

Preface



April 15, 1861

The breeze drifting through the moss draped Southern Oaks cooled the sweat that dripped into Jacob Blanchett's eyes as he hid in the shadows. He'd lost track of his friends and his heart beat fast in his narrow chest as he drew in panting breaths. He held his sword at the ready in his moist palm and hoped that Caleb and Jeramiah hadn't met a fate worse than death at the hands of the pirates they pursued.

As the youngest, and the smallest, of the trio, it was easier for Jacob to stay hidden in the shadowed wood so that he could sneak up on the scoundrels who would dare trespass on Southern soil.

He heard the snap of a twig at his back and, before he could come around and raise his arm in defense, Jacob found himself at the wrong end of another's sword.

"I got you, Jacob. You're dead!" his attacker crowed drawing the blunt edge of his wooden blade across Jacob's exposed throat.

"Where did you come from?" Jacob asked, trembling with rage at being snuck up on.

Caleb, who just turned eleven, stood nearly half a foot taller than the youngest of their little band and used his larger frame to push Jacob out of the way as he leaned against the tree.

"My pa's been teaching me how to track," the older boy answered proudly. "He lived in the Arizona territory for a while and worked as a scout for the army before he came to Savannah. He's out at Fort Jackson now."

"I wish my father would teach me stuff like that. He's too busy to pay me any mind anymore."

Jacob scuffed the toe of his dusty leather boot against a fallen branch. He missed the times he'd spent with his father while they were in Tennessee. Now that he was supporting the Confederacy, his father had duties and new responsibilities to his men that left little time for riding horses and whittling wood with his son.

"I can teach you what my pa teaches me," Caleb volunteered haughtily. "I'm getting really good at tracking. It ain't that hard."

Despite his tone, Jacob knew that Caleb would help him if he could. Jacob was one of his best friends and it was only right that he teach him a few things.

Jacob pulled his eyes from the toes of his boots to search Caleb's face for the truth of his words. "Really? You would teach me how to track?"

“I said I would, didn’t I?”

Jacob’s next words were cut off as a blood freezing scream echoed through the trees.

“That sounded like Jeramiah!” he said, his voice shaking from the fear they’d heard in the scream. “We have to help him, Caleb! Let’s go.”

The most intrepid of the three despite his youth, Jacob rushed headlong through the trees and bushes. He leaped over a fallen log without slowing his advance to save his friend.

“Jeramiah!” Jacob called out. “Where are you? We’re coming!” The only sounds in the woods were the rushing footfalls of the two boys along with their heaving breaths.

“Where is he?” Caleb asked, his words coming out in a pant. “He must be farther away than we thought.”

As they came to a small clearing, Jacob stopped to listen. Not expecting the sudden halt, Caleb nearly ran into him as Jacob took in their surroundings. Sunlight dappled through the heavy tree branches onto the fresh spring growth under their feet. Blackberry bushes, heavy with blossoms, lined the side of a fairly large hill.

“Jeramiah!” Jacob called out once more, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Where are you?”

The boys waited for a moment in tense silence before they heard a faint reply.

“Down here!” The shout sounded far away and echoed as though coming from inside a cave. “I fell down a hole! Get me out of here!”

“Where?” Caleb called out. “I don’t see a hole, Jeramiah!”

“*Get me out of here!*” Jeramiah cried out again, his voice cracking. At thirteen, he was the youngest of seven sons and barely at the cusp of manhood. “I was hiding in the bushes and I fell backwards through a hole.”

“We’re coming!” Jacob called to his scared friend. “Keep talking to us so we know when we’re getting closer.”

Jacob turned to Caleb and pointed left. “You look behind those bushes and I’ll look behind these.”

It didn’t take them long to find the thick bush where Jeramiah had tried to hide. But it did take a little longer to get to where they could both squeeze between the thorny branches and find the ragged entrance to what looked like a cave.

The well-hidden hole was no larger than a wagon wheel but the two boys managed to slip through with ease. The air inside the cave was much cooler than outside and smelled of moist earth and moss.

This is a perfect place to hide a pirate’s treasure, Jacob thought. He gave his imagination free reign for a moment as he assessed the space and tried to gain his bearings. The story was so clear in his mind that he could see it come to life.

The captain of the pirate ship and several of his crew were carrying the big, steel-banded, wooden chest through the heavily wooded area, searching for the perfect place to hide it from the King's army.

Sometimes, the pictures in Jacob's head seemed almost too real. It was as though he were there himself, watching the events unfold. His mother often indulged his flights of fancy, as she called them, but his father would scold and chastise him for not focusing on his training.

He shook his head to clear the vision from his mind and drew in a deep breath. Always one to be prepared, he reached into the pocket of his short cotton trousers and pulled out a wooden matchstick. With a flick of his thumbnail across the head, a bright flame flared up then began to flicker steadily. The small circle of light did little more than show Jacob his own hand and the terrified face of Caleb, who stood close enough to him that Jacob could feel his hot breath on his face.

As the match burned down, Jacob heard a shuffling noise to his right. He stretched his arm out to see what it could be and smacked his hand into a trembling chin.

"That you, Jeramiah?" Jacob asked as his hand found a skinny shoulder in the darkness.

"It was so dark," Jeramiah's voice said, near Jacob's ear. "It all happened so fast and then I couldn't see to get back out."

"It's okay," Jacob told him, magnanimously. "I'd have been scared too. That's why I always carry matches and my pocket knife wherever I go. Just in case."

"Let's get out of here," Jeramiah demanded. Caleb gave an affirmative grunt and Jacob struck another match.

"No, not yet," he said as Jeramiah urged them to move back into the daylight. "We have to check this out. There could be pirate treasure hidden in here."

Jacob told his friends of a story about a hidden treasure chest and pirate's booty hidden in the Savannah area, his imagination running rampant once more. He embellished the tales his father had heard while at the Pirate's Inn before he'd gotten so involved with his cronies in the Knights of the Golden Circle.

"We can't see anything in here," Caleb grumbled when Jacob finished his story. "And your matchsticks don't give off enough light to see anyway. We should just get out of here. We can come back later and bring lanterns."

Jeramiah was warming up to the idea. "We can send Caleb for a lantern and then we can come back and look around."

"Okay, we'll do that!" Jacob said, taking the initiative and making the decision for the group. Even though Jeramiah was the eldest of the three, and thought he should be their leader, both he and Caleb seemed to defer to Jacob whenever a decision of what to do needed to be made.

Leading the way with another flaming matchstick held high above his head, Jacob turned back to the entrance. He stood aside as Jeramiah pushed his way through the bush, followed by Caleb. He then dropped the extinguished match and scrambled through as the others held the branches away enough for him to see his way out.

As the boys all sighed in relief at being in the bright sunlight once more, they sent Caleb off to his home on the other side of the woods. Jacob and Jeramiah sat beneath the shade of a tree, they entertained each other with stories of what they were going to do with their third of the treasure.

In less than half an hour, Caleb returned carrying not one, but two lanterns, a crock jug with a cork stopper and a cloth-wrapped bundle.

“Sorry it took so long. I grabbed a jug of water and something to eat. I was hungry and Maybelle fixed some cheese and bread for us,” Caleb told them. “She put some left over ham from brunch in it, too.”

The three fell on the impromptu picnic like starving animals. They passed the jug of water around between bites of ham and cheese sandwiches made with freshly baked bread.

Around a mouthful of food, Caleb told them how he’d brought two lanterns just in case they stayed in the cave longer than they meant to. That way they would still have light to get home if it got too dark.

When the last crumb was devoured, they stood in unison and marched, single file, back to the blackberry bush. Jeramiah held the branches aside for Caleb to enter first since he had the lanterns.

“Light it now, before we get inside,” the older boy ordered. “That way we’ll be able to see better.”

Caleb reached into his pocket and froze. He swallowed hard and a flush of humiliation crept up his neck. “I forgot matches to light the lantern,” he mumbled, ducking his head and scuffing his shoe.

“Don’t worry,” Jacob told him. “I still have some.” He pulled one from his pocket and held it up for Caleb to see. “I grabbed a bunch of them before I left this morning.” He took one of the lanterns, struck his match, and held flame to wick.

After taking the lantern back and adjusting the flame a bit, Caleb ducked into the mouth of the little cave and stepped aside, making room for the other two. He held the lantern above his head, only to have it yanked away by Jeramiah.

“I’m the oldest. I’ll lead the way,” he informed them puffing out his chest and standing straighter.

“But, it’s my lantern,” Caleb muttered, his words ignored as Jeramiah pushed ahead.

The circle of light reflected off the damp, moss covered, walls as Jacob and Caleb followed close behind Jeramiah. It didn’t take them long to realize that the cave was just that: a cave. They couldn’t see

anything that looked like a tunnel leading off to a treasure, just some fallen rocks and bugs as they scattered from the intrusive light.

The entire space was no more than ten or twelve feet, forming a circular room. Toward the back and a little to the right of the entrance, lay a large bolder with smaller rocks scattered around it. The thing looked like it had dropped from the ceiling of the cave.

This isn't right, Jacob thought. I know there's a treasure hidden here. I just know it.

Jeremiah let the arm holding the light drop to his side, the lantern bouncing hard off his leg, causing the glass globe to rattle.

