



CHAPTER 3

Six weeks later, 2:10 A.M., Vallejo Street

Paisley had to juggle her groceries to make it through the gate that led to the back of her landlord's yard. Her apartment was a tiny one-bedroom located over his garage. She had her iPod playing the Greycats too loud for the safety of her hearing, and she was singing along as best she could with her keys dangling from her mouth. She'd be dancing, too, if her arms weren't overloaded with canvas bags containing flour, Lurpak butter that had been on sale, and ten bars of high-quality, no soy-lethicin dark chocolate.

Her bra strap was falling down her shoulder, along with the sleeve of her sweater, and driving her absolutely batty. In order to free up a hand, she lifted a knee to trap one of the bags between her torso and the neighbor's wooden fence. Then she reached across her body, under the headphone wires, and hitched everything into place.

There. Now she wasn't going to arrive home with her clothes half off.

She got her bags rebalanced and headed for her apartment. Or she would have if the walkway hadn't been blocked by her smoking-hot landlord and a man she didn't recognize, who was also pretty darn hot. She hardly ever saw her landlord, despite the fact that she lived over his garage. The bakery meant she was usually sleeping or at work when most other people were home. The last time she saw him had to be at least three or four months ago when she'd noticed he was home and dropped by on her way to work to tell her her garbage disposal was jammed again. He'd told her he'd take care of it; in fact, when she came home, the disposal had worked just fine.

Her landlord quirked his eyebrows, grinned, and said, "Hey, Paisley."

With her house keys clenched between her teeth, the only thing she could say was "Nnhh." One of her earbuds fell out, and the tinny sound of music drifted on the air. It was plain her landlord and his friend had, like her, only just arrived.

No doubt about it, her landlord was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. Ever. Including in the movies, in magazines, or on television. In real life, the man was a living god he was so beautiful. Right now, he had one hand planted on the wooden wall that separated his backyard from the one next door. He was leaning over a little.

In the dim light, she could see the flexing muscles of his upper arm. He had on a pair of worn jeans, leather flip-flops, and a dark green T-shirt. The tattooed side of his body was hidden in shadow, but she knew the ink covered more than just a portion of his face because she'd seen

him in the yard a couple of times without his shirt on. Five narrow blue stripes went the length of his torso, too.

If it weren't so embarrassing that she'd obviously given both men an eyeful of her undergarment rearrangement, she'd swoon from the sheer perfection of his body. She lifted a knee to push the lowest grocery bag up enough that she could adjust her grip around it. The contents shifted. She savored the moment. For now, she could pretend she had a normal life. Lord, what she wouldn't give for that to be true.

The other guy smiled, too. Killer smile. He said, "Hello."

Oh. Voice to die for. She nodded. With sinuous grace, her landlord, Iskander Philippikos, stepped forward and stuck her earbud back into her ear. Then he took one of her canvas grocery bags. She had such an awkward grip on the bags that he had to come even closer to get one free without jeopardizing her hold on the other two. He smelled good. He took one of the bags with the flour, which meant she got treated to more flexing muscle.

"Hnks." Without question, this was already the longest encounter she'd had with her landlord, not counting the time she'd filled out the rental agreement and wrote him a check for first and last month's rent.

"No problem. This is Harsh Marit." He tilted his head in the other man's direction. "Harsh, this is Paisley Nichols." He pointed in the direction of the garage at the back of the property. "My tenant."

With only two bags to deal with, she was able to free a hand and shove her keys into her pocket. "Mr. Marit. Nice to meet you." She stuck out her hand in his direction and gave him her cheeriest smile. In the last few weeks, she'd gotten good at pretending everything was fine.

“Dr. Marit,” Iskander said.

“Oh. Sorry. Nice to meet you, Dr. Marit.” She smiled. “Are you a medical doctor or one of the other kind?”

Dr. Marit stood there, not saying anything at first. His eyes, a deep brown, fixed on her. Dang. Now that she could see him better, he looked more like a thug than a doctor of any kind. He was almost as tall as Iskander, beefier in terms of muscle, with eyes and skin that hinted at an East Asian ancestry in an extremely dreamy sort of way.

She took back her unclasped hand, feeling even more foolish.

“Medical,” he said, like it was killing him to say anything to her. She had the feeling he’d taken an instant dislike to her, which was annoying and hurtful. “But I don’t practice.”

