

My Sister's Keeper
by Erin Wade

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Edited by

Julie Versoi

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DEDICATION

To the one who has always supported me in everything
I have ever undertaken. You have encouraged me and have
always been my biggest fan. Life is sweeter with you.

Girl, lift me up where I belong
Put your arms around me
I've loved you for so long
You're where I want to be . . . *Erin Wade*

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her suggestions. She makes me a better storyteller.

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CHAPTER 1

The Rockstar and the U.S. Marshal



Wednesday, January 8 – Shaw Rose

“What are you doing here?” a familiar voice demanded.

I turned to face the man who had mentored me through my early years in the U.S. Marshall’s Service.

“Praying for my sister,” I replied, “but a better question is why are you here?”

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"Shannon Rose is your sister?" Brad Taylor's skeptical tone let me know he couldn't reconcile me with the beautiful woman hooked up to all the beeping and swishing machines in the hospital room.

"Yeah, it's amazing what a difference a color job and cosmetics will make." I smirked. "To be completely honest, we are identical twins. She makes a bigger effort than I do to look gorgeous."

He studied me then whistled softly. "I'll be damn, you do look like her, Shaw. Shaw Rose, of course you are her sister."

"Seriously, Brad, why are you here in Nashville?"

"Your sister is involved in a drug smuggling ring. When I heard she had overdosed, I came to check on her."

"I don't believe it. Shannon would never take drugs."

"I didn't say she was doing drugs," Brad clarified. "Can we go somewhere private and talk? Maybe grab a cup of coffee and a piece of pie in the hospital cafeteria."

I glanced at Shannon and all the tubes and wires connected to her. "Sure, she isn't going anywhere."

"I just placed guards outside her door," Brad informed me.

I followed Brad to the cafeteria where we picked up pie and coffee. I let Brad pay. This was his party. He walked to a table on the far side of the room and pulled out a chair for me to sit down.

"Within the next two days we will move Shannon to a private hospital and check her in under another name," Brad informed me. "We will move her during the early morning hours, and you will take her place."

I jumped to my feet, but he caught my arm and pulled me back into the chair. "Just listen to me before you go off halfcocked. I need you to color your hair blonde and make yourself look exactly like her. I need you to become Shannon Rose."

"I don't understand," I said slowly.

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"She was working with us to bust a drug ring that is operating in the entertainment industry. A big ring, bigger than T-Piddly, run by important people."

"Why wasn't I read in on this?" Anger flooded me when I realized he had used my sister—a civilian—to help gather evidence against dangerous criminals.

"It all came together last week. You were in upstate New York on a much-needed vacation. I couldn't locate you. Even your partner only knew you were in the Finger Lakes Region. It would help if you kept your coworkers informed."

I ignored his advice about keeping my coworkers informed about my private life. "Brad, Shannon is famous. She is the hottest name in country music right now. I mean she is Taylor Swift famous. I can't pull this off."

"You used to be in the band with her."

"When we were in high school and college." I shrugged. "I was her drummer, and we sang duets, but that was a long time ago."

"Do you want to find out who overdosed your sister or not?" Brad cut to the chase.

There was only one answer I could give him. "Yes! Hell yes!"

"This afternoon or tomorrow I want you to go to your beauty salon and have your hair colored exactly like Shannon's, blonde with a few streaks. Do whatever it is that women do with makeup to make yourself look like her. I will confiscate a hospital gown and those socks they make everyone wear. When we whisk her away, you will take her place in the hospital bed. The next morning you will be Shannon Rose."

"I don't know, I—"

"You will need to stay in the hospital a week. When the word gets out that you have come to, you will begin to get visitors. Pretend to be disoriented and act like you don't know who they are. It will give you time to meet everyone and find out who Shannon's friends and band members are."

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Query them like you are trying to remember them and their importance in your life. If you are lucky, they will tell you everything there is to know about their relationship with your sister.”

“I can do that,” I agreed. “I’ll get my hair colored this afternoon. We can make the switch after midnight tonight. When I am allowed to have visitors bring me a laptop and a pair of the best earbuds you can buy.”

“Why?”

“I only see Shannon a few times a year. With her touring schedule and my assignments, we must work to find time to get together. I want to watch every YouTube video I can find on her, every podcast, every television interview and performance. I need to know what she knows and who she knows. This is going to be tricky at best.”

“Great. Be sure you do something with your eyebrows, so they look like Shannon’s.”

I curled my lip at him. “I can’t believe you put her in harm’s way.”

“It wasn’t my idea. Someone sold her rhythm guitar player recreational drugs laced with fentanyl. She died. We were working with the Nashville drug squad to apprehend the ringleaders. Shannon contacted us and insisted that she could help us nail the kingpins. I know she wouldn’t voluntarily use drugs, so someone injected her. Our medical examiner identified the injection site of fentanyl in her arm. Thank God, someone got her to the hospital intime for her to be resuscitated even if she is in a coma.

“The worst part of all is that fentanyl is extremely easy to get. It is a mail-order drug openly available on the internet. It is shipped directly to consumers and dealers; no international drug cartels are involved. Unregulated labs in China offer it online and guarantee delivery via standard mail.

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“Basically, fentanyl is more a mass poisoning for Americans than a traditional drug problem. Since 2019 over a million U.S. citizens have died from fentanyl poisoning.

“Think about it this way, China never has to go to war with the U.S. They are simply killing our citizens with illegal drugs like fentanyl and our people can’t sniff it or inject it fast enough. We must stop it.”

“You have a nightmare job,” I sympathized. “I thought keeping people safe in witness protection is difficult. It is nothing compared to this.”

CHAPTER 2

Becoming Shannon Rose--Superstar

Thursday January 9 —The Switch

I was able to get into a beauty salon that offered the works from a bleach job to eyebrow dying and shaping. I showed them my best photo of Shannon and said I need to look just like her.

By the time the sun set I had blonde hair, perfectly arched eyebrows, radiant skin, and beautifully polished fingernails.

I looked into the mirror. I was my sister.

I didn't worry about clothes. When Brad and his men took Shannon, they would take my blue suit and white shirt leaving me a hospital gown and Shannon's clothes.

My constant prayer is that Shannon will awaken and tell us who injected her. At 9:00 p.m. I called Brad to let him know I was ready for the switch any time he was.

"The hospital staff changes a midnight and reduces to a skeleton crew," he informed me. "Meet me in the hospital parking garage at 11:30 p.m. I'll be driving a black suburban."

"Of course you will," I teased.

"What is your ride?"

"Red Mustang."

"Of course it is." Brad laughed. "Go to the top level of the parking garage. I will be there."

Since I had no other place to go, I drove to the top of the parking garage. The view was astonishing. I got out of the car and walked to the far edge of the lot.

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I haven't seen Shannon in nine months. As twins growing up, we were inseparable. She was the outgoing one and I was the serious one. We both loved music and participated in every choral program our school offered. By the time we reached high school, we had formed a decent five-piece girl band. Shannon played the guitar and was the lead singer, and I was the drummer. Other members came and went. By the time we entered college, we were well known in Nashville and in big demand for parties and official college functions that required music.

Our senior year of college we cut an album with Shannon as the lead singer and me playing the drums and harmonizing when a song called for a duet. We recorded songs we had written so it was all new music. To this day Shannon still sends me my share of the royalties from the songs we wrote together.

We carried our album to every radio station in town begging them to play it. One station played it, then another until it spread across the nation resulting in a recording contract and more money than I'd ever dreamed existed.

When we graduated, I entered the U.S. Marshal's Service and Shannon hired another drummer. She was furious with me for choosing a different life, but I had no desire to spend my nights on a bus going from town to town to perform in smoky dance halls.

Shannon was gregarious and outgoing while I preferred a good book and quiet evenings in front of the fireplace. As she grew in fame, we had less contact, but we always kept track of each other. If she was performing close to a town I was working in, I would call her, and she always made time to meet me for dinner so we could catch up.

I knew she liked women but had no idea if there was someone special in her life. I've never thought about a life partner one way or the other, because I wouldn't ask anyone to tolerate my work schedule. It is a lonely life, but I like it.

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I checked my watch as headlights flashed up the incline leading to the top level. Brad's black suburban parked beside my car and four muscular men climbed out. They were dressed like hospital orderlies.

I walked toward Brad as he stepped from the vehicle. "Hot damn," he exclaimed. "Is that you Shaw?"

Wolf whistles and teasing came from the officers with him. "Wow, Shaw, you look just like Shannon Rose."

"Mission accomplished," I replied. "I've done my part now you fellows must smuggle me into the hospital and spirit away my sister."

"We've got you covered, Shaw," Brad assured me. "I have arranged for the first room by the elevator to be empty. You and I will go in there where you will change into a hospital gown that is waiting on the bed. Jamison and I will roll you into Shannon's room as Bryant and Lee roll out Shannon."

"But how will you transport—" I didn't finish my sentence because a hospital ambulance emerged from the ramp onto the level with us. I knew it would be waiting for Shannon.

"Kent will cause a distraction at the nurse's desk," Brad continued. "Hopefully everything will go as planned. The guards at Shannon's door will remain there as long as you are in the hospital. When Kent causes a ruckus, the guards will rush to the nurse's station to help the nurses drawing their attention away from us."

"Let's get this show on the road." I exhaled the breath I was holding and followed Brad into the hospital.

As we slipped into the room by the elevator, Kent staggered toward the nurse's station. "I want to see Shannon Rose," he slurred obviously drunk.

"Sir, there is no one here by that name," one of the nurses tried to placate him.

"I'm not stupid," he yelled. "I know—he fell to the floor and began convulsing as if having a seizure."

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All the nurses gathered around him and screamed for a gurney. The two guards at Shannon's door ran to help, pretending to hold him to keep him from hurting himself.

I slung off my clothes, pulled on the gown, and jumped into the hospital bed as Bryant and Lee silenced the alarms hooked to Shannon and rolled her bed onto the elevator. Brad and Jamison rolled me into Shannon's room, flicked the monitors back on causing them to chime, then disappeared.

Nurses entered my room, and I did my impersonation of Kent's seizure. "She's pulled loose from the monitors," one of them said.

Then something happened I wasn't prepared for. She gave me a shot. My pretend seizure halted, and I slipped into blackness.

CHAPTER 3

I Don't Know You!

Friday, January 10 – Is She Dead?

“Baby, baby, please wake up.” A soft hand stroked my cheek and the scent of the sexiest perfume I’ve ever smelled filled my nostrils.

I didn’t have to fake coming out of a coma. I felt sluggish and I had been drugged by the nurse. I moaned and opened one eye getting a good look at a beautiful woman that screamed, “high maintenance.”

“Nurse!” she called. “She opened one eye.”

Nurses swarmed my bed taking my blood pressure and checking my heart rate and all other vitals.

The auburn-haired beauty beside me clutched my hand and began talking to me. “Shannon, talk to me baby. Say something.”

I opened both eyes and asked her an honest question. “Who are you?”

“Stacy,” she exclaimed. “I’m the love of your life. Your fiancée.”

I wasn’t faking when I stared at her as if I’d never seen her before. I shook my head no and closed my eyes. *Shannon never mentioned a fiancée. Stacy, at least I have a name.*

Stacy grabbed my arm and began shaking me. “Shannon, talk to me.”

“Don’t shake her,” a nurse said. “Just talk to her soothingly. Perhaps she will respond to your voice.”

Stacy began talking in a soft, soothing tone and I let my head roll to the right and opened my eyes so I could watch her.

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"Shannon," she squealed. "Can you speak? Can you talk to me?"

"I...I...I don't know you." I stuttered sending her into a tizzy.

She leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Don't you remember that thing I do with my tongue that drives you crazy?"

I gulped. I wasn't sure what *thing* she was talking about, but I was confident I didn't want to experience it.

"I can't remember anything," I mumbled. "Where am I?"

"You are in Vanderbilt University Medical Center, baby. I've been setting with you night and day."

The nurse standing behind Stacy rolled her eyes letting me know my fiancée wasn't telling the truth.

"How long have I been here?" I let my eyes wander around the room.

"Five horrible days," Stacy replied.

"What is wrong with me? Why am I here?"

"Someone shot you full of drugs," the nurse replied. "You almost died from an overdose."

"Am I a druggie?" I asked.

"Lord, no!" Stacy's voice jumped three octaves. "You would never do drugs. Someone tried to kill you."

I closed my eyes, and my head fell back against the pillow. "I'm so tired."

Confident I was okay; the nurses left the room, and Stacy gently stroked my arm. I've already figured out that Stacy isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, so I opened my eyes and smiled at her. "May I have a drink of water?"

"Of course. Would you like your head raised?" She located the bed controls and began to raise me into a sitting position.

I sipped the water from the straw she held to my mouth and thanked her.

"We're engaged?" I asked her.

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"Yes." She flashed a gorgeous diamond ring. "Don't you remember giving me this?"

I shook my head no. "Obviously, I love you, if I gave you that rock. I'm certain I trust you too."

"Of course, you do silly."

"I may need your help. I can't remember anything or anyone. I will have to rely on you to tell me about my life. What do I do for a living?"

"You are a famous country music star."

"How did I end up here?"

"You and the band performed at the Grand Ole Opry Saturday. After the show we joined a bunch of other artists at the Opry Bar and Grill to party. Someone must have slipped something in your drink because you fell over and began to convulse. I immediately called an ambulance and brought you here."

"I have a band. I can't remember them or their names. Tell me about them."

"It's an all-girl band. You are the lead singer and guitarist. Kelly Clinton plays the drums. Shy Sanders plays the keyboard. Faye Farmer is your bass guitarist, and Ziggye Jones plays lead guitar. Cindy Wayne plays the steel guitar."

"Would you write their names and instruments on a note pad? This is too much for my addled brain to comprehend."

She pulled a cash register receipt from her purse and wrote the information on the back of it.

"Do you travel with me? I asked."

"Of course, I do. I can't stand being away from you. I love you." To reinforce her declaration, she stood, bent over and kissed me on the lips. My immediate reaction was to pull away from her.

She frowned then stepped back from the bed. "I'm sorry. You don't know me from Adam. I had no right to kiss you."

"It's okay, I rather liked it," I lied.

She smiled. "I'm glad."

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"Tell me more about our business. Do we travel a lot? Is the band booked for appearances? Do we have hit songs?"

She laughed. "You have the number one song right now. It has been at the top of the charts for two months. In two weeks, you are booked for the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo. Do we need to cancel?"

"I don't know. Let's not make any decisions yet. Hopefully my memory will return to normal in a few days. Do I have a manager that handles our bookings and bookkeeping? That sort of thing."

"Eleanor Kincaid is your manager and financial advisor."

"I need to talk to her. Can you arrange for her to visit me tomorrow?"

"I can do that."

I looked around my room then turned my gaze on her. "Where's my cellphone?"

