

# LEGITIMATE LIES

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## DEDICATION

To all who have the courage to face the truth of their past and to trust in God to handle the results.

## CHAPTER ONE

Did I really want this baby? Yes.

Wait, no. Absolutely not.

I recognized her—and that wounded me deeper than I'd ever imagined.

The barricade of lies, which I'd droned into my head over the past few months, crumbled the moment little Josh Holder discovered her on the front steps of the Bonita Springs Public Library. She lay on the hard concrete, swaddled in a pink crocheted throw. Innocent eyes, tucked into chestnut skin, widened as they peered into mine. Thick, straight strands encircled her head in a coal-colored halo.

"Look Miz Williams. It was taped to her blanket." Josh teetered on his eight-year old tiptoes to show me.

My business card—"Sheila Williams - Library Assistant." *What on earth?* I tucked a fly-away strand of auburn hair behind my ear and flipped the card over. On the back a familiar handwriting scrawled, "She's yours if you want her."

*Mine? If I want her?* The card trembled between my fingers. A tumult of emotions swirled inside of me like a Dervish dancer. Anguish because she was my now-imprisoned husband, Robert's, illegitimate child. Anticipation she could be what I'd secretly desired—a baby of my own. Anger over the fact she existed at all. My nerves mimicked the twirling leaves on the sidewalk in front of the library, whipped by the tropical storm brewing above us.

Thunder rumbled. Or did my heartbeat thump a warning inside my eardrums? No one from my past in Texas had been told I now lived in Florida. Except for Becky, who'd help me settle into my new life. But she wouldn't tell. Her federal job depended on secrecy. So, who dropped off this child?

I scanned the city block. Then, I spied him. Tom. The one man I'd almost trusted. A smile eased across my lips. So, he'd kept his promise to Robert after all. He'd made sure the baby lived. Now, Robert's hold on him was broken. The old Navy buddy debt paid.

Oh, how I envied Tom's freedom from my husband's evil vice-grip. My thumb rubbed the place where my wedding ring once sat on my finger. My faith told me I remained shackled to Robert—for better or for worse—even though the Feds had changed my identity and my marital status when I entered witness protection.

Tom tipped an imaginary Stetson in my direction. My mouth opened, but no words came out. There remained too much to say, and none of it mattered now. So, I returned the gesture with a slight nod, a heart to heart silent code I hoped he'd interpret as, *I still love you.*

Josh tugged on my sleeve. "Who's that?"

"Just a man saying, 'Hi', I guess."

Tom had been so much more. My husband's friend, turned Federal asset, had become my protector. My comforter. And a fellow victim of Robert's manipulative schemes. As our feelings for each other developed, he represented the forbidden fruit—a constant reminder of the wrong choice I'd made with Robert before God and man at the altar five years ago amidst roses, white lace and taffeta. But, a vow remained a vow.

I wrapped my arms around my chest and watched Tom walk away, his hands tucked deep into the side pockets of his well-fitted Dockers. My feet yearned to follow him. My brain knew better than to respond to their request. Instead, I pushed the soles of my shoes against the concrete with locked knees. Any feelings for Tom, and his for me, rested in God's hands. *I'll wait, Tom. I'll always wait. Does your finding me again mean you will too?*

With a deep sigh, I tapped the business card against my palm. My thoughts returned to the cooing bundle on the stoop. So he'd brought the infant to me. Great. *Now what do I do?* I crouched down to peer at her.

A chill zipped up my spine. How had Tom gotten one of my cards? Wait—how had he found me? Isn't WITSEC supposed to keep my whereabouts a secret? Wasn't that the whole point?

Even if my and Tom's ties to Robert were severed, the federal agents forbade any connections with my past. Tom knew that. Did that also hold true for this tiny child at my feet? My eyes stung from the question. *Oh, why on earth did Tom give you to me, little one? And where is your mother?*

A clap of thunder shuddered against the library building. Quarter-sized raindrops polka-dotted the paved stoop—first a few, then more. The warm, moisture-laden Gulf wind spritzed my face, hiding the tears that welled in my eyes.

"We can't just leave her here, Miz Williams. She'll get soaked." Josh scrunched his third grade eyebrows together. It made him appear wiser than his years. Perhaps he was.

I blinked the emotions back into the dark crevices of my mind. "Okay, Josh. Let's take her inside the library."

He dashed up the steps to open the door for us.

"But," I raised the baby girl to my shoulder and whispered into her little ear, "I just can't let you into my life. Not yet."

\* \* \*

Soon the newborn nestled safely in one of the overnight book-drop bins I wheeled to my desk. Josh tilted his head to examine her. His black-rimmed glasses slipped down his nose. With a push of his finger to readjust them, he nodded. "I think she likes you."

I swiveled my chair closer, hands grasped to my knees. Her bright eyes and tiny fingers peeked out from the swaddling. She seemed fragile, helpless. Robert wanted her to be my responsibility? Why would he give me this baby now when he'd refused to let me have one five years ago?

Another tear threatened to trickle out of the corner of my eye. I squinted it back. Not here, not now. Keep up appearances. Leave the past in the past.

Yet, how could I when it stared me in the face? I breathed a silent prayer. Lord, give me strength. And a touch of your divine wisdom wouldn't hurt either.

Josh edged in for a better glance. His hair smelled of little boy sweat and no-tears shampoo. I used my library-hushed voice. "Josh. Why don't you pick out a book to read? Your mother will be back from her errands in a while."

"Yes'm." He cocked his head to have one more glance at his discovery. "What'll happen to her?"

"I don't know. But she'll be fine." I made my lips form a smile. "Go on, then."

With a shrug, he spun on one heel and dashed to the elementary school reading section where Indians in cupboards and mice on motorcycles waited to stir his imagination.

The infant's expression creased into a frown.

"What is it? Are you hungry?" I hadn't the foggiest idea what to feed her. Some fat-free half and half sat in the workroom fridge. Would that do? But, what to put it in?

