

Chapter 1

A heavy pulse throbbed beneath the scar he carried high on the right side of his chest. The deep, five-inch long mark served as a fundamental reminder of where, at the age of seventeen, he'd taken a blade from one of their brethren. In that same attack he'd lost the father he all but worshiped. Now, the memento of that vicious battle served as a warning. It would start with a light tingle, more of a tickle really. Then, as the enemy closed in, the tickle became a pulse, then a deep, aching throb.

The darkness was as thick and heavy as the sultry night air. He knew they were there slithering around in the shadows. The stench of them hovered around him like a tangible thing clawing with razor sharp talons at his senses. The rotting garbage and human waste overflowing the rusted green dumpster did nothing to hinder the fetid stink of death they carried with them.

The languid half-moon hung high in the cloudless black sky casting its silvery light over those who stood to face the evil. His team spanned the entrance of the alleyway peering into the dense black. All faces a mask of determination. No sign of fear or dread crept into a single pair of eyes, eyes already accustomed to the dark. They were a team of *linea di sangue uccisore di vampiri*—bloodline slayers of the vampires—trained from the cradle to end that which preyed on the humans who refused to believe vampires were real and not a figment of Hollywood's twisted, macabre imagination.

But the vampires were as real as the people they'd once been when their hearts beat. They slunk among the shadows. They hid. They watched as the uccisore watched.

Team Nightly: seven elite warriors all armed with steel swords, wooden stakes and enhanced senses of l'uccisore. The team stood in silent sentry . . . watching . . . waiting. The anticipation of the coming battle set their blood humming and their hearts pounding heavily in their chests.

Chuck, Simon, and Sheila held to their leader's right flank as Michael, Gabe, and Tony held to his left waiting for Chase Nightly, team leader, to give them the order to attack. Their purpose, their spirits were as one as Chase took the first step, slowly moving into the darkness with only one objective: to end the vampires.

With a barely perceptible nod the silent command was given. A single step behind their leader, swords held at the ready, the team was dressed in black to blend with the night.

Chase saw the red eyes blazing at him through the shadows like burning embers; sharp fangs glistened wetly in the slanted beam of moonlight. Without warning and with a speed endemic to the undead two of them flew at Chase. With the deadly accurate speed of a blood-line uccisore, he raised his sword to strike but the vampire sprang high into the air above him, slipping past Chase's blade and out of his reach. Like striking lightning, the vamp came at him again.

Behind him, Chase heard the clashing swords and grunts from landed blows of his team as they took up the battle around him.

One vampire came from his left as another came from his right, with the practiced precision of a well-choreographed dance he took the first one's head. In less than a heartbeat the vampire exploded into a cloud of gray ash, drifting to the ground to mingle with dirt and refuse. He took the head of the second before the dust of the first had settled.

"Not as fast as you should have been, were you?" he quipped.

A trickle of sweat slid down Chase's brow to drip into a pair of clear, green eyes. He swiped the back of his left hand across his forehead, spinning around simultaneously to block with his right arm a lethal fist as it swung at Chase's head. The pain sang through muscle and bone to his shoulder, numbing his whole arm and nearly causing him to release his grip on his sword.

The hot Savannah night air was still, not a whisper of a breeze could be felt as the living battled the walking dead. The sweat soaked through the material of the uccisori clothing plastering it to their powerful bodies. The intense heat wasn't a problem for those they fought: the dead did not perspire.

Chase kept his mind and concentration on the battle at hand but never lost sight of his team. He watched as Gabe swung his sword with the enthusiasm of a boy playing a favorite video game only three feet away.

With a hearty laugh and a sarcastic, "You fight like a girl," to his opponent, Gabe dodged to the left, barely evading the bunched fist. If the blow had landed it could very well have taken off Gabe's head.

The vamps didn't usually use man made weapons, preferring to rip their opponent apart with fangs and fists. But should a weapon come to hand, they had no compunction about using it. Their only thought was to feed their insatiable hunger and to do what their king ordered.

One compulsion was as strong as the other.

“Don’t get cocky,” Chase called out. “Sheila could whip your ass, and you know it.” He slashed his sword at another vampire severing its hand but doing little to slow it down. The fallen appendage turned to ash before it hit the ground.

“Hey, now that would be an ass kicking I could get into,” Gabe said with another laugh as he took the head off a vamp. Gabe’s golden blond hair took on a snowy sheen in the moonlight as he dodged and parried with another vampire. His antics were ignored by those he fought.

“You’re still an arrogant ass, Gabe,” Sheila said between thrusting her sword and letting a stake fly. “And kicking yours wouldn’t be as much fun for you as it would be for me.”

When her stake met its mark and a vamp exploded into dust, Sheila let out a victorious laugh of her own.

“You would be in too much pain when I tie a knot in your dick and stake your balls to your ass,” she promised. She dropped low to the ground knees bent, then swung her right leg to catch another vampire behind the knee bringing him to the ground with a hard thump. Before the vampire could regain his feet she had another stake in her hand from the supply she had looped in her thick leather belt, and plunged it into its chest. Barely a second later and covered in vamp dust she bounded to her feet to take on two more that advanced on her.

The sound of Gabe’s laughter echoed in the dark alley, sending a chill sprinting up Chase’s spine.

“Yeah, promises, promises. Once you touched this body you know my animal magnetism would send you into such a sexual frenzy you would be begging me for it,” Gabe taunted.

He took the head off a vampire with his sword as he kicked his left foot behind him, catching the one coming at him in the solar plexus and knocking him back only a step. That was enough time for Gabe to spin on his right foot and ram the lethal point of a wooden stake into the heart of his opponent.

“Ha! Thought you could surprise me from behind, did you?”

“You’re an animal alright, Gabe, a flipping jackass.” The banter between them fueled their energy, improving their concentration and sharpening their skills. It was an old battle between Gabe and Sheila, begun the moment Sheila and her brother Michael joined the team six years before. Gabe had fallen in love at first sight; Sheila pretended not to be affected by him.

Chase ignored them as he often did. The others fought beside them, occasionally commenting on the verbal sparring between Gabe and Sheila. Grunts and curses bounced off the tall brick façade that bordered the battleground. The war raged on, growing in intensity.

The only respite from the oppressive heat was the breeze of a missed blow of fang or fist. Slicing and hacking with a blood-born skill that had been honed to lethal with the lifelong training of the Uccisore, the battle raged.

Sweat glistened on Chase's face and dampened the black silk shirt he wore. It stung his eyes and blurred his vision as he fought with not only the power of his steely muscles but with senses enhanced by his bloodline.

He felt one coming from behind him and fell to one knee as he spun around loosing a stake to fly at his attacker, hitting its mark squarely in the center of the chest. The dust from its ending salted over Chase as the pain-filled screech of its demise died away.

He jumped to his feet, turning to defend himself from yet another vampire when he saw two more float down from above him as though they were drifting on unseen wings.

The more the team ended, the more it seemed there were. His team was quickly becoming outnumbered as swords clashed—one or two of the vamps came armed, apparently with more than just their bloodlust, damn that was scary—and stakes flew.

The ashy dust covered them all, giving them a ghostly hue in the light of the waning moon. From the corner of his eye, Chase caught sight of Gabe as he battled two vamps that had succeeded in separating him from the rest of the team. Chase took a running leap, bounced off the tips of his toes as though his legs were made of tightly coiled springs, did a front flip over the heads of the two vampires and landed squarely on his feet; stake in one hand, sword in the other, beside Gabe.

