

**Prologue**

*Asheville, North Carolina  
Nine years earlier ~*

**T**he sounds were soothing. The gentle beep of the monitors, the quiet scrape of nurses' shoes on the tiled floor, muted voices in the corridors. She was lulled away from the pain into a restless sleep. Safe, she thought as she drifted away.

"Where's my wife! I have to see my wife!"

The frantic voice startled Mary Grace from her doze. She tried to open her eyes then remembered they were still swollen shut. He's here.

Someone had detained him. Someone with a deep voice that carried across the small room. Perhaps the doctor. Yes, that must be it.

"You need to go slowly, Officer Winters. Your wife needs you to be calm."

"What happened? Let me go! I've got to see Mary Grace!"

"Your wife has had a serious accident. She doesn't look very good."

"What..." She heard him clear his throat. "How bad is she hurt?"

Mary Grace strained to hear. How bad was she hurt? The sharp pain in her head and arm

threatened to fill her consciousness. The rest of her body felt numb. Probably the painkillers, she thought, battling the fog that loomed.

"She has a broken arm, so severely broken we had to pin it in two places. Her right leg is broken. We had to pin it as well, right above the knee. Multiple contusions on her face and to the back of her head. She has a deep cut over her eye. A fraction of an inch lower and she might have lost her eye."

Mary Grace fought the shudder. It hurt far too much to jar her head, even involuntarily.

"But she'll be all right." She heard the desperation in her husband's voice.

The long pause set Mary Grace's heart racing.

"She'll be all right, won't she? Dammit, Doctor, tell me the truth!"

Yes, please do, Mary Grace thought. And hurry. The numbness was already enveloping her once more.

"Your wife fell down a flight of stairs, Officer Winters. She fractured her back at the ninth vertebrae. She lay there unconscious a long time, her spinal cord pinched."

"Oh my God."

Her racing heart went still. It was a moment before she took another breath and that one was forced.

"She has ... there is some paralysis."

Oh my God, Mary Grace thought. Oh my God.

"Is it ... permanent?"

"That's hard to say at this stage. We need to let the swelling subside, then we'll get a spinal cord injury specialist in from Raleigh to take a good look at your wife."

"Can ... can I see her?"

“Only for a few minutes. I’ll just wait here.”

She could hear him shuffle into the hospital room, his cowboy boots rasping against the tile. Then she could smell him, that intense aftershave he’d always worn. Then she could feel his heat as his large body hunkered down.

“Gracie,” he said sorrowfully. “Mary Grace, what have you done to yourself, honey?” His big fingers brushed over the back of her hand, sending chills up the back of her neck. Then he was leaning forward, his lips brushing against her cheek. His mustache tickled her skin as he kissed his way from her cheek to her ear.

Then it came. She’d been waiting, knowing it would come. The knowing never lessened the dread.

“One word,” he breathed into her ear, so low no one would be able to hear. “One word from your idiot mouth and next time I’ll finish the job, I swear t’God.” He nuzzled, his lips seemingly caressing her outer ear. “Understand?”

Mary Grace managed to tilt her pounding head enough to please him and he straightened, his hand passing over her hair, imperceptibly tightening to yank. Nausea rolled through her stomach.

“Oh, Gracie, darlin’. I just can’t stand to see you this way.”

Her body instinctively shrank from his mournful tone, aching with every clench of her muscles.

“That’s all the time you have today, Officer Winters. Why don’t you just go on back to the station and we’ll call you if there’s any change? Or better yet, go on home.”

“I will.” His heavy sigh rent the air. “Where’s the boy?”

Her racing heart jittered to a stop once again.

Robbie. Where was Robbie? A dim memory mocked. Robbie, holding her hand, begging her not to die, begging her to wait for the ambulance. Was that this time or the time before? She struggled against the mind-numbing effects of the medication, needing to know who had her son.

“He’s with the hospital social worker. He found her, you know. That kind of shock can cause a great emotional trauma in a boy his age.”

Rob’s harsh voice carried across the room. He’s standing by the doctor now, she thought. He’s leaving. He’ll be alone with my son. “He’s a strong boy. He’ll survive.”

Mary Grace felt her hands grip the sheet, twist it until her fingers ached. Detached. She felt detached from her own mind. Helpless in her own body. He’ll survive. He has to. Please, Robbie, just hang on ‘till I can get home.

And then life will be different. She would protect herself. She would protect her son. She vowed Rob Winters would never hurt them again. But how?