Miniature feet moved inside the fluffy blanket in sync with a red-faced whimper.

"Please tell me you don't need changing." I hated to admit it, but I didn't know how to diaper a newborn. At thirty-two, many women are into babies. Not me. In fact, I usually avoided them. My being denied one of my own pierced too deeply. Robert knew that. Was this some sort of sick joke spawned from his twisted, criminal mind? Revenge for testifying against him?

Wait. Did Robert know I lived here now? My palms beaded with moisture. Don't panic.

Think. Maybe he'd left that detail up to Tom. I hoped so. Either way, my secret had been breached. That meant I'd have to call it in. My hand reached for my burner cell phone.

The infant's lips quivered.

"Oh, no. Don't cry. Everyone will hear you."

My shoulder blades thrust into the back of the desk chair. Time to get a grip. Deal with the baby, and then deal with your situation. "Okay. You can do this, Jen."

Oh, my gosh. I gulped, hand clasped over my mouth. Why did I do that? I'd just called myself "Jen." Stupid, stupid mistake. She didn't exist anymore. Sheila. That's my name now. I repeated it under my breath. Sheila. Sheila Williams.

Had anyone heard my slip-up? I scanned the library, and relaxed my shoulders. No one neared the checkout desk yet. Thank goodness for the sparse crowd this morning, probably due to the weather. All appeared quiet except for the pattering rain that danced on the roof in sync with the distant drum of thunder.

I ran my fingers over my face. How careless of me. Had discovering this baby muddled my brain that much? I'd tried so hard to cram the past into the remote corners of my mind, just as the federal marshals taught me. Night after night, I play-rehearsed the facts of my new life until it all felt real. I'd even begun to believe this do-over might actually work.

Until twenty minutes ago, that is.

I inhaled courage, and then blew out a long sigh to ease the tightness in my chest. With a wipe of my hands against my pencil skirt, I cupped them under her squiggly form and drew her to me. "Okay. Let's see."

The small body wriggled in response to my touch. Afraid I'd drop her on her head, I balanced the infant on my lap as I checked to see if her diaper had become wet. A weight lifted off my chest with a sigh. Dry.

I cocked my head to peer into her face. The spitting image of her mother, Marisol—a Hispanic teenager tricked into trafficking like so many illegally immigrated girls. When we'd met that night in the shack, something had bonded us despite our language barriers and age differences. Neither of us knew why at the time.

I experienced the same link as I gazed into her baby girl's eyes and rocked her on my knees. Except that now I knew the reason for the instant connection. My voice cracked in a soft whisper. "You're really my stepdaughter, aren't you?"

Her olive-colored eyes and Mediterranean nose, the spitting image of my husband Robert's, blared that fact. "You're his, but you're not mine, sweetie. I'm not your mother. Robert, your daddy, never wanted me to be a mom."

Hearing the words from my own mouth burned the back of my eyes. It wasn't fair. Not at all. He chose an illegal teen to bear his child instead of me, his wife? The man didn't make sense. I'd never forgive him. My molars clamped together as my fingernails dug into my palms. I hate him. Hate him. Oh, why did I marry him?

Deep breath. Don't revisit that hurt. Not now. I blinked the guilt away one more time and swallowed it back into the crevices of my soul. My gaze returned to the newborn. I stroked her head. "I know it's not your fault, but I can't help it. A large part of me just wishes you didn't even exist, wee one."

The infant cooed. Little bubbles formed in her mouth—so cute. How could I hate this product of his lust? I scooped her from the makeshift hammock of my skirt.

As I peered into the baby's face, I shared Marisol's sorrow. She should be holding this child, not me. Had Marisol chosen to give this sweet thing up? Or had she been snatched moments after birth? I didn't want to know. I ached inside—for this baby, for her mother, and for me. All naive victims tossed in the treacherous waves of deceit generated in the wake of my

husband's ambition and cruelty.

I drew her to me. "Oh, why on earth did your daddy have Tom bring you to me?"

The infant's soft eyes blinked the answer straight into my soul. This little girl needed love, no matter how she came into this world. All babies deserved that much. But, was I the one to give that to her?

My little finger stroked her chubby cheek as I cradled her. The scents of baby powder and formula filled my nose. Her shiny eyes twinkled unabashed trust as they focused upon my face.

Some innate motherhood gene awoke from deep inside me. A tingly, warm sensation spread from my chest to my eye ducts. My heart had double-knotted with hers.

A grin crept across to my cheeks as I gently swayed her in my arms. She seemed so innocent. No one had hurt her yet. No one had stomped on her feelings, or lied to her face, or cheated on her. And now, in this new life the government had given me, I had to pretend that none of that had happened to me either.

Maybe, this baby symbolized my fresh start. I'd protect her. Ensure she had a normal, safe life. No one would be the wiser, right? Surely lots of kids grow up in WITSEC protection.

But would I be able to keep all the hurt she'd dredged up hidden? What if somehow, someday, she discovered her past...and mine? Could we love each other, then? Oh, how I hated living a lie.

With a swallow of my now-cold cup of Earl Grey tea, I washed down the tightness in my throat. I traced her forehead with my little finger. The impact of her presence tangled the words in my throat. I swallowed hard to release the question from my vocal chords. It came out louder than I wanted. "What do I do with you?"

"I guess what anyone should do under the circumstances, Mrs. Williams."

I looked up to see the Bonita Springs' deputy sheriff, Jorge Hernandez, gaze down at me and the newborn. "Josh told me you two found her on the steps outside. So, that means you have no idea who she belongs to, right?"

One of his thick black eyebrows raised in a tight arch. I gulped.

## CHAPTER TWO

Deputy Hernandez peered over the library checkout counter as he plopped a stack of preschool books in front of me. Both of his girls had already become avid readers—a librarian's dream. Instead of his official uniform, he wore khaki shorts and a "Go Gators" tank top under his city-issued, fold-away raincoat. But, his tone sounded authoritative and official. "Call Child Protective Services. They'll take care of her—find her a foster home."

