

# MASTERING HER FEAR

MIAMI MASTERS, BOOK THREE



BJ WANE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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## PROLOGUE



### CENTRAL FLORIDA

Midnight had come and gone by the time fifteen-year-old Jackson Davenport hiked his way back to his old neighborhood on foot. Keeping an eye out for the cops and the neighborhood watch, he snuck between the upscale houses, winding his way over to Brook Tree Lane. When he spotted the house he'd grown up in, a wave of impotent fury shook him, the same reaction he experienced every time he'd seen it since leaving. Another family lived there now, maybe with a son who occupied his old room, the one with a window facing the tree shrouded creek in the back. A bitter smile curled his lip as he wondered if that family hid secrets as well. Then he remembered his mission and, clutching the white bag in his hand, dashed across the street and slipped between his old home and Julie's house next door.

After searching the ground for a handful of small rocks, he let loose with one, ping-ponging the stone off his nine-year-old, ex-neighbor's window. "Come on, kid," he grumbled, tossing

another stone. Little Julie Martin and animals were the only ones he usually bore unlimited patience toward, but tonight he didn't have much time, not if he intended to get back before someone discovered he'd left. Last fall, Jackson had promised his grandmother he would stay in school and behave, and he hadn't intended to break that promise. After returning from a grueling summer camp for teen boys like him who fought back in destructive ways against their crappy home lives, he'd meant it. At fourteen, he'd been the youngest, but that hadn't spared him from the physical regimen or the intense, mind-probing counseling. The parole officers and ex-cons who ran the camp seemed to have a sixth sense for what each kid needed and didn't hesitate to dish it out. At least they included compassion and good-natured ribbing when not raking them over the coals.

But last week, between his birthday and the last day of school, Grandma announced he would be going to live with his aunt in Orlando this summer. So much for being good, he'd sneered at her, and not even her tears could dampen his anger. Not only did he hate big cities, but who would look after Julie if he left? She tried reasoning with him, reminding him he'd only be a thirty-minute drive from the small suburb he'd grown up in. For a kid who wouldn't be able to drive alone for another two years, that thirty minutes might as well be thirty hours.

The third toss finally caught someone's attention, and Jackson prayed it was Julie and not one of her controlling parents. A dim light glowed behind the dark glass then the window began inching up. From his position around the corner of his old home, he watched her shimmy out backwards then drop to her feet, her long, ink-black hair swirling around her waist, her bare feet getting caught up in the ankle-length pink robe wrapped around her too skinny frame. As he'd figured, she hadn't put on any weight in the

month since he'd seen her, and he cursed her parents for that too.

Jackson stepped out from his hiding place and, like always, she whirled and threw herself at him with a squeal. "Shh!" he admonished, hugging her small frame before setting her down. "Come on, Monkey, I don't have much time." He grabbed Julie's hand and they sprinted across the yard, knowing their way by heart through the dark. The small fort he'd built years ago still sat nestled in the trees and, with a flick of his small flashlight, they crawled inside.

"What'd you bring me, Jackson? French fries?" Julie asked in a hushed, breathless voice.

"Of course. And a double cheeseburger." Handing her the bag, he leaned back and watched her dig into the fast food with relish. "Tell me what's new." Anything to keep his mind off leaving. Wasn't it bad enough he'd had his whole world uprooted last year? Why did he have to go through another change, another move even further away from where he'd grown up?

Julie shrugged then spoke with her mouth full. "Same stuff. I have a pageant in June, which means practice, practice, practice."

"So tell them no," he growled, hating the way her parents, especially her mother, exploited their only child.

"I'm a kid, not big like you," she sighed. "When I am big, I will. This is really good, Jackson. Thank you."

He smiled, watching her devour the calorie-laden, late-night meal. "You're welcome, kid. Just don't give away our secret." Jackson hesitated, hating to burst her bubble, but it couldn't be helped. "I got bad news. Grandma's sending me to live with Aunt Joyce in two weeks."

"But... but why? You've been so good!" she wailed, forcing him to shush her again before they got caught.

"Quiet, or I won't be able to sneak away when we come

visit. Orlando's not far and Aunt Joyce is always at Grandma's house on weekends. I'll find a way to get away once in a while, just like I have been this past year."

Jackson heard Julie snuffle and it broke his heart. He never could stand seeing those big, violet eyes sad. "Come on, let's come up with ways you can flub the next pageant. I'm sure winning all the time is getting boring." Her giggle eased the tightness in his chest.

"I took third last February and Mom signed me up for modeling classes, to improve my walk and posture," she grumbled with an eyeball roll.

"Your mom's a..." He bit off what he was going to say. She was only nine. "A tough taskmaster. Just trip or something. If you screw up often enough, they'll give in, won't they?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I better get back to my room."