“Hey Boss,” Gabe said with a mile wide grin on his handsome face. “How's it going?”

“Great, buddy, how 'bout you?”

“Glad you could join the party,” Gabe laughed as the battle-wit between he and Chase rang out between the rings of metal on metal. It was so like Gabe to find humor in the fact that he was outnumbered.

Even in a battle to the death, Gabe Collins could find something to mock and laugh about. As a lanky, lust filled teen, Gabe was the class clown and now at the age of thirty-one, he'd yet to outgrow the trait. It was an essential part of Gabe's character, to show everyone how to enjoy life and all its foibles, Chase didn't think the guy would ever change. And that was a good thing. As uccisore, one had to take his pleasure where he found it.

With a flash of speed that defied the eye, Gabe shoved the stake held in his left hand into the chest of one of the vampires. One of his most charming lopsided grins spread across his face as it burst into a cloud of dust. Three more came at them as the battle raged on.

Sharp curses, grunts of pain as strikes landed, hysterical laughter as vampires landed blows, knocking one or the other of the team off their feet. They may be undead, Chase thought at the grating sound they made, but they still had a malevolent sense of humor when it came to getting the best of Puccisore.

Sheila's blood-curdling battle cry—designed to send fear into the hearts of her enemies—as she ended another vampire sent a tickle of thrill through Chase's system and a pride filled smile to his face. She was the only woman on his team and could best any man of them when her warrior blood was up. Chase often thought she might be a reincarnate of an Amazon warrior of legend. Though if he ever made mention of that to Sheila, she would make it a point to prove him right.

She was a classic overachiever and she would somehow prove lineage to the greatest Amazon warrior in history: Aello; the warrior who took on Hercules. Or maybe even Hippolyte herself. Chase thought it best to keep his opinion to himself in that area just to keep the rest of his team safe from Sheila's need to prove who was the better fighter.

Chase battled two more that soon became three as they backed him toward the dirty, cracked brick of one of the buildings that formed the narrow spit of asphalt and gravel. The dark green dumpster to his right blocked his escape in that direction, the flies buzzing around the decaying refuse went about their fly business, happily ignoring the war that waged in the human realm.

The battle was hard and vicious and he and his team were beginning to tire as they continued on. The vamps were trying to separate Chase from his team. He couldn't let them succeed for it would be a fatal error on his part. He spun around and with the grace and agility of a ballet dancer, he set his left foot against the wall then sprang his right foot up to walk the wall like a biped spider for several steps before twisting his body and bending his knees to push off the wall. With a flip that would make any Hollywood stuntman drop his jaw in admiration, Chase flew over the three vamps' heads.

In one smooth motion he let his sword slice cleanly through the neck of one as he pushed the stake in his other hand into the back of another, cleaving its dead heart.

Chase turned to face the third in time to see a vampire drift from above to land on Gabe's back and, with indescribable zeal, sink its fangs into his shoulder. Ripping out a mouthful of

flesh and muscle from shoulder and neck the vampire gleefully ravaged Gabe. Blood spurted from severed arteries with each beat of his heart. Shock, agony and fear flashed across Gabe's features.

"Gabe!" Chase roared as he watched his best friend being torn at, and drank. Time diminished to a crippled snail's pace. In slow motion, Gabe slid to his knees and fell backward, his legs bent beneath him as he grabbed for his masticated shoulder and neck.

Chase was frozen in place as the vamp on Gabe never let go as it slurped and sucked the blood from his friend's spewing vein. The scent of fresh blood had many of the vampires deserting the battle to feast on the wounded man. They fell on Gabe like sharks in a feeding frenzy as Gabe's heart pumped out a banquet for the vampire horde.

Finally Chase bellowed out his rage in a war cry that would stop any man's heart, as he lifted his sword and swung it like an automaton. Dust erupted and vamps disintegrated as Chase carved his way through the undead that continued to fight.

It took only seconds for the rest of the team to take advantage of the vampires' distraction and end most of them. Only a few escaped into the shadows, like the vermin they were. Much as the team wanted to end them all, Gabe's injuries kept them close at hand to protect their fallen brother.

Chase's chest heaved as he tried to suck in the heavy, humid, air. The muscles in his arms felt like overcooked pasta from the fierce abuse he'd put them under.

Letting his sword arm fall to his side, the hilt still in his grip, Chase went to the side of his wounded comrade. He fell to his knees beside the best friend he'd ever known. The pain that dug into his flesh as he fell to the hard cement was nothing compare to the ache that pierced his heart. He picked up Gabe's bloodied hand, held it close to his chest as any brother would do.

"Hey, Boss." Gabe's voice was weak and gurgled as blood flooded his torn throat, seeping through his blue tinged lips. "Sorry . . . about this. I let . . . the bastard take . . . me down."

"Aw shit, Gabe," Chase said as he clenched and unclenched Gabe's chilled hand. It was all Chase could do to draw in breath through the tangle of emotions that strangled him. Gabe's blood coated Chase's hand, mixing with the ash and dust of the vampires they ended.

Gabe's mouth worked soundlessly before the words whispered from his lips. Chase had to lean closer to catch them.

"Take care of Sheila, Boss," he said. "Not as tough—God, Boss." He took a ragged breath, "This hurts, Chase. This burns . . . like . . . the fires of hell." He took shallow breaths between the

words as his strength left his body. He drew in a breath then exhaled. Gabe's heartbeat slowed . . . beat again . . . stopped, dying with his unrequited love for Sheila on his lips.

Agony tore at Chase, gripping his heart in a vice. He bit back the curses that he wanted to rage at the world for the loss of such a good soul. He fought back tears that threatened to spill out of him as hard as he'd fought the vampires. Chase lowered to the ground the lifeless hand he'd clasped. His head hung low, his chin resting on his chest, eyes closed in respect for a valiant warrior felled in combat.

"You know what has to be done, Boss," Chuck said as he placed a supporting hand on Chase's shoulder. His Irish brogue was more evident when Chuck was tired or in pain.

The team surrounded the man on his knees beside their fallen brother. Linked by their collective goal as uccisori and by the love they shared for each other.

The ball of regret and guilt in his throat choked him as Chase tried to draw in another breath.

"Yeah, I know what has to be done," he said quietly. He pushed out the air that threatened to back up in his lungs. He needed to be strong for his people. They needed him to stand tall and take control. It wouldn't do for him, as their leader, to lose control now, Chase told himself. It was his duty not only as leader but as his friend to give Gabriel Collins the purity to pass on to the next life that he deserved.

Chase slowly rose to his feet. There would be time for grief later, when he was alone and no one could see his vulnerability. He covered his eyes, smearing more of Gabe's blood over his forehead, and took a deep breath as he tried to settle his mind to what needed to be done.

It was hard to lose a part of the team, any part. But Gabe, whose hand Chase held as he died, was more than that. He was the soul of the team; that part that kept them united in a way that made them what they were and proud to be called uccisori. Gabe kept them all from taking their work—their calling—too seriously and showed them that there was joy to be had even during the darkest of times. He was their light in the darkness, their smile in the face of despair and their bliss in the hopelessness of this infinite war between good and evil.