"No." I clutched the small, warm-as-toast head to my cheek. I turned my gaze to meet his. "I need to keep her." *Did I just say that?* My eyes widened at the thought, but I lowered them, hoping Jorge didn't notice my expression.

"Whoa." Jorge stepped back, elbows locked and hands out as a barrier between us. "The mother bear emerges. Who'd a guessed?"

Something sharp inside my skirt pocket jammed my thigh. The business card. Should I show it to him? No, it would open up too many questions. I'd have to reveal why I'd been purposely given this baby, and how I knew her parents—an illegal alien and a crime boss who happened to be my husband from a former life. Better to let him think this is just another Safe Haven drop.

His eyebrows knitted into one fuzzy line. "Sheila, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Sheila. She has to be processed through the system. It's the law."

I curled my arms inward, rolling the child towards my aching heart.

Jorge's stance stiffened. "She's not a stray puppy. She's a child who needs care—and a family."

*And, I'm a single woman. A childless widow.* The story the Feds had drilled into me. In this day and age my marital status shouldn't matter, but it did. Besides, I felt so inept—not even sure I held her correctly, much less be able to care for her daily needs. Maybe my body language gave me away.

"Ahem." Three women stood behind him in line.

Jorge turned slightly to shoot a quick smile at the ladies, and then returned his attention to the baby and me. His expression softened. "Let me take her while you check them out." He extended his arms over the counter and beckoned with his fingers. "Then we'll talk."

The infant wriggled and made sucking noises as her head nuzzled into my blouse. Heat flooded my cheeks. I really *was* inept when it came to a caring for a baby, in more ways than one. "Uh, right."

I handed the bundle to him. In an instant, my arms ached from the emptiness.

The deputy gave me a quick grin. "I've got her, now. You, um...get yourself back together." He turned to block me from view while I wiped my drooled-on top.

When I raised my head, I noticed how he expertly balanced the baby in the crux of his elbow as he supported her head with one hand. With the other, he extended a knuckle for her to suckle. "*Hola, bambina.*"

Oh, please. Even Jorge made a better mother than me. Of course, he had two girls of his own. Naturally he'd had plenty of practice. Still, jealousy jabbed deep. I sucked it away with a cleansing breath and plastered on a smile, ready to greet my customers. After all, pretending had become something I'd learned to do quite well.

But, by now the ladies' attentions had zeroed in on the Hispanic tot, dwarfed like a peanut in the muscular arms of the deputy. Female voices cooed baby talk as they huddled around the two.

With a thrust of my chin, my professional demeanor kicked in. I pumped my hands up and down. "Ssshh. Please. This is a library, ladies..."



One by one, their lips pinched together. The din level diminished.

"Thank you. Who's next?"

The first woman shuffled towards me. I motioned to the right with my head. "Jorge, you better take her to the workroom."

He slung the burp cloth over his shoulder and lifted the baby to it.

"Here." I handed him the pink blanket, which he tucked around her small form.

"Yes, ma'am. But, let me call my wife, Rosa, okay? She runs a daycare, you know." He bounced his heels up and down as the baby cooed and gurgled.

I tapped my finger to my lips, unsure if I wanted more people involved.

He added, "She's only a block away. She can be here in no time. With formula and diapers."

"Okay. You can call. But"—I swirled my chair towards the disappearing deputy—"that baby does *not* leave the premises without my say-so. Got it?"

Jorge turned back to me. Our eyes locked. Mine narrowed.

"Yea. Though I don't understand why..." His voice trailed off.

I lowered my gaze. *And you never can.*

### CHAPTER THREE

Word of the abandoned baby spread like grape juice through a one-ply paper towel. Undeterred by the threatening weather blowing in from the Gulf, curious onlookers flooded the library. This was probably the most excitement Bonita Springs had witnessed since the winter of 2009 when Mrs. Addison's cat climbed into a telephone relay box to have her kittens and interrupted the phone service for hours.

Inquiring minds had to know. "Whose baby is she?"

"Where did she come from?"

"Who's been hiding a pregnancy?"

For the next fifteen minutes I stamped library cards, tried to keep the roar to a minimum, and answered endless questions with the same response, "We just don't know anything right now."

Another white lie. When would it all end?

My stomach went into somersault mode. I'd begun to settle into this job and my new life. Why, good Lord, did this happen? Especially with the head librarian out with a bad cold...

Uh-oh, there she stood.

I inhaled through my clenched teeth. Five people turned to discover what startled me. Like the Red Sea under Moses' staff, one by one the library patrons moved to the sides.

Mrs. Burnett stood ghost-white—her raincoat draped over a lavender pant suit. A transparent, pastel scarf in shades of purples and rose lay knotted under her waddled chin.

Sheesh. Even with a fever, she'd taken time to be presentable. I guess image and order really did mean everything to her. Her orthopedic shoes squeaked with each authoritative step as she approached the checkout desk.

"What's this about a baby, Mrs. Williams?" She strutted behind the counter. Her bun, which according to the women's auxiliary gossip had been firmly pinned to her head since her twenties, now threatened to spew hairpins as it jiggled on the nape of her neck.

My words barely shook out. "Mrs. Burnett. You're ill. You shouldn't be here. I'd have called you as soon as everything calmed down and, uh—"

The woman pointed her gnarled finger towards the glassed-in wall of the workroom. Inside, Jorge and Rosa tenderly ogled the infant. "That, my dear, is not likely to happen." Her eyes narrowed. "Not as long as that child is in my library."

"Yes'm, Mrs. Burnett."

She cleared her throat. "Isn't the man in the workroom with the child our deputy sheriff? Well at least you had the sense to call him."

"Yes, ma'am." I chose not to correct her assumption. What was another teeny lie, anyway?