"Then let's go. I'll be back, Julie. I promise."



### THREE YEARS LATER

Jackson spotted Julie sitting with a group of pre-teen girls at a table in the mall's food court. He had been drawn to the cute kid next door the minute he'd stepped out their back door and seen her go flying off a swing to land in a tangle of arms and legs. When she'd popped up with a laugh, her impish face dominated by large, dark eyes, a small clutch had gripped his chest, the same as he experienced now. A wide grin split his face when Julie squealed upon seeing him. She leapt up, and he braced himself for the impact of her skinny, twelve-year-old body.

"You haven't changed, Monkey," he huffed on a laugh. Squeezing her, he pried her arms from around him and held

her at arm's length. "Look at you. I swear you've grown another two inches since I saw you last."

"And I still have to crane my neck to see you. What'd you bring me?" She made to snatch the bag out of his hand but he held it away with another laugh.

"Let's sit down. I only have a few minutes."

They took a seat at a smaller table after Julie waved to her friends, indicating she'd be right back. "You been staying out of trouble?" Jackson pulled out a warm, cinnamon-coated pretzel and handed it to her.

"Yum! And, of course." Rolling her eyes, she added with her mouth full, "Do you really think my parents would have it any other way?"

Unfortunately, he knew they wouldn't. How she stayed so sweet and upbeat with the way they stifled her childhood with their demands and insistence on exploiting her beauty by pushing her into one pageant after another was beyond him. The poor kid had worn make-up slathered on her attractive face at the young age of five, and missed out on all the fun foods kids loved because of her mother's insistence on maintaining a strict diet for her.

"I guess not. Seventh grade is coming up fast. Are you looking forward to going back to school?"

"Yes, but I wish I had time to join a club or go to games. Why do you have to go so far, Jackson?" Julie gazed at him with watery, violet eyes even as she stuffed a big bite into her mouth.

"Gainesville isn't that far, and that's where both the University of Florida and Veterinary college are. We'll keep in touch, just like we've been doing by phone." He still couldn't believe Dr. Drake, the veterinarian who'd given him a summer job the last two years, had offered to sponsor him. Curtis Drake was one of the few adults who didn't hold the sins of Jackson's parents against him.

"It's further than Orlando, and I've barely seen you since you moved there. I wish I was grown up, then I could do what I want." She pouted.

"Spoken like a typical kid." Although, in her case, he could see why she craved independence already. "I have to go." Standing, he bent and kissed her forehead. "Later, kid. Behave."



#### EIGHT YEARS LATER

Jackson was prepared for the instant clutch around his heart when he parked his car and glimpsed Julie leaning back on a tire swing, her long hair blowing out behind her. Sliding out, he lounged against the hood, waiting until she spotted him, then wasn't disappointed when she squealed and came flying across the park playground to launch herself at him. With a laugh, he caught and hugged her five-foot-eight, slender frame before tugging her hair to get her to let go. What he wasn't prepared for was the way his cock stirred with the press of her soft breasts against his chest and the feel of those long, bare legs sliding down his. The little girl next door had grown into a beautiful, desirable young lady, but his reaction caught him off guard nonetheless. Even though she'd been meeting him periodically without her parents' knowledge throughout her teen years, he'd never thought of her as anything except the kid next door who needed his friendship.

"I still have to crane my neck back to look up at you!" Julie exclaimed.

Smiling down into her laughing face, he said, "Get used to it, kid. Your chances of reaching six four are nil." Handing her the bag she kept trying to snatch out of his hand, he steered her over to a covered picnic table. The summer heat and humidity



drew a bead of perspiration down his back, but Julie still managed to look cool in a tank top and shorts.

“A burger and fries. Gee, how’d you know?” Julie didn’t wait for him to pull out his own lunch before delving in.

“Years of sneaking food to you?” Jackson enjoyed a huge bite of his double cheeseburger before bringing up the reason for this lunch. “So, now who’s moving away, and a hell of a lot further than Gainesville?”

“I know; can you believe it? A modeling contract and New York, how freaking awesome is that?” She stuffed two fries in her mouth and continued while chewing. “I still can’t believe it, Jackson. My parents are thrilled and, of course, taking all the credit.” She rolled her eyes.

A pang tightened his abdomen. She had always been the one to bemoan the distance between them and now here she was, embracing this big move with whole-hearted enthusiasm. He couldn’t blame her, could only hope the big city didn’t chew her up and spit her out. That would break his heart.

“It’s a big change, kid. You’ll forget all about me in no time.” That was what worried him most.

“Never! Besides, you’ll come visit, won’t you? You have to.”

Jackson sighed. He hated big cities and crowds, and New York boasted both. “You know I’m starting my practice down near Piedmont. I can’t afford to take off, at least not for a while. Your turn to come to me.” He still couldn’t believe Dr. Drake had left him ten acres and the family home when he’d passed away two months ago after a long battle with cancer. All the times the veterinarian referred to him as ‘son’, Jackson now realized how much he’d meant it.