I’ll find a way.

**Chapter One**

*Douglas Lake, East Tennessee*  
*Present Day*  
*Sunday, March 4*  
*9:30 am ~*

**"God, I hate this part of the job.** How the hell can you possibly eat at a time like this?"

Hutchins looked out at the placid morning calm of Douglas Lake, thought about the body they'd inevitably pull out and the stupidity of the waste. He finished the rest of his doughnut with the even keel of the veteran sheriff he was. "Because I won't feel like eating when they pull out that kid. Might as well not starve." He threw a sympathetic glance at the green face of his newest recruit. "You'll get used to it, boy. Unfortunately, you'll get used to it."

McCoy shook his head. "You'd think they'd know better."

"Kids don't ever 'know better'. You'll get used to that too. Especially when they're on spring break. I expect to pull another couple out of the lake before the whole season's over."

"I suppose I'll need to tell the parents when it's over."

Hutchins shrugged and lit a cigarette. "You started it, boy. You might as well finish it, too. Not

my favorite task, either, but you have to learn to break the bad news."

McCoy focused on the boat slowly pulling the grappling hook across the lake floor. "They're still hoping we'll find him alive somewhere. I swear t'God, Hutch - how can parents hold out hope like that? Those other boys told it clear enough. They were drinkin' and foolin' around and the kid wrecks his jet ski. They watched him sink."

Hutchins dragged on the cigarette, let out the stream of smoke on a sigh. "Kids are stupid. I keep telling you this. But parents -" He shook his gray head. "They hope. They'll hope until you make them identify his body in the morgue."

"Whatever's left of it," McCoy grumbled.

"Hey, Tyler." The words came crackling from McCoy's radio.

"Hey, Wendell," McCoy answered, swallowing the bile that rose at the thought of what Wendell's hook was about to bring up. "Whatcha got?"

"Well, it's no body, that's for damn sure."

Hutchins grabbed the radio. "What're you talkin' about, boy?"

"It's a car, Sheriff."

Hutchins snorted. "There's enough cars down there to fill a used car lot. My great-granny's house is down there, too." All that shit was leftover from the TVA's flooding of the area when they built the dams in the 1930's. Everybody knew that.

"Yeah, all Model T's. This one's newer. Looks like a late eighties Ford. There's a little kid's backpack in the back seat - one of those Mutant Ninja Turtles things. We're bringing it in."

"Damn." Hutchins ground his cigarette under his heel. "If it's not one thing, it's another. Bring it in, then keep looking for the boy."

*Asheville, North Carolina  
Sunday, March 4,  
11:30 pm ~*

**"Motha'fucka'."** The boy gasped. "Sonofabitch."

Rob Winters stared dispassionately at the young boy whose eyes had already begun to roll back in his head. Shame, that. He'd thought the boy would have more spine. At fourteen he himself had been able to take his old man's beatings with his head held high. He applied more pressure to the dark-skinned hand he had trapped in a vise grip. Just a hair more. The boy moaned again, sagging back against the alley wall with enough force to produce an audible crack when his wooly head with its ridiculous braids struck the brick.

"I don't know nothin'. I tol' you that already." The boy sucked in a breath, tried to yank his hand away. "You can let me go. I swear I won't be goin' to no cops. I swear it, man. On my mamma's grave."

Winters's lip curled derisively. "I'd bet a month's worth of your mamma's food stamps that she is very much alive and if you want to stay alive with her, you'll tell me what I want to know." Winters's voice was still low and calm, a striking contrast to the gasping cries coming from the boy's swollen, bloody lips. "Alonzo Jones. Where is he?"

The boy struggled, but Winters held him firmly against the alley wall. He whimpered, but Winters only tightened his bone-crushing grip. Winters leaned close to the boy's head so that his lips

grazed his ear. "Listen, boy and listen real good because I only plan to tell you this once. I need to know where to find Alonzo Jones and you need to keep the use of your hand. If I tighten just a little more, you'll have permanent nerve damage. That'll cause you problems next time you decide to knock off an all-night convenience store."

The boy's eyes grew wide, the whites of his eyes shining bright in the darkness. "I didn't do no store, man. I swear it. Goddammit!" The last came out on a shrill note as Winters tightened his grip another notch.