"Hmph. When will people learn libraries are not legitimate drop off places in Florida for abandoned babies?" She jutted her chin. "It's happened two or three times before in this county, but never here."

Her arched, pencil-drawn brow indicated she blamed me for disrupting her perfect library decorum. I shrunk under her scrutiny. "I'm sorry, ma'am. But it started to rain."

"Well, what's done is done." The woman jerked a linen hanky from her sleeve and blew her nose with a honk, which echoed off the shelves. Several people smirked. I bit the inside of my lip to keep a straight face.

She folded the lace handkerchief. "Now, we must properly rectify this situation. Obviously, I'm too contagious to care for a baby. I'll handle the checkout counter. You"—she peered over her half-mooned reading glasses—"go take care of *that*."

I scrambled off the swivel chair and nearly tripped on my own heels. But, before I began to scoot to the workroom, her nasal voice hissed. "Wait, Mrs. Williams."

I half-turned. "Yes?"

The seasoned librarian cocked her head in the direction of her office. "The Safe Haven procedure booklet is in the top right-hand drawer of my desk. Get it. Read over it. Do what it says."

The clunk of the machine, as it date-stamped the next library card, echoed her command. The sound hit the bottom of my heart with a thud. I had to follow the legal procedure. Otherwise, I'd draw attention to myself. I'd been schooled in the necessity to lay low under the radar— obey the law, be an outstanding citizen, dot "i's" and cross "t's."

I watched through the glass as Jorge's girls stood on tiptoes to get a peek at the baby. The little pink bundle bouncing in his arms may be my stepdaughter, but did it give me the right to raise her? Maybe God planned for the deputy to walk in today of all days.

I had to face the harsh reality. Even if I learned to be a good mother, it might jeopardize both of our chances at a normal life. Sure, many people adopted children from other races and cultures, but would my keeping her somehow link me and her to our hidden lies? I'd have to make up some explanation as to why I'd become so emotionally attached to her.

I slunk to the office and opened the pamphlet. My eyes fell onto the first page—

It stated the infant abandonment, a.k.a. "Baby Safe Haven" laws, allow any adult, be it a family member, pastor, friend or social worker, to drop off an infant without any repercussions, as long as the mother voluntarily relinquishes care and the baby has not been abused.

Jorge wandered in, babe in arms, with Rosa. Their two girls toddled behind. "It's time, Sheila. I have to report this, you understand."

"I know." My response fell flat as I flipped the pamphlet over. "What's going to happen to her?"

"She'll go to the hospital. Within twenty-four hours a pediatrician will examine her to make sure there's been no abuse and confirm she's healthy." He cradled the baby with a gentle sway. "Then she'll be given to foster parents who take in newborns."

"And if no one claims her within a few days, it says here she becomes a ward of the state." I huffed into my chest and slipped the pamphlet onto the desk. "Suppose nobody adopts her?"

Rosa shrugged. "Being a ward of the state isn't too bad. Despite the horror stories, I've observed lots of happy and well-adjusted foster kids in my daycare over the years. At least the mother carried her to term, or so it appears. Thank God for that." Her soft, brown eyes dropped as she made the sign of the cross over herself.

"Yeah." My face warmed as I shoved the unspoken guilt aside, one more time. I shouldn't have rushed to the altar. I didn't know what a manipulative monster I'd married in my former life. Tears re-filled my eyes. *Oh, why had Marisol been allowed to carry his baby and not me?*

Rosa put her arm around me. "Ah, honey. Don't cry." She dug in her purse for a tissue. "You can't get attached."

But, I already had—the worst thing that could happen for us both. I had to let the baby go, for her sake and my sanity. Not to mention our safety.

I gnawed my lower lip as I ran my hand over my stepdaughter's black hair—soft and shiny, just like the mother's she'd never know. Perhaps God's mercy reigned. Marisol, an illegal teenager, had no business raising a child in the U.S. Besides, if the cartel or the Feds ever discovered this baby was Robert's daughter... "It will be next to impossible to locate her mother, right?"

"Probably." Jorge handed the baby to his wife and reached in his back pocket for his cell phone. "As long as the national data base doesn't have an Amber Report of a missing or abducted baby matching her description, she's considered abandoned."

I shot a silent arrow prayer towards Heaven. If the police rarely tried to locate the mother,

perhaps Marisol's baby would have a chance.

"I doubt they will put out much effort to find the mother," Rosa said. "There are too many Hispanic babies out there. But then again, this one must be half-white. Notice her lovely light-colored eyes."

Just like her dad's eyes. The thought jabbed deep inside me. But surely Robert wouldn't report her missing? He'd told Tom to give her to me. Unless...

What if this was all a ploy to locate me? The air pressure changed in my ears as my pulse pounded inside them. No, please no. I didn't want to ever have contact with him, or his goons, again.

Jorge held the cell phone to his ear. He nodded. "Roger that. No, no need to call an ambulance. We'll take her to the hospital right now. Rosa brought an infant car seat." He clicked off his phone and raised one side of his mouth in a semi-grin. "Gotta go."

I reached out to stroke the baby girl's head—softer than satin and as warm as freshly baked bread—for the last time. "Vaya con Dios, little one. May the angels protect you."

A clap of thunder rattled the room as a stark, white lightning bolt flashed outside the window. Divine response?

With a forced swallow, my muddled emotions slid down my throat, but ricocheted into my eyes. I blinked them away as my secret stepdaughter disappeared out the library door, huddled under Rosa's raincoat.

I shoved this latest tie to my past into the far reaches of my mind where the rest of my former life lay. This was one more hurt I had to pretend I didn't feel. Would this ever get easier? What if my past always lurked like a thief, ready to jump out and steal any chance for happiness when I least expected it?