She opened the drawer of the nightstand beside my bed. "Here it is. The battery is dead," she declared as she tried to turn on the phone. "I will go home and get your charger. Do you need anything else?"

"Do I have an iPad?"

"Yes, you are a fanatic about staying connected. I will bring it and your earbuds too. Anything else?"

"No, that is all I need. Thank you so much for doing this for me. I really appreciate it."

A half smile curved her lips. "That's the first time you have ever acknowledged what I do for you."

"Maybe I've come back as a better woman," I joked.

"Maybe." She agreed. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"I'm going to take a nap." I informed her.

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I was awake when Stacy returned with my electronic devices and charger. "You are just in time for dinner," I informed her.

"If you don't mind, I have a dinner engagement this evening," she said sweetly. "I can cancel if you want me to."

"No, go have a nice dinner. I'm certain it will be better than hospital food."

She plugged my phone and iPad into the charger, got fresh water, and kissed me on the forehead. "I will see you tomorrow, sweetie."

"Have a good time and thank you again for all you are doing for me."

She nodded and slipped out the door.

CHAPTER 4

The Outside World

Saturday, January 11 – Connected

“Can we remove all this paraphernalia?” I asked the first nurse I saw this morning.

She checked all the readings and my vitals and nodded. “The doctor is on his way to see you. Let’s let him make that call.”

I nodded and moved to a recliner in my room while clean sheets were put on my bed and breakfast was placed on my roller tray. “Is it okay if I sit here to eat my breakfast,” I asked.

“If you feel like it, that will be great,” the nurse replied.

The doctor entered my room as she left. “Do you know who you are?” he asked.

“I’ve been told I am Shannon Rose,” I replied.

“Does that name mean anything to you?”

“Not really.”

“Your memory hasn’t returned?” He questioned me.

“In bits and pieces. I’m sure it will come back.”

“I want to keep you for two more days,” He informed me. “I will have the nurse remove all of your attachments, but I want to observe you to be certain you are improving the way I think you should.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed. In two more days, I should meet all my band members and my business manager. I wondered if I should call our parents then decided against it. Mom would know my voice and ask about Shannon.

The doctor left and I called Brad. “Hey, I wanted to tell you not to worry about the iPad. My fiancée brought mine

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from home. I have everything I need. The doc said he will release me the day after tomorrow.”

“Good. The less I’m seen with you the better. Keep in touch and Shaw don’t be a hero. If you encounter anything the least bit suspicious, call me.”

“Yes, sir,” I agreed.

I hung up, put the earbuds in my ear and began surfing the internet for any information I could find on Shannon Rose. Wikipedia had several pages of information including the many hits she had recorded. I was familiar with all of them. I had all her audios. Her name was all over the Top Billboard websites and in every gossip column on the internet. It struck me as funny that there was not a single mention of her being engaged to Stacy Thornton.

I was delighted when lunch was delivered giving me a chance to get the earbuds out of my ears.

An attractive older woman entered the room as I lifted the cover from my baked chicken and green beans. I had no idea who she was.

“Stacy said you wanted to see me,” she said as she sat down in the chair beside my bed.

“And you are?”

She observed me for several seconds. “Eleanor Kincaid, your manager.”

“Okay,” I drawled. “Did Stacy tell you I am having memory problems?”

“She said you don’t remember anything. How are you going to perform if you can’t remember the words to your hit songs?”

I held up the earbuds and my iPad. I’m relearning them now, but I am wondering if we should cancel our performance at the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo.”

“It’s not just one performance,” Eleanor pointed out. “They booked you for every night. It is a multi-million-dollar contract, and it has already sold out. I think you would end up with a lawsuit on your hands if you are a no show.”

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"You mean I'm going to be in Fort Worth for two weeks?"

"Yep," Eleanor snickered. "You love Fort Worth. You and your sister went to public school there."

I nodded. "The show must go on," I quipped.

Eleanor went over the band's schedule as I ate my lunch. "This is a grueling schedule. Are you going to be able to do it?"

"I'm sure I can. There is nothing wrong with me physically. It's just the mental thing."

"How long have I been engaged to Stacy Thornton?"

"Too long," Eleanor scoffed. "She's no good for you. The sooner you get rid of her the better."

I nodded in complete agreement with my business manager. "What is my financial situation?"

"If you live two hundred years, you couldn't spend all the money you have."

"Good to know. I'd like to see a balance sheet as soon as possible along with the usernames and passwords on all my financial accounts and holdings."

Eleanor frowned. "Why do you want that?"

"Because I have no idea about my financial situation or my income and expenditures. If I don't recover, I may need to hang up my guitar and call it quits."

"Surely not," Eleanor blurted as a look of horror covered her face. "I'll bring your complete financials and everything you have asked for tomorrow. Right now, I must meet with the band and let them know your plans."

"I want to talk with each of them tomorrow," I instructed. "Schedule them two hours apart. I need to reacquaint myself with them."

"Good idea. When you get out of here, we need to hit the ground running."

I liked Eleanor. She is a straight shooter. I leaned my head back against the recliner as she left the room. I

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wondered who was supplying drugs to the band and who was using them.

As soon as the door closed behind Eleanor, I opened my iPad and put the wireless earbuds in my ears. I searched the internet for information on each band member. I learned as much as possible about their public and private lives. Each member had been with Shannon for ten or more years. That told me they liked their job or the money they made—hopefully both. I want to get out of the hospital so I can visit my sister and check on her progress. The last time I saw her she was comatose.

CHAPTER 5

The Girls in the Band

Sunday, January 12 – Getting to Know You

I had dressed in my street clothes—or Shannon's street clothes—and was listening to my sister's latest hit album when a text dinged into Shannon's cellphone. It was from Eleanor and contained a schedule of time and who was meeting with me today. I love her efficiency. My first visitor of the day would be Kelly Clinton, drummer.

Kelly was thirty, with flashing brown eyes and dark wavy hair. From watching the performance videos, I knew she took showmanship to a whole new level—energetic and magic on the drums. She was a beautiful butch. The fans loved her almost as much as they loved Shannon. Kelly played the field and always had a beautiful woman on her arm.

“How are you doing, Boss?” Kelly carried a fresh arrangement of roses into the room and placed them on the counter that covered the wall under the windows.

“I'm getting better,” I replied.

“What happened? One minute you were fine and the next minute you were convulsing on the floor.”

I observed her as I answered. “The theory is that someone gave me a shot of narcotics meant to kill me.”

“No! Who would do such a thing?” Kelly blurted. “That's crazy. It couldn't possibly be a member of the band. That would be like killing the goose that laid the golden egg. I mean without you there would be no Shannon Rose Band.”

She made a point I hadn't considered.

“Does anyone in our band use drugs?” I asked.

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"I don't think so. You are very explicit about your *no drugs* policy. Since I've been with you, you've fired three musicians for using drugs. I know everyone believes you would fire them in a heartbeat over drugs. This is a sweet gig. No one wants to leave your band."

"Good. I should get out of here tomorrow. We need to hit it hard. We must be in Fort Worth in ten days. Honestly, I need all the practice time I can get. I don't remember a thing."

"You know we will do whatever it takes to make the rodeo a success. We know it is one of your favorite gigs."

"That's good to know," I smirked. "I don't remember it is one of my favorite gigs."

"You grew up in Fort Worth. You talk about it all the time."

"Do I have friends there?"

"I don't know. I know your folks live there."

I jerked involuntarily. In all my reading I had not found anything connected to Shannon that would let the world know Mom and Dad lived in Cowtown. She truly worked at protecting them from her adoring fans.

"Have we put together the show we have planned for the Rodeo?" I asked.

"Yes, I think you have it on a spreadsheet on your computer."

I opened the section showing the last folders opened and saw one titled FTWH Rodeo. I opened it and read the list of information it held.

I opened one titled *Bus* and read the list of people who were riding the bus from Nashville to Fort Worth. My name wasn't on the list. The rest of the band was listed along with a couple of extras.

"Who are the extra people on the bus?"

Kelly pulled a chair close to me and studied the list on my laptop screen. "Melody is Ziggy's wife, and Lady is married to Shy. The rest of us are single."

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"No girlfriends?"

"None we take on the road with us." Kelly grinned.

"My name isn't on this list," I pointed out.

"You have a gig at the Opry using their house band. As soon as you finish Eleanor will take you to the airport and you will fly to DFW on a redeye flight. One of us will pick you up at the airport. I think your flight gets in around 3:00 a.m."

"Can I just walk on stage with any band and do a good performance?"

"Some folks would have a problem with that, but you are always great." Kelly complimented

Great! Just because Shannon can do it doesn't mean I can. I thought.

"You are going to perform four numbers then catch the red eye to DFW. We will start practice after lunch. That will give you about seven hours sleep."

"I've lived on less," I commented recalling the twenty-four-hour stakeouts I've been on.

"You have my phone number, Boss. Call me if you need anything. We will be practicing tomorrow. It would be good if you could join us when you get out of the hospital."

"I will do that," I assured her.

##

My next visitor was Shy Sanders, the keyboard player. I remember she was brilliant on the instrument. I was impressed with her style as I've watched her on the YouTube channel. At thirty-five, she was next to the oldest band member. Her brown hair was stylish and barely touched her shoulders. She wore light makeup and was very pretty. She was accompanied by her wife Lady.

"Hey," I greeted them. "Thank you for coming."

"Do you know who we are?" Shy asked.

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"You are Shy and your wife Lady. I only know who you are because I looked you up on the internet. I've been studying the band and our performances hoping something will jog my memory."

"Then you know I play the keyboard, and you promised me a huge raise." Shy smiled slightly.

I searched her face for any indication she was kidding. "I know you play the keyboard, but I'm not so sure about the raise."

Lady laughed. "Shy, she is recovering from a bad experience. Don't tease her."

I liked Lady instantly. Shy, not so much. She will have to grow on me.

"Do you remember our songs?" Shy asked.

"Not really, but I have been watching our performances and memorizing the words of the songs from *Song Sheet* on the internet."

"When will the doctor release you?"

"Tomorrow. I thought we would rehearse for the next nine days before the band leaves on the bus for Fort Worth."

"Yeah it's a ten-hour drive and we take our time, so it takes us two days." Shy replied.

"I always want the bus to leave in plenty of time for everyone to spend the night halfway," I pointed out, "or to have time to spare if you encounter a problem."

Shy raised her eyebrows. "Maybe we should drug you more often. You usually make us drive straight thru without stopping."

"That sounds dangerous," I muttered forgetting that I am the more reasonable one compared to Shannon.

"Yeah, it is, but we do have two drivers that switch out on overnight trips, and we can sleep on the bus."

"There is that," I agreed making a mental note to find a photo of the bus. "Anyway, plan on taking two days to make the drive to Fort Worth. I will arrive on the twenty-fifth, and

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we will have two days to practice before our first show on the twenty seventh."

"Works for me, Boss. I'll see you at the rehearsal hall tomorrow afternoon."

I frowned. "Where is the rehearsal hall?"

"The building behind your house." Shy smiled. "Let me know when they release you and we will be here to pick you up and take you home."

"Thank you. I feel like a fool, but I have no idea where I live."

##

After Shy and Lady left, I slipped into the hospital bed. I don't want to look too recovered. I raised the head of the bed and leaned back on my pillow. The door slowly opened and base guitar player Faye Farmer entered followed by lead guitarist Ziggy Jones. I smiled at them and nodded.

"I'm Faye Farmer," the brown-haired beauty introduced herself.

"I'm Ziggy Jones. I play lead guitar in your band." A tall woman with thick chestnut colored hair flowing down her back introduced herself. "Faye plays the bass guitar."

"It is good to see you. I appreciate you coming by. "I must admit I don't know either of you, but I'm trying to reacclimate myself with the band members."

"You don't remember me?" Ziggy exclaimed. "No one ever forgets me and my hair."

"It is beautiful," I agreed. "I love the color."

"What happened to you?" Ziggy asked.

"Someone drugged me at the party. I almost died," I replied. "I have very little memory so I'm going to rely on the band members to help me out. I have been memorizing all the lyrics from my own songs."

"Who would want to kill you?" Faye gasped.

"I have no idea," I answered.

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While I was getting to know Faye and Ziggy, rhythm guitar player Babs Clay joined us.

"I'm sorry I'm early," Babs apologized. "I wanted to miss the traffic. How do you feel, Boss?"

"Much better. I will be out of here before noon tomorrow and at the practice hall by 1:00 p.m. so we can start practicing for the Fort Worth Show."

"Someone drugged her," Ziggy informed Babs, "and she has amnesia."

"You're kidding me," Babs scoffed. "Who would drug you?"

"I wish I knew," I replied.

"What can we do to help you recover?" Babs asked.

"Watch me. If I'm not doing things I usually do or singing a number the right way, tell me. I need to make certain I perform like Shannon Rose."

"That will come natural to you," Melody declared. "Muscle memory will kick in. You are a natural entertainer."

"Do I get nervous or dread being on the stage?"

"Gawd no!" Ziggy asserted. "You love performing for an audience. The bigger they are the better you like them. You come alive on the stage."

"Good to know," I said. Somehow, I couldn't imagine being invigorated by a huge audience of strangers screaming at me.

After everyone left, I rummaged through the hospital bag in the bottom of the closet looking for Shannon's purse. I found a designer clutch bag and matching shoes. The bag contained her wallet, a checkbook, and keys.

Feeling like a thief, I looked through her personal belongings. I found a thin billfold that contained her drivers license, five twenty-dollar bills and a Black Card. I checked Shannon's driver license to see where I lived.

I called Brad.

"Hello Shaw," he answered telling me he had me on caller ID. "Is everything okay?"

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"I'm fine. The doc is releasing me in the morning, and I have a rehearsal scheduled with the band tomorrow afternoon.

"I need to know what private hospital Shannon is in. I'm being released in the morning, and I must check out of my motel room and pick up my luggage. Then I'm going to visit Shannon before I go to her house."

"I will text you the name and address," Brad said. "Have you met your band members yet?"

"Yes, and my manager. Do you have any idea which one of them is involved in the drug trade?"

"Not a clue," Brad responded. "Shannon was trying to find out. She must have gotten close. I figure that is why someone tried to kill her."

Holding my breath, I asked, "Is she any better?"

"No, she is still in a coma. I've got guards on her around the clock. I'll let you know if her condition changes."

"She is contracted to perform at the Fort Worth Fat Stock show in two weeks," I informed him. "I'm not certain I can pull that off."

A long silence greeted me. Finally, Brad said. "You must."

"Brad, I—"

"Shaw, we have too much invested in this case to lose it. From now on you are Shannon Rose. Start living it. That's an order."

"You don't understand, Shannon is an incredible lead guitarist. I was a drummer. There is a hell of a lot of difference between fingering the neck of a guitar and beating tin cans with a stick."