“And I can now that I’ll be out from under Mom and Dad’s thumbs. That’ll be awesome.” She cocked her head, an impish smile tugging at her lips. “You always did like animals more than people.”

The urge to lean across the table and kiss her brought him

up short. He needed to do something about this new direction his thoughts were determined to go around her. Popping a fry in his mouth, he winked before answering. “Not more than you, Monkey. Never more than you.”



NEW YORK CITY, FOUR YEARS LATER

As he exited the taxi, Jackson’s heart pounded against his chest and his palms grew clammy despite the fucking cold wind driving right through his leather jacket, an early Christmas gift from his best friend, Miles. Now, he not only hated big cities and crowds, but cold weather as well. He longed to be home where it was still a balmy seventy-five degrees in mid-December. But he figured if he was ever going to do this, it had to be soon. Here he was, over thirty already, and his two-decade relationship with Julie Martin stood at a standstill. They’d kept in touch with texts, e-mails and calls since she’d taken New York and the modeling world by storm, but hadn’t seen each other in two years, not since she’d made her one and only trip back home.

Every time he’d broached the subject of her returning to Florida, she’d said her schedule was too busy. Given the number of times he’d seen her picture splashed on a magazine cover, he wondered how she had time to do anything but work. Each time he caught her gorgeous face staring back at him, those soft lips curved in a come-hither smile, his gut clenched with a pang of sorrow. Gone was the gangly kid next door who gazed at him out of large, adoring eyes. But what had he expected, for her to remain young and innocent her whole life? His body certainly craved the woman she’d become. Just thinking about entering the posh, five-star restaurant and seeing her again stirred his lust. Her breathless voice when he’d

called and told her he'd landed made him itch to touch her, to hear her soft voice crying out under his sexual control.

Anticipation drummed through his veins as Jackson pushed through the ornate glass doors and a maitre'd strolled forward to take his coat. After giving his name, he followed the hostess into the dimly lit dining room, feeling out of place as he wound through the white cloth draped tables lit with candles. Dressed in glittering formals and expensive suits, the other patrons should have made him feel under dressed wearing slacks and a dress shirt. Should have, but didn't. Fighting the urge to turn around and hightail it back to the airport, he wondered where the hell her table was.

Then Jackson saw her and disappointment swamped him when he noticed Julie's short hair. Instead of a beaming smile and exuberant squeal of greeting at his approach, a small curl of the corners of her mouth was all she offered. This time the clutch in his chest stemmed not from pleasure, but regret.

"Hey, Monkey." He hoped greeting her with the nickname that had popped into his head when he first met the skinny kid who was all legs, arms and big eyes would earn him a warmer welcome, but instead, she grabbed his hand and yanked him into a seat with a hiss.

"Shhh! What if someone heard you call me that ridiculous name? It'd be all over the tabloids and I'd be a laughingstock."

"Sorry," he returned, his cool tone reflecting his irritation at the way she scanned the nearby tables with a fake smile. "I didn't realize there were different rules for our relationship here in New York."

"What? Oh, Jackson, I didn't mean I don't like it when you call me that silly name. But let's keep it between us, okay? I'm so glad you're here."

Jackson relaxed his tense shoulders as Julie gushed about her work, the exotic places she'd been on shoots, the constant attention from fans. Her eyes glowed as she described a world

foreign to him, one she obviously basked in. The low scoop of her off-the-shoulder satin top draped over her breasts revealed a creamy expanse of the upper portion of her right breast, drawing his eyes to the pert outline of one nipple. The instant pop-up in his head of her sprawled naked on one of these tables with him pounding between her legs held a wealth of appeal. A woman approached their table, her nervousness drawing his attention away from his wayward thoughts.

“I’m sorry to intrude, but you’re Julie Martin, aren’t you? Would you mind signing my autograph book? My teenage daughter would be thrilled.”

He’d expected to see a friendly smile and greeting from Julie, but a haughty expression tightened her face. Flipping her short hair back, she murmured in a bored tone, “Sure.”

“That was unlike you,” Jackson couldn’t help but point out when the woman left with her face burning in mortification.

Julie rolled her eyes, but the gesture that used to tickle him now drew his pique as it conveyed a look of disdain he didn’t care for. “She was asking for her daughter, not herself. Maybe she should save her simpering for her husband instead of bothering me if she wasn’t interested in meeting me herself. What do you want to order? I recommend the salmon.”

Jackson felt his sexual interest take a nosedive and his chest tighten with a stabbing, sharp pain. It appeared he’d been right to worry this move would change the sweet, innocent girl next door. “Come here often, do you? It’s a far cry from our burger joints.”