One residual emotion stirred in my gut though—a longing for the one who'd dropped off the baby. When he walked away from the library steps this morning, the roller coaster of our forbidden emotions cranked up for another loop-de-loop through my life. The sensible side of me wanted to jump off before the ride began. Yet the other part—thrilled at the sight of his muscular backside, even if from a distance—hoped he'd surface again when I got off work.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The curiosity-seekers filtered out one by one. I watched from the glass windows as they scurried through the rain back to their daily lives. Mrs. Burnett finally left, but only after she'd drenched her hanky and used up all the tissues in the box on the counter. Her raspy cough ended with a sniffle. "Well, I trust you can handle it from here on out."

My response remained the same as always. "Yes, ma'am."

All returned to quiet again, except for the rattling thunder, which echoed across the mostly empty library. Pulses of white light preceded each rumble as the rain pelted the roof in quick, staccato taps.

Thunderstorms usually invigorate me. But, today's events made my nerves rattle like a pebble inside a boxcar. I had to maintain the professional appearance for the residual patrons for two more hours. Thanks be to God, the City Council had voted to only keep the library open half-days on Saturdays.

The hands on the library clock lugged as slow as a child not wanting to leave the playground. One o'clock finally came. I locked up, and began the short trek home. The thunderous rain had stopped, leaving only the spritzing from the wet tree limbs to be carried on the ocean breeze. A litter of tender, green leaves plastered the pavement.

Each click of my heels took me further from the library stoop. Every step pushed a bit more of the morning's cacophony from my mind's ears. But the stifled emotions threatened to resurface. I wanted to get home, soak up to my neck in a steaming bubble bath, and have a long, cleansing cry. After that, I'd call the whole event into the authorities—if they hadn't gotten wind of it by now.

I stopped mid-step. Wait. Why call them? They might relocate me again.

Heck with protocol. I liked it here. I'd made friends and had a good job. Why point attention to myself? Robert's long term imprisonment secured my secret life in Florida. Besides, why would the Feds ever connect an abandoned Hispanic baby to me? Only Becky and Tom knew the truth. Becky, who'd orchestrated my entry into witness protection, wasn't telling. That's for sure. The fact Tom strolled away meant he still worked within the boundary of the federal government's rules. He wouldn't risk his career by letting anyone else figure out my location.

The infant rested in the hands of the authorities and no one would be the wiser. I'd get over this bump in the road and forget all the nastiness of the past—Robert, Marisol having his baby, and the myriad lies he'd told me. The incident had taught me a valuable lesson. I had to stop being angry at myself for loving him so much I'd do anything for him.

Mrs. Burnet's words returned to my mind. *What's done is done*. No going back in time. In order to move on, I had to release this deep-seated regret once and for all. Face it. Because of my decisions, maybe I wasn't meant to be a mother. Cuddling the baby today didn't change a thing. If anything, it emphasized it. I gulped back the lump in my throat. Perhaps it had all turned out for the best.

Of course it had. I gave my head a hard nod and began to walk towards my bungalow. I'd be better off without the baby in my life. After all, being in witness protection gave me a new start and time to heal. My heart had stretched to the breaking point one too many times. Why dredge up the memories and gash open old wounds? Why have the constant reminders of my shame and his lies glaring me in the face every day? No, Marisol's baby would benefit from being raised by strangers who knew nothing of her origins. Unlike Tom, me, and everyone else who had brushed up against Robert, she'd have a chance at an ordinary life.

And my feelings for Tom? They had to stay in the past as well. Too much history there. Robert would always be a wedge between us, and my faith told me only God had the authority

to remove it. Even if I had a new identity, I'd still vowed to be his wife until one of us left this earth. Since we were both in our thirties, it meant I might be "single" for a very long time. The spinster librarian. How appropriate.

I took in a deep, long breath, released it to the count of three, and placed the entire situation at the foot of the cross—one more time.

A golden glow lay over the neighborhood. The hush after a spring storm—my favorite time. The swift shower had rinsed away dust and dirt from the world. Everything washed fresh and new. It gave me hope my life, even my past mistakes, could be washed clean as well. I sent up a prayer to believe in it, once and for all. The idea spread into a smile. I closed my eyes and basked in it.

Then in a flash, a cynical premonition burst my tranquility.

"Who's there?"

Did someone lurk in the shadows, poised to glare into my soul? I glanced over my shoulder. Nobody else on the sidewalk. I walked backwards a few paces, but spied nothing out of the ordinary.

"Anyone there? Can I help you?"

I stopped and listened. No footsteps. In fact, the neighborhood fell eerily quiet.

In the stillness, my ears picked up the tweets of a cardinal. It chirped in harmony with the whispered swish of tires through the puddles at the intersection behind me. Laughter of children in a nearby yard added to the melody. Two squirrels scampered in a twisted chase around an old oak tree trunk. The world had returned to normal.

My imagination had been prickled, that's all. I shrugged and pulled my raincoat collar over the chill in my neck. Half a block later, I turned up my sidewalk.

A wave of affection splashed over me when I spotted my adopted stray, Tom Cat, perched in the front window of the two-bedroom bungalow I now called home. He'd been the only connection to my past, until today. As soon as he noticed me, his mouth opened into a long, mimed meow. Then he disappeared from the sill, no doubt to greet me in the foyer. Our daily routine. Normal, consistent, nice. Exactly what I wanted after all I'd been through today.

When I opened the door, the feline began his welcome dance, winding in and out of my legs. He almost tripped me as I side-stepped towards the hall table to lay down my purse and keys.

I bent to stroke him. "Hi, sweetie."

"Hi yourself, hon."

I jumped at the familiar Americanized brogue. "Tom."

He stood inside my living room, straddle-legged in those tight, casual trousers. A hunter-green, collared knit shirt emphasized his lean, sculptured chest. Countless emotions danced inside of me as our eyes locked. Not shock though. The fact he'd broken into my house didn't surprise me at all. Simple CIA 101 skills he'd probably learned long before we met.