Brad chuckled. "I've got faith in you. You'll figure out something. I know you want to catch Shannon's would-be killer."

"You're right," I capitulated.

"Keep me informed," Brad said. "And be careful, Shaw."

CHAPTER 6

Band Practice

Monday, January 13 – Holding Her Hand

I sat in the chair beside my sister's bed and gently held her hand. The rhythmic beep of the machines on the other side of her bed were the only sounds in the room.

"I will do my best to keep from embarrassing you," I promised. I leaned down and kissed the back of her hand. "If you can hear me, pray for me, sis."

A slight movement of her fingers filled me with hope. I prayed that she would recover in time to keep her commitment to the Fat Stock Show.

"Just in case you need to continue resting, I'm going to practice with your band." I muttered.

##

I started my rental car and entered Shannon's address into the GPS. In half an hour I pulled up to double gates with a cursive *SR* on each one of them. I realized that I had no gate opener in my rental car. "Damn," I cursed under my breath.

I pulled Shannon's cellphone from my pocket and prayed I could reach someone to open the gates for me. As I thumbed through her apps, one called Cargate jumped out at me. Could I be lucky enough to push the button on her cellphone and open the gate?

Yes, I could!

I drove up the curving drive that led to the back of the house and into the garage that also opened with an app on

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the phone. I pulled into an empty space in the four-car garage and closed the door.

I knew Shannon had a housekeeper and wondered if she would be in the house. I didn't see any vehicles I thought would belong to her so, I unlocked the door and entered the house. I knew my luck wouldn't hold. The alarm system began to whoop. I followed the sound to the security panel and prayed that Shannon was as bad about remembering codes as I am. I punched our birthday numbers into the alarm keypad. The wailing silenced.

My heart was hammering like a marathon runner, and my mouth was so dry my tongue stuck to my lips. I searched for the kitchen and ran to the refrigerator. Bottles of cold water greeted me. I chug-a-lugged one of them and dropped onto a stool at the kitchen island.

I looked around the mansion. Everything about it was perfect and it was immaculate. I knew the housekeeper deserved the credit for the home's appearance because Shannon wasn't one to pick up after herself.

As I wandered through the sprawling house, I chastised myself for never visiting Shannon in her home. We always met somewhere when she was performing in a town where I was working nearby. Although she had invited me to her home often, I had never accepted her invitations.

After opening several doors, I located her spacious bedroom. Her walk-in closet was bigger than my living room. It held her society-party clothing and her performance outfits. One wall was a full-length mirror that faced a similar mirror on the wall across from it giving the user a complete view front and back.

Another area held normal everyday clothes. I pulled a black, long-sleeved Henley from the rack and discovered a pair of black jeans on the same hanger. I quickly checked a couple of sweaters and discovered each of them had a pair of slacks or jeans that complimented them. Shannon had

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always had great taste in clothes. I placed the clothes on the bed next to Shannon's purse.

I showered and paid careful attention to my blonde hair as I dried it. Blonde really did make me look a lot prettier, exactly like my sister. I ignored my inclination to put my hair up in a ponytail, and let it hang in loose waves to my shoulders.

"Miss Shannon, are you home?" A pleasant voice called.

I was pulling on a pair of Shannon's boots when my bedroom door opened and an attractive, plump, middle-aged woman poked in her head. Her entire countenance brightened as she rushed to me. "My bambino," she cried as I stood. "They wouldn't let me see you. I was so worried about you."

She wrapped me in a soft, loving embrace. I wasn't certain what our relationship was, so I didn't hug back.

She held me at arm's length. "Let me look at you. Are you okay? They said you were in a coma."

"I was," I mumbled. "I have huge gaps in my memory and I'm sorry, I don't know who you are."

She gave me a disbelieving look. "I am Maria, your housekeeper. I take care of you. You are like a daughter to me. I have been with you for the past ten years. I take care of you as if you were my own child."

I sat down on the bed. "Maria, I am so sorry. I have amnesia. Please help me remember."

A look of adoration spread across her face as she hugged my head between her corpulent breasts. "I always take care of you, little one."

I wondered how Shannon managed to instill such loyalty in another woman who was obviously a mother figure.

"Are you hungry? Come. I will make you something to eat."

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I followed Maria and sat at the quartz island while she bustled around the kitchen. Without asking me, she brewed a cup of Segafredo, put just the right amount of creamer in it, and placed it on the counter in front of me.

Shannon's cellphone announced, "Stacy calling." Maria's scowl made me let the call go to voicemail as I wondered why Stacy hadn't called me sooner.

"You don't like her, do you?" I asked Maria.

"She is not good for you," Maria replied. "You are not your best with her."

Somehow that didn't surprise me. Shannon might be engaged to Stacy, but I had had an adverse reaction to her. I wondered how my sister could love someone who seemed shallow. *Maybe she is good in bed*, I thought. Still, that was no reason to tie yourself to someone for life.

"Things have a way of working themselves out," I replied to Maria.

"Do you want breakfast or lunch?" she asked.

"Breakfast. It's my favorite meal." I said honestly.

"Your memory is returning." Maria beamed.

"The band is rehearsing this afternoon," I informed her.

"I will make dinner for them."

"Do you usually do that?" I asked.

"Yes. You always feed them."

"That seems like a lot of work for you," I pointed out.

She looked at me as if I had sprouted another head. "I like you with no memory. You are more considerate."

"I can take them out to dinner," I volunteered.

"No. I will cook," Maria insisted. "I love listening to all their tales."

"Okay, but you don't have to."

"I want to, Ma Chérie."

"What will you make?" I asked digging into the bacon and eggs she had placed in front of me.

"Spaghetti and meatballs," Maria replied. "Salad and bread. It is one of their favorite meals and it is simple."

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My mouth was watering even as I ate.

##

I finished breakfast and walked to the rehearsal hall. It had a combination doorknob. I keyed in our birthday and turned the knob. It opened. I wondered how many people had the combination of the house and the hall.

The practice hall was amazing. Instruments were on a stage waiting to be played. A glassed in recording studio was in front of the stage. I wondered if Shannon now produced her own recordings.

I hopped on the stage and picked up the drumsticks. I couldn't resist doing a drum roll on the acoustic drums. To my surprise everything I knew about drumming quickly returned. I returned the sticks to their place and eyed Shannon's guitar.

I could play rhythm guitar but had never mastered the skill required to play the lead guitar. I turned on the amplifier and strummed the instrument. I accompanied myself as I sang Shannon's latest hit. When I finished, applause filled the room. I looked around to see a tall, sandy-haired fellow striding toward me. I have no idea who he is.

"I'm glad to see you out of the hospital," he said as he jumped onto the stage. I frantically tried to recall his face but knew I hadn't seen him in any of the videos I had studied.

Kelly Clinton and Faye Farmer entered the hall and greeted us. "I asked Mel to join us," Kelly explained. "I thought you might want a video of today's rehearsal to compare against the YouTube videos you have been watching."

"Mel, thank you for coming," I greeted the man standing beside me on the stage.

"My pleasure," he bowed gallantly and smiled. "I'd never miss an opportunity to record the fabulous Shannon Rose."

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The sparkle in his eyes told me he was teasing me. Apparently are closer than I realize.

We ran through the song set we planned for the Fat Stock Show then took a break. A refrigerator in the kitchen of the hall was filled with beer, soft drinks and all kinds of snacks. I had a feeling that Maria kept it stocked with fresh items.

"You're off," Mel said as we watched everyone raid the fridge.

"How so?"

"You're dull. Lackluster. You are usually so vibrant, filled with energy and enthusiasm. I'm not seeing that today."

"Duh, I just got out of the hospital this morning." I made excuses. "Mel, I have no memory about my life at all. Man, I'm winging it." I told him truthfully. My stomach turned over as I realized that I had never had the energy and exuberance of my sister. How the hell did I think I could impersonate her. I lacked that "who gives a damn" attitude that Shannon wore like a shield.

He searched my face, then said, "You'll get it. I will help you. The first thing you need to do is acknowledge to yourself that you are one beautiful woman. That God gave you your perfect body to drive your admirers rip roaring crazy. Use it. Flaunt it, Shannon. I know you can do it. I've seen it too many times."

He was right. I was restrained and held back from letting my body go with the music. I have always been more low-key than my sister.

"Study how you throw your hair back from your face when you perform," Mel advised. "The way you do that is sexy as hell."

I nodded listening to him carefully. I knew he was right. I'm just not certain I can be as uninhibited as Shannon.

Mel stood and clapped his hands. "Come on everyone we need to run through the song set again."

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##

We practiced until Maria announced dinner was on the table. Everyone cheered as they wiped down their instruments and put them in their place.

"You're beginning to loosen up," Mel praised as we relaxed around the table out stomachs full of Maria's delicious cooking.

"Who else is in my sphere?" I asked.

They glared at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. "You speak differently," Kelly declared. "I've never heard you use the word sphere."

"People who have been in a coma often act differently," Mel explained, "especially when memory loss is involved."

"Do you travel with us?" I asked Mel.

"Yes," he responded. "I am your manager."

"I thought Eleanor Kincaid was my manager."

"She is the financial manager. She keeps the bills paid and things running smoothly but when we are on the road, I am your go-to guy."

"I like that." I smiled.

"Why didn't you let me know you were home," Stacy Thornton stormed into the dining room.

"I, uh I didn't—"

"Even give me a second though," she screamed.

"Stacy, I am so sorry. I've got a lot going on in my head." I tried to reason with her.

She moved to stand behind me and began to massage my neck and shoulders. I fought to keep from pulling away from her. *I don't like this woman*, I thought.

"It's okay, baby. You can make it up to me tonight." She squeezed my shoulders.

I knew she meant she intended to sleep with me and the thought gagged me. "Not tonight," I insisted. "It has been a long day, and I am exhausted. I just want a good night's sleep. No gymnastics."

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Everyone in the room was silent as Stacy glared at me. "Fine, if that is what you want." She almost hissed at me.

Oh yeah, that is definitely what I want.

She pursed her lips, inhaled deeply and said, "I need to speak to you alone."

I was relieved that we were both women because her request sounded like it would be followed by "I'm pregnant."

I stood and led her through the first door I saw, which happened to take us into the largest pantry I've ever seen. I looked around at all the cans and jars on the shelves.

"What do you need?" I asked, eager to get rid of her.

"Money. I'm out of money."

"I don't—" My mind went to the checkbook I'd found in Shannon's purse. "Wait here," I instructed.

I ran to the bedroom and retrieved the checkbook quickly returning to Stacy. "I'm sorry," I apologized. "How much do you need?"

"Five thousand should hold me for the week," Stacy quipped.

"Five thousand!" I gulped.

"Yes! Five thousand," Stacy reiterated, daring me to argue with her. *Man, I don't like this woman.*

I wrote her a check and handed it to her. She tiptoed to kiss me, but I backed away. "I'm going to be practicing around the clock," I said. "I have to be in Fort Worth for the Rodeo and Fat Stock Show in a few days."

"I hope you don't expect me to accompany you," she grumped.

"No, I don't want you to come. I will be busy."

She waved the check in the air and left the pantry.

I do not see what Shannon sees in Stacy. She is gorgeous, but obviously a money-grubbing harlot.

I returned to the kitchen, pulled a cold beer from the fridge then joined the band around the table.

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“When are you going to get rid of her?” Mel asked. “She is nothing but trouble.”

“I have more important things to worry about than getting rid of Stacy,” I reminded him.

“Let’s all get a good night’s sleep and meet back here at 10:00 a.m.” Mel said.

CHAPTER 7

On My Own

Wednesday, January 22 - Understanding

The past nine days we have practiced hard as I became more comfortable in the role of Shannon Rose. I awoke at 6:00 a.m. every morning to visit my sister in the hospital and be back in time for practice.

Shannon shows no signs of recovering from her coma and I am settling into the role of a country music star. I have met everyone that is involved with her band and have found no one suspicious. I have no idea who overdosed my sister and neither does Brad.

While I hold her hand and give her detailed reports on the band's shenanigans and my total failure to emulate her awesome performances, I wonder how anyone could love the life my sister lives. It takes a special kind of person to live in a fishbowl of constant scrutiny and inane commentary about every move you make.

If she has a number one hit riding the top of the charts for three months, she is a musical genius. If she releases a song that fails to catch the fickle public's attention, she is a washed up has been at thirty-five. This is her life, and I hate it. I have never prayed so hard for anything as I pray for my sister's recovery. Not just for her wellbeing, but for my sanity too. Although we are identical twins, we have never been more attached at the hip than we are right now. The horrifying thought that I keep pushed to the back of my mind is, *what if Shannon doesn't recover and I am forced to remain Shannon Rose for the rest of my life.*

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Then there is Stacy. I walk a tightrope with her. If Shannon truly loves her, I don't want to run her off, but I don't know how much longer I can keep her out of my bed. She is Shannon's woman, and I won't touch her. Stacy is beautiful, but I don't like her. Who knew our lives would become so entangled?

Friday, January 24 – I don't want to be Shannon Rose

The band left yesterday morning, and I have been rehearsing by myself. Tonight, I appear on the Grand Ole Opry. Even if stage fright sets in, I swear I won't forget the words to the songs. They are seared into my brain. I sing them in my sleep. I considered feigning laryngitis but knew that would be letting Shannon down.

Mel went with the band, so I am on my own. Eleanor is going to pick me up and accompany me to the Opry, but I know her forte is accounting not rhythm. I did breathing exercises and practiced.

Maria insisted I eat lunch although I am certain I will throw up. Thank heaven she was right, and the food did settle me down a bit. She helped me dress for my performance and took both my hands into hers and prayed. "Lord, bless this imposter and be with her."

I gazed into her soft brown eyes and realized she knew I wasn't Shannon. I hugged her tighter than I have ever hugged anyone in my life. It felt good to know there was someone I could trust with my secret. Someone who knew Shannon better than anyone. Someone who could answer all my questions about my sister.

Eleanor called on my cellphone to tell me she was waiting outside. Maria squeezed my hand. "Go show them how good Shannon Rose really is," she encouraged me.

I grabbed my guitar case, my overnight carry on, and hurried to the door. I'm glad I sent my luggage on the bus, so I won't have to juggle it on the plane.

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I was surprised to see a black limo in front of the house complete with a chauffeur who took my cases and opened the back door for me. He stowed the guitar case and overnight bag in the trunk of the car and slid into the front seat.

"I brought your complete portfolio," Eleanor said as we drove through the mansion gates. "It will give you something to read tonight on your flight Fort Worth. It has all your investments and properties. Everything you own is in it."

"Thank you, I appreciate you pulling that together for me.

"There is a thumb drive with your spreadsheets and usernames and passwords. Your master password is your birthday."

Why does that not surprise me? I will have a talk with Shannon about using more difficult codes.