She waved an airy hand. “Whenever I can. It’s one of the places the press always haunts on weekends. Gotta keep up the exposure. By thirty, I’ll be nearing the end of my career if I’m not careful.”

“That’s six years away.” The waitress arrived and took their order and he frowned when Julie chose a salad. What happened

to the kid with a voracious appetite for calorie laden fast food? Jackson feared the big city had eaten her up.

Julie picked up where she'd left off in filling him in on her life in the fast lane. Sadness and annoyance marred his evening when she didn't look at him once with that adoring gaze he'd missed. Was that what was bothering him, that she'd replaced her hero worship with vanity? By the time they'd finished eating, he realized she hadn't asked about him once, cementing his decision to cancel his hotel and return to the airport tonight.

The sudden glare of flashbulbs nearly blinded Jackson as they stepped outside, but it was the immediate change in Julie's demeanor that snared his attention. Gone was the vain, brittle woman he'd just spent an uncomfortable dinner with and in her place preened a gushing, simpering celebrity putting on airs for the tabloids. Bitterness that rivaled what he'd felt when Federal agents invaded his home and arrested his parents for drug dealing and complicity in a child's death rolled through him. It wasn't fair to have his illusions ripped out from under him twice in a lifetime.

Needing to get away, Jackson stepped away from her and hailed the next cab then gave her a quick hug as soon as the reporters left. "Good seeing you again, Julie." He kissed her forehead and turned, ignoring her as she called after him in a puzzled voice.

"Jackson?"

But as he reached for the handle of the taxi, Jackson held up a finger, bidding the driver to wait. Spinning back around, he caught a glimpse of confused insecurity on Julie's face before she masked it behind the façade he'd been staring at all night as he strode over to her. Yanking her against him, he held her head immobile by cupping her nape. Swooping down, he kissed her, fast and hard, refusing to give into the temptation to linger, to savor, to take more. Her low moan of instant

surrender threatened his resolve to walk away, but he forced himself to remember the past hour, the worst he'd spent in her company. Pulling back with a sigh of regret and heavy ache for all he had lost, he drank in her face one last time. "Have a good life, Julie." Ignoring her astonishment and the arousal in those amethyst eyes, he hopped in the cab and didn't glance back.

## CHAPTER 1



FLORIDA, SIX YEARS LATER

A thin rivulet of blood oozed from the self-inflicted cut, rolled down her arm and dripped into the sink. Sitting on the closed toilet lid, Julie Martin welcomed the painful distraction from the nightmare that had woken her while early morning darkness still lingered outside the motel room. It was fitting, wasn't it, that she continued to hide like a coward in a bathroom from the screams that still echoed in her head two years after they'd been silenced? Unlike that night, she now huddled with the light on, the metallic odor of the blood streaming down her arm reminding her of the smell when she'd emerged from that other bathroom hours later. A shudder rippled down her spine as she shoved aside the images of Maci and Candace's mutilated bodies. How long would her friends' deaths continue to haunt her?

When the pain receded to a dull throb, she rose, rinsed off her arm and slapped a small band aid on the cut. Following 'the incident', as her parents labeled that night from hell, the police

psychologist had urged her into counseling. Eighteen months and three psych docs later and she'd given up after discovering pain worked better than anything else she'd tried in helping her cope with her fear and emotional trauma. Now, her arms and a few spots on her legs bore the signs of her self-harming addiction, marring her once perfect body. And Julie didn't give a damn.

With a hand that shook, she reached for the bathroom doorknob, wondering how long she'd been cowering this time, her sweaty palm making it difficult to turn it. Sucking in a deep breath, she inched it open then released the pent-up air in her lungs with a whoosh at seeing what her mind needed clarifying. There was nothing on the other side of this bathroom door except a queen size, ruffled bed and small dresser illuminated by every light in the room. Padding across the worn carpet, Julie yanked open the curtains, adding a wide swath of early morning sunlight to the space. A few hours had passed since Maci and Candace's terrified cries for help chased her into this bathroom.

Julie ignored her stomach's rumbling as she tossed the few belongings she'd unpacked yesterday back into her suitcase. She managed to eat when she had to, a remnant left over from years of maintaining a rigid diet for her job followed by the stress inducing nausea of 'the incident'. It had been nine years since she'd returned to Florida, not since her twenty-second birthday. As if it were yesterday, she recalled how Jackson had taken time off from establishing his practice to drive up to Gainesville and meet her at the same park where she'd told him about leaving for New York. She'd lost so much by making that move, not only the girl she used to be and her two friends, but the most important person in her life. Maci and Candace's horrendous deaths had shone a light on the raw, unpleasant truths about the person she'd allowed herself to become, and she didn't care for that person any



more than Jackson had. Only she'd been too blind to see it before then.