The muffled sound behind him had Chase looking over his shoulder and into the devastated faces of the rest of the somber group. They'd all lost a friend, he realized as he watched Michael place a comforting hand on his sister's shoulder. Sheila's face was set like stone, showing no emotion.

The shadows in the alley hid what might have shown in her eyes as she reached up and placed her hand over her brother's. She looked down at the body of the man Chase knew she took great pleasure in tormenting at every opportunity.

"It's time Boss. We have to do what needs to be done before sunrise," Simon told him as he stepped up to Chase's side.

Chase gazed up to see the shattered look of grief in Simon's dark chocolate eyes. The moonlight cast a ghostly sheen over his sweat-dampened, mahogany skin.

The man looked like a dark giant resurrected from the depths of hell itself, as he towered over Chase.

"Okay," Chase whispered. "Let's get it done, then." He squared his shoulders and drew in a deep, cleansing breath in preparation for the dismal task of ensuring Gabe's soul was safely headed toward the afterlife.

Chase pulled out the leather-wrapped flask that his father had given to him for his twelfth birthday. It had been handed down through his family for more generations than he could remember, just like the amulet he wore around his neck. A bloodstone of dark green with blood-red spotted through it was set in the center of the purest silver amulet. Engraved centuries ago on the back in Italian script the words *Uccisore del Vampiro, Custode delle anime*—slayer of the vampire, guardian of souls.

He slowly twisted the cap off the flask of holy water as the words that had been seared into his brain throughout his training flooded his thoughts. As he slowly poured the sanctified liquid onto Gabe's wounds he reverently uttered the *Uccisore* prayer of cleansing and safe passage to his new incarnation. The holy water boiled a violent white and a cloud of tainted steam rose up from Gabe's gaping wound.

"Pass from this life into the next, my friend. May this blessed water cleanse the evil that has entered you as you make your journey with purity of heart and soul. May God bless you in your next life as he has blessed us by bringing you into our circle."

When the words settled softly into silence, Chase recapped the flask and placed it back in his pocket.

"Until we meet again, brother," he whispered as he picked up his sword and raised it high over his head. The softest hint of light from the sun cresting the eastern horizon glinted off the steel blade as he brought it down swiftly, severing head from body.

Chapter 2

Chase leaned wearily back against his bedroom door, thankful he hadn't awakened his mother coming in so late, or early depending on your point of view. He'd tried to sneak in quietly, making his way through the dark house and entering his room with nothing more than a whisper of sound as he closed and locked his door. He hung his head and closed his eyes as he pictured the scene he'd just left.

"God *damn it!*" He ground out between locked jaws and gritted teeth. "God damn it to hell and back again. *Gabe.*"

He could still see his friend lying in a pool of blood, his face contorted with agony and begging Chase to take care of Sheila. Chase lifted his hands and rubbed his face hard. The rasp of a night's growth of beard against his rough palms was like sandpaper. Though he had washed the blood from them he could still see it there.

He should have protected Gabe, Chase berated himself. He was team leader and it was his responsibility to make sure his people were protected. He'd let those sons of bitches separate them and now Gabe was dead. He hadn't lost a man since Chase had formed his team . . . fourteen years ago. . . he'd lost his father then.

This time it was his best friend. Who else would he have to lose to these undead parasites? Or worse, if they got hold of someone he cared about and turned them? Would he have the strength to end someone he loved? Thank God his mother had no idea what he did when he left the house in the evenings with his friends.

Chase prayed he'd done the right thing. The battle had lasted longer than normal and the bloodsuckers kept coming. Like an endless army of undead they kept coming; out of nowhere, from every direction.

Where the hell had they all come from?

Then they were gone. Those that hadn't been ended and turned to ash fled just before sunrise.

Had Chase completed the ritual in time? God he hoped so. The sun was just starting to rise as he took Gabe's head off and if it was too late, if he hadn't separated head from body before sunrise . . . no, he couldn't think like that. He did what he had to do. It would be okay. It had to be okay.

His father had trained him to be uccisore from the time he was four years old and started showing a speed and agility not common in one that young. His father had been the best uccisore in the entire southeast; he was a legend.

Chase was seventeen when he watched his father die at the hands of a vampire with a cunning none other had ever shown. Vampires were known to have only one goal: to feed. They didn't care who, where, or how they found their victims. All a vampire cared about was feeding that insatiable thirst.

But that one had set a trap for Chase's father. Waited for him and lured him into that alley. There were two other vampires with him and they'd separated Chase and his father. He remembered the exhilaration of the battle then the concern as he was cornered by one of the vamps while the other two charged his father. Chase remembered taking the head of the one he fought and charging to his father's side to help him.

The vampire that looked to be the leader turned on Chase; he could still feel the tip of the dagger as it pierced his chest. The look of triumph in the glowing red eyes and the sound of his father's terrified voice screaming Chase's name as the blade was twisted and pushed deeper into his chest. He remembered the burning pain and the knowledge that he was about to die while his father looked on helplessly. Then everything went dark.

He'd woken up in the hospital to the sound of his mother softly weeping by his bedside. Somehow Chase had survived the attack, his father hadn't.

He told his mother and the police that they'd been attacked by a gang of four men wearing black leather jackets with strange emblems on the backs, as they left the high school football game where Chase's team had won by a touchdown.

Chase still carried the scar from that day on his skin and on his heart.

When he'd recovered from his injuries, he sought out his father's killer. He never found him but he found out about him. Gordon Ray Charles: self-proclaimed king of the vampires. In life, he'd been a uccisore on Toby Nightly's team. He'd been set upon on his way home from the reception the night Toby and Grace, Chase's mother and father, were married.

Gordon was to be named second in command of the team prior to his death and was a viciously strong uccisore with the uncanny ability to sense future events by examining cause and effect of current circumstances.

The oddest thing to Chase when he'd learned of Gordon Charles's relationship to his father was that Toby had never mentioned Gordon in all of the stories he'd told Chase as he was growing up. The only person Toby mentioned with any regularity was his best friend Harry, whom he'd named Chase after, but had never met. Chase assumed the man died before he was born.

After his father's death, Chase took over as leader of the team. It took a while for him to prove himself as every bit the leader that his father had been even at his tender age. It wasn't long after that, that Chase met Gabriel David Collins, the new kid in school. Gabe's parents had died and he'd moved to Savannah Georgia to live with his uncle, Sam Collins.

The two became fast friends with an instinctive knowledge that each was of uccisore bloodline. Since that time, Chase and Gabe were practically inseparable.

Now, Gabe was dead and it was Chase's fault.

The deep groan rumbled up from his heart into his throat and came out as a low growl. Since leading *Team Nightly*, Chase had kept his people safe, never losing a single one of his team in battle. And for Gabe to be the first was a pain that was next to impossible for Chase to deal with. He was ill-equipped to handle the tumultuous emotions that engulfed him. He kept his soft heart buried beneath a gruff exterior, vicious temper and proficient use of profanity, unless his mother was within hearing distance, of course. His habit of dropping the f-bomb in her presence had been nipped in the bud at a very early age.

Chase pressed his hands against his eyes hoping to hold back the moisture he felt filling them. He bumped the back of his head against the door several times as he tried to regain some semblance of control.

He was not going to cry. He refused to weep like a little girl. He was a man . . . uccisore . . . leader of the strongest team on the entire east coast. He had to be stronger than this.

