked her fingers with Quinn's. "Would you look at me now?"

Quinn's gaze rose slowly. Blake held her stare and smiled. "We have something good. I'm very happy with you. Do you see the truth in my eyes?"

Quinn nodded and tried to smile.

"Let me hold your hand while you wrestle with your fears just like you do mine because that's what couples do. I won't let you fall."

"I don't think you can stop me." Quinn watched Blake closely as her meaning settled in. Her heart skipped a beat when Blake's smile turned radiant.

"Well, that's the only exception," Blake said before she leaned in and kissed Quinn.

"You look like you spent the night having sex." Dani moved in close to Blake and sniffed. "You smell like sex. Go wash your face before you hug our mother."

"Is she a basket case?" Blake asked as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Yep. She woke me out of a dead sleep howling great lamentations over leaving you behind in this 'swampy

hellhole.” Dani laughed softly. “I like it here. I like Quinn, too, despite the fact that she wanted to stuff me in your tool shed. You’re both enamored with each other. I’m genuinely happy... Don’t hug me, you smell,” Dani said with a laugh as she wrapped her arms around Blake. “My only regret is now that you’ve come out of your shell, you’re so far away.”

Blake buried her face in Dani’s neck. “Come visit me. I’ll come visit you.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Make Mom understand.”

Dani sighed. “I’ll try, but you can’t worry too much about her and don’t let her drag you back down.”

“I’m too high, too crazy about Quinn to let that happen.” Blake released Dani and stepped away. “Right now, I need and want to focus on Quinn. Her mother’s dying, she won’t be around long, and Quinn has just reconciled with her after a long estrangement.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Dani said sincerely. “You take care of her. Dad and I will take care of Mom. Now go wash up.”

The goodbye was tearful. Blake broke down in the face of her mother’s misery and the knowledge that they’d have to remain apart for a while. No matter how Blake explained it, Rhonda was inconsolable. The hardest thing Blake had done in a while was to close the car door and wave goodbye as her mother and sister drove away. Quinn had dropped Blake off, so she could say her goodbyes alone, but the minute the rental faded from sight, the red truck pulled into the driveway. Quinn took Blake by the hand, led her inside, and held her as she cried.

Neither of them realized then that they were crossing hurdles as a couple. They comforted each other. Blake spent a lot of time at the nursing home with Quinn and watched Nelda’s steady decline. She held Quinn as she cried over what was to come. They spent the last Thanksgiving with Nelda and Quinn’s family at the nursing home.

Blake never told Quinn about the conversation she'd had with Nelda. She wanted Quinn to believe that her mother had chosen on her own to make amends. That was the only secret Blake kept. Nelda kept it, too, and though she and Blake never discussed it, they often gave each other a nod of thanks when no one else was looking.

Blake and Quinn spent much of their time at Quinn's house. Smaller belongings gradually made their way over until the rental house was virtually empty except for larger furniture. They made jokes about not discussing living arrangements, as they did everything that two people who lived together did. Blake washed the laundry, including Nelda's. She and Quinn took turns cooking. In the mornings, Blake had coffee with Quinn and Jacob before they all began their day. Blake wrote, and in the evenings, Quinn came home to her. After dinner, they'd go out to the boardwalk and stroll along until they came to what they'd dubbed the kissing tree, and each time, they'd commemorate their first kiss. There was one hurdle they had yet to cross.

December winds blew across the water, adding a chill to the air. Blake laughed as Quinn pulled her to a stop beneath the tree. Their lips were cold as they met, but Blake felt warmth spread from her head to her toes. "Quinn, I have to tell you something."

"You're very still. Is there something behind me? Is it a—"

Blake put a finger to Quinn's lips. "We can never let anyone cut this tree down because it's special. This is where we had our first kiss, and this is where I want to tell you for the first time that I love you."

Quinn's eyes sparkled in the moonlight as she pulled Blake out of the shadows. "I was going to admit that to you tonight. I can't believe you beat me to it."

Blake grinned. "Then say it now."

"I love you, Blake Taylor, and I will follow you to the ends of the earth. Wherever you are, that will be home to me."

Blake wrapped her arms around Quinn's neck and kissed her. "Tomorrow, I want you to take me to the DMV where I will test for my Louisiana driver's license."

"I will," Quinn promised with a smile. "In the spring, I want you to take me to New York. I want to see the sights, and I want to see your apartment."

"*Our apartment.* If we decide to keep it, we'll have two residences. Details, we'll work out later. Right now, I want to stroll in the moonlight with the woman I love."