“Nikodemus is going to have something to say about that.” Iskander gave Harsh a playful whack on the back of his head. “Come on, help her.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary.” She juggled the bags she had left, but Harsh came forward and took one of the other two bags from her. When she got nervous, her mostly eradicated Georgia accent appeared. Like it was doing now. “Why, thank you, Dr. Marit.”

“Harsh,” he said, not at all friendly. “Miss Nichols.”

“All right, then, Harsh. Please, call me Paisley.” She had her hands free enough now that she could snag her keys from her pocket and head for the stairs to her apartment. Whatever Dr. Marit’s problem was, her mother had raised her with the philosophy that when you had the urge to kill someone, you had to do it with politeness. And then consult the stars and tarot cards before you called down curses on their head. Her mother was bat-shit crazy.

Iskander led the way up the stairs to her apartment. His

friend stayed behind her. If you like big and rough, Harsh was hot. And unfriendly. She hoped Harsh stayed behind them. He did and his silent presence crept her out. She decided she didn't like having him there. Not being able to see what he was doing bothered her. A lot. She dragged her eyes from Iskander's back and her thoughts from Dr. Harsh Marit. Harsh wasn't the one stalking her, for heaven's sake. He might be unfriendly, but he wasn't a psycho.

"What are you cooking tonight?" Iskander asked.

He knew she owned a bakery. Part of the rental process had included proof of ability to pay the rent, and that meant proof of employment. On the rare occasions when they ran into each other, he generally asked how business was going. A couple of times he'd been in the apartment to fix something when she'd been baking.

"Not cooking," she said. "Baking."

He looked at her over his shoulder. His shirt hugged his perfectly-put-together torso. She imagined herself running a finger down the narrow blue lines that ran alongside his spine, mirroring the lines tattooed on the front of his body. She would never be able to do that in real life, but she had an active imagination that helped her live a thrilling life in her head. Her real life wasn't anything like what she imagined. She closed her eyes for a bit. The sick feeling in the pit of her stomach almost never went away these days.

"Okay," Iskander said. "What are you baking tonight?"

"Birthday cake and chocolate mousse." What she wouldn't give for a normal life.

"Will there be extra?"

She laughed, and, Lord, it felt good to have a reason to laugh. "Sorry. No. They're a special order."

Iskander reached her door and held out his hand for

her keys. The light attached to the wall shone on each and every muscle. Her landlord was a chick magnet, and when he wasn't out doing whatever he did for a living, he entertained at home. With enthusiasm. A different woman just about every night. Or at least on the nights she was home to notice what he was up to.

"I can open my own door." She was standing several steps below him with Harsh behind her. She had to look a long way up. So what if he was a man of loose morals? He was still beautiful to look at.

"Or he could open it for you because he's standing there," Harsh said. "Please give him your keys."

She held out her keys but turned to give Harsh the iciest stare she could manage. "Thank you for your helpful suggestion. Bless your heart." Sugar dripped from her voice. Killing, murdering sweetness.

He gave her body an assessing glance. Was he being crude on purpose? His attention lingered. She turned her back on him—the simple solution. She used it as often as she could with men who were obsessed with female chestiness. At least Iskander didn't stare.

Iskander stood in front of her door with a hand up like he was a traffic cop. He placed her bag of groceries on the landing. "Harsh, my friend. Come here."

"What?" Paisley said. Her stomach dropped to her toes as a familiar foreboding prickled the back of her neck. *Please no, she thought. Not here.*

On his way past her, Harsh shoved the bag of groceries into her arms.

"Stay where you are, Paisley." Iskander made room for Harsh at her locked door. "You feeling that?" he said in a low voice.

Harsh nodded. He touched the two carved wooden circles on either side of her door. Even from where she stood, she could see they were deformed now. The faces that had been carved into them looked like they'd melted.

"Oh," she said. She managed to keep the fear from her voice. Maybe this wasn't what she thought, what she was afraid it might be. "What happened? I liked those! They're cute."

Iskander gave her a look she had trouble interpreting. Was he offended?

"Cute?" he said, eyes wide. "*Cute?*"

Definitely offended. She shrugged and kept pretending things were all right, because most days that's all she had. The pretense that her life was okay.

He addressed Harsh. "What do you make of it?"

Another chill went down her back. She tried to swallow but her throat was dry as dust. He'd found her. She knew it in her soul. Rasmus Kessler had found out where she lived, and the very last part of her life that belonged to her was about to go to hell.