Men did not cry!

He would deal with the loss and he would avenge his fallen brother.

Chase shoved away from the door and stripped off the bloodied and torn black silk shirt. He let it fall to the floor as he reached down to pull off his left boot.

The heavy leather boot thumped loudly against the wall where it struck after an uncontrollable rage overtook him. The force with which he'd heaved it left a deep imprint and a black smudge on

the creamy beige wall. The boot barely missed the dark wood, floor to ceiling shelf that housed most of his high school and college sports trophies.

“*Shit, shit, shit!*” Chase yelled as he closed his eyes again. The tears won the battle this time and they trailed down his face. He gave up the struggle against them and let the anguish of his deep loss silently consume him.

Several minutes later, still standing in the middle of his bedroom, Chase took in a deep breath. Let it out slowly, then stripped off the rest of his clothes.

He blanked his mind as he picked up the tattered remains of his shirt and stuffed it into a plastic bag to be disposed of in the morning. His black leather pants were beyond repair. A wayward blade had sliced a long line from the hip to the knee so they too went into the bag to be discarded.

He needed a shower, a long, hot one.

Chase stepped into the glass enclosed cubical that took up most of the small, attached bathroom. He set the water temperature so hot it nearly scalded his skin. He stood under the spray as it soaked his black hair, plastering it to his scalp and falling across his brow.

The heat penetrated his body, slowly relaxing each muscle until he felt the tension ease bit by bit. With the concentration of a man searching for the meaning of life, Chase watched the soapy water swirl around his feet and down the drain.

He stood under the pelting water until it ran tepid. When it turned icy he turned off the taps and stepped out of the shower. He grabbed a thick brown towel, passed it over his hair, shoulders, back and arms in careless disregard. He let the damp towel fall onto the turquoise and taupe colored ceramic tiles of the bathroom floor with the fleeting thought that he would get that later, and then made his way back into his bedroom.

He flipped off the light switch, sending the room into total darkness. He made his way by memory to the bed and fell face down. The soft, cool pillow felt like heaven as his eyes closed and sleep hovered at the edges of his brain.

As his mind teetered on the edge between dreams and wakefulness, Chase heard his father’s voice as clear as if he were leaning down speaking into his ear.

“He’ll come for her, son. You must protect her.”

Like a shot, Chase jumped up reaching for the bedside lamp. The sudden light caused him to squint and blink several times as he searched the room with his eyes for the phantom voice.

No one was there. But Chase *had* heard his father’s ominous warning. The scent of Old Spice hung in the air, tickling Chase’s memories.

It was what his father had always worn as far back as he could remember.

Chapter 3

“Morning, Mama,” Chase’s voice was raspy from lack of use, no sleep and desperate weariness. Her back had been to him when he’d entered the kitchen and when he’d spoken to her, she’d fumbled and nearly dropped a carton of eggs. She caught the cardboard carton before the contents fell to the floor. The aroma of fresh coffee and the desperate need for a strong infusion of caffeine had his vision focusing on the Bunn coffee pot sitting on the counter next to the microwave oven.

“Oh Baby, you scared me,” Grace said using the endearment she’d used since he was a newborn.

“You okay?” Chase asked, as he stepped past her to get to the coffee pot. He grabbed his favorite mug—dark burgundy with the USC Gamecocks emblem emblazoned across the front—and poured God’s most ingenious creation: coffee, into it.

He breathed a soft sigh savoring the jolt it sent through his brain, before taking a second sip. He peered over the rim of his cup at his mother’s back as she continued, seemingly oblivious, to prepare the morning meal. It was the most important meal of the day Chase remembered her reciting more times than he could count.

“I’m fine, you just startled me. I wasn’t expecting you to be down so soon. I didn’t think you’d been up long, that’s all.” She wore a bright, sunny smile when she turned from her chores to face him.

“Sit down, Chase. The biscuits are just about done and it will only be a minute for your eggs,” she said as she handed him a small glass of orange juice. “Here, drink your juice.”

She patted his face with a soft caress before turning back around to see to the rest of the meal.

Chase smiled at his mother and shook his head as he made his way to his seat at the table. It had already been set with placemat, silverware and matching linen napkin. A woman of tradition, Chase thought as he grinned at his mother. She’d always insisted on things being done properly,

“Just because it’s only the two of us doesn’t mean we should let ourselves fall into laziness. After all, proper manners are always appropriate,” his mother had chided him the one and only time Chase had suggested they dispense with the formalities at the breakfast table.

“So, Chase, did you have a good time last night? What all did you do?” she asked as she turned to him.

He shrugged his linebacker shoulders as he lifted his cup to his lips again. Took a sip then set the cup down.

“Not much really. Met up with some friends at The Blue Mermaid, had a few beers. Ran into Sheila and she and I had dinner and went to a movie.”

He picked up the morning newspaper and scanned the headlines. *Was it too soon for Gabe’s death to be reported yet?*

“Oh, that’s nice, sweetheart. I really like Sheila.” She placed a plate loaded with eggs, grits and bacon on the placemat in front of him. As she set the basket of steaming biscuits next to his plate she continued on, “Even though she’s a Yankee, I really like her. You make such a lovely couple.”

With a bright smile she added, “Her brother is nice too.”

Chase chuckled at his mother’s obvious disdain of those of the northern persuasion.

“Yeah, I like them too, Mama,” he said with a wan smile as he began to apply himself to the feast set before him. He needed fuel, as much as he needed the caffeine. He’d burned a lot of energy last night and his father’s warning kept Chase from getting even a few minutes of sleep.

“You should invite Sheila over for dinner sometime,” Grace said as she settled herself in her seat across the table from him and daintily nibbled at the corner of a biscuit.

“Sure. I’ll do that,” he said but never took his eyes off his plate of food as he shoveled another forkful into his mouth. He felt his mother’s gaze as she watched him eat

“I think you two should see a lot more of each other, Chase. She would make a wonderful wife for you and it’s time you thought about settling down and having children of your own. You are so good with your students. You would be such a wonderful father.”

She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin then placed it back in her lap.

It was an old argument between them and one that Chase was getting sick and tired of repeating.

“Don’t start, Mama,” Chase’s words came out sounding like a weary sigh. “You know how I feel about that. I’m not ready for a wife and kids.”

“Chase, never mind, let’s change the subject. So, what else did you do last night? What time did you finally get home?”

“I don’t know. Late.”

He lifted his left hand and looked at his watch. “Mmmm,” he said as he took a last gulp of coffee and shoved half a biscuit dripping with butter and jelly into his mouth.

“Breakfast was great.” He spoke around the food. “I have to go or I’ll be late for class.”

Chase stepped around the table, pecked a kiss on his mother’s subtly rouged cheek and left through the door that led to the two car garage Chase had insisted on adding to the house ten years before.

Barely making it to the school in time to begin his first class, Chase was already fighting a headache.

His entire sixth grade Social Studies curriculum was mapped out and, thank God and all things holy, he didn’t have to put a lot of effort into teaching. He’d given pop quizzes to each class then went over the most missed questions with his students.

“Mr. Nightly?” The irritation in the voice of the eleven year old prima donna grated on Chase’s lone surviving, albeit frayed, nerve.

Chandra Chandler was the brightest student in his last class of the day and was constantly asking questions that often had nothing to do with what he was trying to teach. He had fifteen minutes left of the class and he had a feeling those searing railroad spikes that were being driven into his brain right now were about to drill right through his skull.