"Where's the treasure?" he asked. "There should be a tunnel or something. Or a marker where to dig. Shouldn't there?"

Jacob, disgusted, stepped around the older boy and plopped himself onto the large bolder. He propped his elbow on his knee and rested his chin in his hand. Caleb sat on the ground beside him, Jeremiah following suit.

In the swaying light as Jeremiah dropped to the dirt floor, Jacob's eyes caught a glimpse of something shiny. It was a brief flash, but enough to grab his attention. He picked up the lantern and held it in the direction he'd seen the flash. He jumped up from his perch and knelt beside the rock he'd been sitting on. He could just barely make out the glow of something that looked like a piece of gold.

The treasure! he thought with absolute certainty

Setting the lantern next to his knees, he began to dig beneath the rock to uncover part of the pirate's treasure.

"What did you find?" Caleb asked, leaning forward to see more clearly around Jeremiah. Neither of the other boys bothered to get up and help Jacob dig.

"I don't know, but it looks like gold!"

After a moment of digging with his fingers, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the pocketknife his father had given him a few months before for his birthday.

"It's caught under the rock," he said as he dug in the hard earthen floor. It didn't take long for him to see the tip of what looked like a gold key.

Freeing enough of the object to get his small fingers around it, he pulled hard. It gave easier than he expected and Jacob lost his balance. He fell backward and kicked the lantern over where it rolled behind the bolder to rest on its side.

Jacob sat up, rubbing his head with a wince, and uncurled his fist.

In his palm, he held a large black ring with three gold keys of varying sizes.

"Wow," he murmured, holding the keys up for all to see. "I bet these open the treasure chest!"

“Holy cow! Look at this!” Jeramiah suddenly yelled, startling the other two, as he bent to pick up the lantern that Jacob had knocked over.

“It’s a tunnel!” The excitement at his discovery caused his voice to crack again, an embarrassing event he couldn’t seem to control.

“It’s just a hole in the wall, dummy,” Caleb admonished, when he turned away from where Jacob sat. “And it’s too small to be a tunnel.”

“No it isn’t, we just need to move these rocks out of the way.” Jeramiah demanded, and put words into action as he set the light aside and began pulling at the mound of rubble. It didn’t take long before Caleb sighed and joined his friend digging as well.

Jacob shoved the keys into his pocket and rushed to help the other boys. Before long, what looked like nothing more than a hole in the wall was large enough for all three of them to crawl through on their hands and knees.

“We need to light the other lantern,” Jacob told them, as he rose to his feet.

“I left it in the cave, give me a minute,” Caleb stated and hurried off to fetch the lantern. When he returned in less than half a minute, Jacob had already pulled another match from his pocket and lit it with his thumbnail.

With Jeramiah starting at the left and Jacob starting to the right, the boys made their way into the new room, following the walls of the cave.

“*I found it! I found it!*” Jacob cried out, breathlessly. “Just like I told you! It’s right here!”

The chest was just as he’d seen it in his mind. The wood was dark with age and the iron straps were badly rusted. There were three locks across the front of the chest, crusted with dirt and rust. Taking the tip of the knife he still held in his hand, Jacob chipped away at the keyholes to get a clearer view.

Jeramiah and Caleb rushed to his side and dropped to their knees beside him and watched as he went to work on the second keyhole.

“I’ll bet those keys I found unlock it,” Jacob said as he continued scraping away the debris. “There are three locks and three keys!”

His heart was about to pound right out of his chest. He’d known this trip to Savannah with his family would be the best summer of his entire life and he’d been right.

Jacob’s father had been summoned to Fort Pulaski and they were to remain in Savannah until harvest, when they would head back to their farm outside of Memphis, Tennessee to oversee the slaves as they reaped the crops of corn, cotton and tobacco for marketing. Since they had come to Savannah, Jacob had met two boys that became his best friends in almost no time at all and they’d become inseparable.

Now, they'd found a hidden treasure. With his share, Jacob would be richer than anyone he'd ever known and his father would finally know that Jacob had been telling the truth. His imaginings were not just flights of fancy or stories made up by an overactive imagination.

Once the last lock was cleared, Jacob pulled the ring of keys from his pocket and held them up. He looked from one face to the other. "We should each take a key and open a lock. It's only right, we all found it and we'll split it even."

"Three ways," he concluded in a shaky voice. "Agreed?"

With a unanimous "yes" from the other two, he pried the ring apart with the blade of his knife. Just as the ring began to separate, the blade broke in two with an echoing crack.

"Oh, no!" Jacob groaned, looking down at the ruined knife. "My father's going to kill me for that." He looked at the hilt that rested in his palm with only about an inch of blade remaining.

Still, not letting a broken knife keep him from his fortune, he dropped the remaining half of the pocket knife to the ground and pulled on the ring with all of his strength. It finally gave, the rusted iron breaking apart, much like his prized knife.

The keys fell to the ground and each boy grabbed one up, Jeramiah claiming the largest of the three for himself, proclaiming that since he was the oldest, it was only right that he possess the biggest.

On that same logic, Caleb picked up the next largest key, leaving the smallest one, no bigger than his finger, for Jacob. Not one for whining about his fate, Jacob accepted his key as well.

"I'll go first since I found the keys and the chest," Jacob stated, brooking no arguments from the others. It was bad enough they delegated him the smallest of the keys, he refused to allow them to usurp his rightful place as the finder of the treasure.

With a nod from Jeramiah and Caleb, Jacob scanned the front of the chest to see which of the keyholes would most likely fit his tiny key.

"The one in the middle looks like the smallest," he finally said. He carefully slid the key in, and with a bit of prodding, finally got past the opening and set the key in the lock. He drew in a deep breath and held it as he slowly turned the key.

It stopped halfway through the turn and wouldn't budge further. He tried to pull the key out but it was stuck in position. A frustrated growl issued from his throat as he tried desperately to release his key from the lock as a crease furrowed his brow.

He dropped his hands to his side and frowned at the stubborn lock as he tried to think of what to do next. The stupid thing had to open. It just had to. His key fit the lock and it turned. Why wasn't it opening?

“Here, let me try mine,” Caleb said as he scooted closer to examine the locks, much like Jacob had done. Choosing the next to the largest keyhole, Caleb slid his key in and turned. Like Jacob’s key, it stopped at half a turn and stuck.

“What’s wrong? Why won’t the keys turn?” he asked, as frustrated and confused as Jacob.

“Maybe all three keys have to be in the lock for any of them to open?” Jacob finally said, uncertain but hopeful. “You try your key, Jeramiah. Let’s see what happens.”

Following Jacob’s direction, Jeramiah poked his key into the remaining hole with less care than the other two, and twisted it in the lock. When it hit the halfway mark as the other two keys had done, it stopped. However, they heard a faint click as if the key had hit something significant.

“Let’s try it together,” Jacob said, knowing in his heart that was what was needed to open the chest. He didn’t know why he felt the keys must be turned at the same time, he just knew it had to be done.

“On the count of three,” he said softly.

“One . . . two . . .” he sucked in a breath and slowly blew it out. “Three!” They turned their wrists as one and the keys slid smoothly around in the lock, releasing the mechanism that latched the lid to the chest.

“It worked!” Caleb whispered in awe. “It must hold a priceless treasure to take three keys to open it.”

“Let’s see,” Jeramiah said loudly as he heaved the top of the chest up to expose the riches inside.

Jacob lifted his lantern to shine over the hidden booty. The soft glow flashed sparks of gold and silver light from the pirate’s plunder they had unearthed. Neither of the three uttered a sound, or even breathed, as they beheld the sight.

Gold coins, silver chalices, jewels of every hue twinkled up at them. There was even what looked like a small crown, encrusted with more jewels, and long strands of gleaming pearls.

The only item that looked as though it was worthless was a leather pouch, blackened and cracked with age. Jacob reached for the pouch with a shaking hand. Whatever it was, had to be even more valuable than the rest if it was separated and placed in a protective covering, his fanciful mind decided.

He carefully pulled at the stiff ties that held the pouch closed, his numb fingers not wanting to cooperate. Finally, the leather came free and he poured the contents into his left hand.

The blue gem was nearly as large as his palm, and the color a richer, deeper azure than he’d ever seen. It mesmerized him, the colors of the gem sparkling hypnotically. The gem grew warm and seemed to glow, casting an eerie blue sheen over his face and dancing off the walls of the cave.

It's like being under the sea, Jacob thought. He could almost feel the waves washing over him and a sense of power pulsed up his fingers as though the jewel he held was a living thing; a beating heart. He'd never felt anything like it in his entire life.

"*The Mermaid's Heart,*" he whispered softly, not realizing what he was saying while under the spell of the gem.

"Wow," Caleb squeaked as he, too, was held transfixed by the radiance.

That single word, uttered in wonderment was enough to break the spell that held the boys in thrall.

"We have to keep this a secret," Jacob said emphatically. "We can't tell anyone about this until we get it out of here and hide it somewhere safe."

"How are we supposed to carry that thing?" Jeramiah demanded. "It must weigh a damn ton."

"We'll leave it here for now," Jacob told them. "We lock the chest again and each of us will take a key. We'll meet back here later with ropes and a wagon. We just need something to cover it with so nobody will see what it is."

