

SAFE Hands

Part I

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Chapter One

Brilliant lights blazed down over the stage, illuminating the navy backdrop, the American and the state flag of New York, and the tall wooden podium behind which stood a woman. She was dressed in a tailored navy blue suit, with a creamy white blouse just underneath, flattering her slender form and rounded feminine curves, while the colors brought out her big, shining, ocean-blue eyes. Her long brunette curls were twisted into a bun at the back of her neck, giving her a well-coiffed, stylish look before the mass of people gathered to hear her speak.

Julia Cartwright's voice rang out over the sea of souls cheering her on. "...and that is why next month in November, when voting day comes, we are going to be the tide that turns this community and this state around! You will go to the polls, and your voices will be heard! When I am the next senator of New York, you know that I will dedicate myself completely to the job that you are entrusting me with. The job of putting this state on the track to improvement in every area that needs change! Together we can do this! Thank you!"

The crowd went wild, and Julia waved; her hundred-watt grin beaming out at them. She left the stage and the lights in the hall came on, as the voters talked and made their way toward the exits. Julia went back behind the curtains, and found her team waiting for her.

Sarah, her campaign manager, handed her a glass of water, which she took gratefully. Her security manager, Joseph stood before her with a pensive expression on his older, bearded face. He was clutching a file, holding it near his chest, and his hazel eyes locked onto Julia's.

"We have to talk." His tone was serious.

"I'd like a moment alone with my wife, please." Blake Merrick interrupted Joseph, cutting through him and Sarah to get to Julia. Julia lowered a brow and leaned forward to hug him.

"I'm not your wife yet." She reminded him.

Blake kissed her and stood at arms-length from her, taking her shoulders into his hands. "I want to talk with you about that."

“Julia... I really need to talk with you, too.” Joseph pressed urgently.

Julia sighed. “I need a clone, or five.” She laughed a little, still buzzing on the high she’d gotten speaking to the huge crowd who’d come to support her in her bid for a seat in the Senate. “Joseph, I’ll be right back. I’ll just talk to Blake for a minute.”

Joseph nodded, reluctant to wait. Julia took Blake to a private area, sectioned off from the rest of the backstage, and turned to face the tall, blonde, well-dressed businessman.

“What’s going on?” She asked, feeling her smile start to fade a bit.

He furrowed his thick brow and peered at her intently; his hazel eyes seeming more yellow than green. “It isn’t about what’s going on; it’s about what’s not going on. We need to talk about when we’re going to tie the knot and get married! You said that you were going to choose a date, and you haven’t. There hasn’t been any kind of planning. Nothing is happening, and you told me that it would!”

The smile fell away from Julia’s face entirely. “Blake, I did tell you that we’d talk about it after the election! I can’t believe you’re standing here five seconds after I’ve just gotten off of the stage, wanting to talk about this! I have to go over the event with my staff and I’ve got loads of work to do!”

Blake planted his hands on his hips as he peered at her. “See? That’s just it! You’re too focused on this campaign! This is all you’re doing; night and day, every day! I never get to see you, and I told you that I wanted you to start using my last name! You’re still not doing that!”

With a deep sigh, Julia reminded herself to let go of the emotions ramping up in her, and to concentrate on the core of the situation. “I told you that I don’t know if I’m going to use your name or not. I haven’t decided on that yet, and yes, I’m focused on the campaign! We’re coming into the last stretch of it! We are down to a month before the election! Of course I’m focusing on the campaign constantly! I didn’t work this hard and spend this much money on it to blow it off in the last month! We can talk about all this later, after the election! We’ll have all the time in the world then!”

“Julia, you aren’t putting us first! I should come before all of this!” He demanded, raising his voice.

Glancing around to see if anyone heard him, Julia spoke soft, hoping he'd follow suit. "I have to do that, just for this next month, and that's it! You know that! Look, I can see that you're upset about this. How can we fix this? What do you want?"

Blake sighed and shook his head, his face darkened with emotion. "I just want you." He leaned forward and kissed her, and she took his hand in hers.

"You have me. Truly. This is just going to be one more month, okay?"

Joseph and Sarah came into the area then, both of them with wide eyes and tight mouths. Joseph still had the folder clutched close to him. "Julia, we have to talk with you right now."

Blake dropped his hands to his sides and rolled his eyes. "There you go again."

Julia ignored his snark and turned toward her team. "Okay, I'm all yours. What's going on?"

Joseph and Sarah shared a silent look, and then Joseph opened the file and handed it to Julia. "Don't touch anything inside. The police are going to take it for evidence."

"Evidence?" Julia asked in a thin voice as her heart began to pick up its pace.

"Yes." Joseph studied her closely. "You're getting more death threats. These are quite serious."

Julia opened the file and her mouth fell open when she saw what it contained. There were three letters inside; all of them with terrifying messages carved out of magazine pages and pasted across the paper.

"Oh my god." Julia barely breathed.

Joseph kept his eyes locked on her. "You've gotten the odd letter or email here and there, but this last month, we've culled dozens of these out of the incoming mail, and they're getting much worse. I think these are all from the same person, and I don't believe that it's just hate mail anymore. I believe we need to take these threats seriously."

"Who in the world would ever..." Julia began, but Sarah pulled her tablet out and was swiping her finger over the screen, holding it up for all of them to see.

"We know who it is, or at least, we're pretty damn sure. Check this out." She pressed play and a video of an older white man, heavy around the middle

and balding on top, stood in a shaft of bright light behind a podium, waving his arms as he spoke loudly and brutishly to his audience.