Oh, how I wanted to dissolve into his arms. But, I held back. With Tom always came chaos. It stuck to him like a shadow. The commotion he'd caused today at the library was proof. I turned to grab the hall table's edge, so he wouldn't read my expression. I cleared my throat. "So, you didn't intend to walk out of my life again after leaving the baby on the steps?"

"I wanted to see you. Alone." Tom inhaled a pause. "About time, though, Jen. Library closed at one, right?"

*Keep your eyes glued to the table, girl. Don't melt into his baby blues.* "Yes. I decided to take in some fresh air after the ruckus you made."

His shoes scuffed against the rug. "I saw you pick her up from the stoop, Jen."

"I gather it's Marisol's baby." My lips pushed into a straight line. I glanced at his reflection

in the mirror that hung in front of me. By now he stood in the entryway between the living room and the foyer.

"Yes. Marisol's and Robert's."

He hesitated. I noticed his eyes narrow. No doubt he wanted to determine if the mention of my husband's name pricked me. Of course it did. A part of me loved the man I'd been duped into believing existed. The roots of that fib still gnarled inside my mind, refusing to shrivel and die in spite of all the hurt and anger he'd caused. From the twitch in Tom's jaw, I figured he recognized it to be true. It lay as a thick block between us. Always had.

He heaved a deep sigh. "She's only thirteen you know."

Disgust bubbled into my throat. My husband had raped and impregnated a child. "I thought she'd been older. Sixteen maybe."

"Yeah, me too. I guess I didn't want to think..." His gaze deepened. "Sorry, Jen."

The air in the room thickened.

Tom raised his chin. "So, where is the baby now?"

"They took her to the hospital to be checked over." I drew a squiggle in the freshly waxed wood. "From what I gather, she'll be a ward of the state. No plans to find out who she belongs to." I glanced up at the mirror. My turn to test his reaction.

Tom's face shadowed. "I see. I thought perhaps you'd...well I wasn't sure. But I understand. It had to be your decision to make."

I cast my eyes downward to blink back new tears. *One, two, three... Steady, Jen. Keep calm.* "So, you agreed to find me?"

Tom's heels shuffled towards me. "Yes. It took a while."

My nose flared to force air into my lungs. I fiddled with my keys. "Why bother at all?"

He snorted a short laugh. "Why do you think, hon?"

I spun on my foot to face him. "I haven't the vaguest idea." Of course, I did—so we could reconnect.

His smirk widened. He surmised I lied. I'm sure it showed in my eyes. He coughed into his fist. After an eternity of a moment, he sighed and leaned against the jamb. "This isn't how I pictured our reunion."

My fingers grabbed for the edge of the table behind me. "There wasn't supposed to ever be one, Tom ..." As I said his name, my voice cracked.

Vulnerability exposed, he rushed to take me into his arms. I leaned back and shook my head. "No. Go away. You're not real. Not anymore."

Tom shoved his hands into his pockets. "So I gather you and that widower from your new church have moved past friends-sharing-dinner stage, correct?"

My own Irish temper splashed my neck with heat and blasted to my tongue. "How dare you spy on me? You're as conniving and..." I sputtered. "...and slick as Robert. Who still is my husband, by the way, no matter what WITSEC says."

"Ah. Is that your heart or your faith speaking, Jen?"

Without thinking, I grabbed the vase from the table and hurled it at Tom's head.

He dodged the ceramic projectile.

Crash.

It splattered the floor in a thousand pieces. Tom Cat dashed down the hall to safety.

A familiar half-smirk eased across Tom's mouth. "Your reflexes have improved, my dear."

I narrowed my eyes.

His expression became serious. "Seeing the baby has really put you on edge, hasn't it? I'm sorry."

Tom had no idea how much or why, and I didn't want him to either. I didn't want anyone

to learn my secret. The only one who had a clue sat in prison.

Let him think it's because Robert slept with an illegal girl he'd help traffic. He needn't know the rest. I folded my arms and changed the subject. "You disobeyed orders. You weren't supposed to find me."

In two moves he stood breath to breath with me. He clenched my arm. "I am not the only one who has, Jen. Which is the other reason why I'm here."



## CHAPTER FIVE

"You mean Robert's goons followed you?"

"Not me. You. They watched you walk home." His eyes darted to the door for a moment. "Now they've figured out where you live."

My gaze darted to the floor. "Is this why you came here?"

He stepped back a bit, but kept his grip. "Well, yeah. But, I also wanted to see you, Jen..."

"It's Sheila, now."

He bobbed his head from one side to the other. "Whatever...but I couldn't talk to you at the library, not with that deputy hanging around." He shrugged. "Cops and I don't always get along."

"How'd you recognize...?"

"Who he was? I watched him head in your direction with library books under his elbow." The sides of his lips curled. "I figured he didn't plan on going to the supermarket."

My brows scrunched together at his evasive answer. Never mind. I had lots more questions for him. "Yet you chose to drop her off where I worked?"

Tom's eyes rolled. "Yeah. But, I walked away, Jen."

"I told you, it's Sheila." Oh, how this man got under my nerves. I inhaled to lower my blood pressure. "You're not making sense."

Tom tightened his hand under my elbow. "Look. Can we continue this away from any large windows and glass-paned storm doors?" He motioned at my front entry. "I don't exactly want the world to notice I'm here." His cheeks paled. "I gather you haven't phoned me in."

"I decided to wait until I got home."

Tom nodded. "Good."

An uneasy silence fogged between us. He tilted his head toward the hallway. "Now?"

"Fine. Kitchen's this way." I jerked my arm loose and turned down the narrow hall. I called back as his footsteps paced with mine. "Water?"

"Anything stronger?"

I stopped. "I haven't changed *that* much. Telling you goodbye didn't lead me to drink and destruction." I twisted the wand to close the mini-blinds over the sink.

"Funny. It almost did me." A chair to the dinette set scraped across the linoleum.

*Count to ten, Jen. One, two, three... change the subject, again.* "What do you mean you saw Jorge walking to the library?" I took two glasses from the cabinet and turned the faucet on.