"It's the only way," he continued. "We can't leave it here for long because someone else might find it, just like we did."

"Agreed," Jeramiah said with a nod. He and Jacob looked to Caleb for his acceptance of the terms.

With a firm nod from Caleb, Jacob returned the jewel to its pouch and wrapped the ties around it once more. He gently set it back into the chest.

"Wait," Caleb called out as Jacob reached to close the lid of the chest. "We could take some with us now. That way we can prove we found it first."

"No, we can't tell anyone! Not until we have it somewhere safe. We have to swear it," Jacob decreed. "Right here, right now. The only way any of this treasure leaves this cave is if we, all three of us, are here together. It has to be the three of us."

He lifted his right hand and spit into his palm then held it out to the other two boys. "A solemn vow that we can never break. We tell no one. Ever."

Jeramiah spit in his hand as did Caleb, and the three took turns shaking each other's hand on their pact. Their word to each other was sealed with the oath they'd just taken.

"Let's get this locked up and then we have to cover the entrance to this part of the cave," Jacob said as he closed the chest lid and placed his key in the lock. "Just in case."

Once the chest was sealed again, they scurried from the chamber and hurriedly pushed the rocks and stones back into place, hiding away their treasure.

It was well past suppertime and the sun was settling in a sky of rose gold clouds when Jacob finally entered the house through the kitchen. He was sweaty and covered in dirt, his arms bearing a maze of scratches from the thorns of the blackberry bush they'd had to pass through to get in and out of the cave. The blood had dried and itched terribly as he closed the door.

"Jacob Nathaniel Blanchett!" his mother exclaimed as she caught him trying to sneak up the back servant's stairway. "Where in the world have you been? We've been searching for hours!"

He scratched at his arm as he stared, wide-eyed, at his mother who was holding his baby sister, Charlotte.

"I was with Jeramiah and Caleb. I'm sorry I'm late for supper. We got . . ." he couldn't tell her where they'd been and his heart lurched in his chest as he tried to think up a quick and believable excuse.

"It doesn't matter," she said with a frustrated wave of her hand. "Go upstairs and clean yourself up. Hurry, we have to leave right away." Without another word she spun on her heel and rushed into the parlor.

Fear engulfed Jacob as he hurried after his mother. "Leave?" he asked. He couldn't leave. They'd just found a treasure.

"Why are we leaving? Where are we going? When will we be coming back?" the questions tumbled out in rapid-fire succession, not giving his mother time to answer the first before he'd asked the next one.

"Jacob, we don't have time for this," she said, her mouth drawing into a thin line as she shooed him along. "Hurry on upstairs and clean up. The trunks are already on the wagon.

"But the sun is setting," he told her. "Why aren't we waiting for morning if we have to go?"

He had to let Jeramiah and Caleb know that his family was leaving Savannah so they could make plans to retrieve the treasure when he returned.

"Stop dawdling, Jacob," his father told him as he came into the room. "Do as your mother told you. We have no time for your foolishness."

"But, Father, what's happening? I thought we were staying here until harvest. I don't want to leave," Jacob pleaded.

"Boy, don't you sass me. You do as you're told. Now get upstairs and clean yourself up."

"What's happened?" Jacob was near tears as it finally dawned on him that his father was truly worried. The look in John Blanchett's eyes bordered on fear as Jacob watched the silent communication between his parents, before he turned back to his son.

"Jacob," he said, putting a heavy hand on his son's narrow, trembling, shoulders. "I just found out this afternoon that the Yankees fired on Fort Sumter three days ago. War has started and I need to send

you, your mother, and your sister to my brother's place in San Francisco. You'll be safe there until this silliness is over."

John gave his son's shoulder a gentle squeeze as he looked Jacob in the eye. "I'm depending on you to be the man of the house until I come for you. Okay?"

"What about you, papa?" Jacob asked, fighting back tears. "Why can't you come too?"
Something terrible would happen if his father stayed behind, it was one of those things he just knew.

"I have to do my duty to the Confederacy, son. We can't let Mr. Lincoln ruin our way of life. We have to fight for what we hold dear. South Carolina has already ceded from the Union. This is war, son. Do you understand?"

Sullenly, Jacob nodded his head yes. He did understand. He was never going to see his father again.

He rubbed at his eyes with one hand while he slipped the other into his pocket and grasped the key hidden there. A flash of insight came to his mind the moment his fingers touched the warm metal. He would never see his treasure again, either. But it would be there to be found when the time was right.

Jacob glanced at his two-year-old sister and a warmth spread through him before he slowly went up the steps to prepare for the long trip west.

Chapter One



Carly Harden couldn't believe that she'd finally told the truth to the team. That she knew they were uccisori: elite vampire slayers with a lineage that dated back to the First Crusades. Each of them blessed with inherent gifts to help them in their relentless battle against the undead.

She'd known their secret the entire three years that she'd been working at The Blue Mermaid. Practically from the first day she walked through the door and asked Gabe Collins and Tony Sargento for a job, she'd been treated like a friend. Almost as though they had known then, that she would be part of their inner circle.

Though she'd wanted to tell them for some time that she knew their secret, something kept telling her the time wasn't right. So, she played the game with them. Even as she and Sheila became closer friends, Carly held back. She'd nearly slipped and let the cat out of the bag a few weeks ago, when she and Sheila were chatting in the ladies room about Sheila's denial of her feelings for Hunter.

She'd expected them to be surprised when she finally came clean about it, but Tony's anger was a bit of a shocker. And honestly, it sort of hurt her feelings. His harsh words still scraped at her heart and she shoved them out of her mind as she plastered a big toothy grin on her face. Her shoulders lifted in relief that she no longer had to hide what she knew from her friends.

She placed the empty tray she had in her hands, on the bar and called out the drink order she needed for her friends. "I need the usual for Tony and his pals. Looks like their having another pow-wow, so keep them coming"

"Will do, Carly," Ben, the bar tender, said as he started filling glasses with ice.

Carly turned around and leaned her back against the bar as she took in the nearly empty restaurant and continued to reflect on her time in Savannah.

From the moment she crossed the Talmadge Bridge that separated South Carolina and Georgia, she'd felt as though she'd finally come home. It was like she'd been drawn to the city by some higher power. But that was just fine with Carly.

She loved Savannah and she loved her friends. She was beginning to put down roots here and the wanderlust that had plagued her since leaving home at the age of sixteen, seemed to have been sated. She had no desire to ever leave this beautiful city.

She had a job she loved in a place where the people treated her like family. Crushing on her boss, notwithstanding. And, to top it all off, the best friend she'd ever had, had shown up out of the blue a little over a month before.

Could my life get any better? She asked herself, letting a small, private smile tilt her wide, full, mouth.

Other than that stupid argument with Tony the day before, about her helping the team with their research, Carly was feeling pretty content with her life. Sure, she'd love to have a man that loved her, and wouldn't take her for granted, to curl up with at night, but that didn't mean she'd settle for anything less than what she deserved.

Respect. Appreciation. Love.

Was that too much to ask for? She didn't think so. She'd been doing pretty darn well for herself since she'd left Indiana all those years ago.

Now if a certain chef would just get his head out of his ass and realize that his soulmate was right in front of his face—

Something that felt like a steel band wrapped itself around her waist and jerked her backwards and a large hand slipped across her chest to tear her out of her musings. The scream that unleashed itself from her rapidly closing throat could have shattered the crystal hanging above the bar.

Fear like that which she'd only experienced once before, when she'd lived in Atlanta with Scarlett and her family, overtook her. Her heart leapt into her throat, pounding hard enough to nearly crack her ribcage.

The way her assailant had grabbed her trapped her left arm to her side, leaving her right arm free. Moving as though her body were taken over by someone else, Carly stomped her foot into the instep of the person who had grabbed her and at the same time, threw her elbow, with every ounce of force she could muster, into his solar plexus.

The grip on her loosened with an audible "oof" that gave her a moment of pride.

She spun around with her right fist clinched and cocked back, ready to swing. Until she got a good look at the man responsible for the assault.

"Rhett James, you stupid ass!" She cried out, grinning and jumping into his arms. She beat his chest calling him names as he laughed at her. "You're just lucky my reflexes are rusty or I'd have had you on your butt."

“I know. I’m the one who taught you those moves, after all,” he said with a wide smile splitting his features. “Man, you look fantastic! Where’s my hello kiss?”

Carly pulled his face to hers and planted a loud, smacking, kiss on his lips.



Tony Sargento was still laughing at how Hunter’s face had gone pale and slack-jawed when Sheila had stated, “I’m eating for two now.”

When Hunter had asked her, in an uncharacteristically falsetto tone if she was pregnant and she’d stated in an offhand manner, “Not yet, but I’m working on it,” Tony and everyone else at the table—the entire team as a matter of fact—nearly fell out of their chairs laughing.

“You are not the least bit funny, Maxson,” Hunter growled at Sheila, his face flushed as his friends continued to laugh. It was obvious to all that he was fighting a losing battle with a grin.

“Sure I am. They’re laughing,” she said, with a wry smile as she nodded her head at the rest of the team.

At that moment, an eardrum piercing scream rent the air, sending everyone at the table into battle mode as they jumped to their feet and rushed to the bar, where the cry had originated.

