

## BURNING LIES

### CHAPTER ONE

The black granite hadn't lost its lustre. I should have known it would be black, but still, it threw me. I'd expected soft white marble and cherubic angels, maybe harps for an infant's grave, but cold, stark granite?

A gentle breeze stirred the dry air.

"Emelynn, are you all right?" Mason could have passed for a bodyguard or a hit man. He kept a cautious watch over me as I kneeled at my brother's headstone and traced the engraving with my fingers. A tear escaped.

*Andrew Reynolds Taylor*

*Beloved*

*March 2, 1986 ~ April 13, 1986*

"Yeah," I lied. My half-brother had lived just forty-two days and I'd only recently learned of him. I didn't have siblings. Maybe that's why I didn't like referring to him as a "half." Somehow, it diminished him. But the tears weren't for the boy I never knew; they were for my father. The agony he must have suffered burying his son made my chest ache. I knew that ache well. Was it he or the child's mother,

Jolene, who had the sad task of writing the epitaph? I wiped the tear away.

“Were you here? For the funeral?” Though in his early forties now, Mason would have been a teenager when his nephew died.

“Yes.” Whether he spoke softly in reverence for the setting or in sadness, I couldn’t tell.

Andrew would have turned twenty-five this year—just three years older than me. What would he have been like? Would we have been close?

I glanced up at Mason and he forced a thin smile. “Are you ready to go?” he asked offering me his hand. He’d forgone his usual black leather gloves; they would have drawn attention in California’s late-September heat. The rest of his attire made no concession to the temperature: black slacks, black shirt and black shoes. Mason was always prepared; all of the Tribunal Novem were, especially now.

I nodded then reached for his hand. “They picked a beautiful spot,” I said. Turner Acres was a small cemetery nestled in the hills northeast of Oakland. Mason helped me to my feet, a small courtesy I was both grateful for and resentful of. I brushed the grass from my capris and straightened my hideous blouse. It was a loose-fitting, multi-hued fashion misstatement, but a necessity that helped conceal the fact I wore no bra. I wasn’t yet able to tolerate anything tight against the tender skin on my back.

“Yes, they did,” he agreed and we strolled through the sombre grounds of the cemetery back to his Audi. The air smelled like freshly mown hay.

Mason and I had gotten to know each other better in the month since my ordeal. I now knew he’d never married nor did he have children. I’d also learned that he lived with his parents, a fact which stunned me and didn’t fit with the imposing image of the leather-clad man who’d stormed into my cottage mere weeks ago. Since then, he’d been making an effort to be kind and keep his menacing tendencies in check.

It was working. I was actually starting to believe what he'd said about considering me his niece since his only sibling, Jolene, had gifted me.

He looked down at the car keys in his hand. "If we ever find Jolene, we'll lay her to rest with Andrew."

Although I didn't like to think about it, Jolene had likely died as a result of giving me her *gift*. If the process itself hadn't killed her, it would have weakened her to such an extent that a bad cold could have ended her life. Sadly, half the documented cases of gifting ended in death and no one had heard from Jolene in a decade: there was little room for hope. Mason and I talked about Jolene a lot. She'd captivated my father years before he met my mother.

"Thanks for bringing me here," I said. Mason had made all the arrangements. The Tribunal's private jet had flown me directly from Vancouver to San Francisco, where he'd picked me up. We'd driven straight from the airport to the cemetery.

"You're welcome." He opened the passenger door and waited until I'd tucked in my legs. "I'm happy you wanted to come." The door closed with a soft thunk. His gaze shifted left and right as he walked around to the driver's side. He'd been vigilant since we left the airport. It reminded me that we were never really safe—even here in the peaceful countryside.

He crammed his six-foot frame into the driver's seat, pushed in the clutch and jiggled the stick shift in neutral. "My father is anxious to meet you," he said, shifting into first. He slowly released the clutch and the car inched forward. Gravel crunched under its wheels.

We turned onto sun-faded asphalt outside the front gates of Turner Acres. I pulled my new Garmin GPS from my purse and input the cemetery's location. The GPS was a wrist-mounted model just like my last one. Unfortunately, that one was tagged as evidence in the Major Crimes Division lock-up in Vancouver. My kidnappers had known

to destroy my GPS-enabled cellphone when they'd drugged me and taken me to their filthy trailer in the woods, but they hadn't a clue that the wristwatch they'd thrown into a bag with my clothes was, in fact, a GPS. It was the only time I'd been thankful for my dismal sense of direction that ensured I wore it everywhere.

