

The events in this short story serial occur during the events in the novel Keep Her.

***Tucson, Arizona***

***Tuesday, April 11, 2012***

Cain paced to the front window, secure in the knowledge no one could see inside because of the translucent, white curtains and the sunshine outside. He'd tried, unsuccessfully, the better part of the morning to clear thoughts of Maria from his head. No matter how he'd tried to distract himself, her beautiful face flashed through his mind. He battled an overwhelming desire to see her. No woman had tied him up in such knots since college, and even then, it hadn't been quite like this.

He swallowed... hard... and fought to keep his breathing steady as his heart pounded against his ribs. *Calm. Down. You bloody well settle down. You've seen the woman exactly once. There's no reason to obsess over her. It's bonkers. Think about something else.*

He scanned the front yard, only to have his gaze land on a large cactus to one side of the yard. Tall with four arms branching off of a central spire, a pair of large white blooms visible on one of the tips. Nearly identical to the one in Maria's front yard.

*Right back to Maria again.* Cain shook his head. *I'm hopeless.*

"Are you alright?" Trent Grayson joined him. The youngest member of Dana's security team had a quiet, relaxed way about him. Cain couldn't help but wonder if it was a facade as his own sometimes was. The man normally worked patrol for Tucson Police Department and had, no doubt, learned to mask stress and strong emotions for the sake of his job even more effectively than Cain had. The younger man quirked a blond brow.

"I'm fine. Just..."—he frowned deeply—"preoccupied, I guess you could say."

"Must be woman trouble." A knowing smile touched the young officer's mouth.

"What makes you say that?" Cain asked, startled by the on-point insight.

"Only a woman can make a man frown like that." Trent shrugged. "At least, that's what Dad always says."

"Wise man, your dad."

"Is it Dana?" Trent lowered his voice even further with a quick glance over his shoulder.

"No. A friend of hers."

"Patti?"

A natural assumption since the registered nurse had been staying with them at the safe house, but... "No. You haven't met her." Cain shook his head. "There's something about her... I can't get her out of my head."

"Is she a believer?"

"No, and that's part of the problem." She was truly alone, dealing with a dying teenage son and having to choose between trying to save her son and saving the life of an innocent man she didn't know. *This unexpected attraction aside, Lord, she truly is alone.* He swiped a hand back and forth across his forehead. "It's a good thing I'm going home next week."

"You think distance will solve the problem?" Trent's mouth curved in what appeared to be a rather amused smile.

"I certainly hope so." Cain sighed. "If not, I'm in trouble. I'm fighting myself not to go see her. If I'm like this in Tallahassee, I don't know how I'll function. I keep wondering how she's doing. She has a lot on her plate right now, and she's trying to manage it all alone. Doesn't even have the Lord to lean on."

"Have you considered calling her? It's probably safer than seeing her face-to-face, if the feelings you have are *that* strong." Genuine concern showed in Trent's blue eyes. "It might allay some of your concern."

"You know, you're right." Cain slapped the younger man lightly on the shoulder. "Thanks!"

"You're welcome."

"By the way"—he pointed out the window—"what kind of cactus is that?"

Trent glanced out and smiled. "That's a saguaro. Some of them have been blooming earlier than normal this year. It's the state flower, actually."

*Saguaro*. "Thanks."

Nodding, Trent walked away.

Cain headed for Dana's room to ask for Maria's phone number. With each step, his confidence grew. Trent's suggestion was sensible. He had no idea what he'd use as an excuse for making the call, so he didn't sound like a blithering idiot with a schoolboy crush, but one step at a time. First order of business, get Maria's number from Dana.

When he reached Dana's bedroom, he knocked lightly on the door, which was cracked open and swung wider with each tap of his knuckles. He peered inside. "Hey, Dana, do you happen to have—"

Dana froze over her nearly full duffle bag with a guilty look.

Cain stepped into the room and pushed the door mostly closed, as it had been when he arrived. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm leaving." She said it tightly, her expression guarded, clearly anticipating a fight.

"What do you mean, you're leaving?" Cain couldn't believe it. She couldn't possibly be serious. "You're getting married tomorrow."

"I know." Her gaze dropped. She zipped the duffle shut then pointed to the nightstand, where a folded piece of paper lay with Alan's name emblazoned across it. "I wrote a note for Alan."

"What is this about? What did he do?" Cain's protective instincts reared up, and he stepped closer. "Did he hurt you?" His gaze traveled rapidly over exposed skin, searching for bruises or other telltale signs of physical abuse.

"Of course not. Alan would never do such a thing!" she protested.

"Then you better explain yourself, or I'm not letting you out that door." He blocked her path, crossing his arms sternly over his chest to emphasize his point.

"This doesn't involve you!" Dana screeched then slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes widening.

Cain hardened his gaze and kept it locked on hers, stifling the anger-induced tremors that tried to run rampant through him.

She let her hand fall back to her side. "You don't understand. There are things you don't

know. Things *Alan* doesn't know."

"So what."

"It's not.... They're.... I'm not...." Fresh tears emerged. "He deserves better," she blurted.

Cain raised his brows and dropped his hands to his sides. "How do you figure?"