There, next to the long mahogany bar, stood a man as big as Simon and just as dark. His arms were around Carly’s waist, holding her tightly against him, as she beat against his massive chest screeching unintelligibly.

Tony was the first to move, wanting to free her from the giant’s grip before he crushed the breath from her. He’d gotten two steps away from the group when Scarlett, his waitress and Carly’s best friend, grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

Tony fought her grip until Scarlett yelled at him, “That’s just my brother, Rhett, Tony! He’s not hurting her, I promise.”

“She screamed,” he said in a hard, clipped tone, and tried to get to Carly again.

“She’s just happy to see him. I told you he was coming in today,” Scarlett told him, her dark caramel face flushed and her espresso eyes glittering with excitement as she looked up at him. Her perfectly arched brows came together in a thoughtful V. “Didn’t I?”

“Dammit, Scarlett,” he growled, staring at Carly and Scarlett’s brother. “No, you didn’t. What the hell is he doing to her now? Is she kissing him?”

The outrage and jealousy that sent his voice to the stratosphere, had the rest of the team choking back their laughter and trying to hide their smiles.

“Tony,” Sheila said, walking over to him. “Either you make a move, or he’ll bulldoze you right out of her life.

Hearing the commotion at the entrance to the bar, Carly looked over in time to see Scarlett grabbing Tony’s arm and pulling him back. As Scarlett informed the group behind her that the man Carly was kissing was Rhett, Carly grinned down at the man holding her high enough that her feet didn’t even touch the ground.

The fury she read on Tony’s face made her heart flutter like a butterfly’s wings before it settled down to a normal beat.

So, she thought to herself, Tony thinks he can tell me what to do like he has a right? I’ll show him.

She looked down at Rhett and gave him another long smacking kiss that no one could miss, before she pushed against his chest to let Rhett know that she wanted to be put back down.

The look of outrage on Tony’s face was priceless, as Carly introduced Rhett to the rest of her friends. She knew that Scarlett should have done the honors but Carly couldn’t help rubbing a little more salt into the wound as she expounded on Rhett’s every virtue.

Rhett smiled down at her as he draped his arm around Carly’s shoulders. “You keep talking like that, sugar baby, and I’ll just have to marry you.”

Carly laughed at the inside joke, knowing that Rhett wasn’t really proposing to her.

Of course, she thought, if a certain someone decided to believe that it is an offhand proposal, well then, that is just his problem now isn’t it?

Scarlett laughed at their antics then threw her arms around her brother and pulled him in for a hug. “I thought you were going to meet us at the house?” she asked, as he let her go with a wide grin.

“I got into town a little sooner than I planned,” he told her. “So I thought I’d stop by here and see if my two favorite ladies were still hard at work. Plus, I wanted to surprise you.”

Scarlett snorted one of her unlady-like laughs. “You succeeded from what we heard. Maybe Tony had better check the windows to see if any of them shattered from that screech of Carly’s. I thought I taught you better than that, girl.”

“Hey, I was busy, and he snuck up on me,” Carly defended as she crossed her arms under her breasts. “And my reflexes are a little rusty but I got in a couple of good hits, didn’t I, Rhett?”

Rubbing his right side, Rhett grinned down at her, but didn’t say a word.

“Are your bags in the car?” Scarlett asked, looking around for his luggage.

“Yep. So, where am I sleeping?” Rhett shot both women a questioning look before his rich dark-chocolate eyes settled back at Carly.

“In the guest room,” Carly informed him. “Scarlett and I can share my room and you can have her room.”

With the new living arrangements, it would be just like old times. The three of them living in the same house, the only family she’d had since she’d left home so many years ago.

“He can have the apartment upstairs. The one across from Chuck’s place,” Tony interrupted, his tone firm.

“But it’s not even furnished, Tony,” Carly told him pointedly. He returned the look without batting an eye, his handsome face set in a stern mask.

What the hell is he thinking? Carly thought, as Rhett raised an eyebrow in Tony’s direction.

“There’s plenty of furniture in the attic. We can haul it down for him,” Tony continued. “It will do until he can find what he wants. He’s not staying at your house, Carly.”

She parked her fists on her hips, still in the circle of Rhett’s arms, and stepped closer to Tony. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Rhett let his arm drop from Carly’s shoulder and took a short step to the side as Carly and Tony moved closer to each other. By the time they’d stopped moving they were almost nose to nose.

“Um, hey, it’s not a big deal.” Rhett’s words went unheard as the two entered a verbal battle.

Tony glared at Carly, his nostrils flaring in anger. “Use your God-given common sense, Carly! What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” she mimicked, her voice going shrill. “Who died and left you the boss of me?”

Great, Carly thought to herself, now I sound like Chandra.

“You strut around here like you’re the king of the freaking world, ordering people around and telling them how to live their lives.”

With each word, Carly poked a finger in Tony’s direction. “And by God I’ve had it. You don’t have the right to tell me what to do!”

“I’m not trying to tell you how to live your life,” Tony growled, his jaw locked.

“You could have fooled me.”

“Well, that wouldn’t be too hard right now, would it?” Tony ground out, leaning into her personal space.

“Go to hell, Sargento!” Carly snarled, pushing against Tony’s chest before she turned back to Rhett.

“Why are you being so stubborn, Carly?” Tony asked, grabbing her arm and forcing her to turn back and face him. “You haven’t seen this guy in how many years and now you want him to move right in? I’m not having it!”

She jerked her arm from his loose grip and pushed against his chest. “I don’t give a sh—”

Sheila let out one of her famous ear-splitting whistles, cutting off Carly’s last word.

“Do I have to kick both of your asses?” the tall, stunning blond demanded, her blue eyes snapping fire. “Both of you need to chill and take a step back.”

She shook her head. “You two test the patience of a plaster saint, for God’s sake. Get a room already.”

Carly’s face flamed as she glared at Sheila. She was one of Carly’s best friends and she’d confessed her feelings about Tony to her in confidence. How could Sheila blurt something like that out in front of him like that in the middle of the restaurant?

“Carly,” Rhett said softly. “I’m sorry, but I think your friend is right.”

“No she isn’t right!” Carly said, her face flaming even more. “There’s absolutely no sexual tension here. I’m fine. I’m calm. Tony is the one being an arrogant ass.”

She crossed her arms under her ample breasts, lifting them just enough to enhance her cleavage over the top of the pale blue neckline of her soft knit, uniform shirt.

Rhett grinned at her and then looked at Scarlett, who was looking everywhere except at Carly and was obviously trying to hide a smile of her own.

“I was talking about Tony,” Rhett clarified. “Staying with you and Scarlett at your place isn’t going to work. I love my sister and I love you, Sugar Baby, but it would just be too crowded. The room upstairs would be perfect. I don’t need much more than a bed and a table for my computer.”

“Good, then you won’t have a problem at my house,” Carly argued. “There’s a bed in the guest room and a table in the kitchen. You’re all set.”

She’d be damned if she’d let Tony have his way in this. It wasn’t right that he should try to tell Carly who she could have stay at her own house.

“Yeah, but, I’ve had your cooking before, Carly.” Rhett shrugged slightly, with a sheepish chuckle. “And here, I can just come downstairs for a fantastic meal any time I want.”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean by that?” she asked, not sure if she was insulted because it was true or that he’d made the remark in front of Tony.

“Your house is too small,” Tony clarified before Rhett could say another word. “You don’t need a strange man staying with two single women.”

“He’s Scarlett’s brother, for God’s sake! He’s not a stranger. And stop telling me what to do, Tony. I’ve known him a hell of a lot longer than I’ve known you.”

Before the war could begin again, Rhett spoke up. “Carly, *stop!* Think for a minute instead of going off your anger. When you get mad you do things just for spite or to prove yourself right, no matter what. Now just calm down and listen to reason. Your friend is right. It’s best if I stay here.”

He moved closer again and lifted her chin with his finger until their eyes met. “Besides, if I’m staying in the same house with you, you might not be able to resist sneaking into my room to have your wicked way with me.”

Carly let out a breath and knocked his hand away, laughing at his stupid joke.

“You are such a goof. I have no problem keeping my hands off of your body. And my ‘way’ isn’t as wicked as you might think, Rhett James.”

She bit her tongue before she could finish the thought. There was no way anyone here needed to know that Rhett wouldn’t know anything about her “way” as he stated previously. Especially with the lethal aura emanating from Tony at that moment.

“So, how much is the rent, Tony?” Rhett asked, turning to face the rest of the group.

“Well now, my friend,” Chuck spoke up, a lock of his chestnut hair falling across his dark brows. “It’s a bit steep but we make due. I have to be at his beck and call at all hours of the night and day. My time’s valuable, you see.”

Chuck grinned as everyone around them chuckled at the frown that crossed Rhett’s face.

“But if you’re talking hard currency,” Chuck continued. “That would be zero dollars, monthly.”

“How do you make any money on rent if you don’t charge anyone?” Rhett asked, turning to face Tony. “I don’t understand.”

“I just run the place. The charges are set by the owner,” Tony said bluntly.

“Where’s the owner?” Rhett asked, looking from one face to the other as the room dropped into a heavy silence at his words. “What did I say? Would someone please tell me what’s going on here?”