The limo pulled into the area to drop off the performers and the driver rushed from his seat to retrieve my cases and carry them to the door for me. "I will be waiting for you here when you finish your performance," he informed me.

I made a mental note to learn his name.

##

I checked in with the guard at the door then wandered around backstage trying to figure out where to go.

"Shannon! Thank God you are here. I was beginning to think you were going to be a no show," a frazzled woman grabbed me by the arm and dragged me to a dressing room. "I'm glad you are dressed and ready to go. You are on in two minutes."

I pitched my overnight bag into the room, grabbed my guitar from the case and followed her to the place where I was supposed to enter the stage. From behind the curtains, I peeked at the crowd and realized I wasn't breathing. The Master of Ceremonies, a fellow named Jelly Roll, began my introduction. I inhaled and exhaled deeply. I was glad I had

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the guitar to hide behind. I was about to perform in front of a full house.

The crowd went crazy at the mention of Shannon Rose, and I charged onto the stage as the band began playing Shannon's current hit, *You Can Look, but Don't Touch*. When I finished the song, the audience jumped to their feet whistling, clapping, and yelling. It was exhilarating. They continued to applaud until the band began playing my next number. Each song received the same wonderful reaction, and I know why my sister loves her life. There are no words to describe how terrifying and intoxicating it is to have over four thousand fans approve of your performance.

I bowed my way off the stage, but the crowd began stomping their feet and applauding all over again. "It sounds like your fans are demanding an encore," Jelly Roll's voice echoed throughout the hall as my heart stopped beating. I had no song for the encore.

"City Lights. City Lights." The crowd began screaming for a remake Shannon had recorded of an old Ray Price hit.

The words ran through my head, and I nodded to the band that seemed to know every country song ever recorded. They played the intro as I walked to the microphone hoping I could do the song justice.

As the song ended the audience stood screaming and whistling for more. I leaned into the mic and said, "Sorry folks. I have a plane to catch, but I have loved performing for you." I walked off the stage to tremendous applause wondering when someone would call me out as an imposter.

I rushed to the dressing room, changed from the sparkling body suit I wore into a pullover sweater, and a pair of tight-fitting jeans. I grabbed the leather jacket I knew I would need on the plane and headed for the exit.

Chauffer was waiting for me at the door. He took my cases, and I opened my own car door.

"Oh my God, you were awesome, tonight," Eleanor praised as I collapsed into the safety of the leather seat.

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“Thank you,” I whispered, too wrung out to talk.

By the time we reached the airport I had recovered, and my heart had stopped racing. Eleanor gave me my airline ticket and wished me a safe trip. Chauffer dropped me off at my gate and I bid them a goodnight as he handed me my guitar case. It was after midnight when I walked up to the ticket agent and handed her my folder. She smiled and checked my tickets then looked around me. “Where is your traveling companion?” she asked.

“It’s just me and my guitar. It is okay to carry it on, isn’t it?”

She chuckled. “It certainly is since you have purchased a seat for it.”

She returned my documents to me and waved me toward the plane entrance ramp. I was thrilled to see I was traveling first class and wondered if Shannon always allowed herself only the best. I buckled my guitar case into the window seat and relaxed in the aisle seat. I leaned back my head and was dozing off when the pilot gave the seatbelt instructions and prepared for takeoff.

I moved my chair into the upright position and glanced around the cabin. There was a couple and two men in first class, so I practically had it all to myself. The engines revved and the plane shot down the runway picking up speed as it became airborne.

I couldn’t stop my mind from replaying the amazing and heart-stopping experience I had just lived through. The portfolio Eleanor had given me slid from my lap and slapped against the floor. I bent over to pick it up. A pair of shoes appeared beside my folder. “Let me get that for you,” a melodic voice said.

I was too tired to stop my eyes from slowly admiring the view as they traveled from her shapely ankles up her long legs then over her flat stomach and perfect breasts to stare into the bluest eyes I have ever seen. To make it worse, she stooped down to pick up my portfolio giving me a perfect

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view of her ample breast. I was still staring when she said, "Are you going to take these?"

"I, uh, I, thank you," I stuttered.

A smile brightened her beautiful face. "Shannon is that you?" she asked, glancing at my guitar case.

My eyes finally focused on her face, and I realized she was a friend from high school. "Amber?" I smiled my most apologetic smile. "I, uh, I didn't mean to—"

She waved off my apology. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"You're a flight attendant," I managed.

"I am." She smiled again. "May I get you something to drink?"

"Yes, please. A Dr Pepper."

Her laughter filled the air like a haunting melody. "Dr Pepper. Shaw finally converted you, hmm."

Too stunned to answer, I simply smiled. Our friends in high school and college always teased me when we went out to paint the town. They ordered mixed drinks while I always drank Dr Pepper. Truth is, I love the taste. I suddenly realized I would have to be careful in Fort Worth. People who knew Shannon and me would know I was Shaw if I continued to make blunders like the one I'd just made with Amber Reed.

I watched her walking toward me carrying my can of Dr Pepper and a glass of ice as if it were the finest champagne in the world. Her eyes sparkled with the same mischievous glint that always drove me wild. I wonder if she is married.

I lowered my tray so she could place hers on it. "Thank you," I mumbled.

She walked through the cabin taking orders from the others in first class. After she had served everyone, she sat down in the seat across the aisle from me.

"How long have you been with the airlines?" I asked.

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"Eleven years. I love it. I have been able to visit places all over the world I would have never seen if I had stayed in the financial world."

"You didn't like New York?" I asked.

"It is too cutthroat for me. When my mentor told me there is no such thing as an iron-clad contract, I threw in the towel. He was right. There is always a way to wiggle out of a contract if your attorney is good enough."

I nodded my understanding and took a sip of my drink.

"Where is your hub?"

"Dallas. I am just a Texas girl at heart. I'm glad to be back home. But look at you. Shannon Rose, top of the charts, knocking their socks off."

I raised my eyebrows but didn't reply. The last thing I wanted to do was make her fall for Shannon.

"Do you miss your husband and children when you travel?" I asked.

She saw right through me. "Never married. No children. What about you?"

I gave Stacy a fleeting thought then said, "Nope no one."

"Do you keep in touch with Shaw? Is she still a U.S. Marshal?"

"Yes, and yes," I answered. "I always thought you and Shaw would end up together."

"So did I." Amber shrugged. "But she didn't keep in touch."

"She told me you were engaged to that fellow that was captain of the football team."

"On the rebound," Amber replied. "I heard Shaw was engaged to a woman. I believe the headlines on all the social media were 'Rose engaged to Nashville Debutante.'"

"No," I said. "That was me. Stacy Thornton. I know Shaw still carries a torch for you."

Amber laughed. "Then tell her to call me. My number is still the same."

"So is hers," I said.

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“Why are you going to Dallas?” Amber changed the subject.

“My band and I are performing at the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo. We will be rehearsing for the next two weeks to prepare for the show. Maybe we can have dinner one night.”

“I would like that. I’m on vacation so I won’t be flying off into the wild blue yonder while you are here.”

“Come to the show. I’ll get you tickets.”

“I will,” she promised. “Where are you staying while you’re here?”

“The Sheraton,” I said softly wondering if she would recall the weekend we had spent there after we graduated from high school. Our senior year, we had saved every penny we could scrape together for that weekend, and it was more than worth it.

She looked down at her hands as she blushed, so I didn’t have the opportunity to look into her eyes.

“Miss,” the woman traveling alone called Amber. “May I have a cup of coffee?”

Amber checked on the others in first class then returned to sit by me. “How are you getting to the hotel?” she asked.

“One of the band members is picking me up.”

“Call her and tell her a friend is giving you a ride to the hotel.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you,” I half-heartedly argued.

“No inconvenience. My car is at the airport, and I’ll drive right past downtown on my way home. I can swing by the Sheraton and drop you off.”

The thought of spending more time with her made my mouth water. I nodded my agreement afraid I’d drool if I opened my mouth.

“You can connect to the plane’s WIFI and call your friend,” she informed me as she pulled the little instruction

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pamphlet from the back of the seat. "Just follow the instructions."

I called Kelly and told her not to worry about picking me up. "I've run into an old friend from high school, and she is going to give me a ride to the hotel. I will see you tomorrow."

"I've canceled my ride," I informed Amber as she sat down beside me.

"Good, it will be nice to have company on the drive from the airport."

I sat silently beside her. I couldn't reference the intimacy we had shared in high school and college, because she wasn't intimate with Shannon. I fought my desire to reach out and touch her—to tell her I have missed her every day of my life. She had been beautiful in school, but she was breath-takingly gorgeous as a mature woman. All the feelings I've harbored for her over the years came flooding back into my mind.

##

Amber pulled the car beneath the portico of the Sheraton Hotel and placed the gearshift into park. "Thank you so much for the ride," I said. "Would you like to come up for a nightcap?"

She laughed as she looked at her watch. "It would be more like a morning cap," she pointed out. "I'm tired and I'm sure you are exhausted. Let's get some sleep and I'll pick you up at 7:00 p.m. for dinner. Where will I find you? The Will Rogers Memorial Center is a big place."

"We are using one of the meeting rooms in the Sheraton to practice so we don't have to compete with the cowboys at Will Rogers," I informed her. "I'll text you the name of it tomorrow. Come in and watch us practice. As soon as we finish, we can go to dinner."

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"I'm looking forward to meeting your band. Is there any chance Shaw will be in town to watch your show?"

"I don't think so. The last time I spoke with her she was relocating a whistleblower from DC to Oregon."

"Oh," she breathed. Her disappointment was palpable.

##

I checked into the Sheraton and rode the elevator to my room on the top floor. I was astounded to find I was in the President's Suite. The bus driver had delivered my luggage to the suite, and it sat in the middle of the floor. I looked at the opulence of my surroundings. My sister sure knows how to spend money.

I thought about having the hotel deliver dinner to the room, so Amber and I could be alone, but I don't want to make her fall in love with Shannon Rose. When this fiasco is over and I return to Shaw Rose, I plan on courting Amber until she agrees to marry me.

CHAPTER 8

Regrets

Saturday, January 25

I caught up with the band members at lunch. The two married couples looked rested, but Kelly, Faye, Babs, and Mel looked hungover.

"I'm assuming the four of you explored the night spots Fort Worth has to offer," I noted.

"I am afraid we did, Boss," Kelly admitted. "Now we are ready to settle down and go to work."

"How did your performance at the Opry go," Babs asked.

"Good, I think. They threw me a curve ball and insisted I sing *City Lights* as an encore. I hadn't practiced it, but I think I remembered all the words at least no one booed me."

"Eleanor said you brough down the house," Mel said. "She called this morning to make sure you are doing okay."

"Are things coming back to you?" Faye inquired.

"Not really. Hopefully that will change."

We ate lunch and consumed copious amounts of coffee. I asked the waitress to have coffee and donuts sent to the practice room.

##

We were midway through our rehearsal when Kelly softly whistled and exclaimed, "Oh my!"

I turned around to see Amber walking toward us. My heart jumped into my throat as I watched her stroll toward us.

She hugged me and said, "I hope you don't mind if I watch."

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"We welcome it." I beamed. "Please tell us when we aren't good. We are surrounded by 'yes' people and appreciate sincere critiques. Be brutal."

"Oh, I can be brutal," she raised her brows and gave me an impish grin.

I felt a blush creeping from my breasts to my cheeks. Everyone began laughing. "Introduce us to this beauty," Kelly insisted.

"Everyone, this is Amber Reed. Sage and I have known her since the second grade. We were like the three Musketeers in school and college. She and Sage were a couple. Amber, this is Kelly Clinton our drummer, Shy Sanders plays the keyboard and her wife Lady, Fay Farmer is on the base guitar, and lead guitarist Ziggy Jones and her wife Melody. Mel King is our manager."

"We were just about to take a break," Kelly announced as she did a *rat-a-tat-tat* on the drums. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Iced tea would be nice," Amber replied.

"Same for me," I called out as I took Amber's elbow and led her to a banquet table and chairs pushed against the wall.

"I hope you don't mind me coming so early," she said as we sat down.

"I'm delighted. I was hoping you would come watch us. We have about an hour left to practice then I'm all yours."

She gave me her mischievous look and smiled.

"Have you decided where we should dine?" I asked as Kelly placed our drinks on the table and the rest of the band pulled their chairs around us.

"Yes, where are we going for dinner?" Kelly grinned devilishly. "I hope it is some place with a dancefloor."

A look of panic crossed Amber's face. "I was hoping to dine somewhere refined and quiet so Shannon and I could catch up."

"But we love to dance," Babs chimed in."

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"You two go somewhere refined to dine," Kelly suggested, "then meet us at Guitars and Cadillacs around 10:00 p.m."

"We could do that," Amber agreed. "I've never been there, but I believe it is in the Stockyards. It is one of the nicest places in the area. My friends tell me they have a great dancefloor."

"Yes, that is the one," Babs answered.

Amber looked down at her high heels. "I'm afraid I didn't come prepared to dance," she said.

"Let's get back to work," I led them back to our instruments as visions of eighteen-year-old Amber and me slow dancing barefoot in our hotel room played through my mind.

##

We completed our rehearsal and locked the meeting room door. Everyone entered one elevator, and all the single women were vying for a dance with Amber. I was relieved when they got off on the tenth floor.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "They aren't usually so aggressive, but then they aren't usually around a woman as beautiful as you."

She laughed. "You and Shaw have always been silver-tongued devils."

I chuckled. "Surely you don't mean Shaw. She never knew any other woman existed but you."

"I didn't mean she flirted with other women. I meant she was always making me blush with her sweet compliments and vows of undying love."

"I'm positive Shaw meant every word she said to you," I defended myself. "To this day, you are all she talks about."

"And yet, here I am with you, and Shaw is God knows where." The hurt darkened her blue eyes, and I wondered

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how I could have been such a fool. I should have come back for her years ago.

I wanted to take her in my arms and tell her I've loved her from the moment she made me eat her mud pies in the second grade. Amber Reed is the only woman I've ever loved, and I am so sorry I have hurt her.

The elevator stopped on the top floor, and I led Amber into the suite. I was delighted to see someone had unpacked Shannon's luggage.

Amber was as astounded with the grandeur of the suite as I. "This is breathtaking," she whispered.

"Almost as magnificent as you," I said honestly without thinking. "I'll just be a minute. I need to change into something suitable for fine dining."

"May I wander around?"

"Of course, make yourself at home," I answered. "There is an extra bedroom suite, if you want to freshen up." I gestured toward the door on the other side of the room.

I slipped into a pair of black slacks, a white silk blouse, and a burgundy blazer. I considered putting my hair up, but decided to let it fall around my shoulders. I slipped on my low heels and grabbed my shoulder bag.