Chase had been going over the Kennedy administration and the Cuban Missile Crisis all week in all of his classes. The kids would have the weekend to study for the test that he would give on Monday about the subject. He rubbed his throbbing left temple with his fingertips.

“Yes, Chandra. What is it now?” he asked dejectedly.

“Why did they call the Kennedy administration ‘Camelot’? Isn’t that like King Arthur and stuff? My Aunt Rae says . . .”

Oh, Jesus, Chase thought as he closed his eyes and let Chandra drone on about the *all-knowing, all seeing, perfect Aunt Rae and her opinions of . . . whatever subject that might be in discussion at the moment*. Since “Aunt Rae” had come to Savannah nearly two months ago, Chandra had developed an uber-case of hero worship.

“. . . and she says that Jackie had the most class of any First Lady before her. But of course Michelle Obama is just as classy as Jackie. Aunt Rae also says—”

The abrupt blare of the final bell ending the school day cut off the wisdom of Aunt Rae.

Oh, praise the Lord! was the heartfelt prayer that blasted through Chase as the last words from Chandra's mouth were drowned out and he nearly wept with gratitude.

The excited voices and stomping feet of twenty-eight ten and eleven year olds as they fled the class room prison reverberated inside his skull for several seconds before dying to blessed silence.

Chase opened his eyes to see Chandra standing in front of his desk watching him intently. He often wondered what went on behind those curious, big blue eyes when she looked at him like that. In all honesty, it kind of creeped him out a little bit.

"Yes, Chandra, what can I do for you?" Chase asked, plastering a smile on his face.

"Mr. Nightly, my Aunt Rae is picking me up after school and she really wants to meet you. I've told her all about what a great teacher you are and how you make Social Studies so interesting and how you make us kids want to learn and everything and well, I sort of told her," Chandra's face flushed bright pink as she added softly, almost shyly—and wasn't that uncharacteristic for the little rascal—as she looked up through thick dark lashes, "that you were hot, too."

Chase cleared his throat. What was he supposed to say to that? Chandra was a sweet kid—when she wasn't being an irritating pain in his ass—and it was a given that a child her age would develop a crush on a favored teacher. For all of her irritating questions, Chase had a soft spot for the kid and didn't want to hurt her feelings but he had to let the girl know that he was not interested in a romantic relationship with "Aunt Rae" or anyone else for that matter.

"Anyway, Aunt Rae is picking me up and she's from New York City and she's so smart and beautiful and you're smart and handsome I thought that maybe . . ." her words trailed off.

"Stop Chandra!" That little stinker! She was trying to couple him with her Aunt Rae! "Look, honey, I don't know what you're trying to do here. If I have a few minutes at another time I would like to meet your Aunt Rae, but I have a very important appointment this afternoon that I can't put off."

Time to nip this little match maker in the bud, Chase decided. He wasn't in the market for a woman. His life was complicated enough without people pushing a woman at him from all directions. First his mother this morning and now an eleven year old girl?

What, did he have "Hopeless Loser" tattooed across his forehead? Did people really think he had trouble getting a girlfriend or something? He did alright in that area of his life, thank you very

much. If he wanted a relationship, which he in no way whatsoever was looking for, he would have a relationship and he didn't need anybody's help finding one.

Her smile crumbled and her bright eyes dulled into such disappointment, Chase thought she might start to tear up any moment.

Oh, shit. He hated tears from women of any age and a child crying was worse than anything.

"Look, Chandra, I'm really sorry. Some other time, I promise, just . . . I can't today." He reached out his hand and touched a finger under her wobbling chin.

"Oh, okay, Mr. Nightly." The disappointment was so over the top it was all he could do not to grin at the drama.

As she turned away, her head hung forlornly, Chase shook his head, not believing what he was about to do.

"Tell you what, kiddo, Monday, after school, I should have a few extra minutes. How about I meet your Aunt Rae then?"

Oh, hell, he did not just say that. What was he thinking? This could only lead to trouble.

Chandra turned back to face him, her face beaming with pleasure.

"Oh, Mr. Nightly that's great. I'll tell Aunt Rae to pick me up after school and you can meet her then. You're going to fall in love with her, I just know it. You two were meant for each other. I had a dream the other night that . . ."

Chase broke into Chandra's breathless, animated ramble, "Hold it, Chandra." Shit, shit, shit! "Don't go there. I don't want you getting the wrong idea. I absolutely do not want you thinking that your aunt and I will be a couple, okay?"

The grin on Chandra's face slipped a fraction before it grew even wider. "I mean it Chandra. I'm not looking for a girlfriend."

"Sure, Mr. Nightly, I understand," she said as she grabbed her books from her desk then flounced—that was the only word to describe it—out the door. He shook his head with a chuckle, gathered his briefcase and stuffed the homework from the previous class into it to grade when he got home.

Now, for the meeting with the detective his mother had told him about when she'd called and left a message on Chase's cell phone.

Apparently this detective had paid Chase's mother a visit earlier that day and asked her some very pointed questions about Chase's whereabouts the night before. Now the detective wanted a

meeting with Chase right after school was dismissed. This was a meeting he dreaded and knew would require handling with great care.

He glanced at his watch, said “Shit, I’m gonna be late,” then dashed out the door and down the nearly empty hall. The sound of his black leather Reeboks slapping on the worn tile floor echoed softly off the locker lined walls as he made his way to the parking lot.

The detective Chase normally worked with when it came to his “extracurricular activities,” Darrel Marcus was unavailable for some reason and Detective Dalton was handling Gabe’s case.

This was not a good sign. The unexpected intrusion of another person meant there was a huge situation brewing and Chase didn’t like that. It made him nervous and he didn’t like being nervous about anything. Chase was, if nothing else, a very confident man who kept control of every situation and steered it the way he needed it to go.

It was one of his gifts as uccisore: the ability to read people and know intuitively what was needed to guide them in the direction he wanted them to go without exerting his will on them mentally or otherwise. It was a quality that made him a strong leader.

It was ten minutes after four when Chase finally knocked on the door of Detective Dalton’s office. Great, he thought, this was not the way to build trust with a man who could throw your ass in jail if the facts didn’t line up the way they should.

“Come on in.” The southern drawl was so pronounced through the thickness of the door, it put Chase in the mind of Rhett Butler.

He hated that freaking movie. Another bad omen?

Chase took a deep breath and blew it out again to calm himself before pushing open the door. He stepped into the tiny, windowless office as the man behind the desk hung up the phone and rose from his seat.

“Sorry I’m late. Traffic is rough this time of day,” Chase said by way of greeting.

“No problem, Mr. Nightly.” Detective Dalton extended his right hand as he spoke. “Glad you could make it.”

Chase briefly shook the man’s hand. “Have a seat.” Dalton invited as he seated himself again.

Chase took in the small office with a quick glance before studying the man before him. The battered desk and chair, the old gray metal filing cabinet in the corner and two guest chairs took up most of the space. The neatness of the place took Chase by surprise as did the fact that there were no personal items set about. No family pictures sat upon the desk. No sports trophies, no memorabilia

of any kind to give Chase a hint of the man who sat stoically behind the desk. A man, if Chase made an educated guess, of perhaps mid to late fifties and nothing like his mother's description of him when Chase had spoken to her at lunchtime. He had not the slightest resemblance to Mel Gibson with or without a mustache.