Humid, warm air smacked Julie in the face as she stepped out of the motel room. The newest slice on her arm still hurt and helped her kick aside the leftover crumbs from her nightmare, but the Florida heat did nothing to thaw the coldness inside her as she'd hoped. She'd been too tired last night to drive the last two hours to her parents' house in Lake Shore and didn't relish arriving at lunch time only to hear another lecture on watching her weight for when she came to her senses and returned to her career, hopefully, before it was too late.

Julie could've told them it was already too late, but why bother? They wouldn't listen now any more than they had been the past two years, or the twenty years before that. They'd never taken into consideration what she wanted, or needed. Tossing her bag in the back of the small Fiat she'd purchased before leaving New York, she checked out of the motel and got back on the road. Weariness pulled at her and, despite having reservations about popping in unexpectedly at her parents', she was looking forward to the end of this trip. Two back to back, ten-hour days driving on little food and even less sleep had taken their toll on her nerves, but she worried if she stopped too long, she'd chicken out and start believing the common phrase, 'You can't go home again'. If she couldn't go home, where would she go? There was nothing left for her in New York, and even if there were, the big city had lost its allure for her a long time ago.

Not working for two years and going through a large chunk of her savings had been one of the catalysts that had coerced Julie into making this move. The second didn't bear thinking about; he and his request didn't bear thinking about. Her lawyer ensured Julie didn't have to speak to the man who had murdered two young women in cold blood, but she still felt the

urge to put as much distance between herself and his prison in Montana as possible. Who would've thought she would become the victim of a violent crime in a small mountain town hundreds of miles from New York City? The quaint, peaceful winter setting their agent arranged for that shoot hadn't turned out to be all that peaceful.

If Julie had to choose one thing she missed most about her old life here in Florida, it would have to be talking with Jackson. His cold shoulder and silence following their dinner in New York six years ago still hurt, and her only solace was now she could look back and decipher why he had walked out of her life.

The long stretch of highway blurred in front of her and she blinked in rapid succession to clear her watery vision. So many mistakes and regrets, so much loss. How could she ever hope to recover alone? The older boy next door gave and gave of himself until she'd been foolish enough to think he'd always be there for her, no matter what. Now she had no one, and the pain of that was as piercing as losing her friends to a madman's rage.

The need to keep going, keep on driving, grew stronger the closer Julie got to her home town. A lump lodged in her throat and her hands shook on the wheel when she spotted the sign for the turnoff. It wasn't until she drove right past the exit ramp that her heartbeat slowed to a more regular rhythm and the nausea churning in her empty stomach abated. Keep going, don't stop, don't stop. The mantra reverberated in her head for the rest of the day. It didn't cease when she pulled over for gas, didn't let up while she choked down an ice cream bar and didn't quiet until she found the directions on the GPS for Davenport Veterinary Clinic just outside of Miami. And yet, Julie still questioned what the heck she was doing as she rolled to a stop outside the wide entrance into Jackson's animal clinic and rescue.

People changed. Look what happened to her when she'd allowed herself to be blinded by the lights and glamor of the big city and fame. She'd turned into a stranger, a person Jackson wanted nothing to do with, and Julie couldn't blame him. So why was she here, sitting outside his sprawling compound, shaking like a leaf at the thought of seeing him again? Even if she managed to earn back his friendship, if he ever found out just how low she'd sunk, she would lose him for a second time because there would never be a way to change the past or to atone for her cowardice.

Miami lay a short distance to the east; beyond that, the endless blue expanse of the Atlantic. It was either stay or retreat and, God help her, she was going to be selfish again and stay. She couldn't go back to the empty void her life had become. Putting the car in gear, she drove down the long gravel drive.

The parking area in front of the two-story, clapboard house seemed small compared to the size of the operation Jackson had set up on the sprawling acreage. Knowing him, Julie figured he'd designed it that way on purpose, so he wouldn't have to deal with too many people at one time. He always did prefer four-legged creatures to anything that walked on two feet. Except her. Her chest ached whenever she remembered the special place in his affections she used to hold and how she'd so foolishly lost her way, and him.

Before she lost her nerve, she trotted up to the porch only to have her hopes deflated when she spotted the closed sign. "Wouldn't you know it," she muttered, reading the clinic's hours, which included closed on Wednesday. Still, she knew he lived on the premises, and it was past regular office hours on the other days anyway, so there was still a chance he was around.

Pivoting, she strolled over to the first of two large buildings housing indoor/outdoor dog kennels, all of which looked to be

teeming with a variety of sizes and breeds setting up an excited ruckus. “Oh, look at you.” Stooping, she stuck a finger through the first cage and the small, scrawny mixed breed wagging its tail so hard its whole body shook licked it with tiny, excited whimpers. Three other medium sized dogs came bounding through the dog door and tripped over themselves trying to monopolize her attention. Laughing, she cooed and tickled their noses as best she could through the pen, wishing she could crawl in there with them.