“Thomas Beckett.” Julia sighed, watching her opponent in the political race as he rambled on bitterly about her.

“I’m going to take that phony woman down any way I can! Nothing is going to stand in the way of me winning! By the time this election rolls around, there’s only going to be one choice for senator of New York, and it’s going to be me!” His followers hollered and applauded for him, and he ate it up.

Julia tilted her head thoughtfully. “Just because he’s running his mouth like that doesn’t mean that it’s him who’s doing this.”

Joseph frowned sharply. “Do not defend him Julia!”

She rolled her eyes a little. “I know I shouldn’t be, and he’s a dirty politician, but do you honestly think he’d try to have me killed off? Honestly?”

Joseph closed the folder and held it beside him, his gaze still steady on Julia. “I am your head of security, and you need to listen to me. We need to take this seriously. Do I think it’s him? I don’t know who else would have a death wish for you, and no one else has publicly threatened you. Maybe it’s not him, and it’s one of his crazed followers instead, but none of that matters. All that does matter is your safety. I’ve called in a security specialist. He’s one of the best in the government. We’re going to put you in his care until this is all over.”

Blake went sharp and stepped forward, standing right beside Julia. “You are not calling anyone in! I am her husband-”

“Fiancé.” Julia gave him a sidelong look.

“-and I’m going to be the one protecting her and keeping her safe! Now I’m not going to hear another word about this!”

Joseph tried to interject but Blake held his hand up and Julia sighed. “I... I guess we leave it up to Blake for now.” She didn’t want any more fights with him, and could already see that there would be if she didn’t diffuse the situation right then.

Joseph looked irate, but he kept it in check. “Fine, but please be careful, and if anything else happens, we are taking this to Defcon One!”

Julia and her team finished their work that night and Blake drove them home. He glanced at her several times in the car and finally wouldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Listen, I think we should talk about the wedding and our future some more. We haven’t resolved anything, and I want to get it taken care of!”

Julia turned and looked out of the passenger’s side window, rubbing her fingertips against her temples. “Please, Blake, not now. All I want to do is get home, have a glass of wine, and let this whole day go. We’ll talk about it later.”

Blake scowled. “That’s what you always say.”

She chose to ignore him, and they didn’t speak the rest of the way. Julia didn’t begin to relax until she was standing in her kitchen, her wavy curls pulled loose from her bun, her blouse unbuttoned partway, and her heels kicked off beside the kitchen door. She poured a glass of wine and savored the quiet in the house. Blake was off in the study, sulking, and she was perfectly happy to tip her glass back and drink in a rich zinfandel.

It was the most serene moment of her day until a pop sounded outside and glass shattered everywhere around her. Julia screamed and dropped immediately to the floor, covered in red. Moments later, Blake came rushing into the room and cried out when he saw her cowered down on the tile.

“Are you hurt? What happened?”

“Someone just shot through the window at me!” Julia yelled at him.

“Oh god.. are you hurt? Did you get hit?” Blake fell to his knees and began to examine Julia.

She trembled and shook, her eyes wide, and her hands clenched tightly. “No... no I’m not hit.”

“You have a cut on your forehead!” Blake reached for a kitchen towel and dabbed at the blood. “I’m calling the police and the paramedics.”

Minutes later the house was swarming with lights and emergency personnel, and right through the middle of them came Joseph and Sarah. Julia, leaning against the island counter with the dishrag still pressed to her head, had never been so relieved to see them.

“Oh no! Look at you!” Joseph worried anxiously, with Sarah at his side. She gave Julia a hug as Joseph turned to Blake furiously. “This didn’t have to happen! I told you that she was in grave danger, and you didn’t listen! She could have been killed here tonight! That’s it! I’m taking over here, and we are going to the highest level of security! I’ve brought my agent.”

“No!” Blake insisted, but his voice was hollow.

Joseph turned then, and called out. “Logan!”

Everyone turned to the wide entrance to the kitchen, just as a tall, sturdily built man dressed in black pants, a black button up shirt, and a black leather jacket strode into the room. His hair, even blacker than his clothes, looked somewhat tousled and hung down in longer locks, framing his brilliant blue eyes, lined with thick lashes. His jaw was strong and sharp, his cheeks high, and his full lips set into a serious line.

In a single glance, he took in every person in the room, but when his baby blues landed on Julia, he stopped in place and blinked, his lips parting slightly, and he seemed to suddenly forget everything around him for a moment.

She stared back at him, her heart beginning to pound hard in her as her blood grew warm, and her breath caught in her chest.

“Julia, this is Logan. Logan... this is your new client, Julia. I need you to keep her safe.” Joseph looked at the bodyguard intently.

Chapter Two

Logan reached his hand forward and shook Julia's.

"It's good to meet you, though I wish it was under different circumstances."

Logan spoke in a deep, clear voice.

The words sounded in Julia's ears, but all she could focus on was the warmth of his soft skin, and the feel of his hand on hers, sending ribbons of electricity up her arm, straight to her core.

"I... I wish it was different too."

"We don't need him!" Blake insisted, and Julia suddenly snapped back to reality, looking around as though she'd just woken from a dream.

"I've reviewed the death threats and the videos of Thomas Beckett declaring that he will come after you by any means. You are in imminent danger, and the shooting tonight only goes to prove that. I'm going to relocate you to a remote place for your own safety."

"What? No you're not!" Blake moved to stand in between Julia and Logan; his face turning red and his voice growing louder. "You're not taking my wife anywhere!"

"Oh my god! Blake! I am not your wife!"