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Epilogue

That was the first Christmas that Blake had spent away from her family. She refused to go home and leave Quinn, and she could not ask Quinn to leave her mother over the last Christmas they'd probably share. It was understood when Dani spent the holidays with her in-laws, and Blake gently explained to her mother that it would not be the last time she wouldn't be in New York for Christmas. To Blake's surprise, her mother took the news well.

The leaves had barely begun to bud on the trees, when Nelda in her sleep slipped through the veil that divides this life from the next. Quinn had been a constant source of strength to Blake, but on that night and the ones that followed, Blake was the comforter. With Tonya's help, they finalized all of Nelda's arrangements as Quinn had planned to do. At the wake service, Blake only left Quinn's side once, and that was to show Glenda Percy the door when Blake heard her whispering to someone that Nelda had been a poor mother.

Blake led Glenda by the arm past the others who stood outside the chapel. "This is not the time or the place to express your opinions. And for the record, you don't know jack shit about Nelda or the Scott family, so shut your foul yap. If you don't do the respectable thing and get into your car and drive away, I'll wring your neck just like a chicken's. Look into my eyes, Glenda, you know I mean it."

Glenda took Blake at her word and left. Feeling satisfied with herself, Blake spun around to go back inside and ran into Tonya. "I'm not a lesbian," Tonya said as she held Blake by the arms, "but you totally just turned me on. I'm serious. My nipples are so hard right now I think they're cutting holes in my bra." Fresh tears welled in Tonya's eyes. "I'm so proud to call you my sister." She hugged Blake tight.

"Oh...you really are serious about the nipple thing," Blake said as she patted Tonya on the back. "I'm honored to have you as a sister, too."

The next day as everyone turned and left the burial site, Blake walked alongside Quinn with her arm around Quinn's waist. Quinn sniffed and wiped her eyes with a tissue, and said, "Now would be a good time for you to make your confession."

"What're you talking about?" Blake asked, caught completely off guard.

"I went into the nurse's station one day to get some ice, and one of the nurses told me about an incident that occurred with Mr. Wade. She said he grabbed you one day and you jacked him in the jaw." Quinn stopped walking and turned to face Blake. "She remembered the day well because they had to ice his face. You did that not long before my mother called me to make peace. You talked to her, didn't you?"

Quinn's expression wasn't one of anger, but she wasn't smiling. "All she needed was a little push. I believe she wanted to talk to you, but I think maybe she was afraid that it was too late. So...I gave her a nudge."

Quinn's eyes filled with fresh tears. "Thank you." She kissed Blake, uncaring of who watched or disapproved. "You're a hero to the staff there. Mr. Wade stopped grabbing them after that and uses his hands to play bingo and chess, no pun."

Blake smiled timidly. "Ester the chicken trained me well."

Cassidy stared at Blake's next book on her computer screen disappointed that it was not the one she'd read a portion of while in Cypress Glade. There were no ghosts, no demented psychopaths, just the story of a woman battling her own demons. And it was told in first person, which was not Blake's style. She'd be very surprised if it sold at all given Blake's audience.

At the moment, Blake was the golden child. The video of her doing an EVP session and the responses she received had gone viral on the Internet. Her next book, the one that was to

immediately follow the manuscript Cassidy was reading was based on the investigation of the Whitley house, and news of it had created a buzz. Cassidy was forced to capitulate to Blake's demands of releasing the one dedicated to Quinn first.

She sighed and reread the last paragraph.

Love is the most fickle of the spirits. She chooses to whom she bestows her gifts, and her timing isn't always perfect. She's often hateful when she seeks out a pair and kisses only one depositing her spell. In my case, she was kind and blessed me with love most healing and a lover extremely divine.

Cassidy snarled at the screen. "Poetic, romantic bullshit. God, deliver me!"

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About the Author

Robin Alexander is the author of the Goldie Award-winning *Gloria's Secret* and sixteen other novels for Intaglio Publications—*Gloria's Inn*, *Gift of Time*, *Murky Waters*, *The Taking of Eden*, *Love's Someday*, *Pitifully Ugly*, *Undeniable*, *A Devil in Disguise*, *Half to Death*, *Gloria's Legacy*, *A Kiss Doesn't Lie*, *The Secret of St. Claire*, *Magnetic*, *The Lure of White Oak Lake*, *The Summer of Our Discontent*, and *Just Jorie*.

She was also a 2013 winner of the Alice B Readers Appreciation Award, which she considers a true feather in her cap.

Robin spends her days working with the staff of Intaglio and her nights with her own writings. She still manages to find time to spend with her partner, Becky, and their three dogs and four cats.

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