"You did it all right. We have you on video, boy. You and that gang you run with headed by one Mr. Alonzo Jones. Now you can come along with me to the station and tell us all about stickin' a knife in a sixty-two-year-old unarmed white man or you can tell me where I can find Alonzo Jones. I want him more than I want to see your sorry ass rottin' away in jail."

The boy licked his bloody lip and his eyes went narrow with hate. "You're a cop? Shit, man. I don't need to talk to you. I don't need to talk to nobody but my lawyer. Police brutality. I know you white cops like to beat on us black folk." He leaned back against the wall, sweat beading on his upper lip as he tried to pull his hand free. "Yo' ass is gonna roast."

Winters smiled and took pleasure watching the hate in the boy's eyes swing back to fear. He squeezed. Hard. And cocked his head to be able to hear the sound of popping cartilage over the boy's shrieks.

"Motha'fuckin' sonofabitch!"

"Some vocabulary that sainted mother of yours lets you keep. Jones. Now."

The boy sagged again, his knees hitting the asphalt. "With his woman."

Winters released the boy's hand and clamped his fingers around his dirty, scrawny neck, pushing him face forward into the street as the boy cradled his injured hand in his good one. "Her name?"

"I don't --" A strangled cry of pain cut off his pathetic denial. Winters lifted his thumb from the boy's larynx. "Chaniqua," he gasped.

Winters's boot connected with the boy's hip. The boy rolled into a ball, crying like a baby. "Last name, you worthless --," he kicked again, the tip of his boot catching the boy in the gut and flipping him to his back, "spineless, piece of shit."

A faint moan floated on the air. "Pierce. Chaniqua Pierce. Cuts ... hair. Down ...town."

Winters grimaced as the boy lost the contents of his stomach all over Winters's boots. "You disgusting--" Rage rose to mix with the disgust and he kicked the boy again. And again. And again. "Now you know how that old man felt curled up in a ball on his own floor dying in a pool of his own blood." He wiped a boot on the boy's dirty pants, transferring most of the filth where it belonged. Then he aimed and kicked again, savagely. The boy's scrawny body hit the brick wall and his eyes rolled backwards, blood flowing steadily from the corner of his mouth. A final kick to his head finished the job and the boy shuddered out his last breath.

Winters drew a deep breath and wiped his other dirty boot on the boy's shirt.

One less punk on the streets. He considered it a job well done. He peeled the thin latex gloves from his hands and tossed them in the third dumpster he passed. One could never be too careful with

street punks. Nasty diseases all over the damn street.

By the time he'd walked the quarter mile to his parked truck he'd pulled the cotton from the gap between his cheeks and molars, the false overbite from his upper palate, and the gray wig from his head. Nobody could tie him to that punk even if anyone cared enough to call the police. He cast a brief look up and down the street before carefully putting his wig away. He changed his boots, stowing the fouled pair in the back with a frown. They were his best ones. Then he shrugged. Sue Ann would clean them later. He swung up into the driver's seat, ten feet tall and bulletproof.

It was time to pay a visit to Miz Chaniqua Pierce.

He'd driven less than five minutes when his pager buzzed against his hip. He glanced at the number from the corner of his eye while keeping his gaze pinned to the lowlifes that skulked about in the hours most decent people were in their beds. Dammit to hell. Couldn't that bitch leave him alone for five minutes? He pulled his phone from his pocket with a snarl, punched in her number.

"Ross."

Winters ground his teeth. Ross, as in Lieutenant. As in Q-U-O-T-A, written in big black letters. As in the bitch that stole the job that should have been his.

He injected as much oozing sincerity into his voice as he could muster on a semi-full stomach. "Winters. What's up?"

"The same thing that was up the last six times I paged you in the past hour. What seems to be more important than returning my calls, Detective?"

Winters drew a breath. She'd written him up for

insubordination once already. Insubordination. The very thought made his stomach burn as rage ate at him. He'd been "warned". Warned, goddammit, by some incompetent bitch with an ass the size of South Carolina. He managed to control his tone, barely. "I was with an informant. Lieutenant."

"Did you find Jones?"

"No, but I know where he is."

"Care to share it with me?"

So she could send in one of her handpicked ass-sucking favorites to make the bust? No fucking way. "I'd prefer to wait until I'm certain."

"I guess you would. I prefer you tell me now."

Bitch. "He's with his girlfriend."

There was a short, tight silence on the other end. Small victory, he thought. "Does this girlfriend have a name, Detective? And please don't play games with me again. I want answers and I want them now."

