

Chapter 1

“Hey, girl. You want to do lunch today?”

Faith Alexander smiled. “Sure. I’m just working on one of my web designs.” Once or twice a month on a Saturday she and her best friend, Kathi Norris, met for lunch. “Hang on, Kathi. Someone’s at the door,” she said. She saved the page she’d been working on and left the spare bedroom in her townhouse that she had converted to an office. It contained a desk, two bookshelves, a file cabinet and a sofa for those times when she planned to work all night, but needed a place to nap. She crossed the living room, opened the door and saw the mailman standing there.

He stuck a box into her hands along with a card and pen. “Just sign here, please.”

She cradled the phone against her ear, adjusted the box and signed the receipt. “Thank you.” Faith closed the door and frowned, not recognizing the sender.

*“Helloooo.”*

Kathi’s voice drew Faith out of her thoughts. “Sorry. I just got a box from someone in Los Angeles named Thaddeus Whitcomb.”

“Ooh, girl, you’ve got a man sending you gifts from California?”

“No. I have no idea who this is.” She shook the box and heard a slight rustling.

“What’s in it?”

“I have no idea,” she said, walking back to her office and placing it on the desk.

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

“Anyway, Cameron—the guy I’ve been dating—has a cute friend and I thought we could double-date,” Kathi said.

“No.”

“Come on, Faith.”

“No. The last time I went on one of your little blind double dates it turned into the month from hell. You’re on your own this time.”

“Grant wasn’t that bad.”

“Hmph. You weren’t the one he was calling ten times a day asking when I was going to let him come to my house. I swear that man had octopus arms and was just as slimy. He made my skin crawl.” She shivered with the remembrance.

“Okay, okay, I get your point. He did border on stalking.”

“You think?”

“But this guy is different—six feet, rich brown skin, fit and easy on the eyes.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not interested.” After that fiasco six months ago, she had sworn off men and was content with building her year-old web design business.

“We aren’t getting any younger and I’d like to settle down and have a kid or two before my eggs shrivel up and die.”

She laughed. “Kathi, you act like we’re pushing fifty. We’re only thirty.” She cut into the box, pulled back the flap and saw a stack of letters with a rubber band around them. All were addressed to her from Thaddeus Whitcomb and had “Return to Sender” written on them. She quickly flipped through them and noted the postmarks went back almost twenty-eight years.

While half listening to Kathi list all the reasons why this guy would be different, Faith opened the gray envelope on the top that had her first name written in large letters and withdrew the

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

sheet of paper. When she unfolded it, a photo of a man wearing an army uniform and holding a baby fell out. She didn't know who he was, but she recognized the child. She quickly read the letter. Her eyes widened and her heart stopped and started up again. "It can't be. He's supposed to be dead," she whispered in shock. "Kathi, I have to go."

"Wait...what? What about lunch?"

"I need to take a rain check. I'll call you later."

Butterflies fluttered in her belly as she picked up the photo again and studied it for a moment before re-reading the letter. Tears filled her eyes and anger rose within her. She tossed everything back into the box, slid her arms into a light jacket and grabbed the box, her purse and keys, and left. Although the sun shone, there was a slight breeze and the early June temperatures in Portland hovered near seventy. Twenty minutes later, she rang her parents' doorbell.

"Faith," her father said with a wide grin, "we didn't know you were coming over. Come in, baby." He kissed her cheek.

"Hi, Dad." Her mother had married William Alexander when Faith was eight and he had been the only father she'd known. "Where's Mom?"

"She's in the family room working on one of those word search puzzles." He placed a hand on her arm as she passed him. "Everything okay, Faith?"

"I don't think so."

His concerned gaze roamed over her face. "Well, let's go talk about it."

Her mother glanced up from her book when they entered and lowered the recliner. "Hey, sweetheart."

"We need to talk, Mom."

Her mother's brows knit together. "Something wrong?"

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

Faith dropped the box on her mother's lap.