"Is that his name? I recognized him as one of the locals. Does he usually come to the library on his day off?"

My Irish temper edged up into my jaw. "Yeah. I guess. So?"

Tom curled the placemat edge, but smoothed it back. "When you headed to the library, him next, I decided the time was right. Maybe even a sign from above." He cocked his head. "I mean what were the odds? You usually don't work on Saturdays, right?"

My eyes widened. "How did you know that?"

He shrugged. "Anyway, I figured you'd find the baby, or he would. Either way, she'd be safe."

I slammed the water glass down in front of him, leaned in and threw several daggers into his deep blue eyes—the ones I almost drowned in another identity ago. "You had my business card."

His eyes twinkled. "Not too hard to snatch."

"Exactly how long have you been watching me?"

He pushed his shoulders into the backrest and took a deep swallow. After he set the tumbler down, he ran a finger around the rim. "Is it important?"

I wanted to slap the smirk from his face. I wanted to plant kisses all over it. I wanted to smash the water glass and shove its broken shards into his chiseled cheekbones. Instead, I slumped into the chair across from him. My emotions with this man had never been crystal clear.

Tom leaned forward.

I remained pokerfaced. To show fear would crumble any ounce of sensibility I clung to at the moment. Besides, Tom must have a plan. He always did. I dropped my head and picked at my fingernail. "So, what do we do now?"

Instead of a response, I heard the chair scoot back, and the fridge door creak. "Why not fix something to eat? I'm starved."

*Excuse me?* How could he be so casual? Once again my frustration bubbled. "Then go to a restaurant. There's a café two blocks west, but you've probably staked it out already, right?"

The fridge door closed. His shoes clicked in my direction. "Nah, not a good time. Saturday's special is meatloaf. Pretty lousy, I hear."

A curse word hung on my tonsils. I gulped it down. "I get it. You've been spying on me. Don't be so glib about it."

"I'm trying to protect you, Jen. Kinda become a habit, you know."

I stomped my foot. *Don't give him the satisfaction of seeing you still care. Not yet. Be cool. Remember the last time how much it hurt to say goodbye.*

Under the table, fur rubbed against my calves. Tom Cat. I picked him up, nuzzled my face into his fur and whispered to him, "I'm sorry I scared you. You're my sweetheart, aren't you?"

"You talkin' to me?" Tom's leer widened.

I laid the cat in my lap. "No, to Tom Cat."

The man cocked his head in the manner I always found irresistible. "You missed me that much? You named the cat after me?"

"No, I call him Tom Cat because"—I rolled my eyes in a mimic of his a few moments prior—"he's a male cat. Ergo, he's a tom, Sherlock."

"Uh-huh." Tom snickered, and got up. He came around to scratch the cat on its head as he planted a smack on the top of mine.

My scalp tingled from his lips. I willed every ounce of me to not react. If I gazed at him right now, I'd liquefy into a puddle of weakness. Instead, I iced my emotions and placed the purring beast onto the linoleum.

An elongated sigh whistled through his nose. "You're upset with me being here? Okay, I'll back off."

But he didn't. He hovered over me. I waited. First one who talks loses. So they say. But what did it matter? I'd already lost my husband, my home, my life, and my identity. All except this cat making S turns through my legs under the table. He remained my one stability.

Tom's voice turned soft and husky. "Jen, please. Don't break my heart."

My calm, cool exterior shattered to the floor. I banged my fist onto the table and shot to my feet. Tears burst down my cheeks. "Why did you have to come back into my life, you...you..." My knees wobbled.

Strong arms scooped me up and drew me to him. I buried my head into the crux of his shoulder. His heartbeat pounded in my ear. One hand stroked my hair, the other the small of my back. As we gently swayed to our love's own tune, I prayed he'd never let me go again.

## CHAPTER SIX

"Long time no see, friend."

I peered around Tom to Becky, my old neighbor and WITSEC asset. "You knew he'd found me?"

She shrugged. "I've just spoken with your marshal and read her in. We'll need to relocate you now." She dropped a key to my front door, no doubt the one the Bureau had given her, onto the table.

"Again? I was just getting settled..." My gaze met Tom's. His eyes clouded before he cast them to the floor. I slunk back into the chair. Bile in my throat prevented the rest of my sentence from forming. In the distance, a rumble of residual thunder sounded, well past Bonita Springs. The storm had been brief, but swift—just like Tom's and my relationship. Perhaps some things were not meant to be.

Becky eased into the chair where Tom had sat. He leaned against the wall, knocking the calendar off center. He shot me a half-grin. "Still flowers of the month, I see."

Our gaze locked again. I sensed in a split-second, we both flashed back to six months ago when he'd first flung rain droplets on the calendar in my office cubicle—the stormy day he kidnapped me and faked my death to protect me from the cartel. It seemed so long ago. I blinked to break his stare and turned to Becky. "It's because the cartel's followed Tom and the baby here, right?"

She moved her shoulders into a hump. "Probably. Some of Robert's gang were spotted in the area."

My attention zipped back to Tom. "Now see what you've done."

He kicked a seam in the linoleum. "I had to, Jen, for my own sake. I promised Robert I'd place his baby in safe hands, remember? He had long arms, even from the Pen."

I huffed. "Yeah, like an octopus, the conniving..." I swallowed back the words I really wanted to call him and ran my hand through my hair.

Becky cleared her throat. "Tom asked me to help."

My eyes narrowed onto Becky. "What?"

Her cheeks flushed. "I told him your location." She blinked rapidly as her fingers reached for my shoulder. "I'm sorry, dear."

I shrugged away. "You two planned this?" My eye lids stretched as they darted between these two people I'd once trusted.

Becky pressed her lips into a line. It made her middle-aged wrinkles deepen.

Tom leaned on the table, elbows stiff. "I found Marisol and got her into a safe house. She chose to have the baby there. Afraid of the questions they'd ask at a hospital."