"I booked you a room in Bodega Bay, although I wish you'd reconsider and stay with us."

"I appreciate all you've done for me, Mason. I'd just feel more comfortable in a hotel." I didn't mean to be difficult, but I didn't think of him as my uncle—not by a long shot. Besides, he probably lived in a dank basement apartment and I didn't want to impose on his parents.

But more than that, his family had ancient ties to the Tribunal Novem—the judge, jury and executioner for our kind. I didn't want to be any closer to them than necessary. Mason was a card-carrying member of this so-called judicial body. I learned that the night I met him . . . the night I'd been the unlucky focus of the Tribunal's attention.

The Tribunal had paid me a visit when they learned that I possessed Jolene's gift. They had a well-earned reputation for brutality; a fact I learned first-hand. Mason was there the night the Tribunal bloodied me and forced James Moss to read my memories. It was only after Mason and the others were satisfied that I hadn't *stolen* Jolene's gift, that they released me. I couldn't just ignore that.

After that violent encounter, I shut Mason out of my life. It wasn't until after he helped rescue me from my kidnappers that I finally understood how much I needed him. Mason was one of only a handful of people who could teach me about a facet of Jolene's gift that continued to elude me. A facet that would get me killed, if I didn't learn how to control it. So I'd swallowed my pride and forced a change of heart where Mason was concerned. It's why I was here. Well, that and also to learn everything I could about Jolene and the time she spent with my father.

The Audi's engine purred as we headed toward the San Rafael Bridge. During the long drive, Mason recounted stories about Jolene from when they were children. Jolene was eight years older than Mason. They'd grown up just north of Bodega Bay on an estate he called Cairabrae. These were happy memories for Mason, and he spoke about his childhood home with pride. "The name's Scottish," he explained. "It's been shortened, and the spelling's been bastardized, but it means dear friend on the hill." I tucked away the fact that he thought of his family home the same way I felt about my cottage.

"Jolene went abroad to study art when I was ten, first to Paris for a few years, then to Rome. She came back for breaks or we'd visit her, but we didn't have a lot of time together until she returned to Cairabrae. I was fourteen then. She would set up her easel in the solarium or out in the pasture somewhere and paint all day. Sometimes, she'd head out to the beach or down to San Francisco and fill a sketchbook. We'd ride the horses on the weekends and my friends all thought she was hot." Amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes.

I didn't doubt him. I could still picture her from our brief encounters on the beach outside my cottage that fateful summer when I was twelve. I'd only met her a few times before naively accepting her gift: a gift that altered my life's path. Mason had the same wavy hair as Jolene, but his was now flecked with grey and he kept it short, brushed back from his forehead.

"She brought her share of boys home but none of them compared to your father. When she brought Brian home, we all knew he was special and not because he was a doctor. She looked at him like he was her whole world. I think she fell for him the moment she laid eyes on him. If they hadn't lost Andrew, I'm sure they'd be together still."

And if they'd never parted, I thought, I would never have been born. But they *had* lost Andrew and Jolene lost

herself. For three long years, the man who would become my father reached out to her, but she didn't reciprocate. Grief paralyzed her. Eventually, my dad met my mother, Laura. They married when she became pregnant with me, and Brian made a new life for himself. I'd only recently learned about Jolene and their son from a letter I found in a box of my father's things I'd discovered in the attic of my cottage. It had left me reeling. Neither he nor my mother had ever shared that part of his life with me. Maybe it wasn't the kind of thing you shared.

We travelled north on Highway 101. Mason kept a keen eye on the rear-view mirror, his left wrist bent over the steering wheel, his right hand loose on the gear shift. The cityscape increasingly gave way to larger green spaces, or what would have been green space if it weren't for the drought. Now the scenery was largely tan and yellow except for the deep green of trees that punctuated the gently rolling slopes.

"Why do you think Jolene felt she had to forfeit her gift?" I asked.

"I wish I knew. A part of her died with Andrew. She ran away—settled in Greece for a time. When she finally came home, we thought she'd come to terms with his death. I didn't realize she'd reached out to Brian until I read that letter you found. She must have realized that she'd lost him, too."

"I can't imagine giving this wondrous gift away. She must have been desperate."

