

Chapter One

It was raining the day Jana and Walter Whitfield brought their new baby daughter home from the hospital. Despite the rain and the dark grey skies, Jana Whitfield had somehow hoped that this would be a new beginning for her family. She hoped that beautiful baby Rayna would captivate Walter and that he would be so mesmerized by her that he would once again be the man she had fallen in love with.

At first, everything was perfect. Walter would spend every spare moment marveling at Rayna's newest accomplishments. He was charmed by the little dimples that appeared every time she smiled or how she would grab her tiny little feet and place them in her mouth. He said that she'd gotten her beautiful grey eyes from his mother. Walter never talked about his mother or his father or his brothers and she hoped that the recollection did not bring back any sad memories from his morbid past. By her first birthday Rayna exhibited skills far beyond that of other babies her age. Walter glowed whenever she would say what he thought adamantly to be da-da. He always made it a point to brag to their few remaining friends that their children paled in comparison to his Rayna. He was proud to be father to this precocious child. He seemed forever charmed by her tiny button nose and the curly auburn ringlets that framed her perfect little face, although he did not know from where her reddish-blond hair had come. As far back as he could remember no one on his side of the family had hair that resembled the color of bright orange flames. He figured it was from somewhere on Jana's side of the family. He remembered her uppity mother walking around with her nose so high in the air and how they forbade Jana to marry him because of the Whitfield family reputation. Well he showed them all! He had walked away with the kit and caboodle, although he struggled with an inner conflict to fight what seemed to be his destiny. Walter decided he wouldn't worry about that just yet. He would focus on his beautiful child and hope that he could be as a father should be and once again the husband that he once was. Even with the pleasant distractions of adding another member to his family, he missed both of his brothers and sometimes wondered how their lives would have been different if his father hadn't run his mother off with his constant philandering. Ways that he knew lay dormant beneath the surface of his momentary preoccupation with the newest addition to his family. Walter would go against the grain to make his wife and daughter happy. For as long as he could, he would play the part.

The next couple of years were more of the same, a combination of pride and pleasure, followed by anxiety and finally, complete and total submission which would become the beginning of a catalyst that would unfold slowly and eventually consume innocent lives.

Jana shared his fears, a fact not hidden by the love in her eyes that often became a mixture of fear and hope that he would be the first male Whitfield to dispel the disgrace forever attached to his legacy.

Jana knew the story behind the infamous Whitfield brothers when she accepted Walter's marriage proposal in naiveté. Walter's mother had left their father when she could no longer deal with the gossip and burning stares as a result of her husband's insidious gallivanting, leaving her three incorrigible boys for their father to raise. He was heartbroken and found solace at the local bar leaving the eldest of his three sons, Jeremiah, to raise his two younger brothers, Corey who was nine and Walter who had just celebrated his sixth birthday. This presented a challenge because Jeremiah was thrust into the position of breadwinner at the tender age of twelve. Jeremiah used the skills he had learned by watching his father to keep his two younger brothers fed and from freezing to death during the winter by chopping wood and eating the livestock on their farm. When those means were depleted, he felt he had no choice but to resort to activities less savory in character. Shortly after his thirteenth birthday, Jeremiah spent his first night in the county jail. Corey soon became acclimated to the familiar tracks of his brother's footsteps. By the time the two eldest Whitfield boys were old enough to shave, the jailhouse had become their second home. Then there was Walter. He hadn't turned out like his brothers at all. Or so Jana had thought when she married him. Although forewarned by her parents that she would not be entitled to any portion of the family fortune, Jana persisted. There was something sad, yet intriguing about Walter despite the fact that his mother had left them at an early age and that he had grown up with an irresponsible drunk for a father and two lawless, misguided brothers. Jana had felt sorry for him because her upbringing was nothing short of a fairytale in a normal environment with a very wealthy and affluent family. She thought she could make him forget his past and that in the end love would conquer all, especially when she had given him the most adorable baby girl. She'd even named her Rayna after his very own mother whom he had adored so much. Being married to the youngest brother of the Whitfield trio was cause for much speculation since Jana's all-American looks and good family name could have won her any of the town's notable bachelors. Much to Jana's dismay, a few years after Rayna was born, Walter became the mirror image of his father, the magic ending around Rayna's fourth birthday. The bouts would start up when Walter had had too much to drink and would last well into the early morning hours. His tirades were vicious and cruel towards his wife and young daughter, whose only consolation was to hide under her bed where she would stay for hours pretending that she was safe in her castle while the ferocious dragon was right beyond the protective walls of her sanctuary. Rayna had never met neither her mother nor her father's parents so she looked forward to trips down memory lane when her mother would point out relatives in the old family albums while she wondered if the smiling people in the photographs were really happy, unlike the photos of her parents on the mantle with her mother's eyes filled with so much sadness behind her smile. Much like the sadness that had become a part of her life every day, making Rayna wonder if her mother felt the same way her father did about having a child. One day when she was old enough she would ask her mother if she could do it all

over again would she marry daddy? Even before she completed her thought, Rayna already knew the answer.

As time went on, the fights became more vicious; ending only when her father ran out of the house and sped off into the night, sometimes not returning for several days. It became a game of hide the keys. Rayna was admonished to hide the car keys when daddy started drinking. Rayna did not understand why but she did as she was told. She liked it when her father was gone. It was quiet and she didn't have to hear her father accusing her mother of purposely trapping him with a brat. Although she was just a child she began to despise her father, often times finding any excuse not to be around him even when he wasn't drinking. As the years progressed, Rayna did everything in her power to exclude her father from her life, even going as far as to tell her teachers at school that she and her mother lived alone when the time came for activities requiring parent participation at school. It was almost true. When he wasn't at home ranting and raving and accusing her mother of trapping him, he was passed out in what became his first home, the local bar, just like Rayna's grandfather. Jana's attempts at celebrating Rayna's birthday's were feeble at most ending with her father drinking a beer then escalating to the point where everyone had to leave before Rayna had even opened her gifts or cut the cake. Once he had gotten so drunk that he stumbled and fell directly into a two-layered strawberry cake that her mother had spent hours making the night before. Rayna was so ashamed of her father. She wished he would just leave and never come back. She celebrated her last birthday at the age of twelve and before blowing out her candles she closed her eyes tightly and made a wish. The arguments suddenly ended one day after Walter received a telephone call from the hospital where Rayna was born revealing that there was a mix up with hospital records indicating that Rayna was not the biological child of Jana and Walter Whitfield. This being discovered after a terrible tragedy took the life of Rayna's birth parents, Donald and Kathryn, who were survived by the biological daughter of the Whitfield's and a son. This was Walter's cue to exit stage left; although he had had too much to drink, Rayna did not hide her father's keys. She simply watched him pause to grab his keys then stumble to the door from her usual hiding spot under her bed. She wanted something bad to happen to him. He left on a rainy Wednesday night taking one suitcase, a bottle of gin and the information he'd learned from the hospital with him. Walter Whitfield never looked back. The man Rayna thought to be her father killed a young woman that night. Rayna remembered being awakened, it was a full moon the night she was told her father would not be coming home again. That was the happiest day Rayna had ever known. Her birthday wish had come true.