“What is this?”

“You tell me.”

Her mother lifted out the envelopes and quickly flipped through them. Her loud gasp pierced the silence. “Where...where did you get these?”

“They were delivered to my house this afternoon. How could you do this to me, Mom?” She paced back and forth across the plush gray carpet.

“What the heck is going on here?” her father asked. “Who are those letters from?”

She stopped pacing and, not taking her eyes off her mother, Faith answered, “My father. The man she told me died while serving in the army.”

His eyes widened and he dragged a hand down his face. “Francis? Is that true?” he asked.

Her mother tossed the letters aside. “You don't understand,” she snapped.

“You're right, I don't.” Faith flopped down onto the sofa. “He's been alive all this time and trying to contact me,” she murmured, tears gathering in her eyes. “Why, Mom? Why did you lie to me?”

“I was trying to protect you.”

“*Protect me?* From what?”

“You were too young to know what it was like when he came home that last time—the crying out, the nightmares with him flailing around the bed, the flashbacks. I was worried he'd hurt you and me, and I didn't want to deal with it every time he came home.” She sniffed. “So I left.”

Faith couldn't begin to imagine what her father had seen and experienced that would cause such nightmares, but she had a hard time believing that her mom hadn't even tried to help him. Growing up, she'd always marveled at her mother's compassionate nature and wanted to grow

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

up to be just like her. Now she was learning that hadn't always been the case. "That still didn't give you the right to just erase him from my life." Faith wiped away her own tears. "And how did you know you would have to deal with it every time?" She paused. "He's invited me to visit him and I'm going."

Her mother jumped up from the chair. "Why? It's been twenty-eight years. What can you possibly gain by going to see him? Just let it be."

"He's my *father* and I'm not going to let it be." She caught her stepfather's gaze. "I'm sorry, Dad. You know I love you." She felt bad because he had always been there for her.

He nodded. "I know, honey. You go do what you have to do. Francis, she has to find her own way."

"Thanks, Dad."

The two women engaged in a staredown for a full minute before her mother turned away. She had never been this angry with her mother. Sure, when Faith was a teen, they'd had their disagreements, but nothing like this.

Her mother pointed a finger Faith's way. "Nothing good can come from this. *Nothing*. I don't know why he's trying to disrupt your life after all these years."

Faith threw up her hands. "Disrupt my life? How is wanting to know your daughter a disruption?" She snatched up the letters. "He's been sending letters for twenty-eight years and you sent them back without ever telling me. The only person who's *disrupted* my life is you." She put the letters in the box and stormed past her mother. "I have to get out of here."

At the door, her stepfather's voice stopped her.

"I know you're pretty angry at your mother right now, but try to see it from her side. She was only doing what she thought best." He gave her a strong hug, palmed her face much like he did

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

when she was a child and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Whatever you decide, I’ll always be here.” Although approaching his fifty-eighth birthday, he didn’t look a day over forty. His walnut-colored skin remained unlined, his body was still trim and toned, and his deep brown eyes held the love he had always shown her.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“When are you leaving?”

“I don’t know.”

“Call to let us know you’re safe.”

“I will.” Faith kissed his cheek and slipped out the door.

She drove home still in disbelief over what her mother had done and that her biological father was actually alive. Once there, she called Kathi and filled her in, then searched hotels and reserved a flight and car for the following Tuesday. Although she loved her stepfather, Faith had often imagined what kind of man her father had been. Now that she had his letters, she’d get her wish. But she wanted to know what he would be like in person. *Guess I’ll find out soon.*

\*

“Are you ready to step into the CEO position, little brother?”