“The owner, Gabe Collins, died a year ago, Rhett,” Chase Nightly, the team leader told him in a subdued tone, his green eyes sad. “His uncle’s been taking care of things until the estate is settled. We’re all hoping that Tony goes ahead and buys the place but until everything’s settled through probate, there’s not a whole lot more we can do.”

Chase ran a hand through his dark hair and turned away from the others. “I’m heading out on patrol. You guys have your assignments. Rhett, it was nice to meet you, finally. I’m looking forward to getting to know you better.”

He stepped around Tony and Scarlett, offering his hand to the other man. “Give me a call tomorrow afternoon and we’ll see what we can do about you joining our team. Scarlett’s been a hell of an asset to us so far.”

“Thank you, Mr. Nightly,” Rhett said as he shook Chase’s hand.

“It’s Chase, and you’re welcome.” He dropped his hand and smiled at Rhett. “Carly or Scarlett can give you my number, but please wait until after four to call. I teach Social Studies classes at the middle school until three and my students like to chat a bit before they head out.”

“I will, Chase. And thanks for being so good to my sister.” Rhett playfully pulled Carly to his side once more, and added, “and to this one. I know she can be a real pain sometimes but it’s all part of her charm.”

As Tony stood back, his eyes focused on Carly’s face and the smile she bestowed on Scarlett’s brother. Something not all together comfortable simmered around the edges of his mind and he recognized it as jealousy. Where it originated and why he felt it every time he thought of Carly and Rhett, he couldn’t seem to grasp. But it was there and try as he might, he couldn’t seem to squelch the feeling that Rhett James was poaching on his territory.

He knew that Carly had dated other men since he’d hired her, and had even slept with a few, though she never broadcast her private life to others. He didn’t eavesdrop on her emotions to find out. He’d pretty much blocked out everyone around him on a routine basis.

His empathic gift was a bitch otherwise.

Before he could complete the thought his cell phone vibrated in his pocket, followed by the childish rendition of *I’m A Gummy Bear*. He recognized it immediately as the ringtone his six year old son, Davis, had chosen for his mother’s number, when they’d visited Tony the month before.

Tony pulled the phone from his pocket and stepped around Carly and Rhett as they spoke to Chase. As he passed Carly, he said in a low tone that only she could hear, “We’ll discuss this later.” And then made his way back into the now empty dining room.

He pulled out a chair to make himself comfortable while he talked with Davis, for he could sense that was who was calling.

“Hey, Buddy, how are you doing?” he asked

When a nearly hysterical little voice said, “Daddy?” every muscle in Tony’s body tightened to the point of pain. Something was terribly wrong.

“What’s wrong, Davis?” he asked, trying to keep his own voice calm.

“Gramma said Mommy had to go to heaven yesterday and she can never come home. I don’t want her to go to heaven. Can you make her come back? Please Daddy, make Mommy come back.” Davis’ voice hiccupped as the words came through the phone so fast, it was difficult to understand what the boy was trying to say.

A cold so deep it penetrated his bones, sent a shudder through Tony. He couldn’t have heard right. He just couldn’t have understood Davis. His son was crying so hard his words were getting mixed up.

That's all it is, Tony thought, he's gotten confused about something his grandmother said.

“Davis, I can't understand what you're saying, son. Slow down now and tell me what's going on, okay?”

He stood frozen to the spot, waiting for Davis to answer, one hand on the chair he'd pulled out and the other clutching the phone to his ear so tightly his knuckles had whitened. Before his next breath could be drawn, Shelly's mother gently took the phone from Davis.

“Tony,” Sarah said, with an audible sniffle. He could hear the tears in her voice as she spoke his name. He could sense the inconsolable grief that swamped the older woman, even from the distance to New York City.

Oh, God, please don't let it be true, Tony prayed silently, closing his eyes tightly knowing that it was a futile plea.

“Shelly was in a car accident last night.”

There was a brief pause as Tony's heart pounded with dread. “She didn't make it, Tony. My little girl is gone.”

In that moment, he forgot to breathe. His lungs were on fire and white points of light flashed across his vision. He felt like a spectator watching as the events unfolded before him. His mind refused to accept what his ears had heard. He dragged in a ragged breath and let it out slowly.

He and Shelly had never really been in love. They'd been friends for so many years they'd both lost track. Then, one night almost seven years ago while Tony was visiting his parents in the city, he and Shelly had run into each other at a favorite restaurant. One thing had led to another and after several drinks and a walk down memory lane, they'd ended up spending the night together. Thankfully, that one night didn't ruin a lifelong friendship, but they'd both agreed that it shouldn't have happened and would never happen again.

Tony had returned to Savannah and Shelly had returned to her life. Then, six weeks after his return, Shelly had called him to let him know that he was going to be a father. Being the honorable man he'd been brought up to be, he offered to marry her. She'd laughed long and hard at his proposal. At first he was embarrassed and a little hurt but then, he too, found the humor in it.

The mutual decision was made that once the child was born, they would share custody. Tony wanted to be involved in his child's life and even offered to move back to New York to be with her and the baby. Shelly refused even that offer, knowing that Tony was where he needed to be and moving back to The Big Apple, would only make him miserable.

Now, in the blink of an eye, Tony had lost not only the mother of his son, but one of the best friends he'd ever known.

“I’m coming up,” he said, after regaining his voice. “I’ll get the first plane out. I’ll call you back as soon as I get the itinerary.”

Sarah’s tremulous voice was barely audible when she spoke again. “I don’t know what to do, Tony. I love my grandson so much. He’s all I have left of my only child.”

“But,” she said in a somewhat stronger tone. “Davis needs his father. He has . . . special things that he needs to learn. Things that you need to teach him, Tony.”

His heart lodged itself solidly in his throat and he had to swallow several times as the reality of what Sarah was telling him sank in.

Davis was showing bloodline tendencies. Beyond that, she was telling him that she wanted him to bring Davis to Savannah to be with him, to train him as uccisore.

“We can discuss all of this when I get there,” he said. “In the meantime, try to keep my boy calm, Sarah. Tell him I’m coming up today if I have to charter a private plane to get there. Okay?”

“Okay, Tony. And thank you. He . . .we, need you.”

“I know, Sarah. I’ll call you back as soon as I get the flight information.”

For almost five minutes after Sarah disconnected, Tony stood staring into space. His mind was numb and he could swear he could hear the blood as it rushed through his veins. He counted his heartbeats, his mind filled with flashes of memories of Shelly. The image of her smiling face as she looked down at their son the day he was born lingered in his mind’s eye.

No, he hadn’t been in love with Shelly. But he had loved her and losing her was leaving a hole in his life. A hole he wasn’t sure anyone else could adequately fill.

He heard Carly’s laugh echo from the bar area and the brief thought that, maybe, someone could fill that hole after all, flashed across his mind.

That thought immediately fled as he hurried back to his friends. He had a lot to do in a very short period of time and he was going to need help getting it done.

Everyone had left except for Chuck, Rhett, Carly and Scarlett, who were all moving toward the kitchen. He caught up to them quickly and found that his voice failed him. He grabbed Carly’s arm, gently, to get her attention.

She spun around to face her boss, fury still simmering in her eyes at his unnecessary and highly unusual bossiness toward her earlier.

“Don’t start on me again, Tony. I’m in no mood—” She looked up into his ashen face and damp eyes. “What’s wrong? Is Davis okay?”

He presumed that she’d recognized the ringtone when Tony stepped around her to take the call. After all, she was the one who helped Davis find it for his mother’s number.

At the fear in her eyes for his son, Tony realized how much Carly cared. He appreciated the sentiment more than she would ever know.

“Davis is fine. Just hurting and scared.” He drew in a long, slow breath at her questioning look and continued.

“It’s Shelly.” He cleared his throat and looked away for a brief moment, then his eyes met hers once more. “She was killed in a car accident last night, Carly.”

Carly’s eyes widened with shock, her hand covering her open mouth as tears glimmered her eyes.

He cleared his throat again. “I have to go to New York as soon as possible. I’m taking the first plane out that I can get. I need to make some calls. Have a rental car waiting. God, I don’t have any idea how to help my little boy with this. And this place. I just . . .” His words drifted into silence as desolation took over.

“Oh, God, Tony. I’m so sorry. What can I do to help?” She put her arms around his neck and pulled him to her tightly, her energy warm and comforting.

His arms went automatically around her and he held on for several moments, basking in her consoling embrace. He’d known she would set aside her anger at him and do whatever she could to make things easier for anyone in need. It was just who she was. What she didn’t know was that he needed her at that moment like he’d never needed another human being.

Yes, he thought. Carly could fill the hole that Shelly’s death had made.

He pulled away from Carly then before his emotions drew him in a direction he wasn’t ready or willing to go.

“Can you cover the restaurant for a few days?” he asked, dropping his arms to his sides and taking a step back. “And call Danny and tell him that I need him to cover the kitchen for me while I’m gone. Let the rest of the team know what’s going on, too.”

“Of course. No problem,” Carly said, her voice sincere. “Tell Davis I’m sorry. Shelly’s mother must be devastated. I don’t know how she’s capable of coherent thought at a time like this. That poor woman.”

“I’ll be bringing Davis back with me, Carly,” he said, stopping her commiseration. “I’m going to be asking a lot more from you until I can get him settled. He’s just lost his mother and I’m going to need to be with him as much as possible to help him through this.”