"Jolene struggled with depression after Andrew's death. She never painted again. Mom went to great lengths to get her to stay at Cairabrae. She even cut off her trust fund. But Jolene would never stay for more than a month or two. I was away at school then and wrapped up in my own life. I think Carson Manse was the final blow. God, how I wish I could go back and reach out to her. We could have protected her."

Jolene had been running from Carson Manse at the time she gifted me. He'd been her lover and was the same man who, years later, arranged to have me kidnapped. Mason and I speculated that Carson had tried to steal Jolene's gift in much the same way he'd tried to steal mine: inside a circle of wood ash and under mortal threat to her or someone she loved. He would have tried to force her to recite an incantation that would transfer the gift to him, but somehow, she'd escaped him all those years ago. I wasn't so lucky when he found me.

"But she coped for fifteen years after Andrew's death," I said. "Surely she found some peace and happiness in that time."

"She was never the same."

"I can't decide if Jolene was terribly brave gifting me, or a coward."

"She was exhausted," Mason snapped. Immediately, I regretted my insensitive choice of words. He shook his head and softened his tone. "Her depression was never treated."

I turned to study his face. "Suicide?" I asked, shocked at the realization. That possibility had never occurred to me, but it made perfect sense. It also explained why she hadn't ensured there was someone in place to help me transition into the world she'd inexorably made me a part of. Mason shrugged and we drove on in silence.

We exited Highway 101 at Petaluma and headed west toward the coast. Half an hour later, we hit the postcard-perfect Shoreline Highway at Bodega Bay and turned north. The narrow highway wound precariously around bluffs and beaches for another fifteen miles before he signalled a turn to the right. The steep, winding road was marked "private." The nearly bald ocean cliffs gave way to pasture and sagebrush, as we climbed higher into the hills. Rocky outcrops and eucalyptus stands marked the slopes. We wound our way uphill for another five minutes before we came to a stop at the gates of Cairabrae. I recognized the

Reynolds family crest on the wrought-iron gates. It also adorned the cover of the Reynolds family anthology, a leather-bound heirloom that Mason didn't know I carried in my luggage. Mason clicked what looked like a garage door opener and the big gates swung open.

We drove over a rise and Cairabrae came into view. Clearly, I'd underestimated Mason's definition of estate. Cairabrae was a sprawling two-storey stone mansion with wings on either side of a large columned entryway. Formal manicured gardens surrounded a circular drive that passed under a wide porte cochère. Outside the porte cochère, opposite the front doors, stood a larger-than-life marble fountain. It consisted of three Greek-inspired female figures standing shoulder to shoulder, facing out. Their stone dresses were wet from water that spilled from the heavy vases on their shoulders. Each of the figures held a dove in an outstretched palm.

"This is beautiful," I said, my voice filled with awe. He pulled in under the porte cochère and parked. Mason definitely did not live in a musty basement.

"Dad's had a late lunch prepared for us. I'll take you to your hotel after we eat."

"Thank you." I reached to open the car door. Mason came around and held it for me then offered his hand. I took it, once again apologizing for my frailty. Mason winced in sympathy.

I hated feeling weak. "It doesn't hurt that much." I smiled brightly as I straightened my clothes. "Avery says two more weeks and I'll be as good as new." Avery was my doctor and the closest thing to a father I had in my life. The new skin on my back hadn't hurt this much since he'd removed the bandages a week ago. But I'd been on the road since seven this morning, most of that time strapped in with my back against a seat—almost five hours in the plane and another hour and a half in Mason's car. The pressure irritated, but the skin would soon toughen up. I'm not sure



the same could be said for my psyche. The horror of my ordeal still woke me some nights.

The right side of the big double-entry doors opened before Mason reached them. A man, who could only be described as a pro-wrestler, held it ajar. He was dressed in black and had biceps larger than my thighs. His neck was even thicker. All he needed was the ornate gold belt and spandex tights.

"Mason," the man said, dipping his head. His clean-shaven face was kindly but a smile wouldn't have gone amiss.

"Ryan. Where's Dad?"

"Out back. Do you have luggage?"

"No. Emelynn's not staying. Emelynn, Ryan," he said.

"Ryan." I offered my hand. He darted a glance to Mason. Was a handshake inappropriate, I wondered?

He forced a brief smile. "Nice to meet you, Emelynn." Ryan was too intense to be the doorman. He must be security.

"This way," Mason said, steering us forward.