Brandon Gray acknowledged a couple of people leaving the conference room after the Wednesday morning staff meeting ended. He then smiled at his older sister, Siobhan. “Been ready.” His father had started the company more than two decades ago after being discharged from the army. When he saw the difficulties his best friend who had been wounded in combat, had trying to get services and accommodations, Nolan Gray decided, instead of waiting around, he would design them himself. What started in their home garage had now grown to be one of the largest in-home safety companies in the country. They provided everything from shower rails

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

and specialized mattresses to custom-built ramps. Their father would step down at the end of the month, leaving Brandon as head of Gray Home Safety. His father's best friend, Thaddeus Whitcomb, whom they affectionately called Uncle Thad, had joined the company shortly after it was formed and served as the company's vice president. He planned to retire, as well. The two men had always said that the reins would be turned over to their children, with a Gray in the CEO position and a Whitcomb as vice president.

Siobhan stuffed some papers into a folder. "I wonder what Uncle Thad is going to do. Too bad he never got married or had kids. And as good-looking as he is, I'm surprised. I don't ever remember seeing him date."

"I saw one woman coming around for a while when I was working in the warehouse that summer after junior year in high school, but I don't know what happened to her."

"Well, with no one to step in as vice president, you'll be in charge of everything."

"True." Brandon actually preferred it that way, expected it after all this time. While the roles worked well for his dad and uncle, he'd much rather work solo.

Their father came around the table. "Brandon, can you come by my office? I need to talk to you."

Brandon studied his father's serious expression. "Sure, Dad. I'll be right there."

His father clapped him on the shoulder and exited.

Siobhan said, "I wonder what that's about."

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Well, let me know what happens."

"Okay." Brandon left the room and started down the corridor leading to his father's office. He spoke to the administrative assistant, who told him to go in.

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

“I just hope this time you can get the answers,” he heard his father say.

“Dad? Oh, hey Unc. I didn’t know you were here.”

“Hi, Brandon. I’ll talk to you later, Nolan,” Uncle Thad said. The two older men shared a glance that wasn’t lost on Brandon.

He followed his uncle’s departure. Today Uncle Thad was on crutches. He’d lost the lower part of his left leg during Desert Storm and typically used a prosthetic. However, over the past year, he had taken to using his wheelchair or the crutches because of problems with the artificial limb.

After Uncle Thad left, Brandon’s father said, “Close the door and have a seat, son.”

He complied. “What’s going on, Dad?”

“There may be a little delay in you taking my position.”

“What? Why?”

“Something has come up that needs to be handled before we pass on the reins.”

“If you tell me what it is, maybe I can help.”

“No, no,” his father answered quickly. “I’ll handle it.”

He tried to keep his surprise and distress hidden. Brandon knew he could be intense sometimes, but he was the best person for the job. He knew this company inside out. “How long are you talking?”

“I’m not sure. Another month or two perhaps.”

He did his best to remain in his seat and not behave like the hotheaded teen he used to be. Was his father having second thoughts about Brandon heading the company? He was afraid to ask, but needed to know. Taking a deep, calming breath, he asked, “Are you thinking of putting someone else in the position?”

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

“No.”

Something—he didn’t know what—in his father’s tone gave Brandon pause. “Is that all?”

“Yes.” His father released a deep sigh. “Son, I know you’re upset, but I assure you this is just temporary.”

Brandon stood and nodded. “Since it’s almost five, I’m going to take off, unless you need me to stay.”

He shook his head.

“Tell Mom hi.”

“I will.”

Brandon stalked back to his desk, locked up and set out for the gym his brother, Khalil, owned. The former model was now a highly sought-after personal trainer. With rush-hour traffic, it took Brandon nearly an hour to reach his destination, which incensed him even more. He was more than ready to take out his frustrations on the heavy bag.

“Damn, big brother. You might want to go easy on that bag.”

Ignoring Khalil for the moment, Brandon continued with his punches. A few minutes later, winded, he removed his gloves, wiped his face with a towel and downed a bottle of water.

“Want to tell me what’s going on and why you’re about to dislodge my bag from the ceiling?”

He took up a position next to Khalil on the wall. “Dad is postponing his retirement. He said something came up that he needs to handle and it could be another couple of months.”

“Why can’t you handle it?”