"You are my fiancé and that is tantamount to the same thing!" Blake snapped at her over his shoulder before whipping his head back to face Logan, who was half a foot taller than him. "You're not taking her! I can defend her and protect her just fine here!"

"I can clearly see that she's not safe here, and as her fiancé, I know you must certainly be concerned with her safety above all else." Logan told him evenly.

"Blake, you had your turn and she was shot at. We're lucky she's alive. I'm not taking anymore chances, and neither should you. She goes with Logan, and that's all there is to it!" Joseph spoke so sternly that everyone in the room felt silent.

"Fine." Blake grumbled bitterly, narrowing his eyes at Joseph. "I'll go pack our things."

"No." Logan stopped him, planting a hand on Blake's chest.

Blake looked down at it and then pushed it away. "Excuse me?"

“No one is going except Julia. It will only be the two of us.”

“Just the two of you? Over my dead body!”

“Just as long as it’s not her dead body.” Joseph intoned dangerously, glaring at Blake.

Julia turned to Blake and held her hand up. “Just stop, please? I’m scared, and I’m not going to stay here. Obviously this didn’t work, so we need to try something else. Just... let go of your bitterness about this, and think of my safety. I’m leaving with him, and that’s all there is to it.”

Blake was speechless for a long moment, and then tried to follow her as she and Sarah went to pack. “But how will I know where you are? How will I know you’re safe? You can’t leave like this!”

Twenty minutes later, with a fresh bandage on her forehead, Julia was sitting in the passenger seat of a 1969 Ford Mustang, and her bags were in the trunk. The highway rolled out for miles behind them in the darkness, and as city lights faded, stars began to show brightly in the night sky.

“So, can you at least tell me where we’re going?” Julia asked, finally breaking the long silence between them.

“We’re going to my lake house. It’s on an island in a small lake in upstate New York. There’s no one else on the island, so it’ll just be us, and I know that you’ll be safe.” He kept his eyes on the road ahead, and Julia watched him for a few long minutes as a million questions and confusing emotions wove themselves into a tangle in her mind.

It was a long while later when they arrived at a small bait and tackle shop, where Logan parked his car and then took Julia’s bag from the trunk. He took her hand and helped her down the bank to the dock where a single, small boat was tied. She felt her heart skip a beat at the touch of his hand in hers again and she told herself to stop imagining things and stay focused.

They rode in silence as he directed the little motorboat through a few other small islands, to one nestled, almost obscured, in them, but not near any of them.

“Home sweet home, for a little while.” Logan told her quietly as he pulled the boat into a hidden cove, and tied it to a short dock. “You can see it all in the morning when the sun comes up.”

The sky was emblazoned with more stars and celestial objects than Julia ever could have imagined were there, and everything around her was pitch black. Only the shapes of the tops of the trees were distinguishable against the backdrop of the sparkling stars behind them.

A quick walk took them to a clearing where a two story cabin stood, facing the water. Logan escorted Julia inside and took her to a bedroom on the second floor. He flipped on the light and she felt some ease, seeing the big bed covered in a thick white comforter, set with soft pillows. There was a dresser against one wall and a rocking chair near a sliding glass door that led out to a balcony.

“You’ve got your own bathroom in here, and I’m right across the landing in that room. Let me know if you need anything.” He indicated a door almost adjacent to hers.

“I just need some sleep.” She answered; her mind flooded with questions about him.

He nodded, and left her to herself, closing the door behind him.

When Julia opened her eyes, the sun was streaming in through the glass door and the window near it, warming the room with autumn light. She was startled for a moment, wondering where she was, but then the events of the night before came back to her and she pushed herself out of bed and went to the glass door, sliding it open. Stepping out onto the balcony, she found herself suddenly stunned by the incomprehensible beauty all around her. There were stairs that led down to a well-groomed garden at ground level, but the world seemed to expand from there.

The lake spread out in every direction, tucking itself into coves on the opposite shores, and washing up at the bases of great rolling hills covered in evergreens and deciduous trees blazing with the glorious colors of fall. It took her breath away, and she smiled, wondering how she could smile at such a time.

Giving herself a cursory glance in the mirror, Julia checked that her makeup and hair looked nice, as her wavy curls fell about her shoulders and down her back. Her jeans were form fitting, but not too snug, and her soft blue sweater hugged her feminine curves closely. She’d been told by many that she looked like a model, and except for the bandage on her forehead, she thought as she gazed at her reflection, that maybe she did just then.

Heading into the kitchen, she found Logan just finishing preparing breakfast for them. When he turned and looked at her, he stopped short once more, as he had when he'd met her, gazing at her for a long moment and letting his sky-blue eyes sweep over her before turning back to the stove.

"Did you sleep all right?"

"Yes. I had a look out on the balcony too. This is a beautiful place to be captive." Her tone was light, and there was a smile on her face when she spoke.

"It is a beautiful place." He indicated the pot on the counter. "There's coffee, if you want some."

"Thank you." She poured herself a cup and eyed the meticulously toned muscles over his back and shoulders, finding herself wondering what he might look like under the shirt.

"I understand that you're in politics. What position do you play in that field, and how did you get roped into it?" He asked without looking at her; focusing on the food he was preparing.

She could hear the smile in his voice, and she chuckled, liking his sense of humor. "I started out working as an intern in high school and became more involved in college. Then I realized that if I really wanted to make a difference in my community and state, I'd have to run for and hold an office. It's a lot of work, but it's worth it. There are a lot of lives that could be changed for the better if I'm elected and I get to work for the people. Does that sound like a politician?"

He turned to her and handed her a plate filled with food. "No. You sound like a determined dreamer. I admire that." He took a sip of his coffee and eyed her curiously.