Amber was standing at the floor to ceiling window overlooking downtown Fort Worth. "A penny for your thoughts," I quipped fighting the urge to step behind her and wrap her in my arms.

"I was just thinking about Shaw," she replied.

"I am thinking about steak." I grinned walking toward the door. "Where do you want to dine?"

"Is the Capital Grill, okay? We can walk from here."

"Sounds perfect. I have an extra jacket, if you'd like to wear it. It is cool outside."

She nodded yes and I searched through my luggage for two mid-length coats. I held one for her to slip into. Again, I had to stop myself from slipping the coat over her shoulders and pulling her into my arms. It felt so right to kiss her on

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the back of her neck. Thank heaven she stepped away from me.

##

The weather was nicer than I expected, and we were warm in our light coats. One can never tell what the weather will be like in Texas. A saying in the state is, "If you don't like the weather in Texas, wait an hour and it will change."

"Have you visited the Water Garden?" Amber asked, slipping her arm into the crook of my elbow. I pressed her arm tightly against my side.

"I haven't visited it since..." I stopped myself from saying "since we waded in it."

I finished with, "I can't remember when."

"Umm," she hummed. "Let's walk through it. It is truly beautiful."

"What was the name of that movie they made here?" I asked as we made our way from the top of the gardens to the pool at the bottom. I held her hand and helped her navigate the steps.

"Logan's Run," she replied.

"Yes, I never saw the movie, but I remember Fort Worth got a lot of publicity for the gardens from it."

A slight breeze combined with the spray of the waterfalls was chilly.

We walked back up to ground level then made our way to the Capital Grill. We entered the restaurant and basked in its warmth. To my surprise Amber had made reservations while I was dressing. "If you had wanted to go somewhere else," she said, "I would have cancelled the reservations."

"This is lovely," I complimented. "I haven't been here."

"The steaks are excellent. I think you will like it."

"Amber Reed," she said to the maître d'. "I requested a quiet table for two."

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"Yes, Ms. Reed, please follow Raymond," he smiled as he passed the menus to a server.

I helped her remove her coat and draped it over the back of her chair. She rubbed her hands together and declared she wanted something hot to drink.

"May I suggest our Bailey's Irish Cream and coffee," the server recommended.

"Perfect. I got chilled in the Water Garden."

"I will have the same thing," I agreed.

We scanned the menu as the waiter returned with our drinks. "Give us a few minutes," Amber requested. "We are in no hurry."

"This is delicious," I commented as I sipped my Bailey's and coffee.

"I hope you won't be angry," Amber's eyes reflected the low light from the chandeliers in the room. I was mesmerized.

"Why would I be angry with you?"

"I did a Google search on you today. I thought you said you weren't involved with anyone, but according to Google, you are engaged to a beautiful woman named Stacy Thornton."

"It's complicated," I said.

"It always is."

"You have no idea how complicated it is." I insisted. "But I've done nothing wrong. I've been a perfect lady."

She laughed. "Yes, you have. And to be completely honest, I still carry a smoldering torch for Shaw."

I sipped my coffee as I looked into her eyes. Everything in my wanted to confess my charade to her, but Brad's words of warning stopped me.

"Then we both agree that we are the best of friends just like in public school and college, and we can enjoy each other's company."

"Yes." She sipped her Bailey's and a tiny bit of whipped cream was on her lip. I reached across the table and gently

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wiped her lip with my thumb. Her pink tongue slid across
her lips as she licked away my touch.

CHAPTER 9

Resisting Temptation

Sunday, January 26

I spent a restless night dreaming about Amber and our time together. I awoke several times during the night reaching for her only to find a cold empty bed. We had been roommates in college and were certain our lives would be entwined for as long as we lived.

I called the nurse's station at the hospital and inquired about Shannon. I prayed they would tell me she had recovered from her coma, but fate continued to give me the finger. I disconnected the call with the nurse's reply, "No change," ringing in my ear. At 7:30 a.m. I gave up trying to sleep and called room service for breakfast.

I called Brad using Shannon's phone so he would have her number, and I could stop carrying two phones. I asked if he had found any evidence that would lead us to Shannon's attempted killer. He knew nothing.

"I don't know how long I can keep this up," I informed him. "I don't like this lifestyle."

"We will talk when you return to Nashville," Brad said. "Until then keep up the masquerade and watch your back. Whoever tried to kill Shannon thinks they have failed and may try again."

A knock on my door made me end the call. I was dying for a cup of coffee. I opened the door and Kelly's infectious grin greeted me.

"What are you doing up so early?" I asked.

"Why didn't you and your girl join us last night?"

"Kelly, I was tired. I just came back to the room and went to bed."

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"Alone?"

"Yes, of course, alone." I scowled.

Room service pushed a cart from the elevator as we stood in the doorway. I stepped aside for him to bring my breakfast and coffee into the room. Kelly followed behind him.

I signed the room service ticket and closed the door behind the man.

"Does Stacy know about your Texas gal?" Kelly antagonized me.

"Amber and I have known each other since grade school. She has never been my girl. She was my sister's girl."

"Then she is fair game," Kelly declared.

"As I said we have known each other since grade school, and she is a dear friend far too good for the likes of a philanderer like you. I would be extremely upset if someone screwed around with her."

I poured my coffee and leaned back into my chair. "Did you have a good reason for interrupting my breakfast?"

"I just needed to know the ground rules, Boss," Kelly replied. "Now I know, hands off Amber."

I nodded. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No, I'm going to take a dip in the heated pool. I'll see you in the practice room at ten."

##

As I stepped from the shower Shannon's phone announced, "Amber calling."

"Hey pretty lady," I answered forgetting I wasn't supposed to let her know how I felt about her.

Her soft laughter made me smile. "I thought I'd watch you practice today, if that is okay," she said.

"Of course, it is okay. I love your critique. Why don't you arrive around 11:30 a.m. so we can go to lunch together?"

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Wear comfortable shoes in case we are forced to go dancing with the girls in the band tonight.”

“That sounds perfect, then I can watch your afternoon rehearsal.”

I found myself taking extra pains to make my blonde hair curl softly around my face and fall onto the shoulder of my black sweater. Black jeans and black boots completed the look I was after. I grabbed my favorite white leather jacket from the closet. *Maybe we will go boot scootin' tonight.*

##

I was the first to arrive in the practice room. I hung my jacket over the back of a chair and got my guitar from the case. I strummed the instrument and sang the words to the song that had been running through my mind from the first time I saw Amber again.

*Girl, lift me up where I belong
Put your arms around me
I've loved you for so long
This is where I want to be*

When I finished, I was applauded by Shy and Lady Sanders. “Thank you. Thank you, very much,” I bowed doing my best impression of Elvis. “I didn’t realize I had an audience.”

“That’s a new song,” Shy noted. “I love it.”

“So did I,” Lady agreed. “Is there more?”

“Not yet, I just started working on it. It just came to me last night.” I shrugged.

“Maybe you had some inspiration last night,” Shy winked at me.

“Maybe,” I mumbled.

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The rest of the band entered the room discussing where they should go dancing tonight. *I wonder when they will sleep.*

"I want to go back to Guitars and Cadillacs," Faye Farmer said. "I'm meeting someone there tonight."

"That brunette you left with last night?" Kelly teased.

"Maybe." Faye grinned.

"You've got to come with us, Boss," Babs said. "The band there is great. Their vocalist is not so good, but they make up for him."

"I've got my boots on," I called their attention to my black and white footwear. "I'm good to go."

"Is your friend Amber going with us?" Faye asked.

"I think so."

Kelly began playing our first song and everyone hurried to their instruments as I stepped to the microphone.

##

We were still working when Amber slipped into the room. I smiled at her and sang the last number of the set to her.

"Let's have lunch at the hotel's restaurant," Babs suggested. "Several people have told me it is excellent."

"It is," Amber chimed in. "I've been to several functions here and the food is exceptional."

We roamed through the lobby heading for the West + Stone restaurant. "They have a guaranteed cure for a hangover," Faye announced. "A drink called *The Snake Oil Cure*. I'll need two of them."

The hostess greeted us, "Aren't you The Shannon Rose Band?"

I nodded, "Yes, but we'd rather not advertise it."

"I'll put you in one of the smaller side rooms where you can close the door and not be bothered by fans."

"That would be terrific." I exclaimed.

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She seated us and everyone ordered *The Snake Oil Cure*.
“Whoa,” Amber coughed after she took a sip of the drink. “I didn’t need anything for a handover, but I will after I drink this.”

Everyone laughed and teased her about being a pansy.

“Seriously,” she squinted her eyes. “What is in this?”

Babs read from the menu. “It contains Still Austin Bourbon, Yellow Chartreuse, Domaine Canton, fresh lemon, and honey. What is Still Austin Bourbon?” she concluded.

“A distiller located in Austin, Texas,” Amber informed them.” She rested her hand on my thigh and the charge that shot through me made me forget *The Snake Oil Cure* had burned the hair off my tongue.

Amber let her hand rest on my leg as if it were the most natural thing in the world and I felt like it was where it belonged. When the server brought our lunch order, she took away her hand and it felt like the warmth had been drained from my entire body.

I listened to the band members as they discussed music, performers and how excited they were to be back at the rodeo. “I met some hot Texas chicks last year,” Kelly bragged. “I hope they remember me.”

“I think I’ve lined up something good for the duration of our stay,” Faye chimed in.

“Honestly, you sound like horny old men.” I reprimanded them. “Surely you don’t think of women like that.”

They stared at me as if toads were jumping from my mouth and I suddenly had the feeling my sister was a player. Damn!

“I am not like them,” I whispered to Amber hoping she would return her hand to my thigh, but she didn’t.

CHAPTER 10

Save the Last Dance for Me

Sunday Evening, January 26

The *Guitars and Cadillacs* club wasn't too crowded for a Sunday night. Mel led us to a table for eight that was on the corner of the dance floor. We stole a chair from the table beside us and managed to get all nine of us around one table.

A waitress dressed in western attire with a skirt that was just slightly below indecent took our orders as the single women in our group flirted with her.

"What would you two like," she asked Amber and me.

"I just want a Dr Pepper," I ordered.

"Me too," Amber chirped.

The waitress leaned into me and said, "Aren't you Shannon Rose?"

"I get mistaken for her a lot," I replied. "Thank you for the compliment."

She shrugged and walked away shaking her head.

"I think you have been spotted," Amber said softly into my ear as she placed her hand on my thigh again.

God, this woman is killing me. I closed my eyes and tried to tamp down the fire her soft breath in my ear had started. If that fire reaches the charge on my thigh, I will probably explode.

Our server returned with our drinks as the band began to play *She's Like Texas* and *She Likes Me*.

"Do you want to dance?" Amber asked. "I love this song."

I stood and took her hand. I wondered who she usually danced with. She put her hand on my shoulder as I slipped my arm around her waist. There was no doubt she wanted

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me to take the lead. I held her away from me and moved her smoothly around the dance floor. I twirled her and as she came back into my arms, she pushed her body against me. Her breasts against mine made me weak in the knees. I stumbled and she pulled our hands between us, resting them against my breast. She toyed with my hair with her free hand, and I tightened my arm around her waist. "You are killing me," I mumbled in her ear. She leaned her head back and smiled that mischievous smile that has always turned me wrong side out.

The music stopped and the dancers applauded for them. Amber led me back to the table where our friends were daring each other to eat one of the deep-fried appetizers piled on a plate and served with a barbeque dipping sauce.

Kelly speared one of the hunks of meat, dipped it into the sauce, and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes opened wide as she chewed the appetizer. She swallowed, chased it with a drink of her bourbon, and declared. "That was delicious."

She speared another one as the woman she had picked up asked, "Do you know what a calf-fry is?"

"I'm assuming its deep-fried balls of beef," Kelly replied, popping another one into her mouth."

Amber tilted her head as an impish grin played on her lovely lips. "To be exact, a calf fry is the deep-fried testicle of a bull calf," she informed Kelly

"The what!" Kelly cried gagging and charging toward the lady's room.

Everyone had a good laugh at Kelly's expense. "She will stick anything in her mouth," Babs declared before breaking into laughter again.

We danced and partied until after midnight when the band announced the next song was *Waltz Across Texas* and everyone grabbed a partner for the line dance. An inebriated Kelly stumbled around the table and grabbed Amber's hand. "May I have this dance?" she slurred.

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“Nope, she’s already taken. Go find your own woman.” I scowled. I laced our fingers together and led Amber to the dance floor.

“Thank you,” Amber said. “I don’t think Kelly can make it through the dance.”

“We should leave after this dance,” I said. “I don’t want them to get so drunk they have hangovers tomorrow.”

Amber chuckled. “I think that ship has already sailed.”

Instead of lining up for the line dance, I pulled her to the far corner of the dance floor so we could waltz to the Texas favorite the band was playing. I wanted to hold her in my arms one more time.

“You are an excellent dancer,” she complimented.

“So are you. I’m assuming you dance a lot.”

“Not really. I have friends in my layover towns, and I sometimes go out with them.”

“Do you have a girl in every port?” I asked as jealousy overwhelmed me.

She laughed. “Heavens no. Most of my friends are straight. I know very few lesbian women.”

I pulled her closer and she laid her cheek on my shoulder.

After the dance we met back at the table. “I think it is time for all of us to go home,” I announced. “Amber and I are leaving now. Call a taxi and I’ll see you all in the morning.”

They waved me off and I knew rehearsal wouldn’t begin until after lunch tomorrow.

“I really appreciate you chauffeuring me around in your car,” I said to Amber as we walked across the dimly lit parking lot.

“My pleasure.” She smiled and squeezed my hand.

“Hey! Hey! Blondie,” a gruff male voice called from behind us as we reached Amber’s car.

I turned to face the man staggering toward us. “Why are you leaving so early?” he yelled.

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"It's late," I replied as Amber unlocked her car door.

The man reached for me, and I side stepped away from him. "You're drunk," I said. "You should go back inside."

"You should give me a kiss," he grumbled.

"You should go back inside." I pushed Amber into her car then I stepped behind the door, putting it between him and me. He lunged at me, and I slammed the door into him, knocking him to the ground.

"Bitch," he howled as he struggled to get on his hands and knees.

I slammed Amber's door and ran behind the car to get to the passenger side. As I reached for the door handle, he wrapped his pudgy hand around my wrist. "I told you to go back inside," I hissed.

He yanked me toward him, and I kicked him as hard as I could in the crotch. He howled and crumbled to the pavement in the fetal position, clutching himself and whimpering. I jumped into the car and Amber drove away leaving him rolling and moaning.

"Where did you learn to fight like that?" Amber asked

"When you are a popular female performer, you sometimes have to fight your way out of unpleasant situations."

"I'm not sure I would like your life," she said.

"It's not all sunshine and roses," I mumbled wondering how my sister handled situations like the one we'd just encountered.