“No problem. You just do what you need to do; your son needs you. We can deal with whatever comes up around here, so you just don’t worry about this place until you’re ready.”

Carly wiped away the stray tear that had escaped down her cheek as she spoke. “Now, go get your kid and get back here with him. I can’t wait to spoil the little booger even more than I did last time he was here.”

Tony opened his mouth to tell her how much he appreciated her, but nothing would come out. The words just weren't there at that moment. He nodded and, as though he'd only just realized there were others in the room that heard and saw what had just happened, cleared his throat again.

"I'll get Rhett settled in the flat, Tony," Chuck said, his normally jovial disposition subdued. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you. I'll help out around here as much as I can while you're gone, as well. And I'll let Chase know about it."

"Thanks, Chuck. I owe you, man." Tony said, nodding to his friend and teammate. "You know where the keys are to the apartment."

Chuck nodded and Tony turned to Scarlett and Rhett, trying to think of what to say. He'd been acting like an ass and now he was going to have to ask them all for help. He wouldn't blame Rhett if he'd told Tony to kiss his black ass.

"Rhett, I'm sorry about earlier." He held out his hand and Rhett took it, shaking once before Tony let his hand drop to his side. "Scarlett, I'm hoping you can give Carly a hand around here too. She's going to have a lot to deal with running the floor and being temporary overall manager."

"No worries, Tony. You can count on all of us to do whatever needs doing," Scarlett told him, giving him a quick, comforting hug. "Now go make those calls. We'll get someone to take you to the airport as soon as you're packed."

"Thanks, Scarlett. Thank you all." Tony said, rushing out the back door to the parking lot, without a backward glance.



Within two hours, Tony was settling himself into the window seat in Coach, which was the only available seating, on his way to Charlotte, North Carolina where he would catch a connecting flight to JFK in New York.

He watched as white fluffy clouds drifted beneath the wide white wings of the USAir Express CRJ900 jet. He tried not to think of how much his little boy's life was going to change and how much pain the child was in at that very moment. He only hoped that he could do enough to help Davis through this and be the kind of father the boy needed.

He'd taken it for granted that Shelly would always be there for their son. Leaving New York and going to Savannah was supposed to keep them both safe from Tony's uccisore lifestyle. Shelly was supposed to watch their son grow up, graduate from college, become his own man.

She wasn't supposed to die at the age of thirty-three, leaving a six year old boy to be raised by a part-time father whose job was more dangerous than a cop's beat in New York. She was supposed to find some guy, fall in love, get married, and give Davis a half dozen little brothers and sisters so he would never be alone.

What would happen to Davis if Tony were killed by a vamp during patrol? Or what if the unthinkable happened and Tony were to be not killed but turned? Who would protect Davis from a father who wanted to do nothing more than tear out his throat and drain every drop of blood from his little body until there was no life left in him?

That train of thought had Tony's heart rate going into the stratosphere and a clammy sweat soaking through his shirt. He rubbed his hands over his face and then pushed them through his hair, gripping it until the pain in his scalp burned away the horrifying images.

The announcement that the plane would soon be landing in Charlotte, brought Tony to the realization that no matter what his macabre imagination could dream up to torture him with, he had to do whatever came next. At that moment, that was getting to New York without driving himself insane with "what ifs."

After over four hours in the air and another forty-five minutes waiting for his bags to show up on the carousel and then hailing a cab, Tony found himself standing on the doorstep of Sarah Mitchell's large brick home. He'd decided to forgo renting a car since getting to his son as quickly as possible was his top priority. He could always call Enterprise to bring a car if need be.

He pressed the lighted doorbell and could hear the muted chimes inside the large brick home. It only took a moment for the door to open and Sarah to throw her arms around his neck. Great heaving sobs wracked the older woman as she wept into his shoulder, clinging to him on the doorstep.

Tony had always tried to block his empathic abilities, especially around those who were grieving. Their emotions could overwhelm him to the point that he would become just as distraught as the one hurting. He couldn't deal with so much agony because it would never be just one person's emotions he would feel. He would pick up everyone in the vicinity's pain and it would be too much for him to deal with.

So he had learned to close himself off, sometimes to the point that many thought him unfeeling and uncaring. Cold and emotionless.

But he couldn't stop himself from feeling Sarah's pain. His own loss of Shelly cut deeply, leaving him vulnerable to the emotions spilling out of the older woman. To lose a child was the hardest thing a parent would ever have to cope with. If Tony lost Davis, he knew it would very possibly destroy him.

After another moment, Sarah pulled away, her red-rimmed eyes focusing on his face. "I'm so sorry, Tony. I didn't mean to break down right here on the doorstep where all the neighbors could see. Come on in."

She stepped aside as he retrieved the suitcase he'd set aside before ringing the doorbell. "Don't worry about it, Sarah. I know you're still trying to deal with everything. I can't imagine what you must be going through."

The problem was that he didn't have to imagine it. He could feel every emotion emanating from her in torrential waves. He drew in a long, cleansing breath, and let it out slowly, to muffle the roaring in his mind as he stepped through the door.

Sarah closed it behind them as Tony stepped into a neat, pleasant living area. "Where do you want me to put my bag?" he asked. "I hope you don't mind me staying here. I need to be with Davis."

"Of course you'll stay here," Sarah reassured him, twisting her hands nervously and giving him a sad smile. "I wouldn't have it any other way, Tony."

Before either of them could say anything more, Davis cried out, "Daddy!" and raced across the room into Tony's waiting arms.

"Daddy," the boy wailed, his eyes red and swollen from crying. "Are you going to make Mommy come back?"

What the hell am I supposed to do? He asked himself. *There's nothing I can do to ease his pain.* He wanted to do exactly what his little boy demanded but there was no way for that to happen.

"Oh, Buddy," Tony whispered, kneeling down to stare into his son's anguished face. "I wish I could. I really wish I could."

He lifted the shattered child into his arms and held him as he wept piteously into Tony's neck. He rubbed his big hand over Davis' back to soothe and comfort his little boy.

He carried Davis to the sofa and sat down. It took several more minutes before the loud heaving sobs slowed to sniffles, while Tony held him close.

"I know you're scared and you miss your mom," Tony said, as his son quieted. "But I promise you that she will always be with you in here."

Tony laid his palm over Davis' heart. "You know how I know that?" he asked.

Davis shook his head and looked up into his daddy's face.

"Because I had a really good friend, Gabe, you remember Gabe, don't you?" When Davis nodded, Tony continued. "Well, I can still hear him in my head sometimes and he's always looking out for me and the rest of my friends."

"Does he look out for Carly and Sheila and Chase, too?" Davis asked, his expression slowly changing from distraught to pensive.

“Oh yes,” Tony said with a smile and a nod. “All of us. And as time goes by, you will hear your mom inside your head, guiding you. Telling you how proud she is of you and probably scolding you when you do something you know you shouldn’t be doing. Moms are like that. They have this secret radar that tells them when you’re being naughty even when they are nowhere around.”

He hugged Davis tightly before looking him in the eye. “Your mother loves you, Davis. You can’t ever think that she left you because she wanted to. Okay?”

Davis nodded again and rubbed his fist across his eyes to wipe away his tears. “Why did she have to go to heaven?” he asked. “I don’t want her to be in heaven, Daddy.”

Tony’s heart broke and he fought back his own tears as he searched for an answer to his little boy’s question. He looked over to where Sarah had been sitting quietly watching them, pleading silently to her to help him answer that question.

When no answer was forthcoming, he took another long slow breath and said, “I don’t want her to be in heaven either, Davis. But, sometimes, God needs a special angel and when that happens he has to choose the most wonderful person on earth to be that special angel. He picked Mommy because he has something that only she can do.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony watched Sarah slowly rise from her seat and move toward the kitchen. He and Davis sat quietly, neither of them doing anything more than listening to Sarah rattling dishes on the other side of the door.

A few minutes later, she came back into the living room carrying a tray with a bright red teapot, two cups, a glass of milk, and a large plate of Ding Dongs. The sight of the round, foil wrapped chocolate treats, brought a huge grin to both Tony’s and Davis’ faces.

“Like father like son,” Sarah said with a forced smile, her eyes still misty. “Davis loves these silly things as much as you do, Tony. I can’t keep them in the house when he’s around. But I picked up a few boxes this morning. I thought we could all have them with some tea. And milk for Davis, of course.”

She set the tray on the long, glass topped, coffee table. “I know you would probably prefer coffee, Tony. But I think tea would be more soothing for all of us.”

“Tea’s perfect, Sarah. And thank you for going to so much trouble,” Tony said meaningfully, as he watched Sarah pour the steaming brew into the three cups.

“Daddy?” Davis asked as he looked over at his grandma.

“What, Buddy?”

Big, damp brown eyes that looked too big for his face, looked up at Tony. “Where am I going to live now that I can’t live at home anymore?”

“Well,” Tony said as Sarah set a cup of tea in front of him with a rattle, sloshing the tea over the rim and into the saucer. “I was hoping that you’d want to come live with me in Savannah.”

Davis looked over at his grandmother then back at his father. “But what about Gramma? She’ll be all alone here.”

