

## Chapter 1

It wasn't my cousin Collin's face that caught my attention first. It was the cheesy mustache. It reminded me of Billy Stutte in tenth grade drama class, when the teacher handed him a stage make-up kit and he'd come back with a ridiculous bush on his upper lip. As a disguise, it was pretty corny. From the look in his dark-brown eyes when I met his gaze across the produce island in the North Fork grocery store, he was quite aware of how silly he looked, and had enough of the quirky O'Donnell sense of humor not to mind.

Collin was what one might refer to as a charming rogue. He was taller than my 5'8" by a few inches, had dark hair that went nicely with the dark eyes, and while he wasn't what I considered handsome, he wasn't ugly, either. He made his living conning other people out of their hard-earned cash. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been face down and unconscious in an Argentine cow pasture, the victim of a well-aimed rock.

"Hello, Patty." His Irish accent sounded a little out of place in the heart of the American southwest.

"Collin," I acknowledged, eyeing him warily. I was more than a little alarmed to see him in the small Arizona town where I'd grown up, and where my husband Mícheál and I had come to spend our vacation. There was a good six feet of solid display table between us. I doubted he could reach me quickly or easily. I asked the question that had to be asked, and dreaded the

answer.

“Are you still working with Mick Jarratt?”

“Of course. In fact, he sent me to show you this.”

He reached toward me over the tomatoes and avocados, holding out a Polaroid picture face down. I took it from him, giving it a quick look. Then I looked closer, my insides going cold.

I'd recognized the man in the photo right away. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, and deceptively handsome, Mick Jarratt could be extremely charming when he chose to be, and downright frightening when he didn't. This was one of those times when he didn't. In his arms was a little girl with curly fair hair, wearing a blue and yellow cotton one-piece. Her face was turned toward him as she studied him uncertainly, but there was more than enough visible for me to see she was my one-year-old daughter, Brianne. Jarratt was facing the camera, his expression slightly taunting. My knees went rubbery.

“Oh my God,” I said, my voice tight. “Where's Mícheál? He took her to the park to play while I did the shopping.”

“They're at a motel south of town. Mícheál's sleeping off the sedative we shot him with.”

He reached out for the picture. Numbly, I handed it back. He shifted away from the produce island.

“Come outside with me. I have a message for you, but this place is a little too public for this kind of discussion.”

I left my cart where it was, trailing him through the store and out into the parking lot. The Arizona sunlight was bright and hot, the sky a clear, vivid blue. Heat rose in waves from the asphalt. Collin glanced skyward, frowned, and strode quickly across the parking lot to a stand of cottonwood trees in the undeveloped strip of land next door. He paused there and glanced back, waiting until I’d caught up.

“He hasn’t hurt her, and he won’t. If you don’t agree to his terms, though, he’ll take her with him and raise her as his own.”

I sat down more abruptly than I’d intended on the hood of an old Ford sedan parked in the shade. The ancient shock absorbers creaked under my weight.

“What does he want?”

“Patty, you know what he wants,” he replied. “You know it’s not really her he’s after. He’s offering a trade. You for her.”

I shivered in spite of the heat and looked away, wrapping my arms around myself. I’d known when I’d seen the photograph what was coming, but it was still a shock. A little over a year and a half ago, when I was six weeks

pregnant with Brianne, Collin and Mick had forced me to participate in a horse racing scam they were running in Argentina. Afterward Mick had announced that I would be going with him to Australia, whether I wanted to or not, because my skills and talents made me too useful an asset to let go of. He'd warned me if I tried to escape, he would track me down and bring me back. I'd escaped from him anyway, taking the chance he hadn't really meant it. After all this time, I'd convinced myself he hadn't.

“He said he's willing to overlook the fact you ran away,” Collin continued, “but time is short and he's got a plane to catch. He wants to know if he'll be leaving the country with you or your daughter.”

I closed my eyes, feeling helpless. Of course there was no way I would ever sacrifice my daughter to stay out of Mick's hands. He'd known that when he'd chosen this means of forcing my cooperation.

“Collin, that was so long ago. We'd thought...” I shivered again. “We'd thought he wasn't coming after me.”

“Roy Blythe convinced him he didn't want a newborn on his hands, so he decided to wait until after the baby was born. Then, Christine convinced him you'd be in no shape for much of anything immediately after the baby was born, so he put off coming to get you a bit longer.”

“Christine?” I asked, opening my eyes again.

“You’ll meet her.”

I breathed out slowly. “What will happen to Mícheál and Brianne?”

“Is that her name?” He smiled. “That’s pretty. They’ll be left in the motel room. If she wakes up before he does, she’ll just wander around the room for a little bit. You know what motel rooms are like. There will be nothing there she can hurt herself with.”

I sighed again. I had no choice, and we both knew it.

“He sent you because he knew I’d run screaming if he came himself, didn’t he?”

Collin laughed. “As a matter of fact, the thought did occur to him.” He shifted, the look of amusement fading into seriousness. “We have to go.”

“I know.”

I stood up, looking around me at the small town where I’d been born. It was unlikely I’d ever see it again. Collin started back into the parking lot.

“Wait, my purse,” I said. “I left it in my shopping cart.”

“You won’t need it. We’ll have a new set of identification cards for you.”

“And a new identity?” I hesitated, resisting taking that first physical step away from my life and my family. Collin paused, looking back at me.