"Are as tired as I am," Amber asked.

"Tired and I should not have had that last signature drink before we left." I waited for her to say something else, then added. "You are welcome to use the guestroom in my suite. I don't feel good about you driving home alone."

"Oh, and the rumors would start," she replied. "Your fiancée would not be happy to find out I spent the night in your penthouse suite."

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"I told you, the situation between Stacy and me is complicated."

"How long have you been together?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure."

Amber laughed. "That is complicated."

"How often do you fly out of DFW?" I asked trying to change the subject.

She glanced at me and smiled. "It's complicated."

"Seriously," I chuckled.

"I work twelve to fourteen days a week. I go anywhere the airlines send me, but mostly I am scheduled on the Dallas to New York or Dallas to Las Vegas flights. I have enough seniority to pick my schedule unless there is some kind of emergency. I am what they call a line holder which means I can select my shirts based on days, hours, or destinations. I can also swap shifts or drop a shift if another flight attendant wants to pick it up."

"Do you enjoy your job?"

"I do," she replied enthusiastically.

She pulled her car under the hotel portico.

"Please spend the night in my guestroom," I encouraged her.

She turned to face me and said, "I am enjoying interacting with you and the band. It is good to see you again, but I'd be lying if I don't tell you that I'm still in love with your sister."

I bit my tongue to keep from telling her I am my sister. That sounds crazy even to me. I know I can't jeopardize the assignment Brad gave me. I must find the source of the drugs that are spreading throughout the country music scene in Nashville. I dragged my hands down my face trying to clear my head.

"I am enjoying your company," I said. "It is like old times—fun times when we were young and innocent. That is all. I would never overstep the line. I love Sage too much to do that. She would never forgive me and honestly, I'd never

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forgive myself. So, please pull your car into the parking garage and sleep in my guestroom tonight.”

She nodded and pulled into the parking garage. “You know I’ll have to do the walk of shame tomorrow if I show up in these clothes.”

“Wait until we are packing our instruments and visit the clothing store in the lobby. Get a new outfit and charge it to my room.”

“I don’t—”

“I insist. I’ll write it off as work expense. Sign my name to the ticket. Tomorrow morning, we move our equipment to Dickies Arena, and we will perform our first show tomorrow night.”

“Are you ready for the show?” Amber asked

“As I will ever be.”

##

We talked about frivolous things as we rode the elevator to the penthouse. “I think you will find everything you need in your en suite. If you need anything just give me a yell.”

We entered the apartment and said goodnight. I pushed back my desire to kiss her goodnight and went to my bedroom.

CHAPTER 11

Not My First Rodeo

Monday, January 27

“Oh cowgirl, you look so fine.” Kelly beamed at Amber as she walked into the practice room. She wore a pair of skinny jeans and a fitted red sweater. Her long dark hair rested on her shoulders like a storm cloud before the thunder and lightening show. The memories of her hair spread out on a white pillow made my heart stop.

I gave her my best wolf whistle and hurried to her. “You are gorgeous,” I declared.

“You’re not so bad yourself.” she laughed. “I am here to help. What can I do?”

“We’re loading our instruments and sound systems onto our bus.” I said leading her to my guitar. “That needs to go into the red case with the rose on it. If you will get it, I’ll grab the case of microphones and wires.”

It took us two hours to get everything loaded and stowed away on the bus. “I’m riding with Amber,” I informed the band. “We will meet you at the back entrance where we always access our dressing rooms.”

“That is some bus,” Amber commented as we walked to her car. “Did you ever think you would have a life-size picture of you on a travel bus?”

“It never crossed my mind,” I replied honestly. “I just wanted to make America safe.”

She looked up at me and tilted her head. “That’s a strange goal, considering you pack venues with thousands of screaming, weed-smoking fans.”

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That I would arrest, if given the opportunity, I thought. I've got to stop thinking like U.S. Marshall Shaw Rose and more like music star Shannon Rose. It is so easy to forget myself when I'm with Amber.

##

Five muscular men rushed our bus as we pulled into the back of the arena. They graciously carried our instruments onto the stage. "Park your bus out front," one of them directed, "so fans will know you are here."

We quickly arranged our instruments on the stage and tuned our instruments. Kelly played one of Shannon's hits and the acoustics were incredible. The sound man tested all the mics, and I sang a song with the band so he could set the sound to my voice. It was four hours until our showtime.

"Things have changed since I was here last," I said. *Because I don't remember any of it.*

"Every show is a sellout," Amber informed me. "Dickies Arena seats 14,000 people and you have sold it out for all twelve nights. No wonder everyone is so excited about you and the band."

"We have three hours to kill, let's go grab some lunch," I suggested. "Do you have anywhere close by, you'd like to go?"

"Lucile's is a few blocks down Camp Bowie. Let's go there. Shaw and I always loved it."

I nodded and followed her to her car.

We visited as we enjoyed our lunch. "I need to get back to my dressing room an hour and a half before the show starts. I must shower and dress in one of my performance outfits."

"I need to get a ticket," Amber replied.

"Oh, no. I have arranged for you to sit with Lady and Melody. The best seats in the house. Do you need tickets for anyone in your family?"

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“My parents and younger sister Lacy would love to see you. Lacy has such a crush on you.”

“Tell them to come backstage and they can sit with you and the girls. You will need to meet them at the backstage entrance and escort them in since you have a backstage pass.”

Amber clapped her hands genuinely thrilled that her family could join her. She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. I looked around but didn't see anyone paying attention to us. Shannon often told me that the paparazzi were the bane of her existence.

Amber called her family to invite them to join us tonight for the show. They arranged to meet at the backstage entrance door. We paid our check and returned to the Arena.

“Do you need any help dressing?” Amber asked as we entered the dressing rooming.

“No, I'm a big girl. I can dress myself.” I joked.

“Is it okay if I watch the steer wrestling in the Will Rogers Coliseum?”

“Sure. You do whatever you want and take care of your family. I will see you at the reception after the show. Lady and Melody will show you where to go.”

“I'll let you get ready,” she said as she pulled the door to behind her.

I locked the door and sat down on the chair at my dressing table to remove my boots. A small burnt orange envelope was on the dresser. It was addressed to Shannon Rose and sealed. I tore it open and a note with a small baggie fell out of the envelope.

I immediately knew the baggie was filled with illegal pills. The note said, “Shannon, for you! To take the edge off. Knock 'em dead tonight.”

Surely my sister didn't take drugs to enhance her performance. I called Brad.

“I have a small bagging containing over a dozen pills,” I blurted when he answered the phone.

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“Where did you get them?”

“Someone put them on my dressing table while I was out to lunch. I haven’t touched them. How can I get them to you for the lab to ascertain their content?”

“Hide them, just in case someone is trying to set you up. Put them where they can’t be found. Not the back of the commode. That is the first place everyone looks. I will be there by the time you finish your show tonight. I’ll take them to my forensics folks in Fort Worth.”

“Okay. Brad is there any change in Shannon’s condition?”

“Not yet.” He exhaled. “They are doing exercises with her several times a day so her muscles won’t atrophy and will still be strong when she comes out of the coma. We’re giving her the best care possible, Shaw.”

“I know you are. Thanks. I’ll see you tonight.”

Using an eye liner pencil, I pushed the pills and note back into the envelope and wrapped them in a hand towel. I looked around for a place where no one would look for them. I considered the removeable tile ceiling but decided that was too easy as was the air conditioning vent.

A four-light wall scone was mounted on each side of my mirror over the vanity. I managed to loosen the screws that held one of the lights to the wall. Holding it by the corner tip, I took the envelope from the hand towel and slipped it behind the wall mount. I screwed the light back to the wall and checked my handy work. The mount had fitted right back where it originally was.

Satisfied no one would rip out wall sconces looking for anything, I took my shower. I dried and curled my hair then applied my makeup. I was slipping on my boots when a stagehand knocked on my door and yelled, “Five minutes, Ms. Rose.”

Words cannot describe my nervousness. I was tempted to unscrew the wall scone and take one of the pills, but common sense told me they were laced with fentanyl. I took

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one last look in the mirror, admired the beautiful blonde woman looking back at me, and left the dressing room, careful to lock the door behind me.

The band members were already in their places, and the master of ceremonies was introducing Shannon. I glanced toward the area where Amber and the others were sitting. She smiled and gave me a little wave.

“And now ladies and gentlemen, The Queen of Country Music, Shannon Rose”

The band kicked off one of Shannon's hits and I danced my way to the microphone. The crowd went wild. I thought the Opry had been an ego boost, but the fans in Dickies Area shook the roof setting of an adrenaline rush like nothing I've ever experienced.

I suddenly realized I wasn't hidden behind my guitar. I was on the stage with nothing between me and fourteen thousand screaming, clapping ticket buyers expecting to see the show of their lives. I grabbed the mic stand like a long-lost lover and began to sing into the microphone. The crowd went crazy.

For the next hour, I danced and jumped around the stage like a woman possessed. Doing all the crazy antics I'd studied my sister doing. Best of all I was able to carry the tunes to her songs. When the show was over the audience raised the rafters demanding encore after encore. We performed for another forty-five minutes then I danced my way off the stage and collapsed in a backstage chair. God bless Shannon's band, they played one more song.

Everyone gathered in my dressing room. “That was brutal,” Ziggy huffed. “You don't usually perform that long without a break.”

“I hope all of our audiences don't expect the show you did tonight,” Babs added.

“Don't relax, we still have a backstage party to meet and greet Fort Worth's movers and shakers.” Mel reminded us.

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“I must have water,” I gasped heading for the minifridge in my dressing room.

We all freshened up then headed for the room hosting the backstage party. Amber and her family were waiting for us outside the door. They rushed to meet us. “Y’all were amazing,” Mr. Reed said shaking the hand of everyone in our entourage.

Amber wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me soundly. I couldn’t keep from responding. I slipped my arms around her waist and kissed her back. She ended the kiss and gave me a puzzled look while I struggled to keep from hyperventilating.

The Fort Worth Mayor and her husband joined us, singing the band’s praises. “That is the best performance you have ever done for us, young lady,” the Mayor complimented. “Ticket buyers are raving about you and your band.”

Still recovering from the performance and the breathtaking kiss from Amber, I nodded my head like a bobble-head doll.

##

We mingled with the guests, signing autographs until my hand cramped and smiling until I thought my face would fall off. Around 11:30 p.m. I saw Amber and her family walking toward the door. I excused myself from a city councilman and rushed to catch them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Reed, Lacy, Amber thank you so much for coming.” I tried to steady my breathing.

“You are incredible,” Lacy gushed. “I’ve never seen anyone put on a show like that. I saw you here last year and you are now so much better.”

I mumbled something stupid like, “Practice makes perfect.”

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I gently caught Amber's arm. "You're not leaving are you?"

"We will talk tomorrow," she said still eyeing me like I had two heads.

"Be careful," I said as she walked away.

My cellphone rang and Brad's number ran across the screen. I answered.

"Shaw, I'm in your dressing room," Brad blurted. "Someone has torn it apart."

"I'll be right there."

I sprinted to my room and cautiously opened the door. Brad was standing in the center of the room looking around at the destruction. I closed the door behind me.

"Do you have any idea who did this?" Brad asked.

"No, it's happened in the last two hours while I was performing."

"I'm assuming they found what they were looking for," Brad declared. "They left no stone unturned."

I glanced at the wall sconce. "Not every stone." I began unscrewing the mount and the envelope fell onto my vanity. "Here it is."

Brad held out an evidence bag. "Did you touch it?"

"The corner of the envelope. My prints are in the database; forensics can find them. Let me know something as soon as you do."

"I will be back here tomorrow night with answers for you," Brad promised.

After Brad left, I screwed the wall mount back into place and called the arena security. "Someone has ransacked my room,"

##

"Did they take anything?" The head of security asked me as she noted the ripped cushions and broken vases.

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“Nothing. I learned a long time ago not to leave anything I wanted in a dressing room. I don’t know what they were looking for, but they didn’t take anything that belonged to me.”

“I’ll have a heavy-duty lock put on your door and replace the furniture they ripped up. I am so sorry this happened. I must confess I was so awed by your performance, I may have neglected my duties.”

“No harm done,” I assured her.

After she left I called Mel. “Are you all ready to go back to the hotel?”

“No, Shy and Lady are ready to call it a night. Ziggy and Melody left about half an hour ago, but Kelly, Babs, Faye, and I are getting lucky. We may be in late.”

“I’m going to Uber back to the hotel,” I informed her. “Be safe. Have the driver return the bus to the hotel.”

It was after 1:00 a.m. when I fell across my bed. I touched my lips where Amber had kissed me. My body tingled at the thought of her sweet lips on mine. Her lips were just as firm and silky as I remembered.

I contemplated calling her, but decided it was too late. I fell asleep still dressed in my performance clothes.

CHAPTER 12

Social Media Hell

Tuesday, January 28

Shannon's phone blaring, "Stacy calling," pulled me from an exhausted sleep. I rolled over and pushed speaker, so I didn't have to hold it. "Hello,"

"Did I wake you?" Stacy asked.

"Yes."

"Good, because I'm pissed. You have shamed me all over every social media imaginable."

"What? I don't understand. I haven't done anything."

"The world thinks you have. Look at it then call me back."

I went to the en suite and splashed water on my face to wake me. I called room service for breakfast, then opened my iPad.

"I held my breath as I watched post after post of Amber and me together: dancing at Guitars and Cadillacs, Amber kissing me on the cheek in Lucile's, and the smoking kiss she placed on my lips at the backstage party. It looked like everyone with a cellphone had taken and posted photos of Amber and me looking like lovers.

I don't know what to do. I don't like Stacy and would be thrilled if she left me, but it isn't about me, it is about Shannon. Stacy is Shannon's girl, and I am really screwing over her love life. I am in social media hell.

I decided to eat breakfast and shower before returning Stacy's call. I called Amber but it went to voicemail, and I left a message. "I'm hoping I will see you tonight," I tried to

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keep the begging sound from my voice. I desperately need to see her.

Room service delivered my breakfast, and I downed a cup of hot, black coffee. Even the shot of caffeine didn't jump-start my brain. I drank a second cup as I clicked through post after post of Amber and me dancing and kissing. My phone announced another call coming from Stacy. I answered it steeling myself for a tongue lashing—and not the good kind.

“Why haven't you called me back?” Stacy demanded.

“I have been scrolling through social media. Stacy there is nothing going on between me and another woman. I've known Amber since the second grade. She is Shaw's girl not mine.”

“I supposed Shaw is there with you and all the pictures are her and Shaw. Don't BS me, Shannon Rose. I know you too well to believe that line of bull.”

“I swear, Stacy, nothing is going on between Amber and me. She and her family attended the concert last night and arranged for complimentary tickets for them.”