"Aren't you intimidated by the death threats?"

She shook her head. "Not really. It's part of the gig. People fear change and desire power, and Thomas might say he'll stop at nothing to win, but it's up to the people to choose, and if they choose me, then I'm going to keep fighting for them, no matter who tries to scare me off. They'll get the bad guy. I'm not going to back down just because some old man doesn't want me in office. I can't make the differences I want to make if I'm not there."

Logan stared at her and shook his head slowly. "I've never known a woman with such spirit and dedication... such fire. You're amazing."

Julia couldn't help the smile that spread over her face as she lifted her cup to her mouth. "What about you? How'd you come to be in secret service?"

Logan shrugged and looked down at his plate. "I was in special forces, and I retired with a perfect track record, so the government continues to hire me as an independent contractor. That's about it."

"I suspect there's quite a bit more to it than that." She watched him, yearning to know so much more about him, but he talked instead about the island and the house. They did the dishes together and he gave her a tour of the small home.

When they reached the main bathroom upstairs, he gazed a long moment at her eyes and face, and then spoke softly.

"We should change your bandage." He opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out new gauze, tape, and ointment.

Julia leaned her back against the counter and held her breath as Logan drew close to her and tenderly peeled the old bandage off. She didn't want to breathe in the scent of him, but it couldn't be helped, and then she didn't want to stop breathing him in. She could feel the heat from his body, and all she wanted was to lean into him and feel his skin on her cheek and on her lips. Forcing herself to remember that she wasn't free, she reeled her wild desires back in and tried to remain completely detached, but the questions swirling in her mind would not be stopped.

With a quiet voice, she studied his eyes and spoke what had been firmly stuck in her mind, while his soft fingers moved gently over her skin, and his face was only inches from hers.

"Have you... ever lost anyone you were protecting?" She tried to hide the quickening of her heartbeat, wondering if he could hear it in her breath.

Logan was silent a long moment, pausing in his work before he drew in a breath and spoke. "Only my wife. Five years ago. A foreign terrorist killed her to get back at me for work I'd done. It was the last thing they ever did."

"Oh my god. I'm so sorry. That's... horrible."

"It is."

"So... you haven't found anyone else?" She asked hesitantly, not wanting to tread on a pained heart.

"I've been alone since."

Julia was stunned. “Not even a lover?”

Logan sighed and shook his head. “No. I... haven’t wanted to let anyone in.”

Her eyes met his, and she searched them, needing an answer. “Don’t you ever get lonely? Don’t you ever... want anyone?” She knew that she shouldn’t ask, but she found herself desperately wanting to know.

Logan’s eyes stayed on hers a long moment, and then drifted downward to her lips. “Not until recently.” He murmured.

A twinge stung her deep inside, and at first she didn’t understand why it bothered her that he wanted some woman, but then she realized that it was a tinge of jealousy that she was feeling, and it made no sense to her at all. There was nothing for her to be jealous of.

“Will you have the woman you want?” She asked, not sure she wanted to know.

He looked into her eyes and it was a moment before he answered. “I can’t have her.”

With that he turned and walked from the room, and Julia’s heart began to beat again in her chest.

Chapter Three

Julia sat in the living room, facing a whole wall of cathedral windows looking out onto the forest and the lake, holding a book in her hand. She hadn't turned a single page in an hour for all the thoughts and emotions roiling in her. Finally getting fed up, she snapped it closed and left it on the table beside the sofa. She needed to find Logan.

He was standing on the front porch, pulling on a pair of gloves. He looked at her and smiled.

"Bored?"

She didn't feel bored; she felt anxious, but she didn't want him to know it. "Sure, I guess I could use something to do."

Logan chuckled a little. "All right then. Come with me and you can earn your keep." He tossed her a pair of safety glasses and gloves, and she slid her hands into them as she followed him around to the back of the house.

"What are we doing?" She asked, and then she knew as they rounded the corner and she saw a big pile of logs stacked neatly to one side, an axe, and a chopping block. "We're chopping firewood?"

He picked up the axe and gave her a sly grin. "Have you done this before?"

Julia shook her head. "Not even once."

"Watch and learn." He placed a log on the chopping block, pulled the axe behind him, and sent it zinging through the air and crashing down into the log, splitting it cleanly in two.

"Got it?" He stepped aside and handed the axe to her.

Julia, not to be outdone, placed a log on the chopping block and lifted the axe the way she'd seen Logan do, and swung it downward. The axe hit the chopping block and knocked the log off of it.

Julia groaned and struggled to pull the axe from the wood. Logan chuckled and came to her. "You're okay! You just need to stand and swing differently. Here, I'll show you."

He stepped up behind her and reached his arms around her, holding them against hers, and closing his hands around the handle of the axe, just below hers. It struck him in that moment, how close he was to her; fully against her

body, and he turned his face toward her ear, inhaling the scent of her hair and skin. He closed his eyes, heady with it, and swallowed, then opened his eyes again, making himself speak in an even, soft tone.

“So, you need to put the axis of your arms and hands here, and when you swing, the energy from the swing produces force upon the log. Newton’s laws... just pull back like this... and... swing.”

The sound of Logan’s deep voice in her ear, and the feel of his breath on her skin made Julia’s heart race, and in that moment she wanted nothing more than to lean back further into him, and then to turn in his arms and... her mind snapped and she blinked fast, making herself concentrate on the task at hand, at least as much as she could.

“Pull back... and swing...” she whispered, hoping she didn’t sound as weak as she felt in his arms.