I considered myself lucky to come from a family that was well-off, but this was well-off to the hundredth power. It was easily the most beautiful house I'd ever been in, though "house" was a misnomer: it was a palace. We stepped over the threshold into an expansive vestibule. Pale marble floors gleamed all around and a six-foot-wide staircase curved up on the left to a second-storey atrium. A round claw-foot table sat in the entrance and it was bigger than two of my dining-room tables put together. In fact, my dining-room table would have collapsed under the weight of the enormous bouquet of flowers that graced this one. A thick oriental carpet was centred under the table and a chandelier the size of an armchair lit the lofty two-storey entryway. It put me in mind of a hotel lobby.

We crossed the floor and descended three steps to a formal sitting area. The scale of the room was huge. To the

right was a fireplace I could almost stand upright in, and I'm five foot seven. In the corner to the left sat a beautiful, red-lacquered grand piano. Floor-to-ceiling folding glass doors stretched across the back wall.

We strode through the room and stepped outside onto a vast covered patio, beyond which lay an expanse of pavers drenched in sunlight. Potted palms were artfully scattered about and blue water sparkled invitingly in a pool off to the left. The back lawn, cut short and faded to a crispy pale brown, stretched on for an impossible distance. Horses swished their tails in a paddock beyond the lawn.

I spotted Mason's father sitting just inside the shadow of the covered patio. He set his glasses on the table and rose to greet us. Pure white hair framed his tanned face. He smiled at me like an indulgent grandfather as Mason made the introductions.

"Dad, I'd like you to meet Emelynn Taylor. Emelynn, Stuart Reynolds."

I offered him my hand. "Mr. Reynolds." He was shorter than Mason and handsome despite the deep lines on his face.

"Stuart, please," he said, crinkling the edges of his dark eyes as he grasped my hand firmly between both of his. His hands were rough; a working man's hands.

"It's so nice to finally meet you, Emelynn. Please have a seat." He gestured to a chair on his right. I perched on the edge of it while Mason took a seat on Stuart's left.

Stuart turned to Mason. "Any trouble along the way?"

"None," Mason said.

Stuart nodded and turned back to me. "How was your trip?"

"The jet was a nice touch," I said, embarrassed at the extravagance.

He shrugged like it was nothing. "It wasn't being used today. Please, make yourself comfortable."

Mason interjected. "She's still healing, Dad."

The reminder stung, but not as badly as the whip that my kidnappers had used to persuade me to cooperate with them.

"Forgive me. Can I offer you a refreshment?"

"A glass of water?" I suggested.

"Still or sparkling?"

"Ah, still please." Tap water would have been fine. I felt like such a poseur in this palace.

"Iced tea," Mason said.

Stuart raised his hand and movement in the shadows close to the house caught my eye. A woman I hadn't noticed before moved silently behind a bar and moments later delivered our drinks. She was dressed in a black shirt and slacks, just like Ryan. Maybe she was also security. She certainly didn't look like a barmaid. Her brown hair was pulled back and twisted tightly in a chignon and she looked as fit as an aerobics instructor. She blended discreetly back into the shadows as quickly as she'd appeared.

"I'm very sorry about your run-in with Carson Manse," Stuart said. "Rest assured he'll be dealt with appropriately if he ever regains consciousness."

I could only nod. Their version of *appropriate* meant he'd be dead. You would think that would upset me. It didn't.

"What's his status?" Stuart asked Mason.

"He's still in a coma. James is keeping tabs on his condition."

"Good." Stuart turned his attention back to me. "I've taken the liberty of ordering our lunch. I do hope you enjoy salad niçoise. Maria makes the best one in California."

"Then I'm sure I'll love it."

Stuart wasn't wearing the basic black uniform. He dressed casually in a blue checked shirt, and cowboy boots peeked out beneath the legs of weathered jeans.

"Maria's your wife?" I asked.

“Maria’s our cook,” Stuart said. “Regretfully, my wife’s in poor health and isn’t able to join us.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Stuart breezed over the subject. “I understand you’ll be with us for a few days?”

I shot a glance at Mason. Had he told him I was staying here? “I’m returning home on Friday,” I said with no mention of my accommodations.

“Good. That gives us some time to get to know one another. Next time, you’ll stay longer.”

I raised my eyebrows. Now I knew where Mason learned to be so presumptuous.

“You must take after your mother,” Stuart said, studying me. “I don’t see much of Brian in you.”

My heart lurched at the mention of my father’s name. “Did you know him well?”