“Patty, we have to go.”

“I want to see them,” I said.

He frowned, studying me. Apparently that hadn’t been part of their plan.

“You can’t just take me away from my family without letting me say goodbye.”

“They’re asleep,” he pointed out. “They’re not going to know.”

“But I will. Please, Collin.”

A flicker of irritation crossed his features. He shifted his weight to one hip, unclipping a mobile phone from his belt. I waited while he punched in a number. No good Samaritans came to see what the problem was, or rushed from the store to tell me I’d forgotten my purse. Life went on around me as it always had. It seemed unfair there was hardly a ripple to show that my life had just irrevocably changed.

“She wants to see them.”

I turned back to him, watching his expression. After a few seconds, he nodded and shut the phone off.

“Come on. We’ll take your car.”

My ‘car’ was a battered blue pickup truck belonging to my family’s ranch. Collin climbed in on the passenger side, eyeing Brianne’s car seat, which was strapped in the center position. He flicked me a quick look. I ignored him as I slid in behind the wheel, digging the key from my pocket and inserting it in the ignition.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“North Fork Inn. Know where it is?”

“Of course.”

He let his breath out in a quick snort of amusement, acknowledging the stupidity of the question. “Right. Of course you do.”

Since I was without my purse, I harbored half a hope our ever-diligent police force would find some reason to pull me over and ask for my license, but we arrived at the motel without attracting their attention. At Collin’s direction, I parked at the end of the row, in front of room twenty-five. There was a dark gray sedan in the next spot over. I glanced into the back seat as I got out of the truck, and spotted one of Brianne’s shoes in the back floorboard. My stomach knotted tighter. I took a deep, steady breath before following Collin to the door.

A ‘do not disturb’ sign hung from the knob. At the other

end of the row, a woman pushing a cart loaded with cleaning supplies and fresh sheets gave us an incurious look before entering one of the rooms. The door to twenty-five opened before we reached it. Collin took my arm, guiding me in ahead of him.

The curtain was closed, and the room was dim, lit only by the bathroom light and what sunlight was coming in through the open door. Collin shut it, reducing the level to half twilight. Mick had withdrawn to the far end of the long dresser, and stood with his arms folded across his chest, watching me. I'd expected him to be wearing a smirk, but there was nothing more than a hint of impatience in his gaze.

"There," he said in a rich, low tenor, nodding toward the bed, but I was already turning to look.

Mícheál and Brianne lay side by side in the middle of the king-sized bed, in the unnatural stillness of drugged sleep. Ignoring the two men, I crossed to the bed and sat, reaching out to touch Brianne's cheek. Her skin was warm beneath my fingers. I brushed a few unruly blonde curls off her forehead. She didn't stir. Mícheál's slow, even breathing reassured me he, too, was still alive. I stroked his cheek with the backs of my fingers. His skin was slightly prickly where his beard was just beginning to grow back out. They looked sweet sleeping there together, my fair-haired, athletic husband and our tiny daughter.

Tears stung my eyes. Collin was right. They would never



know I'd been there. Mick shifted, crossing the carpeted floor with nearly silent footsteps to stand behind me.

“Do you understand the agreement? The girl stays here only if you come with us.”

I closed my eyes and nodded, not trusting my voice to be steady. He shifted again.

“Come on.”

I stood up, turning to move past him toward the door. Collin was at the dresser, drawing a dose of some clear liquid from a small brown bottle into a hypodermic syringe. I stopped short, my skin crawling.

“What are you—”

Mick reached around me, jerking me back against his chest and pinning my arms to my sides. Startled, I drew in a quick breath, but he clamped a hand over my mouth before I could make a sound. Already on edge, I hit the panic stage in a split second and struggled to free myself, trying to bite his hand and drawing my legs up to kick him in the shins with my boot heels. He let out an exasperated curse, his arm tightening around me as he twisted toward the bed.

I realized at the last instant he intended to pin me beneath him on the mattress, but by that point there was nothing I could do to stop him. Our combined weight crashed onto the bed, making the springs squeal. He was

solid and heavy, all muscle, and his arm around my chest, between me and the mattress, squashed the air from my lungs. I gave up trying to bite him and just struggled to breathe. Mícheál's right ankle was inches from my face. I couldn't see Brianne.

“Collin,” Mick said sharply.

They'd never had any intention of trusting me to go with them quietly. I whimpered and tried to dislodge him, but he was too heavy, and my movements were too restricted to do any good. He shifted just enough to give Collin access to my shoulder. The needle bit into my skin.

“Mick, get off her. She can't breathe.”

“She's breathing,” the Australian returned, his mouth just behind my left ear. His warm breath brushed across my cheek. “If I let her up, she'll scream, and that's the last thing we need right now.”

Under the circumstances, there was nothing I could do to tell him he was wrong. My head buzzed from the restricted airflow. It would be ironic, a small, calm part of my mind thought, if I passed out from lack of air before I passed out from the drug.

At the rate my heart was beating, it didn't take long for the drug to hit my bloodstream. Though it seemed to take forever, it wasn't long before it started to work. The last thing I saw as it took effect was the worn leather of Mícheál's boot. I'd intended to buy him some new ones

when we got home. It wasn't exactly the last memory of my husband I'd wanted to take with me.

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