“You guys are freaking adorable,” she sighed, pushing to her feet. Her parents had never allowed Julie to have a pet, claiming it would take too much of her time caring for one and there were more important things she needed to concentrate on during her spare time. It never mattered she would have much preferred playing with a dog after school than spending hours on dance, music or voice practice.

Walking with slow, measured steps down the row of kennels, Julie noticed how clean both the cages and the animals were. Some dogs were pitifully underweight, and a few showed signs of noticeable health issues, but since each kennel held bowls of ample food and water, she figured they were a work in progress in restoring their health. By the time she reached the end of the second building, she realized how big of an undertaking Jackson had taken on, one that would have daunted any other person regardless of their good intentions. He had to have help, but knowing him, he would keep his employees at a minimum and likely took on most of the work himself.

Rounding the corner, Julie saw a small red barn across the sweeping lawn and started that way until her pulse leaped from the low but recognizable voice coming from behind the kennels. Drawing a deep breath to steady her nerves, she walked to the back then stopped short, her heart stuttering at seeing Jackson again for the first time in six years. The old

cliché about how a woman could get turned on from eyeing a hot man wearing a tool belt or Stetson pulled low over a rugged face never mentioned the instant, cream-your-jeans effect of seeing a tall, muscular man crooning to a small puppy held with care in his large hand. The sun picked up hints of red in his dark, mahogany hair curling around his nape, one sweat-dampened lock falling across his forehead. Not since the night he'd left her with her lips throbbing and her girly parts tingling from his first and only kiss had she been so affected by a man.

Then Jackson raised his head and pinned her in place with those dark blue eyes. The urge to run and throw herself at him threatened Julie's composure, forcing her to fist her hands until her nails gouged her palms. The sharp pain kept her grounded in place. She could no longer expect him to catch her and hold her tight.

"Hello, Jackson."



JACKSON HAD to blink twice to make sure he was seeing correctly. There was no way Julie Martin was standing just a few feet away, looking as young and innocent as she had when she'd been all of twelve. But there was no mistaking those wide purple eyes or the cloud of midnight hair that was longer than the short cut she'd been sporting the night he'd walked away from her without looking back. Or the familiar clutch of his heart. Remembering that night, and why he'd severed ties with her was enough to throttle back the instant surge in his libido, the same response he'd experienced when he first recognized the little girl next door as a grown, desirable woman, the one he'd worked so hard to forget these past years. Resentment welled up, rose to the surface and obliterated the instant warmth surrounding his chest, erasing the flash of disappointment when she didn't hurtle herself at him

and wrap those long limbs around him in a bear hug greeting.

“What the hell are you doing here, Julie?” he demanded gruffly.

Her face paled, those slim shoulders drooping as she took a step back. Remorse for his harsh greeting propelled Jackson forward. Regardless of why he’d stayed away from her, he couldn’t stand to hurt her. “Sorry, you took me by surprise. I didn’t know you’d be in the state, let alone down this way.”

She glanced away in discomfort. “I... I’m sorry. I should’ve called, but it’s been so long...”

And the last time she tried to get hold of him, he’d ignored her call, just as he’d done with her texts and e-mails until she’d quit trying. “Six years, but you haven’t changed.” Which was a lie. There were circles under her eyes, and a look in the beautiful dark depths that pulled at the protective urges he’d thought had subsided over the years. And she was thinner than he’d ever seen her.

“You always did know what to say. Who’s this?” Reaching out a hand, she petted the soft head of the shaking puppy.

“The runt of a new litter. I was on my way to the house to feed her with a syringe since her siblings have been too greedy to share.” He hesitated, but saw no way around not inviting her into his home. “Follow me and you can tell me what brings you here.” And what put that haunted look in your eyes.

No, he didn’t want to know. It had taken him too long to quit thinking about her every day, to stop worrying and dreaming about what could have been. To stop missing her. He’d bet she had an ulterior, self-centered motive for popping in on him after all this time—at least, the woman he’d walked away from so long ago would have.

Holding the puppy close to his chest in the hopes his heart-beat would ease the poor thing’s shaking, Jackson pulled open

the back door to his clinic then held it open for Julie. "Come on in and go to the right."

"Thanks. You have quite a place out here." Entering a small treatment room, she sank onto the one chair with a sigh, as if the fatigue etched on her face went bone deep.