"As I said, there are things neither of you know. It's...." She frowned, seeming to search for the right words.

"So help me, Dana, if you say *complicated*, I'll strangle you."

"Well, it is complicated, but that's not what I meant to say." Her face tightened. "My past is... ugly and evil."

He clenched his teeth. "Give me a break."

Dana flinched.

"You can't do this. Alan's done nothing to deserve it."

"You don't understand. I don't have any choice." Tears filled her eyes, and she dropped heavily onto the foot of the bed.

"We always have a choice, Dana, between right and wrong." He narrowed his eyes. "Shouldn't Alan have a say in this? He loves you. That fact is bloody obvious to everyone... except you apparently. He'd do anything for you. He's already proven it." A wave of anger crested over him. "Maybe that's not good enough for you."

"H-h-how can you say that?" She shied away from him as though he'd grabbed for her.

"After everything he's done, you'd sneak off. Maybe you're doing him a favor. Being abandoned without cause is preferable to a life sentence married to a hypocrite."

Dana lunged to her feet, anger flashing through the tears in her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You gave him a dressing-down yesterday for making a decision that directly affected you without consulting you first. Today, you'd do the same to him?" He shook his head. "Hypocrisy at its finest." He bit his tongue and turned toward the door. *I better get out of here before I say something I'll truly regret. I've already gone too far.* Hand on the doorknob, he glanced over his shoulder. "You better pray about this. If you take off, you're not the person I thought you were. I never took you for a hypocrite *or* a coward."

He stepped into the hallway and hauled the door closed hard behind him. Hanging his head, he fought considerable confusion over the jumbled emotions ripping through him. Why was he so angry? Dana had been on the verge of betraying Alan, not *him*. So... *why does it feel like she's betraying me instead?*

When he lifted his head, he realized Dana's mother stood only a few feet away.

Dismay sliced through him. "You heard all of that?"

Mrs. Chandler nodded, a sympathetic smile softening her face.

"I'm sorry. I lost my temper." Something he hadn't done in a very long time. So, *why now?*

"How about you join me and Claire in the kitchen for a cup of tea? We're holding off lunch a bit to see if the others return soon." She looped her arm through his.

"I'd like that very much." All he could summon was a weak smile. "Thank you, but... what about Dana? Don't you want to check on her?"

Concern puckered Mrs. Chandler's brow. "I suspect she needs some time alone with the

## Thinking of Maria by Dawn M Turner

### Maria Short Story #4

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Lord. As much as I want to be in that room right now, I don't want to interfere with His work."

They made it all the way to the kitchen before he bit back a sigh. In his fury over Dana's actions, he'd totally forgotten his original intent in seeking her out. He still needed Maria's phone number. *After all of that, will she give it to me now? Will she even speak to me again?*

He lowered himself into a chair at the table. *Why did I react so fiercely, Lord?*

*Old hurts*, came a gentle response.

Cain frowned. *Old hurts? What old hurts, Lord?*

*Betrayal leaves a wound on the heart, My son.*

*Betrayal? Old hurts? What—* His breath caught as realization struck. *Oh.*

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A while later, from where he sat in the living room with some of the others, Cain spotted Dana in the doorway leading to the foyer. *Time to face my overreaction.*

Dana motioned for him to join her.

Reluctant but resigned to what he needed to do, he got to his feet and crossed the room.

"Dining room?" she asked.

He nodded then followed her.

"I'm sorry," they said in unison the instant they'd entered the other room. Both laughed.

As laughter faded, Cain tried again. "I'm sorry. I'm horrified that I lost my temper. I guess my past isn't as far behind me as I believed."

Dana stared at him, her eyes wide. "What do you mean?"

He took a deep breath and scratched his forehead. "I almost got married once. While I was a college student in England."

Dana laid a hand on his arm. "I didn't know that."

Cain shrugged. "It's not the type of thing I advertise." In fact, he'd never talked to anyone outside of family about it.

"What happened?"

"No show. I waited at her family's church with about two hundred guests, and she never came." He scowled, recalling the humiliation and confusion far too clearly. "The next day, I got a letter in the mail. She'd decided she couldn't go through with it and taken off. I never saw or heard from her again."

"Oh, man." Dana grimaced. "I blew it today, didn't I? I'm really sorry, Cain."

Cain shook his head, managing only a weak smile. "You had no way of knowing. Truthfully, I had no idea I still harbored so much anger. I'm afraid I unleashed it on you." *It might've helped if I'd realized I was still so hurt over what Katerina did.*

"Yeah, well, I deserved it. Besides, I tend to bring out the worst in people sometimes," Dana half-joked. "You were right, though. About everything." Tears filled her eyes, and her voice wavered. "I was a coward and a hypocrite. Thank you for caring enough to be honest and not let me do to Alan what your fiancée did to you."

"I could've been more tactful."

"You did fine." She hugged him. "Thank you."

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“You’re welcome.” As they parted, he pointed to the kitchen. “There are leftovers on the stove, if you like.”

*Only after Cain had returned to his seat in the living room did he realize he’d forgotten—again—to ask for Maria’s number.*

Coming next Maria #5 – Not yet titled