Her heart dropped to her toes when Harsh reached for the door. She juggled the groceries, put down the heavier of the two bags, and dug into her purse. "Stop. Please. Just stop."

Iskander looked down at her from the landing. His eyes were the kind of blue that made people famous. The man should act or model or something.

"I know what this is." She wanted to cry, but she didn't. "Don't touch anything, okay?" She pulled out her phone and flipped it open, her stomach knotted up tight.

"What?" Iskander said.

"I'm trying to get a restraining order against him." She

looked down at her phone. Until Harsh snarled at her. He actually snarled. The sound made her take a step down, away from a man who could make a noise like that.

“Put that away,” Harsh said.

“Restraining order?” Iskander asked.

She stared at the two men, phone in hand, aware she’d made a mistake. She wouldn’t be the first victim of a stalker to get evicted. Or the last. She punched the number 9 on her phone. Her stomach hurt, but she didn’t have a choice. She hated that her life had gotten so out of control. “Yes,” she said. “A restraining order.”

Harsh put his palm on the door of her apartment. “Stop her, Iskander.”

Before she could press the other two digits, Iskander leaned down and wrapped his hand around her phone. His fingers were warm around hers. “Five minutes before you call, okay?”

“If he’s been here, I need the police to know.” Her arms shook.

Iskander’s fingers tightened over hers. “Five minutes.”

Her door swung open. Odd, because her keys dangled from Iskander’s other hand. Iskander turned around and stared into her dark apartment. An odd smell wafted out the door. He shot out an arm when Harsh took a step forward. “No, Harsh. Let me.”

The other man nodded. Iskander shoved her keys into his pocket and replaced Harsh at the door. Poised at the entrance, he did something graceful with his hand and slipped inside her apartment like a shadow. Harsh came down a step, took the bag she held, put it with the other, then grabbed the one she’d put down and did the same with it. He crouched at her door, staring through the

opening with one hand on the landing, poised on three fingers.

She clutched her phone. Every nerve in her body screamed at her to get away. If Rasmus was inside, she didn't want to be anywhere near here. She ignored her fear and used her phone to snap a couple of pictures of the vandalized wooden faces. Three was all she managed before she was too creeped out to stay close. She backed away.

"Paisley." Harsh spoke softly, but she heard him. He made a downward motion with his other hand like he was telling her to be quiet. "Iskander can handle this."

Softly, she said, "You don't know what he's like."

"Iskander?" He laughed. "He's one of the most dangerous men I know."

She blinked. "Him? Dangerous?" That lighthearted, gorgeous, always-smiling demigod? A man who didn't even seem to have a job?

"Yes. Very."

"Well, I'm sure you're right. But I didn't mean him."

Paisley shook her head. She meant to tell Harsh about Rasmus, but Iskander came to the door and she didn't get the chance. The odd, musty smell coming from her apartment got stronger.

Rasmus Kessler had been here. In her apartment. She felt his presence down to her bones. He was crazy. A nightmare that wouldn't stop. Their meeting for coffee had been a disaster to say the least. She'd politely declined his further requests for dates. After the sixth request on the same day, she'd told him as plainly as she could that she wasn't interested. Despite that, he called her at the bakery several times a day and lurked outside, waiting for her. She had to start leaving by the back door. Sometimes he waited near

the bakery from opening to closing or until she called the police and had him rousted. He tricked someone into giving him her cell number, and now he called every day. Dozens of times a day in the weeks since the date from hell.

He'd threatened her male friends and employees and told anyone who would listen that he had a sexual relationship with her and that she was either the love of his life or a lying, cheating bitch. He sent her insane, threatening, and cajoling e-mails and left notes and gifts at the bakery every day. After the first package with a dead bird inside, she threw his gifts away without opening them. He'd called her bank and, posing as a bakery employee, convinced someone to transfer money out of her account.

In the doorway, Iskander's eyes slid to her for a minute. "Gone."

"How bad?" Harsh asked.

Iskander did his little flicker of a glance at her before he answered. "Bad."

Paisley headed up the rest of the stairs. "What did he do?"

Iskander's friend took a step back, opening the door wider. The lighting was all wrong, and at first she didn't understand what she was seeing. Something crunched under her feet, a fine gray sand. She gripped her phone when she saw what her tormentor had done.

That same grit covered the entire floor and drifted from the ceiling.

Other than that, there was nothing left. Everything in her apartment was gone.