

Chapter I

Ava Martin jammed her hand to the depths of her purse, tossing out lip gloss, keys, lotion and Tylenol. Hands on hips, she stared at the jumble strewn about the table. No bank envelope.

Now what? The doctor expected the initial payment of six thousand dollars before he picked up the scalpel.

Pacing about the stable's tackroom, Ava paused in front of the fly-specked mirror over the sink and confronted the wrinkles on her face.

"Damn!" She tried to smooth them away with her hands. *I can't cancel today's appointment.*

It took months of stashing money away and then scheduling the appointment at a time when Vance would be in England for ten days on business. She couldn't risk her husband questioning the large item on her credit card, so she squirreled away a hundred or so at a time. An amount that Vance would never think about.

Ava thanked God daily for sending her Vance. He was acceptably good looking, but more importantly, he willingly paid for her slightest whim...a Ferrari last year and now, Imperial Gold Master. Vance bought her a hundred-thousand dollar, multi-champion Morgan horse for her birthday! She did make sure she properly thanked him for the extravagant gift, but if he suspected some of her beauty was store bought it would be disastrous. She would never put her marriage, with all its trappings, in jeopardy.

She resumed her pacing while peeling back the polish on her manicured nails. Ike would have to handle this. Now. Ava shoveled her belongings back in the purse, swung it

onto her shoulder and stomped out to the riding ring where Ike Cherny, the owner of Replika Stables, was driving a young horse.

"Ike!" Ava demanded as his horse trotted toward her.

"In a minute, Ava. I'll meet you back in the barn."

"No, now!" She slapped her hand on the railing, causing the young horse to jump away. "I've been robbed!" She screamed at Ike as he struggled to bring Buster back under control. "In *your* stable."

Ike steadied the colt, then drove back to where Ava stood.

"Someone rifled through my purse and took..." She stepped closer and leaned on the rail before whispering, "took six thousand dollars."

"Easy, boy." Ike calmed Buster who sensed anger in the woman and wanted out of there. "No one at Replika would steal from you. Bet you'll find you left it at home or in your glove box."

"No!" Ava stamped her foot and shook her head, her blond curls catching the morning sun. Buster snorted and tried to leave.

"Ava, keep your voice down."

"I'm damn more upset than that horse. The money was in my purse. I distinctly remember checking when I placed it in my locker in *your* tackroom."

"Let me get Buster unhooked and I'll help you look. Open the gate. Please."

"Look all you want, Ike." She yanked the gate open and walked beside Ike as he headed toward the barn. "It was stolen. And I have a pretty good idea who the thief is."

Ike wouldn't rise to the bait of her implication. *Kurwa*, he cursed in Polish. No one on this farm would steal from their best client. Pippa, Ike's five-foot assistant, went to Buster's head when Ike drove him onto the barn floor.

Ava tapped her foot and peeled back more polish while she waited for Ike and Pippa to unhook the horse. Ike lifted

the shafts up and pushed the cart out of the barn. When he turned around he bumped into Ava, almost toppling her to the ground.

"*Kurwa*, woman." Ike barked his trademark Polish curse and grabbed her arm to keep her upright. "Come on, let's go to the tackroom and figure this out."

"There's nothing to figure. I know who took my money." Ava jogged to keep up to Ike's long stride.

"Okay, I'll bite. Who on this farm would steal from you?"

"Rowtag."

"And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"Oh, come on Ike, it's obvious! Everyone knows his kind steals. They can't help themselves. It's in their genes."

"And just what is 'his kind?'" Ike knew perfectly well what Ava meant, but he would not tolerate racist attitudes on his farm. But, *Kurwa!* Ava Martin was his best paying client with a horse that could win at the big shows. He kept moving toward the tackroom, hoping to walk off his anger before he strangled the woman.

"Rowtag's the worst kind of Indian. He's a half-breed."

"Ava, you need a little more to accuse Rowtag than simply his race." Ike held the tackroom door open for Ava to pass through. He followed and went straight to the far wall, needing to put some distance between them. He turned around, clamped his mouth shut and folded his arms waiting for Ava to speak.

"Well, if you can't take my word for it, listen to this." Ava sat at the table and laced her fingers together. "After my workout with Goldy, I came back here. There I was, about to open the door when Rowtag comes barging through, lugging one of those big western saddles. Rude man. Never so much as acknowledged he nearly knocked me off my feet." Ava tossed her head.

"I know he was in the tackroom *all by himself* for goodness knows how long. I demand you handle this. I'm not

going to tell you your business, but you should fire that man." Ava stood and took her car keys out of her purse.

"I will get to the bottom of this. We'll find your money by the time you get back from visiting your sister."

"Don't you understand, Ike? I need this money for my trip!" Ava glanced at her diamond encrusted watch. "I should be on the road now."

Ike walked over to Ava and reached out to still her shaking hands. "I can't do that in five minutes, Ava. I *will* make it top priority, but it will take a little time."

He should turn it over to the police, but sure wanted to avoid law enforcement. He'd been off AMHA probation for only a couple of months. If the American Morgan Horse Association heard a whisper of this new issue at his stable, they'd never let him continue his career. Ike tuned back into Ava, who was dabbing at tears.

"I'll have to cancel my appoint...trip."

"I'm sure your sister will understand." Ike looked more closely at his client. She appeared considerably more upset than a delayed visit to her sister warranted. "Ava, are you okay?"

"It's private, Ike. I can't tell you. Please call me the second you know something." Ava tilted her head, making sure she had Ike's full attention. "And promise me you'll start with Rowtag."

Ike watched the Ferrari spit out gravel as Ava drove away. He turned to pour a cup of coffee and was adding sugar when his wife, Billie, stepped into the tackroom.

"What's up with Ava?" Billie said, pouring coffee for herself.

"She's accusing Rowtag of stealing thousands of dollars from her purse because--get this--because he's a 'half-breed.' Said it's in his genes to steal." Ike sat at the table and wrapped his hands around the mug.

"Unbelievable." Billie sat across from her husband. His

long face sagged as he struggled with the repercussions of the robbery. His full mustache twitched while he chewed on the problem. Absently he patted his shirt pocket, looking for the pack of Camels that had been there most of his life.

No cigarettes, Ike. Billie wisely kept this to herself. She had told Ike she would not marry him until he quit smoking. And he did. But it didn't come easy and she had to be careful not to lecture him about it.

"What's the plan?"

"I'll talk to Rowtag," Ike said. "He deserves to know Ava's gunning for him."

"You know, Luke is here shoeing," Billie said. She propped an elbow on the table and twirled a strand of her dark red hair.

"Luke's been our blacksmith for ten years. He'd never steal from us."

"No. That's not where I'm going." Billie wave a hand in dismissal. "Luke brought a new blacksmith with him today. He was in here twice." Billie turned away from Ike and looked about the room. "He got coffee and donuts and came back later to use the bathroom. So he said. And you know," Billie stood up, excited about the possibility of identifying the thief. "When he came back from the bathroom, he went directly to the truck and stayed there awhile."

"He could have been hiding Ava's money," Ike said.

"That's what I'm thinking. Luke finally yelled at him to get back to work. Talk to Luke before he finishes for the day. There are only two horses left to reset. See if there's some way to search the truck."

"I'm on my way. Sure want to get this cleared up." Ike dropped his mug in the tackroom sink. "*Kurwa*, Billie! Six thousand dollars is not chump change."