"You were there when...?"

The movement of his Adam's apple matched his nod. "They called me as soon as she went into labor." His gaze shifted to the FBI agent. "So I texted Becky."

Becky shrugged. "I used to be a nurse's aide."

A nervous laugh spewed from Tom's throat. "I figured she'd help me take care of it until we got to you. I don't know the first thing about babies."

*Join the club. What made him think I would? Because I'm a woman?*

Tom pointed with his head to the kitchen window. "I can't rely on too many people out there, other than you. Becky, however, I trust."

Her smile faded as her gaze turned from us both. I wondered why. Maybe she felt embarrassed.

She waved his comment away with her hand. "Anyway, once Marisol delivered, she gave me the baby. She didn't even want to see it."

My head wobbled like an out-of-balance spin-top. "Then why bring her here?"

Tom crouched onto his heels and pressed a grip onto my shoulder. "It's what Robert wanted. He promised I'd be free of him."

"And you believed him?" I clamped my eyelids and massaged the stabbing pain in my temples. "Oh, Tom. For God's sake, why?"

"I saw truth in his eyes, Jen." His touch slid to my mid-back in a soft rub. "I'm sorry. I thought maybe you'd keep her. He told me how much you wanted a child."

My eyes shot open. "He said *that*?" Did Robert tell him we once had a child? One that I didn't carry to term? A chilled tremor rippled through me. Robert bent people's will like licorice sticks, and stabbed them with his twisted stiletto of irony.

Becky replied in a soft voice, "Sure, it was risky, but it seemed the right thing to do. The child needed someone to love and care for her. And in a way, well, you are the next of kin."

As I stared into her face, tears swam. "You've both betrayed me. You've given away my location."

She said, "But you could have relocated with the baby. We'd provided you a new cover..."

I dropped my head into my hands. "Both of you. Leave."

Silence.

I raised my face as teardrops slid to my cheeks. "I mean it. Go. Now."

Tom's gaze shot in the direction of the matronly FBI asset.

With every ounce of fortitude dangling in my soul, I steadied my tone. "Please. I need to be alone for a minute."

Tom's voice shook. "Okay, Jen." He squeezed my arm.

"Sure, dear." Becky's face became distorted as shimmery ripples danced in my vision, skewing everything out of shape. "But, I can't leave the house, now." She cupped my chin. "You know that. Orders."

I nodded rapidly. "I do."

I closed my eyes in an attempt to stop the merry-go-round sensation. The sound of two pairs of feet scuffled out.

Robert, the baby, Tom, having to move— being assigned yet another name. One more set of lies to learn. How could I go through that again? The thoughts swirled around in my mind. Faster. Faster. *Stop. I want a normal life. Dear God, why can't I have it?*

A wail, which began in my gut, exploded from my throat. My soul cried a heartfelt prayer. *Yes, I chose the wrong man to marry. Yes, I made a mistake. Yes, I loved him more than You. I abandoned my beliefs for a while. But, dear God, must I still keep paying for my sins? I need Your strength. How else can I get through this?*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A few minutes later, I slunk into the living room, eyes swollen and tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Becky held her cell phone to her ear. She paced as she responded in monosyllables. Tom crouched on the floor as he rubbed Tom Cat's fur in various directions. The feline writhed in joy.

Oh, how I'd wanted to react to his touch the same way when we hid together at his duplex. But it wouldn't have been right. Even though the world thought me a widow, we'd both known that wasn't the case. It was just another strand in Robert's web of lies. So, Tom decided not to tempt me into breaking my vows, which made me love him even more.

I scanned the curtain-drawn room, which I'd enjoyed decorating. To give it personality gave my new identity one as well. Of course everything had been newly purchased, but, by shopping flea markets and garage sales, I'd found some things which appeared to be family heirlooms. A round table with lion paw legs, a lamp with a bronzed patina, candlesticks to match, a painting of the ocean shore with slight water marks on the matting—it all gave the room hominess. Would I be allowed to take any of this with me? What "story of my life" would be droned into my skull until it sounded like the truth? How many more times over the next few years would this happen? Did WITSEC even have stats on that?

"Better?" Tom kept his attention focused on the cat, but I sensed he addressed the question to me.

I hugged my waist. "Honestly? No."

He rose from his crouched position and took three slow steps towards me. He stopped at the imaginary line, as if my subconscious had drawn it across the carpet. "How do you want to play this, Jen?"

"I don't want to play it at all." I swiveled on my toes and headed for the couch. I plopped down, crossed my leg, and weaved my arms in a knot like a pouting child. "Both of you go away. I want a normal life."

Tom stood knee-locked, soldier fashion. His eyes flashed to Becky, who was still on the phone. Even through her whispers I picked up a few responses. "Yes, sir. Right. Today? Got it."

I bounced to my feet. "Are they serious?"

Becky glanced at me, raised a finger beckoning me to hold on, and kept listening to the commands coming through the line. Tom huffed into his cheeks and headed back toward the kitchen. "Might as well eat up the fridge's contents."

"Is that all you ever think about?"

His eyes became a brighter blue. He pumped his eyebrows. "Not always."

I looked at the carpet and willed my cheeks not to flush. Too late. I padded after him even though food remained the last thing on my mind. Truth be told, the man drew me to him like a magnet.

We prepared three sandwiches in almost monastic silence, broken by simple one or two word questions or responses. I guess we both had too many things on our minds.

"Want onions?"

"No, thanks."

"Where's the mayo?"

"Refrigerator door, second shelf."

Soon, chicken sandwiches, potato chips, sliced cantaloupe and freshly baked chocolate chip cookies from a prepackaged state sat on the kitchen table amidst paper plates, flimsy toss-away cutlery and a stack of napkins. My stomach didn't want to untie enough to accept any of it, but I hadn't wanted to drink my morning protein shake after I found Marisol's baby. Maybe food would clear my head. I chomped into a sandwich.