Logan drew in one more long breath of her, and then let her go and stood back, watching her and wishing he didn’t want her so much. Julia imagined that he was still behind her, guiding her, and she swung the axe. It sailed through the air and landed with a loud crack in the middle of the log, splitting it in half.

“You did it!” Logan cheered her.

Julia grinned. “I did! Wow! I can’t believe I did it!”

“You can do anything.” He told her, giving her a genuine smile.

Julia picked up another log and severed it in two as well. She continued for a while, and Logan watched her, letting his eyes move over her slender form and generous curves, finding himself aching to touch them and feel her against him, as close as she had been minutes before.

Clearing his throat, he moved toward her and took the axe from her. “You’ve done your fair share. Why don’t you go back inside and keep yourself busy. I’ll finish up here.”

Julia nodded, beaming with pride over her accomplishment, and she headed inside to shower and change her clothes. When she got out of the shower, she wrapped herself in a towel and went to the open glass door of her balcony, looking down at Logan, still cutting wood. His shirt was off, and his tanned skin glistened with beaded sweat in the warm October afternoon sun. It took

her breath away and made her gasp to see him that way, and just as she was about to turn away, he looked up at her.

Her wet hair was curled around one side of her neck, draping down over the towel wrapped around her chest. Logan's gaze followed the terrycloth material reaching down just to her thighs, and he groaned deeply, making himself look away from her.

Logan turned his back to the balcony and cut through every piece of wood in the pile, trying to burn off his desire and the tightrope of sexual tension straining inside of him. Julia moved away from the window and went to her bathroom, dressing and doing her hair and makeup again. She found herself staring at her reflection in the mirror, touching her ear and neck where his mouth had been so close, and telling herself for the hundredth time since she'd met him that she was engaged and could not have any kind of feelings for him; at least not the ones that had lodged themselves in her and grown in so short a time.

She was in the kitchen, starting dinner when he walked in, his hair and skin dripping with sweat; wearing only his pants. She averted her eyes from his toned and muscular body, as he avoided looking at her and rushed up the steps, skipping two at a time, heading to his own bathroom.

Julia let out a great sigh and told herself that it was only chemistry; just hormones, and there was nothing more to it than that. She promised herself that she could build a platonic friendship with Logan, and it would be just fine. It would work.

Logan came down to the kitchen a while later, his wet hair looking as tousled as it always did. He was wearing a blue chambray button down shirt that seemed to illuminate his eyes, and a pair of jeans. Julia smiled at him and indicated the kitchen counter in front of her.

"I started dinner. Do you want to help?"

Logan exhaled slowly and nodded. "Sure." He began cutting things and she started cooking.

Julia tapped her phone and turned on some jazz. Logan paused in his work and looked over his shoulder at her. "You like old jazz?"

"Yeah, I love it." She grinned.

The wall he'd been trying to keep up melted, and he gave her a wink and a smile. "You're really going to love this. Turn yours off."

She raised a brow and chuckled softly, but did as he bade. Logan walked into the living room and opened a dark wooden cabinet to reveal an old record player in pristine condition, and a considerable collection of records. He pulled a few out and put one on to play.

A sentimental smile grew over Julia's face as Ella Fitzgerald's voice floated through the room amidst the soft scratching of the needle against the wax.

"That is pure heaven." Julia beamed blissfully as Logan came back to continue helping her.

"Yes, it is. I'm so glad you like it." He was deeply pleased. "It's nice to have someone here to enjoy it with. That hasn't happened before."

Julia raised her eyes to meet his. "Did you ever come here with your wife?"

"No." He shook his head. "She was gone before I had this place. I guess... I came here to escape the places that had painful memories."

"Well, now you have some good memories here." Julia's mouth turned up at the corner and Logan chuckled and nodded.

"Yeah. It looks like I do."

"Have a bite." Julia moved to stand before him, and his breath faltered.

"What?"

"Have a bite. Taste this and tell me if it works." She held up a spoon with a veggie filled tomato sauce in it.

Logan blinked and opened his mouth for her. The air between them felt as if it crackled with energy and electricity, and as he swallowed, he did his best to maintain his composure.

"It definitely works." He told her quietly; his eyes locked on hers.

She lifted her fingertip to his mouth. "You have a little on your lip." She wiped it away and didn't think at all as she slipped her finger into her mouth and gently sucked it clean. Logan turned away from her suddenly and went back to work, and Julia closed her eyes for a moment, pushing away the feel of his lips beneath her fingertip.

Logan cleared his throat. "So... tell me about your fiancé. What's he like? He loves jazz and cooking too?"

Julia laughed out loud. “No, he’s more into the stock market and he doesn’t really get into music.” She paused, thinking about Blake, and spoke after a long moment. “He’s a traditional guy; you know, wants the white picket fence, the wife, kids, dog in the yard. The man and the Mrs., I guess.”

Logan carried their plates and Julia carried their wine glasses to the table, where they sat and ate together. “I realize we’ve only just met, but that doesn’t sound like you to me at all.”

Julia sighed. “It’s a challenge. We’re working through some things. He’s more traditional than I am. He’s so ready for us to be married and I keep holding off on it. He wants me to take his name, to be home with him more often instead of on the road, but we talked it over, and the difficulties right now are just because of the campaign. Once I’m voted in, things will be better and I won’t be on the road as much.”

Logan stared at her. “Yes, you will.”

Julia blinked, staring at him, and then realization swept over her like a wave on the sea. She sighed, knowing it was true.

He studied her intently. “Why won’t you set a date?”