Dalton was perhaps a few inches shorter than Chase's six feet two inches. Dark hair liberally salted with silver was trimmed neatly over his ears and didn't touch his starched white shirt collar. He was built like a pro football player; not a retired player but a man still in the prime of his youth. The fine lines that fanned out from the corners of gray-blue eyes gave another hint to his age. His eyes that had that cop look of having seen it all and wasn't impressed in the least. Eyes that looked as though they doubted most of what they saw and none of what he heard.

Along with . . . something else Chase couldn't quite figure out. That was odd and a little disconcerting. Chase was really good at appraising situations and people. Rarely did he come across a person he couldn't get a read on.

His mother was one of those rarities but then she was his mother and he knew her better than anyone.

"Would you like a cup of coffee, Mr. Nightly?" Dalton asked. The man, Chase noticed, looked him straight in the eye. He didn't blink, just stared as though he were studying Chase under a microscope.

"No thanks, Detective Dalton," Chase answered with a half-smile curving his lips, not letting his own eyes drift from the detective's stare.

"Good choice, the coffee here sucks." Dalton's eyes shifted to the closed file on his desk and a grim smile crossed his own face.

"My mother said you had some questions about my friend, Gabe Collins." Chase decided to start the interview on his own terms to control the conversation. He intended to keep it as affable as possible.

Dalton looked up at Chase as he opened the file and read from the first page. After a moment of silence, Dalton asked, "How long have you known Gabriel Collins?"

Without hesitation Chase answered the question. "I've known Gabe since high school," he said as he leaned forward propping his elbows on his knees and looking Dalton straight in the eye. He had nothing to hide, after all.

Dalton scanned the page again. "When was the last time you spoke with him?"

“Last night,” Chase answered. “He came to my house and we went out for a few drinks at The Blue Mermaid. It’s the restaurant that Gabe and his uncle own.”

“Yes, I know The Blue Mermaid, Mr. Nightly,” Dalton said bluntly. “How long were the two of you together?”

Dalton sat back in his chair, an eye-twitching squeak sounded a protest at the motion sending a steel spike through Chase’s eardrum.

Chase shrugged nonchalantly as he sat back in the chair to think. The key was to maintain control of the conversation and answering as honestly as possible. He didn’t know how much Dalton knew about what went down last night. There was something about Dalton that put Chase on edge.

“I’m not sure, a little before midnight I think,” Chase said. “I ran into a friend and we left together. Gabe stayed at the restaurant to help his uncle out. It was a busy night for a Thursday.”

Dalton had a way of letting the silence drag on, a cop ploy no doubt, to get the other person talking to fill in the void. Chase waited silently.

“Who was the friend, Mr. Nightly?” Dalton asked as he moved ever so slightly setting off another round of screeching from the springs of the chair he sat in.

Chase’s lips curved up into a cocky grin. “A woman friend.”

“Does this woman friend have a name?” The chair spring squealed again sending pointy knives through Chase’s temples.

Did he have to do that? Chase wondered. Better yet, was he doing it on purpose to get on Chase’s nerves?

“Is that really important, Detective Dalton?”

“Yes,” *Screech*. “It is important, Mr. Nightly.” *Screech*.

A small tic was beginning to develop at the corner of Chase’s right eye with each sound of the protesting chair. Chase reached up with the tip of his right forefinger and pressed it against the nerve that twitched.

“Her name,” Chase said with a calm he didn’t really feel, “is Sheila Maxson.”

If Dalton didn’t stop that damn chair from squealing, Chase was going to drop kick the son of a bitch through the wall.

“Problem, Mr. Nightly?” Dalton asked as though he had no idea he was driving Chase insane with the incessant squeal of that damned chair.

“No, just a bit of a headache, that’s all.” Chase dropped his hand to his knee, crossed one ankle over the opposite knee in a posture of nonchalance.

“What’s this all about, Detective?” Chase asked as though he didn’t already know the answer to that question.

“Is she like ‘a friend with benefits’ type friend?” The smirk on Dalton’s face and the lascivious look in his eyes when he asked that particularly rude question had Chase on his feet and emerald sparks flashing in his eyes before he could stop himself. He knew the phrasing of the question was to elicit a reaction from him but he couldn’t help it. Sheila was like a sister to Chase and he refused to let anyone insult her that way.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Chase demanded.

“Nothing really. Sorry, that was rude of me wasn’t it?” Dalton said sitting back in his chair once again. “So, this Sheila Maxson is more than just a friend, then.”

“Yes. She’s a very good friend, almost like a sister to me and I don’t like your insinuation,” Chase stated as he stiffly resumed his seat.

“What the hell is this all about?” Chase was losing the lead and had to regain control of the interview now.

After another of those pregnant pauses that the detective seemed so fond of, he finally stated, with little emotion, “Gabriel Collins’s body was found in an alley at six-thirty this morning. His throat was cut. Whoever did it nearly decapitated the man.” Dalton did that no blinking stare as Chase absorbed the news.

He could feel the blood drain from his face as the detective’s words finally found meaning.

Nearly decapitated? What the hell? No, it couldn’t be. The breath backed up in his lungs and Chase had to struggle to breathe.

“Oh God, no!” The words were out of his mouth before he realized he’d spoken them aloud. He hoped it sounded more like a man who had just learned his best friend had been murdered than a man filled with guilt and fear. Chase fell back in the chair and stared up at the cracked and peeling gray paint of the ceiling.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Nightly, to be the one to give you this news. I thought you might have heard already.” There was a look of confusion on Dalton’s face as he spoke.

“I, ah, I was at work all day.” He took a deep breath. “My mother didn’t tell me anything other than you wanted to talk to me about Gabe. I hadn’t heard any news reports all day.”

Chase rubbed his hands over his face as he tried to think. Of course he knew Gabe was dead, he was there when they took him down. But what if he hadn't separated his head from his body completely before the sun rose? What if the blessing wasn't performed in time? Oh, sweet Jesus! What if . . . NO! He did everything right. He knew he did.

But what if he hadn't done it in time?

"It must have . . . it must have happened after we separated." Chase forced the words out through the lump that had lodged in his throat.

"Yeah, probably," Dalton said. After another brief silence, he said, "Thank you for coming in, Mr. Nightly. If you don't mind, keep yourself available in case I have more questions."

That's it? Chase thought, I'm being dismissed? How had he lost control of everything so quickly? That had never happened before.

"That's it?" Chase asked confused.

"That's it." Dalton sat back in his chair. Funny, there was no earsplitting, brain stabbing squeak this time.

Chase stood up slowly and turned toward the door. His hand on the knob, Chase took a deep breath before opening it.

"You look a lot like him." The words were barely audible; as though they weren't really meant to be heard and they made absolutely no sense whatsoever to Chase. His mind was numb and his heart thundered in his ears.

"Excuse me?" Chase turned to face Dalton again, his confusion deepening. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I said that you look like him." Dalton stood slowly to his full height as he spoke. "Your father, you favor him."

If the man had said he was from the planet Krypton and was here to kill Superman, Chase would not have been more stunned.

"My father?" He shook his head to clear the fog that had engulfed his brain. "Wait. You knew my father?"

With a sad, rueful smile, Dalton said, "A long time ago, Chase. A lifetime ago, I knew your father."

He slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small white card and held it out to Chase. "If you ever need anything, anything at all, call me."

Chase reached out to take the card, but Dalton held tight to it for a few seconds longer, “Anything, Chase,” he repeated then let go of the card. “My cell phone number is on the back of the card.”

As though he were in a fugue state, Chase took the card, turned and left the office without a backward glance. Halfway down the hall, Chase’s senses returned and he looked down at the card in his hand. As he read the name printed in black, block letters, his vision narrowed, and time stood still. His father’s voice telling him an anecdote about Harry echoed in his head.

Harrison Chase Dalton,

Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police Department-Homicide Unit.

It only took a heartbeat before Chase was barreling through Detective Dalton’s office door. “What the hell does this mean?” Chase demanded, holding out the card.

“Well,” Dalton said, without preamble. “It didn’t take you long to ask that question.”

“What the hell is going on Dalton?” Chase slammed the door behind him as he stalked to the front of the desk with a threat of violence wafting off him like a summer heat wave. He through the card on the desk and leaned forward, bracing his palms on the surface of the battered green desk.

“You’re going to want to back up and cool off, Chase.” Dalton’s voice was cool, calm and filled with enough intimidation that not even Chase could miss it. He stared up into the fury that threatened to spontaneously combust as he spoke.

The two men stared into each other’s eyes for several seconds, one daring the other to make the first move before Chase finally calmed down enough to regain control. No way could this man be the man Chase’s father had spoken of so fondly. This could not possibly be the man he had been named for.

No way in hell. Harry Dalton was dead as far as Chase knew. Wasn’t he? Of course he was. His mother had never even met the man, so how could this be his father’s best friend? Where had he been all these years and why hadn’t he come to his father’s funeral?

“Are you the man my father called Harry?” Chase asked. “Are you the man my father loved like a brother?”

The accusatory tone of the questions as the words fell from lips stiff and razor thin was undeniable.

Chase heard the long release of breath before Dalton looked away. The older man leaned his elbows on his battered desk but refused to look up into Chase’s eyes as he answered.

“Yes,” Dalton said briefly. “To answer both questions at once.”

He stood up and walked around the desk to face Chase more squarely. “Although no one calls me Harry anymore, just Dalton.”

Was that regret Chase was sensing? No, probably not. Dalton didn’t seem the type to regret anything. But then, when Chase got those “feelings” about the person he was with, he was pretty much on the bull’s eye with his impressions. It was giving him a little pause for thought here and Chase took a mental step back to look at the man. A little non-biased insight might be called for here.

“When did you know my father?” Chase asked. He forced calm into his voice hoping he could pull it off. His emotions were so out of control with the death of his best friend, his guilt over his failure to protect Gabe, and now finding out the man investigating the case was none other than the man Chase had grown up hearing stories about that practically made him a freaking legend.

“And where in the hell have you been all these years? You weren’t even at his funeral, were you? Mama would have told me if you were there.” The last question was hissed out with such unbridled venom it was a wonder Dalton was still standing upright.

With the resignation of a man about to start a task he dreaded but knew had to be done he said, “It’s a long story Chase.”

Dalton shoved his left hand through his coarse, salt and pepper hair twice before shoving it into his pocket. Chase caught the fleeting look in Dalton’s eyes before the “cop shield” came up and closed off whatever emotion he’d glimpsed. So, the man did have tells. Chase filed that little tidbit away for future reference.

“I’m not leaving till I get some answers,” Chase stated matter-of-factly, as he sat down in the chair he had previously vacated and crossed his arms over his wide chest.

“Yeah, I got that much,” Dalton said and leaned his hip against the edge of the desk. He heaved out a breath and rubbed both hands over his face before speaking again. “I knew Toby Nightly back in college. We were roommates at USC . . . That’s University of South Carolina, not Southern California.”

Chase gave the man a “no shit” look.

Dalton smirked before continuing with his recitation. “We hit it off like we’d known each other all our lives.” Dalton let out a quick laugh and shook his head. Chase saw a flicker of amusement cross his features as fine lines fanned out from Dalton’s eyes.

It infuriated Chase all the more as he muttered a vehement, “Son of a bitch.” He couldn’t believe it. *This was really Harry.*

“Very well put,” Dalton said as he stood up again and moved back to his chair before continuing.

“What happened? You must have been pretty tight back then. After all, Daddy insisted I be named after you,” Chase asked. “Why did you two stop being such close friends?”

“We were tight back then. Hell, we were like Siamese twins if you want to know the truth, practically joined at the hip.”

“What happened?” Chase asked as he dug his fingers into his knees until his knuckles turned white. “Why would he make us believe you were dead all these years?”

Dalton blew out a breath, rubbed the back of his neck and looked everywhere except at Chase for a long moment before answering the question.

“The job,” was all he said.

“The job? What the hell does that mean? Because you were a cop and Daddy wasn’t, you split?”

“Are you being intentionally obtuse Chase, or are you really that dense?” Dalton asked, his eyes steely with determination.

It took a full half minute before he could let the insult pass and Chase found his voice again.

“You?” he asked.

“Yep,” Dalton said. “Hard to believe isn’t it, Chase?”

The question was pretty much rhetorical, Chase decided and kept quiet.

“Toby was team leader and I was his second in command.”

“Yes, I remember him telling me that much,” Chase said. It would be not only useless but incredibly stupid of him to even try to feign ignorance about being uccisore or knowing what uccisore was.

“I assumed you died or something and that was why you weren’t around anymore.” Chase stood up and began pacing. There really wasn’t enough room in the tiny space to do any serious pacing but he couldn’t just sit there any longer. He felt like every nerve in his body was electrified and he was ready to jump out of his skin. This was so amazingly unbelievable.

Why? Why would Dalton tell him all of this now?

“Yeah, I know how he felt. I missed him too. It was like a part of me was missing and nothing felt right after that.”

Yeab, you missed him, that’s why you never came around or even came to his funeral.

“What happened?” Chase asked for the third time. He could barely force the words through the monstrous ball of rage that was forming in his chest.

“Oh hell, I don’t know.” Dalton did that fingers in the hair thing again but this time he didn’t seem to care that Chase caught the motion.

“I guess you could say my ego took control and I let it.” He looked up into Chase’s face as he continued to speak in low tones filled with regret. “I’ve been watching you over the years since Toby died.”

It sounded like a confession to Chase, but he wasn’t buying it.

“What the hell does that mean? Would you please give me a straight answer for once?” Chase spun around to face Dalton, flinging his arms out to his sides before throwing his head back and hissing a loud breath at the florescent lights that buzzed softly over his head.

After a brief pause, no doubt in Chase’s mind it was for dramatic effect, Dalton began again. “Since your father was killed, I’ve . . . sort of kept back in the shadows, so to speak, but still kept an eye on you both. I felt I owed it to Toby since it was my fault he died.”

That was a little bombshell Chase hadn’t expected to hear and wasn’t quite sure he had heard right anyway.

“Excuse me? You want to rewind that last remark and hit replay for me?”

Dalton continued on as though Chase hadn’t spoken. “I kept my hand in any case that involved you but never let anyone know what was really going on. It just seemed safer for all of us that way.”

There was another pause where nothing but the distorted hum of voices outside the door could be heard. Dalton continued on like a man on a mission.

