

ONE

CALEB Devereaux turned out of the sharp switchback and onto the driveway leading up to the tiny mountain cabin, swearing when he hit pothole after pothole. Fury and impatience simmered in his blood but the anticipation of having finally found Ramie St. Claire after an exhaustive search kept his mood from being completely black.

Ramie was his sister, Tori's, only hope.

The moment Tori was kidnapped, Caleb had begun his search for Ramie St. Claire. She certainly wasn't the first person on most people's go-to list when looking for a loved one. Ramie was psychic and had been helpful in locating victims in the past. While many would be skeptical, Caleb absolutely believed in Ramie's abilities.

His own sister had psychic abilities.

He and his brothers, Beau and Quinn, had always been extremely overprotective of their baby sister. With good reason. Caleb was the head of a veritable empire. Security was always

top priority. They'd always feared kidnapping for ransom, but in their worst nightmares they'd never imagined that Tori would simply disappear and be at the mercy of a madman.

There'd been no ransom demand. Simply a video of Tori bound hand and foot and the maniacal laughter of her captor as he told Caleb to kiss his sister goodbye.

He just prayed he wasn't too late. God, don't let it be too late for Tori.

It infuriated him that Ramie St. Claire had simply dropped off the map three months ago. No trace of her, no forwarding address. No evidence that she even existed. How could she simply disappear when she was such an invaluable aid in finding kidnap victims and missing persons? How selfish of her to simply refuse, by her actions, to help anyone.

He'd worked himself into a rage by the time he finally pulled up to the small cabin that looked as though it wouldn't weather the upcoming winter at all. He wasn't even certain there would be electricity. Only a person determined not to be found would live in a place like this.

He got out and strode to the ramshackle front door, his fist up and pounding. The door shook and rattled under the force of his knock. Only silence greeted him and it sent his blood pressure soaring.

"Miss St. Claire!" he roared. "Answer the goddamn door!"

He beat on the door again, shouting for her to answer. He likely looked and sounded like the madman holding his sister, but at this point he didn't care. He was beyond desperation. It had taken every resource available to him to finally track Ramie down. No way in hell he was leaving until he'd gotten the information he'd come for.

Then the door swung open and he was greeted by the sight of a petite woman with wary gray eyes. He was momentarily taken aback, going silent as he stared at Ramie St. Claire for the first time in person.

The photos he'd seen of her didn't do her justice. There was a delicate air to her as though she were recovering from an illness, but it in no way detracted from her beauty. She looked . . . fragile. He felt a brief moment of guilt for what he was about to ask her to do, but he brushed it away. There was no price too high to pay for his sister's life.

"I can't help you."

Her softly spoken words slid like velvet over his ears, a direct contrast from the anger her refusal caused. He hadn't even made his request yet and she was already giving him the brush-off.

"You don't even know what it is I want," he said in an icy tone that would wither most people.

"It's rather obvious," she said wearily, fatigue drooping her eyelids. "Why else would you come all this way? I don't even want to know how you found me. It's obvious I did a piss-poor job of covering my tracks if you managed to find me here."

Caleb frowned. Had she been ill? Was that why she'd dropped out of sight, so she could recover? It didn't matter why now that he'd found her. He didn't care what her reasons were.

"With your abilities why would you purposely make yourself difficult to find?" he demanded. "My sister's life is at stake here, Miss St. Claire. I'm not merely asking you to help me. I'm not leaving until you do."

She shook her head adamantly, fear chasing the lethargy from her eyes. "I can't."

There was quiet desperation to her words that told him

there was more to her refusal than what appeared on the surface. Something was wrong and yet he couldn't summon any regret for forcing her compliance. Not when Tori's life hung in the balance.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out Tori's scarf. The one item they'd found at the site where she must have been taken. In the parking lot of a grocery store beside the open door of her car. He should have never let her go alone. He'd failed her. Failed to protect her. Failed to ensure proper security.

Ramie immediately backed away, a desperate cry on her lips. He shoved forward, forcing the scarf into her hands and holding her and the scarf so there was no escape. She emitted a broken sob and she looked up at him, stricken, her face going unnaturally pale. Her pupils flared and then clouded, pain and devastation clearly outlined on her features.

"No," she whispered. "Not again. Oh God, not again. I won't survive it."

Her knees buckled and she would have gone down, but he caught her, ensuring the scarf never lost contact with her hands. He watched in horror as Ramie's body sagged, slipping from his grasp despite his best effort to support her weight. She was simply lifeless, as limp as a rag doll. He quickly followed her down to the floor, determined that she not lose her grip on Tori's scarf. But it didn't seem to matter now. Ramie was somewhere else.