“So, she ran her tongue down your throat to thank you,” Stacy yelled. “I'm catching the next plane to DFW. I'll be there for your show tonight.”

“Please don't do that. You know I don't want you to travel with me. You are too distracting. I need all my energy to play the shows.”

“I am coming. You can't stop me.”

“Stacy, if come here, I will cancel all your credit cards and have the leasing company pick up your BMW. I am dead serious.”

After a long silence she replied. “Okay. I won't come, but you'd better not be screwing around on me.”

“I'm not. I promise.”

“Call me tonight,” Stacy demanded.

“Okay. Have a good day. Talk to you tonight.”

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I finished my breakfast and took a shower. I let my hair air dry and walked into my bedroom to dress. My phone on the dresser was flashing. *God, please don't let it be Stacy again. I am making a big mess of Shannon's personal life.*

I was delighted to see the call from Amber. I pushed the icon to play her message. "Shannon, I wanted to let you know that the airlines called me and I must work an international flight to Italy with a layover. I will return February first. We all enjoyed your show last night. Thank you again for the tickets."

That's it. How could she kiss me like that and then be so formal. Maybe she saw the social media storm we created and was embarrassed.

I tried to call her back, but the call went to her voicemail. I left her a message to call me.

I dressed and called my mother. "Mom, would like to take you to lunch today, if you have time."

"Shannon, I was wondering when you would call. Of course, I have time for you. Where are you staying? I will pick you up."

We arranged for her to pick me up beneath the Sheraton's portico at noon. I hope I can pull off my masquerade with my mom. She is very sharp, and we were never able to fool her when we were kids. She always knew I was Shaw and my sister was Shannon.

I called the hospital and inquired about Shannon. They told me there was no change.

##

Mom picked me up and took me to their country club for lunch. "Your dad is going to join us."

I was delighted to see both of them. Although I only saw them four or five times a year, we spoke on the phone every week. Mom is adamant about keeping in touch with us and Shannon and I love it.

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“You must come to my show tonight,” I invited them.

“We’d love to,” Dad replied. “Do you have time for dinner before the show?”

“Honestly, if I ate before the show, I’d throw up on stage,” I confessed. “But we can have a late supper after the show if that is okay.”

“We would love that,” Mom agreed.

I gave them the time and how to reach the backstage entrance. “You’ve met Lady and Melody. I’ll have them meet you at the stage door and take you to your seats.”

After lunch Mom drove me back to the hotel. “May I come up to your room,” she asked.

“I’d like that.”

As the elevator reached the top floor, Mom fanned her face doing her version of a southern woman having the vapors. “My that was a long way up.”

“It’s the top floor.” I laughed at her antics.

She oohed and awed over my suite as we walked through the door.

“Would you like something to drink?” I offered.

“Do you have Sprite?”

“I do.” I pulled two cans from the minifridge, popped them open and poured them over ice. We sat on the sofa and began to talk.

“What is wrong with Shannon?” Mom blurted.

I quickly weighed my options. I knew if I told Mom the truth she would want to rush to Shannon’s bedside. I also knew my mother was like a dog with a chicken bone. She would keep on gnawing at me until she wore me down.

I decided honesty was the best path with Mom. I took her hand in mine. “Mom, someone attempted to kill Shannon. She is in a coma in a private hospital. The Marshal’s Service is involved in catching the perp. Brad instructed me to take Shannon’s place so we could catch the killer when he tried again.”

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Mom gasped. "Shannon is on life support and your life is also in danger."

"Yes ma'am."

"I saw the photo on the news of Amber kissing you." Mom informed me. "Does she know it is you or does she think you are Shannon?"

"I'm not sure. If she suspects I'm not Shannon, she hasn't said anything."

"Your Dad and I still get together with Amber and her family once or twice a month. She is a lovely girl, just like you and Shannon."

"What happened to Shannon?"

"Someone slipped drugs into her drink. She was helping Brad identify the gang leader of a drug cartel in Nashville. I'm still angry with him for using her. This job is too dangerous for civilians."

"I want to see her," Mom declared.

"You can't. It is imperative that I keep my cover intact. I check on her every day and Brad has two guards outside her door twenty-four/seven. As long as I am performing and impersonating Shannon the killer will think he failed and hopefully try again."

"When do the doctors think she will come out of the coma?"

"Soon, I hope. I don't like living her life."

Mom looked around. "It looks like a dream come true to me," she exclaimed.

"Not my cup of java." I grinned at her.

"I'm not going to tell your father. He will insist on being at her bedside. He won't figure it out. He never could tell you girls apart anyway."

"You could always tell us apart. How did you do that?"

"Personality, dear. Shannon has always been flighty, a bit of a narcissist with more energy than a room can hold. You have always been the steady one. The one I could depend on in a crisis. You know, the strong silent type. With

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enough integrity to save the world. If the tables were turned, I can promise you Shannon wouldn't pretend to be you to find your killer. She might kill them once they are identified but wouldn't be dedicated enough to hunt them down."

"I think Shannon is more serious about life than you think, Mom. I can't even begin to tell you how hard it is to be Shannon Rose. She keeps her band in line, keeps up an unbelievable pace, and is a truly good person."

"Both of you are good people. I am very proud of my girls.

We clinked our glasses together in a toast to silence.

"I will call you everyday and let you know how she is doing," I promised.

Mom finished her Sprite and carried the glass to the sink. "I must get home and find something to wear tonight. I can't believe you are fooling everyone in the band. You and Shannon are so different in your personalities."

"I work very hard to behave like Shannon," I assured her. "It is exhausting. Hopefully I perform the way she does."

I went to the lobby with her and waited as the valet brought her car from the garage. I hugged her tightly thankful that God had given me such a wonderful mother.

"We will see you tonight, dear." She patted my cheek. "I love you, Shaw."

"I love you too Mom."

CHAPTER 13

Please Answer the Phone

Tuesday Evening, January 28

I grabbed the hanging bag that contained the outfit I would perform in tonight and headed for the elevator. As I reached the door, I realized I'd left my phone in the bedroom. It began to ring as I sprinted toward the sound only to have it stop as I grabbed it. Amber's beautiful face was still on the screen. I tapped her icon to call her back. The call went to voicemail. I wanted to scream.

I waited for the message to end and said, "Please call me back. I miss you so much."

I waited a few minutes for her to call me, then took the elevator down to the hotel lobby where the band members were waiting for me.

We loaded onto the bus and arrived at Dickies Arena an hour before the show. We gathered in my dressing room and discussed our future after we completed the rodeo gig. I asked Lady and Melody to meet my parents and take them to their seats. "If you will escort them backstage after the show, I will be most appreciative."

"Do you remember we have an international tour in May?" Babs asked.

"International! No, I have little recall. Things are coming back to me slowly, but I have no information about an international tour. Is there anything else I need to know about?"

"We're supposed to finalize our new album," Faye commented. "Kristen will want us to get on that as soon as we return to Nashville. She wants to drive it to number one

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before we embark on our tour. You must write two more new songs for it.”

“Have you finished them yet?” Babs asked.

I shook my head no, wondering how my sister kept up with everything going on in her life.

“Who is Kristen,” I asked.

“Kristen Carter is our agent,” Kelly answered. “She keeps us busy. At least we will be in Nashville for a couple of months before we go to Europe.”

“That will give me something to think about,” I groaned. We better get dressed. It is almost showtime.” Everyone scattered to their own dressing rooms, and I locked the door behind them thankful for the new double-bolt lock Security had installed on my door.

I tried to call Amber again but went to voicemail. I left another message, beginning to feel like a beggar.

##

I ran onto the stage throwing kisses to the audience just as Shannon greeted her audience. The band began playing one of her hits and I crooned into the headset the sound people had asked me to wear. I felt naked-no guitar to hide behind and no microphone to hold in front of me. It was a sickening feeling.

The audience roared as I finished the first song, and the world faded away leaving only my audience and me. I sang every song for them, and they loved me. Once again, I realized why my sister loved performing.

We completed the show doing only twenty minutes more than it was scheduled for. I hurried to the backstage reception to meet Mom and Dad. They were surrounded by people who were delighted to meet the parents of Shannon Rose.

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Mom spotted me and dragged Dad to meet me. "Darling, you were incredible. I don't know how you do it. I am always amazed by you." Mom winked and smiled.

"Thank you and thank you for coming." I hugged them and the band gathered around them, hugging them and telling them how wonderful it was to see them. Mom loved all the attention, and I was happy to know that one of her daughters was able to provide the notability that pleased her and Dad.

I stayed at the party until Mom said she was a little exhausted by all the attention and her face hurt from smiling. "We are going to leave, dear," she informed me.

"Would you give me a ride to the hotel?" I asked. "I'm tired too. The band will stay out until all hours of the night."

"May we come to all of your performances," Dad asked as he pulled the car from the arena parking lot.

"I would love that," I said sincerely. "I don't get to see you as much I'd like to."

I sat in the back seat and turned on my cellphone. Notifications of a call from Amber popped onto my screen along with a call from Brad. I hoped he had information for me about the drugs left in my dressing room.

##

I said goodnight to my parents and hurried to my room, hoping against hope that Amber would be there. I was both pleased and disappointed to find Brad waiting in the lobby. I walked to the elevator and activated it with my keycard. I held the door open until Brad joined me.

"It is good to see you, boss," I greeted him. "Do you have good news for me?"

"I don't think so. The fingerprints on the envelope belong to your drummer Kelly Clinton."

"You're kidding me!" I gasped. "She has been my rock. I wonder if Shannon knows she is dealing drugs."

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"I think she learned something someone didn't want to get out. That is why they overdosed her. Keep the information to yourself and try to find out who is supplying Kelly," Brad instructed. "We need to know the source."

"I can do that." I wondered if Kelly had sold drugs to anyone in the band. I decided to have everyone drug tested when we returned to Nashville. A drug test was in their contracts.

"I'm heading back to headquarters," Brad informed me. "Call me if you need me or find out anything."

I was glad he didn't stay long. I desperately wanted to call Amber. I walked him to the door and locked it behind him.

I touched the icon that would bring Amber into my world. The call went to her voicemail. "Amber, I am so sorry I missed your call. I'm in my hotel room now, if you want to call me back."

I pulled off my clothes and slipped into the hotel's soft terry-cloth robe while I waited for her to call. The phone rang and I grabbed it, tapping the incoming call.

"Hey," I said brilliantly.

"Shannon, why the hell haven't you called me?" Stay's nails-on-a-chalkboard voice screeched in my ear.

"Jesus, Stacy, why don't you burst my eardrums?" I grumbled.

"You said you would call."

"I just finished my show and walked into my hotel room. I was going to call you. What do you want?"

"Who said I wanted anything?"

"You always want something," I snarked. *I do not like this woman.*

"Since you are partying in Texas, I thought I go to Las Vegas with some of the girls."

"Fine. Go."

"Um, well I need some money."

"Use your credit card." I sighed trying to be nice to her.

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"I may have overdrawn the card, and it keeps getting declined," She whined.

"I'll call Eleanor and tell her to pay the credit card bill. That will return your balance to zero. It will be good, but if you go over it again, you will need to get a job."

There was a long silence then she responded. "Baby, don't be mad at Stacy."

I almost chewed off my tongue trying to make it talk nice to her. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm exhausted. That's all. Go to Vegas and have a good time. I'll tell Eleanor to increase your limit on the card."

"Oh, I just love you, Shannon Rose. The next time I see you I'm going to do that thing with my tongue that you love until you beg for mercy."

The thought of Stacy touching me with her tongue sent icy shivers down my body. "I can't wait," I mumbled. "Let me go so I can call Eleanor before it gets any later."

"Okay, Goodnight." She ended the connection.

I wonder what Shannon likes about Stacy. I find her repulsive. Of course, I have no idea what she can do with her tongue.

I sent Eleanor a text instructing her to pay off Stacy's credit card and raise the limit to twenty-thousand dollars.

She texted back, "Her limit is twenty-thousand dollars."

I replied, "Don't increase the limit. Just pay it off."

I can't imagine anything Stacy can with her tongue that would be worth twenty-thousand dollars, unless she can spin gold with it.

My phone dinged and I saw that Amber had tried to call me while I was dealing with Stacy. I read her message. "Tried to call. You didn't answer. I am still in Italy. I must cover some other flight attendant's shifts. Will be back in Fort Worth, on the seventh. I hope everything is going okay with you."

"Damn Stacy," I cried.

CHAPTER 14

Returning Home

Saturday, February 8

I closed my eyes and listened as the big jet engines roared lifting us off the runway at the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. I was happy to be leaving Texas behind.

I am still trying to come down from the adrenaline high of performing for twelve straight days. It has been twelve days of exhilaration fueled by pure adrenaline. I know at some point; I will crash and burn.

I am beginning to understand why my sister loves performing. It is addictive.

I closed the curtains in my first-class seats, raised the center armrest, laid down, and went to sleep. My luggage and instruments were on the bus with the band.

##

“Miss, you need to fasten your seat belt,” a gentle hand touched my leg. I blinked the sleep from my eyes and looked around trying to establish my location.

I sat up and fastened my seat belt as the pilot reversed the thrusters slowing down the plane. The plane taxied to the gate and stopped.

My agent Kristen Carter was waiting for me outside the baggage claim area. God, it is good to get home.

“I appreciate you picking me up,” I thanked her as I buckled my seatbelt.”

“It’s like greeting a conquering hero,” Kristen replied. “I have heard so many great things about your rodeo performances, you must have been higher than a kite. I’ve never seen such action videos as I witnessed on the social

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media outlets. You have dominated social media posts for the last two weeks. The rodeo secretary has already called to book you for next year."

"What did you tell them?" I asked, praying that I wouldn't be the one performing at next year's Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo.

"I penciled it in for now."

"Good, that is the most exhausting gig we do all year."

"I think your international tour will top that in difficulty and demanding performances."

"I am taking off next week," I told her. "I've got to work on the songs for our new album, and I just want to hang around the house and rest."

Kristen nodded her head in understanding.

"I know this sounds crazy, but I have huge blocks of time missing from my memory and I don't know where the songs for the album are. Do you have them?"

"No, they are probably in your home office. You told me you only lacked two songs so, I'm guessing you have written the others."

"That makes sense. I will search the house and let you know when I find them."

##

Maria met me at the front door with a big, warm hug. It was good to be home. "You look exhausted, ser querido."

I knew enough Spanish to understand her term of endearment for Shannon was 'loved one'."

"I am, Maria. I'm going to shower and sleep until I awake. Please don't let anyone disturb me."

"I will protect you," she promised.

"Maria do you know where Shannon keeps the music she is writing?"

"Yes, it is locked in the safe in her office."

"A combination safe?" I gulped.

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“See,” Maria confirmed my biggest fear.

“Do you know the combination?”

“I do.” She smiled as if she were thrilled to help me.