“I offered, but he wouldn’t even tell me what it was. It’s bugging the hell out of me. I’m almost positive Uncle Thad is in on it, too.” Brandon recalled the shared look between the two men.

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

Khalil swung his head in Brandon's direction. "I know he's not thinking about putting someone else in the CEO position. Granted, you do go over the top sometimes, like when that couple was trying to sue the company last year. You're lucky Siobhan and Morgan are still speaking to you."

He shot his brother a dark glare. "Shut up." When the accusations were first leveled, Siobhan, the company's PR director, had been out of town with her now husband and missed several calls that weekend. Their baby sister, Morgan, had been tasked to handle the legal case and, unbeknownst to the family, had become agent to a star football player. Both times, Brandon had confronted his sisters, feeling that they should have put the company first. Needless to say, it hadn't won him any brownie points. While Siobhan still worked for the company, Morgan had left the company six months ago and was doing well in the world of sports management. She had also married said football player. "Dad said he wasn't looking to place anyone else in the position, but I have a bad feeling about this."

"Thank God, because I'm certainly not going to do it, and neither is Malcolm." Their youngest brother, Morgan's twin, played professional football and had no interest in doing anything not sports-related. Khalil straightened from the wall. "Well, you've waited all this time for the position. Another few weeks won't kill you." Brandon grunted and Khalil laughed. "Besides, it'll give you more time to practice some patience."

Brandon grabbed his stuff and left Khalil standing there. He spent another forty-five minutes lifting weights before calling it a night. To add to his already foul mood, he realized that he'd forgotten to add a change of clothes and, after showering, had to put his wrinkled slacks and dress shirt back on. He spotted Khalil on his way out working with a client and threw up a wave.

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

At his car, Brandon tossed his gym bag in the backseat then climbed in on the driver's side, started the engine and drove off. His stomach growled, letting him know it was far past the time for him to eat. As he merged onto the freeway, his cell rang and he engaged the Bluetooth device. "Hello."

"Brandon, can you stop by Thad's and pick up a folder for the meeting tomorrow morning?"

"Hey, Dad. I thought he was going to be there."

"He planned to, but the orthopedic clinic had a cancellation and can see him sooner than his original appointment two months from now."

Brandon knew how difficult it was to get an appointment with a specialist and understood the necessity of taking anything that came along earlier.

"I'd go, but your mother and I are on our way out and won't be back until late."

"I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. I'll see you in the morning."

Groaning, Brandon reversed his course and headed in the opposite direction. Twenty minutes later, he parked behind Uncle Thad's black Buick, got out and started up the walkway. Unlike the other houses on the block, this one had no steps leading to the door, which made it easier for him to maneuver his crutches or wheelchair. He rang the bell and, while waiting, scanned the meticulously groomed yard. Brandon remembered mowing it on many weekends growing up. The grass had turned brown in spots, but that was to be expected with the drought.

"Brandon, come on in."

He turned at the sound of his uncle's voice and stepped inside. "Hey, Unc. I see you still keep the yard looking good."

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

Uncle Thad smiled. “You know I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He adjusted his crutches and led the way further into the house. “Sorry you had to go out of your way. I know you probably have things to do so I won’t keep you.” The inside of the house was just as neat, with not a speck of dust to be found anywhere, despite his bachelorhood. He picked up a manila folder from the dining room table and handed it over.

“Thanks. Dad or I will fill you in when you get back.” Brandon retraced his steps to the front door.

“All right. See you Friday.”

He loped down the walk to his car, got in and backed out of the driveway. His stomach growled again. He had a steak marinating that he planned to grill and pair it with some potatoes and an ear of corn, but he was so hungry he didn’t think he’d last the time it took to prepare the meal. But he didn’t want to stop for fast food, either. The good thing was that Unc’s house wasn’t far from the freeway. He shifted his gaze from the road briefly to check the dash clock. Seventy-three. Hopefully, at this hour, he would have missed a good portion of the traffic. Brandon eased onto the highway and immediately saw that it was still a little heavy, but not too bad. His cell rang again. He sighed and connected.