“Yes. He and my Jolene were very close. They planned to marry right here at Cairabrae after Andrew was born.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, well, it didn’t come to pass. Terrible thing, losing a child.” A shadow of his own loss crossed his face.

“How did they meet?” My curiosity burned to know every detail of my father and Jolene’s time together.

“He walked into the gallery one day when she was working.”

Mason interrupted his father’s narrative. “The gallery was in San Francisco.”

That fit. My father had worked in a clinic in San Francisco in the early eighties.

Stuart frowned at the interruption then continued. “The gallery was a cooperative where the artists took turns running the shop. After Jolene met your father, she came home lit up like the fourth of July. Jeannette knew right away.” He shook his head, smiling at the memory. When he saw my confusion, he quickly clarified. “Jeannette’s my wife—Jolene and Mason’s mother.”

“She knew Jolene was quite taken with the young man who’d admired her work. Jolene kept Brian coming back with promises of more pieces from the same artist. She strung him along for weeks before telling him that she was that artist. But by then, I don’t think it was the art that drew him to the gallery. She was talented with a paintbrush, but no one likes seascapes that much.” He chuckled and winked at me.

I couldn’t help but smile back and told him of the painting of Jolene’s that still hung in my father’s study. “I remember him looking at that painting absolutely mesmerized,” I said. “He never tired of it.”

Stuart seemed pleased with that.

“So, Emelynn,” he said, “tell me about yourself.”

I knew they’d be as curious about me as I was about them, but talking about myself made me uneasy. I felt uncomfortable being in the spotlight, so I’d prepared a Coles Notes version of my life. “There’s not a lot to tell. I lived with my parents in Summerset until I was twelve. Summerset’s on the west coast of British Columbia,” I said, describing the location of a hometown I’d learned few people had heard of.

“Just south of Vancouver. Yes, I know it,” Stuart said, nodding.

Surprise registered on my face. “Well, the summer I turned twelve, I met Jolene and that October my father was killed. After the funeral, my mother moved us to Toronto.”

“I’m sorry. I liked Brian very much. How did he die?”

“His float plane disappeared on its way to a fishing lodge in the Queen Charlottes. They never found him.”

“That must have been difficult.”

Some days it still was. My recap was finished, but they both looked at me expectantly. I wanted to tell them—I’m only twenty-two—there isn’t more.

Stuart spoke, breaking the awkward lull. “If you wouldn’t mind, tell me about Jolene.”

“Jolene,” I said, wondering where to start. “I met her on the beach in front of the cottage in the summer of 2001. She visited a few times, just briefly. She was soft-spoken. Wore a big floppy hat and sunglasses, as if she was hiding from someone. Carson Manse, I suppose.”

Stuart and Mason listened without touching their drinks. “I liked her. She asked about my family and brought me feathers and pretty beach glass for the sandcastles I liked to build. The day she gifted me, she told me she had to leave soon. She said she wanted me to have something special but insisted I keep it a secret. The next thing I remember was waking up on the sand and wondering where she’d gone.” I look furtively over my shoulder. The woman with the chignon stood quietly behind the bar.

“You can talk freely,” Stuart said, correctly guessing the reason for my hesitation.

“All right.” Did all of the staff here know about us?

I continued. “I discovered my night vision a few days later and knew then that she’d given me something special.” I paused, remembering the first night that darkness didn’t fall. Even though I was just a child, there was no mistaking when the night took on a blue hue and my vision remained clear as day. The miracle of it has never faded. “I didn’t understand what it was, but I kept my promise; I didn’t tell anyone.”

“She never contacted you after that?” Stuart asked.

“No. Maybe she tried, but we’d moved to Toronto. I looked for her when the floats started, but I only knew her first name.”

“The *floats*?” Mason and Stuart said simultaneously.

I stifled a laugh and not just because of the matching quizzical look on their faces; most people would think I was a lunatic in search of an asylum for telling this story. But not these two men. I had their undivided attention.

“That’s how I thought of it before I knew what the gift was. It started with sleep-walking, or at least my mother

thought I was sleepwalking. It was years before I figured out that I was losing gravity in my sleep and drifting around the condo. Thankfully, my mother never got a live-action view of it and, luckily, the condo was small so I couldn't float too far away."

"You could have been seriously hurt," Mason said. He leaned back to let the woman with the chignon refill his glass.