Julia’s heart picked up its pace. She looked away from Logan and focused on the food before her, pushing it absentmindedly around the plate. “I’ve just been busy; that’s all. The campaign is a lot of work. I don’t know what’s going to happen after the election. I just want the dust to settle first. That’s all.”

Logan peered at her, and she could not look away. “Do you love him?”

A quiet laugh escaped Julia and she tore herself from his gaze, returning her attention to the meal. “Of course I do. I’d never marry someone I don’t love.”

It felt to Julia as if Logan was looking right through her, and seeing all of her in a way that no one ever had before. “Actions speak louder than words. Your campaign is your priority, not your fiancé.”

“That’s not true!” Julia snapped back at Logan, but he seemed unfazed by it. He only watched her a moment longer and then took another bite.

They finished their meal and he did the dishes while she put the leftover food away. Logan went to the living room and took his time building a fire with some of the wood they’d chopped that day, as the night grew much colder outside, and a bank of fog rolled in off of the lake.

He sat by the fire and poured himself a glass of wine, watching the flames, and Julia came to him and sat beside him quietly, her wine glass in her hand. He filled it for her, and she gave him an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry about what I said at dinner, about my campaign.”

Logan shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. None of it is my business.”

Julia smiled tenderly. “It’s fine, and of course I respect your opinion. I guess I hadn’t really let myself think about it because I’m always defending myself to Blake. The campaign is more important to me. I want a career before a family.” She shook her head and looked down. “I feel so guilty admitting that out loud.”

Logan reached a hand out to her arm. “Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that; not at all.”

Julia gave him a grateful nod. “I wish Blake felt that way.”

Gazing at her intensely, Logan lifted his fingers and touched her cheek lightly. “Blake should be thankful that he’s so lucky to have such a smart, beautiful, dedicated, passionate, bold and courageous woman at his side. He should support you in whatever you want to do.” He let his hand fall away and took a long sip of his wine.

A flood of relief and gratitude washed through Julia and she smiled. “Thank you... so much.” In the back of her mind she found herself wishing that Blake was more like Logan.

Their conversation turned to the music playing around them, and Logan changed the record, putting Etta James on. ‘Sunday Kind of Love’ played, and Logan refilled their wine glasses while the firelight danced over them, turning their skin gold and keeping them warm.

Julia reached up and rubbed at her shoulder while she was talking about where she’d gone to college, and Logan furrowed his brow some.

“What’s wrong with your shoulder?” He asked, tipping his head a little to one side and watching her closely.

Julia shrugged. “I guess it’s just sore, probably from chopping so much wood.”

She chuckled and Logan set his wine glass down. “I’ve been told I’m pretty good at this; may I help you with it? It’s the least I could do after all the work you did.”

Julia lowered her hand and moved closer to Logan. “Sure, if you don’t mind. I never say no to a massage.”

She had managed to keep her thoughts and desires somewhat at bay for part of the evening, but when his hand moved beneath the collar of her blouse and pressed against her skin, she closed her eyes and exhaled long, feeling a strange and unknown fire burn through every part of her. She leaned into his hands and lost herself in the way they moved over her, pushing the soreness away and leaving her heated and ravenous for more.

Without thinking about what she was doing, she lifted her fingers and traced them over his arm and wrist, turning her face toward them. Logan froze for a moment, all his strength and will leaving him as she took his hand from her neck and pressed her lips against his palm for a moment, her mouth drifting to his fingertips.

Logan could not hold himself back in the face of the longing between them, and he gently turned her face in his hand toward him. They gazed at each other’s eyes for a long moment, both of them finding a reflection of their own desires, and it drew them in to one another. Their lips brushed tentatively together as their breath escaped them, and they tasted each other slowly, tantalizingly at first, and then lost themselves in shared depths, powerful and sweeping.

Logan pulled her close to him, his arms wrapping her in a sanctuary of hypnotic hunger, and she found a paradox in that the more she had of him, the more satisfied and ravenous she became at the same time. She had never imagined she could feel so wanted, or desire anyone as much as she did him, and as his hand moved over her back and his fingers tangled into her long curls, she ached to feel those hands on every part of her body; his skin fully against hers.

A soft moan escaped her as she slid her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his, feeling his hardening need for her against her thigh. As he heard her, Logan stopped, breathless and heady with passion, and forced himself to let go of her.

“I’m... I’m so sorry. I want you... you have no idea how much I want you, but we can’t do this. You’re engaged to someone else. This isn’t who I am. We should... call it a night.”

Julia gasped, fighting the burning need for him with everything in her. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I guess we just...”

He shook his head. “No explanations, no more apologies. This was both of us. We both wanted it, and we know we need to stop, so we are. That’s all there is to it. It’s okay. We’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Right.” She nodded as he closed the fireplace and turned the music off.

Julia put the wine away, and they went upstairs, pausing on the landing as they each stood in front of their own doors; their bodies smoldering for each other.

“Have a good night.”

“Yeah. You too.” Julia murmured as she went into her room and closed the door and her eyes, leaning her back against it, wondering what she was thinking.

Logan lay on his bed, fully clothed, staring at the ceiling, his body hard with need, his heart pounding, knowing she was so close and yet a universe away. He prayed for sleep to come, but he knew it wouldn’t. The only thing that did come was the sound of a thump and a cry, just outside.

Chapter Four

In seconds Logan was out of his bed and dressed, waiting behind his door with his gun in his hand. Slowly, he opened the door a crack and peered through it to the landing. There was nothing. The lights downstairs were out, and he saw a shaft of light shining out from beneath Julia's door. He went to it and listened. Only silence answered him, and a cold draft of air spilling from beneath the door; much too cold.