“You were supposed to stop by my office and tell me what Dad wanted,” Siobhan said as soon Brandon answered. “I went to your office and your assistant said that you left before five. You *never* leave before five. What happened?”

He sighed, not really wanting to talk about it. “I just thought I’d leave a little early today, Vonnie, that’s all.”

“Mm-hmm, and you didn’t answer my question.”

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

Rather than risk his sister coming to his house tonight—and she definitely would to get answers—Brandon gave in. “He’s postponing his retirement.” He repeated what he’d told Khalil.

“That’s strange. Well, at least you’ll still get the position.”

“Yeah, but—” A truck cut across the highway and hit something in the road that flew through the windshield of a car in the next lane a few lengths ahead. The car swerved and crashed into the center divide. Brandon let out a curse, flipped on his hazard lights and eased to a stop in front of the car. “There’s an accident. I’ll call you back.”

Luckily, the shoulder was wide enough for the crashed car to be out of oncoming traffic. He jumped out, cell phone in hand and, being careful to stay closer to the shoulder, sprinted back to the passenger side of the car while dialing 911. He peered through the window and saw a woman inside. He gave the dispatcher the location and told him that the woman was conscious, but that a pipe of some sort was imbedded in her right shoulder. Brandon couldn’t tell whether it had gone in deep or if it was just the deployed airbag holding it in place. “Miss, are you okay?” he called through the slightly open window.

She moaned, tried to push the airbag out of her face with her left hand and rolled her head in his direction. Her eyes fluttered closed and opened again.

In the fading sunlight, Brandon could see bits of glass in her hair and blood on her cheek where she had been cut. “Can you unlock the doors?” For a moment he thought she had passed out, then he heard the click of the lock. He opened the door and, being careful of all the glass on the seat, leaned in. “Help is on the way. What’s your name?”

“Faith,” she whispered.

“Faith, I’m Brandon. Are you hurt anywhere else besides your shoulder?”

“I...I don’t know. Every...thing...hurts.” Her eyes closed again.

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

“Faith, I need you to stay with me.” He backed out and started to go around to the driver’s side.

She moaned again. “Please...please don’t leave.”

“I’m just coming around to your side.” He waited for a break in the traffic and hurried around to the driver’s side. Once there, he carefully opened the door and managed to give her some breathing room from the airbag. Brandon reached for her hand, his concern mounting. “Are you still with me?” She muttered something that sounded like yes. Brandon was momentarily distracted when another person approached.

“Is she okay, man? I called 911.”

“Thanks. She’s hanging in there.” It seemed like an eternity passed before he heard the sirens.

*Finally.*

When the paramedics and police arrived, Brandon stepped back. A police officer called him over to give a statement and his gaze kept straying to where the medical team was getting her out of the car and onto a gurney. Faith cried out and it took everything in him not to rush over. He finished his account and stood by watching with the other two people who had eventually stopped.

“Is one of you named Brandon?” a paramedic called out.

Brandon strode over. “Yeah. Me.”

“She’s asking for you.”

He smiled down at her strapped down on the gurney. In the fading sunlight, he could see her face starting to swell where the airbag had hit her. “You’re in good hands now.”

“Thank you,” Faith said, her voice barely audible. “My stuff...my...”

## GIVING MY ALL TO YOU

Sheryl Lister

He took it to mean she wanted her things from the car. “I’ll get them.” To the paramedic he asked, “What hospital are you taking her to?” After getting the information, he walked back and retrieved her purse, keys and a small bag from the backseat. Why was he thinking about going to the hospital? He’d done his civic duty. It would be easy to hand off her belongings to one of the officers and be on his way. But for some reason, he needed to make sure—for himself—that she was okay. Brandon slid behind the wheel of his car and, instead of going home, merged back onto the freeway and headed to the hospital.