

CHAPTER THREE

Tavo slipped a finger into the tight collar to breathe easier. He'd had about all the wedding atmosphere he could handle. As soon as he could escape, he planned to lift some serious weight to drain off the excess energy pulsing through his veins. Before a case of the wedding day blues overwhelmed him.

Maybe he'd ask Rory to join him. Making his way over to the punch bowl, he stopped at the buffet, picked up a delectable-looking cheesy appetizer, and popped it into his mouth. Paige would have a fit. No plate. No napkin. But Jesse, the man of the hour, wouldn't give a flying fig about Tavo's manners.

Idly, he watched as Paige caught Brenna's bouquet. No way she could have missed it. Brenna had aimed it at her as if she was the bullseye. Her being next in line to get married exposed the wishful thinking on the bride's part. He'd have known if Paige was dating someone.

Renewing their relationship prevailed as the main reason he'd returned to Valiant, but they weren't anywhere near

closing the gap. He didn't deserve her, not with the mistakes he'd made, but he couldn't seem to let go either.

The twinkle lights cast a golden glow over the large reception area. Gauzy white fabric wound its way around the rafters. White tablecloths adorned each round table set with an arrangement of pink and white flowers. As usual, Paige had nailed it. Her knack for making things pretty kept her in demand. He'd heard she was considering event planning as a career.

"Gus." He stiffened at Paige's hint of reproach, then moved toward the punch bowl. Did the woman have eyes in the back of her head? She'd just been in that gaggle of girls doing the bouquet thing. He wasn't up for a scold, no matter how sweet the delivery.

"Can you help with the tables?" Paige came toward him, still wearing her gown, but barefooted.

"Sure thing, darlin'." He forgot he committed to help with the breakdown. "Feet hurt?" He gave her an indulgent smile, even as a poignant memory rose to the surface. The one where she'd let him rub her feet after a long evening of cheerleading. She had massaged his shoulders in return. His gut twisted again.

"Yes. No shoes should be okay this late in the game," she said uncomfortably. Paige, with her penchant for making things pretty, had always been appearance-focused.

He forced his thoughts back to the present. "Someone might report you to the shoe-police." He chuckled when she stuck her tongue out at him. Perfect. If he couldn't have her, then aggravation was the next best thing. "What's left before the breakdown?"

"The girls are passing out the bags of birdseed, then the sendoff."

The great grand sendoff. Where everybody threw birdseed,

of all things, at the departing couple. Nutty way to end a momentous occasion to Tavo's way of thinking, but no matter. This ordeal was almost over.

"I'll round up the twins to help." Paige's eyes drifted to the buffet.

"Have you eaten?" When she shook her head, he said, "Let me round up your brothers." She could do it, but he didn't want her to. Wrangling the twins proved an onerous task on the best of days. "You stay here. Check out what's left of your marvelous food bar and see if something meets your fancy."

"Thanks. It is almost over, right?" Relief mingled with insecurity in her almond-shaped eyes.

"Jesse and Brenna want you to have fun, Paige." Funny how they both fell into their former roles of reassuring each other. "You outdid yourself. The decorations. The food. Everything is stunning."

She flashed him a smile, only it was the merest shadow of previous times. His vague feeling of unease grew. He couldn't seem to bridge the emotional distance she'd put between them. Polite but chilly. Much too reserved, as if they had no history.

As if they'd never loved each other.

Tavo forced the traitorous thoughts away. Round up the boys. Break down the tables. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he crossed the wide area to the place where he'd last seen Carlos. He nodded to Rick at the deejay station. His brother loved these gigs, and the extra money he earned doing them. Said it helped balance the hours behind a computer screen. He'd worked as a company analyst right out of college. After a couple of years, he'd struck out on his own, preferring to contract his services. Tavo suspected some of his jobs involved hacking, but he didn't lose any sleep over it. Rick was a white hat at heart despite the long hair and worn jeans.

Over the years, he'd built up a reputation for providing the perfect music for any event. He'd also amassed an impressive collection of equipment to do the job. Tavo glanced at the massive speakers that resembled giant warfare robots, then sneezed. Another excellent reason to wrap this up. The frou-frou smell from the multitude of candles was tickling his nose.

PAIGE'S TASTEBUDS salivated as she popped a wedding-sized chunk of watermelon in her mouth. Standing behind the buffet, she viewed the room. Vi and Dicey had disappeared with Brenna to help her out of her gown and into travel clothes. The short honeymoon they'd planned in San Antonio was by design. They were saving every penny for the house Rory was building for them. Between wedding plans and their new home, Brenna had talked of little else the last couple of months. Paige had worked hard not to turn into a green blob of envy.