Logan wrapped his hand quietly around the door handle and flung the door open. No one was in the room. Julia's bed was untouched and still made, and the door to the balcony was open. Foggy night air swirled in, chilling the empty room, and Logan bolted through the space to the balcony, leaning over the edge of it to look around. It was bare; nothing but stairs leading down into the misty fog toward the ground.

Flying down the stairs, Logan only touched his feet to three of them before he was in the garden beneath the balcony. He stood silently in the grass; his eyes wide as he searched. Only mist and silence surrounded him. He breathed in through his nose and just barely caught a whiff of the stench of sweat. Following it, he rounded the house, and heard a shuffle of dead leaves on the ground in the distance, down by the water.

Racing to the bank, he found a short, heavier man trying to push Julia into a waiting boat tied to the dock. Julia's head was covered in a black cloth, and her hands were bound behind her. The kidnapper held a gun in his hand and whispered continual threats to her as she struggled against him, trying to get free.

Logan leapt at him, taking the man to the ground from behind. He hit him in the back of the head once and knocked him out. Julia screamed, but Logan spoke gently as he pulled the black cloth off of her head.

"I'm here! You're okay." He untied her binds and closed his arms around her tightly, holding her against him as she wept. "You're all right. You're safe."

When she was breathing again, he let her go and tied up the kidnapper, who was still passed out. Logan dragged him unceremoniously back up the hill to the porch, and tossed him into a corner of it. The man groaned.

“How did he get to you?” Logan asked, turning to look at Julia, who was still shaken.

“I guess he must have been waiting in the bathroom. Earlier, after I showered, I was out on the balcony...”

Logan swallowed hard, thinking back to the sight of her. “Yes, I remember.”

Julia felt her cheeks grow warm. “I guess I left the door unlocked. He got me as soon as I walked into the room. He put that thing over my head, and I couldn’t see anything. He hauled me down the stairs and brought me to the boat, and then you came.” She couldn’t stop a sob that tried to choke her, and Logan took her into his arms again.

“It’s all right. You’re safe.” He murmured gently in her ear. She wanted to lose herself in him and forget any of the attack had ever happened.

“It was terrifying!” She whispered, pressing her face into his neck as he held her tightly.

“It’s over. I’m here, and no one is going to hurt you. I’m calling the police.”

Just then the man groaned, and Logan let go of Julia turning his attention to the assailant. He opened his eyes and looked around, grunting as he tried to move a little in his corner on the porch. He was hog tied, and laying on his side.

Logan sank down and gazed at the man coldly. Pulling his gun out, he held it to the man’s head and cocked it. “Do you know who I am?”

The man grimaced. “Yeah.”

“Good. Then you know I can pull this trigger and the police will pat me on the back.”

The man stared at him silently, his eyes wide as beads of sweat formed all over his face.

“Who are you and why are you after Julia Cartwright?”

The man furrowed his brow. “Dominic! Dominic Vinelli. I was hired.”

“By whom?”

He hesitated, and Logan pressed the gun tight against his forehead. “One. Two. Th-”

“Okay! Okay. I’ll talk! Blake! Blake Merrick hired me!”

“You’re lying.” Logan’s voice grew fierce. Julia stared at the man and her mouth fell open.

“I can prove it! He paid me! He paid me fifty-thousand dollars!”

“Oh my god.” Julia whispered in a rush of breath.

“Why does he want her dead?” Logan leaned closer, fury burning through him.

Dominic began to blubber. “He doesn’t want her dead. He just... wanted me to... scare her!”

“WHY?” Logan demanded.

“I don’t... know!” The blubbering became sobbing.

“We’ll let the police work it all out of you.” Logan stood up and gave Dominic a solid kick to the groin, and then one to the gut. “Don’t ever come near her again, or it’ll be the last thing you do.”

Dominic nodded adamantly. Logan secured Dominic to the porch, called the FBI, and then took Julia inside. He gave her a glass of wine and then sat with her on the sofa. She wiped at the tears on her face and wept quietly.

“God. Blake... I just don’t understand it. Why would he do this? I was so sure it was Thomas Beckett! We all were! He had motive!”

“We’ll find out.” Logan answered her, and then held her a long while as she leaned into him and cried into his chest.

The FBI arrested Dominic, took statements from Logan and Julia, and then advised them that Blake was nowhere to be found.

“What do you mean he’s gone? He wasn’t at home?” Julia asked, still dumbfounded by it all.

The agent shook his head. “No. Vinelli said he called him to tell him he was taking you off the island, and they were going to meet up at a gas station. We checked the station, but there’s no sign of Blake. There’s a statewide manhunt for him now. We’ll keep you posted. It’s probably best that you stay here.”

Logan drew her closer to him. “She’s not going anywhere.”

The FBI left and Logan took Julia upstairs to her room. He closed the balcony door and locked it, and she turned to him, her eyes wet with tears. “I know this might sound... wrong, but could I please sleep by you tonight? Just... sleep.”

Logan nodded and took her hand. “Of course.”

He led her to his room and she curled up beside him as he held her against him. It was a long while before she fell asleep, and when he saw that she was, he kissed her forehead closed his own eyes.

Gray early morning light lit the windows, chorused with softly falling rain, and Julia opened her eyes to find that she was in bed alone. She pushed herself up and looked around, feeling cold without Logan beside her.

The door on the other side of the room opened, and Logan stepped out of his bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist; his wet hair wild and curled around his bright blue eyes.

Julia slid off of the bed and walked to him in her button down shirt. She’d pulled her jeans off in the night and tossed them to the side of the bed. Logan swallowed the hard knot in his throat as he watched her come toward him.