“At least, until recently, that is. It just seemed best if I didn’t get too involved.” Dalton blew out a breath, puffing his cheeks out like a chipmunk with a mouth full of nuts. “Easier.”

“Okay,” Chase cleared his throat of the lump of emotion he had no intention of putting a name to. It seeped into his numb brain that it was of the utmost importance that he listen to the rest of what this man had to say. Chase could beat the living shit out of him later; right now he had to maintain control.

“Why now? Why get involved now, with Gabe’s death?” Chase asked.

“That’s a very good question and not an easy one to answer.” Dalton stood up again then sat back down.

It seemed to Chase as though the other man had suddenly become very nervous about something. “There’s something in the air, Chase. I can feel it. Something bad is coming.”

Chase said nothing. He’d felt those same vibrations himself over the past several months. It felt like one hell of a squall was brewing and ready to break at any moment. A storm unlike any they had ever seen before with the potential for untold devastation.

“I knew Gabriel Collins was one of yours. That was why I grabbed this case from the other detectives. When I heard the call that a homicide detective was needed on the scene I made damn sure I was the first one there.” Dalton took a deep breath, held it like a man preparing to take a dose of nasty tasting medicine.

“The day before Toby died, he contacted me. I think he sensed something was in the wind back then. He asked me to put our differences aside and rejoin his team. I refused.” Dalton looked Chase in the eye as he said the words again. “I flat out refused; just short of telling him to go to hell.”

He stood up again and walked around the desk to face Chase. His shoulders back his chin held high and his back rigid like a man ready to face his demons and take his due punishment. “We had been friends once and he helped me through some rough times even after . . . after our friendship ended. I had my own team by then and I was top dog.

“Why would I give up being number one to take orders from someone else?” he asked, pleadingly.

Chase just stared at him as Dalton continued. His mind reeled as he tried to make some sense out of what he was hearing.

“I respected Toby, hell I loved him like a brother and I still couldn’t bring myself to give up what I had to go back to being second in line. My,” Dalton chuckled humorlessly before continuing on. “My ego just wouldn’t allow that, no way in hell was that going to happen. Before he walked out my door, you know what he said to me, Chase?”

Not giving Chase a chance to answer Dalton answered his own question. “He said to me, ‘Harry, if anything happens to me just remember, I don’t blame you.’ The next night Toby was dead and you were at death’s door. They didn’t expect you to make it through the night. I guess you showed them, huh?” The laugh Dalton let loose was humorless and filled with self-loathing.

“You bastard,” Chase forced through clinched teeth. “My father is dead because you refused to help him when he came to you.”

“You’re right, Chase. Because I refused to join his team again, he went out alone and he died. Don’t you think for one second that I haven’t carried the guilt of that decision like a vest of lead from

the second I heard about his death? You can't hate me any more than I hate myself for letting my own selfishness make that choice for me."

"You want to make book on that, Ace?" Chase asked as his blood seethed. "And he wasn't alone that night, remember? I was with him."

Chase stabbed the fingers of his right hand into his own chest to accentuate his words. "I have the scar to prove it, you son of a bitch"

Chase's chest heaved as his breath came fast and hard, his words getting louder as he spoke.

"How well I know that, Chase. But honestly, who knows? If I had gone with him that night we could have all been killed. Or we could have all survived. Or he could have lost you. There is no way to know 'what if' and to be blunt I am sick and tired of asking that question. I have asked it so many times over the past fourteen years it's like a recurring nightmare. So don't you sit there like the judge and jury over me. When I face God almighty come judgment day I will answer to him for my sins, not you. So you can take your righteous indignation and loathing of me and shove 'em up your ass."

Dalton was losing his temper and Chase was glad to see some sign that the man was human. The little glimpses he'd caught here and there were nothing more than window dressing. This was real emotion and it fed Chase's own wrath.

"He told me he wouldn't blame me if something happened to him, but by God, *I blame me!*" Dalton's voice was so loud it reverberated off the walls for several seconds before the room fell into a deafening silence broken only by the harsh rasping of the two men's breathing as they faced each other, rage versus rage.

After several long seconds of glaring at each other and standing toe to toe, Dalton backed up a step. In a voice much calmer and a few decibels lower, he said, "I was at Toby's funeral. You were still in the hospital in ICU. I made a promise to him that day. Two promises actually. You want to know what they were?"

Chase's eyes never left Dalton's face. "Not really caring here, Dalton. Your contrition means shit to me right now."

"I'm going to tell you anyway." Dalton leaned his hips back against the desk once again. "I promised him I would find Gordon Charles and end him. I also promised to look out for your mother. No one figured you would make it so she was my promise to Toby."

“Mama doesn’t need you to look out for her. That’s my job.” Chase turned and headed for the door but the next words that fell on his burning mind struck him like a locomotive had slammed into his heart.

“Did she tell you that last night there was an attempted break-in at your house while you ‘were out with your friends?’” Chase turned to face him, his face pale as wax and a look of total desolation filling his eyes. “Didn’t think so.”

Chase was speechless. His brain couldn’t function as he watched Dalton rise and walk back around to his desk, sit down in his chair and flip open a second file folder he hadn’t realized was under the folder about Gabe’s case.

“At twenty-three-hundred hours three men were spotted by an officer on patrol near your house. One was heading around the side of the house, one walking to the front door and the third was attempting entry through a window on the second floor. The officer turned on his blue lights and the three perpetrators fled. The officer started pursuit but they disappeared before he could see which direction they went. When the officer went to check on the resident of the home she was found to be safe and unharmed. The officer called it in and per my orders remained on scene until it was determined that the perpetrators would not return. Or, until you arrived on the scene at oh-five forty-two hours. At that time he contacted me to inform me you had arrived and I dismissed the officer for the rest of his shift.” Dalton paused and looked up at Chase’s ashen face.

Chase finally spoke, “Who was the officer and why was he patrolling near my house?” His voice was thick with emotion and barely recognizable to his own ears.

“I’ve had your house watched every night you were not there for the past fourteen years. Toby was terrified that Gordon would come after Grace and you.”

“Okay.” Chase swallowed loudly. “Okay. Why does Gordon want my mother?”

“That my friend is the sixty four-thousand dollar question isn’t it?”

“I’m not your friend, Ace. Don’t you forget it.”

“I let your father down and he was the best friend I’d ever had in my life or ever will have. I won’t let you down and I won’t let anything happen to Grace. You have my word on that.”

“Your word doesn’t mean jack shit to me, Dalton. I gotta go.” Chase headed for the door again.

“Chase.”

He halted, glancing over his shoulder. It was a wonder, Chase thought, that he didn't spontaneously combust from the heat of his hatred that was consuming him for the man who could have saved his father's life.

"I'm not going to let them win. They took too much from me. I didn't just lose my best friend to Gordon and his bloodsucking minions. I've lost everyth—" Dalton's words stopped as though they had been cut off with a well-honed blade. The look of surprise—and perhaps a bit of embarrassment?—that briefly flashed across his face had Chase thinking that they were spoken without forethought. This from a man whom Chase judged did nothing and said nothing without thinking it through thoroughly.

That's what a self-righteous attitude will get you, Ace, Chase thought with a sardonic grin. *Asshole!*

Chase walked out the door of Dalton's office without a backward glance, closing the door behind him with a decisive crack that echoed off the pale plaster walls.