It had happened so fast. Her two best friends were married with dreamy places to live. A far cry from her cottage-like house. Paige loved Brenna and Vi like sisters, but she didn't quite fit in with their married status.

Oh, well. If her plan to become Valiant's go-to event planner gained momentum, she'd be much too busy to develop a serious relationship, which suited her just fine. She was quite aware Gus would be thrilled to pick up where they left off, but she couldn't do that. What they'd had in high school had been idyllic. But he'd been too serious, and Paige had a different mission. She had to attend college because she couldn't bear the thought of ending up like her mother. Her father stayed gone far more than he was home. Paige had vowed early on that would never happen to her.

Except the college scene had included a bad relationship. Once that had fizzled, her interest in the dating/relationship scene tanked right along with it. Now she only cared about preserving the memories she'd had with Gus. Her one good relationship. If they dated again and it didn't work out, she'd lose the lovely, tender moments they'd shared.

Her eyes strayed to him. At six feet, six inches, she'd had to special-order his tux. Oh, but he looked good. The powerlifting, his latest sports interest, had only accentuated his already large stature. Short-cropped dark hair, craggy features, and the warm smile that made her knees melt—*back to business, girl*.

Miguel and Carlos scampered off when Gus moved in their direction. Did they honestly think they'd be a match for him? His size, along with the "I'm-in-charge" police officer air, commanded attention. She shook her head. At eighteen, the twins were wiry as electrical cords, unpredictable as lightning, and half again as wild. They'd been running over Mama for years.

Now they raced around the deejay station, acting like ten-year-olds. Miguel had snatched the garter. Carlos stayed in hot pursuit. She stiffened. A wedding reception was no place for their shenanigans. Gus called out for them to stop. Miguel slowed, and Carlos spied the chance to catch his brother. One ferocious tackle later, they rolled into a heavy speaker held up by a giant tripod.

The cumbersome piece of equipment wobbled. Then everything happened too fast. "Gus, no!" she screamed, but he darted into the falling object's path. For a big man, he moved swiftly as he shoved a young girl out of the way. The tray of birdseed packets she held popped into the air. Amid the chaos, the tiny, sparkly bags fell like water drops to the floor.

The monstrous speaker continued its descent, but Gus

couldn't outrun it. It struck him on the shoulder. He slammed onto the floor. The speaker landed next to him with a dull thud, inches from his head. Only then did Paige realize she was screaming again.

This couldn't be happening. Not Gus. Heedless of her long gown, she ran over to where he lay motionless, but Rory beat her there. He stuck his fingers under his jaw. Paige wrung her hands. The twins, their eyes huge and scared, stood motionless.

Rory gave her a grim nod. "His pulse is strong, but he's not in good shape. His face smacked the ground. Don't know about the rest, but no one can withstand a hit like that—not even *El Jefe*."

Paige whipped her phone from her pocket, but her hands were shaking so badly she couldn't punch the keys. Panic-stricken, she gazed at Rory. He snatched the phone from her and punched in the emergency numbers.

Gus moaned and stirred. Rory stopped communicating with the person on the other end long enough to say, "Get in his ear, Paige. He shouldn't be moving right now. Not until the EMT checks him out."

Tears streaming down her face like ribbons, Paige dropped to the ground and grabbed his hand. She leaned in and whispered, "Gus. Don't move." His body stilled. Heartened, she continued to patter about help, the reception, anything to keep him still.

The minutes seemed like hours before men in uniform stood at her side. "Ma'am, you need to step back if you want us to help your friend."

She stared at them without comprehension until Rory pulled her away. Noooooooo, she wanted to shout. Her feet and legs were prickly from the straw on the floor. She could barely stand.

Jesse sprinted through the warm haze from the twinkling lights. Where was his wedding attire? Then Brenna showed up, wearing the cute outfit Paige had helped her pick out. They looked stricken. What a way to end their special day. They should be leaving for their honeymoon. When Vi appeared, the last vestige of Paige's emotional strength fled. Sobbing, she crumpled into her friend's arms.

How could this lovely event have gone so wrong? But that wasn't the worst of it. Her body thrummed with chaotic tension. She needed Gus's quiet, steady presence. Her throat was raw. Involuntary sobs kept making their way up her throat. Vi rubbed gentle circles on her back. One thought kept her from completely losing it.

Gus would be all right. No other option existed.