

## Chapter One

Alex stared out the side window of the taxi cab, subconsciously listening to the thump thump of the tires as they traveled across the bridge. The drizzle of rain falling as she left the airport had turned into a downpour. Somehow, that seemed appropriate. She'd been operating on auto pilot, going through the motions but not really aware of her surroundings, since she got the call from her stepbrother Thomas. It was all so surreal. Her stepfather, the only father she'd ever known, was dying.

So many memories flashed through her mind. She hadn't known her biological father. She refused to refer to him as her "real" father as many did because Luke had been her father since she was seven. In every sense of the word Luke was her real father. Something had just clicked the moment they met. It was easy for her to understand why her mother fell so hard and fast for the man. Alex never felt like an unwanted addition, or a burden he had to carry to be with her mother. He accepted and loved Alex from the beginning and she loved him with all her heart. How was she going to function without him? He was her rock, the one steady aspect of her life, and he was dying. How had this happened? Thomas said he had been attacked in an alley after leaving the office. But who would attack Luke? He often worked on big, top secret projects. Had a competitor attacked him? A random mugging? Thomas had been so vague, almost secretive. He was probably just in shock. She certainly was. He was in shock and would fill her in later.

Lucius "Luke" Deveraux was a powerful man, one of the wealthiest men in the nation. So many people depended on him. He wasn't just head of Deveraux Industries, he was involved in every aspect of the company. He was intimately involved with each new project. With this power came responsibility. How many times had Luke lectured her on safety and responsibility? He wasn't a careless man. He wasn't a vulnerable man. How had he been injured in an alley of all places? It just didn't make any sense.

Alex suddenly realized the taxi was no longer moving. The driver had exited the car. She looked up to see the hospital looming in the darkness. She took a deep breath and opened the door. The driver had already retrieved her bag from the trunk and was standing under the awning next to the hospital entrance. She collected her luggage, paid the driver and walked through the automatic door. There was a group of reporters hovering at the reception desk. Alex was grateful Thomas had provided Luke's room number. The last thing she wanted to deal with was a mob of reporters. Word was obviously out about Luke Deveraux. She quickly slipped into an open elevator and closed the door. Alex was stopped by a nurse as she approached Luke's room. After providing her name and relationship, the nurse finally allowed her to enter. The woman was annoying, but Alex was grateful for the security.

The lights were dim and Luke was quiet and still. There were so many machines hooked up to him and his body was battered and bruised. Alex had never seen her father look so fragile. She quickly blinked back the tears forming in her eyes. She had to be strong. She could fall apart later. Right now, she needed this time with her father. Alex silently walked across the room to a chair positioned next to the bed. Luke hadn't even stirred. She sat down and gently picked up his hand. Again, she had to blink back tears, but she was determined to get through this without crying. She felt Luke squeeze her hand and looked up to see he was watching her. He was giving her comfort, how typical. She gave him what she knew was a pitiful smile and leaned over to kiss him softly on the cheek. Luke reached up and gently brushed her cheekbone with the tip of his thumb. "Hi princess" he whispered. "I'm glad you were able to get here. I've missed you terribly."

Alex swallowed the lump in her throat. "I've missed you, too. I thought about you and Thomas every day. I didn't think I was ready to come home yet. Now, I wish I had never left."

"You needed to get away for a while. We understood. Don't ever regret doing what you needed to do to heal. If I could have run away for a while, I would have. Unfortunately, I had to stay and run the company." Luke paused and looked out the window. "There are so many things

you're going to need to know now. Things I should have talked to you about sooner, but I always thought there was plenty of time.” His voice was just a whisper now. He sounded so weak.

“Don't talk.” Alex whispered. “You need your rest.”

Luke looked back to Alex. “There's no time for rest. Life is going to change for you. My little princess...” he reached up and brushed a tear away. Alex hadn't realized she was crying. “I know you'll be strong and brave. You're going to have to be, your very life depends on it. Don't get too angry with Thomas. I know you think your overprotective father has rubbed off on your older brother, but we mean well. There are so many things you don't know about our lives. I'm afraid I have failed you. I haven't prepared you for what's coming.”

Just then Alex noticed movement in the doorway and Thomas walked in. Over the past year, Thomas had changed a lot. Alex couldn't believe how strong and masculine he had become. He was always good looking. He was always stout, but now he was a force to be reckoned with. He was the spitting image of his father. Thomas crouched down and took her into his arms. “He's been holding on for you,” he said as he leaned in and kissed her. “I don't think he has much time left.” He turned to his father as he stood “I don't want to hear any more about failures from you. You're the last one that should be lamenting over what you did or didn't do. What you did was love and protect your family. I talked to Jake by the way. He told me the real story, filled in all the holes. He explained the things you left out. You should have let me go with you.”

Luke winced. “I told him to keep his trap shut about that. Why am I not surprised? Thomas, we both know you have a temper. Promise me you'll keep it in check. You're going to need your wits about you. No revenge, that's what got me into trouble. Please, think with your mind and heart, not with your temper.” The last words were almost a croak. Luke was so weak, but he insisted on pushing himself.

Thomas walked to the other side of the bed and took his father's hand. "Dad, you're a great father and a great man. You've taught us well. Don't worry about me or Alex. We'll be fine. We know how to protect ourselves and we have the others. Everything is going to be okay, I promise." He reached up and brushed back his father's hair, then kissed him on the cheek. "Rest now, stop holding on for us and say hello to Marlana. I'm sure she's anxious to see you again."

At the mention of her mother's name Alex shot a look at Thomas. He studied her for a long moment, his eyes never leaving hers. He seemed to be telling her to say goodbye. Alex looked down at Luke, fragile, breathing in gasps. He too was watching her, needing her to confirm she was going to be okay. She leaned down and hugged her father tightly. "I love you so much!" She cried. So much for keeping it together until she left. Tears rolled down her cheeks one after the other. "You have always been my hero. You always will be. And just for the record you were never a failure at anything, especially a father. Thomas is right. It's time for you to rest. Tell mama I miss her. It's good to know that soon you'll have that special spark back in your eyes. The one that's been missing since mama passed away. I know you two will be together again. At least that gives me comfort."

Luke's hand tightened around hers and Thomas'. "My wonderful, special kids. You both make me proud. I pray you're strong enough to weather the coming storm. Take care of each other. I love you both so much." The last came out as a croak. Luke closed his eyes and his hands went limp. Alex fell on top of Luke's chest and wept. She looked up and saw that tears were running down Thomas's face as well. The machines started beeping and nurses quickly entered the room pushing them aside. Alex walked over to Thomas and collapsed into his arms. They walked out of the hospital in silence, leaning on each other for strength.