Tony glanced at Sarah’s face as she battled back tears he knew were close to falling once more. Without a second thought he said, “You know, Gramma can come too, if she wants. I have a big house with lots of bedrooms. And if she decides to come with us, she can be with you when I have to work. She can pick you up from school and she can even bring you over to the restaurant once in a while so we can all eat dinner together. How does that sound?”

“Oh, Tony,” Sarah said, her voice cracking with emotion. He could see the light coming into her eyes at his veiled invitation and her battle against the tears was lost. She covered her mouth with trembling fingertips. “Do you mean it?”

“Well of course, Sarah. How on earth could Davis and I function without you there to keep us in line? We need you, don’t we, Davis?” He looked down at his son’s answering grin and realized that the grip on his heart had loosened considerably.

It was the perfect solution to all of the doubts and worries that had plagued Tony since the moment he’d heard of Shelly’s death so many hours ago. And taking Davis away from his grandmother would be one trauma to his son that Tony could prevent.

“Well?” Tony asked Sarah. “How about it? Do you want to come live with Davis and me in Savannah? I’m sure Grace Nightly would appreciate any help you could give her at the Historic Society. She’s always saying how shorthanded they are and I know how much you enjoy that kind of thing here.”

“Oh, Tony,” she repeated, nodding tearfully. “I think I’d like that very much.”

“It’s settled then,” he said with exaggerated excitement, hoping that Davis would be a little less sad now that he knew he wouldn’t have to move away from his gramma. “We’ll work it all out in the morning.”

“Daddy?”

“What is it, Buddy?”

“Do I have to go to school there, too?” the boy asked, looking up into his father’s eyes.

With a shocked, snorting laugh, Tony looked down at his son’s pleading face. “Of course you have to go to school, Davis.”

“Can we vote on that?” Davis asked with a huff as he crossed his arms over his narrow chest.

“This isn’t a democracy,” Tony informed him, choking back the laughter that bubbled inside of him. “There’s no ‘voting’ on it because you’re going to school.”

Tony glared at Sarah, daring her to let loose the laughter that he could see that she too, was battling.

“I think it’s past your bedtime, Davis. Come on,” Tony said, putting the boy on his feet. “I’ll tuck you in.”

Chapter Two



Carly sat back into the comfort of her well-used, overstuffed, sofa. It was good to get off her feet. Since Tony had been gone, she and Scarlett had been running themselves ragged trying to keep up with everything at The Blue Mermaid. She'd had no idea how much Tony really did at that place besides the majority of the cooking. She loved her job but the management of a business she would be happy to leave to someone else.

Carly Harden was not a paperwork kind of woman. She was a people person. She loved the interactions with her customers, making them feel as though they were the only one in the place and her whole attention was focused on them. It wasn't just the tips, though they were nothing to sneeze at during tourist season in Savannah, but the people in general.

There were as many different types of people as there were fish in the sea, her Grammy had always said, and Carly believed that.

Despite her hectic shift, coming home to relax with a glass of wine and good friends to vent to, was the perfect ending to a long, busy day. Sheila was curled up in the threadbare, floral print, wingback chair, her legs curled beneath her. Scarlett strutted in from the kitchen balancing a tray laden with chilled wine, assorted cheeses, a plate of fresh, green grapes, and a pile of white paper napkins, in one hand and three stemmed wineglasses in the other.

"Here," Carly said, jumping up and reaching for the heavy tray. "Let me help you with that.

"I've got it. You can take these glasses though."

"Food! Great," Sheila said, reaching for a cube of sharp cheddar and popping it into her mouth as Carly poured the wine. "I'm starving."

Carly laughed as she, too, selected a piece of cheese. "You are always hungry, Sheila. What makes today different?"

"You're a riot, Carly. Have you ever thought of doing standup?" Sheila deadpanned as she grabbed a small bunch of grapes and plucked one from its stem.

Carly shook her head and chuckled at her friend as she took a glass of wine and returned to her perch on the sofa. Scarlett sat down beside her and stretched out her long legs as she closed her eyes and sipped from her own glass of crisp white wine.

“You know,” she said wistfully. “You need to get yourself a hot tub.”

“Where would I put it?” Carly asked as she lifted her aching feet and settled them on the edge of the scarred wooden coffee table she’d found at a yard sale shortly after moving into the house she loved so much.

“Out in the back yard, of course. Where else would you put a hot tub?”

“There’s barely enough room back there to plant my flower bed.”

“You can always come to my house—or Michael’s house I mean,” Sheila offered, settling back in her chair. “Now that I’m with Hunter and we’re about to be married, my brother has that big house all to himself. He rarely ever used the hot tub anyway.”

“I don’t think I’d feel right using your brother’s hot tub, Sheila,” Carly said, then took another sip of wine.

“Why not?”

“I’d just feel weird asking. I don’t doubt he’d be okay with it but, I don’t know. I couldn’t do that unless you were there too.”

“Well, if you change your mind just say the word.” Sheila leaned forward to set her still half full wine glass on the coffee table beside Carly’s foot. “Have you heard from Tony today?”

“Yes, he calls me every day at the Mermaid, just to check on things. You know, problems, menus, that sort of thing.” Carly sighed softly and let the stresses of the day seep out of her body. Closing her eyes and leaning her head back to rest on the sofa, she continued. “I told him not to worry about that place. He needs to focus on Davis right now.”

“He calls you every day?” Sheila asked incredulously.

Carly opened her eyes and focused on Sheila’s face. “Of course. Why wouldn’t he? He’s been running the restaurant for Sam since Gabe died.”

The quick flash of pain that crossed Sheila’s face had Carly wishing she’d found a gentler way to mention the death of her dear friend. Gabe had been in love with Sheila and, even though she’d loved him like a brother, his death had caused her more grief, and guilt, than the rest of the team.

“I’m sorry, Sheila. I didn’t mean that the way it came out.”

“It’s okay, sweetie. I’m good,” she said, waving away Carly’s apology. “Hunter’s helped me get past a lot of issues and Gabe’s death was one of them. I don’t feel guilty about it anymore but I still mourn him.”

“We all do,” Carly gave her a sad smile as she spoke and Sheila nodded, brightening her own smile.

“Hunter may not take life seriously, but he does help me see the brighter side of things.

“So we’ve noticed,” Scarlett said with a wicked gleam in her dark eyes. “Right, Carly?”

“You are so right,” Carly answered enthusiastically. “It’s like she’s a completely different person. I’m tempted to tell the pod people who took our Sheila and replaced her with this nice one, they can keep the original with our deepest gratitude.”

“Oh, you suck, Carly,” Sheila said, flipping up her middle finger. “I’ve always been nice. I just kept that side covered with a bad attitude so it didn’t get scratched.”

That brought a round of guffaws and good natured comments about Sheila’s previous assaults on her betrothed as well as anyone else who had pissed her off.

“So, when is the boss-man coming back?” Scarlett asked, after the laughter died away.

“Shelly’s funeral was this afternoon,” Carly informed her friends. “He said they were going to be putting the houses up for sale and as soon as they get that settled he’d be heading back to Savannah.”

“Houses? Plural?” Sheila asked, arching a dark blond eyebrow.

“That’s what he said. Apparently Shelly’s mother will be moving to Savannah to help Tony with Davis’ care. He won’t need to hire a nanny that way. Plus, she’s already initiated into the uccisore life. That seems to be the perfect resolution to his dilemma. He can leave Davis without having to call someone at the last minute and won’t have to answer questions. I think that’s a wonderful solution.”

Carly’s eyes drifted closed again as she spoke. “I was worried about her, you know. Poor Sarah. Lost her husband five years ago and now she’s lost her only child and her grandson was moving hundreds of miles away. It was sad to think about her all alone. It’s too lonely knowing you have family so far away and can’t be with them.”

She fell silent as she thought of her mother and sister, melancholia taking over her mellow mood. As if with a mind of its own, her hand came to her chest, just above her breasts, to rest on the key she’d worn on a chain since it was given to her as a young child. A small smile tilted her pretty mouth as she thought of her grandmother and the story she’d told Carly when Grammy had given it to her.

“Uh, Carly?” Scarlett asked.

“Hmm?” The smile was still on her face and her eyes still closed, her fingers gently twining the gold chain.

“Would you like to be alone with yourself?”

Carly’s eyes popped open and a bark of laughter erupted from her as she faced her roommate, dropping her feet to the floor.

“Scarlett, you are a nut. No, I don’t want to be alone with myself, you idiot.”

“Well what were we supposed to think?” Scarlett asked, innocently. “You started feeling yourself up and then got that sexy grin on your face. I thought maybe you were having a fantasy about you and Tony and wanted to be alone.”

Sheila snorted and choked on her last sip of wine, spewing it all over herself and the coffee table.

Carly picked up one of the sofa pillows and threw it at Scarlett, who caught it before it could slam into her nose.

“You jerk!” Carly yelled between bouts of laughter. As she pulled the gold chain out from under the thin white shirt, she continued, holding the key up for her friends to see. “I was just thinking of my Grammy.”

“Oh, my God! You still have that? Do you still collect keys, Carly?” Scarlett asked, the wicked humor in her eyes replaced by curiosity.

“Of course I still have it. And yes, I still collect keys. As a matter of fact, this key is the reason I had to work at the Blue Mermaid.”