"That came later. The summer before I started university, I began experiencing the floats when I was awake. There was no predicting when it would occur, so I started packing weights around to keep me grounded. I thought I'd lose my mind. Jolene wasn't my favourite person during those years. When the floats took me unawares, I'd usually end up hurting myself." I took a breath, allowing myself a brief wallow in the torment of my awkward childhood. I now knew that the vast majority of Fliers were born with the gift. The few like me who were gifted would normally be mentored, but I'd been left on my own to figure it out.

"That's what finally brought me back to the cottage in Summerset. When I finished university, I figured there'd never be a better time to learn how to control this thing. I knew if I wanted any kind of a normal life, that's what I needed to do. The cottage was the ideal place; it's isolated and private, and my mother had no interest in returning with me. In fact, she gave me six months' living expenses for my graduation gift."

"I'm so sorry, Emelynn." Stuart reached forward and took my hand. "Please believe me when I say that my Jolene would never intentionally hurt you or anyone else. She was a gentle soul—too much so for our world I'm afraid. I have to believe she wasn't in her right mind at the time."

He released my hand and sat back in his chair. "How did you learn about the gift?"

“Foolishly, I thought I could teach myself how to control it, but I was wrong. I ended up in the hospital after a spectacularly bad fall and, fortunately for me, Dr. Coulter was on duty in the ER that night. He spotted the second lens in my eyes and recognized me for what I was. What I am,” I corrected, feeling the weight of the words.

“He arranged for Jackson Delaney to take me under his wing. I thought Jackson was delusional, but who wouldn’t? His impossible notions flew in the face of everything I knew about physics, but the proof was undeniable. Jackson introduced me to the local covey and, with their help, I learned about your world.”

“I imagine it came as a shock,” Stuart said. He had no idea.

“Mason tells me your covey is admirably loyal to you.”

“Not just to me.” With only eleven of us in the covey, we all knew one another. It felt like family. We were tied together by our gift and depended on one another to protect the secret and each other. We’d worked hard to develop our defensive skills and we’d proven that we could protect our own. I was enormously proud of that.

Maria arrived with our lunch, and the woman with the chignon set out wine glasses.

“The Gerty today, I think, Debbie,” Stuart said, and the woman, who now had a name, quickly produced a chilled bottle of Gewürztraminer for his inspection.

“Yes, that’s the one. You’ll join me, I hope,” Stuart said, turning to me.

At this point, I was famished and would have eaten with my fingers and stuck a straw in the bottle. But then again, I drank tap water. I nodded and Debbie poured us each a generous glass of wine. Over lunch, they asked me endless questions about my *floaty* episodes. Maria’s salad niçoise really was the best I’d ever tasted. The tuna was grilled rare and the tarragon was fresh. It was after three o’clock by the time coffee was served.



"If you don't mind, Emelynn, I'll take my leave," Stuart said. "I like to visit with Jeannette after lunch and I'm sure you're tired after your trip." He stood. "Finish your coffee and then Mason will show you to your room. Feel free to use the pool or wander around and get to know the place."

"That's very kind of you, Stuart, but I think there's been a misunderstanding. I'm staying in Bodega Bay."

"Oh?" He tipped his head. "You know you're welcome to stay here. Lord knows we have enough room."

I swallowed, feeling awkward. Mason sat there like he knew nothing of my plans. Was this his way of pressuring me to stay?

Stuart must have sensed my unease. "Well, whatever you're most comfortable with," he said. "Dinner's at eight."

"Thank you for lunch," I said, pondering his dinner statement. Or was that an invitation?

"My pleasure." Stuart nodded at Mason before turning and strolling back into the house.

"Thanks for your support there, Mason."

His lips curled in a wry smile. "He's right, you know. Look at this place and just three of us live here."

Though tempted, I hadn't changed my mind. Mason didn't understand how much it had taken to get me this far. I'd come despite the loud and insistent protests from James Moss. James had become a good friend despite not one, but two fiery introductions. He'd proven himself highly skilled in the security arena. I paid attention. "Something's not right," he'd warned. "He's trying too hard to get you to visit."

Mason's persistence that I stay at Cairabrae reminded me of James's warning. Right now, however, I needed Mason. I was only staying three days and I'd assured James that I would leave at the first sign of duplicity. That didn't do much to appease James, but I was living *my* life, not his.

"Would you like to see Jolene's room before I take you to your hotel?"

My face lit up. “Yes, I would.”

“Come on then. I’ll show you.” He stood and led the way into the house.