Winters bit down so hard his teeth hurt. "Her name is Chaniqua Priest." Or Pierce. The kid was gurgling there towards the end. He could have said Priest.

"You have a location?"

"Just downtown."

"Helpful, Detective. Keep your informant available in case we have more questions."

Winters swallowed the chuckle. His informant was now answering questions at the business end of a fiery pitchfork. "Yes, sir," he said, knowing the "sir" pissed her off more than anything else, but technically was not something she could get him on. "Did you have a particular reason for paging me, Lieutenant Ross?"

"Yeah. You got a call from a Sheriff Hutchins,

Sevier County, Tennessee. He says it's urgent you call him." She rattled off the number and he memorized it instantly. He had a good memory for numbers and names. He'd been through Sevier County on his way to Gatlinburg, but he'd never heard of Hutchins.

Winters pulled into the first convenience store parking lot he saw and punched in Hutchins' number. The sheriff was available, his assistant told him, if he'd please hold. Winters grumbled as he waited. This had better be important, he thought. He was using up cell phone minutes waiting on this yahoo. Finally the illustrious sheriff came to the phone, huffing and puffing.

"Sorry to keep you waiting so long, Officer Winters," he said and Winters could hear the creaking of a chair in the background as the sheriff apparently sat down.

"It's Detective Winters," he corrected sharply. Didn't Ross tell him that? Bitch.

"Oh, sorry. Your lieutenant told me you'd been promoted. My brain's a little fried at the moment. We've been draggin' Douglas Lake all day lookin' for an accident victim and I just had the pleasure of tellin' his parents."

"That's a shame," Winters offered, rolling his eyes.

"But what does that have to do with you, huh? Listen, Winters, when we were dragging the lake we came up with something else. I thought you should know before the bureaucrats get involved."

Winters listened and suddenly Lieutenant Ross and Alonzo Jones were the last things on his mind.

They'd found his car. Seven years of helpless fury came rushing back with the force of a freight train. They'd found his car, but his boy was not

inside.

Neither was his wife.

**Chapter Two**

*Chicago*  
*Monday, March 5*  
*7 am ~*

**"So what's the occasion?"**

Caroline jerked, sending her mascara wand skittering up her forehead, leaving a thick black line in its wake. She turned her head deliberately, mouth bent down in a frown, eyes narrowed. She hated the nervous reaction time had failed to diminish. Made her feel like a stranger in her own skin. She drew a breath and slid the wand back into the mascara tube.

"You know not to do that."

Dana leaned against the bedroom doorjamb, arms loosely crossed, one eyebrow elevated. "Sorry." One corner of her mouth turned up. "You look like a lopsided raccoon."

Caroline blew out a sigh as she surveyed her ruined makeup in the mirror. "I don't need this today, Dana. I'm stressed enough without you sneaking up behind me." She fumbled in her drawer for a tube of eye makeup remover.

Dana stiffened. "I didn't sneak. I called your name when I came in the apartment and talked to Tom for five minutes before I came back here. You just weren't listening. Oh, for crying out loud, Caro. You don't have to make such a production about it. Just wipe it off."

Caroline closed one eye and scrubbed. "I can't. It's waterproof."

"I hate that waterproof stuff." Dana leaned over Caroline's dresser and picked up the tube of mascara. "Since when did you start using waterproof mascara?"

Caroline took the tube from her hand and focused on re-doing the job. "Since Eli died."

Dana's face fell. "I'm sorry, Caroline. I didn't think."

Caroline closed the drawer with a snap. "It's okay. You'd think I'd be over it by now, but I can't seem to get through a day without at least a sniffle or two."

"It's only been two months, honey."

"Two months and twelve days." Eli Bradford had been her teacher, her boss, her friend. Besides Dana and Tom, Eli had been the only other person in the world to know her deepest secret. Her throat tightened in the now-familiar response to any memory of the man who'd been the closest thing to a father she'd ever had. Now he was gone and she missed him more than she thought possible. She made herself think of something else. "Well, now that you've invaded my space, how do I look?"

Dana pursed her lips and tipped her auburn head to one side, playing along with Caroline's need to change the subject. "Your roots are showing. You need a touch-up."

Caroline leaned forward to stare at the top of her head. Sure enough, a thin ribbon of gold ran along the part in her hair in stark contrast with the coffee brown waves. "Darn it. I just did my roots two weeks ago."