Her eyes glazed over and her body began to twitch spasmodically. She curled into a fetal position, the fragility of such a self-protective measure gutting him. She moaned softly and then began to weep.

"Please don't hurt me again. Please, I'm begging you. I can't

take any more. If you're going to kill me, just do it. Quit torturing me."

Chill bumps spread rapidly up Caleb's nape as Ramie's voice, which sounded nearly *identical* to Tori's, filled his ears. Dear God, was he witnessing what was happening to his sister through Ramie?

The scene Ramie was painting was horrifying. Not only for the fact that his sister was even now enduring the absolute worst. But from all appearances, Ramie was suffering with her.

He'd certainly done his research on Ramie St. Claire's abilities but there was little information beyond her astonishing success record. No mention of *how* she managed to help victims or what it did to her. God help them all. What had he *done*?

Her body jerked and it took only a moment for Caleb to realize what was happening. It was too unmistakable. Bile rose in his throat and he had to suck in steadying breaths to keep from heaving the contents of his stomach on the floor. Tears burned his eyelids as he helplessly watched his sister being raped through the window of Ramie's awareness.

Ramie's weeping tore at his heart and he gathered her into his arms, not knowing what else to do but rock her gently. "Tori?" He whispered his sister's name experimentally, not knowing if a link had been established through Ramie. "Can you hear me? It's Caleb. Tell me where you are, honey. I'll come for you. Hold on please. Don't give up, no matter how bad it is."

Ramie's head jerked sideways and the imprint of a hand immediately appeared on her cheek. Caleb was horrified, unsure of what to do now that he'd crossed a line he couldn't come back from. He tried to push back his guilt, telling himself that any-

thing that helped him recover his sister was worth it. But was torturing an innocent woman worth it?

He hadn't given her a choice. She'd told him no and yet he'd forced this on her not knowing the heavy toll it would take. He had no idea how her powers worked and now that he did he was sick to his soul. No wonder she'd been so resistant. No wonder she'd told him she couldn't do it anymore.

"Ramie. Ramie!" he said in a more forceful voice. "Come back to me, Ramie. Come back so you can tell me how to find her."

Ramie's eyes were opened but so distant that he knew she wasn't here. The imprint of the hand on her face was bright and vivid, red against deathly white skin. There was a look of such defeat and despair in her eyes that once again he found himself battling tears.

Suddenly she hunched inward, her entire body jolting as though absorbing a blow. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and he realized that she'd been kicked. Or rather Tori had been kicked. It was a horrific, helpless feeling to know that two women were being victimized, one because of *him*.

Then she simply rolled away, her cheek lying against the cold floor, her eyes fixed and vacant. She was completely still and terror gripped him. Was Tori dead? Oh dear *God!* Had he just witnessed his sister's *murder*?

"Ramie! Wake up! God, *please* wake up. Tell me how to find her. Tell me that she's still alive!"

He picked Ramie's slight weight up, swearing because she was so thin and fragile, weighing nothing in his arms. He carried her to the worn sofa and carefully laid her down, not wanting to hurt her any more than she'd already been hurt.

He sat on the edge, gathering her icy hands in his, rubbing, trying to infuse warmth. He had no idea what to do. Should he take her to a hospital?

Then after several long moments, she blinked and seemed to come out of her trance. Pain immediately swamped her features and she began to silently weep again, each tear cutting him to ribbons.

"Is she still alive?" he asked anxiously. "Do you know how to find her?"

"Yes," Ramie said dully.

Hope surged in his heart and he found himself nearly crushing her hands in his.

"Tell me where," he urged.

Slowly and painfully she whispered the location down to the minutest detail. Chills once again slithered up his spine at the precision with which she described not only the location but the kidnapper. She even provided a license plate number.

He picked up his phone and immediately called his brother, relaying the information that Ramie had provided. When he was done, he stared helplessly down at Ramie, grateful and yet deeply regretful for what he'd just subjected her to.

"What do I need to do to help you?" he asked softly.

Resignation dulled her eyes even further. "There's nothing you can do," she said in a flat voice. "Just go."

"The hell I'll just leave you here!"

He was already calculating in his head that he could simply bring her with him. He could get her the care she so obviously needed at the same time Tori was receiving what she needed.

"Your sister needs you. Just go. I'll be fine."