“A key made you want to work at the Mermaid?” Sheila asked, as she began wiping up the mess she’d made. “How on earth does that little gold key link you to a restaurant in Savannah, where you’d never been before?”

“This key absolutely made me want to work at the restaurant. You see, Sheila, when Grammy gave this key to me she told me the story of *The Mermaid’s Heart*. When I saw the sign outside The Blue Mermaid, I knew I had to go inside and see if they were hiring.”

“What is *The Mermaid’s Heart*?” Sheila asked.

A light of exhilaration gleamed in Carly’s dark eyes, causing the dimples in her cheeks to deepen as her smile widened.

“Oh, no, Sheila! Please don’t get her started?” Scarlett pleaded, then groaned when she saw Carly’s face. “Well, crap. Too late, she’s got that ‘it’s story time’ look on her face.”

Scarlett pushed herself from her chair and grabbed her empty glass. “I need more alcohol if I have to listen to that story again.”

“Ooo, me too!” Carly said, holding her glass out to Scarlett, playfully. Sheila drained the last sip from hers as well and held it out, munching on another cube of cheese.

“Hell, I might as well just bring another bottle in here,” Scarlett said and set her glass back down before heading to the kitchen.

“So tell me,” Sheila said, sitting back in her chair and tucking her mile long legs beneath her as she focused her attention on Carly.

“This key,” Carly said, swinging it a little as she spoke. “Was given to me by my maternal grandmother when I was nine years old.” The soft light from the lamp sent dazzling sparks of gold light dancing off of it and onto her face.

Scarlett returned with the bottle and refilled all three glasses. She set the bottle on the table, next to the empty one, with a soft clunk. “Do you still have that old cigar box full of keys?”

“Yes and it’s held together with duct tape and rubber bands. I really need to find something else to keep them in.”

“Get back to the story, Carly.” Sheila insisted, narrowing her eyes at Scarlett who groaned and flopped back on the couch. “The key?”

“Right. Anyway, when Grammy gave this to me she told me the story behind it.” Carly picked up her glass and took a sip before continuing with the family legend. She told Sheila of how her third—or was it her fourth?—great-grandmother Charlotte’s older brother, Jacob, and two of his friends had been visiting family in Savannah, in the spring of 1861. The boys had been playing in the woods and stumbled upon a hidden cave where they’d found three keys and a treasure chest.

“When they opened the chest they’d found it filled with gold and jewels,” Carly expounded with dramatic glee. “A pirate’s treasure to be sure. But, the chest had been too big and too heavy for the boys to carry out of the cave. So, they each took a key and made a pact that they would all return together the next day with a wagon to haul away their treasure and they would never tell a living soul what they’d found.

“They were supposed to meet the next afternoon,” Carly continued. “But when Jacob returned home he was forced to leave for California, along with his mother and baby sister. Fort Sumter had been fired upon and the Civil War had begun.”

“You mean, ‘The War of Northern Aggression’ had begun, Carly. Get your facts straight, girl,” Scarlett teased.

Carly ignored the jibe, rolling her eyes at Scarlett. “As I was saying, Jacob’s father was going to join the Confederate army and made plans to meet them in San Francisco after the war. This key has been passed down in my family ever since.”

“So did Jacob tell anyone about the treasure?”

“Nope. None except for Charlotte, that is, but that wasn’t until about seven years later. Right after their mother had died. Charlotte was...let me think.” She paused for a moment. “She was nine at the time and Jacob was around sixteen, I think Grammy said. He told the story to Charlotte and gave her the key, with the promise to never tell a soul. After their mother died, they’d been evicted, and lived homeless and hungry for nearly a year.”

“*Holy crap!*” Carly yelled, sitting bolt upright as a realization struck her, the sudden curse jolting the other women out of the story.

“Damn it, Carly, don’t do that!” Sheila groused as she wiped more spilled wine from her denim clad leg. “I spilled my wine all over me, again.”

“Sorry. I just can’t believe I never made the connection before,” Carly explained.

“What connection?” Scarlett asked.

“Charlotte was given the key when she was nine years old. Jacob and his friends found the key when Jacob was nine years old and Grammy gave me this key when I was nine years old.”

“You know, Carly,” Scarlett said, her face taking on what Carly knew to be her serious look. “Nine is a magical number. You say that all the women who possessed the key passed it on to their daughters when they were nine. It has to mean something. Female power, maybe.”

“Actually, Jacob found the key, not Charlotte,” Carly pointed out.

“Yes, but he was nine at the time and Charlotte was what? Two? He could have been the key’s protector until Charlotte was old enough to take possession of it.”

“That could be a possibility,” Carly agreed, nodding thoughtfully.

“Okay. Cute story, Carly, Sheila interjected. “But I still don’t get the connection to The Blue Mermaid.”

“One of the jewels they’d found in the treasure chest when Jacob and his friends opened it was a huge blue sapphire called The Mermaid’s Heart. Get it? Blue sapphire? Mermaid’s heart?”

At Sheila’s still confused face, Carly huffed out, “Geez, Sheila, really?”

“No, I get that part of it,” Sheila said. “I’m just amazed at how everything came together to bring you here to Savannah. You were on your way to Florida to find your sister, but first you stopped in Atlanta where you met Scarlett. The two of you hit it off, apparently, as though you’d been friends forever. Not to mention her twin brother is bloodline. That’s where you were indoctrinated into the world of vampires and uccisori.”

Carly bit into a cracker, her focus on Sheila as she plowed on. “When you left Atlanta, you landed here and got a job at a restaurant that, low and behold, is owned and operated by the Second to the local uccisore team leader.”

“Now,” Sheila looked at Scarlett as she continued to speak. “Scarlett, you and your brother, have also landed smack in the middle of that very same town and working at The Blue Mermaid. Sounds like way too much coincidence for my peace of mind.”

“Are you suggesting that we planned all of this, Sheila?” Scarlett asked, the insult rippling off of her like a heat wave. “Because if you are, I’m more than happy to face your ass on the sparring mat.”

“Oh, God no!” Sheila said, almost apologetically. Almost, Carly thought as she tried to hide a smile. “I didn’t mean that at all. I’m just saying that maybe it was destiny, or fate, or karma, or whatever you want to call it that brought us all together in the same place,”

“Okay,” Scarlett said as she picked up her wine to take a sip. “I get that, too, now that you’ve mentioned it. But, what I don’t get is where you’re going with that link,”

“I’m not going anywhere with it. I’m just highlighting some of the finer points of Carly’s story.” Sheila stretched her arms over her head. “Where the hell is Hunter? He’s supposed to be picking me up and I’m so tired I could fall asleep right here in this chair.”

“Maybe we should see if we can find the other two keys, Carly,” Scarlett suggested, ignoring Sheila’s scowl.

“I could do some research,” Carly offered. “Try to find out if there really is such a gem as The Mermaid’s Heart. See if there are any records of current owners, that kind of thing.”

“And maybe we can locate the other two keys while you’re at it.” Scarlett’s excitement had started to bubble over as she leaned closer to Carly.

“Sounds like loads of fun, ladies,” Sheila said, stretching her back. “On second thought, no it doesn’t. I’ll pass on the treasure hunting, I’d rather go out staking vampires. More fun and less chance of failure. Besides, my hands are full enough just keeping Hunter from getting himself killed.”

“Party pooper,” Carly said, then stuck out her tongue at her friend.

“Right, and all that sex has nothing to do with it either. Right Sheila?” Scarlett said.

“What can I say?” Sheila asked with a glimmer in her eyes and a huge smirk on her face. “The man loves me and wants to keep me happy. I’m not a stupid woman. When it comes to a choice between treasure hunting and multiple orgasms, what would you choose?”

“She’s got us there, Scarlett,” Carly said, with a deep sigh. “But she doesn’t have to rub it in with such relish.”

“Oh, sweetie, don’t worry. Tony will be back next week and he can clean out the cobwebs for you,” Scarlett said, in an overly sympathetic tone that caused a crimson flush to flood over Carly’s face.

“That’s it, Scarlett, you are officially off the treasure hunting team.”

“Like hell!” Scarlett chortled. “Besides, Rhett can help with the research on the other two boys. He’s a whiz at genealogy and nearly as good with hacking as you are. He’s followed our line all the way back to the fifteenth century.”

“I’m not a hacker, I’m just better with computers than most people, but that’s still a great idea. I’ll ask him tomorrow.”

Carly started to give Scarlett the beginnings of her plan to find the missing keys when a knock at the front door halted all conversation.

“That’s probably Hunter,” Sheila said as she unfolded herself from her seat and stood up. “I’ll catch you guys later. Have fun with your treasure hunting.”

As the door closed behind Sheila, Carly and Scarlett put their heads together to plan their strategy. As the hours passed and notebooks filled with ideas of where to look for the elusive keys, Carly couldn’t help wondering if maybe Sheila hadn’t hit on a very solid point about Carly being led to Savannah, via Atlanta, for a reason. She fingered the key again as she often did while deep in thought.

“I’m getting cross eyed,” Carly said with a yawn as she saw the clock on the wall read midnight. “I’m going to bed. See you in the morning.”

She left her friend to check the locks on the windows and doors and turn out the lights as she headed to her room.