I hugged her tightly. “I’m going to sleep now.”

CHAPTER 15

Sunday, February 9

I awoke, trying to determine where I was. I have slept in so many different places since I've become Shannon that it is extremely disorienting. I slipped on my robe and walked onto the landing in front of my room. I could hear voices below and hoped it wasn't Stacy.

"You don't understand, I must see her," a melodic voice floated up to me. I ran down the stairs and skidded into the room.

"Amber," I gasped as my stomach did a little square dance.

"I have chased you all over the U.S." Amber declared. "I must talk to you."

Maria placed her body between Amber and me. "Miss you can't..."

"It's okay Maria. She is my dearest friend."

Maria looked from me to Amber and back again then nodded. "I will prepare dinner," she announced. "How do you like your steaks, Miss?"

"Maria," I interrupted. "This is Amber Reed. Amber this is the woman who keeps me sane, Maria Rosa. Amber likes her steaks medium-well, same as mine."

Maria nodded and marched from the room.

"Give me a minute," I begged. "I need to dress and run a brush through my hair."

"I like you just the way you are."

I gulped. *Please God, don't let her fall in love with Shannon.*

"I've seen you in less, Shaw." She held my gaze with hers.

"You know?" I mumbled. "How?"

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"I suspected the second day, but I knew for certain the minute I kissed you at the backstage party. What is going on, Shaw?"

"I can explain." I grabbed her hand and pulled her upstairs to my room.

"Let me get dressed, then we can talk." I insisted, pulling a pair of jeans and a Henley from my closet. I went into the ensuite, quickly changed, and brushed my hair putting it up in a high ponytail.

Amber smiled at me and the gleam in her eyes told me this day would end the way I'd prayed it would. "Let's get a cup of coffee," I suggested. "I'm not hitting on all cylinders yet. Maria knows I'm not Shannon but everyone else thinks I am."

Off the kitchen we sat in the café style breakfast nook, and I began my explanation. "You know I am with the U.S. Marshals Service. Several weeks ago, I was notified that Shannon was in the hospital in a coma. I immediately flew to see about her. As I was in her hospital room, the head of the Marshal's Service showed up. He is a good friend. He informed me that Shannon had been helping the Marshals identify the culprit that sold her rhythm guitar player recreational drugs laced with fentanyl that killed her. Apparently she was getting close to the drug dealers responsible, and they tried to kill Shannon with an overdose. Fortunately, someone got her to the hospital in time to keep her alive, but she is in a coma."

"I don't understand why the dealers want to kill their customers," Amber reasoned.

"That's the point, their entire purpose is to kill Americans. The Chinese are behind fentanyl. They don't want customers, they want corpses. Fentanyl is the Chinese war on America. It is their new epidemic."

Amber frowned and nodded for me to continue.

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"My boss asked me to assume the roll of Shannon Rose to help identify the gang responsible for her attempted death. I couldn't say no, so here I am."

"Have there been any attempts on your life?"

"One. Someone left an envelope of recreational drugs laced with fentanyl in my dressing room before my first appearance in Dickies Arena."

Amber sat silently contemplating the information I had shared with her. "I have no words to explain my heartbreak when I thought you were engaged to someone else. I think about you every hour of every day."

I reached across the breakfast table and took her hands in mine. "You are always on my mind. No matter what I am doing, your beautiful face is always in the back of my mind. I dream about you every night and fantasize about you constantly. I have made love to you a million times in my mind. I never stopped loving you, Amber Reed."

She smiled. "Good, we are of one mind."

I laughed. "Good to know. How long do you have before your next flight?"

"Three days. I intend to spend every hour with you."

My stomach did a back flip that made my heart race like a Churchill Downs winner. I tamped down the feeling that made me want to drool and said, "I must check on Shannon. Do you want to accompany me?"

"I am honored that you want me to."

We ate the perfectly prepared filet Maria made for us then slid from the booth. I took her hands and slowly pulled her close. I closed my eyes savoring every emotion that swirled through my body as she melted into my arms and her lips brushed mine. I touched her soft lips with mine then held her tighter. The feeling of Amber's body pressed against me was overwhelming. I tightened my arms around her and deepened our kiss. Her velvet tongue teased my lips then slipped into my mouth and tangled with my tongue. My knees weakened as she melted into me.

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“You know, Shannon isn’t going anywhere.” I whispered.

She leaned back in my arms and smiled. “You are so bad but let’s check on Shannon then we will have the rest of the day to visit with nothing to distract us.”

“Oh, the anticipation,” I moaned before kissing her again.

CHAPTER 16

Hand in Hand

Sunday Evening, February 9

The only light in Shannon's room was a dim fixture over her bed. She looked healthy but was still comatose. I sat in the chair beside her bed and took her hand in mine. "Hey, Sis, I'm getting really tired of doing your job. It is exhausting.

"I've brought a friend with me. Do you remember Amber Reed?"

We spent the next hour telling Shannon about the Dickies Arena and the crowds that were there to see her. "Dickies has fourteen-thousand seats," I informed her. "We performed twelve nights, so you appeared before one-hundred-sixty-thousands fans in Fort Worth."

"And they adored you," Amber chimed in.

Shannon squeezed my hand. "Shannon, if you can hear me, squeeze my hand again." I held my breath waiting for her to respond. She did not.

"Shannon, I don't mind impersonating you until you get back on your feet, but I have a small problem. As you know I have always been in love with Amber. But you are engaged to Stacy Thorton. Stacy thinks I am you and keeps wanting to be with me intimately. Honestly, Sis, I can't stand your fiancée. I don't want to destroy your relationship with her, but I can't be affectionate with her. I just keep giving her your money and sending her on her way."

Shannon squeezed my fingers. "Is it okay to keep giving her money but stay away from her?"

She squeezed my hand again then her hand went limp, and I knew I had lost her to the darkness that now was her

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world. I couldn't stop the tears from running down my cheeks. Amber gently wiped them away with a soft tissue. "Look," she whispered.

I looked at my sister's face and tears were also running down her cheeks. Amber handed me a tissue, and I gently wiped the tears from Shannon's face. "Don't worry, Sis. We will get through this." I whispered as I kissed her on the cheek.

We stayed with Shannon until the physical therapy clinician entered the room. "I must ask you to leave," she said. "I will be working with her for about an hour, then it will be past visiting hours. You can come back tomorrow."

"We will do that," I replied taking Amber's hand and walking from the room.

"I know it is difficult to see her like that," Amber consoled me as the elevator door closed, "but she is responding. I believe she will be okay. We must visit her every day and talk to her, read to her, and maybe you can sing to her. I want to come with you."

I leaned down and kissed her silky lips. "I love you."

She leaned into me. "I'm sure you are going to show me just how much you love me, before the night is over."

I laughed. "I'd forgotten what a tease you can be. Just know that sooner or later, you will have to pay the piper."

"As long as the piper is you, I'm good with that." She kissed me back. We walked from the elevator hand in hand. *Happiness is spelled Amber Reed.*

##

Maria and her family lived in the home on the back side of Shannon's property. She was gone by the time we returned to the estate. She left a note that she had baked a fresh chocolate cake that was under the glass cake plate on the kitchen counter.

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I took Amber's hand and led her up the stairs. "Do you want anything? Something to drink?"

"Just you." She smiled squeezing my hand.

I feel shy, almost like a teenager making my first advance to a girl. I can tell she is feeling the same. While I want to rip her clothes off and make love to her, I also want to take my time and let her know how much I love her. How important she is to me. How I never want to let her go.

Maria had turned on the lamp on my bedside table and a soft glow gave the room a warm welcoming feeling. I sat down on the bed and slipped off my shoes. Amber stood in front of me, holding my gaze as she slowly unbuttoned her blouse and allowed me to touch her smooth, silky skin. I pulled her between my knees and buried my face between her breasts. She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled my head tighter against her as I unhooked her bra.

She pulled back from me and let the bra fall down her arms and onto the floor. I inhaled deeply as I gazed at her beautiful breast. "You are even more magnificent than I remembered," I muttered into the valley between her breasts. She took my breath away.

She slipped her knee between my legs and pushed against my core, sending a wave of pure lust surging throughout my body. I want her so badly.

I unfastened her jeans and slid them down her long legs as she pulled my Henley over my head. I fell back on the bed pulling her on top of me.

Amber kissed her way from my breasts, up my neck and captured my lips. She is the most incredible kisser I've ever known. Her lips are firm and silky as she molds them with mine. The feelings she excites in me are indescribable. She nibbles at my bottom lip. "I love you so much," she mutters against my lips the vibration driving me crazy.

She reaches behind me, unfastens my bra and lets it slide down my arms. I sling it across the room free myself from

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any restraints as I gather her in my arms and memorize the feel of every inch of her.

Our lips capture each other as our breasts press against one another. The sensualness of the contact is overwhelming. I want all of her—every inch of her. My desire for her is insatiable. I can't hold her tight enough. I can't kiss her hard enough.

I don't remember when we shed the last of our clothes. I only know our hands were all over each other's body—caressing, savoring the silky feel of skin against skin. Our mouths teased and tortured each other mercilessly as we made the other beg for more.

I have always loved the sounds she makes when we make love. I learned a long time ago just where to touch her to elicit the soft moans of desire and pleasure. Her whimpers and whispered words of love drove everything else from my mind. She was my world. Nothing else mattered. Pleasing her was my only goal. I didn't leave an inch of her body untouched.

I fell onto the bed beside her gasping for breath as her chest heaved desperately to draw air into her lungs. I watched the rise and fall of her full, soft breast and wanted to make love to her again, but I couldn't find the strength.

We lay silently as we tried to slow our heart rates and catch our breaths.

"You are something else," she said softly. "I thought I had built you up in my mind, but you are even more fantastic than I have dreamed."

"As are you," I returned the compliment. "You are marvelous."

We fell asleep entwined in each other's arms. I made a silent vow to never let her go again.

CHAPTER 17

Singing Our Song

Monday, February 10

I awoke to the thrill of silky legs entwined with mine, a beautiful head of brown hair on my shoulder, and a possessive arm draped across my midsection. I have never been happier in my life.

I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her on the forehead. "I can't believe we have three whole days together."

"And three nights," she added.

"Where do you go from here?"

"Back to DFW where I will resume my normal schedule. Which means I will fly into Nashville one day and back to Dallas the next day. Hopefully I can spend all my nights in Nashville."

"That would be a dream come true," I mumbled into her ear as I kissed her neck.

"You will have to let me rest a little," she nibbled my bottom lip. Turn around flights are exhausting."

"I will, I promise. I will wait on you hand and foot. I just want you with me."

"What about you? Don't you have some Shannon Rose commitments you must keep?"

"I do. I have to find the original songs she has written for her upcoming album, and I must write two new songs myself. Then we have to record the album."

"Do you have any idea where her new songs are?"

"I believe they are I her safe. Maria has the combination."

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Amber slid her foot up and down my leg. It was like striking a match against a flint stone. I caught fire. "Maybe we can visit a little while before you search for her songs," she cooed in my ear.

"Maybe we can visit a lot," I replied easing on top of her and placing my knee between her legs."

"Yes," she moaned. "Yes."

##

"We showered, put on comfortable jeans and shirts, then walked downstairs to find coffee and Shannon's new music.

Maria smiled at us as we entered the kitchen. "I thought you were going to sleep all day." She cast us a knowing glance and winked at me.

Figuring silence was golden, I simply nodded and wrinkled my nose at her. I filled two coffee cups and carried them into the breakfast nook.

"Shaw likes bacon, eggs, and toast for breakfast," Maria informed Amber. What would you like?"

"The same," Amber replied.

"Maria, after breakfast I need to find Shannon's new music," I informed her. "Would you open the safe for me?"

"Of course. That is the only place I can imagine she would keep it. It is the most secure."

"Do you have any idea what you will write?" Amber asked me.

"I have one tune and words that keep running through my mind," I admitted. "Inspired by you. After that, I have nothing."

"Maybe we can work on inspiring you." She covered my hand with her soft warm hand. Music definitely ran rampant through my mind. The words, um, maybe not kosher for public consumption.

"You've just inspired a tune," I grinned, "but I will have to work on the words."

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We enjoyed a leisure breakfast as we discussed our lives without each other and how miserable we have been. "I thought you would come for me," she admitted.

"Tada, I did," I declared with a grand sweeping gesture.

"No, you showed up in Fort Worth as your sister. If I hadn't known the difference, would you have ever told me?"

"Yes, I was getting ready to tell you. I certainly didn't want to make you fall in love with Shannon Rose."

"There was no chance of that. I was certain it was you the first time I looked into your eyes. I have seen those eyes every night in my dreams."

I turned my hand over and laced our fingers together. "I plan on you seeing them every day for the rest of your life."

"When you two get through making goo-goo eyes at each other, I will open the safe for you," Maria teased.

"I'm ready," I said. "Lead the way."

Maria led us to a life-size photo of Shannon, hanging on the wall. It was framed in gold. The picture of her looked so real, I reached out and touched it. "She is gorgeous," I murmured.

"As are you," Amber said.

I walked from side to side of the portrait. It was a hologram that moved as I did, making Shannon's life-size figure change. "I don't think I can lift that off the wall," I admitted.

Maria scoffed at me and reached behind the edge of the frame. A click released the lever that held the picture against the wall. It swung away from the wall on invisible hinges.

"Wow! That is quite a feat," I exclaimed. "The picture looked like it was flat against the wall, but it isn't."

"That must have cost a small fortune," Amber noted.

Maria nodded. "My chica is very narcissistic." She walked to a safe that was big enough to walk into—more a vault than a safe. She shielded the code with her body, keyed it into the pad, and pulled down on the lever making the steel

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latch retract. The door swung open, and Amber and I gasped. The vault was filled from floor to ceiling with gold bars.

“Sweet Jesus,” I exclaimed. “Are those real?”

“Yes,” Maria said proudly. “She has always invested wisely. I know she is a showboat, but she is also extremely savvy in the ways of the world.”

“How many people know about this?” I asked Maria.

“Only Shannon and me. Now you and your lady, of course.”

I walked into the vault and saw a thick three-ring binder. I opened the cover and thumbed through the sheets of music paper. Each note was meticulously hand drawn onto the staff with the words neatly printed below them. “She doesn’t use a computer program to do this?” I asked.

“No, she does the original score by hand,” Maria said. “When a song sells a million records, she gives me the original score. Each score is worth millions, but I have never sold them. Just like her, they are precious to me.

“She does the commercial score for the music company on the computer, but I keep the originals.”

I was deeply impressed by my sister’s generosity and her business acumen. For all her faults, she was kind to those she trusted. Again, I wondered who had tried to kill her and why.

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CHAPTER 18

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I want to give all of you more exposure

Plane crash
Fort Worth FSS
January 27 – Monday
Friday February 7