"I told you not to choose such a dark color. But did you listen to me? Nooooo."

"Smartass. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time." Quickly she braided it back, hiding most of the telltale gold.

Dana shook her head. "It's too dark. It's always been too dark. You should lighten it."

"Da-na." It was a sigh of exasperation Caroline didn't even try to hide.

"Caro-line." Dana mimicked her tone, then sobered. "After all this time you still think you need to hide behind that hair color?"

"Better safe than sorry." It was her stock response.

"How true," Dana murmured, her eyes downcast for just a moment. She looked back up, still serious. "You could lighten it just a little. The contrast makes your face seem so pale. Especially this time of year, coming out of the winter."

"Thanks a lot."

Dana grinned and the atmosphere in the room suddenly brightened. "Don't mention it. But I do like the sweater. The blue matches your eyes."

"Too little, too late, my friend. And I do use that term loosely." It was the farthest thing from the truth and they both knew it. Dana's unique combination of laughter and sobriety had pulled Caroline through many a dark day. They were best friends. And having gone so many years so totally alone, Caroline Stewart was fully aware of the value of a best friend like Dana Dupinsky. They didn't come any better, smarter or more loyal. Caroline slid her feet into a pair of low-heeled pumps. "Can you tell these are \$10.99 Payless specials?"

Dana squinted, looking down at Caroline's feet. "No. Why all the fuss this morning? And to bring us full circle - what's the occasion?"

"My new boss starts today. I just want to make a good impression." She turned sideways in the mirror, inspecting the final package. "I want to look professional without overdoing it." She peered more closely. "Do you think these earrings are too Saturday night?"

Dana snorted. "Those earrings are the closest you've ever come to a Saturday night, girl."

"Don't nag me on my love-life now. Just answer the question."

"You don't have a love-life, Caroline. And they're fine. Don't worry. You look wonderful. You are a terrific secretary. Your new boss will be impressed."

Caroline sighed. "I hope so. I got so used to working for Eli. I knew what he wanted before he even asked for it. I really need to keep this job, just until graduation." After graduation, she'd be off to law school, the day-to-day worries of managing the Carrington College history office a thing of the past.

"You'll be fine."

Caroline glared mildly from the corner of her eye. "You always say that."

"I'm always right."

Caroline smiled. "You're such a fathead."

"But I'm a right fathead."

"That you are." She stepped closer to the mirror and pushed the turtleneck collar of her sweater aside, inspecting the side of her neck.

"You can't see them," Dana said softly. "Stop worrying."

Caroline let her collar spring back into place and straightened her spine. "Then I'm ready to meet Dr. Maximillian Alexander Hunter."

Dana laughed. "That's his name? He sounds

like he should be a four-hundred year old history professor."

"He is a history professor."

"My point exactly."

Caroline shrugged. "He's probably no older than Eli was. As long as I don't have to work for Monika Shaw, Hunter could be a four-hundred-year-old stuffed kangaroo and I'd still be a happy woman."

She started for the kitchen, Dana at her heels. "How's old Shaw-claw taking it?"

Caroline snickered, then her face went serious as she saw Tom sitting at the tiny dinette eating Cheerios. He must go through a box a day. At fourteen he was growing more and more, truly eating her out of house and home. She put on her "mom" voice. "You must stop calling her Shaw-claw, Dana."

"Give it a rest, Mom," Tom said, his spoon pausing mid-lift. "I saw you laughing."

"Doh!" Caroline ruffled his wiry blond hair. Cut short in a crewcut it felt like a scrub brush, tickling her palm. "Busted. You need to hurry or you'll --"

"Miss the bus," Tom finished. He shoveled another four spoonfuls in his mouth before grabbing his backpack. "Gotta go. I got practice after school, Mom. I won't be home until five."

"Be --"

"Careful," he finished with a saucy grin. "You too. Good luck with Hunter today." His smile faltered. "And be careful with Shaw, okay?"

Caroline reached up to cup his cheek. At six-one Tom's cheek was almost out of her reach. "I will. I told you not to worry. Shaw can't hurt us. She's mean and vindictive, but it's more likely I'll win the Nobel peace prize than that Shaw will take the time to dig up our family secrets. Don't worry,

honey. Please."

Tom frowned, his blue eyes stormy with a mixture of fear and anger. "Don't you ever worry at all?"