She lifted her hands to his face and leaned up on her feet, pressing her lips softly to his. He gasped quietly and held her hands in his, lifting his mouth from hers.

“We said... we said we weren’t going to do that again.” He breathed in a low voice.

Julia gazed into his eyes, inches from them. “My fiancé was trying to have me kidnapped. I am no longer engaged. I am free, and I am hurting, and no one has ever made me feel as safe as you have. I have never wanted anyone as much as I want you, and I know you want me too. I need you, Logan. I need you to touch me, fill me, and push all this anguish out of me until there’s nothing left in me but you. Please... fix this. Take all the bad away and give me love.”

Logan could not speak. He closed his mouth over hers and kissed her deeply, passionately, as she pulled his towel from him and his fingers drifted down over the buttons on her shirt, leaving it at their feet as they laid back in his bed together.

Julia moaned softly and felt the universe swirl around her as his hands sculpted every curve of her body, leading a path that his mouth and tongue trailed, from her lips to her breasts, down her body where he parted her thighs and tasted her core. She arched her back and twisted her fingers in his hair, crying out as he brought her to her fullness once, and then again. As she

trembled with release, he moved above her and entered her slowly, filling her inch by inch, staring into her eyes and then he kissed her.

They began to sway together, both of them gasping breathlessly, overwhelmed with tremendous passion and holding one another tightly; their skin hot and slick with sweat as they rocked against one another in their dance of desire. Their hearts raced in them as their pleasure heightened, and they moaned as one; ecstasy flooding them, dizzying them, until they laid back against the pillows weak with their release.

Logan held her a long while, and they kissed softly before he made love with her again, and then finally let her go, rising from the bed.

“Where are you going?” She asked plaintively, needing more of him.

He smiled tenderly. “I’m going to go start a fire, and get breakfast going. We need sustenance because I’m not letting you far from that bed today.”

Julia giggled and watched him leave. She snuggled his pillow, knowing that she was falling hard and fast for him, and she had never felt so good. A grin spread over her face when she heard the door, and rolled over to look at him.

“Coming back for more already?” She murmured silkily, but the words trailed away when she saw Blake standing in the doorway. His hair was wild, his clothes dirty, and his eyes were crazed and bloodshot.

“You BITCH!” He seethed at her.

Julia scooted up in bed and pressed her back against the headboard. “How did you get in here?”

Blake walked toward her, and she clutched the sheet up around her nude body. “I came in off the balcony.” His voice was low and dangerous.

“But... it was locked!” Julia remembered Logan locking it the night before.

“No. Dominic disabled the lock. You see, he’d been watching you and reporting to me. I knew what you were doing here. I knew you were out here sneaking around... whoring and cheating on me!”

Julia leapt up from the bed and wrapped the sheet around her. “Don’t you dare come any closer to me, you son of a bitch! I wasn’t cheating on you! We broke up the minute I found out that you were trying to have me killed!”

Blake stopped in his step and blinked, wide-eyed. “I wasn’t trying to have you killed! I was only trying to scare you so that you’d quit your ridiculous

political race and come home! You have to be my stay-at-home-wife and mother to our children!”

Fury burned through Julia and she raised her voice, shouting at Blake. “How dare you! I have never wanted that, and you knew it! I’ve always been honest with you! You knew that I didn’t want kids! All I want is my political career!”

Blake shook his head. “I knew that I could change you! If you just tried it, if you were too scared to go on with politics, you’d be home with me and you’d see that it’s the right place for you! You’d want what I want, and I don’t want anything but you!”

“Oh, *go to hell Blake!* It doesn’t matter what you want anymore, because we’re through!” She yanked the ring off of her finger and threw it at him. “Choke on that, you bastard! How dare you try to terrify me and manipulate me! That’s not love! That’s psychotic!”

Blake’s face grew red as he picked the ring up and clutched it in his fist. “Oh and I guess you think you’ve found love with your bodyguard!” He leapt for her in a rage, his hands reaching for her like claws.

Julia jumped backward, and Logan came crashing down on Blake’s back as the two of them landed on the floor. Logan’s knee dug into Blake’s spine as he yanked his arms backward and cuffed him. Blake tried to wriggle free, but Logan flipped him over and landed a solid punch against the side of Blake’s face.

“You better get a last look now, because you’re never going to see her again.” Logan growled at Blake and then picked him up by the feet and dragged him down the stairs, outside to the porch, and locked him up where he had put Dominic the night before.

Julia sank down on the bed and dropped her head in her hands, exhaling long and slow as her body tried to calm itself.

She felt Logan’s hands on her shoulders, and she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

“The FBI is on their way.”

“Thank you so much.” She spoke quietly, standing and letting her forehead fall to his chest. “I’m so... worn out. So confused and angry. Such a mess. I feel like I don’t know what’s going on.”

Logan took a deep breath and lifted her chin with his finger. She gazed into his baby blues. “Listen, rest here until you’re ready to go, however long that might be, and if you think that this should be it for us, I understand. You’ve been through a lot. You probably don’t want to rush into anything with someone you just met. Don’t worry about that. Just take care of yourself, and focus on what you need.”

Julia studied his eyes and shook her head. “What I need is you. I don’t know how I know that, but I do. Right down to my core. I need you, and I want you. So, yeah. I’ll rest here a while, with you, and I know I’ll be just fine. If you want more with me, then let’s work together on that, because I know two things for certain. I’m going to win the election, and I want you at my side when I do.”

Logan grinned in relief. “There is nowhere else I want to be.” He lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her for a long while.