"It keeps me busy." Using one hand, he opened a new plastic syringe, set it on the exam table then grabbed a can of baby formula off a shelf. "What about you?" he asked, filling the syringe. "Are you here working?" Leaning against the table, he coaxed the puppy to open her mouth. Pushing on the syringe, he sent a squirt of milk down the pup's throat while trying to ignore the hungry way Julie's eyes were devouring him. Just like the old Julie, the one he'd gone to New York to see if the spark of lust he'd felt when she'd been twenty was still there and worth risking an invitation into his kinky preferences. He could still recall, way too easily, the instant flare of heat when he spotted her in that fancy restaurant, and how fast it had cooled.

Julie averted her face before answering, another small sign something wasn't right. "No, I'm on a... hiatus from work." She turned those incredible eyes back toward him, and this time there was such pain in their dark depths, his dominant nature urged him to demand an explanation. Luckily for him, his control was stronger. "I've wanted to come home for a while now. It's been too long."

The catch in her soft voice followed by the growl he heard rumbling from her stomach kept Jackson from prodding her on her way. What could it hurt to invite her upstairs for dinner before she left? There were enough leftovers to feed them both. Tossing the now empty syringe into the sink, he glanced down at the sleeping puppy. "If you have time to wait while I get her settled in a crate, and are good with leftover spaghetti, you're welcome to stay and eat before you go."

"I have time. Thank you," she accepted without hesitation.

He spun away from the relief crossing her face and the questions that kept begging for answers. “Let’s go upstairs then.”



JULIE CONCENTRATED on the view of Jackson’s butt showcased in tight jeans shifting in front of her instead of the nervous pounding of her heart as she followed him up a wood planked staircase. She hadn’t expected a huge welcoming smile after all this time, but she didn’t know how to act or what to make of this polite but indifferent man who had replaced the boy next door who’d always looked after her. “Oh.” Stopping short when he led her into a wide open great room, she gazed around the masculine space with appreciation for the homey, welcoming feel of worn, overstuffed furniture and a row of potted plants lined up in front of a bank of wide windows. White marble countertops topped the blue/grey kitchen cabinets, the bright pattern of blue, white and grey backsplash tiles adding a splash of color to the white shiplap walls. “This is so you.” She turned a beaming smile up to him and for the first time in the last thirty minutes, his sun-browed face creased in a grin and revealed his dimples.

“Glad you think so. Sit down a minute while I take care of her.” He nodded toward the high stools at the counter.

She stood a moment, watching him settle the sleepy, content puppy in a small crate then set it on a chair. Julie envied the way Jackson stroked over the small brown head and the softness of his gaze before he turned toward her and his jaw went taut. It couldn’t be more obvious he didn’t want her here. A pang of regret tightened her abdomen. Yet another mistake she had to answer for.

“What can I do to help?” she offered.

“Nothing. This’ll just take a few minutes. Tell me what



exotic places your agent has sent you to.” He pulled a glass dish from the refrigerator and slid it into the microwave.

Hopping onto a stool at the kitchen counter, she leaned on her elbows and watched him pad over to the refrigerator. The charcoal tee shirt with his rescue’s insignia of a dog stitched in bright red on the breast pocket fit with snug tightness around his bulging shoulders and biceps. His height and size would intimidate most people, but she’d never felt anything but comforted in his presence. Until the end of that last dinner they’d shared on her turf. The coldness in his eyes when the paparazzi had descended on them the second they stepped outside had rivaled the frigid, December temperature. Which had rendered the first carnal kiss he’d given her as a woman as startling as her quick response.

“I did a swimsuit layout on the Cook Islands about four years ago. That was fun.” Too late, she realized her mistake when he raised one, dark brown brow in question.

“Nowhere else since then? Maybe you need a new agent.” His direct gaze held curiosity and a hint of suspicion, reminding Julie of how well he knew her.

She didn’t mention she’d fired her agent right after the murders while she’d still been under police protection in Montana. Six days she’d spent in a safe house until they’d caught him. Thankfully, once Evan Daniels heard he’d left an eyewitness alive, he confessed and spared her the trauma of testifying at his trial. It was bad enough she still relived that night in her nightmares; to have to relay the details of those hours to a courtroom of strangers with him staring at her would have been sheer torture.

“I... I’m not modeling any more, Jackson. I... retired.” That sounded better than ‘quit and ran away’ like the coward she was.

That explained a lot, but not everything. Jackson resorted to sarcasm to chase away his growing curiosity. “Just turned

thirty-one and you can't compete with twenty-somethings? Tough career choice."

"Yes, well, we all make mistakes. That smells good." His ridicule hurt, but not enough to set aside appreciation for the first sign of her appetite returning after so long.

"Julie... sorry, I need to get this," Jackson said instead of apologizing when his emergency line pealed. Snatching his cell off the clip at his waist, he listened for a moment before saying, "I can be there in about twenty minutes. Right." Flipping the phone closed, he returned it to his belt then grabbed hot pads to lift the casserole dish from the microwave. "I've got to run on an emergency and I'll be gone a while." Torn between wanting her gone and his growing desire for answers, he hesitated a moment before caving to the latter against his better judgement. "I'll be about two hours. Feel free to stick around if you want."