Caroline studied his face, a replica of her own. Fate had been kind to them that way. If he'd looked like him, he would have been so much more difficult to hide. "Yes, I worry," she replied honestly. They'd been through so much together he deserved nothing less than the truth. "Sometimes I get through a day without worrying he's going to jump out from behind some bush and drag me back, but those days are few and far between. There are days I wish we could go back and hide at Hanover House, but I know Dana would kick our butts out on the street." She saw the glimmer of a smile in his eyes and knew humor had taken the edge off his fear, as usual.

Dana moved to Tom's side and slung her arm around his shoulders. "I would. I'm a scary witch that way."

Tom managed a weak grin. "Yeah, I remember. 'Eat your peas'," he mimicked. "'Do your homework. No Nintendo after eight-thirty.' Man, was I glad to move out of that prison."

He hadn't been. Caroline remembered the day they left the shelter of Hanover House for the big, bad world of downtown Chicago, with nothing more than a suitcase filled with clothing donated by others more fortunate. She remembered his silent tears, the expression of abject terror on his small face, the way his eyes had darted back and forth looking. Always looking. But he'd obeyed. Slid his little hand in hers and walked out without a single look back. He'd come a long way in seven years. They both had.

"Tom, honey." Caroline shook her head, looking for the words. "I'm afraid still. But I'm not terrified anymore. He could find us, that's true. He could jump out from behind any bush and try to drag us back to North Carolina." It wasn't "home" anymore, for either of them. It was always "him", never "father" or "husband". They never, ever used the names they'd left behind. They were as vigilant about those little things now as they'd been seven years before. Attention to those little things had kept them safe.

And it was way, way better to be safe than sorry. Sorry equaled dead.

Caroline stood a little straighter. "But we're stronger now, both of us. We have weapons at our disposal that we didn't have back then."

Dana squeezed Tom's shoulders hard. "Yeah, like me."

Caroline smiled. "And she's a scary one, don't forget. But there's more. I have an education now. I know my rights." She hesitated. "And I know how to run."

Tom squared his jaw. "I don't want to run again."

"And we probably never will again. But if he comes—"

"If he comes, I won't leave you."

Caroline sighed, then shrugged. "Honey, we've discussed this a thousand times."

"I won't run," he asserted. "I won't leave you alone." Suddenly he looked so much older than fourteen. Her son was fast on his way to becoming a man, she realized. And she knew what she needed to say, even if the words stuck in her throat.

"All right. If that day ever comes, we stick together." She reached up again to touch his face.

"But for today, don't worry. And same goes for tomorrow and the next day."

"One day at a time," he murmured, as if to himself.

"You taught him well, Caro."

Caroline looked from her son to her best friend. They had taught him well. Together, she and Dana. And stick together or not, Tom was equipped to survive, whatever happened. She'd surrounded him with friends who would care for him in an instant should anything happen to her. It was a comforting assurance.

"It's time for school. Have a good day, honey."

"I'll try." He hesitated, then dipped down to peck her cheek. "Bye."

The door slammed on his way out and the little apartment trembled. Caroline stood still for a moment, then shook herself back into motion. "Want some coffee?"

"No. I had some already. What brought all that on?"

"Oh, Tom's worried that Shaw will exact revenge against me because I was on the committee that recommended Hunter to take Eli's position as Department Chair."

"She had her eye on it, huh?"

"From day one. I think she was counting the days until Eli retired. And then when he had that heart attack ... " She cleared her throat before her voice could break. Forced her hands to steady as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "You should have seen her at Eli's funeral."

"I did." Dana retrieved a carton of half-and-half from the refrigerator and added some to Caroline's cup. "She was ..." She held the carton by its bottom and turned it toward the overhead light.

"Like the proverbial cat in cream."

"Well, I'm so glad I don't have to work for her. Hunter would have to be one step up from Jack the Ripper to make me ... dislike him as much as I ...dislike Monika Shaw."

"Dislike?" Dana stopped pouring Cheerios in a bowl to look over her shoulder with a grin. "Such strong words from the lady this morning."

Caroline grinned back. "Okay, I hate her. She's a mean bitch. Satisfied now?"

Dana's husky chuckle filled the little kitchen. "I am. Nothing less than the truth will do."

Caroline looked pointedly at Dana's full cereal bowl. "I thought you didn't want breakfast."

"No, I said I didn't want coffee. I'm starving to death. My cupboards are bare."

"Da-na." Caroline sighed. They sat down at the table.

"What?"