The lie was so obvious, but it seemed to be all she could

muster. He was torn between rushing to be with Tori and staying to ensure Ramie would be all right. But how could she be? Two women would live with this for the rest of their lives. His precious sister and the woman he'd forced to help him, never knowing the price she'd pay.

"Please," she begged, her voice breaking. "Just go and leave me be. I gave you what you wanted. I helped you, now go. It's the *least* you can do."

Caleb stood, wiping a hand over his hair and down the back of his neck in agitation. "I'll go, but I'm coming back, Ramie. I'm going to make this up to you."

"You can never take this back," she whispered. "There's no making up for what's been done. Just go and take care of your sister. She needs you."

She closed her eyes, tears seeping from her eyelids. How could he just leave her like she asked? And yet how could he not go and ensure that his sister was safely recovered? He'd never felt so torn in his life.

"If you have any humanity whatsoever, you'll leave and never tell anyone where you found me," Ramie said hoarsely. "Please, I'm begging you. Just *go*. He plans to kill her tomorrow. At dawn. You don't have much time."

Her words proved to be the impetus, driving him to action. But goddamn it, he would make this up to her. Somehow, someway.

Regret swamped him. Worse was the fact that even knowing now what he hadn't known before, he couldn't say he would have done anything differently. Not when it meant the difference between Tori's life and death. But at least now he better understood Ramie's resistance. No longer did he look at her and think

she was selfish and cruel. Now he realized her disappearance had been self-preservation. He didn't know how she'd survived this in the past. He just prayed he wasn't the tipping point in pushing her so far over the edge she'd never recover.

Caleb closed his eyes and then gently touched her cheek. "I'm so sorry. You'll never know how much. My family and I owe you more than I can ever repay. I'll go for now and pray to God I'm not too late. But I'm coming back, Ramie. Count on it. I'll make this up to you if it's the very last thing I do."

TWO

RAMIE dragged herself toward the end of the couch, lacking the strength to even make it to her feet. Caleb had departed just a few minutes earlier. Not that he'd introduced himself. But his name had been a strong presence in Tori Devereaux's mind, her anchor to reality as her captor pushed her further and further to the brink of insanity.

She could summon pity and even understanding for Caleb's actions. She could even forgive what he'd done. But she'd never be able to forget. That was worst of all. The images, the memories, engraved permanently in her mind.

Tears burned a trail down her cheek. She felt hollow and empty. Not even like a person. She'd been stripped of all humanity time and time again.

She pushed herself upward, forcing her way through the horror and pain that flooded her. Because the connection to Tori Devereaux didn't end when the scarf was taken away. Ramie was

still very aware of what she was enduring. The link could last an hour or a day. Ramie could only pray it ended soon.

She had to run. Had to get as far away as possible and this time make sure no one could find her. So *he* couldn't find her. Because if Caleb Devereaux had found her, then the man stalking her could as well. Never again could she go through what she'd just experienced. She wasn't sure she'd ever recover. Too much, too soon, too fast. She hadn't even healed from the last time she'd located a victim and now she'd been forced to do it all over again.

Numbly she shuffled like an old woman to the tiny bedroom of the cabin. She couldn't even summon hate for what Caleb had done. She understood desperation. Had encountered it time and time again. Who was to say she wouldn't do the same exact thing if she had a loved one whose life hung in the balance?

But no, there were no loved ones for her. She supposed at some point she had a father and a mother. Somewhere. But she'd been abandoned when she was just a baby and had become part of the system. Bouncing from family to family with no real roots.

The discovery of her powers had only alienated her many foster parents. They looked at her with fear, like she wasn't a human being with feelings. And the last foster home where she'd been placed had ended in horror and violence.

Ramie had lived her life alone ever since. She'd never been able to bring herself to trust someone enough to become involved with them. Being isolated didn't bother her. She embraced it.

Except . . . every once in a while, she grieved for what she'd never had and never would. A normal life. Friends and family.

All the things most people took for granted. Ramie would never make that mistake. If she were ever blessed enough to have family or friends, she would cherish every single day and never take life for granted. It was impossible for her to do so because she'd witnessed death and unimaginable horror over and over again.

Where to go now? Where could she be assured no one would find her? She simply wanted to disappear.

For good this time. And pray that this time she'd do a better job of covering her tracks. Of hiding. Of making certain no one could find her. Because if the one man who'd focused all his concentration on destroying her ever found her, she would die. And her death wouldn't be quick and merciful. She would die an agonizing death, spending her last breaths praying that each one would be her very last.