Jackson didn't wait for her answer, just snatched his keys off the hook by the door leading to the outside staircase and left without looking back. Just like last time. When he found himself hoping she'd still be there when he returned, irritation forced his hands into fists and he welcomed the painful, sharp gouge of the keys against his palm. Slamming into his truck, he put it in gear and sped down the drive, trying to shift his mind onto the ailing horse waiting for his help and away from his surprise guest.

Staying away from Julie hadn't been easy. He'd lost count of how many times his best friend, Miles Cavanaugh, had caught him losing focus on a scene or with a conversation and questioned Jackson about it. Miles knew how he'd befriended Julie when they were young and neighbors, before his teen years went to hell after his parents' arrest. He'd gone off the deep end after the surprise raid on his home revealed the truth about his mother and father's little side business, and the death of a ten-year-old it had inadvertently contributed to. Did they think the

drugs they sold to their dealer would only end up in the hands of adults? Whenever he thought back upon all the years of hearing them preach ‘just say no’ to drugs, he still wanted to rail at their hypocrisy.

If it hadn’t been for his mother’s relatives—mainly his grandmother and aunt—stepping in when he retaliated against those in their small town who scorned him for the sins of his parents, he knew he would have ended up in prison himself. After stealing cars and booze led to breaking and entering in an electronics store and theft, and landed him in juvenile court for the third time, his choices were simple: juvenile detention until he turned twenty-one or three months in a rigid summer camp for juvenile delinquents. That had been a no-brainer and the bonds he’d forged with six other guys that grueling summer helped keep him grounded when he returned to live with his grandmother. Them, and maintaining his protective watch over Julie, whose parents continued to exploit their only child for their own selfish interests and purposes.

Whenever the death of his father just two years after being sentenced to twenty years in prison got Jackson down, all he had to do was think of his friends’ childhoods and the family traumas they also suffered and struggled to cope with, and he knew he wasn’t alone. Miles had it the worst, yet he never faulted in his support or friendship, none of them did. Julie hadn’t either, not until she’d gone to the big city and changed into someone he didn’t want to know. The woman he’d left in his home just now seemed more like the young girl he remembered, a little lost and in need of a friend, which yanked at the over protective instincts he’d always harbored for the innocent kid next door. The haunted look in her eyes worried him, but he had to remember she wasn’t a kid anymore, and was a far cry from the innocent twenty-year-old he’d first felt a stirring of lust for.

Jackson turned into the private horse farm he’d received an

emergency call from, shoving aside the thought of who waited back on his property as well as the desire to dig into the reasons for Julie's unexpected pop back into his life. Grabbing his bag, he slid out of the truck, vowing it didn't matter why she'd come to him or what had happened to bring about her early retirement from modeling. It had taken too long to get over losing her and he refused to go down that road again. It could only lead to more heartache and he'd had enough of that to last him a lifetime. He had his work, his friends and now their own private yacht decked out with the BDSM accoutrements they all enjoyed when indulging in their kinky preferences. What more could he want?

Five hours later, Jackson returned home with a heavy heart. He hated losing patients, and putting down a young, beautiful mare left him torn up. The water levels in the bogs and marshes were all up due to the rainy weather of late, and the poor horse couldn't be pulled out safely when she got herself mired down in the muddy banks of one. The rescue team from the SPCA and fire department tried every trick they knew before the distraught owners asked him to end her suffering.

To add to his piss-poor mood, the longer he stayed gone, the more likely it was Julie would have already left by the time he returned. That likelihood added to his sour disposition even though he knew it would be easier all around if she were gone. The last thing he needed with his busy schedule was to entertain an uninvited, unwelcome guest for long.

Jackson craved a stiff drink, some alone time and sleep, but when he drove up to his house and his pulse jumped with pleasure at seeing Julie's car still parked out front, he frowned in irritation. The kennels were dark and quiet, but the porch light lit up the front of the two-story, one-hundred-year-old home and as he climbed the stairs, he noticed the brightness waiting for him on the second floor of private living space. Entering the great room, a quick glance confirmed every light was lit

before his gaze zeroed in on Julie curled up on the sofa, sound asleep. The exhaustion he noted on her face earlier was even more pronounced now, her face even paler and the dark circles under her eyes now resembled bruises.

Too tired to deal with her, or his mixed emotions regarding her sudden reappearance in his life, Jackson grabbed the knitted throw off the back of the couch and draped it over her. Pouring himself that much-needed drink, he sipped it while feeding the puppy again then shut off all the lights before dragging himself off to bed. Dealing with his guest would have to wait until tomorrow as he didn't have the energy, or the heart, to shove her on her way tonight.