"You gave it all to the kids, didn't you." It wasn't even a question.

Dana lifted her chin defensively. "Yes, I did." Then her shoulders sagged. "We got this family in yesterday. From Toledo. They were starving, Caro, literally. Mom was so bruised you couldn't even see what shape her face was supposed to be. Her back ..." She shuddered. "It still gets to me, even after all this time."

"That's because you're human. If you weren't, you wouldn't be nearly as good at what you do."

And what Dana did, Caroline reflected, was to save lives. Literally. Dana managed Hanover House, a shelter for abused women and their children. It offered a safe place to stay, medical attention for those who needed it -- and most quite certainly needed it. But best of all, Hanover House

offered hope and the promise of a new start. And the means to make that start. Caroline wasn't sure where Dana got the new social security cards and birth certificates and she'd never asked. She'd been so grateful to get a birth certificate with her own son's new name that she'd cried. She remembered the moment as if it were yesterday instead of seven years before. Tom Stewart. Live birth at Rush Memorial in Chicago, Illinois. Father unknown. The last name matched the birth certificate she'd ... borrowed for herself. Caroline Stewart. There were even some days she could go an hour or two without remembering who she really was. Where she really had come from. That Mary Grace Winters was just a bad nightmare. That Mary Grace was gone.

Caroline Stewart held her future. And Caroline intended to make the most of it.

"Caroline?" Dana tapped her spoon against the bowl.

Caroline sighed. "Just remembering my own first experience with Hanover House." She reached across the table and squeezed Dana's hand, studied the dark circles under her friend's brown eyes she hadn't noticed before. "And with you. How about you, Dana. Are you okay? You look so tired."

"I'll be fine with a few hours' sleep. I came over straight from the House. One of the new kids from Toledo has strep, and --"

"And you spent the night taking care of him."

"He's only three years old. And so damn scared." Dana's brown eyes filled, uncharacteristically. "Dammit, Caroline. That baby had scars. Worse than his mother's. I held him because he couldn't lie down on the bed. His back was one big black bruise. He screamed every time I touched him. His

father..." The tears spilled over and down her cheeks. "His father burned him with cigarettes. On his feet, dammit." She choked on a sob, pushed the half-eaten bowl of cereal away.

Caroline squeezed Dana's fisted hand tighter with one hand, the other creeping up to the side of her neck to touch her own scars. Makeup and high collars covered them so that they weren't visible to anyone's eyes but her own. In her own mind's eye, she saw them as they'd been when they were fresh, still felt the paralyzing fear, still smelled the acrid odor of burning flesh.

"The scars on his feet will heal, Dana. You need to focus on helping them heal the scars on the inside."

Dana shook her head. "I don't know if I can do this anymore, Caroline. I'm so tired."

Caroline bit back a frown. Dana never got tired. She'd never once spoken of giving up. Even when funding was non-existent and she had to give herself paycut after paycut, even when there were more women and children than beds. Even when the women themselves gave up. Dana was always strong. But not today. I suppose everyone has her limit, Caroline thought. Any words of inspiration were stowed for another day.

"Then go to sleep, honey. Things will look better when you're rested. Use my bed. Help yourself to anything here, although my own cupboards are a bit bare." She pressed a paper napkin in Dana's hand. "Hurricane Tom and his friends descended last night after their basketball game. What didn't move, they ate. I think I may even be missing a fork and three spoons. I hope they don't set off the metal detectors at the school."

Dana managed a small chuckle and dried her

eyes. "Thanks, but I can't. I've got to get back and check on Cody."

"The little boy? I can go by on my lunch hour, Dana. I'll check on him. If he needs a doctor, I'll call Dr. Lee." Dr. Lee was a retired pediatrician who volunteered his time to the shelter. When Dana opened her mouth to refuse, Caroline held up a warning finger. "Don't even think of saying no. If you push yourself, you'll get strep, then you'll have Dr. Lee sticking one of those ahh things down your throat."

Dana's shoulders sagged wearily. "You're right. I think I will stay here for a few hours. Will you see Evie today?"

"Probably. She works this afternoon in the office." Evie was their latest joint project, a teen runaway grown into legal age. Evie roomed with Dana while she took classes at Carrington College where she assisted Caroline in the history department's office.

"Then tell her I'm okay. She gets worried when I don't come home."

"I will. Now I need to go to work. I certainly don't want to keep Dr. Maximillian Hunter waiting on his very first day."